

FOREST AT THE EDGE
~ Book Seven ~

THE
SOLDIER
in the
MIDDLE
of the
WORLD

THE WORLD'S BIGGEST BATTLE IS FOR ONE PERSON

TRISH MERCER

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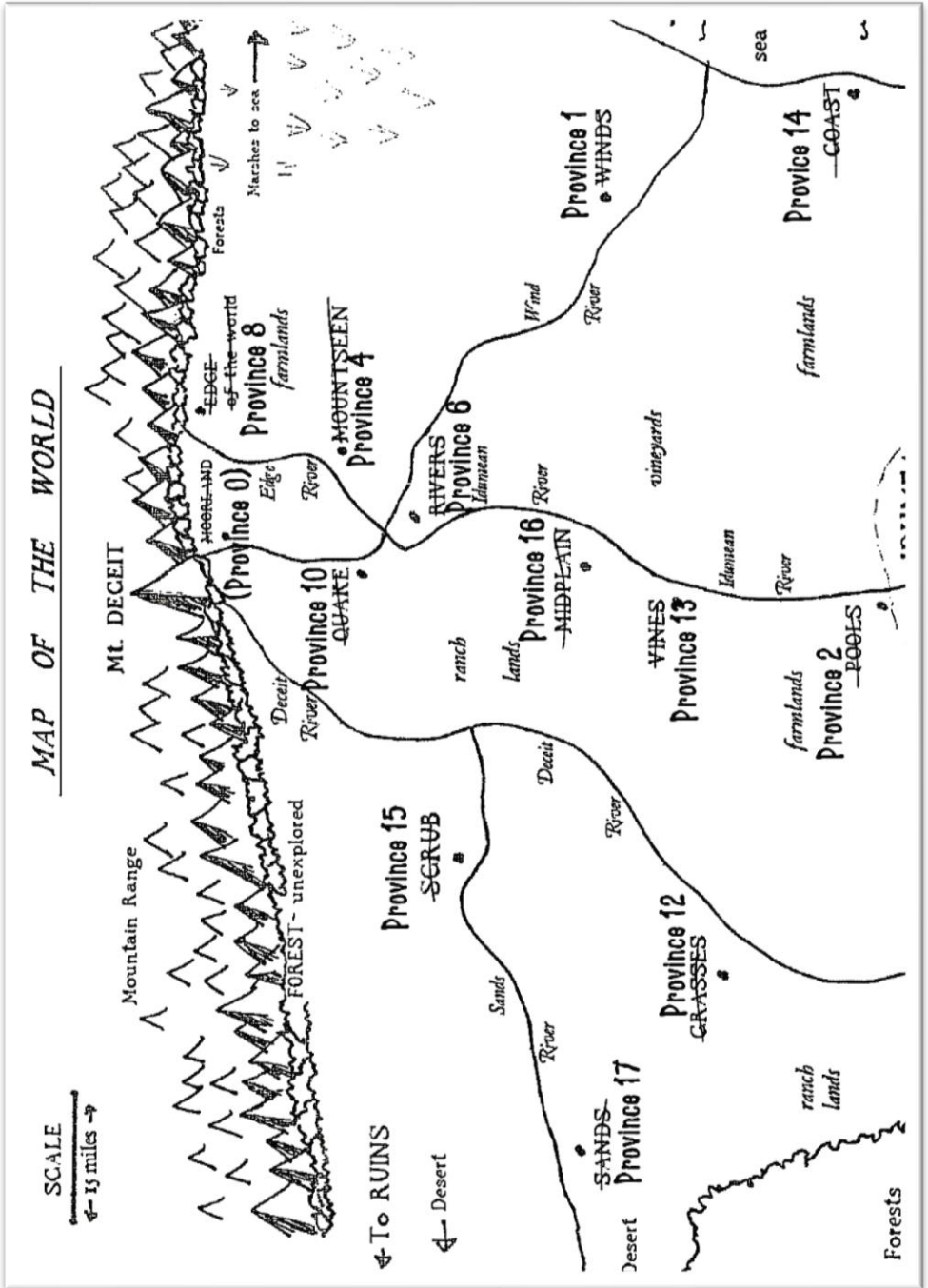
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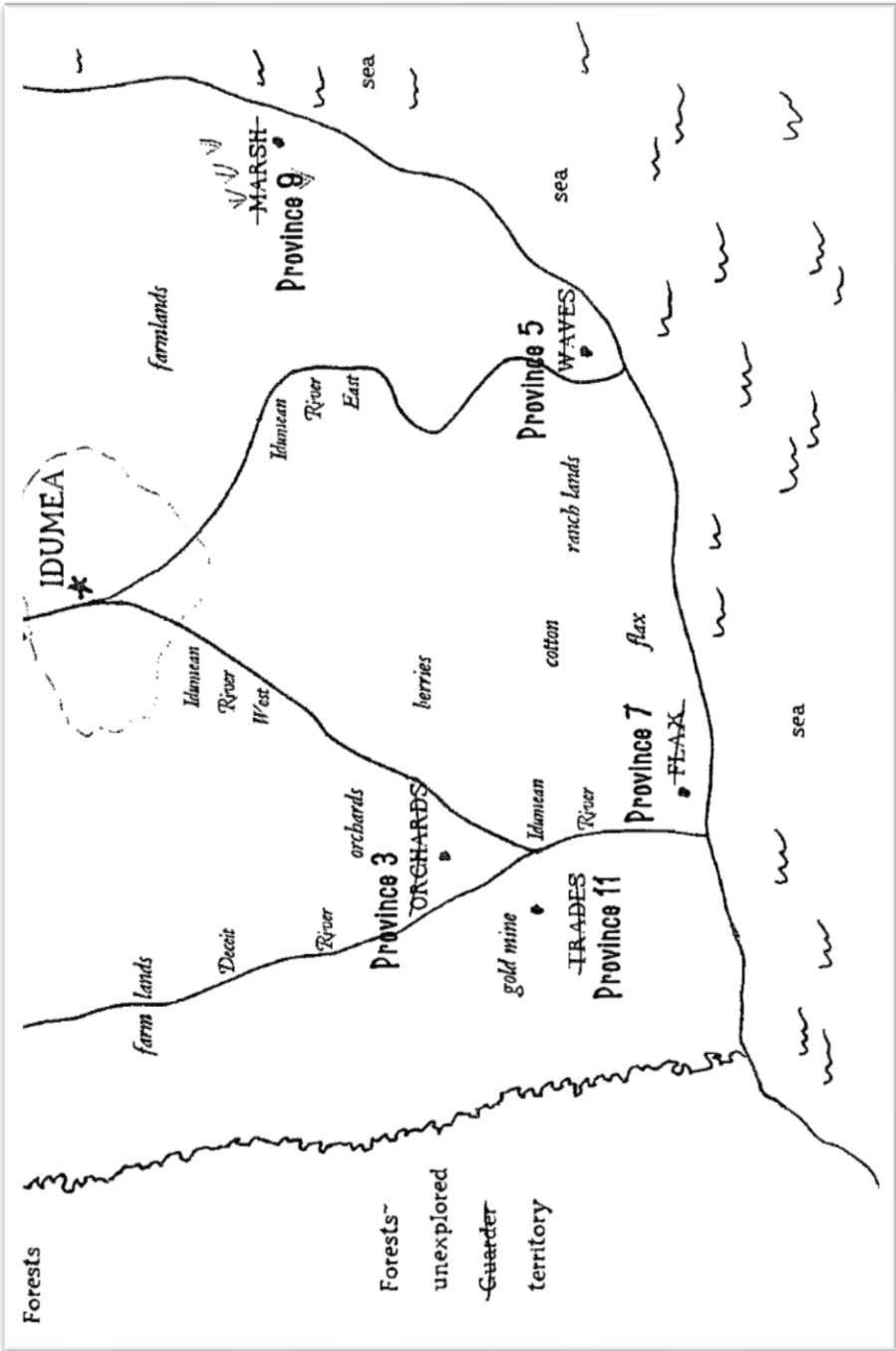
Because, at some time or another,
all of us get ourselves lost
like a soldier in the
middle of the world.

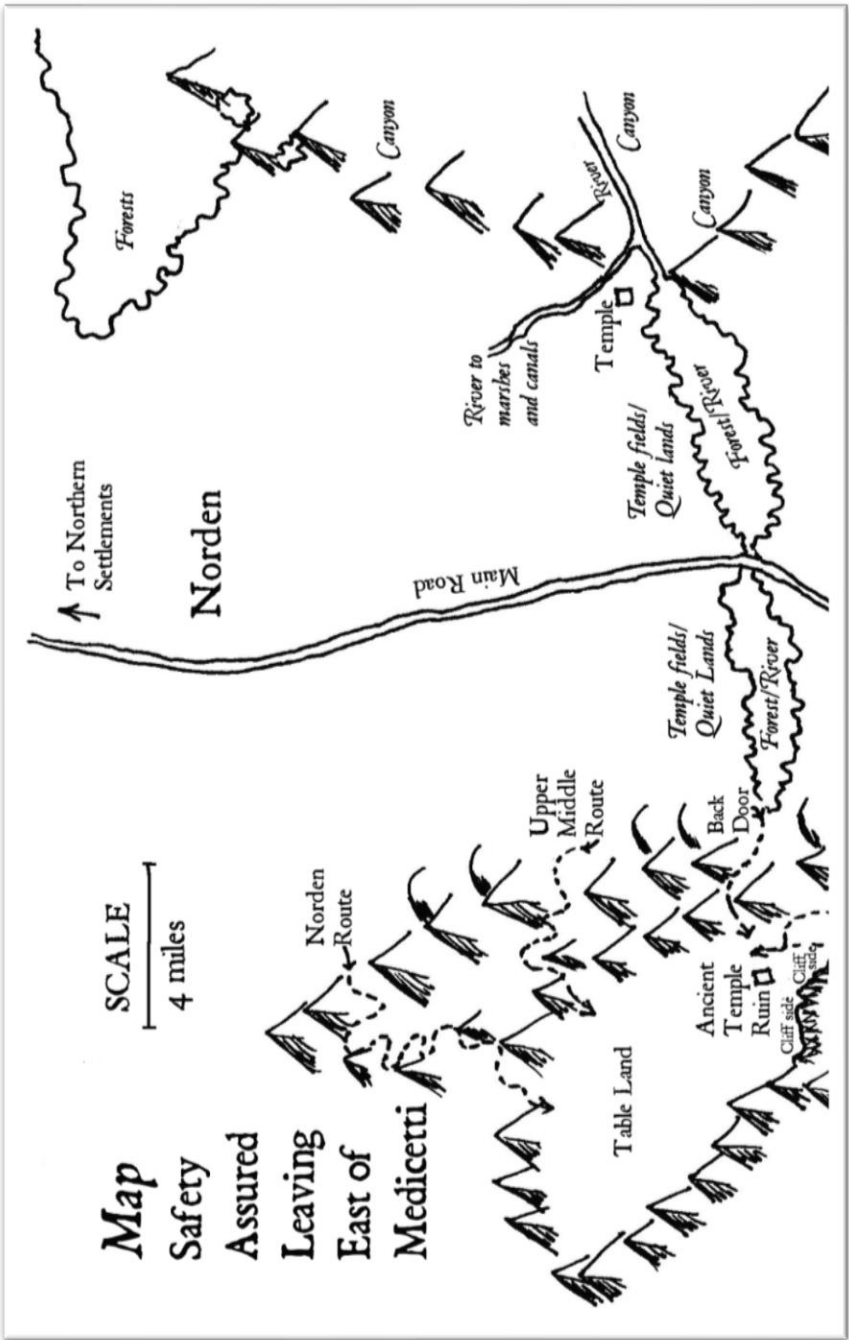
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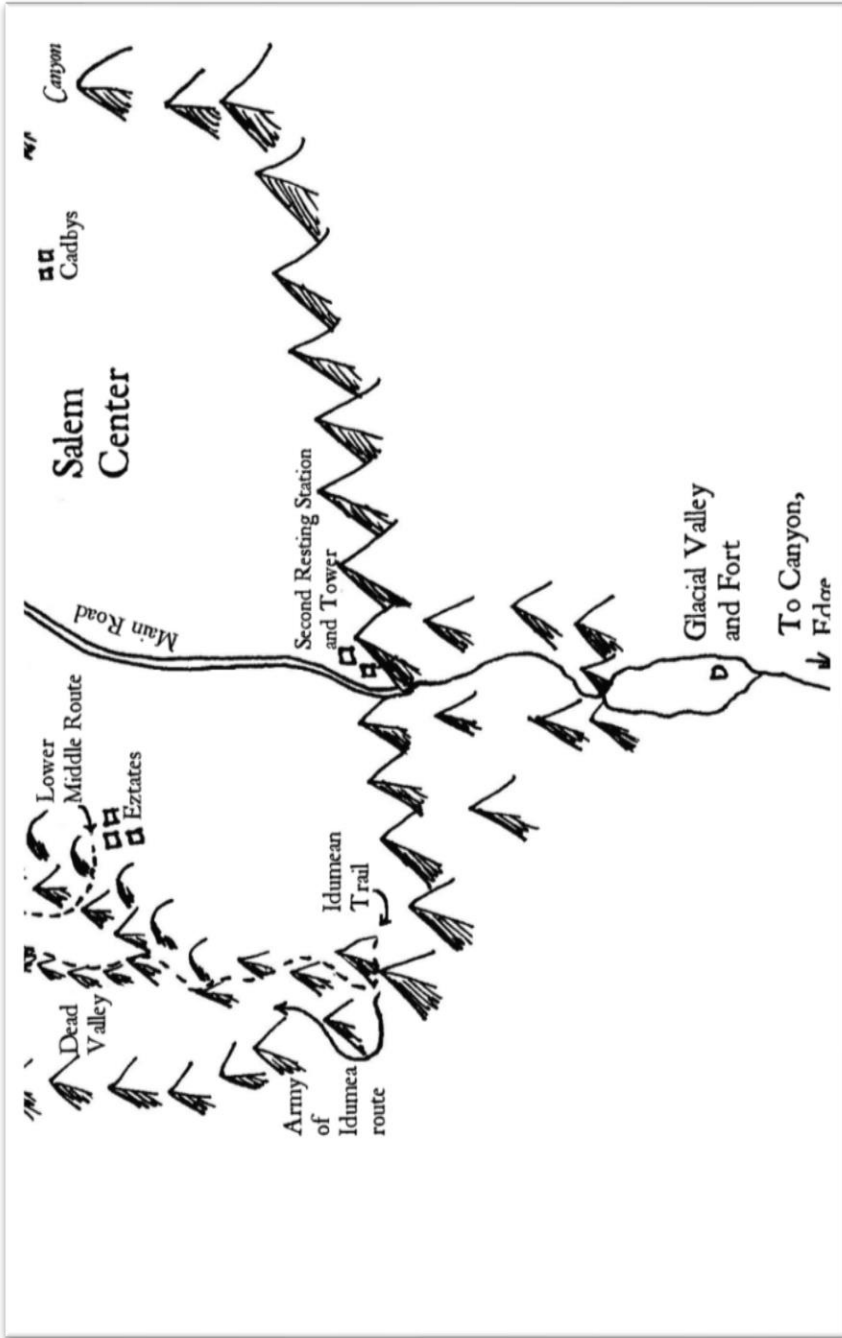


The Soldier in the Middle of the World





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Book 7

**A pronunciation guide to some of the more
unusual names . . .**

Idumea	i-doo-ME-uh
Mahrree	MARR-ee
Peto	PAY-toh
Jaytsy	JAYT-see
Lorixania	Lor-ix-ZYAN-ya
Hifadhi	Hi-FAHD-hee
Cephas	SEE-fus
Qayin	KAY-in
Trovato	troe-VAH-toe
Fadh	FOD
Boskos	BOSS-kose
Barnos	BARN-ose

Book 7

Chapter 1--“So you’re thanking me?”

It was two days after Mt. Deceit erupted, throwing itself all over the world in the form of knee-deep ash, rock, and debris.

Two days after it coughed up a massive mudslide that obliterated the rivers all the way to Idumea and turned everything that wasn’t already gray and ashy into something gray and muddy.

What the rest of the world north of Pools looked like, none of the soldiers knew. Of the twelve thousand who had followed General Lemuel Thorne south to launch his offensive, only two thousand remained. The rest were buried by ash or washed away by the mudslide. From the east, two thousand more men arrived at their makeshift camp yesterday, their numbers cut by a third as the eruption claimed one thousand of their men and supplies. But there were still six thousand supposedly waiting at the fort at Pools, although their supplies were reduced by citizens desperate for food.

To Corporal Lek Briter/Sword Master Thorn Shin, the army’s future didn’t seem too sure. The plan *was* to surprise General Sargon with the massive army and invade Idumea so that Thorne could reclaim the city and reunite the world. Less than a week ago, Corporal Shin had abandoned his twenty soldiers assigned to patrolling the roads in Edge and snuck into the attacking army looking for something more exciting.

He’d found it.

But now that massive army of twenty-one thousand strong was reduced to half that size, and most of those men were injured, hungry, thirsty, and traumatized.

Still, General Lemuel Thorne was as confident as usual that morning, calling for his ragged survivors to begin plodding south to Pools. And if Thorne—who had been down to the fort and back again, and had seen first-hand the devastation—was still optimistic about their chances, then so should be Shin.

So dutifully—eagerly, even—the tall and brawny corporal readied his big black horse that he had acquired from the Stables at Pools yesterday, a distant relative of the original Clark his grandfather Perrin Shin had owned. General Thorne’s optimism as he shouted at wagon drivers and issued commands about loading up the wounded was contagious.

Making sure that General Thorne didn’t see him, Captain Nelt sidled up to Corporal Shin. Since Nelt’s skin and curly hair were nearly as dark as the horse, he blended in. And since he had a knack for moving silently, the corporal jumped in surprise when he heard the quiet, “Hey.”

Shin clutched his chest. “Sir! You nearly scared me to dea—”

“Look,” Nelt cut him off hastily, “Thorne may be coming over at any moment, so just listen. I wanted to wish you well. You’re looking far better than yesterday when you were *hallucinating* and *dehydrated*,” he said, referring to Shin’s performance before General Thorne where he had every man convinced he’d been seeing visions of a dead General Cush. It was a good cover to explain why Shin had been successful in rescuing dozens of soldiers from the mudslide, finding a couple hundred horses, and discovering a water source to save the army when the general couldn’t.

Only Captain Nelt knew about the corporal’s acting abilities, having helped him create the story to preserve his hide, too.

“Shin, I’ve been assigned to lead a group of men who are walking to the fort, so I may not see you again for a while,” Nelt told him. “I just wanted to make sure that *you’re doing all right*.” Those last four words were heavy with meaning.

But Shin smiled easily. “Thank you, Captain. You’ve been very helpful. Without you, I don’t think I’d be in this position right now.”

Nelt raised his eyebrows. “So you’re *thanking* me?”

“Well, yes,” Shin said, confused. “I’m supposed to stay by Thorne’s side today. For all that I did for the army—or rather, what I did *with his grandfather’s* help, I’ve earned a position next to him.”

Nelt scratched his stubbly chin. “You’re really looking forward to this, aren’t you?”

“Shouldn’t I be?”

Nelt glanced around to make sure Thorne was still engaged. “Look, Shin, whose last name rhymes with imagination as well as intimidation—I hit a rhyming gold mine with you, boy, and to complete a few hundred verses of your song for each of those horses you

got from the Stables at Pools, I’m going to need them all. Just be careful, all right? You’re clever and strong and you have half the army a little panicked right now about who you may be, but you’re also *sloppy*,” he whispered the last word.

The corporal’s confusion returned. “What do you mean?”

“I really don’t know who you are, and honestly, even I’m a little spooked. But Corporal, I never told you that General Cush had golden buttons on his uniform. How’d you know that?”

Shin didn’t realize until then that he’d made a mistake last night as he was describing the ghostly image he supposedly was seeing. All the whispers and promptings he’d received from his own grandfather he had instead pretended came from Thorne’s grandfather. Even Nelt had gasped along with the other officers when Shin divulged that detail about the brass buttons.

Until then, he’d never noticed that no officers had such buttons anymore. All he remembered was Puggah’s jacket that he took to Salem.

“His portrait,” Shin blurted, inventing wildly again. He seemed to have a knack for making stories, much like General Thorne. “There’s a painting of Cush in the Province 8 fort—”

“No, there’s not,” Nelt whispered harshly. “There are no portraits in Edge or *anywhere*. Thorne doesn’t want any other images of commanders where they can compete with him. And no officer in the world has worn brass buttons since the old Administrators were killed. I don’t know who you really are, but just remember that I can rhyme your name with usurpation and revelation and execution. And I really don’t want to. I know your secrets and I’m looking forward to seeing how this story plays out. Just be careful, all right? I’d hate to see anything happen to you.”

“Captain Nelt,” Shin smiled easily, deciding the button issue really wasn’t one, “what could possibly happen to me?”

Nelt scoffed. “What could happen to you? You’re riding with the ripest cherry!”

“The what?”

“The ripest cherry,” Nelt gestured wildly. “The reddest berry. Who’s going to be picked off first by the birds? Have you ever been near an orchard, Shin? Without the netting?”

“Yes?”

“So which fruits do the birds snatch first? The brightest, most ob-

vious. Right now, that's General Thorne. Sargon's going to be looking for him in battle, should they ever meet. And if he takes him out, Sargon takes over the army."

Shin's mouth dropped open. "But, it couldn't be *that* easy to take over the army."

"Of course it isn't! Whoever knocks off Thorne then has to deal with about a dozen colonels and majors who all think *they* should be the next in line. There's a reason all of them hang back, Shin, watching Thorne from a distance. Everyone wants Thorne to succeed in unifying and taking over Idumea, yes, but *only* because then it will be easier for *them* to bump him off and take over the world's army themselves. They're all just biding their time, and the closer you get to Thorne, the bigger the target you'll be. Why do you think Thorne's been trying so hard to get a son? To ensure someone will be there to take over once he falls, to continue his name and his legacy. Corporal, just don't become that 'son'."

Shin stared at him, realizing command was a lot more complicated than he'd thought. "You really think he wants me as *his son*?"

Nelt rolled his eyes. "Don't you get it, boy? Creet, and I thought you were smart." He leaned closer. "A king needs an heir," he whispered. "With no marriage or family duty laws left, he can take whoever he wants as his own. Don't you remember last night? He said you'd do well under the name of *Thorne*? Several men have been hoping he'd give up trying to have his own son and claim one of them. Captain Lick in particular is not going to be pleased to see you by Thorne's side. He's been vying for that spot ever since he realized General Yordin wasn't going to conquer Thorne." Nelt shook his head. "Do you *not* understand *anything* of Idumean politics?"

"Apparently not enough," Shin confessed, wishing he had something with which to take notes.

Nelt sighed. "Do the names Deckett and Jaytsy Shin Briter mean anything to you?"

Shin paled at the mention of his aunt and uncle. "A little. We were told about them in training. And they may be my distant relatives—"

"Not according to the latest rumor, Shin. Last night people thought you were Thorne's long-lost nephew, but this morning the rumor is that you are Jaytsy and Deckett's son, abandoned in the forest when Jaytsy was killed. Your Briter relatives found you and hid you, then lied to you about your age. Honestly, I can believe that part.

You look bigger and older than not yet nineteen. I can see by the surprise in your eyes you don’t know about this latest story, but the more I think about it, the more I think it just *may* be true. You might be the last surviving member of the Shin family. Do you know what that makes you?”

Shin was too stunned to speak.

“It makes you the closest thing to royalty left in the world! It’s no secret Perrin Shin wanted to become king, and he was very close to deposing the Administrators. If things hadn’t gone badly with that wife of his, he might have been crowned king that season instead of dying in the forest. A lot of people wished he *had* become king. The world wouldn’t have seen so much fighting and bloodshed. Some people still hold onto the fantasy that he made it out, that he’s still alive somewhere. Supposedly Mrs. Yordin thought that before she vanished last year. She told someone she was going to see him, but then she drowned herself in the river. Maybe she thought she’d meet him in death, but for whatever reason, there are still rumors that not all of Shin’s family died. You may be the proof and you don’t even know it yourself!” he exclaimed, noting the shock on Shin’s face.

It was definitely a shock, because he didn’t realize people suspected his family might still be alive. Which, of course, was true. About fifty Shins lived on the other side of the mountains. And, of course, Mrs. Yordin had been brought to Salem last year, but no one here knew Salem existed. What really surprised him was the notion that Puggah supposedly wanted to be king.

He was so distracted that he barely noticed Nelt was still talking.

“—Thorne would have a much easier time taking over Idumea and the rest of the world if everyone thought his adopted son is the actual grandson of Perrin Shin, the one-time hoped-for king.”

Shin leaned against the black stallion for support. A checklist of sorts had formed in his head, and he had tried to put the details into three columns—Truth, Fiction, and So Close to the Truth I May Get Confused That It’s Only Fiction. He really did need to take notes, because for a moment he wondered if he really *was* older than almost nineteen. Maybe he and his oldest cousin Salema, who was twenty-six now, were twins, and—

He shook his head, confused at the swirl of ideas, rumors, and possibilities. What he latched onto, however, was the original reason he’d run off to the world ten moons ago—to conquer the world and get his family’s honor back. Suddenly that was a whole lot closer.

Sure, there were still some sticky bits, such as Thorne who he had intended to overthrow but instead came to admire over the past year, but all of that would work out somehow, right? Right?

Those muddled thoughts and ideas must have manifest themselves in Shin's expression because Nelt was slowly shaking his head as if regarding a dog stuck up in a tree. "Shin, you're a decent man. You're clever, too, but you just don't *know* enough. I'd really hate to see something happen to you, and standing by Thorne's side? I don't foresee you lasting long. Do you want some advice?"

Shin nodded, still too surprised to speak while trying to figure out how he might be able to reclaim his family's honor and stay on Thorne's good side at the same time.

"Stay just like that—quiet. *Listen*: to everyone. Hear what they're saying and what they are *not* saying. Then watch: watch who they are watching and *not* watching. That's what I do. Hang back. No one knows the truth of everything, but you can pick up a lot by just paying close attention. That's what you need to start doing right now. *Pay attention!* And stay low."

"Yes, sir," Shin whispered.

"Realize something," Nelt said earnestly, "it's not about the truth, it's about *the story*. And for better or worse, you've inserted yourself into the world's best-loved tragedy. Everyone knows *some* version of the story, how Mahrree threatened to kill the soldiers pursuing her in the forest, then she was filled with arrows and fell into a crevice, and poor Perrin fell in after her as he tried to retrieve her, then their pregnant daughter was killed by the sudden return of Guardians, and her husband and brother were carried away—"

Nelt hesitated, as if some details were no longer making sense in light of the evidence standing before him. He shook it off.

"But Shin, the world's going to think you *mean* something. Because here's the world at its lowest point, and suddenly a Shin mystically appears out of thin air—"

"But I've, I've been serving in the army for ten moons—" the corporal reminded him.

"That's not what *the story* will be," Nelt reminded him back. "The truth doesn't matter! Whatever *needs* to happen *will* happen. Thorne's going to use you because he *has* to. He's built his reputation based on the loss of the Shins. He killed the traitor Shem Zenos. He tried to save your supposed grandfather in the forest as he chased after his lecherous wife. Thorne can't afford to ignore all you've done to

help the army in the past two days, but he can certainly exploit it!”

Nelt read the blank expression on the corporal’s face. “This is as hopeless as trying to teach tactics to a goat,” he grumbled. “Look, just listen to what’s going on around you and be careful. And if you *do* manage to survive all of this, remember your old friend, right? If it weren’t for me and our little story last night at the spring about how you’ve been seeing the spirit of a dead general, you might not be alive right now, correct?”

Shin nodded. “Of course, of course.”

“Good. One last bit of advice: ride just a little behind and to the side of Thorne. Let him be the first one the arrows hit.”

Shin paled as Nelt slapped him on the back then marched off.

“They’re saying he’s *who*?!” Captain Lick snarled at the messenger. He had arrived at the fort at Province 2 with the official news that Thorne and the remaining army were on their way to Pools.

The *unofficial* news, however, was that the grandson of Perrin Shin had been found, ironically serving under the tongue-twisting name of ‘Sword Master Thorne Shin.’

The messenger shrugged apologetically.

Captain Lick, pacing in the command office of the fort, turned to the major. “Do you *believe* this?”

Major Gage shrugged as well. “First I’ve heard of it.”

“I know him!” Captain Lick exclaimed. “I mean, I’ve never met him except to see him walk away, but Kroop’s been using him to fix his supply numbers for the past eight moons. He almost met Thorne at the parade grounds when Miss Amory was talking to him—”

Lick stopped abruptly and sat down on a chair.

“Amory!” he whispered.

The messenger looked to the major, wondering what Thorne’s latest consort had to do with the corporal. Major Gage wondered, too, but lowly messengers weren’t privy to officer gossip. “You’re dismissed, Private.” When they were alone, the major analyzed Captain Lick whose eyes were darting back and forth.

Lick was a mealy man, peaked and pointed, skinny and young, always appearing to be on either the edge of ingratiating flattery or a raging temper tantrum. As an officer, his arrogance and presumption

annoyed everyone. But as Thorne's battle commander for the offensive on Idumea, he was perfectly suited.

"Amory?" Gage asked, noticing that Lick was bordering on tantrum again. "Is that his latest breeder?"

Lick nodded, his eyes studying something in the distance.

"Why would she be of interest?" Gage prodded cautiously as if dealing with a coiled snake.

"She's not. She's not," Lick decided suddenly. "I just thought there might be a connection for a moment, but then I remembered Shin was born and raised in Mountseen. His file suggests he was distantly related to the Briters. That's his real name: Briter."

Gage's eyebrows rose. "As in the Shins' son-in-law Briter?"

"Interesting," Lick mumbled. "Very interesting."

"I wonder how Thorne's taking the news," Gage said with a forced smile.

Lick shifted back into borderline tantrum. "According to this note," which he waved with alacrity, "Shin's riding *with* Thorne! Sounds like Thorne's taking it quite well!"

"Hmm," Gage mused. "Perhaps Thorne's considering claiming him. That would be an excellent strategy. All he has to do is see if the boy's parents are still alive, and even if they are, well, *that* isn't a deterrent to the general."

Lick glared at Gage. "Thorne wouldn't dare! Shin's only a corporal. He enlisted not even a year ago—wait, he's not even *supposed* to be out here yet!" Lick kicked the wall. "Not battle-ready until the first year of service is completed! A corporal as Thorne's successor?"

"Whoa, whoa!" Gage held up his hands. "No one said anything about a corporal as Thorne's *successor*. Claiming him wouldn't make him second in command. Besides, I have it from the general himself that I'm in line behind a lieutenant colonel from Coast. Or whatever province number that is. That boy has to outrank me first."

Lick scoffed. "And *that* lieutenant colonel is behind what *other* lieutenant colonel, who's behind another colonel? Come on, Major. I know of three men who each think they are going to be Thorne's assisting general when he's taken over Idumea. Major Yordin told me *he* was promised the position for delivering his father's forts into Thorne's hands, with *my help*, mind you! And he's only a major like yourself. There are probably even more. And now we have some upstart corporal who thinks he's thrown his name into the arena? Well, if it's a fight he wants, it's a fight he's going to get."

The major motioned for Lick to take a chair, which he ignored. "Calm down, calm down. All we've received is a message about a possible member of the Shin family. That's all. He's probably some scared little soldier who's in over his head. Spending the day riding with Thorne ought to terrify him."

"It better," Lick said bitterly, pacing. "He's accomplished nothing but has a *name*. What have I done for Thorne? Everything! Why—"

Another messenger ran into the office, gasping. "Representative! From Sargon! Wants to speak to the officer in charge!"

Lick leaped to his feet and rushed out the door before the major finished reaching for his cap.

Gage stopped in mid-step, stunned by Lick's audacity. "Boy, you better be finding the colonel!" he growled as he rushed out the door. "Because you're definitely not in charge either!"

"You're quiet this morning," General Thorne said with a small smile aimed at Corporal Shin. "Feeling all right?"

Shin, atop his mount and riding to the left of the general, swallowed hard. "Yes, sir. I think all this gray is starting to get to me. And that *smell*." He pulled up his kerchief over his nose, as Thorne had already done.

Today the general wore a cap over his dusty blond hair, the dirt from the past few days settling into the wrinkles around his eyes, making them appear deeper than they were. Instead of his early fifties, Thorne seemed twenty years older. The corporal was glad the general's dead right arm was on the other side where Shin couldn't see it easily. Like many other soldiers, he struggled to ignore the stiff, motionless limb. One's eyes just naturally tracked to it, wishing it'd do something more than act like a long sausage in a sleeve.

"That's the stench of death, Corporal," the general said conversationally. "You'll get used to it in time. It'll pass in a few days as the corpses decay. It'd be much worse if we were near the river."

Even moving the army several hundred paces away from the edges of the mudslide didn't move them far enough from the smell.

Probably because that mudslide, likely originating from Mt. Deceit sixty miles to the north and continuing south into Sargon's territory, was massive and thick and full of who knew how many corpses, animal and human. It had gone through the villages previously known

as Quake, Rivers, Midplain, and Vines. What happened to those places, now labeled with random province numbers, no one was asking. Those had been the homes of most of the soldiers who were now slogging in the ash behind them.

Once Thorne had decided that they'd found all the soldiers they could, he gamely continued on to the south, seemingly unconcerned about what else undoubtedly lay in that half-mile wide mudslide, or what such an immense movement of land and rock and vegetation might mean, especially about the north.

Corporal Shin couldn't think much of it, either, because whenever he did his breathing would become so labored and his chest tighten so much that he thought he'd pass out. It had to be bad, it just had to be. But since no one else seemed to be too concerned, he consoled himself that he didn't need to be either.

"Everything will look better when the sun comes back out." Thorne said in an oddly cheery tone, and glanced to the gray sky as if trying to determine where it would be.

Shin looked around too, feeling nibbles of doubt. "Sir, do you think this is still a good idea? Are there enough soldiers for the offensive?"

"It's true that I've lost a few thousand men and horses," he said indifferently as if detailing the loss of beans rather than lives. "But I've run the numbers and those are sustainable losses. We should be able to free a few more hundred men from the mud down in Pools today. We were bringing them out food and water last night. With those we rescue, I should still have about six to seven thousand men. That'll be more than enough to take over Idumea, especially if their losses are as heavy as ours. They're hurting more than we are."

Shin pondered the general's optimistic evaluation until he glanced over and noticed Thorne studying him.

"So what do you think, Corporal Thorne Shin? You tell me what you think the army should do."

Shin's stomach dropped at the name, at the emphasis of 'Thorne.' "I . . . I'm really not sure, sir. I've been serving less than a year and I never went to Command School. I didn't sign up to think."

"At least you admit it," Thorne almost smiled. "But you can still go to Command School, you know. I have an idea: once we've secured Idumea, I want you to start Command School where I went—at the University of Idumea. I was in control of it before, and many of my past appointees are still serving there. I have a feeling with

your mind and abilities, you could complete the three years of education in far less time than that. Perhaps in a year from now, depending upon how well you perform, you could be commissioned as a lieutenant.”

Shin was speechless. Just last year he was planning to be a lieutenant by deceit, but in just another year he could actually earn the uniform? The possibility was too heady to consider. However . . .

“Sir, that’s a very intriguing offer. But I’m supposed to finish my duties first at Edge—I mean, Province 8. I’m sure I’m already in trouble for abandoning my twenty men to come here before my first year was over.”

Thorne stared at him, almost amused. “You really don’t think *I* can’t release you from rubbish heap duty? Who do you think I am, boy? I *am* the rules! I *am* the duty! And I am the only person in the world you need to worry about obeying, *from now on.*”

Thorne’s words suggested a relationship that gave Shin a flutter of panic. He wanted Thorne to notice him—he’d been trying to get his attention ever since he joined the army—but he didn’t want *this* much attention.

Then he realized a tactful way out. “But sir, I don’t have any way to pay for the university. My parents don’t really have—”

Thorne continued to shake his head. “Shin, Shin, you don’t need to worry about that. Let me take care of it for you, all right?”

Another flap of panic. “No, sir, I really couldn’t. That’s too generous. I’m just a lowly corporal—”

“No you’re not, Shin,” Thorne cut him off. “You’ve been neglected and denied all these years. You have great potential—I can see it in your eyes. I’m sure you don’t realize just *who you are*. It’s not your fault your family was too short-sighted to see your worth. We’re often held back by those who claim to love us. But your unfortunate upbringing by mere farmers doesn’t have to dictate your future. You can forget all that you left behind and embrace something far greater. Allow someone else to provide for you for a time. Let me do for you what should have been done, *son.*”

Shin felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up when Thorne said ‘son.’

Nelt might be right.

He didn’t want to believe it, but the offer to go to the university, to hurry him through the education, to make him a lieutenant by next year . . .

Shin was confused. This was what he had fantasized about, not so long ago. And here he was, riding side by side with General Lemuel Thorne talking about his future, yet somewhere in the middle of his mind it felt as if a heavy, dark wall had crashed down, preventing him from feeling or going or understanding any further. It was an odd sensation, one that if he was paying close enough attention to, would have been yelling, *NO, NO, NO!*

Shin continued to ride south not really thinking too much about his direction. He traveled further away from everything he had ever known, to places he'd only heard of, and to a future that was just intriguing enough that he was willing to consider it.



General Sargon's messenger was a captain in a clean dress uniform carrying the purple striped flag of truce. He sat on his horse as the colonel, major, and captain of the fort at Pools, which they inanelly called Province 2, came from the gates to confront him.

Behind the messenger sat twenty more soldiers, swords drawn in case anyone decided to ignore their captain's truce banner.

The three officers approaching from the fort were still in their muddy, ashy clothing, making them seem even more disagreeable. The colonel, a man in his late fifties with little hair but plenty of hard lines on his face, folded his arms across his chest. "What does Sargon want?"

The captain cleared his throat. "General Sargon is aware of Thorne's intention to invade us. Any hope of surprising our army is futile. We do, however, have a proposition."

The colonel smiled. "Your surrender? Very well, I accept."

The major and captain sniggered behind him.

Sargon's captain remained unmoved. "Yes, the oldest joke in battle. Ha, ha, ha. It's obvious, Colonel, that your forces have sustained a great deal of damage. Much of your food stores have also washed away in the mudslide. We know, because it floated down to feed many hundreds of grateful Idumean citizens."

The colonel growled softly.

"I am here," Sargon's captain continued, "to convey General Sargon's proposal that we cease hostilities for the balance of the season. Considering what's happened, perhaps it's in the best interest for both sides that the armies spend their resources and efforts in rebuilding

the villages, securing supplies, and planning ways to prevent further disasters.”

The colonel eyed Sargon’s captain. “So Captain Glasser, tell me: how’s your father these days?”

Captain Glasser went rigid. “I don’t know, Colonel. He won’t communicate with me.”

“Did he survive the mudslide?”

“Evidently he did, sir.”

“So,” the colonel said, “if an *old man* like him can survive the slide, doesn’t it seem likely that many others did too?”

Glasser was growing exasperated. “That’s why this proposal, sir. To allow both sides to find the survivors and rebuild their villages. What’s the point of battle if there is no spoil at the end?”

The colonel tilted his head. “Well put, Glasser. But from my point of view, it’s you and Sargon who stand to profit from this cessation. From what we’ve seen, your half of the world will have suffered far more devastation than ours. And while you say you propose a cessation of hostilities for both sides, I can’t help but suspect you’re asking for time so that Sargon can find his scattered forces to mount an assault upon us. It seems rash to give you that time. What benefit is there for us?”

Captain Glasser waved his arms in dismay. “Do you have any idea how extensive this disaster was? Yes, there’s the mudslide, but one of our scientists think it originated from Mt. Deceit. The mountain’s exploded! According to him, all that I see before me may be all there is left of the northern half of the world! This cessation would give you time to see if anything is *left for us* to conquer! *It’s for you!*”

The colonel chuckled. “You always were so dramatic, Captain. An exploded mountain, of all things. General Thorne will be here in a little over an hour. Come back in two, then you can hear from Thorne himself what he thinks of Sargon’s little idea. Sergeant!” he called over to a muddy soldier. “I want ten soldiers to accompany Captain Glasser back to the border. Make sure he and his men are unharmed. You can attack them later.” The colonel turned abruptly to head back to the fort.

“Colonel!” Captain Glasser called to him as the major and captain followed. “Colonel, wait! Please! Listen to reason! *Father!*”

Colonel Glasser ignored his son’s shouts as the fort gates closed behind him.



“Normally the approach to Idumea is quite picturesque,” Thorne explained to Shin as the horses trudged through more gray muck. “Today, though, I wouldn’t know this place from Province 8. Looks more like a snow day in the Raining Season, not a hot 58th Day of Weeding. But look there in the distance—see the blue flag? We’ve been spotted by the fort. Ever been this far south before, son?”

“No, sir,” Shin admitted. He’d heard ‘son’ so many times in the past hour that he’d quit stiffening at it. “Spent all my life in the north.”

“The mountains are agreeable enough,” Thorne acknowledged. “They grew on me while I’ve been there. But there’s no place like Idumea. I think the ash seems less deep here. Perhaps the city is relatively unharmed, except for the slide. There’s so much I’d like to show you—buildings and houses of great interest. You’d find the arena incredible. Everyone does. There’s nothing as large anywhere in the world. And I think you’d appreciate the old mansion.”

Shin squinted. “The old mansion?”

“Where the High Generals of Idumea used to live, before the Administrators lost control. The mansion was still intact the last time I held the city, and I had it refurbished to its former glory. Beautiful home. You could stay there while you attend the university.” Thorne sighed longingly. “Creet, son, how I’ve missed Idumea! You’ll love it, I’m sure you will.”

“Yes, sir,” Shin said quietly.

The mansion.

He tried to recall what he’d learned about it a year ago when he read Aunt Calla’s book about the army of Idumea during the Shin-Zenos years. If it was the same mansion he was thinking of, that might have been where The Dinner had been held, where a young Lieutenant Thorne danced all evening with an even younger Jaytsy Shin.

Where his great-grandparents were killed.

Maybe he could live in the dormitories instead, claim that it’d help him study better than staying in such a grand home filled with too many family ghosts and stories.

Thorne turned around to the balance of the army walking and riding behind him. “Colonel Ferrim, the corporal and I are going ahead to the fort. You’re in charge here.”

Ferrim saluted and Thorne turned to Shin. “Ground’s clearer through here. We should get to the fort as soon as possible, see what

needs to be done in rescuing the rest of the soldiers.”

“Yes, sir,” Shin answered and kicked his horse into a gallop.

Soon they arrived at the fort, the large gates opening for them. Two soldiers came up to take their horses and General Thorne waited to make sure Shin was by his side before striding to the main building.

Colonel Glasser came out to meet him, and his eyes lingered for a moment on the large corporal who accompanied him. “General, good to see you again,” Glasser said. “We’ve had a visitor since you were here last night.”

“Oh?” Thorne said as he walked into the building, Glasser and Shin following him to the command office. “Sargon’s getting nervous, is he?”

“Yes, sir,” Glasser said. “How did you know?”

Thorne chuckled bitterly as he walked into the inner office, nodded a greeting to Lick and the major, and sat down in the chair behind the desk normally reserved for Colonel Glasser.

But Shin hung back in the outer office, unnoticed.

“When you’ve been fighting a man for so many years,” Thorne continued, “you begin to think like him. Let me guess—he wants to call for a cessation of hostilities so we can assess our losses?”

“I’m impressed, sir,” said Glasser.

“Of course you are,” said Thorne. He scanned some pages on the desk, then glanced up. “Where’d he go?”

“Who?” Glasser said.

“Shin!” Thorne bellowed. “Where are you, son?”

Feeling completely out of place, he *had* been trying to tiptoe away but wasn’t fast enough. Shyly, he peered into the office.

A major named Gage smiled at his hesitancy, but Captain Lick greeted him with a frosty glare.

“I was just . . . waiting out here, sir.”

“That’s not where I want you, Shin,” Thorne declared. “Get in here. Your training in command begins right now.” He ignored Captain Lick’s angry scoff, and Shin slunk into the room. “Here’s the scenario: Sargon has called for a cessation of hostilities. Do we agree to it?”

Realizing the officers were watching him, he said only, “Uhh.”

Thorne scowled. “Now, now. The soldier who got most of my army out into the dark to dig men out of the mudslide can certainly produce something more compelling than ‘Uhh!’”

Shin searched his mind, waiting to hear the nudges, the whispers

from Puggah which had sustained him for so long in the world. It was General Shin's words which had motivated the army to go digging, his promptings that had found them the horses and led them to water.

It was General Shin who had been saving Thorne's army for the past few days, but now he was gone, perhaps behind that wall in the corporal's mind.

He was on his own.

"What would be the advantages for us accepting the proposal, sir?"

Thorne tipped his head at the question, probably realizing it was a delaying tactic, albeit an appropriate one. "It'd give us time to pull together our manpower, organize our resources, and create a plan for attacking Idumea based on the new circumstances."

Shin nodded. "And it would give Sargon time to do that as well, right, sir? No more element of surprise."

Thorne almost smiled. "That's right."

Shin thought for a moment. "Why did Sargon say he wanted a cessation?"

Thorne gestured to Glasser.

"To evaluate the needs of the citizenry," the colonel explained to both of them. "Sargon thinks our efforts would be best put to use rebuilding the villages so that there's still something to attack. But he did suggest that their scientists think this is actually Mt. Deceit all around us—"

Shin gasped and he belatedly hoped it was quiet. He'd heard the rumors, and thought it himself, but to hear that supposedly intelligent men also thought that this was the volcano's eruption—

The prophecy? After all these years could the prophecies of the old guides finally be happening? "So it really *was* the awakening of Mt. Deceit," he couldn't help but whisper to himself.

Glasser glanced at him before he continued with Thorne. "Sir, have your scouts returned yet from the north with news about the mountain? We need some kind of verification."

"Nothing yet. They probably got *stuck* somewhere," Thorne said, with a little irritation. "But early this morning Ferrim sent two more on horseback up to Province 4. I should hear back from them by tomorrow night at the latest."

"Because," Glasser continued tentatively, "the captain suggested that perhaps *we've* been hit worse than Idumea. How's the land to the north?"

Thorne waved off his question without an answer.

“So, the cessation would be an act of mercy?” Shin volunteered.

Thorne narrowed his eyes. “I don’t *need* mercy, Shin.”

“Of course not, sir,” he defended anxiously. “But maybe the people do?”

Thorne leaned forward. “So if the decision were yours, Shin, what would you do?”

The corporal gulped under the stares of the officers. “I . . . I can’t help but think about the people, sir,” he started uncertainly. “I mean, we’re fighting *for them*, right? To protect them? But wouldn’t they rather we take *care* of them first? What would *they* want?”

Glasser looked cautiously at Thorne.

Lick developed a smug little smile and also watched the general, anticipating his reaction.

Thorne sat back in his chair as he scrutinized Corporal Shin, who lost an inch of height in worry.

“The problem with the people, son, is that they rarely know what’s best for them. They’re self-centered, mindless sheep that run together after anything that can promise them security. Watch what happens when a wolf enters their flock. If they were truly intelligent, they’d stick together like a barricade and face that wolf. But never in my life have I seen the dumb animals combine to do that. They scatter in terror, leaving each sheep vulnerable.

“That’s why they need someone to fight off the wolf *for them*,” Thorne continued, punctuating his message with a finger pointed at Shin. “That’s why I’m here, son. I fight because what these senseless people don’t realize is that Sargon isn’t just one wolf, he’s thousands. And even though the people may think the priority is food, water, and shelter, the real priority is to make sure the wolf doesn’t attack while they’re searching for those supplies.”

Shin did his best to stand tall. “I understand, sir.”

“Good,” said Thorne, turning his attention back to the updates on Glasser’s desk.

“But I don’t agree.” The words were out before Shin realized he’d said them.

Slowly Thorne raised his head. “You *what*?”

“As you know, sir,” Shin began nervously, hoping the correct words would come out, “I don’t know much about battle or politics, but I can’t help but wonder . . . if the sheep are starving to death, what will they care about the lack of wolves?”

He was vaguely aware that Major Gage smiled in approval, that Captain Lick was massaging his fist as if he were ready to throw it, and that Colonel Glasser was gazing out the window as if he'd heard nothing.

But because Thorne was staring so steadily at him he felt as if he were shrinking.

"All that the flock needs is a handful of ewes and a couple of robust rams, Shin," Thorne said as if teaching a stupid child a simple lesson. "If the rest of the flock dies, the few that remain will have a peaceful life with plenty of space and no wolves anywhere."

Shin, dismayed, lost all his previous hesitancy. "Sir, are you suggesting that, that, that *letting* all these people die is . . . *not a problem*? Their deaths just mean more room for the rest of us?"

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting—"

"But, *sir*—"

Thorne threw down the piece of paper, his patience gone. "And here's where your education begins, Shin!" he yelled. "What's the battle I can win today? Tomorrow? Can I rebuild the provinces now? Can I find out what happened to Mt. Deceit this very instant? No! But can I launch an offensive on Idumea in two days' time with the men I have and the resources I still possess? Oh, yes! Most definitely! Can I succeed? Absolutely! And that's what we'll do!"

Captain Lick grinned in satisfaction and folded his arms. Major Gage nodded too, though not as enthusiastically.

Colonel Glasser cleared his throat. "Sir? The captain should be returning soon for your answer. Shall I deliver it or do you want to?"

Thorne pulled his eyes away from the shocked corporal and turned to Glasser. "Your son, right? Do you want to see him again?"

The colonel shrugged indifferently. "I could handle it for you."

"Then deliver the message that our forces and provinces are fine and need no time to rebuild. Sargon better hope his army is as ready as ours. Many of our soldiers are anxiously awaiting the moment they can bloody their swords," and he smiled derisively at Shin.

The corporal placed his hand on the hilt, remembering his bold words two nights ago about being eager to ding his new sword. That now sounded cruel and stupid.

"Gentlemen," Thorne turned to Lick and Gage, "get me numbers on how many more men we need to dig out. The balance of the army should be approaching the gates. See to it they are fed and taken care of. You are both dismissed. The corporal and I have a few things to

discuss.”

Captain Lick shot a triumphant glare at Shin as he walked out, with a sympathetic major behind him.

Glasser glanced out the window again. “I think the messenger’s returning, General. I’ll alert you if there are any new developments,” and he shut the door as he walked out.

Shin continued to stand at attention, his gut churning with worry. He’d inherited Muggah’s unfortunate trait of always saying whatever he thought without concern for the consequences. Now, in his first few hours next to General Thorne, he’d already offended him. And there were no witnesses to what would happen to him next.

Thorne leaned back in the chair and, with a finger on his good left hand, indicated to the chair across from him. “Sit.”

Shin desperately wished he could leave and dig out more men, but he obeyed the order and waited for the worst.

But instead of yelling, Thorne tipped his head and said, “Brave of you to speak up like that. That’s the Shin I remember from the other night. Interesting perspective. You sounded like your namesake, there. Do you know that?”

Shin opened his mouth to respond, but no words came out. He didn’t hear Perrin Shin anymore so he didn’t know why he sounded like him.

Thorne watched him as if waiting for something more, watching for some kind of evidence. When nothing happened beyond Shin holding his breath in fear, Thorne leaned forward. “I have a little secret to share with you, son. You may be more like him than you realize. There’s evidence that you may actually *be* his descendant. The name you chose when you were recruited, then, is no accident.”

Shin swallowed, trying desperately to keep track of all the stories, names, and variations that were now filling the confusing columns in his mind. More than ever he needed some paper and sharpened charcoal to take notes.

Thorne read the bewildered expression on his face. “Don’t worry, son,” he said, almost kindly. “I don’t see you as a threat but as a gift. If *his* blood really does flow through your veins, you need to learn how to manipulate that. You could succeed where he failed. And there’s no one in the world more qualified to teach you about becoming a great leader than me. It’s no mistake that you wandered to Province 8 and came to my fort, no accident that you snuck into my ranks to come to Idumea. You were meant to find me and I was meant to

teach you. This is where you belong, son: right by my side where I mold those interesting ideas of yours and make you one of the greatest leaders the world has ever seen.”

Shin could hardly breathe as another thought bloomed in his mind. He wanted to be the youngest sergeant major, but what if he could be something even more?

What if he could be the next General Perrin Shin?

He stared at General Thorne who still evaluated him intently, his piercing blue eyes trying to pry into Shin’s dazed brown ones.

“The prospect’s overwhelming, isn’t it, Shin? I understand. Let it all sink in. I have even more to share, but I can tell you’re not ready to handle it yet. Once we take Idumea, I’m going to pour all my attention into training you properly. Perhaps I should ask you, do you even *want* to become that great leader, son?”

Shin nodded.

“Words, son. I want words!”

“Sir, yes, sir!” Shin said loudly.

Thorne smiled. Even though it was meant to be genuine it seemed brittle. “Excellent. The first thing we need to do is work on your name. I like the two last names, but the order ought to be reversed.”

“Sir?”

“Changing your uniform officially will have to wait, but until then, how do you feel about the name Lek Perrin Shin Thorne? Captain Nelt told me your real name is Lek Briter. I’ll let you keep some of your old identity while building a new one around it. Well, *Corporal Thorne*? How does that sound?”

Shin tried to catch his breath. Nothing that had occurred in the past few days felt familiar or understandable. Yet this was what he wanted, wasn’t it? Wasn’t this future certainly more intriguing than anything else he’d imagined?

“Sounds fine, sir.”

Chapter 2--"It was complicated enough before, but now?"

Colonel Ferrim watched from a distance as Colonel Glasser spoke to the messenger with the purple striped flag. The last of the several hundred soldiers were filing into the fort, taking nervous glances at Sargon's men who seemed tense and angry.

At the end was Captain Nelt, and he turned to Ferrim, likely hoping to read his expression.

Ferrim's face remained emotionless as he said, "See to your men, Captain. Get them fed. They're going to need their strength soon."

Ferrim remained outside the gates as Sargon's men rode away. Glasser noticed him and walked over to his long-time friend.

"I see they have horses as well," Ferrim said quietly to Glasser.

"They do," Glasser answered heavily.

"Your son looks healthy," Ferrim noted. "Is Thorne still planning to attack?"

"Yes. Yurgis, how bad is out there? From the towers we can't see anything alive—no livestock, no animals. Nothing."

Ferrim sighed. "I heard you had to fight off the Idumeans looking for food."

Glasser blinked. "What? Those were *our* people we fought off, not Idumeans. *They've* been eating what we lost down the river!"

Ferrim groaned. "That's not what Thorne told us last night."

Glasser looked around to make sure they were alone. "Are you surprised?"

"We're facing disaster!" Ferrim exclaimed. "Everything out there is dead! Farms, orchards—everything's gone. Maybe the root crops and corn are still salvageable, but only if we work quickly. As for the rest? No grains, no vegetables. Fruit, berries, grapes—all withered. I don't think there's enough food in the emergency supply houses to see us beyond a few moons."

Glasser's rotund belly sagged. "That's what I feared. We've lost a lot of our soldiers and all of our cattle from breathing in the ash. I was able to get a few of the cattle butchered before villagers stole the rest of the carcasses. And to be honest, Yurgis, those emergency supply buildings? Filling those has been neglected for years around here. I suspect every supply building is mostly bare as well."

Ferrim threw his hands in the air. "We've got to convince Thorne now's not the time for an offensive! We've only a few days to salvage whatever's left before it rots. Who cares if we take Idumea if everyone dies from starvation a season later?"

"Thorne's too obsessed with that corporal," Glasser said bitterly. "He's already running him through his own version of Command School, and even did a scenario with him about Sargon requesting a cessation. But Yurgis, the corporal's naïve and trusting. We just might be able to use him."

"Do you realize who he thinks that boy is?"

"We heard the rumors," Glasser told him. "I think the news moved faster than the mudslide. Already Thorne seems to be treating him like his own. I wouldn't be surprised if he claims him."

"It might be even more than that," Ferrim said. "He told me last night he *finally found his son*. You may not know this, but he used to be involved with Jaytsy Briter. I'm beginning to wonder if that corporal might not actually be *Thorne's* son instead of Deckett Briter's. And the corporal does look remarkably like Colonel Shin."

"I was thinking the same thing, especially when Thorne asked his opinion," Glasser said. "He gave a very Shin-like answer."

Ferrim's eyebrows went up. "Really? What'd he say?"

"Shouldn't we take care of the people first? That's when Thorne gave him a very loud lesson using his old sheep and wolf analogy."

"And how'd the corporal respond?"

Glasser smiled genuinely. "He asked Thorne if starving sheep would care that there were no more wolves around."

Ferrim found himself smiling as well. "That's a brave boy! What happened after that?"

"I had to leave to come out here. Thorne's alone in my office with him right now."

Ferrim winced in sympathy. "If he's still in Thorne's good graces after that . . . Glasser, he *might* be malleable enough for us. At least he may be able to shove Captain Lick out of the way."

"So Shin's not in Lick's little group? Good," Glasser bristled.

"That little Zenos upstart came in yesterday with so much arrogance I was ready to use his pasty little face to shine my boots. If Shin's not with him, then Lick's got to be furious. I'm sure he expected Thorne would claim him as his son after the Idumean offensive."

Ferrim sneered. "Perhaps Battle Commander Lick will finally irritate Thorne enough that Lemuel will kill him for us. So—Idumea. What's really happening there?" he whispered.

Glasser's smile faded. "It's bad," he breathed. "All the connections are scattered. It was complicated before, but now it's a complete mess. To get Thorne where he needed to be so Sargon's side could assassinate him was going to require a great deal of coordination, but according to what my son could reveal, they're no longer prepared. He went so far as to use the code, 'Listen to reason.'"

Ferrim exhaled in despair. "It took us six moons to get this planned! How long would it take to organize both sides *again*? I've made promises, Glasser, and I'm growing a little tired of playing Thorne's best friend."

Glasser raised an eyebrow. "And you think Sargon's going to be better?"

Ferrim folded his arms. "Does it matter? He won't be around long enough for us to find out, correct?"

Glasser smirked softly. "The most disappointing news out of all of this destruction was that both of them *survived*."

Ferrim scoffed in agreement. "Thorne's beginning to believe in the spirits of the dead generals. He thinks this is all their doing, some kind of protection and reward. Next he'll be worshipping a pebble for bringing him back his 'son.'"

Glasser tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Yurgis, I'm beginning to wonder—maybe we just need to *simplify* everything. Maybe this *is* fortunate. Perhaps we can still salvage it all."

Ferrim squinted at him. "Go on . . ."

"We need to get in the crops first so we can feed the people. Remember, they'll follow whoever feeds them. And then, Yurgis," Glasser smiled as he stroked his chin, "I know you used to be a Writings Wretch so don't pretend you weren't, but until I find an old copy of The Writings, what can you tell me about a curious little phrase our frightened corporal uttered: *Mt. Deceit awakening*?"

Obediently following General Thorne, Corporal Thorne left the office feeling uncomfortable with his new name. It just didn't stick. It was like trying to get melted lard to stay on a ceiling. He'd tried that before, because he was challenged by his sist—

Anyway, it just felt odd, like walking sideways all day with one's clothing inside-out and hoping no one would notice.

But they did. He felt everyone's eyes on him as he trailed the general through the vast and packed eating hall for midday meal. Thorne went straight to the head of the line of soldiers getting food, took the first plate offered him, handed it to the corporal, then took the next plate. He tipped his head for the corporal to follow him, and Shin, trying not to look at anyone, followed him to a smaller room.

But one man caught Shin's eye.

Captain Nelt, sitting with his men, raised his eyebrows as if to send all kinds of warnings before Shin skulked into the private eating room.

A few higher ranking officers were already there as the general put down his plate at a table in the middle of the room. Shin stopped in the doorway, knowing he didn't belong there.

Thorne frowned expectantly at him, so Shin stepped into the room and set his plate across from Thorne's. The conversation in the room fell silent as the officers watched the anxious corporal sit down across from the general.

"Men," Thorne said to the room as he speared a chunk of beef, "how's morale out there?"

None of the officers wanted to be the first to speak. Besides, all of them were staring at the corporal, trying to see what everyone was talking about.

They saw it.

The corporal shrank a little under their inspections and tried to eat as inconspicuously as he could while being the center of attention.

"Well?" Thorne roared to get their focus back to him.

"Good!" an officer answered automatically. "Considering the circumstances."

"Yes, yes," Major Gage added quickly. "Considering. We have enough food and the men are eager to find more."

Another officer nodded at him to continue.

Gage cleared his throat. "You see, General, this is the farming swath of Pools, as I'm sure you know—"

"Of course I know," Thorne said, concentrating on his plate.

"Well, everything that's salvageable needs to be harvested now or it'll rot. I was, well, *we* were," he motioned to officers who suddenly weren't looking at him, "—we, we, we were just discussing that if we took all the men and went to the farms, we could harvest everything in . . . less than a week."

When the general didn't respond but took another bite of his beef, Gage took that as a promising sign and continued.

"The soldiers who are weak will have time to recuperate, the citizens will be taken care of, and we could commence the offensive far more effectively. Sir?"

The corporal thought that sounded like the most reasonable idea he'd heard in days.

"And while we're strengthening," Thorne said, taking up a piece of bread, "so too is Sargon. Correct, Major?"

Gage cleared his throat. "What if they're already strong, sir? We have no idea of their condition—"

"They're worse than we are," Thorne insisted, pushing his food around aggressively with his fork, "because they asked for mercy. Only the weak beg for mercy."

"And only the strong grant it."

Thorne stopped moving his fork and looked up at the corporal.

Every officer was watching him as well, and only then did Corporal Shin-Thorne realize he'd said those words out loud.

"Sir," he added, far too late.

Thorne sat up fully. "The strong grant mercy?" he asked slowly. "To what end? For what purpose?"

Rigid with fear, because only one word came to his mind and he hoped it was from the back of his mind, Shin said, "Respect."

"For who?" Thorne asked tonelessly.

"For the strong." The words filled his mind and he offered them as quickly as they formed. "The enemy wants to destroy what it fears, but it wants to join what it respects."

"*Join?*" said Thorne sharply.

Shin nodded, although he had no idea what was going to come out of his mouth next. "Isn't it nobler to have your enemy capitulate to you out of respect rather than because you pounded him into submission? Isn't it easier to get them to fall in line behind you when they respect the vision you have?"

He knew the words weren't his because he had no idea what the word 'capitulate' meant.

Maybe, just maybe, General Shin was still by his side . . .

But if he was, why would he want Thorne to find a way to unify the world again? Why defeat Sargon—

SAVE LIVES.

Puggah! General Shin *was* still there, shouting words over that wall in his mind. The corporal nearly grinned, realizing that his grandfather couldn't leave the army that easily.

Thorne continued to eye him, as did everyone in the room.

Shin had one more idea. "The farmers might appreciate a little help, sir. Don't we have men available for today and maybe tomorrow? Until we march to Idumea? Sir?"

Now the officers shifted their gazes to Thorne.

"I have men I could spare," Gage offered.

"As do I, sir," added another officer. A couple more nodded.

Thorne's jaw shifted as he continued to stare into Shin's worried eyes. "First priority is getting the last of our men out of the mudslide. Then, after that, whoever is available can . . . help the farmers in the fields," he mumbled before turning back to his plate.

Shin sagged in relief and smiled. He chanced to look at the officers, and several nodded back appreciatively.

Shin resumed eating, feeling as if he'd just passed some enormous test. "It'll be good to go digging again," he said between mouthfuls.

Thorne looked up at him. "You? Digging? I don't think so."

"Why not, sir?"

"Why not? You have other duties to fulfill!"

Several of the officers tried to give each other looks without looking at each other. Each man turned back to his meal but his attention was at the squabble beginning at the center table.

"But," Shin started, confused, "but you said the first priority was to get the last of the men out!"

There was a stray cough that came from one table, and a snort that came from another. Both tried to sound like warnings but neither Thorne nor Shin paid them any attention.

Thorne pointed at Shin with his fork. "That is *enough*, Corporal!" and he turned back to his meal.

The corporal did not. "But, sir," he persisted daringly, because another trait he'd unfortunately inherited from his grandmother was the inability to stop pressing an issue, "did you or did you not say the first priority is to pull out the men? Shouldn't *every* able-bodied man be doing that? Who's more able than me?"

Thorne cocked his head and glared at the corporal.

It was no ordinary glare, but one that had been well-practiced and honed to turn even the most hardened receiver into a crumbling mess of fear.

And it worked quite well on the corporal, who shriveled appropriately in his chair and silently turned back to his meal.

When Captain Lick returned from the mudslide, his list of survivors very short. Only a dozen soldiers were needed to pull them out.

The rest of the army, as Thorne had agreed to in front of too many officers to pretend he hadn't, could spend the afternoon harvesting nearby farms.

Colonel Glasser had made the assignments himself and Colonel Ferrim volunteered to lead out the first groups of soldiers.

General Thorne had wanted the corporal by his side to inspect the surviving supply barns, but Shin had begged him to let him teach the soldiers how to harvest instead.

He'd just finished describing what potato plants look like to a group heading out when he noticed Captain Nelt. Shin gave him a brief smile, but Nelt didn't return it.

The captain waited until the soldiers left before he walked up to him. "Did you listen to a *word* of advice I gave you? Any of it?"

Corporal Shin blinked. "I rode behind and to the side of him—"

"At midday meal I heard the two of you through the door," Nelt hissed. "I used to argue with *my father* the same way! Has he claimed you already?"

"I don't think so," Shin admitted, deciding not to tell Nelt about his new, complicated name, "but I'm not sure."

Nelt rolled his eyes. "Trust me, you'd know. It has to be a public and formal declaration. He claims you, you accept, and then you are Whatever Your Name Thorne."

But Shin smiled. "It's all right, I think I can handle this." He took Nelt by the shoulder. "I can do good things *by his side*, Captain." That happy thought had occurred to him after midday meal, and now he was eager to see how far he could take it.

ONLY BECAUSE IT'S NOT POSSIBLE TO GET YOU HOME RIGHT NOW, SO WE NEED TO MAKE THE BEST OF A DIFFICULT SITUATION.

Shin ignored most of that. The best part of having the spirit of

General Perrin Shin by his side was the ability to ignore him as well. “Who do you think convinced him to let the soldiers go harvesting?” Shin said proudly. “I bet I can get him to do it again tomorrow. Hey,” he grinned and shook Nelt’s shoulder. “What do you say, Captain—another bet?”

Nelt ogled him as if he were a tree which suddenly knew how to talk.

TELL HIM, NELT: HE’S THE DUMBEST SOLDIER YOU’VE EVER MET.

“You’re the dumbest soldier I’ve ever met,” Nelt breathed. “Just how far do you think you can push Thorne? You’re in a truce with him right now—”

“I don’t think so,” Shin said. “You make it sound like a battle—”

“It *is* a battle, Shin! With men like Thorne, everything’s a battle. He’s tolerating you to figure out who you are and how you may help him or undermine him. Once he’s got you figured out, this truce will end and you’ll either become his unfailing servant or his next target!”

Shin recoiled at Nelt’s brutal assessment. Thorne had been almost kind at times. “But I don’t think that’s the case with me, Captain. I’m on top of things, sir. It’s different—”

Nelt shook his head sadly. “I like you, I really do. That’s why what’s going to happen to you is so tragic. In one way, you’re right: you *are* on top of things which makes you the biggest target. Just don’t become Corporal Thorne. Thorne’s not as much fun to rhyme, I have to tell you,” he said. “Born, torn, mourn, forlorn . . . Slag, I’m going to miss you when he’s done with you.”

Nelt patted Shin on the arm as if saying a permanent farewell and jogged after a group of soldiers heading out of the fort.

“What does he know,” Shin mumbled to himself. “I’m the grandson of Perrin Shin, after all.”

THAT’S A LIABILITY, YOUNG PERE—NOT AN ASSET. ARE YOU LISTENING? DO YOU KNOW WHAT “LIABILITY” MEANS? YOUNG PERE!

Captain Lick fumed as he watched the tall corporal in the compound giving orders to men who had higher rank and far more experience. All because he was now attached to Thorne.

And because he could draw pictures of plants quite accurately with charcoal on the walls of the fort. He’d even sketched little soldiers with shovels demonstrating how to dig up the potatoes. One of

the stick-figure soldiers had a smiling face and was waving.

Lick's stomach twisted. This was *not* Thorne's son, a product of his relationship with Jaytsy! Lick suspected where the boy might really be from, but he couldn't divulge that without compromising his own security.

He spied Thorne marching into the compound. The general stopped, stared at the drawings on the walls that looked like a giant farming textbook and . . . smiled?!

"No!" Lick snarled. "I've done far more to earn the position of Thorne's 'boy' than anyone! No, Shin—I know what you are. You're not going to ruin all my family's work. Not now!"

That night Corporal Shin rested in the guest quarters on the softest mattress. He sighed in complete comfort as the exhaustion from the past few days overcame him.

Tonight he had a full belly, was satisfied that hundreds of acres of farmland had been harvested by five thousand soldiers, and he could finally sleep in complete security.

So why his eyes wouldn't remain closed that night was a complete mystery to him.

The next morning he was awakened by something he hadn't seen in days—sunshine. It burned bleakly through the remaining gunk on the 60th Day and changed the scenery. Instead of gray, everything became a lighter gray.

At least it was different, Shin decided as he stood up and looked out his window. The sky still wasn't the deep blue he remembered, but there was patchy parts of blue, and it had to be enough. Another perfect day for more harvesting.

He washed his face and reached for his uniform he'd left hanging over the chair, but it wasn't there.

His heart skipped as he looked frantically around the room. He glanced at the door, and hanging on a hook was a new uniform with new underclothes and a cap. Wondering when it arrived, he took the uniform off the hook and held his breath as he looked at the name

patch.

SHIN.

Seeing that familiar name filled him with relief. He really didn't need everyone looking at the label of THORNE and imagining things about his aunt. He probably couldn't have the new label until he was formally claimed by Thorne, and he was fine with that delay as he peeled off his foul undershirt.

He washed as best he could in the basin, since no one was allowed to bathe because clean water was in short supply, then dressed in the new underclothes and uniform. He was going to feel far too clean and guilty when he faced the rest of the still-muddied soldiers.

As he checked out his new uniform in the mirror, he found he still couldn't look himself in the eyes. He searched all of his other features but couldn't focus on any one spot for long, as if his eyes didn't like what they saw and wanted to be done with the task quickly.

He ran his hand through his black hair to shake out the dust which unnaturally lightened it, then put on the new cap. It fit perfectly yet felt strange on his head.

Unsure of what he was to do next, he stepped out of the guest quarters into the officer's wing. The table was set for breakfast. Cautiously he approached the table, glanced behind him to see if anyone was watching, and snatched a biscuit.

"You're going to need a lot more than that to keep you going this morning, Shin."

He jumped and turned to face Colonel Glasser, who was standing in the shadows of a corner.

"Sit down, son," he said genially as he approached. "This is for you as well. General's orders. Mind if I join you? Doesn't seem to be anyone else up yet, but since you were raised on a farm, I'm not surprised to see you up so early."

Shin nodded. "Of course. Please, sit."

Glasser smiled as he pulled out a chair, Shin sitting down only after he did. "Try the sausages," the colonel said, pushing the plate to him. "Not sure what they put in it, and with sausages around here it's never a good idea to ask, but I've never tasted finer."

Shin took some, knowing what they were but having never eaten them. Back at the Ezzates, half of the families didn't eat meat, and the rare times when they did it was usually poultry or fish, never pork or the beef his uncles and cousins loved too much alive. His mother

thought pigs were filthy, fatty things and only used bacon for flavoring, or when her father-in-law begged her to fry some up for a sandwich. If any sausage tasted finer than this, Shin had no idea.

The colonel nodded at his clothing.

"Does the new uniform fit? We had to guess at the size but it looks like we did all right."

"So I have you to thank for this, sir?"

"Again, general's orders, although I was happy to do so. You see, we have you to thank for convincing Thorne to send the soldiers out to the farms yesterday. I've been serving here for many years and I know all of the farmers. They not only supply their neighbors, they supply us as well. It's important to keep good relationships with the hands that feed you. And it seems Thorne's agreed to let all available soldiers go out again today."

"Good, sir," Shin said, filling his plate with potatoes and biscuits. "If we had more time before the attack we could probably glean all the fields from the west to the coast."

Glasser nodded, still not eating but watching the corporal as he downed two sausages. His mother was right: they *were* fatty, disgusting things, but surprisingly tasty. Shin reached for a third.

"Good work you did there, son, getting Thorne to release the soldiers to work," Glasser said. "If you don't mind me asking, why do you think he agreed?"

Shin swallowed. "I'm not entirely sure, sir. If I knew that, perhaps I could get him to postpone the offensive indefinitely."

Glasser leaned back in his chair. "Now why in the world would you want to do *that*?"

Shin hesitated, wondering if he'd said the wrong thing. "I'm, I'm not sure, sir. But it just doesn't seem to be a good time right now, you know? But then again, I'm not an officer," he tried to recover. "Thorne knows much more about battle. I should just trust him."

Glasser smiled at Shin's retreat. "Could it be that you're nervous about the battle? It's natural if you are, son. This would be your first?"

"Actually, sir, I snuck into the ranks just so I could use my sword for something more than threatening mules blocking the roads."

Glasser chuckled.

Shin almost smiled. "It's just that, this . . . *whatever* it is outside, I have a feeling it's far worse than we realize. I'd feel a lot better about everything if I knew all was well up north. Maybe once we hear back from the scouts everyone will feel better about the attack, sir?"

“Agreed,” said Glasser appreciatively. “You know, you may be one of the smartest soldiers we have.”

Shin wished Nelt could have heard that assessment, and from an older officer at that.

“You know,” Glasser continued, “Thorne’s always been very *forward looking*.”

Shin had noticed that most officers spoke about Thorne this way, as if doing a tiptoe dance around an issue, trying to draw one’s attention to it without disturbing it. While Shin recognized the cautious words, he wasn’t sure entirely what they were cautious about.

“He gets a goal in mind, son, and nothing’s going to stop him. That’s why he’s been such a successful leader. He sees what he wants and he won’t stop until he gets it.” Glasser’s earnestness put into Shin’s mind the image of a very large man trying to dance very quickly without breaking into sweat.

“Thank you for the evaluation of the general,” the corporal tried his own tiptoeing. “I’m still getting to know him, sir. I met him only days ago. Any advice you have would be greatly appreciated.”

Seemingly satisfied with that response, Colonel Glasser finally picked up the bowl of sausages and put some on to his plate. “He seems quite taken with you, Shin.”

“Yes, sir. I’m not sure why, though.”

“He didn’t tell you his suspicions about your origin? About who your grandfather may actually be?”

Shin shifted in his chair. “Yes. Not sure if I dare to believe it.”

YOU MEAN, “ADMIT IT.”

“It’d be quite a remarkable thing if you were Shin’s actual grandson. Then again, I really wouldn’t be surprised.” Glasser’s voice dropped to a whisper. “That seems like something the Creator would cause to happen for Perrin Shin. Don’t destroy his family completely, but let a ray of sunshine come just when the world needs it the most?” He gestured to the nearby window where the sun was trying to penetrate the dusty air.

Confused, Shin frowned at the colonel.

Glasser glanced around. “But that’s just our little secret, Shin. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell the other men that I’ve read *The Writings*. They wouldn’t understand my *wretchedness*.”

Shin nodded blankly, wondering just what was going on here—

“There was a passage, from what I remember,” Glasser whispered, “about the Creator sending His help when His people need it

the most. The spirits of the dead generals seems to be His chosen way. I wish I had my copy here at the fort so I could check, but there's also something about Mt. Deceit awakening. If you ask my opinion, that was some awakening! Seems providential, your arriving at this time, don't you think? And I can't help but think you're here because of the dead generals."

OH, FOR CRYING OUT LOUD . . . YOUNG PERE, BE CAREFUL ABOUT WHAT'S COMING—

Shin suddenly felt he was drowning. He couldn't imagine what the colonel expected of him, and as he tried to remember specific words from The Writings, nothing came. It was as if those words he'd studied so many times as a youth had leaked out of his mind.

Fortunately the colonel didn't seem to need a response.

"Corporal Shin," he said softly, "you may be our only hope to getting General Thorne to postpone the attack until the people are secured. I'll consult The Writings, but I'm fairly certain that *you*, Corporal Shin, are the one sent to *deliver* us at this time to make sure General Thorne is successful in uniting the world. You, Corporal Shin, may be the key to helping him in bringing lasting peace again."

Shin had taken another bite of sausage, still analyzing its spiciness and texture. Suddenly it was very difficult to swallow, and he wasn't sure if it was because of the strange chewiness or the colonel's words.

The three columns in his mind popped back up, and he feverishly tried to put Glasser's words into Truth, Fiction, and I Have No Idea Anymore, but the categories kept shifting and soon he seemed to have nothing left but a pile of ideas in a heap.

The Deliverer?

Chapter 3--“General! We have news about—”

That morning and afternoon, Shin was able to avoid General Thorne. It wasn't as if he was doing so on purpose, it was just that, well, Shin found things that needed to be done and didn't want to get in the way of Thorne who was planning the next day's offensive with a close-hanging Captain Lick.

Only twice did Shin exchange words with Thorne. The first time was as Shin was leaving breakfast with Glasser to receive a tour of the fort, just as Thorne was arriving to eat. Thorne smiled at Shin's new uniform and nodded at the label. “No one's available to make the new one yet, so they just scrubbed out the old one and stitched it back on. But we'll work on that as soon as we get to Idumea.”

The second time Shin saw the general was when the last group of soldiers was leaving to harvest more farms. Shin asked Thorne for permission to accompany the soldiers.

“They're going to the southernmost farms by the border,” Shin explained. “I thought it might be a good opportunity for me to see our jumping off point into Idumea. I should be learning the terrain, correct, sir?”

Thorne had smiled while Captain Lick took a deep, angry breath. Lick seemed to always be watching him—from windows, from doorways, and at that moment, from right next to Thorne.

So Shin spent the entire day away, hoping for a quiet moment to think about Glasser's words and the notion of “delivering.” But he didn't get to ponder because his time was taken up surveying the farms, showing soldiers where to dig, and speaking to the farmers about what else might be salvageable. He even took off his brand new jacket so he could dig in the dirt to feel for every last potato or to discover if any more carrots were hiding under the ash.

Not even the officers questioned why a first-year corporal was

allowed so much freedom of movement. They just glanced at his name and got out of his way. Besides, the soldiers listened to him and everything he said seemed to be the right thing to do.

By dinner time, the soldiers were exhausted as they marched back to the fort. Corporal Shin accompanied them, allowing a soldier who became ill to ride his black horse as Shin held the reins and walked alongside. He chatted with some of the soldiers asking them about their provinces, finding out how long they had served, and gathering their ideas as to what happened to cause the world to lose all color.

The soldiers first answered him tentatively until they realized he was just like them. By the time they returned to the fort, the cluster of about thirty men walking with Shin were singing one of Captain Nelt’s less risky compositions for the poor corporal who hadn’t yet heard Nelt’s full repertoire of songs for the lovesick soldier.

General Thorne was waiting at the gates, and the men came to attention as they passed. Corporal Shin saluted as well until Thorne beckoned to him with his left hand.

Shin obeyed, still leading the horse with the ill soldier. “Do you need something, sir? This soldier needs to get to the surgeons.”

The general sighed. “Someone else can do that, *son*,” he said quietly. “I’ve missed your company today. Many things you could have learned by my side.”

Shin shrugged. “I think Captain Lick would prefer I stayed out of the way, sir.”

Thorne waved that away. “I don’t care about Lick’s preferences. I’m more concerned about your learning to command an offensive.”

“But sir, I don’t think I’m ready for that. I spent the day learning about how soldiers work. When I understand how they work, I’ll know better how to plan an offensive for them. That’s how you began as well, sir, right? For the offensive at Moorland?”

Thorne’s smile seemed genuine. “You have a point. Very astute. But considering who you are, why should I expect anything less?”

Shin shifted uncomfortably, not sure what he meant by that last sentence. “Sir,” he whispered, “the soldier here? May I take him and also return the horse?”

“Be quick about it. We need to eat dinner then discuss the plans for the offensive. Elements of it have to do with Moorland.”

Corporal Shin sighed in relief to have avoided the general again, but it wouldn’t last.

As he delivered the feverish soldier to the surgery wing, he was

surprised to see it packed with victims from the mudslide. They filled up every bed and dozens more were lying on the floor between them. Shin's heart sank at the sight of so many incapacitated men.

Seeing Shin supporting the ailing man, an assistant approached.

"Another one pulled from the river?" he asked in a bored tone.

"No, sir," Shin whispered to keep the news from anyone else. "He took ill while we were digging the farms. High fever, aches, and he seems almost delusional."

The assistant looked worriedly at the soldier who could barely stand. "We don't need this right now," he whispered and beckoned for Shin to follow him to a small room where two visiting surgeons were staying. One of the men reading on his bed looked up.

"No, I am NOT giving up my bed—"

"A fever," the assistant hissed.

The surgeon jumped off the bed to allow Shin to lay down the soldier.

Nervously, the second surgeon stared at the man. "Corporal, how many men was he near today?"

"Dozens, sir."

The first surgeon groaned as he checked Shin's name badge. "Oh, Creet! You're *him*, aren't you? Thorne's found one? And you've been supporting that soldier?"

The assistant shut the door. "What are we going to do?"

Shin squinted at the surgeons and assistant. "You suspect the pox, don't you?"

The three men exchanged startled looks.

"Don't worry," Shin whispered, "I can't get it."

"How do you know that?" one of them demanded.

Shin started to speak until he realized all his knowledge about the pox came from the other side of the mountains. When Relf had tried to bring him home—oh, it seemed like moons ago that he argued with his oldest brother in the forest, but was just over a week—Relf told him the pox was returning to Salem and the world, but while the Briters were susceptible, the Shins seemed to be immune.

"I just know I can't get it. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone else. I'm expected at dinner," he said in a rush and hurried through the surgery before anyone could question him further.

Shin got his dinner and turned to look for a seat among the filling tables, but General Thorne was waiting at the door to the officer's eating room with an expectant look.

Five minutes into wolfing down his dinner, focusing intently so as to avoid getting pulled into the general’s conversation with some colonels, he didn’t notice the commotion outside. But soon the shouting in the eating hall caused everyone to twist to see what was wrong.

“General Thorne! We need General Thorne!” cried two muddled soldiers who stumbled into the mess hall. One of the men cried out when he saw the food line and rushed to the head of it.

Thorne had stood up quickly and started for the door before Shin realized who the men were. He jumped to his feet and followed to greet the scouts they had sent to the north.

“General! We have news about—” one of the scouts began before Thorne cut him off.

“Not here!” he hissed. “Get your plates and follow me. Glasser! Ferrim!” Thorne called to the private room.

The two colonels were already on their way to join him.

“Shin, with us,” the general ordered.

Captain Lick stood at the door. “Sir, do you need my assistance?”

“No!” Thorne barked as he marched out of the packed hall, ignoring the enraged expression on Lick’s pallid face.

Thorne led the scouts, who were snatching food off their plates as they jogged after the general, to the command office.

“Let them finish eating first, General,” Colonel Ferrim suggested as the men collapsed into chairs. “They look half-starved.”

“Which is why I’m worried,” Thorne said, studying the two men from behind the desk. “They’re half-starved because they found nothing to eat since I sent them out yesterday morning, correct?”

The first scout nodded as he gulped down his food. “Sir, the situation’s far worse than we imagined.” He glanced at the second scout for confirmation.

His companion nodded. “We did our best to make it to the fort at Province 4 but . . .” He looked back at the first scout, unsure of how to continue.

“But?” Thorne repeated.

The first man licked his lips. “Sir, I don’t think it *exists* anymore.”

“What?” Ferrim cried. “How can it not exist? What’s in its place?”

“Sirs, to be honest, we didn’t make it there,” the first man said. “We got as far as Province 16, no 6, I mean whatever Rivers is, sir. And there was hardly anything left of it.”

Thorne stared, trying to comprehend what they meant.

“Hardly anything left?” Glasser said, bewildered. “Explain yourself!”

The second scout tried. “It looked like around here, but . . . but *worse*. Here the mudslide was maybe six feet deep, but in Rivers where the river splits into two, the left fork going to the southeast? Sirs, it was so deep that everything, and I mean *everything* was covered! Maybe forty feet deep—no trees, no buildings, no fort, not even the river. Sirs, it’s all gone! And if Rivers is gone, Mountseen further north must be gone as might be Quake. We couldn’t even find the fork of the river that goes there. It was just mud and ash and . . .” The scout’s voice grew hoarse off and dropped off as he buried his face in his hands.

“His woman and daughter live in Quake,” his companion explained quietly.

“What about Edge?” Thorne whispered, forgetting the random province number he gave it two years ago.

“No way of knowing, sir,” the first scout said. “But General, it was Mt. Deceit. It was cloudy up there until this morning when the sun came out briefly. That’s when we realized the clouds weren’t clouds. It’s more like smoke and steam. General, colonels, there *is no more* Mt. Deceit. Only an enormous gap between the other peaks. And all the smoke and steam? It’s coming *from* it. Even Midplain and all the way down to Vines is devastated. We found only one tower still up in Midplain but no one alive. Everything else was covered. Pools is the only village along this river that’s survived, sir. Perhaps Winds is still in the east, and maybe Scrub and Grasses to the west, and Sands as well, but we couldn’t find any way to get there. The ash was so deep in the north. If any of it blew to the west, then . . .” Now the first scout sagged into his chair, overwhelmed.

Corporal Thorne-Shin hadn’t moved, leaning against the wall astonished at the news. The villages he’d just marched through no longer existed. None of the fields, the animals, the people. Perhaps the scientists in Idumea were correct—there was nothing left in the northern world to attack.

His knees began to buckle.

Thorne stared at a spot on the desk. “Are you saying that there is little left? No significant numbers of people in those villages?”

The scouts glanced at each other, dumbfounded that the general couldn’t grasp the enormity of the disaster.

“Sir, there aren’t even any *villages* left!” the first scout exclaimed.

“Pools is the most intact place we’ve seen! Sir, no supplies will be coming. We don’t even have a home to go back to!”

Something hit Shin’s mind: the route to Salem. Edge was to the northeast with several mountain peaks between it and Mt. Deceit. What had Relf said? Guide Zenos was getting everyone out because something was coming.

The Guide had seen it and Shin had ignored it. He was trapped.

There were three routes to home—the Moorland/Deceit one, which was hopelessly gone; then the Edge route which deposited travelers into Salem; then, finally, in the far west beyond Sands and the desert was the longest route, a big half loop past Terryp’s lands, then north then east again.

Shin’s chest tightened. He didn’t even know that route, never paid attention to it on the maps in Puggah’s office. He hadn’t planned on going home but he always knew he *could* if he really had to.

But now there was no going home. All escape was gone. He was completely trapped with nowhere to fly.

And what might have happened to Salem?

He didn’t notice something was wrong as everything around him began to grow gray, although he should have recognized that feeling having experienced it many times before. There was nothing left in his power to stop anything—

He heard shouts and found himself lying on the floor, staring up in the concerned face of General Thorne bent over him. The side of his head pounded.

“Son, son! He’s coming around. Are you all right? Yurgis, get him some water. Corporal, you gave me quite a start there.”

Colonel Glasser was unbuttoning the corporal’s jacket as Shin struggled to sit up. “No, son,” said the colonel quietly. “Don’t get up. You hit your head pretty hard on the desk when you passed out. Just stay down for a few minutes.”

Colonel Ferrim squatted next to him with a mug. Glasser helped Shin sit up briefly to drink, then laid him back down.

The weary scouts remained on their chairs, watching the corporal with sympathy because they understood exactly how he felt.

“I’m sorry, sirs,” Shin whispered. “I don’t know what happened. I just . . .” His head swirled again in the terror that there might not be any going home and he closed his eyes.

Thorne went down on one knee next to him to pat his cheek. “I know what happened. You’ve had quite a blow. I’m very sorry. Your

parents probably didn't even know what hit them. They likely went to sleep the night before and didn't even wake before the slide covered them."

A tear leaked from Shin's eyes.

Thorne leaned closer. "I told you it was no accident you came to me," he whispered. "And I also told you I'd take care of you. I will, son. Better than any father ever could. You just rest right now and don't worry about anything. I can handle everything."

Through the cracks in his eyelids, Shin noticed Ferrim and Glasser exchange glances.

Thorne got up, put his left hand on one of the scout's shoulders and looked at the other, his eyes surprisingly gentle. "You men have had a very difficult two days. Go lie down for a couple of hours and then we'll get a full report from you. I want as many details as you can produce. Mud depths. Ash depths. Numbers of survivors. At first light tomorrow we'll send scouts to Winds and try to get over to Quake," he nodded to the scout whose family was there. "I'm sure Grasses has been preserved, even though we haven't heard from them, but we'll check there as well. You men have done good work. Colonel Glasser will see to your comfort."

Glasser, looking surprised, hastily got up and opened the door.

"Men!" Thorne said before they left the office, "not a word of this to anyone. Not until we know *how* to tell the story, all right?"

Glasser scoffed quietly and exchanged the same look with Ferrim. Shin knew cynicism when he saw it, even blurrily.

Thorne regarded Shin, whose chest was still rising and falling rapidly, almost with sympathy, and must have assumed the corporal couldn't hear him with his eyes mostly closed.

"Yurgis," Thorne whispered to Colonel Ferrim who stood next to him, "we're going to have six thousand more reacting just like Shin if we don't handle the story correctly."

Ferrim turned to the general. "Lemuel, you can't hide the truth! The men have to know! They're going to figure it out when they head back north, now, won't they?"

Thorne flicked a piece of dust off his jacket. "How could it possibly be as bad as they say? Who's ever heard of villages vanishing completely under mud? It's absurd."

"Then . . . then how do you explain their report?"

"Simple: trauma," he said, studying Shin on the floor who surreptitiously studied him back. "They've seen too much, been too scared,

and exaggerated what they saw. That’s why I’ve sent them to go rest. I’ll send the surgeon to sedate them if they can’t sleep. When they wake, I’m sure we’ll have a much more accurate report of what actually happened—”

“Lemuel, you have to face the fact that what they reported is the truth!”

Thorne turned on him. “How could it be? When in our entire 364 years have you *ever* heard of a mountain exploding? Nothing left *at all*? It’s just too unbelievable,” he said with such certainty that no other options existed. “We have no evidence of it ever happening before so it can’t happen now. Logic, Yurgis. Time we start teaching that again in the schools.”

Now Ferrim rounded on him. “Lemuel, I sent those scouts out yesterday myself with the express command that they reach Province 4 to find out about . . .” He motioned aggressively to Shin who remembered that his supposed parents lived in Province 4. “Those two men were solid and fearless interrogators, *not* the kind to see a little mud and start panicking about the end of the world!”

“End of the world?” Lemuel scoffed. “What are you talking about, Yurgis?”

Ferrim took a deep breath and seemed reluctant to explain. “The Writings. There was a passage that said that before the Last Day the tallest mountain would awake. The tallest mountain, until a few days ago, was Mt. Deceit.”

Thorne studied him for a moment.

Ferrim looked sincere.

“*Awake*?” Thorne sneered. “What the slag does ‘awake’ mean to a mountain? I had no idea you were a Writings Wretch. You really think this signals the *Last Day*?”

Shin gulped and squeezed his eyes tightly. The Last Day—

“I’m not suggesting that I *believe*,” Ferrim said carefully. “My great-grandfather was a rector and told me the story when I was a boy. I relate it only as a warning that other soldiers may have heard that prophecy and may react worse than . . .” He pointed again to the corporal on the ground.

“The Last Day,” Thorne sniggered. “Seriously, does anyone still believe that nonsense? So if it *is* the Last Day, when will it be? Tomorrow? Twenty years from now? Do The Writings give a date?”

Ferrim sighed. “No one knows. Some other things are supposed to happen, too, but I don’t remember what they are anymore—”

“Some prophecy! Vague reference to a mountain ‘awaking’ then no explanation of when the Last Day will occur? Creet, Yurgis, I could make up a prophecy like that. So tell me, what happened to this great guide after he made this grand announcement?”

Ferrim looked down. “The Great Guide was killed.”

“Good. I’d kill him as well for such alarming nonsense.”

Ferrim squared his shoulders. “But none of that changes the fact that there may be thousands of men who won’t think it’s nonsense. Or at least they’ll be devastated by the fact they’ve lost their family and friends. *Come on, Lemuel!*” he pleaded. “You can’t deny this. You can’t deny everything.”

Thorne grabbed Ferrim’s jacket with his good hand. “I deny *nothing*, Yurgis! But I refuse to believe until I have some solid evidence. I want proof.”

“Then get on a horse and go see for yourself!”

“And do what with the offensive, Yurgis?” He tightened his grip on the colonel. “Let *you* lead it tomorrow evening? Is that what this is all about? You think you’re going to take charge already?”

Ferrim pushed Thorne off and took a large step backward. “*The offensive?* How can you even still *think* about the offensive? Man, we have NOTHING! We are *it!* Us and these villagers and maybe no one else. And you want to go attack Idumea? There’s one hundred thousand people there. Even if they lost one-fifth, that’s still eighty thousand. Lemuel, when you had twenty thousand soldiers and the element of surprise and an endless supply line we could’ve succeeded. But now? You can’t be serious!”

Thorne’s glare turned harder than stone. “I promised my boy I’d take care of him,” he snarled. “He’s lost the only family he knew. I promised him a University of Idumea education and a lieutenant’s jacket by next year and there’s only one way to accomplish that, Yurgis. I’m taking Idumea, with or without you. I’ve been denied my son’s companionship for far too long. You can sit here and fret, but I’m taking my son home to the mansion.”

On the floor, Shin gritted his teeth. His son . . . his son—

Ferrim took another step backward. “Lemuel, you’re not going to have much support.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No, my friend, just an honest evaluation. You may have found your son but thousands of others just lost their sons, fathers, mothers, daughters . . . *lovers.*” Ferrim emphasized the word to see if anything

sparked in the general’s eyes about Miss Amory.

Nothing did.

“You’re the only one who’s going to be happy tonight now that you can officially claim him since he has no family to protest. But Lemuel, you have no idea the pain everyone else will be feeling.”

“Oh, I know the pain, Yurgis,” Thorne said in a steady whisper. “I’ve been feeling it for twenty-six years. But now that I’ve finally got him, I’m not about to disappoint him.”

Ferrim sighed in defeat. “So what do I say to the men when I go out there?” he whispered. “The news that the scouts have returned will have spread all over the fort and camps by now.”

“Tell them the truth: that we’re still trying to find out the details ourselves. In the meantime, tell them to sharpen their swords and get to bed early. Tomorrow’s going to be a day to remember.”

Shoulders sagging, Ferrim stepped cautiously over the prone corporal and walked out of the office, closing the door behind him.

Thorne kneeled again by Shin who tried to sit up.

“Slowly, now, son. Slowly.”

Shin nodded. “I know. I’ve done this before, sir. A few times.” He pulled up his knees and rested his forehead on them.

“You’ll have to tell me about those times,” Thorne tried to sound cheerful. “I’d like to hear all about your childhood.”

“Perhaps not tonight, sir?”

“No, no,” Thorne patted him on the back. “Another evening, of course. Tonight you just rest. I won’t leave your side.”

“That’s not necessary, sir,” Shin said to his knees. All he wanted was to be left alone to try to sift through the debris in his mind and grasp something that was true and real. He felt nauseated but didn’t know if that was caused by a new concussion, the news about the volcano, or the very close presence of the man actually breathing down his neck.

“No, no. I insist,” Thorne said, sitting next to him on the floor. “Whatever you need, son.”

Shin shuddered slightly. “Sir,” he mumbled, “what I really need is—”

It was *not* to hear him say the word “son” again.

“Go ahead,” Thorne encouraged.

Shin took a deep breath. “What I really need is . . . for you to give up the attack on Idumea,” he said in a rush.

Thorne leaned away from him. “You can’t be serious, son.”

“Now’s not the time, sir. I heard you speaking to the colonels. If you really don’t want to disappoint me, then please—call off the offensive!”

Thorne looked around in dismay. “I . . . I can’t imagine why! Why don’t you *want* this? We discussed this!”

Shin rubbed his face with his hands, hoping his next words would come out right. “The offensive should be well-coordinated and executed perfectly.”

He bravely looked the general in the eyes although something in them frightened him.

“You mentioned Moorland earlier. Nothing happened until the men were fully practiced, and then it was a quick and decisive success. Except for the parts where that black powder blew up those buildings and everything went chaotic,” he babbled. “That’s what I want to be a part of, General—not the chaos but the part before: the perfectly executed attack. The mansion can wait, sir. Let the Idumeans clean all of Idumea for us,” he said, trying to come up with a smile. “If we go in now, we’d have to supervise the cleanup. Not something I want to do, sir. Show me Idumea when it’s looking its best again?”

The corner of Thorne’s mouth went up. “Shin, once again you surprise me with an interesting take on things. Let *them* clean it up? Funny.”

He put his left hand on Shin’s shoulder, and it took all of the corporal’s strength not to squirm underneath it.

“You intrigue me, son. The ideas you come up with and the way you express them . . . Shin, I know you just lost your family, but I don’t want you to feel alone. I want to claim you, officially, as my own. As my son. It’s not difficult. In a public place before at least twenty people I name you and you accept it. You are then, forever, the son of Lemuel Thorne.”

That did it. Until that moment, Shin had been able to ignore the suggestions and brush aside the irritating “son” references. But no more. How binding the laws in the world were, he didn’t know. But of all that he had done in the world, he simply couldn’t imagine doing this one thing more. As much as he wanted to become a lieutenant—

That *was* what he wanted, wasn’t it?

What he wanted was silence, the ability to think, which seemed to have eluded him.

“Sir, I’m overwhelmed. Too overwhelmed to think about it right

now. I . . . I need some time. Is that all right?”

Thorne’s face dropped, but he nodded. “Of course. You need some time to mourn what you’ve lost before you can rejoice in what you’re gaining. Just remember that I already think of you as my own. And, perhaps, you truly *are*.”

The corporal stared at him in dread, but Thorne took it as confusion.

“I’ll explain that later,” Thorne said with a leering smile. “The proclamation is only a formality. In the meantime, you can come to me for anything.”

“So, sir,” Shin began, unable to resist knowing how sure a promise that was, “there’s no attack on Idumea tomorrow or anytime soon? Not until we hear about Edge and everyone else?”

Thorne squinted but nodded again. “No offensive, son. Not until we have news and we agree about it together.”

“And sir, will you please let the other men know what happened with Mt. Deceit? We could all head back north together to see what can be done and salvaged. We have the horses, the wagons, and the remaining supplies. You could tell General Sargon you’ll grant him his request so he has time to properly bury his dead. It’s all in how you present it, sir. That’s something I’ve learned from you. You still come off as the victor but you can also earn his respect, the way you’ve earned mine.”

That the last sentence came out smoothly surprised even Shin.

Thorne smiled as genuine a smile as Shin had ever seen. “All right, son. For you, anything.”

Corporal Shin lay on his bed staring at the dark ceiling. The nausea he felt manifested itself shortly after Thorne walked him out of the office, and then Thorne readily agreed—after calling over some privates to clean up the mess—that Shin needed time to sleep.

How the rest of the men were taking the news, he didn’t know. What news they had been given, he couldn’t imagine.

He still wished he had something to write on, to somehow plot the intricate knot he now found himself entangled in, hoping to see a way out. He stared up at the ceiling wishing he knew what happened to Salem. It shouldn’t be so much on his mind but it was, filling every corner with trepidation.

He rolled to his side, his belly empty and calming but his head still pounding. In the shadows he saw the chair against the wall. He thought briefly of other times he'd been knocked unconscious and had awoken to see such a chair filled with the only man who ever understood him. A tear leaked from his eye.

“Puggah,” he dared to whisper.

YES?

“Puggah!” he said louder, relief warming him. “Where have you been?!”

I TOLD YOU I'D NEVER LEAVE YOUR SIDE. I'VE BEEN HERE ALL ALONG.

“But,” Shin whispered, “why haven't you helped me?”

NO MATTER HOW LOUDLY I YELL YOU STILL CAN IGNORE ME, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOUR MIND IS FILLED WITH IDEAS FROM LEMUEL. BUT YOU'VE BEEN HEARING ME AND EVEN REPEATING ME, YOU JUST DIDN'T REALIZE IT.

He had to admit his mind had been filled with all kinds of thoughts, most not of his own making. “So why do I hear you now?”

IT SEEMS YOU PAY CLOSER ATTENTION WHEN YOU'RE IN DISTRESS. IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THAT WAY, YOU KNOW. YOU COULD HEAR ME ALL THE TIME, NOT ONLY WHEN YOU'RE HURTING.

“Puggah,” he whispered, “what happened to Salem? To Mama, Papa, Muggah—everyone?”

THEY'RE SAFE FOR NOW.

Shin sobbed quietly in relief. “No devastation—”

I DIDN'T SAY THAT. SALEM'S BEEN HIT, HARD. BUT THEY'RE LED BY A MAN WHO BELIEVES IN PREPARATION AND DOESN'T FOLLOW HIS OWN IDEAS.

“Puggah, what I should I do next?”

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO, YOUNG PERE?

“Not become Perrin Thorne . . . Lek Thorne . . . whoever Thorne.”

ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THAT? YOU SEEMED TEMPTED BY THE IDEA.

“No, Puggah. There's another way—I'm sure of it.”

ANOTHER WAY TO DO WHAT, YOUNG PERE?

“To become a lieutenant, to—”

WHY ARE YOU STILL ENTERTAINING THESE THOUGHTS?

“Puggah, I'm on top of it—”

OH NO YOU'RE NOT. YOU'RE NOT IN CONTROL OF ANYTHING. IT'S ALL GOING TO CRUSH YOU IF YOU PURSUE THIS.

“Puggah, Puggah . . . please, help me?”

ONLY TO SAVE LIVES, WHICH IS WHAT WE'VE BEEN TRYING TO DO

LATELY. WHEN YOU’RE STUCK IN A BAD SITUATION, YOU MAKE IT GOOD, AS MUCH AS YOU CAN. BUT I CAN’T HELP YOU DO WHAT’S WRONG, YOUNG PERE. THAT’S WHAT LEMUEL’S FOR.

“Puggah, he’s not *all* that bad—”

YOU RECOILED UNDER HIS TOUCH, YOUNG PERE—I SAW THAT—AND YET STILL YOU TRY TO JUSTIFY HIM? YOU’RE ONLY SEEING THE SIDE THAT’S ENAMORED WITH THE POTENTIAL OF WHAT YOU MAY MEAN TO HIM. HE’S USING YOU AS MUCH AS YOU’RE USING HIM.

“It’s not entirely like that—”

OH, BUT IT IS! WHAT ARE YOU HOPING LEMUEL WILL GIVE YOU? A POSITION? AUTHORITY? LEMUEL DOESN’T KNOW HOW TO LOVE AND HE CERTAINLY DOESN’T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT BEING A FATHER. WHEN SOMEONE DOESN’T TURN OUT THE WAY HE EXPECTS, HE ABANDONS THEM. YOU’RE NEXT, YOUNG PERE.

“But Puggah, I really don’t think it’ll be like that. He really seems to think I’m what he’s been looking for.”

WELL, OF COURSE HE DOES, BECAUSE YOU’RE CONVENIENT. HE’LL TWIST ANYTHING TO HIS ADVANTAGE, MANIPULATE ANY MEMORY TO GET WHAT HE WANTS. HE COULD MAKE YOU INTO HIS FIRST HORSE STREAK IF HE SPENT ENOUGH TIME ON IT! YOU THINK YOU’RE CONFUSED? HE’S CREATED SO MANY LIES OVER THE YEARS THAT HE STRUGGLES TO REMEMBER WHAT’S THE TRUTH. ALREADY HE’S SURE THAT HE WAS SUCCESSFUL IN HIS ATTACK OF YOUR AUNT, THAT SHE DIDN’T FIGHT HIM OFF—

“Wait—*what?* Thorne and Aunt Jaytsy?”

IT DIDN’T HAPPEN! BUT THAT’S NOT WHAT HE’LL REMEMBER NOR WILL HE RECALL THAT SHEM KEPT AN ANNOYINGLY CLOSE WATCH ON HIS EVERY MOVE AFTER THAT. LEMUEL SLIDES ONE STORY IN PLACE OF ANOTHER, AND ALREADY HE’S CONVINCED YOU’RE HIS OWN FLESH AND BLOOD. BUT THORNE NEVER WAS SUCCESSFUL WITH JAYTSY, THANK THE CREATOR! AND NO, YOU’RE NOT SALEMA’S TWIN!

Shin cringed. “I know. I guess I just sort of got caught up in the moment—”

JUST LIKE LEMUEL. MUST BE A FAMILY TRAIT.

“Puggah?”

AS IS HAVING A LIMITED SENSE OF IRONIC HUMOR.

“Puggah, *what?*”

There was a cosmic sigh. NEVER MIND. YOUNG PERE, YOU NEED TO HEAD BACK NORTH AT THE FIRST OPPORTUNITY THAT ARISES.

“I’m trying to convince Thorne to do that.”

YES, IF YOU CAN GET THE ARMY HEADING THAT WAY, IT WOULD BE

The Soldier in the Middle of the World

BEST, FOR THEM AND FOR THE REST OF THE WORLD. BUT IF NOT, GO YOURSELF. SARGON IS IN FAR BETTER SHAPE THAN LEMUEL IS, BUT HE DOESN'T REALIZE THAT. WHILE HE'S TERRIFIED OF THORNE, HE COULD EASILY DEFEAT HIM RIGHT NOW. IF THORNE WERE TO MARCH DOWN THERE, SARGON WOULD FIGURE THAT OUT AND BE EMBOLDENED IN HIS DEFENSE OF IDUMEA. THAT'S WHY IT WAS SO CLEVER OF US TO CONVINCING THORNE TO WAIT . . . AT LEAST UNTIL IDUMEA WAS CLEANED UP. LET SARGON STEW IN WORRY FOR A WHILE LONGER.

“Wait—that idea was all you?”

OF COURSE IT WAS. SOME IN THE WORLD WOULD ARGUE THAT YOU'VE GOT AN UNFAIR ADVANTAGE IN ME, THAT I'M HELPING YOU CHEAT LEFT AND RIGHT. WELL, THAT'S THE WAY OF THE WORLD, AND WE'RE GOING TO USE THE WAYS OF THE WORLD TO SAVE AS MANY LIVES IN IT AS POSSIBLE.

“Thank you, Puggah. Will you keep helping me?”

YOU HAVE TO LISTEN TO ME.

“I'm trying.”

YOU STRUGGLE BECAUSE YOU'RE TORN. FORLORN. CORN . . . NELT'S RIGHT. THORNE'S NOT MUCH FUN TO RHYME.

Shin smiled to the dark. “I'm trying, Puggah,” he said as his eyes closed in exhaustion. As long as *he* was by his side, Shin had a chance. “I'm trying . . .”

Captain Lick slammed his stack of notes down on the command desk. “You've decided NOT to attack?! General! I . . . I don't understand . . . You didn't even *consult me*? We had it all figured out—”

General Thorne let out a low angry sigh that stopped Lick in his tirade. “And since when do I consult with *you* about the decisions I make for *my* army, Captain? Have you forgotten your position?”

Lick breathed heavily. “My position is by your side as your offensive commander, sir! Or did I misunderstand our discussions for the past six moons?” While Thorne's glare was relentless, Lick was resolute.

“You misunderstood nothing, Lick. But you also don't understand the current state of our world. I plan to send more scouts out at dawn. If the villages to the east and west are intact, then we have more men with which to fortify our army. We still need a supply line, Captain. I've been in consultation with *my colonels*, all eight of them. It's agreed by the hierarchy of the army that postponing this offensive is

the best. In fact, as I consider it more, it’s a good thing that so many of us were here. Had we remained in the north, there may have been no one left to discuss this with. Those spirits of the dead soldiers, Lick—maybe they *are* with us. We need to pay attention to the messages they’re trying to give us.”

Captain Lick took a step closer. “Sir, I understand. I just want to make sure that you’re not influenced by anything *less worthy*.”

“Less worthy?”

“Such as someone lower in rank,” Lick hinted. “Not even an *officer*. Decisions made in the heat of emotion are often poorly made.”

Thorne narrowed his eyes. “Might this have something to do with a certain corporal who believes you don’t like him?”

“Shin’s just a boy, sir. I realize you’ve created an . . . an attachment to him, but—”

“But nothing!” Thorne said severely. “He’s hardly a boy. He’s a man and now he’s lost his family. Get used to it, Lick. He’s lost his father, so I’m going to take him as my son.”

“Sir! You can’t be serious!”

“I am. What’s it to you, Lick?”

Captain Lick scoffed. “Well . . . I lost my father as well!”

Thorne snorted in derision. “Years ago, from what I remember. And he was an old man. Wasn’t he in his fifties when you were born?”

“What I mean, sir, is that you barely know this corporal! He’s eluded you at the fort for seasons, and now suddenly he’s going to be *your son*?”

Thorne rose slightly out his chair. “I know more about Shin than I know anyone else. I know his family, his potential, and his mind!”

“Sir, but you don’t! What proof do you have aside from his features that he’s who you think he is? General, for all you know he could be *one of them*!”

Thorne plopped back into his chair with an exasperated har-rumph. “Oh, not *this* again, Lick. And I thought Kroop was paranoid—”

Lick pounded the desk. “Sir, it’s not paranoia! There are people from Salem living among us! They hide their identities, learn about who we are, then influence the politics! My father told us repeatedly. Sir, Miss Amory came through the forest to the grassy arena with someone. I saw her come out of that shed with a tall, young man. General, I swear it *must* have been Shin!”

“I’ve told you before, Lick,” Thorne’s voice was frighteningly

calm, “I know full well what kind of a woman Amory is and I don’t wish to discuss her past, especially with *you*. People have sneaked off to the safer parts of the forests for privacy for decades. You claim you were at the grassy arena to find new recruits, but perhaps it was to spy on those whose love lives are more exciting than yours? Exactly what did you say to Amory that she followed you out of there?”

Lick straightened his back. “She was asking to meet an officer and wanted to know the way to the fort. I escorted her to your fort, sir, only because I thought she would be . . . diverting for someone.”

“You were hoping she’d *divert you*,” Thorne said coolly. “You thought she was *that* sort of woman. Has it occurred to you that according to the little theory you’re trying to throw together, if Shin is from Salem so too might be Amory? Next you’ll be convinced Sargon is from your mysterious little city as well. As for the shed, I know what it’s used for, but it’s no longer a concern of mine. Shin was a vial head, probably for years ever since that place was set up. If I can forgive Amory of her past, I can certainly forgive my son of his, especially since he had no control over it. Now, do you have anything else you wish to express?” Thorne’s hardened expression suggested that if he did, he’d be prudent not to.

Captain Lick pressed his lips firmly together. “No, sir,” he lied. Thorne raised his eyebrows. “Then OUT!”

The next morning, on the 61st Day, Corporal Shin had his kerchief tied around his nose and throat to filter out the growing stench. Despite what Thorne said, he wasn’t getting used to the scent of death. He was leaving the compound with another group of soldiers to finish gleaning some fields when he heard shouts from the observation tower. In the north, a cloud of ash was rising. Three horses were on a fast approach, and Shin jogged over to meet them.

“We need the general!” the first rider said through his kerchief. “Did he survive? Hey, wait a minute . . . *Shin*? What the slag are you doing HERE?”

Shin looked at the rider’s label and grinned. “Sergeant Onus?! Province 8 is still there?”

Surprised, Onus pulled down his kerchief. “We thought you were dead, boy! At least I did. Poor Kroop thought you were *reabsorbed*

into the forest or something. You vanished almost a week ago—
What are you doing here?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I really am. I left a note but I guess you didn’t get it. I sneaked away to join the battle. Hoping to see a little excitement?”

“Well, looks like you got it, Shin!” Onus shook his head, still astonished. “So what about Thorne?”

“He’s alive, sir, and quite well. I’ll take you to him.” He grinned a welcome to the other two soldiers before replacing his kerchief and running back to the compound.

Edge was alive! If Edge was still there, then so might many other things, including the routes—

He was shouting even before he entered the officers’ quarters. “General! General! Onus’s here from Province 8! Sir, Edge is still there!” His energy propelled him into the officers’ breakfast room and he crashed into Thorne who was just rising from his chair.

“Sir, excuse me!” Shin panted as he caught the general’s dead right arm and steadied him. Grinning, he exclaimed, “I’m sorry, but Sergeant Onus’s here! Edge survived!”

Thorne grinned back and grasped Shin’s shoulder. “That’s wonderful, son! Where is he?”

Shin spun around. “Uh, they *were* right behind me . . .”

Several of the officers at the table began to chortle.

“Oh, wait, there they are—Sergeant! Here!”

Onus, a squat yet stocky man, and two soldiers came warily to the room and stopped to salute the general.

Thorne saluted back and gestured at three empty chairs across from him. “Come in, come in! You must be starved. Sit down—we have plenty.”

Onus froze, startled at the general’s unexpected warmth and glanced at Shin who nodded enthusiastically. Onus and the two soldiers sat down at the empty spots, pretending that they belonged at the table of officers.

The officers looked at each other as well, but not because enlisted men were seated with them. They pushed plates of food to the newcomers while waiting to see what the Thorne-Shin team would spring on them next.

Shin sighed in relief as he took an empty chair next to the general. There were always empty chairs next to the general.

“Ah, Sarge! So good to see you! What did you see? How’s Province 8? The rest of the world? The scouts we sent out came back yesterday with reports that Rivers is gone. They couldn’t even get to Mountseen. What’s your evaluation of the area?”

Thorne leaned back and eyed Shin critically. “So are *you* conducting this debriefing now?”

Shin’s eyes flashed in alarm. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

Thorne chuckled.

Every man stared at him. When they talked about it later, none of the dozen officers could remember a time they had heard a laugh out of the general that didn’t turn into a snigger.

But that morning Thorne nodded, and in a *friendly* sort of way. “Usually, son, we ask one question at a time and let the men take a breath every now and then. So, what should the first question be?”

“Status of Province 8, Sarge!” Shin burst out. “Then move south.”

Thorne nodded at Shin and turned to Onus.

The sergeant’s eyes couldn’t get any bigger as he said, “Province 8 is covered in ash, General. About a foot deep. But the bulk of the explosion went to the west and south of us. In fact, we had no idea it was so devastating until we started on our way down. We should have been here a day and a half ago. But, sirs,” Onus looked around the table, “your scouts were right. Mountseen is gone.”

The men at the table groaned in unison.

“Not only that, but everything directly south of the mountain is covered. It’s as if Mt. Deceit exploded to the side, straight over everything. There’s now a huge hill, maybe three hundred paces high and many miles long, sloping well past Rivers. We rode to the east of it and eventually ran into some scouts from Winds. That village was covered in ash but suffered few deaths.”

Now the officers sighed in relief together.

Except for Thorne who said nothing but watched Onus intently.

“Edge had lost about twenty people when we left,” Onus told him, “and most of the livestock, but people were harvesting the remaining crops so we have hope of making it through the season.”

His tone wasn’t as optimistic as his words.

“The same thing was going on in Winds. As to the west, we’re not sure. We tried a few times to climb the new hill, but what wasn’t soft mud was huge boulders and tangles of trees. That hill is probably a few miles wide as well. It covered Rivers, but started to taper off at Midplain. Still, we saw very few people and only a few survivors at

Vines. I can't tell you what a relief it is to see so many here at Pools! Province 2,” Onus remembered to add.

“It's cut us in two,” Colonel Ferrim exclaimed. “This new hill? The northern half of the world is split in two by an impassable hill!”

“We should hear back from the west by this afternoon,” Thorne said, not yet resigning himself to the news as the rest of his dejected officers had. “The scouts left an hour ago.”

“But Grasses is on the river,” Colonel Glasser reminded. “Most of the villages are. I never saw that as a drawback until this week. If the mudslide split further up and went west toward Quake—”

Corporal Shin turned to the sergeant. “Could you tell if a mudslide followed the river east to Winds?”

Onus shook his head. “Looks like it all went south. Mudslide? Is that what happened? We never found the river again.”

Another officer said, “We suspect that whatever was left of those villages is either buried or on its way out to sea past Flax. Province 13,” he corrected.

Onus sat back. “It's astonishing. I've never seen anything like this. Never *read* about anything like this.”

“No one has, Onus,” Thorne said quietly, sounding almost ready to except this new reality. Almost.

“Most of the commanders are here, so we might as well discuss this,” Thorne continued. “We know Province 8 has survived, as well as the eastern half of our lands, so we need to make some decisions.”

“Sir,” asked a major, “since the offensive has been called off—*postponed*,” he clarified, “may I take my men back to Scrub to see what's left? We'll send you a report as soon as we discover what happened to the west.”

“I'd like permission to do the same, sir,” said a colonel from Quake. “While I have no doubt Major Yordin has dispatched aid from Sands, I'm rather anxious to see the damage for myself.”

The location of his village was west of Mountseen, but south of Mt. Deceit. No one said it but they doubted he'd ever find Quake.

A few more officers voiced their requests, while the commanders from Midplain, Rivers, and Mountseen stared blankly at the table.

“Sir,” Corporal Shin decided it was safe for him to speak, “may I return with my sergeant to Province 8? See what can be done to help with the cleanup?”

The officers turned to watch the response.

Thorne squinted. “I thought you said you don't like to clean up.”

“I’ll clean up *our* mess—not other people’s. May I, sir?”

The plea sounded so much like a boy asking his father for a toy sword that Onus stared at Shin with complete befuddlement. Something more than the eruption had definitely happened here.

Leaning toward the corporal, Thorne said, “I’m not letting you go alone with the sergeant. I’ll go with you. In fact,” he gestured to everyone, “I want each of you to return to your forts with your remaining men and see what can be done. Those who have lost their forts should remain here with Colonel Glasser. I have a feeling he knows of some more farms that need harvesting. Let’s evaluate what we have here, then later start making assignments for who gets which wagons, horses, and supplies. I want regular reports sent to me and get me your ideas for cutting a route through that new hill to reunify the north. In a few weeks, we should be able to redistribute the remaining soldiers and then continue our plan for returning here. In the meantime,” he turned back to Shin. “Let’s get ready to go home, son.”

“Thank you, sir!” Corporal Shin grinned back to Thorne.

“No,” Colonel Ferrim whispered to a grateful Major Gage next to him, “thank you, *Shin*.”

“How was that, Puggah?” Shin whispered triumphantly as he jogged to the supply barns. “Everyone’s going home!”

BUT HE DIDN’T SAY EXACTLY WHEN, NOW, DID HE? IT’S NOT OVER YET, YOUNG PERE. NOT BY A LONG SHOT.

“So that’s it?! We just pack up and head back north?” Captain Lick said with barely controlled rage. He knew he was within moments of being punched by General Thorne but he didn’t care. There was too much at stake.

“Yes,” Thorne said. “When we are *ready*, we head back north!”

Lick leaned across the command desk. “And when, sir, are we ‘ready?’” A small smile was beginning to form around his mouth.

“When the crops are harvested, when the men are rested, and,” Thorne tossed the Lick-puppy a bone, “when Sargon knows who’s in charge.”

Lick pounded his fist on the desk. “Yes!” he cried. “I knew it, sir! I knew you wouldn’t back down! When’s the attack?”

“Who said anything about an attack?”

“But, but you said—”

Thorne’s head-shaking stopped him. “So much you have to learn, Lick. Just because you scored the best on the battle aptitude test you believe everything must become a battle. If Sargon’s in as bad of shape I suspect he is, he may willing to capitulate to a truce or even surrender when he sees it’s in the best interest of his people.”

“Wait a minute, what are you suggesting?”

“Negotiations. At the border. Sargon, me, and about six thousand of my strongest men.”

Lick began to smile. “And me at your side?”

“And Shin on my other.

Chapter 4--“I just want to see what’s going on out there.”

Mahrree had been watching from the window. There’d be two visitors today and one was always on time.

Through the path shoveled in the ash he came, pausing periodically to evaluate the area, then climbed the front steps to the house.

His companion, Teman Sobat, a tiny man in his sixties, followed dutifully behind.

Mahrree opened the door before Jon Offra could knock on it. “Hello, Jon!” she said cheerfully as she had every day since Mt. Deceit erupted. She had a feeling she’d be doing this for many weeks more. The colonel they’d recently stolen from the world needed his routines. He was a tall, almost gaunt, man, his blond hair going gray and his blue eyes shadowy and worried. The world had been hard on the man who had spent the last twenty-five years trying to frighten it.

“Hello, Mrs. Shin—I mean, Mahrree.”

He was uncomfortable calling her that, but Mahrree thought it only fair since what he’d do next would make her uncomfortable.

He extended his finger and put it on her cheek. “You *are* real.”

“Yes, I’m real,” she verified. Dr. Toon, Shem, Teman, and Honri agreed this was the best way for Jon to come to grips with his new life.

He looked around. “And this is real. And so is the ash.”

“Yes, unfortunately, that too is real.”

Shortly after Jon arrived in Salem, Mt. Deceit rained down upon them, and several times that day Teman and his neighbors had to drag Jon back into the house because he couldn’t believe it was real, even as the ash covered him.

Finally, Teman sat outside with Jon, covered themselves with blankets, and watched the mountain fall down around them because

Teman couldn’t believe it was real, either. They went inside when they began to cough.

The next day, Jon started making his rounds, stopping at the Zenoses, the Shins, the Briters, and even visiting Eltana Yordin just to make sure all of this was real.

Mahrree was sure, as he began to finger a lock of her gray hair, that poor Jon Offra was never going to be sure about what was real ever again, even though the ash was slowly vanishing. Industrious Salemites had spent the last three days shoveling it into wagons and carting it away. They had plans.

So did Mahrree, but first she had to go through this routine. While Teman waited on the porch, Mahrree let Jon into the gathering room where he went to each portrait and verified its reality, patted little Morah on the head and told her that she, the youngest Shin granddaughter, was real. Then he made his way to Mahrree’s wing to see the last painting of Perrin again.

“He was real. He *was* real and he died. And it’s all right,” Jon muttered. He turned and smiled at Mahrree, and she saw the change.

Jon had three expressions: the first was the dutiful, almost child-like behavior he’d just exhibited where he talked dully and concentrated fully. His eyes were the blankest then.

But then he’d shift, and suddenly he was the Offra Mahrree remembered: smiling hesitantly, talking easily, and with brighter eyes.

Then there was, for lack of a better descriptor, Crazy Colonel Offra. Something would cloud his countenance and he’d become a typical army colonel—sarcastic, sharp, and officious. That one surfaced only briefly because already he was realizing that he didn’t need to scare soldiers or spread rumors anymore. To his great credit, he was working to downplay that part of himself.

Now he was Friendly Offra, and he said cheerfully, “How are you, Mahrree? Anything I can bring you from Salem?”

“No, thank you. We’re doing just fine. I’m a little stir-crazy, though,” she admitted.

Offra nodded. “Sergeant Major Guide Zenos won’t let you out because you’re over seventy, and I agree. Your lungs are too frail to handle this air and it’s not time yet for you to die.”

Jon frequently said things like that, carrying on a pleasant conversation then dropping something dramatic in the middle of it.

Mahrree was getting used to it, but Morah, who had been lurking behind the sofa, darted back into the kitchen where her mother was.

“I don’t see the problem,” Mahrree said as they walked to the front door. “I can wear a kerchief like all of you.” She gestured to the ones the men had around their throats. “I just want to see what’s going on out there.”

“Only when Guide Shem says so,” Jon told her, almost childlike again. “Now, off to Mrs. Yordin’s, to make sure she’s still real.”

“You know,” Mahrree began, “if she’s being too unpleasant—” which was a generous way of saying, *an irrational brute*, “you don’t have to talk to her.”

Ever since Eltana learned that Young Pere wasn’t returning but Thorne’s wife and daughters were, she’d been hostile, according to reports. Mahrree hadn’t bothered to visit her.

Again something shifted in Jon’s countenance, and his smile became brittle. “Oh, I’ll visit her. She *loves* me,” he said significantly.

“Oh, dear,” Mahrree said, not sure if her smirk was appropriate.

“Yes,” Jon sighed. “She’s realized that Salem has, once more, a former army colonel living in it.” He gave her a meaningful look.

And again, Mahrree said, “Oh, dear,” but this time with much more worry behind it. “I hadn’t considered that. Is she . . . is she making plans for you?”

“Of course she is!” barked Colonel Offra. “She’s lost every other man she thought would exact revenge for her, and now she thinks I’m here to serve *her!*”

His scoff of derision put Mahrree at ease. In spite of all his instability, Jon was too clever to fall for Eltana’s flattery.

“But she’s been through a lot,” Colonel Offra said magnanimously, “and I can give her a few minutes each day. To be honest, Mahrree,” Jon leaned to whisper, “*the woman’s not stable.*”

Mahrree couldn’t hold in her laugh, but Jon smiled kindly and nodded to Teman whose expression mirrored Mahrree’s.

“All right, then. To Mrs. Yordin’s!” Colonel Offra announced, but almost instantly Jon turned back around. “Be careful, Mahrree,” he said intently. “Obey Sergeant Major and don’t go outside until it’s safe. All right, then?”

Mahrree smiled at his childlike earnestness. “All right, then. Will I see you tomorrow?”

“Always,” he said. “I need to conduct the daily reality checks.”

As he marched down the stairs he exchanged salutes with Mahrree’s other daily visitor who smiled tentatively as he came to the porch.

“How’s our colonel today?” asked Honri.

“Making evaluations about *Eltana’s* stability, if you can believe it,” she chuckled sadly.

He sighed. “I’m beginning to wonder if it’s possible to rescue any sane people out of the world anymore. I should pay *Eltana* a visit soon. I was, after all, the rector who got her here.”

“I’m guessing by your hesitancy that she’s bitten your head off recently as well?”

She could already see the answer; Honri was looking weary. His tanned skin and normally merry hazel eyes still caused him to appear a youthful seventy-four, but he didn’t carry himself as largely as he used to. While still burly, today he was a little hunched over.

“Oh, yes,” Honri said heavily, sitting on a bench on the porch.

Mahrree sat in a chair opposite of him.

“Maybe *you* don’t blame me for not finding Young Pere,” Honri said, “but *she* sure is. ‘*Didn’t look in the fort at all?*’” he mimicked in a shrill voice. “I promise I did, Mahrree! But Relf assured me that it took him days to even recognize Young Pere. *Eltana’s* also none-too-happy that *Druses Thorne* and her three daughters and son-in-law are living at the Second Resting Station. She has no idea what traumatized, shattered women they are. If only she’d visit them she’d realize that we haven’t brought *Lemuel* to Salem.” He slumped dejectedly.

“You’ve done the right things,” Mahrree assured him. “Don’t worry about anyone’s opinions but the Creator’s. He’s the one who tells us who needs retrieving. *Perrin* had wanted to bring *Druses* and her daughters here for probably fifteen years, ever since he heard they’d left *Lemuel*. It took years for them to finally come, and they have as much right to be here as *Eltana Yordin*. Maybe that’s what bothers her. Sometimes those in the world struggle to understand that their enemies—especially the innocent family of their enemies—deserve the same lives that they do. That’s *her* thinking she has to get straight, and not your problem, Honri.”

He smiled gratefully, then remembered. “You haven’t met *Druses* and her family yet, have you? Weren’t they supposed to come for midday meal? That was the plan before *Deceit* exploded—”

“No, I haven’t,” Mahrree cut him off, secretly relieved *Deceit* got in the way. While she wasn’t bitter about the *Thornes*, she also had no idea what to say to them. ‘*So, you ran away from Lemuel too?*’

“*Shem* won’t let me travel anywhere,” Mahrree explained. “And

don't bother visiting Eltana. She now thinks Jon Offra will be her champion."

Honri rubbed his face. "Sometimes the world is still too much with us, Mahrree. We bring them out of it yet they drag it with them."

Mahrree sighed because he was right. She regarded Honri sympathetically, then suddenly realized, "Hey—you're a year older than me!"

He looked up from his brooding, amused. "You've known that for how many years?"

"But . . . but Shem said no one over seventy is supposed to be out here breathing this air!"

He smiled slyly, showing his dimples. "You're sitting out on your porch, breathing in this air. Aren't you worried he'll catch you?"

"But . . . but you've been over here every day checking on us and walking in this and . . . how come?!"

He chuckled. "Because Shem knows he can't order me around. He can suggest, he can implore, but I'm my own man, I'm older than him, and if I want to take chances with my health, I can. Besides," he added, "Shem made that 'suggestion' primarily for one reason. Or rather, for one person." He raised his eyebrows at her.

It took Mahrree a few seconds to catch on. "Because of me?"

"Yes."

"Why?" She scoffed in surprise. "I don't need babying!"

Honri smiled sadly. "The wife of his best friend and brother? He thinks you do. Shem's terrified to lose you too, Mahrree," Honri confided quietly. "He couldn't bear it."

She sagged. "It's not as if he could stop the Creator's will, you know. And Honri," now it was her turn to whisper, "if I don't get out of this house soon and see what's going on in Salem, I'll be less stable than Jon and Eltana put together!"

Honri laughed and Mahrree grinned to hear it. He was such a dear man, but—

"Then Mahrree," Honri leaned to her conspiratorially, "*get out of here*. Everyone has to wear a kerchief—Guide's orders—and if you put something over your head, he'll never recognize you."

"You know, I think I'm going to do just that."

An hour later her opportunity came by the means of her oldest grandson, Cambo Briter, who had returned with the wagon and team. She recognized him, even with the kerchief tied around his nose and a straw hat pulled down nearly over his eyes. He walked exactly as

his father Deck did and jogged up the front porch and into the house.

“Aunt Lilla?” he called as he came in. “Uncle Peto needs that file after all. The one of those requiring new houses? The building foreman wanted to see it. Is it still in his office?”

“Nope, I’ve got it,” Mahrree said, waving some pages.

“Thanks, Muggah.” He started to take them out of her hand.

But she didn’t release them. “I’m going with you.” She tucked the file into her waistband, whipped out a kerchief, and tied it around her head as her grandson stared in dismay.

“But, Muggah,” he exclaimed, “Guide Zenos ordered that no small children or people over seventy or those with breathing problems should go out until it’s all cleaned up!”

She waved that away and put on a straw hat. Hating the feel of it around her head, she put it back on the rack. “I’ll risk it,” she decided. “And yes, I know what Shem said. He’s such a worrier. But I can make my own decisions about my own health, and if I don’t get out of this house, I’m going to go insane. Right, Lilla?” she called.

Lilla poked her head out of the kitchen. “Take her, Cambo, just to preserve MY sanity. Bring her to the site. She can slip in among the crowd and not be noticed. We’ll apologize to Shem later.”

Cambo blinked in surprise at his aunt’s disobedience, but Mahrree smiled. After all these years, she was finally rubbing off on her.

Cambo pointed at his grandmother. “If something happens to you, it’s not my fault, right? This was all your doing. I’m just being respectful to my elders by doing what *you demanded*. Remember that.”

Mahrree grinned and squeezed his arm. All of the ranching boys were exceptionally strong. “Oh, I’ve taught you well. What a *respectful* young man. No wonder you’re my favorite grandson today.”

Cambo chuckled, a little surprised by her light-heartedness. He led her outside and helped her into the wagon, then climbed in next to her. “Just keep your kerchief on as tightly as possible. I wish you were wearing a hat though, Muggah.”

“I’ll just brush the ash out of my hair later,” she told him as he slapped the horses into a trot for the center of Salem.

“No, I wish you were wearing a hat to disguise you. Everyone will see you and tell Uncle Shem.”

“For the past few days everyone has had gray hair,” she reminded him. “No one will notice mine.”

“You’re probably right. Last night I had my hat off while I was brushing the ash off our roof, and when I came in, Decker looked at

me and said, ‘Are you now a grandpa?’”

Mahrree laughed. “Ah, the wisdom of four-year-olds. Oh, it feels so good to be outside again, Cambo! When I was your age, I could never stand to be outside. Now I couldn’t stand to spend another day trapped in that house doing nothing useful.”

“Oh, Muggah,” Cambo nudged her. “Feeding people and taking care of the younger kids—that’s always useful.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mahrree said blandly. “But really, Cambo—the greatest event in the *history* of the entire *world* happens and Shem tries to keep me locked up so I miss it? I’m the director of the history department at the university! How can he expect me to hide inside and miss out on all the fun?”

Cambo eyed her. “Muggah, you always had a strange sense of fun. I remember when we were littler and you tried to get us excited about inchworms. They only got exciting when we started racing them.”

Mahrree smiled at the memory. “And wasn’t that ‘fun’? Although racing them to your cousin’s open mouth while he slept on the table wasn’t exactly the nicest thing to do . . .”

Cambo shrugged. “Young Pere only swallowed two. No lasting damage that we could see.”

Mahrree thoughts wandered to where that grandson could be now.

Salem’s scientists had spent the past few days on the mountains, getting as close as they dared to what used to be Deceit. They recorded the quaking, measured the amount of ash, dirt, and steam sent up by the crater, and worked out calculations as to where the bulk of the mountain went. The fifteen men and women who rode up there each morning and came home late each night reached the same conclusion: Mt. Deceit was all over the world, maybe even all the way to Idumea.

And Young Pere was somewhere in the middle.

He was still alive, Mahrree was sure. Someone in the family would have felt something if he wasn’t. Every night, morning, day, evening, and afternoon she prayed for his safety. She did again as she twisted in her seat to look to the southwest, obscured by whirling gray clouds. She wished she was younger and fitter in order to spend a day with the scientists watching it all. She’d heard Shem discussing taking interested groups to the first peak to observe the volcano once it quieted down, and she’d do all in her power to sneak up with them, if only to try to gauge when the end of *the end* was near.

She wished Perrin was there to watch it with her. Sometimes she thought he probably knew far more of what was happening than she did, and wished he could break away just for a moment to fill her in.

But, she reminded herself, the day would soon come when she’d get to know about all of it. She just had to be patient.

“I suppose you really should see it,” Cambo interrupted her thoughts as he turned the wagon to a large field.

It took Mahrree a moment to realize he was talking about the new block yard.

“After all, Uncle Shem got the idea after seeing the experiments with ash that you and Mama were conducting with the children that first day. He told the brick workers what you two noticed, they did some of their own experiments adding ground up lime, and there you have it.” He gestured to the enormous amount of activity that lay before her in what was a great outdoor gaming field, now converted to be a much more useful space.

Mahrree scoffed a laugh. “In a way, I’m glad Perrin’s not here to see this. Oh, how he hated block! So gray and unimaginative. And to see his beloved Salem greens turning into a massive block factory?”

Cambo stopped the wagon and helped her out. “There’s always a use for everything, Muggah. I’m sure Puggah would have gotten over it, especially when Uncle Shem would have asked him, ‘What else should we do with this stuff?’ Besides,” he lowered his voice, “with so much of the southwestern forest dead from the ash, we might be looking at a shortage of timber for building in the future.”

“So once again the Creator gives us an alternative. When one resource is gone, there’s always another,” Mahrree marveled.

She watched as thousands of Salemites, organized into different teams, move around and with each other as if in a large, elaborate dance which they learned only yesterday.

Long lines of wagons full of ash drove up to one of many enormous pits dug during the past couple of days. The wagon owners carefully shoveled their contents into the pits, trying to control the flow of material to keep it from blowing in the breeze.

Workers kept a steady trickle of water and limey sand pouring into the pits. The mixture was churned by several oxen yoked together, walking in large circles attached to beams with extensions into the pits that stirred the concoction together.

When the mixture was right, other teams of oxen, hooked up to another clever contraption designed by several building students from

the university, walked in another circle to power the thick, heavy mixture up on a large, wide moving belt. The belt dumped the mixture into rectangular forms which were then quickly packed down and slid down another long belt to be carted off to a kiln set up nearby.

The block yard had been fully in existence for only a day and a half, and already there was the first batch cooling in the distance, waiting for the testers to see if the mixture was right yet.

Mahrree smiled in awe. "I never cease to be amazed by Salem's resourcefulness. With so many people working, all the ash should be converted to block in a few weeks."

"It'll probably take longer than that, Muggah," Cambo said. "But I heard one of the supervisors estimate that in a season or two no one will ever be able to tell we were buried under eight inches of the stuff. The hope is to get it all together before the rains come and turn all of Salem into block. Uncle Peto said there's a committee already designing barns for holding the ash."

"Remarkable!" Mahrree whispered. "Just days ago I couldn't imagine where we could put all of this. We couldn't churn it into the soil or dump it anywhere that it wouldn't blow out again. But Shem was right—the Creator put everything here for us to find a better use for it. And if we can't think of a *use*, we *better* think until we do—"

She stopped because someone was exhaling in exasperation behind her.

"So it's *your* fault my nephew is late getting me my file. I should've known!"

Mahrree turned around and smiled at her son from under her kerchief. Although she could see only his eyes, they were crinkled in a way that meant he was smiling back.

"Right here," she said, pulling them out of her waistband. "I wouldn't let Cambo have them without taking me along. I just had to get out."

Peto took the papers. "I understand. Just don't get caught, all right? Thanks, Cambo. Take her home, then get over to the western vineyards for another load." Mahrree remained silent while Peto jogged to the housing supervisor, then she turned to her grandson.

"I just got here, Cambo! You go get the load, bring it back, *then* we'll see if I'm ready to go home. I want to inspect that new block, see how it compares to what my mother's cottage was made out of."

Cambo shrugged. "All right. Just be careful and steer clear of Uncle Shem. He's out here, somewhere, checking on the progress." He

started back to his wagon mumbling, “She wants to sit outside playing with blocks.”

She laughed. “Thanks, Cambo. Remember, you’re my favorite grandson today!”

He waved without looking back.

Mahrree rubbed her hands together with excitement and energy she hadn’t felt in years, and headed over to the large pile of cooling block. She may not be young enough to sit on the mountain and watch the volcano, but she was still going to have some fun!

She almost felt guilty for feeling so lighthearted, for being out in the almost-sunshine. And why shouldn’t she be happy? The Last Day was coming—practically around the corner!

She didn’t care that Shem had made it clear to all of Salem in a recent message that the Last Day could still be *years* away. She didn’t believe that. It was closer—much closer, and she was that much nearer to Perrin’s return. Of course she was in an excellent mood!

As she walked, unrecognized, outside of the working men and women, she nearly giggled. She went right past one of the Guide’s assistants without him recognizing her and felt as if she’d snuck by the most fearsome guards in the world.

She grinned when she spotted Jon Offra in the middle of it all. He’d been given the task of directing wagon traffic, pointing to which pit each should go. Cheerfully he barked out orders in full colonel mode, occasionally whistling at an errant ox and once yanking back a mule that had ideas contrary to that of its driver.

Behind him a little distance, watchful but not interfering, was his helper and friend. On stacked bales of hay, Teman sat cross-legged, smiling softly to see Jon with a purpose. Mahrree noticed that Jon kept Teman in the corner of his eye. Occasionally Jon spun fully, as if to catch Teman not there, but Teman would nod back reassuringly and Colonel Offra returned to shouting orders with renewed vigor.

When Cambo came back an hour later it took him awhile to find his grandmother. When he did, she was deep in discussion with one of her former students who was sketching by the block cooling area. Cambo walked up behind them to observe.

“Yes, yes!” Mahrree said excitedly. “Much better. You’re right, Loid. Just because it’s rectangular doesn’t mean everything made with block has to be as well. Those curves are amazing!”

“And it’s not like it takes up more block, Professor Shin. I mean,

Woman *Under Seventy Whose Identity I Do Not Know*,” he chuckled. “Turning it at angles gives us a wider variety of possibilities.” He drew another line on the house design he was working on without corner in it anywhere. “I’m sure when the general’s spirit walks by the new buildings he’ll be impressed with what block can create.”

Mahrree patted his shoulder. “Absolutely. I can hardly wait to see your first creation.”

Loid shrugged. “May be a while. Looks like this first batch isn’t staying together as they were expecting, but the brick makers think they have the problem solved. So maybe in a few weeks.”

Mahrree noticed her grandson. “Cambo, look at this house plan! Block might actually be a good thing.”

“I just overheard that they’re trying to see if they can paint it, too,” Cambo told them. “Some of the artists are working on pigments and want to see if they can dye the ash before it’s made into block.”

Mahrree sighed. “If only so many people weren’t ill with the pox in the north we could probably get everything done more quickly.”

But Loid said, “I don’t think so, Unknown Woman. I don’t see how we could fit any more workers here. But the ash is being moved efficiently. And, honestly,” his voice lowered, “since all of the farms and orchards are withering, creating block for the next few moons will be a good diversion from staring at dying crops.”

The three of them fell silent at that thought, watching as more block molds were moved into the hot kilns.

“I always wondered why we needed so much in the emergency stores,” Cambo muttered. “Sometimes it seemed a little excessive to have four years’ worth of food in buildings all over Salem. But now? I almost wished it was five years’, just to make sure we have enough.”

“Agreed,” said Loid quietly. “For years we worked never knowing why, and then one day the answer is blowing right in front of us. I just thank the Creator I live in Salem.”

Mahrree nodded and fought the urge to look behind her at what was left of Mt. Deceit, and where another grandson might be—

“Well!” Cambo said, as if reading her mind and trying to divert her from useless pondering, “Muggah, time to get you home?”

“Ah, no, Cambo! I feel like I just got here! Lilla’s got dinner under control. Let me stay, just a little longer?”

Loid chuckled at her plea that bordered on a whine. “Is she worse than your four-year-old?” he asked Cambo.

“Much!” he said with a stern look in his light brown eyes. “I heard

the older they get, the more difficult they become. When this one turns eighty, she’ll be unbearable.”

Mahrree swatted his arm playfully. “Go get another load. I wanted to gather some of the samples of the failed block to bring to Relf. Maybe he can carve it into something. Or I can use it as a door stop.”

“All right, Muggah. Just keep a low profile. Loid may not tattle on you but others would.”

Mahrree wandered over to where the failed blocks were being dumped and squatted at the edges out of the way, ignoring the stiffness of her knees. Another woman, also with a kerchief around her face, kneeled next to her.

“Quite amazing, isn’t it?” she asked as she picked up a piece. “Just days ago I was trying to sweep it off my front porch and now it’s a rock again.”

“I was thinking the same thing!” Mahrree said. “There must be something useful we can do with this. A bit heavy for children’s puzzles, though.”

“Maybe for grinding grain?” her companion suggested as she smashed it on another piece. The block crumbled and the women winced and chuckled at the result. “I guess not unless you like very coarse bread,” the woman decided.

Mahrree picked up the fragments. “Maybe for scrubbing stains? I rub it on my hand and it’s getting some of the berry stains off.”

“But that doesn’t look comfortable,” the woman observed.

“It’s not,” Mahrree agreed, dropping the pieces. “But maybe it’d work for cloth.” She put some crumbles in her pocket. “I’ll try it when I get home. There’s plenty to scrub right now.”

“Definitely,” the woman said. She looked up at the kilns. “Gray block, huh? Not the most pleasant-looking substance to build with.”

“Oh, but it will be,” Mahrree assured her. “I was just speaking to one of the housing designers. Already he’s drafting some beautiful ideas. His belief is, even though the blocks are rectangular and gray, the buildings don’t have to be.”

The woman sighed. “I hope not.”

“My husband absolutely detested block,” Mahrree told her. “But I think even *he* might’ve been converted to the idea.”

The woman glanced over at her. “He saw block buildings? Did he serve in the world for a time?”

Mahrree looked at her in surprise. Someone who didn’t know who she or her husband was? What a delightful turn of events!

“Yes. Yes, he served for a few years and hated block houses.”

The woman placed one broken block on top of the other. “Because they’re cold, lifeless, and colorless. Dreadful.”

“Did you used to live in the world?”

The woman nodded, tilting her head. “Often in houses made from stuff just like this. Tiny boxes with small windows, many of them abandoned because newer, bigger ones were built. We could afford ‘abandoned.’ I’d thought we’d gotten away from block, but now?”

“Don’t you worry,” said Mahrree comfortingly. “If there’s something Salem knows how to do, it’s surprise you.”

The woman looked up at her with cheerful eyes. “Oh, we’ve been surprised, quite pleasantly. When Guide Zenos met us at the canyon, he promised us this was a place of miracles. Already I’ve made more friends than I thought possible—he’s seen to that. He’s taken such good care of us. He’s a remarkable man.”

Mahrree grinned. “Yes, he is. Even if he ordered people like me to stay indoors. If you see him, be sure to warn me.”

The woman chuckled. “Are you over age or not immune to the pox?”

“I had the pox the first time around, so now I’m just over age. What a terrible phrase! Sounds like I’m spoiled cheese for the pigs.”

The women chuckled as they played with the broken block.

“I just had to get out of the house,” Mahrree explained. “I think my daughter-in-law needed me out of the house as well.”

“I know the feeling,” the woman responded. “I’m not quarantined; both my husband and I had the pox. But my daughters aren’t supposed to be out. However, my oldest decided that if the kerchief can keep out the dust, it can keep out the pox.” The woman leaned closer to Mahrree and whispered, “She snuck out with me and is over there somewhere, tossing in firewood for the kilns. So if *you* see Guide Zenos, be sure to warn me as well. He wouldn’t be happy to see her breaking his recommendation either!”

They laughed together and looked around for the guide.

“Seems we’re safe right now. So is your husband out there?” Mahrree asked.

“No,” the woman sighed. “He didn’t come with us to Salem.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Mahrree said. “I didn’t realize—”

“It’s all right. It wasn’t as if he was expected to join us.”

Mahrree sighed. “It’s so difficult without a husband, isn’t it?”

The woman shrugged. “It wasn’t so easy *with* that husband, either. I’m assuming you no longer have yours?”

“Not on this side of the world, no. He’s been in the next one for almost a year now.”

“I’m sorry,” the woman said softly. “Sounds like you miss him.”

“Oh,” Mahrree waved it off, “only a hundred times a day.” She glanced at the woman who seemed relatively young despite the lines around her eyes. “You know,” she started, “there *are* available men in Salem. You don’t have to stay alone. You could find someone.”

The woman scoffed as if that was a hopeless cause. “Have *you* tried to find someone else?”

“Not actively. I have enough family to keep me company and I couldn’t bear thinking about replacing the man I lost.”

“Well, I could *easily* replace the man I lost!” the woman exclaimed.

Mahrree grinned. “Oh, really? Well, consider me on the job! I need a project and I’d love to find you a truly great man.”

The woman’s eyes took on a sad quality. “Thank you, but I don’t want to bother with men ever again. I’ve realized over the years that women and men see marriage differently.”

“How so?” Mahrree asked.

The woman pushed back a wispy lock. “When women—*girls*—dream of marriage, they have a whole sappy list of what they think will happen. They believe that their husband will become not only their lover but their friend. They’ll spend every day together talking, laughing, and enjoying each other. He’ll be attentive and her happiness will be his main concern. It’s a romantic and hopelessly silly list.

“But men?” She scoffed. “As boys, they never think of girls except in one way. Then when they marry they have only two items on their list: that she takes care of the needs of the house, and the needs of *him*. Beyond that, she’s irrelevant. He gets more joy out of his horse and would prefer spending the evening with his friends drinking or gaming. A wife is a maid who services him in bed.

“But a true companion? A mate for his soul? Men don’t need or want that. As long their basic desires are met, that’s it.”

Mahrree whimpered in dismay for the miserable woman next to her. “Oh, my dear, you’ve been far too long in the world! That’s not how it is in Salem, I promise!”

The woman shrugged. “I wish that was true, but long ago I set

aside my unrealistic expectations. Let's be honest: women are dreamers with too many needs. It's not a man's fault if his wife expected more from their marriage. It's her fault." She looked down at the block she was crushing under her fist. "Then when she disappoints him in one of the only two things he expects from her, she's finished."

Mahrree couldn't bear to see her so despondent. She gripped her arm and said, "I'm going prove to you that all men are not like that! Men of Salem aren't so base. They have great feeling and warmth and love. They have souls that long for mates! They see women as far more than a maid and a . . . a . . ." She couldn't think of an appropriate word besides the vulgar "sow" that the world used.

The woman looked up at her with eyes that were drained of all hope. "Perhaps your husband was that way, and maybe a couple others. But all the good men have been taken long ago. It'd take a miracle to find another one unattached."

"Salem is a place of miracles!" Mahrree reminded her. "We have some wonderful widowers ready for a lovely woman. And I *have* made a very successful match once," she said, all energy and desperate to see some promise of joy light up the woman's dull eyes. "So, anything specific I should look for in your new husband? I'm going to convince you that you are wrong, much to your delight!"

The woman chuckled. "My, but you are determined. But I'm warning you, with my background, this would be quite the project." She sat back and considered. "Only one requirement: no men who served in the army of Idumea."

Mahrree nodded. "Bad experiences with the army?"

"Oh yes," the woman answered with a heavy sigh. "I'd be content to never see a uniform again."

"Be warned, there are a few still in Salem but all belonging to good men. Guide Zenos still has his," Mahrree said. "He pulls it out occasionally, but he can't get that middle button to fasten anymore. I heard one of his daughters say some of his chest muscle must have slid down to his belly."

The woman snorted. "That's a terrible thing to say! I thought he looked quite fit when I met him."

"Oh, he is!" Mahrree chuckled. "Fitter than most men half his age. He's hardly aged at all."

"So you've known him for quite a while?"

"I have, a very long time. In fact, he's the one I made a match for! As soon as I met Calla, I knew that was his future wife. See? I can do

this.”

The woman chuckled. “Well, if you *can* find me a man, I hope he’s like Guide Zenos, but younger, like Rector Shin,” she suggested, and Mahrree stopped turning over the block in her hands.

A thought was occurring to her which should have struck her a while ago . . .

“He’s been most helpful to our family since we arrived,” the woman continued wistfully. “Too bad the Shins couldn’t have more sons so there’d be a lonely one for me.”

Mahrree did her best to keep her voice calm as she asked, “Just how long ago did you arrive?”

“Barely a week ago,” the woman said, peering closely at a block. “With the last group that came in. I understand it was one of the largest they ever had. I was really quite nervous, but the rector’s son rode with me the entire time. A very nice young man. Too bad he’s married—he would’ve been wonderful for one of my daughters. But I understand *he* has unmarried brothers.” She chuckled sadly. “But if my husband ever heard that one of his daughters married someone with the last name of Shin, well *that* would get him here.”

Mahrree turned to face the woman.

She looked up from her piecing together a broken block. The smile in her eyes faded as she saw the surprise in Mahrree’s.

“You know,” Mahrree began slowly, “we haven’t been introduced yet. It was supposed to happen the day the mountain exploded when you were to come to my house for midday meal.”

The woman paled. “Oh . . . my . . .”

Mahrree pulled down her kerchief and smiled. “And what I would have said then was, ‘Welcome to Salem, Druses Thorne!’”

Mrs. Thorne dropped her block and held the sides of her face, her kerchief sliding down. “*Mahrree Shin?* Oh, my . . .”

Mahrree took her gently by the shoulders. “Please don’t be alarmed. I really am happy to see you. We’ve been wondering how you’ve been faring and—”

Mrs. Thorne’s tears surprised her.

Mahrree stood up with some effort and pulled her up as well, taking her into a hug. “I hope you’re not crying out of worry or fear,” she said, patting her on the back. “Because I don’t fear you.” She started to laugh. She tried to hold it back but it was impossible. “I’m sorry but I just remembered what you said about *your husband*.” Mahrree pulled back to face Mrs. Thorne who was now smiling too.

“He’s easily replaced?”

Mrs. Thorne started to laugh, shaking her head and wiping her eyes. “I was so, *so* frightened to meet you! When I felt that tremor that morning the first thing I thought was, ‘Oh good—now I don’t have to face Mrs. Shin today!’”

Mahrree laughed back. “So did I! I was *not* looking forward to meeting you or your daughters. I had no idea what to say that would be appropriate. So the Creator threw us together this way instead. My brother Shem was right, Mrs. Thorne—this is a place of miracles!”

A young woman ran over to them.

“Mother, are you all right?” she asked as she pulled down her kerchief, but instead of looking at Druses she glared at Mahrree.

“Yes, I’m fine, Versa,” Druses said, chuckling and dabbing her tears.

Versa scowled in concern for her mother’s odd behavior.

“So you must be Versula,” Mahrree declared and analyzed the blond hair and piercing blue eyes that were remarkably reminiscent of her father near the same age. She released Mrs. Thorne and stepped over to Versa. “Welcome to Salem!” She wrapped her arms around the startled young woman who didn’t return the hug.

Mahrree stepped back, still holding a glowering Versa by the arms. “Remarkable. You look so much like him but on you those features are simply beautiful.”

Versa’s mouth dropped open. “Are you . . . ?”

Mahrree nodded. “Having a wonderful time with your mother? We’ve been sitting here chatting and laughing about blocks and men without any idea who each other was. Yes, Versa, I’m Mahrree Shin. And I’m not supposed to be out here, as neither are you, I understand, so let’s make sure we don’t draw Shem’s attention, shall we?”

Versa continued to stare at her. “You are *nothing* like I imagined,” she said tonelessly.

Mahrree’s eyebrows went up. “You know,” she turned to Mrs. Thorne with an impish grin, “she even *sounds* like him. Perrin always said he had a long ways to go in diplomacy.” She winked at Versa.

Druses sent a warning look to her daughter as Mahrree chuckled.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Shin,” Versa said, still watching her steadily. “I really didn’t expect to run into you. I’m just a little startled. Usually I’m much more polite—”

Her mother scoffed. “No, you’re not!” She turned to Mahrree. “You’re right, though. I often called her the General because she has

such an abrupt way about her, but she’s been my strength all these years.” She beamed with pride at her oldest daughter. “She’s pulled me through it all.”

“You sound like a fascinating young woman, Versa Thorne Kiah,” said Mahrree sincerely. “I’d like to get to know you better when all of this excitement dies down. I’ve heard a few stories about your past from Shem. You’ve lived a remarkable life. Have you considered writing it down? They made me write a book once we got here,” she said. “They might want you to do the same thing.”

Versa finally managed a faint smile. “Yes . . . nothing like I imagined. That’s a good thing, Mrs. Shin.” She smiled more genuinely. “I’ll have to get a copy of that book. I suppose this is a better way to meet you than over midday meal at your ho—”

“And WHAT are YOU doing OUT HERE?!” The booming male voice made all three women jump.

Mahrree cringed as she turned. Meekly, she said, “Hi, Shem.”

“Don’t ‘Hi, Shem’ me, Mahrree Shin!” the guide said sternly. “Do you have *any idea* what—” He stopped short when he saw who Mahrree was talking to. A smile began to grow on his face but quickly hardened when he saw Versa.

“And YOU!” he pointed at her. “Didn’t I quarantine you? The last thing I want for *you*, Versa, is to get the pox *now!*”

She scrunched her mouth apologetically.

He turned to Mrs. Thorne. “But Druses, I have no problem with you,” he said with his familiar warmth and gave her a quick hug. “Are you doing all right? Do you need anything?”

Mahrree threw her head back and laughed. “Mrs. Thorne, he still likes you. Get me back in his good graces again, will you?”

Shem put a brotherly arm around Mahrree and pulled her kerchief back up over her nose with his free hand. “He would not be happy with you *or me* should something happen to you. You’re supposed to be behaving yourself.”

Versa and Druses quickly replaced their kerchiefs.

Shem nodded his approval at Versa. He kept his arm firmly around Mahrree as if to keep her from escaping. “Mahrree, Mahrree, how many times have you snuck out?”

“This is the first time, honestly, Shem. Honri told me I should rebel so I made Cambo take me. I just wanted to have a little fun.”

Shem’s eyebrows rose at her use of the word ‘fun.’ “How often have you coughed?” he asked severely, but his eyes were twinkling.

“Not once.”

Shem turned to Versa and beckoned her to come closer so he could put a hand on her head. “No fever—*yet*. Anything itching?”

Versa’s eyes smiled at him. “No, Guide. I’m healthy.”

He pointed at her. “Stay that way, young lady,” he smiled. “And just so you know, I don’t approve of either of you ignoring my recommendations! I make these rules because I’m worried about you, not because I’m trying to ruin—” he turned to Mahrree, “—*your fun*.”

Mahrree rolled her eyes at the Thorne women. “*He* used to be so much more fun before he became a father and the guide.” She leaned closer to Versa. “Don’t bother reading my book but get a copy of Calla’s about the army. There you’ll see just how mischievous this very stern man used to be.” She patted his belly.

He sucked it in a little.

“I especially recommend the chapter about his relationship with Karna. Shem used to pull the meanest tricks on the poor man. Very un-Salem-like.”

“Mahrree!” Shem exclaimed as he pulled his arm off of her.

She laughed as the Thorne women chuckled.

Shem’s face softened as he watched her. “I’ve just become more mature,” he explained, and leaned over to the Thornes. “But if you really want to know how rotten *she* could be, remind me to share a few stories with you the next time I come by.”

Mahrree’s eyes grew wide. “What? What stories? Shem!”

Shem grinned. “You should know it all, Mahrree. Ah, but wait—you’ve over seventy and maybe your memory is beginning to fail you. Otherwise you would’ve remembered to not be out here. *Cambo!*” he called as he saw his nephew coming over to them. “Make sure she gets home safely in about an hour. Druses, do you and Versa need a way home?”

Druses shook her head. “Anoki will come get us at dinner time.”

Shem turned back to Mahrree with his stern expression again. “The *only* reason,” he whispered for just her to hear, “that I’m letting you stay out is because I love seeing you laugh again. Who would’ve imagined it would take a volcano’s eruption and Lemuel Thorne’s wife to accomplish *that*.”

At the end of the day it was Shem who brought Mahrree home.

Cambo stayed near the greens to help fortify an older house whose roof was on the verge of collapse, and the guide was on his way back to the Eztates anyway.

He helped Mahrree into the wagon and sat next to her on the bench, a little stiffly. “You know, I really can’t remember the last time it was just you and me alone. I’m beginning to think it was before I was even married,” he said with a slightly nervous chuckle.

“Probably true,” Mahrree said. “I know you make it a practice to never be alone with a woman who’s not your wife, but I think Salem will understand your giving me a ride today without a chaperone.”

Shem smiled as he drove the horses down the road. “I must say, Mahrree, I’m surprised to see you so *chipper*. Not that I’m not pleased to see you smiling and laughing again, but I can’t help but wonder what’s going on in that mind of yours.” His voice quieted. “The anniversary’s just two days away, you know.”

Mahrree sighed away her chipper-ness. “I know full well when the anniversary is,” she said tightly. “You don’t need to remind me of when my husband died, Shem. It’s just that . . .”

She went silent.

“It’s just that what, Mahrree?”

She took a deep breath. “Why be sad when it’s nearly over?”

He glanced sidelong at her. “When what’s nearly over?”

“This!” she gestured wildly. “Deceit! The world! Everything!”

Leaning away to see her better, he said, “Mahrree, are you talking about—”

“The Last Day!” she nearly hollered. Unable to suppress her grin, she said, “When, Shem? When is it? I know He tells you things!”

Shem’s jaw was slack as he stared at her. “I . . . I don’t know. You think I’d know that?”

“You’re the guide!” she elbowed him. “The Creator MUST tell you everything!”

Strangely, Shem’s shoulders drooped. “Oh, Mahrree,” he said with so much sympathy that she felt like pushing him off the bench. He was going to stab holes into her joy, she just knew it.

“First, Mahrree—”

This wasn’t good. When someone begins with a list it’s never good.

“—the Creator doesn’t tell me everything; only what I need to know to lead His people. He makes me live by faith as well.

“Second, I haven’t the foggiest idea when the Last Day will be.

We've been directed to store enough food for four years. We don't even know for sure if this is 'the awakening'—"

"Yes, you do!" she hissed at him. "When we stood on the back porch looking at the ash falling, you looked up and said, 'This is it, isn't it?' You weren't asking me, you were asking the Creator. So what did He say?"

"Mahrree, Mahrree—"

"Shem, come on! It's *me*! You can tell *me*!"

"Mahrree!" he said urgently. "Please, don't do this. Don't ask what you can't know the answer to."

"So you know?"

"I don't!" he nearly wailed. "I wish I did but I probably won't even realize until the very day when the Deliverer appears, shakes my hand and says, 'Thanks, I can take it from here.'"

She scoffed, partly at his attitude and partly at his doubt.

"It's not for us to know," he said quietly, "but to have faith that it *is* coming."

She nearly mimicked him in her frustration.

"I mean," he continued, "why would we have four years' of supplies if we didn't have that many years to go? And even then it might not be the end but just when we get to start planting again. Mt. Deceit may do this again later. It could still be twenty or more years away—why are you glaring at me like that?"

"Because you don't believe it," she said so bitterly it came out as a snarl. "And I don't know why you won't admit it. I know that look in your eyes. You think the Last Day is soon, don't you! Then tell me?"

Shem sighed. "Mahrree, why are you making such a big deal about—" He glanced over again to see her fierce determination. But he saw something else as well.

"Oh, Mahrree. I think I understand." He put an arm around her and pulled her close. "Perrin, right?"

She felt like she'd been stabbed and deflated. Shem's reticence could only mean . . . But he *could* be wrong—

"Yes," she said. "The Last Day brings him back. To both of us."

"I'm so sorry, Mahrree," he groaned. "I wish I could promise you differently, but it *could* still be years away. You saw Mt. Deceit erupt and you started to believe he was on his way back already."

The first holes of doubt began to hurt. She rested her head on his shoulder feeling a little guilty about it, but only a little.

“He *could* be on his way, Shem. Maybe this will bring Young Pere to his senses and Perrin can—why are you shaking your head?”

Shem’s voice was very low. “He’s still far away, Mahrree. He’s not even in Edge but much further south. Getting back now will be very difficult, *if* he can get back at all. He’s surrounded by danger but doesn’t recognize most of it.”

Mahrree sat up. “Shem, I remember when you used to bring so much joy and hope. Every time I saw you I’d grin, waiting to see what humor or teasing you’d bring. But the past couple of years you’ve been as gloomy as my students in Edge on testing day.”

“That’s harsh, Mahrree!”

“Well, it’s true! You could be a little more hopeful, a little more encouraging! Guide Gleace was never as glum as you are.”

“Now you sound like a pouty twelve-year-old. I feel like I hardly know you today. And I’m not glum, Mahrree. I’m just . . . realistic.”

“Can’t you be realistic in an optimistic way? You used to be!”

He blew out in annoyance. “The Last Day *is* coming, Mahrree. I have full confidence it will be glorious. We may have to wade through a few rough days until we get there, though, but all will be glorious in the end. How was that?”

“Pitifully inadequate,” she said. “But I suppose that’ll have to do.”

“I suppose I can go on with my calling, then. Good thing I don’t need your approval—”

She gripped his arm. “I’m sorry. You have my full approval. You always have. You’re a tremendous guide. No man could handle this better than you. I don’t think I tell you that enough.”

“I don’t think you’ve *ever* told me that before.”

“Really?”

Shem shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. I don’t do it for compliments.”



When Versa opened the front door of the Second Resting Station she was not in a good mood.

Delia saw the severe look in her eyes and shriveled in the stuffed chair she was sitting in, holding her book up higher as a shield.

But Versa wasn’t glaring at her sister. She was boring holes into her husband who snored softly on one of the large sofas.

Mrs. Thorne followed her daughter into the large gathering room

and pursed her lips when she saw why her oldest was fuming.

Versa slammed the front door with a loud bang.

Anoki jolted awake and sat up. “What was that for?”

“What are you doing?” Versa demanded.

He rubbed his eyes. “Just napping.”

“Why?”

“Because I was *tired!*”

“How could you be tired? It’s only dinner time and you’ve done nothing all afternoon but . . . but sit here?”

“I got up early to milk that stupid cow and the sick neighbor’s stupid cows! That’s hard work! Doesn’t seem like it would be but you’d be surprised. And I did it again this afternoon.”

Slipping behind her daughter, Druses crept over to the kitchen. Priscill was just coming out but when she felt the tension thickening, she retreated. Delia held the book a little higher.

Versa put her hands on her waist. “Milking cows twice a day is hard work? I’ll tell you what’s hard work—standing outside for seven hours moving kindling!”

“No one told you to do that,” he snapped. “In fact, you’re not supposed to be out at all. That was *your* choice to get all dirty.” He grimaced at her dusty appearance.

“Well, if you’re not going to do your part, I need to!”

“My *part* is supposed to be taking care of things here!”

“But you’re immune! We don’t need you here *napping*. You should be out there helping these people!”

“Why?”

“For all they’ve done for us!”

Anoki scoffed. “What have they done?”

“Brought me and my mother home today, for one! You were supposed to pick us up hours ago. Fortunately someone else’s husband gave us a ride home. I don’t think he even lives around here. He did *your* duty! Doesn’t that make you feel anything?”

Smirking, he said, “Makes me glad I didn’t bother hitching up the horses. You made it home. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal?” Versa exclaimed. “You were supposed to get us! Someone else had to take care of us!”

Anoki’s smirk turned smug. “That’s the way it’s *supposed* to work in Salem. Everyone takes care of us.”

“No, it’s not! What is *with* you? Why don’t you get it?”

“Get what?” he bellowed at her. “This is *not* what I expected!”

How much longer are we trapped here?”

Versa held out her arms in dismay. “Trapped? In a huge building with a dozen bedrooms, an enormous library and kitchen, and more food than I’ve ever seen in a year? Anoki, this is luxury! What do you want? Tell me! What do you *really* want?”

He scoffed. “You don’t get it.”

“I don’t!” she yelled at him. “So tell me! What don’t I get?”

He stood up. “Call me when dinner’s ready.”

“Where are you going?”

“To bed!” He stormed to the other side of the gathering room and up the stairs to the bedrooms that filled the second level.

“Aaauugh!” Versa hollered at him and kicked over a chair.

Druses came flying out the kitchen. “Versa! Everything all right?”

“Just *wonderful*, Mother.”

Delia lowered her book. “Doesn’t sound wonderful.”

Versa shot her a look and Delia took cover behind her book again.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with him, Mother,” Versa said. “He does nothing all day, he complains about everything—what I am supposed to do with him?”

Druses sighed and sat down on one of the sofas. “I’m not exactly the best person to ask about marital problems, Versa.”

“What *did* he do all day?” Versa demanded of her sisters.

Priscill slipped into the gathering room, glancing around to make sure it was safe. “He *did* take care of the cows. And he was outside for a long time this afternoon but I don’t know what he was doing,” she shrugged. “Do you, Delia?”

Delia shook her head. “I’ve been reading all day.”

Druses, desperate to improve the mood, beamed at her middle daughter. “Find anything interesting, dear?”

Delia’s eyes lit up. “Oh, hundreds of books! I’m reading a story right now about two families that fought until the son of one family fell in love with the daughter of the other and—”

The simmering of her older sister stopped her and Delia hesitated, unsure if she should go on.

Versa sighed apologetically. “Sounds like a good story, Delia. Maybe I’ll read it when you’re through.” She threw herself on a chair she hadn’t kicked over yet. “Why is he acting like this? Why does he hate everything here? It doesn’t make any sense.”

Druses shrugged. “I’m sorry, Versa. Maybe, maybe it’s because

he doesn't feel a purpose yet. Men need to know where they fit in society, what their job is. If they don't have that they get irritable and frustrated. Anoki knew only the army and law enforcement. Neither of those jobs is needed here. It's been a big adjustment coming here, then the volcano, and now he's stuck in this house with four women—have you considered it just might be a bit much for him to handle?"

Versa sighed. "I can handle it all!"

Priscill rolled her eyes in the same annoying way Anoki had. "Of course. Versa can handle *anything*. Leave it all to Versa."

Versa pointed at her. "I'm not taking that mouth of yours tonight, Prissy. Don't *you* start with me or you'll regret it!"

"Girls!" Druses said sharply. "Enough!"

Delia peeked over her book again. "I'm fine, Mother."

Priscill growled quietly at her. "Of course you are. Delia's always the good girl—"

"Hey!" Versa shouted, rising to her feet again. "Lay off of her, Prissy! I swear you're getting as irritable as Anoki—"

"I'm so BORED!" Priscill shouted back. "There was supposed to be entertainments and stuff to see! But this?"

"Is a LOT better than dying down in the world, Prissy! Ask Delia. There are hundreds of books to read—"

Delia nodded eagerly. "I found one all about Guide Zenos and Colonel Shin's experiences in the army, and there's another one all about the history of the world—"

Priscill flopped herself dramatically on the sofa. "Books of *army stories* and *world history*. Just kill me now before the boredom does."

But Versa was too interested to chastise her youngest sister. "Delia, is one of them by Mrs. Shin?"

Delia nodded hesitantly.

Versa surprised her by smiling. "You know, we met her today."

"Really?" Delia's eyes grew big. "What was she like?"

Druses smiled at the break in the arguing. "Quite lovely! We actually had *fun*. And she thinks she's going to find me a new husband."

Delia was shocked. "She is?"

Her mother waved that off with a chuckle. "Oh, I don't know. She said she knows a few good widowers."

"So," Delia began tentatively, "you didn't see any sign that she and Guide Zenos ever . . ."

Druses shook her head. "We spent about two hours together and

she spoke so much of her husband that it was obvious she was devoted to only him. Even when Guide Zenos came over to talk with us I could tell she didn’t see him as anything more than a brother.”

Delia developed a worldly smirk. “But what about Guide Zenos when he saw her?”

Versa held out her hands. “She’s seventy-something years old! And he’s not a young man, either, anymore.”

“Mrs. Shin didn’t look that old to me,” Druses decided. “I thought she seemed more in her fifties than her seventies. And the guide is *only* in his sixties and still quite handsome—”

“Old people,” Priscill grumbled from the sofa. “Yuck.”

Versa shrugged her off. “Trust me, Delia—there was nothing there besides a long friendship. All the world’s stories were false.”

“That’s good,” Delia said. “I hoped they were.”

Priscill sighed loudly. “Grand. Not even a good *scandal* around here for entertainment.”

“So what do you want?” Versa demanded.

“Something to do!” Priscill hollered and sat up. “I’m sure there’d be something going on at the amphitheater in Midplain tonight—”

“Prissy, Midplain is GONE!” Versa shouted. “Do you understand that? There’s a MOUNTAIN on top of it!”

Priscill looked dubious. “That’s only the scientists’ guesses. They don’t really know. How can they?”

“They go to the top of the mountains and,” Versa motioned furiously, “figure things out! I don’t know it all either but they have some way of measuring volume and direction and distance, and by their estimates all of Deceit is now one long sloping hill over the middle of the northern world. Now is that the kind of entertainment you want? Trying to survive in that kind of chaos? I don’t!”

Druses put on a fake smile and clapped her hands. “Who’s hungry for dinner? I know I am! Cheese, bread, dried beef, and berries—doesn’t that sound good?”

Delia nodded eagerly and marked her page in the book. “I’ll help get it ready, Mother.”

Versa stared at Priscill, knowing exactly what the sixteen-year-old was going to say next.

“Didn’t we have that for dinner *yesterday*?” Priscill whined.

Her sister cracked her knuckles. “Why you *ungrateful* little—”

“Versa!” Druses snapped and immediately took a deep breath. “Versa,” she began in a false cheery tone, “would you care to retrieve

your husband for dinner?”

“Not particularly.”

Priscill hopped off the sofa. “I’ll go get him,” she volunteered. “At least *that* will kill a minute or two,” and she bounded up the stairs.

Druses and Delia headed into the kitchen while Versa drummed her fingers on the armrest and put her other hand on her belly. Alone, she looked up.

“What are we going to do with them?” she whispered.

Chapter 5--“But it’s all right—I have an insider.”

Captain Nelt stared up at his dark tent. He was exhausted from yet another full day of harvesting dusty crops and wanted nothing more than to give in to the sleep that was tormenting his eyes. Maybe tonight there wouldn’t be a message either. Nothing might *ever* be coming, but just in case it was he wanted to be ready.

A moment later a dark body stole into his tent.

Nelt propped himself up on his elbows and said to the shadowy figure, “Rather late at night for squirrel hunting, wouldn’t you say?”

“Depends on how moody the squirrels are,” came the response.

Although he was relieved to hear the line, and even more pleased to recognize who was delivering it, he scoffed. “Why won’t they let me create the codes? Seriously, *moody squirrels?*”

The body sat down next to him with a quiet chuckle. “Because the last time you created a code half the men were so distracted by it they couldn’t settle down long enough to relate their messages.”

Nelt grinned. “That was a good one, wasn’t it? I still think about her when it’s late at night and—”

The other man cleared his throat. “Sir?”

“I *told* you,” said Nelt authoritatively, “you don’t have to ‘sir’ me when we’re alone. Only in front of the other men.”

“Just trying to stay in character. Live it day and night. That’s also what you’ve told me.”

Nelt smiled into the dark. “Good man. Glad you’re listening.”

“I’m always listening to you, even when I shouldn’t be. The way you’ve twisted my mind, the images you’ve created—”

“You’re welcome,” Nelt chuckled. “So what’s the news? I expected you three days ago. I *almost* started to worry.”

“A little storm got in my way, *sir!* And some mud, and trees—”

“But you’re all right, I see? So what’s happened to the north?”

“Sands is fine,” his informant related. “Only about three inches of ash, according to the message I received two nights ago. Grasses was also in fairly good condition when I left it.”

“Good,” sighed Nelt. “As far as I know, Thorne hasn’t heard anything from the west but is expecting news tomorrow morning. He thought something would come this afternoon.”

“We know. We’re the ones who detained his messengers. They should reach him with the same news tomorrow morning. We wanted to make sure we got here first.”

The messenger slipped something to Nelt and the captain fingered it in the dark.

“Feels perfect,” said Nelt. “How were the trials?”

“Excellent. We’ve distilled it significantly.” A small vial was passed.

“Good, good. Subtlety is everything.”

The messenger chuckled. “Ironic statement coming from *you*.”

Nelt smirked. “When everyone expects the outrageous from you, they never suspect the subtle. Act as the opposite of what you are. Remember that. You may need to play that part as well someday.”

“So I’ll need to play the idiot to cover up my genius?”

“No, you’ve *always* been an idiot, little brother. You need to start acting *smart*.” Nelt ducked automatically, knowing his brother would swing for his head when he was insulted. The captain stifled a snort as his brother hit only air.

“You’re getting quicker at that, *Captain*. Good dodge.”

“It’s only because you’re predictable, *Little Brother*. Never do the same thing twice. If you leave a pattern, you’ll be discov—oof!”

“Like that?” his brother asked smugly. “Didn’t expect that punch to the gut, now, did you?”

“Ow, yes . . . yes, just like that,” Nelt gasped. “I have hope for you yet. Slag, if that leaves a mark—”

“How could it? Besides, I learned from you to never leave marks.”

Nelt grumbled in approval. “So, what’s the news? Is Yordin still coming? Under what pretext?”

“To bring his general assistance, of course!” the younger Nelt said with feigned enthusiasm. “What greater devotion can Major Yordin demonstrate than by bringing reinforcements and supplies?”

“Good, good,” Nelt said. “Tell Yordin we have about fourteen of our contacts—”

“Only fourteen? We had nearly one hundred when you left!”

Nelt sighed. “I found many of their bodies in the mud. The rest are corpses washing out to the southern sea by now.”

His brother cringed. “Is it enough?”

“It has to be. There are still six on the other side—”

“Only six!”

“—but it can still work, according to the message I received when I was harvesting a field not far from the border. Thorne’s still playing at something. He’s agreed to send everyone back to their forts but I have a feeling he won’t go until he has it out with Sargon first. That’s when we’ll act. But it’s all right—I have an insider.”

“Captain Lick?”

Nelt scoffed. “He’s on his way out, as are his little helpers. I’ve seen only two left—surgeon’s assistants, it seems. He’s not going to be a problem. No, my insider is about to become Thorne’s *son*.”

“What?!”

Nelt explained the situation, and when he finished his brother shook his head. “And we’re sure he’s not with Lick?”

“He’s too innocent to be with anyone. He’s trusting and smart, but also hopelessly naive. He’s my *little buddy*. Whatever Thorne is going to do, he’ll tell Shin, then Shin will tell me. We have a good chance at succeeding at this.”

“If you pull this off, you’ll be Major Nelt by the end of the week!”

Nelt smiled, but gripped his brother’s arm. “One more thing—get the word out: tell Yordin and the rest to steer clear of Shin. He’s a good boy and we could use him. I’d hate to see him go down.”

“I can’t make promises. Everyone around Thorne is a target—you know that. He shields himself with other people’s bodies. The only way to reach him is to take out his protection.”

“I know, I know,” Nelt said. “And Shin’s hard to miss. He’ll be the biggest thing out there. Tall, black hair, dark eyes, bulky, a corporal . . . just tell them to *try* to miss him.”

His brother sighed. “Might as well ask Thorne to surrender to Yordin instead.”

“It’ll work,” Nelt said firmly. “And,” he added, “if something goes wrong, keep an eye on Shin for me, will you? He doesn’t belong here.”

“Where does he belong, then?” his brother probed.

“I’m not sure yet. Just not at the side of Thorne. Promise me?”

“Of course. But what would I do with him? Sounds like he’s too

big to be my pet.”

“I’m not sure what you should do with him,” Nelt admitted. “In time it may be obvious. Just keep your eyes open for him.”

The next morning on the 62nd Day, Shin woke up feeling hopeful. Yesterday, Thorne had agreed to harvest more crops, and when news came that farms on the way to Coast were requesting help, Shin was sure Thorne would agree to one more day of work before heading north to Edge. As he washed his face and dressed, he felt like he was succeeding.

Still, he was concerned that each time he asked the general *when* they were returning to Province 8, Thorne responded with, “When the time’s right, son. Soon.” His hopeful feeling was pushed aside by a nagging one that Thorne wasn’t telling him everything.

As Shin made his way to the officer’s eating room he saw a lone figure hunched over a book.

“Corporal! You’re up early again,” said Colonel Glasser.

“Yes, sir. I didn’t mean to disturb your reading, sir—”

“Not at all, not at all.” Glasser motioned to the chair across from him. “I was hoping I’d see you this morning. Here, read this.” He slid the book across the table to Shin, who sat down.

“What is this, sir?”

“What I was looking for,” Glasser said quietly. “And I found it—The Writings. Right here, about the waking of Mt. Deceit. I think it might be the sign, don’t you? And here,” he pointed to a passage.

Shin swallowed hard. The style of printing was different and the book was considerably thinner than the family version they had in Salem. But the words were familiar. Mostly.

Before the Last Day Mt. Deceit will awaken.

**Before the Last Day my chosen will strike terror in the
deadened hearts of the fiercest soldiers.**

**Before the Last Day those who have no power shall dis-
cover the greatest power is all around them.**

**Before the Last Day those who stayed true will be deliv-
ered to peace from destruction.**

**I have created this time, I have given these warnings, and
I will reward my faithful children.**

Shin’s eyebrows furrowed. Something was missing or written incorrectly. He knew in the version they had in Salem that Mt. Deceit was called “the tallest mountain.” This was Guide Hierum’s prophecy, given only six years after the first five hundred families were placed here by the Creator. Deceit wasn’t named until nearly two hundred years later.

And where were the names Deliverer and Destroyer? In the Salem version they were capitalized, as if denoting individuals.

And “my chosen will strike terror”—he knew that wasn’t right. There was never someone who was “chosen,” was there? In Salem the phrase was something bordering on the laughable: “even the aged,” not “my chosen.”

Perhaps someone had rewritten this, had taken liberties with the wording—

Then again, he didn’t seem to recall anything accurately anymore. Maybe he was just remembering incorrectly.

“Right here,” Glasser whispered as he pointed to ‘my chosen.’ “And look here—‘delivered to peace from destruction.’ Shin, I’d never admit this to anyone else but I think it’s referring to you.”

Shin was already shaking his head. “No, see, I’m pretty sure that’s not right because—”

“What do you know of destiny, Shin?”

He looked up. “Destiny, sir?” He was only vaguely familiar with the term. “I believe there are things we *could* do but it’s up to us to actually *choose* to do them.”

Glasser smiled. “Shin, you *could* bring great peace to Idumea. You might be able to fulfill this prophecy!”

Disbelieving and baffled, he said, “Sir, how?”

The colonel glanced around again. “I have a spy in Sargon’s camp,” he whispered. “He’s told me that Sargon’s scared, ill-prepared, and vulnerable. He’s willing to listen to a compromise from Thorne, but Thorne has to deliver it himself. If we could get the two of them together to discuss the tragedy that’s hit both of our territories, we could forge a lasting peace! Think of it, Shin: a unified, peaceful world just like your grandfather and great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather had. You might be able to do this, Shin. It’s in your blood and it’s your destiny.”

Glasser's words bounced around in Shin's mind, smashing anything that could have interfered with the notion that he was not the "chosen one" which, a few moments ago, he didn't even know existed. It was intoxicating, intriguing, and incredible.

He *did* come to the world to do great things, didn't he?

"All you have to do is talk to Thorne and get him to agree to a meeting. Tell him he needs to face Sargon so that he can appreciate the caliber and strength of a man like Thorne. Then Sargon will yield to his proposals. It's all in your hands, Shin. He'll do anything for his son—I already heard him say that."

Shin was already nodding halfway through Glasser's plea. "Consider it done, sir. When should the meeting take place?"

Glasser leaned back. "How about this evening? After the rest of the crops are brought in? Save the people from starvation first, then save them from a bloody end next."

"Well?" Colonel Ferrim whispered to Colonel Glasser as the two men sauntered to the stables half an hour later.

"He's the 'chosen one,' Yurgis. I could see it in his eyes as I planted the idea. Very fertile soil, that boy is. Too bad he's not going to live to see the fruits of our efforts. Maybe we'll have to name something after his memory in Idumea as a thank you."

Ferrim chuckled quietly.

Captain Lick paced in the command office waiting for Thorne who was slow to return from breakfast. Lick suspected it had to do with a certain corporal who caught the general and asked for a few minutes.

Shin was going to ruin everything, especially if he *was* from Salem. Lick had been anxious to speak to Onus about the mountains behind Edge. The path through the boulders was there, somewhere. And *someone* should have found it by now. But was that someone still alive? Depending on where Salem was, it might be under Deceit, too. The only way Lick could find out was if he had an army.

But his own offensive, along with the majority of his men, had

been blown to pieces by the volcano’s eruption, leaving him with only two associates and fragments of his plans. Yet all he needed was one success, one sure victory to seal the deal with Thorne.

In many ways, the explosion was fortunate. Supposedly Salem had huge buildings filled with food and supplies. It might not be so difficult now to convince Thorne that they needed to go north. Or northeast. Or northwest. His father was never quite sure. Then again, his father didn’t have much grasp of reality during his last bitter years.

Lick’s pacing turned to stomping.

He had to eliminate Shin; he stood in the way. But it had to look like an accident. Maybe Lick could be defending Shin somehow, trying to help save him when the poor corporal meets his demise . . .

Then again, one of Lick’s men was particularly *skilled*, and perhaps Lick could suggest that he find his way to Shin and—

The door flew open and General Thorne marched into the office.

“General, sir! Have a good breakfast?” Lick stood at attention.

“Sure, Lick. Breakfast was just *lovely*,” Thorne said with a sneer. “What are you doing here already?”

“We were to meet this morning. Remember, sir? To discuss the *border meeting*?” Lick knew not to point out that Thorne was half an hour late.

“That’s right,” Thorne said, shuffling some papers on the desk as he sat down. “I just came from a discussion about that.”

“You have, sir?” he tried to say brightly, attempting to hide his anger that he, the chosen battle commander based upon his plans submitted to Thorne many moons ago, had been left out of the discussion about the very battle he had planned. “With the colonels?”

Thorne glanced up again. “With those of influence, yes. It’ll happen this evening.”

“This evening, sir? Are we prepared?”

“For negotiations, yes,” Thorne said, picking up a paper and scanning it. He ignored Lick’s gasp of surprise.

“Sir, do you mean actual negotiations or,” Lick leered, “*negotiations*?”

“Negotiations are negotiations, Lick,” said Thorne dismissively. “I’ll be prepared with all my soldiers and I just received word that Yordin is coming from the west with five hundred men and horses, fresh and ready to help at the border.”

Lick wasn’t expecting that. “Yordin, sir? On his way *here*?”

“So I was told by my messengers. Seems the west is in fairly good

condition and can reestablish supply lines should we need them.”

“So . . . it’s *negotiations*,” Lick smiled. “Where General Thorne is victorious once again in reuniting the world?”

Thorne sighed. “Just what do you want, Captain?”

Lick resumed his stance. “To know how to best serve, sir! Your success is my greatest concern. I have a variety of scenarios for you to choose from. This is what I was selected for, correct? To stay next to you and provide strategies? So what will you have me do this evening, sir?”

“You, Captain, may stand next to me as I engage in negotiations with Sargon,” said Thorne crisply. “You may *learn* by my side how to win over the enemy for the common good of the world.”

These were strange words coming from the general. “Common good” was never part of any strategy they’d discussed.

“Of course, sir. I look forward to it. Do we know with what forces General Sargon may arrive?”

“Doesn’t matter as long we arrive with *more*,” Thorne said meaningfully. “Tell the soldiers who are finishing harvesting that they best not overexert themselves. We have a *meeting* this evening.”

Lick nearly burst with anticipation. “So it *is negotiations*, sir!” He couldn’t understand why Thorne regarded him with such a strained expression, but he nodded officiously. “On my way to the men, sir!”



Captain Nelt stood at the main gates watching as Corporal Shin handed out assignments to the soldiers heading out to harvest.

Such a tragic loss, he thought. So much potential. So many rhymes not yet completed. Nelt glanced instinctively to the west. No horses were yet seen kicking up clouds of dust, and Nelt regretted that he wouldn’t be there when they rode in. If he could spare half a minute to speak to Yordin, to find out when to draw Shin away—

The chipper corporal jogged over. “Told you I was on top of it, Captain! Another day of harvesting. What do you think about that?”

“I still think you’re pushing your luck, Shin,” Nelt sighed. “Especially with what’s coming tonight.”

Shin waved that off. “It’s just negotiations, Captain. We’re going to achieve a lasting peace with Sargon.”

Nelt almost scoffed. “So you’re not in the least bit upset that you

won’t get to *bloody* that sword of yours?”

He seemed jolted by that. “That hasn’t seemed so important lately, sir,” he confessed quietly. “All I want to do is go back to Edge.”

Nelt almost smiled. Despite his outward confidence, this was just an overly large boy, flailing and drowning in a very deep pool. All he wanted to do was go home where it was safe.

“I have a better idea,” Nelt said. “Come with me to Sands instead. News is good out of there. There’s very little ash, lots of food in the storehouses—apparently General Yordin believed in keeping those stocked—and I could finish your song and create a few more for you.”

Shin shifted uncomfortably. “Sir, I really need to get back to Province 8. The general’s expecting it.”

Nelt gripped Shin’s arm. “Don’t do it! Don’t go with him, especially tonight. When you ride next to him, you’re the biggest target! Stay back with me. Let me introduce you to Yordin, start discussing your transfer—”

Shin pulled his arm out of Nelt’s grasp. “Captain, no. I thank you for your concern but I have greater things to do tonight. Don’t deny my destiny.” The boy was flailing dangerously because he was irrepressibly stupid.

“Your *what?*”

Shin sighed. “Just . . . just be there to watch, Captain. You’ll be impressed, I’m sure.”

Nelt groaned. “Why are you so obsessed with impressing people? You should be worried about staying alive. Come with me—”

“I thank you again for your assistance in the past,” he said formally. “I need no more assistance from you now, sir.”

Shin really believed it, too. Just when he needed the most help, he didn’t want any at all. “I’m really going to miss you, boy,” Nelt said sadly. “We could have had a lot of fun together. I’ll see you on the other side.” He turned and walked away.

Glasser stood outside the fort walls waiting for the messenger he sent to the border. The man carrying the purple striped banner of truce was riding back with his escort of ten soldiers and he stopped in front of the colonel.

“I met with Captain Glasser, sir. General Sargon has agreed to the meeting. The captain said *everyone will be in place* an hour before sundown.”

Glasser nodded to the messenger and walked back to the fort.

Colonel Ferrim met him at the gates. “Well?”

“Which mansion do you want?” Glasser whispered. “The old High General’s or the rebuilt old Chairman’s?”

As much as Corporal Shin wanted to join the soldiers harvesting, he knew General Thorne wouldn’t want him anywhere else than by his side. In fact, Captain Lick retrieved him, wearing an oddly earnest smile. “The general’s waiting for you, Shin. He wanted to discuss the steps of negotiation with you. I’ll bring you to him.”

Anxious about spending any time near Lick, Shin fell in line behind him. “Thanks, sir, but I know the way to the command office.”

Lick smiled as if he’d had too much sugar that morning. “Well, of course you do! You know, I think we got off on the wrong foot. I’ve been a little sharp with everyone lately, and word’s gotten around that I’m not too happy about things. But I assure you, that’s not true. You see, this is my first major offensive and I really want to do well, as I know you do. Lots of pressure, isn’t there?” He nudged the corporal in a brotherly way.

“Uh, yes, sir,” seemed the safest answer.

“We just don’t want to disappoint our general, do we? Quite an honor for us to be at his side this evening. You and I are his first choices, so let’s make sure we please him, all right, Corporal?”

“Yes, sir. So how do we please him?”

Lick grinned broadly. “I’m glad you asked that! You please him by doing exactly what he says. But I also know that Thorne enjoys taking the glory for himself, as he rightly deserves to do. So when he steps forward to shake Sargon’s hand, take a few steps back. Let him be the center of attention. Behind the general will be a row of officers, surgeons, and their assistants. Since you don’t belong among the officers, step back between the surgeon’s assistants. Thorne may gesture for you to join him, but don’t move unless he does. Understand?”

Shin nodded. “Of course, sir. Let him take the glory and stand with the surgeon’s assistants. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”



Later that day, General Thorne stood outside the gates watching as the plume of ash approached from the west. Corporal Shin hung back as usual, hoping that Sargon’s soldiers who were massing a mile to the south would realize reinforcements were arriving, five hundred strong.

Major Yordin was appropriately up front of the soldiers and saluted as he reined his horse to a stop. His gaze automatically shifted past Thorne to Shin, and the corporal instinctively looked down.

“Yordin!” Thorne called, drawing the major’s attention back. “You made good time, I see. Get your men in for an early dinner. We have a great deal to discuss and much to prepare for tonight.”

“Of course, General,” Yordin said, dismounting and handing the reins of his horse to a lieutenant. “I didn’t realize you had plans for this evening. I hope it’ll be satisfying for everyone here?” he asked as he approached the general to shake his left hand.

“Indeed it will be. Follow me, let’s get you briefed,” and he turned for the command office.

But Yordin couldn’t take his eyes off of Shin. “Corporal, have we met before? You look strangely familiar.”

Thorne spun to see the exchange.

Shin looked up and gulped. “Yes, sir, we have. You recruited me before you took over the fort at Sands almost a year ago. I was coming out of a fog. You got me peach pie?”

Yordin tapped his lips. “Yes . . . yes, I suppose that could be it. Interesting name choice, there: SHIN. I met the original when I was about eleven or twelve. It was at his daughter’s wedding in Mountseen—”

“Major!” Thorne said sharply. “We can discuss that later. Come now. We have little time left.”

Yordin stood taller as he faced Thorne. “Of course, sir.” But he dropped his voice and said to Shin as they followed the general, “Come, Corporal. He doesn’t like reminders about a wedding he thought was supposed to be his.” There was a quiet snigger. “Nor do we want to keep *our brave general* waiting, do we?”



Captain Nelt exchanged the briefest of looks with Major Yordin at dinner. He didn't have to communicate what Shin looked like, because Yordin was walking with the corporal.

But Yordin did raise his chin to Nelt as he passed.

Yordin was ready, as were all who were with him.

Colonel Glasser looked over the mass of men gulping down their dinners and he silently counted. All that he expected were there. Fer-rim had his numbers too.

All who were with them were ready.

Captain Lick surveyed the soldiers as they filed out of the compound on to their short march to the southern border, their faces sober and determined. He caught the eyes of his men, on either side of the battle surgeon.

All who were with him were ready.

Corporal Shin swallowed, then swallowed again. Atop the large, black Clark cousin, he had a view of the entire army and the scene of gray before them. Which meant those he was approaching had a clear view of *him*.

He didn't feel ready, not one bit.

A few times he tried to slow the gait of his horse to position himself behind General Thorne, but each time Thorne glanced back.

"By my side, son. Ready and on my left."

On the right side of Thorne, Captain Lick nodded once to remind Shin to keep the general happy. So Shin clucked his horse and stared straight ahead, pretending he knew what "ready" meant.

It wasn't hard to know when they approached the border. The sweeping gray before them formed dark shapes in the distance. Sargon's army, waiting. General Thorne had purposely left late, he told Shin, to remind Sargon whose 'party' this really was.

Shin bit his lower lip as he assessed how far the dark line of uniforms and horses extended. At least half a mile, maybe more. He wondered just how trustworthy Glasser’s spy was; if this was Sargon at “unprepared,” he shuddered to think what “organized and angry” may have looked like.

As the line of soldiers came into view, Thorne turned in his saddle, nodded to Glasser and Ferrim riding behind, and the two colonels shouted orders to the men marching behind. Shin twisted in his saddle to watch the soldiers, eight hundred on horses and six thousand on foot, spread apart in a great wide line themselves, three men deep. The mass of men fanning out in an endless stream was impressive to Shin, but it wasn’t a lowly corporal who needed intimidating.

He took a bracing breath and turned to see the enemy looming ever larger in front of them. Thorne directed his horse to the banners waving in the distance, signaling the presence of General Sargon, now barely one hundred paces away.

Thorne signaled to a lieutenant colonel along the row of officers who rode behind them, and the man waved to twenty soldiers on horseback. As one body, the soldiers kicked their mounts and rode to Thorne and his accompaniment to form a wall of soldiers and horses before Thorne, Lick, and Shin.

Even with the buffer, Shin still felt exposed as he focused on the enemy before him. They wore blue uniforms as well, a slightly darker shade with red bands on the sleeves. At fifty paces away, the men looked larger than anyone Shin had ever faced. Eltana Yordin had been hopelessly wrong to claim that the soldiers in Idumea were flabby, weak things.

Shin’s stomach twisted and he wondered for the hundredth time why he thought this was going to be a fantastic experience. Although he knew it was his imagination, he was sure that every last soldier was staring at him, their hands hovering near their swords.

A row of bowmen, dozens of paces behind General Sargon, also seemed to be eyeing him. That didn’t seem fair. Thorne had lost all his bowmen, as well as the building that stored extra weapons, to the advancing mudslide. Shin squinted to see if the bows the soldiers held were caked in mud, but couldn’t tell.

What he really wanted to do was make sure the two rows of remaining officers, as well as the battle surgeon, were still behind him. But he also knew that he was supposed to maintain eye contact with Sargon. Thorne had made that very clear before dinner as he drilled

into him the principles of intimidation, negotiation, and retaliation. Any twitch, any turn, any movement that betrayed a lack of complete control could be detrimental to Thorne's show of absolute strength. Not one man riding with Thorne should back down or cower under the gaze of General Sargon and his rows of officers, now a mere twenty paces away.

The soldiers in front of Thorne stopped and the entire corps of soldiers halted as well, lined up on either side of General Thorne as far as the eye could see. Each soldier began his own staring contest with the man across the border from him.

Thorne nudged his horse to slip between his guard, allowing himself to be foremost before his army. Lick followed, as did Shin's horse, as if knowing it was supposed to remain next to Thorne in the most exposed and open position possible.

Shin held his breath as the men up and down the lines glared at each other in unnerving silence. Apparently this was how it was played, to see who'd breach the stillness first. It struck Shin as childish, and as the silence continued he imagined himself breaking the tension by blurting, "So, quite an odd patch of weather we've been having, eh?"

But fortunately nerves made him bite his tongue.

From the corner of his eye he noticed that General Thorne remained completely still. As Shin imagined the stony glare the general must have been using on Sargon, he wished he could feel such a sense of control. Instead, he looked across to General Sargon mounted on his horse.

He was shorter than Shin expected, and his bald head was covered by a cap with a shining eagle on the front. While the man wasn't as handsomely commanding as Thorne, he was compact, muscular, and intimidating in his own way. His brown eyes were just as hard as Thorne's blue ones, and Shin thought for a moment that he was watching each man in front of him simultaneously. Sargon, too, didn't want to be the first to speak as he glared back at Thorne.

Finally, a captain on foot from Sargon's side walked to the space between the two generals. He cleared his throat as he faced Thorne about five paces away from his mount.

"General Sargon welcomes General Thorne to the border and demands to know what concessions Thorne is willing to make in order to ensure a lasting peace between our two factions."

Another voice, shouting from the left of Shin, answered. "Captain

Glasser, this show of mercy was pleaded for by Sargon,” Colonel Glasser called. “It’s *his* obligation to lay at General Thorne’s feet his requests for leniency.”

The captain straightened his back to shout his response, his eyes fixed on General Thorne. “It was our understanding, Colonel, that this meeting was to benefit *both* sides. We were led to believe General Thorne was *wise enough* to recognize this mutual disruption to both our forces, that attention now should be on alleviating the suffering of our people before we decided whose government was most powerful in the world!”

Shin sat in rigid dread. This didn’t sound right and hardly seemed like a prelude to peace. He had no idea what he could do to fix it. No one had been whispering in his ear for a while.

A gently chuckling caught Shin’s attention; it was an odd sound for such a dramatic moment. He turned to see Thorne, amused.

“Come, come, Sargon!” he called out with surprising geniality. “We don’t need a Glasser family argument to take over our negotiations, do we? Captain,” he said looking down at the younger, livid man. “Step back. Your father’s armed and has been in a foul mood lately. He may do something he’ll later regret.”

The captain’s mouth dropped open and he pivoted to Sargon.

But Sargon was watching Thorne intently. “I do believe you’re right, Thorne,” he said in measured tone. “No need for the Glassers to escalate in our behalf. Captain, you may step back.”

Astonished, Captain Glasser stumbled backward two steps. His eyes darted to his father and then back to Thorne.

“So, Sargon,” Thorne called over as if hailing his best friend, “tell me—how’s the most beautiful city in the world faring? I hope the garrison’s still intact?”

Sargon nodded once. “It is, in excellent condition.”

“Good, good,” Thorne nodded back pleasantly. “And how about the University of Idumea? Home of some of my fondest memories?”

Sargon nodded again, tipping his head as if trying to work out Thorne’s strange cordiality. “A little ashy but soon swept away. Classes will resume on schedule.”

“Excellent, excellent . . . And one more question—the condition of the old High Generals’ mansion? I spent a great deal of gold restoring it to its former glory. How fares it today?”

Sargon smiled, willing to play along. “As magnificent as ever. One of my women and her children especially enjoy the furnishings.

My other woman and our sons live with me in the old Chairman's mansion which you rebuilt, also still in pristine condition."

"Wonderful, wonderful," Thorne said in approval. He glanced over at Shin. "Doesn't sound like too much cleanup is necessary."

Shin's lips parted in worry.

Thorne turned back to Sargon. "But then again, the university and garrison were on banks high above the river. So, Sargon, how's my beloved Idumea along the rivers?"

Sargon's eyes clouded. "About the same as Pools, I imagine. The citizens are gathering in whatever crops remain while finding new sources of water. We've lost both the West and East Forks of the Idumean River. Of greatest concern is to secure the safety and future welfare of our citizens."

Thorne nodded once. "Of course, of course. And I concur. The wisest course of action is to ensure our world survives this disaster. Therefore I have a proposal—"

Corporal Shin began to breathe easier. This sounded more like what Thorne had discussed with him an hour earlier.

"—To maintain security while we clean up, I propose that we cease all questions as to whose governing ability is superior until the world is stabilized."

Sargon narrowed his eyes. "And what kind of assurance will I have that you'll not break this cessation prematurely?"

Thorne smiled thinly. "I have too much at stake in Idumea." He nodded to his left. "You have yet to meet my son, Lek Thorne."

Corporal Shin froze. He no longer knew how to breathe, especially with thousands of pairs of eyes trained on him.

"Your *son*?" Sargon snickered. "He looks a little *old* to be one of your sons. And from what I can see, his label says SHIN. I thought you gave up chasing after Shins years ago."

"I did," Thorne said easily. "*He found me.* General Sargon, may I present the grandson of Colonel Perrin Shin and the son of Jaytsy Briter. He was abandoned in the forest where his mother was killed, then hidden by those who thought they were his aunt and uncle, the Briters, for twenty-five years. But now he's found his way back to me, his *true father*."

Shin wasn't sure how many men gasped because it was drowned out by his own desperation to breathe again. It was out—everything. Even the suggestion that Lemuel Thorne was his real father. The corporal's stomach traded places with his heart.

Sargon stared at him, looking for the resemblance. Suddenly his eyes flared in recognition.

“Congratulations, Thorne,” Sargon said with an odd smile as he recuperated from the surprise. “I never knew you had it in you. Although I must point out he looks nothing like you.”

Thorne shook his head reprovingly. “Now, now, Sargon. *Your* daughters look nothing like you, either, much to their relief, I’m sure.” Ignoring the scattered sniggers, Thorne continued, “My son Lek is why I’m determined to make sure Idumea not only survives but thrives. You see, I’ve promised him a University of Idumea education. I want my only son to complete Command School as I did and know the privilege of living in the mansion of his ancestors.”

“And how are you proposing to accomplish this,” Sargon asked guardedly, “seeing as I currently hold all you profess to love?”

“By handing you the last thing I love. General Sargon, I will give to you my son, Lek Thorne.”

Corporal Shin felt as if someone had punched him in the gut, and he gripped the horn of his saddle to keep from tipping over.

Given?! To General Sargon? How could someone just *give* another person away? He wasn’t even Thorne’s to give! Or was he just claimed? There certainly were more than twenty people around. Wasn’t he supposed to accept the claiming? He was given a name, too, wasn’t he? Lek Thorne?

Shin looked around wildly, hoping someone could explain what was happening, but his eyes rested on Sargon who was smirking.

“Perhaps you should have warned your son, Thorne. He seems a little surprised by your offer.”

Shin immediately tensed, trying to look less like a terrified boy and more like a hardened soldier. He knew he was failing.

But Thorne chuckled easily. “He’s just worried he has to clean up in Idumea. He never did enjoy cleaning up other people’s messes. Sargon, I give you my son as a token of my honor and promise to leave Idumea alone. In return, I expect you to make sure he’s housed in the gold bedroom of the High Generals’ mansion and is enrolled in Command School.”

Sargon nodded. “Sounds surprisingly reasonable—”

Reasonable?! Shin thought hysterically. What, if *anything*, of this sounded reasonable?

“—but Thorne,” Sargon continued, “I want your son’s assurances that he’ll behave appropriately at all times, especially in light of the

fact that I have two teenage daughters who also live in the mansion.”

Shin’s gut took another hit. He could see exactly what Thorne had in mind and it made him nauseated.

Thorne cocked his head innocently. “Are they that old now? My, my, how time flies. I’m certain my son will behave as I expect him to. Now, in exchange for giving you a son, I want another in return.”

Sargon’s eyebrows went up. “Thorne, I’m sure you know my two boys are still quite young. Neither of them is ready to—”

“I don’t want *your* sons. I prefer them already raised and trained. No, Sargon, I want that one.” He pointed to the soldier standing in front of him. “Give me Captain Glasser. I believe his father has been without his company for too long.”

“No!” Captain Glasser shouted. “NO! I won’t go!” He spun to Sargon. “Sir! Don’t make me leave your side!”

Sargon tipped his head thoughtfully. “Thorne, once again, is proving to be quite insightful today, and I agree with him.” He sneered as he said, “Glasser, you and your father need to be together again.” To Thorne he said, “Glasser’s yours while Lek is mine.”

Colonel Glasser bellowed from his horse. “I don’t want him! Thorne, he’s a traitor! Why do you want a traitor in your midst?”

Thorne looked over at him. “Indeed, why would I?” he answered coolly. “I have so many already, don’t I?”

Colonel Glasser didn’t flinch but stared at Thorne. “Yes, you do. One by the name of Captain Lick.”

Captain Lick flinched in his position next to Thorne and straightened up. “Sir! It’s a lie! I’m completely devoted to you!”

Thorne smiled smoothly at Lick. “Yes, yes, you are. But you’re *not* devoted to my son.” With one swift movement, Thorne drew his sword and thrust it into Lick’s chest, to the shouts and cries of his men and the soldiers across the border.

“But, General,” Lick gasped. “*Salem*—?”

He fell from his horse in a lifeless heap on the ground.

Shin slapped his hand over his mouth to keep from retching. He didn’t know what was more alarming—the swiftness with which Thorne killed Lick or the fact that his last word was “Salem.”

Someone here *knew*.

His stomach heaved but he fought against it. Again, *why* did he think this would be a fantastic experience?

Thorne gestured calmly to Captain Glasser. “There’s your new horse, Captain. Take Lick’s sword before you mount. You can wear

two for the time being.”

Stunned, Captain Glasser only stared at the still body of Lick.

“Go on,” Sargon commanded him.

As if kicked from behind, Glasser took a few stumbling steps across the open space between the two armies. He crouched when he reached Lick’s body and, with a shaking hand, pulled the sword from the sheath. He stared at it before looking up at Thorne.

“Don’t even *think* about it, boy,” he hissed.

The captain’s chest heaved and he wet his lips nervously.

“Glasser!” another stern voice barked. Colonel Ferrim. “Captain, take your place next to General Thorne. Now!”

The captain glanced at Ferrim before he mounted the horse where he held Lick’s sword limply across his lap.

Sargon nodded in satisfaction. “Now give me the newest addition to my household, Thorne.”

Corporal Shin could hardly breathe as he turned to General Thorne. “Sir? You *really* mean this?”

Thorne smiled pleasantly. “You’ll love Idumea. The entertainments at the arena are unsurpassed. I’ll write to you frequently and I expect you to do the same. *And* I expect you to honor the daughters of General Sargon as they *deserve* to be honored.” Thorne gave Shin a quick wink that no one in Sargon’s camp could have seen.

Shin’s belly churned with new nausea at the implication.

“Go now. Take your position by that major over there.” He pointed with the bloodied sword to an officer who blanched. “I’m sure he’ll slide his mount over to make room for you. And keep the horse. Not like I was about to return it to the Stables at Pools anyway.”

Corporal Shin didn’t know what else to do but nudge his horse to walk across the open space to the other side. His mind screamed, No! No! No! but he knew the words coming out of his mouth would be pathetic. Every man watched him take the short ride.

Maybe this was what was needed to ensure peace. Maybe the chosen one was to sacrifice himself?

Two officers on the side of Sargon reluctantly shifted their horses to make room for Shin, forcing several soldiers to slide down and rearrange the line. His chest was heavy and hot as he reached the other side and turned his horse around to face General Thorne.

That’s when he saw the row of officers behind Thorne. They wore expressions that reflected his own: shock, amazement, dismay.

And on the face of Captain Nelt, immense pity. He shook his head almost imperceptibly. There was nothing more Nelt could do to help him. He'd be lost to the other side not knowing a single soul in the world, not knowing any way to get back home.

"Welcome to Idumea, Lek," Sargon called down tonelessly.

Shin nodded back once and gulped.

"Do we have any other business, Sargon?" Thorne asked breezily.

Sargon shook his head. "Not that I see. I'm satisfied. Are you?"

"Sirs?" Colonel Ferrim spoke up. "I believe all of us on both sides would feel more at ease with the arrangement if the two of you clasped hands in agreement. If only for the sake of the two sons exchanged." Ferrim nodded at Corporal Shin who was beginning to turn as gray as the ash around him.

Thorne sent Shin a reassuring smile. "I have full confidence Sargon will take *great* care of my son, as I promise no vengeance will visit Captain Glasser for abandoning our side a year ago. But, as a gesture of good will . . ." Thorne replaced his sword, dismounted from his horse and took three steps to the empty space between the armies.

Sargon, not to be outdone by the gestures of peace, dismounted as well. "Your son will enjoy the very best of Idumea, as I'm sure Captain Glasser will enjoy getting reacquainted with his father," Sargon said as he began to walk toward Thorne.

Instead of watching the generals, Shin found his attention drawn to Yordin, with Nelt by his side. Yordin made an odd eye twitch followed by a quick nose scratch.

An officer within Shin's peripheral view scratched his nose too.

Shin gaped. Codes. Those were facial codes, like Puggah and Uncle Shem's—

A soldier standing next to Shin's horse made a jerky movement with his arm, his hand going into his jacket. Another soldier on horseback, part of Thorne's buffer, flicked his foot in an odd manner.

It was happening too fast. Shin could see what was coming but didn't know how to stop it except to shout, "Sirs!"

But he was too late. As the generals clasped left hands, something shot out from the vicinity of Shin's boot and streaked to the generals.

"No!" Shin cried, and he kicked the soldier whose hand was in his jacket. Another muffled noise like a *thwack* came from the man's uniform as he fell to his knees from the blow.

On the other side of the border, an officer fell from his mount.

Colonel Glasser hit the ground clutching his shoulder where something small and pointed was protruding from it.

“Father!” Captain Glasser cried as he jumped from his horse and rushed to his father’s side.

But everyone was watching Thorne who was shouting, “Who did this?!” as he tried to hold up a collapsing General Sargon with his one good arm. Sargon had slumped to his knees, a small object jutting from his back. Two of Sargon’s officers hurriedly dismounted to rush to their general’s aid.

“You!” Thorne shouted at the officer by Shin who was clutching the arm that Shin had kicked. “You’ve shot your own general! Betrayers! Get him!” Suddenly Thorne gasped and recoiled from a blow that must have come from behind. “I’m hit!”

“It was him!” the officer next to Shin shouted, pointing to Yordin. “He signaled for the shot!”

“Liar!” Yordin roared back, drawing his sword.

“No! No! No!” Shin cried and spurred his horse to the middle of the open space. “Stop! We can’t come to blows now, not when we’re so close to peace! Sir?” he called down to Thorne who was breathing heavily. His battle surgeon was already at the scene and one of Thorne’s surgeon’s assistants rushed to the aid of General Sargon, laying him down and hovering protectively over him.

Now nearly all of the soldiers had unsheathed their swords and were watching intently to see what would happen to the generals gasping in pain on the border. Shin watched with growing panic as the surgeon examined the short arrow sticking out of Thorne’s back.

“Hold on, General,” the surgeon said, then with a mighty yank, he pulled out the stubby arrow.

Thorne cried out in pain as the surgeon supported him. “What is it?” he demanded. “Where did it come from? Who was the target—”

But the surgeon’s assistant, frantically working on Sargon, cut him off. “General, sir? SIR!” He slapped Sargon who appeared unconscious.

“What’d you do to him?!” shouted one of Sargon’s men.

“Nothing! Trying to help him breathe! He just . . . General?”

The surgeon lunged and gripped Sargon’s throat, searching for a pulse.

Corporal Shin knew it wasn’t good. He also knew he and his horse stood right in the middle of whatever was about to come next.

The surgeon sighed and stood up. “He’s dead,” he announced.

“Who’s second in—”

No one heard the end of his sentence. Ten thousand men with swords unsheathed had been waiting for the word, any word.

Terrified, Shin kicked his horse and rode between the soldiers rushing each other at the border. Only once he was sure he was far enough away did he rein his horse to a stop and turn to see what to do next. But the bloody horror he faced paralyzed him.

Already dozens of men were on the ground and deafening shouts rose up as hundreds more slashed and swiped and raged at each other. But worst of all, Shin was on the wrong side, in Sargon’s territory. He searched the other side and spotted Nelt, mounted and shouting to soldiers.

Somehow Nelt caught Shin’s eye, as if he’d been looking for him, and waved for him to join him. Not seeing an available opening in the melee, the corporal whipped his horse around and headed west along the line until he came to the bulk of the soldiers who, interestingly, only watched the battle.

About a hundred paces from the fallen generals on either side, soldiers were fighting fiercely. But beyond that, the men held their swords uncertainly, tossing glances at their enemies but not eager to engage them.

It was through those anxious soldiers that Shin rode his horse. They didn’t even notice him forcing his animal between, too engrossed in watching the violent show as if at the arena.

A glance at the battle explained why the rest of the soldiers weren’t joining in: men with red armbands slashed at others with red armbands, and men with yellow trim battled those in yellow. Captain Glasser was dragging his limp father out of the commotion while Colonel Ferrim suddenly cut down one of his own lieutenants, to Shin’s astonishment. Who was on whose side wasn’t clear, nor did it seem smart to engage before knowing which side may be victorious.

Shin spurred his horse to follow after Nelt, who was heading north out of the fray. Nelt slowed down his mount to allow Shin to catch up, and they stopped their horses only once they were well away from the wildly swinging blades.

“Captain! What’s happening?!” Shin was nearly hysterical. “I don’t understand anything!”

But Nelt was calm as he surveyed the battle. “Thorne’s not a man with a lot of friends, Shin,” he said, his eyes darting as if trying to locate particular individuals. “Nor does Sargon have an army entirely

devoted to him. Although his death is likely the responsibility of *our* side,” he added in a mutter, although no one was near to hear.

“What do you mean?” Shin asked.

“That small arrow? It didn’t kill him. Our surgeon’s assistant had some substance embedded in his sleeve. I’m guessing it’s a distilled and lethal version of sedation. Rub it into someone’s nose and they’ll never wake up again. And hovered over an ailing body, no one can be sure what an assistant is doing. I’ve been watching him because *he’s* been watching *you*. Whatever it is was intended for you, Shin. He’s one of Lick’s men. I suppose he figured that since Lick is gone, he could use his poison on an even more important target.”

Shin was dumbfounded and the urge to vomit overwhelmed him again. Somehow he managed to ask, “Captain, who shot Thorne? The arrow came from our side—”

“Yes, it did,” Nelt said, eyeing the skirmish, still searching. “And if it wasn’t for the other side mistiming and misjudging *their* shot, *this* wouldn’t be so sloppy right now.” He waved in frustration at the battle. “And it’s called a bolt, not an arrow.”

Shin stared at him. “Where’d it come from?!”

“New weapon,” said Nelt distractedly. “Called a crossbow. Can make them very small and compact, ideal for concealing. The man you kicked, he had two inside his jacket. You caused him to fire the second prematurely and I think it hit Glasser.”

“It did,” Shin said. “But he should be all right. I saw him take the hit in the shoulder—”

“Shoulder?” Nelt asked, glancing at him for the first time. “He’ll be dead soon.”

“Why? It was just his shoulder!”

“The bolt’s tip was poisoned,” Nelt said, surprisingly cool and focused on the shouts and screams and bodies falling at the border. “If the bolt penetrates the muscle, the poison travels to paralyze the whole body. That’s what hit Sargon, too. He still would’ve died but it would’ve taken another half hour or more. He would have drifted quietly to death while being attended to, no one realizing what danger he was in. But instead we have a full-scale battle on our hands! It was stupid to send you to the other side!” He spat as if it were Shin’s fault. “Changed everything! Shifted all the angles! It’s almost as if Thorne suspected—” Nelt shook his head in frustration. “I always hated playing Dices. We can’t afford this—not right now.”

Shin stared at Captain Nelt, feeling as if he were drowning. “Sir,

how'd you know that bolt was poisoned? That it works like that?"

"I *listen*, Shin," Nelt said, not taking his eyes off the battle. "I *pay attention*. Didn't I tell you to do the same thing?"

"Thorne!" Shin suddenly remembered. "General Thorne was struck as well—Sir, will he be all right?"

Nelt finally turned to him. "You sound like you really care. He claims you as his son then the very next moment *hands you over* to his greatest enemy and you're worried what happens to him?!"

Nor really sure how he felt about Thorne, Shin asked meekly, "Will he die?"

Nelt scoffed. "Not unless we're lucky. The slagging surgeon pulled out the bolt too quickly." He turned back to the battle. "Thorne probably wore his body shield anyway. I doubt it even penetrated his skin. He cried out in pain just for show."

"Body shield?"

"Thick cowhide. It covers him like a large vest. He usually wears it to battle under his uniform and he had it on today, I'm sure. That's why he needed to be hit in the *arm*, not his back," he added bitterly.

"What do we do now?" Shin said, his attention on the fighting but feeling uneasy next to a man who he initially thought was his help but was turning out to be something else entirely.

"We sit back and wait, Corporal. We see who prevails, then we align ourselves with whomever gives us the best chance at survi—" Nelt stopped short and began to slide off his horse.

"Captain? Captain!" Shin fell off his horse to catch Nelt who was crumpling to the ground. A long arrow was protruding from his chest.

"Captain! No!" Shin broke off the shaft and tore open Nelt's jacket to get to the rest of the arrow. It had penetrated deeply into Nelt's chest. "Sir, hold on! I can do this—"

"Shin," Nelt whispered as his eyes closed. "Gonna miss you," was all he could say before his ragged breathing stopped.

"Captain Nelt! Sir! Please, no!"

It was no use. Nelt was dead, the arrow anchored in his heart.

Shin sat on the ground next to him, too shocked to shed any tears. Something partially concealed under Nelt's open jacket caught his eye. He lifted the jacket and stared at the odd object.

It looked to be a small bow with a mechanism that released short arrows. A bag of bolts hung from the inside of the jacket, along with a small, dark vial.

Chapter 6--“It’s all over, Corporal.”

Glasser dragged his father out of the chaotic mess of swinging swords and shouting men. A pile of ash built up behind the colonel, slowing his son’s efforts as he was hauled over to a cluster of rocks for shelter. The captain laid his father down and patted his cheek.

“Father! *Father!* What’s wrong with you? Come on! It was just a poke in the shoulder. Colonel, up!” The captain shook his father’s shoulders but his eyes wouldn’t open.

“Come on! You need to tell me what to do next. This wasn’t according to plan. What happened? Father, please! Wake up!”

The captain tore open the colonel’s jacket and pulled it down to examine the injured shoulder. There was only a remnant of the small arrow which the captain had broken off when he reached him. But something that small couldn’t have caused his father’s current unconsciousness. The captain pushed his ear up against his father’s chest. His heartrate was erratic and slowing.

“No!” the captain whispered. “No, no, no, no . . . Mother always said those sausages would do you in someday. No, Father . . . How will I tell her? Come on—you can come back from this. Just a little heart flutter again, that’s all . . . *Come on*, Father! . . . Think of the mansions . . . Come back for the mansions . . .”

Major Yordin remained atop his horse, cutting down soldiers left and right. He had yet to reach his target and no one from either side was going to get in his way. When he finished they’d all be united, and since those opposing him here wouldn’t approve of him as their general later, he might as well hack them down.

Two more men fell, then another and another as Yordin made his way to the middle of the battle. How Thorne still remained on his

feet, surrounded by loyal soldiers and not wavering from the effects of the bolt, both perplexed and enraged him.

Thorne caught his eye and beckoned with his sword.

Yordin glowered back. This wouldn't take long.



Corporal Shin remained huddled behind the two horses he forced to lie down on the ground and used as shields to hide him and the body of Captain Nelt from additional arrows. Four more had fallen harmlessly around them. Shin rocked back and forth, trying not to look at the still body in front of him and trying to ignore the sounds of clashing metal.

“Puggah . . . Puggah . . . where are you?” he whimpered like a six-year-old. “Puggah, please . . . help me . . .”

I'M TRYING TO, YOUNG PERE. YOU HAVE TO LISTEN—

“Puggah . . . please . . .”



Colonel Ferrim wasn't sure who he was fighting. Completely on the defensive, he fended off blows with his two swords, only wounding confused soldiers with yellow stripes who came after him in their frenzy.

Those wearing red arm bands, however, Ferrim hacked down. Someone on *their* side, after all, had just thwarted the most carefully planned assassination of General Thorne, and Sargon died before he could be blamed.

It didn't have to be this messy. He and Glasser would've been able to save everyone, unite the world once and for all, and only two generals had to die.

But some jumpy little Zenos ruined it all. Ferrim hoped he was suffering a slow and painful death, because now Ferrim would be seen as nothing more than another butcher. He tried to make his way to the only man whose demise would stop it all, but he could barely make out Thorne in the crowd of blades.

He looked up from slashing another red-banded soldier to see a horse shoving through the soldiers, Major Yordin on top. It must have been one of his men who botched it all. Last year Ferrim and Glasser

had told him they’d take care of the Thorne problem, but Yordin had scoffed at that.

If he thought *this* was effective, he was mistaken. Yordin had eliminated his own father well enough, but this was a disaster that would take half a year to *clarify* for the citizens.

Ferrim brandished both his swords expertly and set off for Yordin. One of them was going to get Thorne, but Yurgis Ferrim was going to end it properly.

He always wanted the gold bedroom of the High Generals’ mansion.

Corporal Shin continued to rock, sobbing quietly as he listened to the battle cries that seemed to descend upon him from all angles.

Suddenly the sounds quieted, a man shouted, and a cheer arose.

Cautiously Shin lifted his head and peered over his horse. Men were thrusting their swords into the air yelling in celebration. Evidently “negotiations” were over.

But what did that mean to the trembling corporal? He tried to make out who seemed to be the victor and realized that whoever it was likely wouldn’t be too pleased to see “Lek Thorne” still alive.

Shin wrung his hands like a timid old woman wondering what to do next. He *could* run away, perhaps. Get on his new Clark and ride north, like Puggah told him to do days ago. The village of Winds was still intact, and now that he knew Edge was all right, he could—

“There you are!” boomed a relieved voice.

Shin held his breath and looked up into the face of Major Gage. He gestured at him with his sword. “Someone’s looking for you and is disappointed that you missed out on all the excitement, *Lek Thorne*.” He sniffed as he kicked Captain Nelt’s body. “Dead? He deserved it. Sloppiest assassin I ever saw. Doesn’t matter anymore. It’s all over, Corporal. Come with me. *Now*.”

The emphasis on the last word told Shin he better not consider any other alternative than following the major. He got to his feet and noticed with humiliation that his sword was still sheathed. The battle for Idumea was over and he’d spent it cowering behind a horse with a dead man.

No wonder the general of Salem was no longer in his thoughts. What a pitiful soldier he turned out to be, cowardly in every way.

He marched sullenly to meet the new leader of the Idumean army and learn his fate. There was much more going on around him than he'd imagined. Nelt was an assassin. Lick may have intended to kill him. And how did Lick know about Salem? Who else knew?

Shin *was* stupid. He thought he knew everything but now it was obvious he knew nothing.

Then there was Thorne. He'd handed him over to Sargon like lending him a sack of flour. And why *did* he care about Thorne? Because Thorne had promised him the world? At least he'd kept Shin safe.

Until he gave him to Sargon, that is . . .

But now it was well over half an hour and Thorne would be dead from the bolt if it had penetrated his muscle.

And Shin would be on his own.

All too soon he was approaching the crowd of cheering men. Maybe it was Yordin who prevailed and he'd remember that he recruited Shin. Perhaps Colonel Ferrim was victorious. Of all the officers, Ferrim seemed the most fair.

But maybe the victor was one of Sargon's men. In that case, Shin was sure he was facing his Last Day.

The crowd of soldiers parted as Shin walked as tall and bravely as a runaway could. He stopped abruptly when he recognized who stood in the middle.

"Ready to try out the gold bedroom, son?" Blood-splattered, sweaty, and exhausted, General Thorne was grinning.

Shin stared in astonishment. How did he—? How could he—? But wasn't he—?

"I'm waiting for an answer, Lek. How about it?"

"Sir, I, I, I—"

Thorne chuckled as he walked over to him. "Your old man did well, now, didn't he? And I even kept you out of the battle. Couldn't risk losing you already, now, could I? Sorry about leaving you in the dark about the plans, but it all worked out in the end. Right, son?" Thorne slapped him playfully on the cheek and the men around them laughed obligingly. Shin could only gape.

To the soldiers, Thorne said, "See to the wounded!" They obediently moved off to start evaluating the men on the ground.

Several officers with red arm bands, held by Thorne's soldiers, glared hard at General Thorne. He made his way over to them, stepping around bodies and stopping in front of a colonel.

“To whom do you owe your allegiance now, Colonel?” Thorne inquired.

“To the man who’ll bring lasting peace to Idumea, sir.”

Thorne nodded once. “I assure you, Colonel, that I’m that man, as the small loss of life here proves. When was the last time a battle for Idumea took less than an hour? Hm?”

The colonel smiled partway. “Then my allegiance is to you, sir.”

Thorne nodded in approval and stepped to the next man. “And you, Major?”

The major stood tall. “I follow you, sir, for trying to save my general and for trusting your only son to his care.”

Thorne smiled thinly as he moved to the next man. “Lieutenant Colonel, your allegiance?”

“Lies with you, sir!”

Shin watched in fascination as each officer previously loyal to Sargon easily pledged his support to General Thorne. Why, just moments after the death of their leader, would they so quickly switch their devotion?

That’s when Nelt’s last words came back to him: “Align ourselves with whoever provides the best chance for survival.”

It didn’t matter what someone believed, just if he held the power. That struck Shin as hypocritical until he had to admit that he was doing the same thing—following who would feed him.

When Thorne reached the last officer and received his pledge, he turned back to the group. “Men, I release you to tend to the wounded. Every injured man should be taken to the garrison for treatment. In the morning, we’ll send out soldiers to retrieve the dead while we officers discuss new command assignments.”

“But, Thorne” interrupted the red-banded colonel, “the fort at Pools is closer than the garrison for the wounded.”

“But the fort at Pools is filled beyond capacity,” Thorne said. “You see, when the mudslide came through, I wasn’t about to stop until we rescued every last man. We saved over a thousand soldiers, working tirelessly day and night to make sure all were fed and secured. That’s the kind of commander I am, Colonel. I’ll take care of every soldier faithful to me.” He turned to Shin. “Don’t I, son?”

He had no choice but to stand at attention and say, “Yes, sir!”

Thorne smiled tightly at the colonel. “The garrison will care for them the best. And I want only the best for *all* my men.”

The colonel nodded in appreciation and called to soldiers behind

him. “You heard your general! Bring the wagons for the wounded.”

“Colonel,” Thorne said as easily as if he’d known the man all his life, “you’re in charge here for now. I need to spend a few minutes with my son, then I’ll relieve you.”

The colonel tipped his cap and shouted orders to the soldiers.

Shin couldn’t help but shake his head in amazement as Thorne fairly swaggered to him. “How’d you survive, sir? And win?”

Thorne looked a little insulted. “You seemed surprised, son. I haven’t been a general for so long without learning a few things along the way. I know I have enemies, Lek,” he said in a quiet voice, and it took Shin a moment to remember that *he* was Lek. “There are those who want to steal my power and make a mess of things. But I alone know how to care for the world, and it’s up to me to flush out those who’d overthrow me.

“It’s like hunting for pheasants hiding in the brush,” he said conversationally as they meandered among the dead and moaning bodies. “Often you think there are only one or two birds, but on days like this you find an entire flock. Hey, soldier,” he said to a body he accidentally kicked. “Chin up. Someone will be by soon to check on that leg.” Without missing a beat, he continued with his lecture. “And sometimes, Lek, those pheasants take each other out for me. Rather efficient. Yordin? I always suspected him. But Ferrim, here?”

He pointed to another twisted body near their feet and Shin held in his yip of surprise.

“Well, he always was a little odd. Latched on to me back in Command School. It got a bit tiring playing Ferrim’s best friend all these years, but he was always a faithful source of information. I knew he and Glasser would be taken with you, especially when they saw how closely I drew you in. It was Glasser’s idea for the meeting at the border, wasn’t it? Told you to tell me to negotiate with Sargon?”

Shin’s eyes were huge and fearful as he nodded guiltily.

To his further astonishment, Thorne smiled. “You’re trusting, son. That’s good but dangerous. Good for me, dangerous for you. I knew Glasser would use you, and you played the informant very well.”

Shin stared at Thorne. How much he knew about what was going on, Shin couldn’t begin to guess. He had no idea himself.

Thorne sighed as he looked at the bodies strewn around them. “But no longer. We need to teach you to pay attention to a man’s eyes, not to his words, so that when you run into another man like this—”

he kicked Ferrim’s boot as if it was nothing more than a stray rock, “—and his friend Glasser, you’ll know what their *true* intentions are.” Thorne regarded the colonel’s still body. “I had thought a little more of him, but lust for power does strange things to good men. Not everyone can handle power as I can. That’s another thing I’ll teach you.”

It was still so puzzling to Shin that the general was even alive. “But sir, I don’t understand, the arrow you took—”

“Couldn’t penetrate my body shield, son,” he said, thumping his chest which made a curiously hollow sound. “I’ll have one made for you too. We need to keep you protected.”

Shin suddenly felt very vulnerable. “Sir,” he said quietly, “are you *sure* you’ve found all the pheasants?”

“No, I’m not. *Yet*. That’ll be our work for the next week. Our numbers may be thinner when it’s all over, but those who remain will be those we can trust. I guarantee, however, that there’ll be no officers named Glasser in our ranks. Sargon knew of their duplicity as well. That’s why he was so willing to hand the captain over.”

Shin shifted uncomfortably, wondering if Captain Glasser was still alive, or would be by the end of the night. But something more bothered him. “As willing as you were to hand me over, sir?”

Thorne gave him an easy smile as he led Shin from the battlefield. “So *that’s* what’s bothering you? First I claim you in front of the entire army, then I turn around and hand you to my enemy? A father can tell when his son is troubled, but it’s like a game of Dices, son, and Sargon loves to gamble. He knew exactly what I was doing.”

“I’m sorry, sir, I don’t understand.”

“You’ve played the gambling version of Dices, right? There can be *two* winners in any round. You make your predictions, throw the dice, and depending on how close you were to your prediction, you take that number of chips from those who claimed you’d be wrong. Whoever throws the lucky ten is the winner and gets the pot of winnings that round. But what about the man who happens to have the one silver chip when the ten is thrown?”

Shin could see where this was going. “Whoever’s holding the silver chip gets half the pot.”

Thorne nodded once. “And what happens when the man who rolls the ten *also* happens to be holding the silver chip?”

“He takes all the winnings from the last ten rounds.”

Thorne put his left hand on Shin’s shoulder as if they were ambling through a scenic countryside, not a grim bloodbath. “*You*, my

son, are the biggest silver chip any gambler's ever seen. Sargon knew that when I handed you over to him. There can be twenty men playing, yet once the first ten rounds have been played, there may be only two serious gamblers in control of that one silver chip, waiting for the right moment. When a big-stakes gambler intentionally gives his silver chip to another gambler, it's a token of intending to continue the game another time when the stakes are higher, or even as a promise to split the winnings at the end of the night, although that's never been my style. Tonight, Lek, not only did I give away my silver chip, I also got it back *and* rolled a ten!" He grinned proudly. "And there was no one left with whom I had to share the pot."

Shin knew he appeared disappointed that he was merely a gambler's token.

Thorne gave him a comforting smile. "Oh, don't be so offended, son. I've known Sargon for years. He meant it when he said he'd care for you. We *treasure* the silver chips. And had things not progressed as I anticipated they would, you would've still been in an excellent position as an informant in that house."

Shin was feeling dumber every moment. Thorne intended on manipulating him any way he could. He didn't even care how Shin felt, but was going to just hand him over without another thought.

"So you . . . you *used* me, sir," Shin whispered.

Thorne scoffed. "Well, of course I did. What's family for? You would've been *fine*," he waved it off. "Sargon respected your grandfather almost as much as I did. He met him only a few times, but I'm sure Sargon would have been eager to have you in the same house as *his daughters*. Shared descendants to unite the families, that sort of thing. And the best part is," Thorne whispered, "you still will be."

"What do you mean?"

The general chuckled. "Spoils of war, son. To the greatest victors go the greatest prizes. Now, Sargon wasn't much to look at, but his daughters? It's been a couple of years since I've seen the girls, but I envy you, Lek!"

Shin stopped walking.

Thorne turned to see why.

Even though his mouth had gone dry, the corporal said, "What are you suggesting, sir?"

Thorne pulled him along. "I'm sure when they see you they'll be more than willing to *respectfully capitulate*," he said with a cold chuckle, "to your comforting them after the loss of their father. I can't

imagine they cared much for him since he moved their mother from the Chairman’s mansion for his new woman who gave him sons.”

Shin stopped again. “No, sir. I . . . I won’t. I’m . . . I’m not that kind of a man . . . I don’t want—”

Thorne paused, too, and scowled. “What? Why not? Oh . . . *wait*.” He rolled his eyes in disappointment. “Have you *never* taken a—”

“I have!” Shin defended angrily, ashamedly, his mind filling with visions of his sisters gaping in terror at soldiers bursting into their homes. “It’s just that . . . I don’t *feel* like—”

Thorne put his left arm around Shin. “It’s not as if we encourage this for *all* the soldiers, son. The citizenry doesn’t respond well to the widespread taking of their girls. We earn more respect by allowing them to keep their land and their daughters. But certain shows of power *are expected*. Why else do we have females except to comfort men and birth another generation? And stitch a uniform or two.”

Shin took a deep breath, begged for the influence of Salem’s general, and stammered out, “Sir . . . may I, may I not do this? Don’t you need to earn the trust of Idumea right now? And, and we need to evaluate what’s happening down there, then get back north and see how the forts are faring, and, and—”

Astonished, Thorne put his hand on his waist. “You’re *really* turning this down? Lek, I’ve done this for you! If it’s because you have another girl somewhere, that’s not a problem. She doesn’t need to know. It’s none of her business anyway. Do you have a girl?” Suddenly his eyes widened in alarm. “Or a baby somewhere?”

“No, sir!” Shin said quickly. “None.”

Thorne exhaled in relief. “Then let’s *get* you a girl. Or two. Most of them don’t mind, you know. Men like you tend to be too much for only one woman to handle—”

The corporal had never been so uncomfortable in his entire life. “Sir, *please!*” he cut him off, then tried to regain control of his face which must have been beet-red. “Please, this just isn’t something I want to do . . . Maybe someday, but . . . but not *now*. Sir?”

Thorne frowned, perplexed. “All right, son. I have to admit, the idea of my becoming a grandfather already was just a little unsettling. But,” he perked up, “the gold bedroom is still yours tomorrow. And Sargon’s woman and daughters will have received the news by then that they are to vacate the mansion. *If*, however,” Thorne’s smile turned ugly, “one or both of the daughters decide to *linger* once they see you, promise me you’ll rethink this. I have a feeling once you see

those girls you might not think of *anything* clearly. I'll let them know they're free to stay to get to know you."

As if to erase the suggestion, Shin vigorously rubbed his forehead.

Something flashed on Thorne's face as if he were startled by the movement. But he recovered himself and raised his eyebrows, awaiting a response.

"I'll do . . . my best, sir," Shin sighed.

Thorne pointed at him. "And that's one more thing I wanted to talk to you about. When we're in front of the other soldiers, I am 'sir'. But when we are alone like this, I'd rather you called me 'Father.'"

Shin winced although he didn't mean to. When he opened his eyes he could tell Thorne wasn't pleased by his reaction.

"General, I'm sorry, but I lost my father only a few days ago. I'm still overwhelmed by your offer and I don't think I can yet call you father." The word nearly gagged him. "Again, probably someday, but . . . I just need more time. Please?"

Thorne sighed heavily. "If your goal today was to disappoint me repeatedly, you're succeeding, Lek. But perhaps I ask too much of you and too quickly. You're dismissed to go help with the wounded, but report to me before you leave for the fort at Pools. I want to know of your whereabouts at all times. Remember, not all the pheasants have been flushed yet."



When Perrin Shin Lek Briter Thorne went to bed that night it was well past midnight. But the overly-named corporal couldn't sleep, despite his exhaustion. The evening had been too full.

To watch General Thorne in action was remarkable. He issued commands, structured assignments, and integrated his men with Sargon's with such confidence that the corporal was in awe.

Then Shin remembered: taking over the world was just another day at work for Lemuel Thorne.

He stared up at the ceiling of the guest quarters wondering what his view in the mansion would be tomorrow night, and felt again like retching. He didn't want to go there, not to the place where his great-grandparents were killed, where his papa and aunt raced each other on the slick floors of the long hallways, where his grandparents hosted a dinner where Colonel Shin put to sleep a little boy who now

laid dead in the ash—

If there was a way to turn off his mind, maybe some plant to chew or drink to take that could shut down his brain for a few hours, he would’ve taken it, and lots of it, to forget that his life was taking him further away from all that was familiar.

Then he realized that’s why someone came up with the vials and mead, and why soldiers snuck them into the barracks.

Idumea. He was going to live in Idumea, beginning tomorrow. On the one hand, there was nothing he wanted more than a future there. But on the other, there was nothing he feared more, yet he didn’t know why. He needed a third hand with an option in the middle.

Shin rolled over and wondered where he could find a vial seller this late at night.

Chapter 7--“I’ve realized this past year that there are worse things than dying.”

One year ago. One long, miserable year ago.

Mahrree stood in the back garden as the sun was rising, a kerchief wrapped appropriately around her nose and mouth, but it seemed unnecessary. The remaining ash had settled and a light rain the evening before kept it down but mercifully didn’t harden it. She’d been planning for weeks to mark this day properly, beginning by herself. But how to do so . . . Well, nothing ever came to mind.

There wasn’t much of a sunrise either, obscured by rain clouds from the east and steamy clouds from Deceit that still drifted upward.

Mahrree had considered sitting on the bench where they’d last been together, sharing their last kiss, but it felt wrong to be there alone. She hadn’t sat there since Perrin died, even when Peto moved it to another location just to give it a different feel.

She instead walked to his boulder where his name was carved and looked at the stones around it with the names of all the family. Another one would be added next season when Hycy and Wes welcomed their firstborn. Mahrree ran her fingers along the grooves of his name, aware that her feet were over his body and his army-issued long knife she had Deck bury there, two feet below. After Peto had found it hidden in Perrin’s desk and gave to Mahrree, she held on to it for only a day and night before realizing it should never have come to Salem, and it was time to bury the weapon.

Another anniversary would be coming in a few weeks, marking one year since the *other* Perrin Shin left the Eztates. How Lilla and Peto wanted to deal with that day, she didn’t know. It wouldn’t be like today’s remembrance, though.

Calla had come up with a plan for today two moons ago, when the families gathered to once again commemorate the day that the Shins and Briters escaped to Salem with Shem. Traditionally, Perrin

and Shem put on their old army jackets and retold the story, usually with some embellishments to make the other look bad. But this time, no one knew what to do with Perrin’s jacket that Mahrree clutched to her chest.

But Shem gently took the uniform from her, grinned mischievously and whispered, “I *always* wanted to try this on!” He could even fasten every button. Then he stood in front of the family and announced in his best Perrin voice, “So *this* is what it feels like to be in charge!”

As the family laughed, Calla suggested that they mark the first year of his passing by remembering Perrin’s personality. The three families would join after dinner for an “I remember when Perrin . . .” evening. They’d bring out his old uniform again and everyone would share their favorite experiences.

Deck already asked Mahrree if he could borrow the jacket to reenact how the commander of Edge greeted him his first day after Deck’s parents had passed away. Jaytsy confided to her mother that she spied on Deck and Holling practicing in the barn. Deck had down the quick walk of Colonel Shin as he marched to confront a young Deckett Briter who he assumed was a thief.

Holling, who was the same age that Deck had been at the time, was practicing his surrender and flop against the barn as ‘Colonel Shin’ drew his sword and demanded to know “just who he thought he was.” Deck promised Mahrree she’d laugh, and she readily agreed he could use the uniform. Besides, it was nice to see someone wearing it again and she hoped everyone would want a turn donning it.

But that would be tonight.

For this morning, she wanted to mark the day alone. Secretly, she hoped he’d come to her, if only briefly to hug her again as he did when he left. Just anything to feel him again. But he hadn’t come yet.

Now as she wandered aimlessly in the orchard, it seemed like a silly idea. She touched one of the leaves of a pear tree and it crumbled like it was the end of Harvest Season. There were so many more things to worry about right now, and she felt selfish for feeling sorry for herself. Selfishness wasn’t a Salem trait.

She looked around to make sure she was alone before she said, “Perrin? Can you hear me?”

Silence.

“Where are you? Are you still with Young Pere?”

Nothing.

Mahrree sighed dejectedly and leaned against another pear tree. She pulled down the useless kerchief and closed her eyes in prayer.

Dear Creator, am I really supposed to feel so alone? Is there no hope You can deliver me? No comfort You can send me?

Silence.

She opened her eyes. “Father?” she whispered to the trees. “Can’t He send even *you* to me?”

Of course He can, my darling daughter.

Mahrree burst into a grin. “Where have *you* been!?” she whispered as she wiped away a tear. “You could have come to me sooner, you know!”

You haven’t needed me sooner. It’s not as if we’re sitting over here watching the latest show at the arena, you know. We’re busy, Mahrree.

“Of course you are.” She sighed and smiled. “Father, do you know where he is? Perrin?”

Yes. He’s fine. And he’s worried about you. He had a feeling you wouldn’t handle this day too well.

“Well, of course not!” She scoffed and kicked a rotting piece of under ripe fruit. “How would I handle this day?”

You allow yourself to mourn a little, weep a little, then laugh a great deal more tonight. It will all feel slightly better tomorrow.

“You promise, Father?”

Have I ever led you astray before?

“No,” Mahrree smiled to the sky. “Never. Where is he?”

With Young Pere.

“I suppose I did tell him to *stay* with him, didn’t I? At least Young Pere has him for company.”

Young Pere’s not listening to anyone right now. Perrin’s never left his side, just as you asked, but Young Pere is struggling to hear him.

Mahrree closed her eyes. “How bad is it, Father?”

Bad enough. But he’s still alive.

“He’s still alive,” Mahrree repeated. “But I’ve realized this past year that there are worse things than dying. Is he in a position worse than death?”

Not yet, but he’s been very close. And in the future? You’re right—if he doesn’t start remembering how to listen, he may find himself in a position worse than death, especially since dying is far from the worst thing that can happen.

Mahrree exhaled. “So . . . I shouldn’t be selfish today. I should be grateful my husband is still caring for my wayward grandson. That’s why he can’t comfort me.”

You’re not alone, Mahrree, no matter how often you feel you are. We frequently interpret our feelings incorrectly. He’s always thinking of you, as you are of him. He’s not that far away. And he has a message for you.

Mahrree’s eyes filled with tears. “Really?”

He wanted me to tell you that, You’re the most perfect woman in the world and that he still loves and adores you more than words can say.

Mahrree laughed and sobbed at the same time. “That’s my line! How dare he steal my line?”

And that’s exactly how he said you would respond! I can bring him back a message, if you like.

“Oh, yes, Father—please! Tell him . . . tell him . . . *He took my line!*” Mahrree stomped her foot childishly and laughed. “Now I have to come up with something else.” She shook her head in delight that she was still debating, in a way, with her husband. It’s exactly what she would have wanted to do today.

“Uh, tell him . . . I miss him. Terribly. Every day, every night. Tell him I love him, eternally. Tell him there’s going to be a family party tonight where everyone will relate their favorites stories about him. Tell him that little Perrin Zenos is the fattest baby ever to exist in Salem. Poor thing might never be able to walk. Tell him . . . just tell him—” Tears brimmed in her eyes. “Tell him I can hardly wait to be with him again. And thank him for keeping his promises.”

I will, Mahrree. Right now.

And she knew he was gone, but still she smiled. “There’s more to tell you, Perrin,” she murmured to herself. “But seeing as how you’ve got a lot to deal with, I didn’t want to burden you.” She strolled over to the plum trees and fingered a plum that looked like it might ripen before the rest of the tree died. “I want you to know that—”

The plum dropped off the tree and she winced apologetically at it.

“I want you to know that Honri . . . Well, let me back up. Honri’s been a very good friend these past few moons. A *very* good friend.” She confessed guiltily. “He started off by letting me cry in his arms about missing you, then he tricked me into going to a dance with him. Don’t worry, I was horrible at it, and two formerly robust men are

still limping.

“But that was only the start. He started taking me to all kinds of rectory activities, and reminded me how to laugh.

“It wasn’t until a few weeks ago, when Jaytsy and Peto took me aside for the most awkward conversation in the history of Salem, that I realized Honri has been courting me! You see, *you* never courted me. We debated in public, then you came over to apologize, then suddenly we’d decided to get married. I didn’t even realize Honri’s intentions until your children said to me, ‘We want you to know that we’ve always loved Honri and that he came to ask our permission to speak to you about the future.’

“Yes,” she chuckled ruefully. “He even went about proposing to me more properly than you had, checking first with my family and getting their permission. And your children granted it, you should know! They told me they didn’t want me to be lonely and that I seemed so happy with him. It only made sense, they said.”

She leaned against an apple tree and looked up through the leafless branches.

“Instead of waiting for him to come over to make his grand proposal, I went to his house. And there I told him . . . *no*.”

She clenched her jaw and blinked back frustrated tears.

“Do you know why, Perrin Shin? Because you’ve ruined me for any other man. Oh, and Honri is a man, I’ll tell you!” She smiled miserably. “He’s adventurous, charming, even more thoughtful than you, and with *dimples*! When he smiles—who knew I’d fall for dimples?”

Her chin quivered.

“But I couldn’t. Oh, I just couldn’t. I mean, how ridiculous is that, at our age figuring out whose house to live in, and how to rearrange the furniture, and how to make up a new routine we could both live with . . . Just so much *work*.”

But she sighed, because that wasn’t the entire truth. “No, the real problem is, I sleep with your uniform on occasion. I lay it in our bed and I dream that I can smell you still in the fibers, earthy-sweet. And what if . . . what if I woke up next to Honri dreaming about you—”

She shuddered in embarrassment. Yes, he’d be her husband, *but*—

“Shem and Calla didn’t understand it. They came over the next day to tell me how *adorable* they thought we were, how there was nothing wrong with our being together until we could be with Nan

and you again. Just because we’ve both committed to our spouses for forever doesn’t mean we can’t be with someone else until we can be reunited. Then they started listing all the widows and widowers we know who have remarried. And then, if that wasn’t bad enough, two of Honri’s daughters came over to tell me that their mother would be *thrilled* if I were to marry their father. Oh, Perrin,” she sighed wretchedly. “I’ve never been so torn in my entire life. When I said no to Honri, I felt like I’d disappointed everyone we know. But if I said yes to him, then I’d feel like I was betraying you.”

She’d strolled over to the cattle fence and leaned against it.

“But there’s something no one seems to realize, Perrin. I even brought it up with Honri who still visits every day on the pretext of checking on me, but I think he’s just waiting for me to break and change my mind,” she chuckled sadly. “But Perrin, the Last Day? It’s *got* to be just around the corner! Why should Honri and I marry when, in maybe a few short weeks, we’ll be back with our first loves? I tried to explain that to him, but before I could get too far he reminded me that we have stored four years’ worth of food. In Honri’s mind, the Last Day won’t be here for at least that long. And Shem? Oh, he’s even worse. He claims he’s not even sure if this is the ‘awakening’ of Deceit, although *I know* I heard him asking the Creator about that the morning it happened. And the look on his face then? Oh, he knew it was. Yet he claims it could still be decades away even though there’s no Deceit left!

“Perrin, I’m surrounded by faithful and humble fools. Why won’t they see the truth? Oh, and people around here think *I’m* a little unstable, in case you haven’t heard. Dr. Toon came by last night asking my opinion about Jon Offra, who I think is doing quite well given the circumstances, I thought you’d like to know. But I had the feeling Toon was evaluating *my* mental stability, too. But Perrin, I can’t help but be happy! The world’s falling apart—”

A branch of a peach tree in front of her broke off and crumbled as it hit the ground.

“See? Just like that, quite literally. But why can’t anyone see that’s a great thing?! I keep imagining how you’ll look again, restored and whole and maybe even younger.” She unconsciously hugged herself. “Heaving yourself cheerfully out of that grave, dusting yourself off, and grinning at me in that way . . .”

She looked around.

“This is the oddest conversation I’ve ever had with trees. You can

see why I can't explain this to anyone, right? Poor Honri can't even consider that sweet Nan will be running in to his arms before we could figure out where to place the sofas. No one gets it, Perrin. No one but me. So if you hear any rumors that I'm going a bit grainy, don't believe them. I'm the only rational, thinking person around here. I'm still grieving you, don't you worry. But I won't be for long."

She grinned to the sky then fairly skipped on her way back to the house, so full of hope that she was ready to explode like that ridiculous mountain in the south.



By that morning, Corporal Shin had it figured out. He dressed early and stood outside Thorne's quarters, waiting. He purposely ignored the officers' breakfast, bypassing the bowl of sausages that would only remind him of how naively he trusted Colonel Glasser.

Shin wished he could find the copy of The Writings that Glasser had shown him. Now he was sure Guide Hierum's last prophecy was wrong. While the words of the guides always warmed him a little, what he read the other morning did nothing but give him stupid notions of glory.

The *chosen one*. He'd been chosen to be every gambler's token.

Shin paced the hall, plotting how to phrase his plan to Thorne. He'd found a third hand and was sure he could stay on top of everything, but he needed some time to think. He could be Thorne's son—no, *heir* and could become an officer, and could . . .

And that's where he got hung up. What did he want now that he was knitting his soul to the Leader of the World?

While the question filled him with anxiety, there *was* something admirable about Thorne, even special. Maybe that was why Salem, and Shem Zenos, was afraid of him.

But Thorne was also unpredictable, and as much as the image of a dead Captain Nelt haunted him, the memory of Thorne thrusting through his captain worried him more. True, Lick was ingratiating and irritating, but that wasn't enough to *kill* him for, was it?

Maybe it had something to do with Salem. Just how much did Lick and Thorne know about it, and why? And what would Thorne do if he found out Shin was from there?

Surely Thorne wouldn't kill his *own son* out of disappointment, would he? But didn't he say last night that Shin had disappointed him

repeatedly?

And what if he realized Shin wasn’t his and Jaysy’s son? He *had* to know! The timing was all wrong.

He remembered Puggah’s warning: Thorne believed any lies that got him what he wanted. Amory had said something similar when they were sneaking away: the truth is what you believe it is.

And really, he thought in the middle of the night, the story didn’t *have* to be true as long as it produced the desired result. Even Shem Zenos lied to his best friends for seventeen years to achieve a higher good. He couldn’t be completely honest *and* still smuggle people out of the world. The truth would’ve ruined everything.

He pondered that concept for an hour of his sleepless night, and decided, Why ruin everything with the truth? He *could* be Thorne’s heir, be an officer, and maybe even the next great general of the world.

And *only* then would he reveal Salem. He could return in power and glory and *really* unite the ‘world.’ And it didn’t need to be a devastating invasion like the guides’ predictions, but a seamless melding of two societies into one great whole. He, Perrin Shin Thorne, could become the greatest general the world ever saw.

Now how could a man sleep with thoughts like *that* on his mind?

But, he also realized, there was a great deal he didn’t know and not a lot of time to learn it. He needed to start thinking like a great leader, and he knew from where the greatest leaders came.

As he grew wearier, his mind began to drift and wonder what became of the tribute song Nelt was writing for him with 300 verses, one for each horse Shin had procured from the Stable at Pools. It probably no further than Nelt’s mind. Shin felt a stab of guilty sorrow. Nelt would have been a good man to keep nearby.

Then stray verses of Nelt’s other songs drifted through his mind, but all he could remember were the most explicit phrases. Then thoughts of Sargon’s lonely, mourning daughters popped up, creating such an arousing agitation it was remarkable he ever got to sleep. When he woke that morning he knew that if he went to the mansion he’d forget his resolve to not be involved with women—

Thorne’s door opened.

“Corporal Thorne! And we’re going to change that on your jacket, as soon as possible.” The general pointed to the Shin label on his uniform. “Today, if we can. What are you doing here?”

Shin stood at attention. “Wishing to speak to you, sir. Do you

have a moment?”

Thorne sneered. “Thought you’d change your mind about a *few things* we discussed last night. Come in.” He tipped his head. The corporal sat down formally on a wooden chair as Thorne dropped casually on his bed. “So what do you wish to talk about, son?”

“Sir,” Shin began, hoping the right words would come, and that maybe an old general would give him the correct phrasing.

No whispers came.

“I’m concerned about your hold on the northern forts. Now that we realize Major Yordin was plotting against you, it seems that a strong presence should return to the north as quickly as possible.”

Thorne nodded slowly. “I’m arranging for a colonel from Orchards to take over at Sands. Up to Edge I plan to send a solid major I knew the last time I held Idumea. He’s been enjoying the heat of Flax for far too long. More assignments are forthcoming.”

“Excellent, but sir, I fear *your presence* will be missed.”

Thorne leaned back. “Continue.”

“But you’re needed *here*, in Idumea, to fortify your claim to the city. You certainly can’t be in two places at once.”

“No, I can’t.”

“But, sir, *I* could. I mean, not be in two places, but *act* as you, in behalf of you. I now have your name, so perhaps some of your influence will accompany that. Sir, I think I should go back to Edge as a reminder to all those in the north that your presence is still there.”

It hadn’t come out as eloquently as he had rehearsed it. About four versions ago it was much clearer, but the steady gaze of General Thorne had a tendency to muddle his thinking. He thought of one more thing he could say to clinch the deal, but felt himself gagging on the word. Perhaps another day.

Thorne leaned forward on the bed. “You’re *choosing* to not sleep in the gold room? Boy, have you any idea what that room is *like*?”

Shin risked a smile. “I imagine it’s shiny with a hint of gold in it?”

Thorne slowly smiled as well. “Hint of gold. Funny. Just like your mother,” he whispered. “She could always make me laugh.”

The corporal shifted uncomfortably.

Thorne sighed. “As much as I hate to admit it, you make a valid point, Lek. To be honest, I’ve been concerned about the supply situation in Edge since the eruption. Major Kroop’s on his own without you to influence his decisions. Yes, I know it was you. Edge may be

one of our last remaining strongholds of food, and Kroop’s likely feeding it to the hogs when Hili isn’t looking instead of butchering the animals for food.” He gestured to the air. “Ah, but Lek—*Idumea!* I can’t bear the thought of not showing it to you.”

“It still sounds a little dusty, sir,” Shin tried to smile again. Thorne returned it. “But what about this—I return to Edge, evaluate the situation there, make a detailed plan for distribution that not even Kroop could mess up, then work my way back down? I could stop at Winds and Coast as well. I know what the supply numbers should be for every fort. I figured it out while I was helping Kroop. In a few weeks I’d be back here, and the citizens will have cleaned up *Idumea* for me to see it in its full glory.”

Thorne studied Shin for a moment before giving him a short nod. “Clever, and with a great deal of insight, just as I expected. I’ll send you with a security force of no fewer than twenty-five soldiers. I expect you to return to me at the High General’s mansion no later than four weeks from today. And I’ll see to it that you’re properly entertained when you arrive,” he added with a quiet snigger.

Shin ignored the last comment. “Thank you, sir! I mean, for letting me go to Edge. I’ll impress you, I promise.”

“I’m already impressed. You’re showing forethought in considering the future. Many graduates of Command School can’t think beyond midday meal. And speaking of Command School,” Thorne said, consulting a stack of papers on the desk near the bed. “Hm. Better make your return for a little sooner. Command School resumes on the 90th Day of Weeding. Since today is the 63rd Day, that means you have only—”

Shin nearly toppled over. “Excuse me, sir. *What* did you say today’s date is?”

Thorne looked up. “The 63rd Day. Something wrong, son? You look as if you’ve seen another spirit.”

“No, sir,” he mumbled. “I just . . . I guess I lost track of time . . . it’s just . . . my mother’s birthday today,” he salvaged. “She would have been forty-six.” But it wasn’t a *birthday* that made him go pale.

One year ago.

Just one year ago he walked past his body and touched his hand one last time. What were his last words to them that afternoon? Shin couldn’t remember. *One year ago—*

Thorne was shaking his head sympathetically. “Maybe today was *Lilla Briter’s* birthday,” he said quietly when he saw the emotion in

the corporal's eyes, "but your *real* mother would've been forty-four back in Planting Season. I always remember beautiful Jaytsy on her birthdays. Now we can remember her together when her forty-fifth comes next year, and imagine what she would've looked like. I have a few stories I can share with you. She was a fascinating woman. We were very close, *closer* than you might imagine," he emphasized.

Shin knew a response was wanted, but he'd heard only bits and pieces in his surprise that it'd been one year ago. "Yes, sir," he said vaguely, and tried to shove away the date. He'd deal with it later.

He cleared his throat and asked, "Then . . . I have your permission to return to Edge, *today*, in your name?"

"Yes, of course, son. Take Onus with you. I'll start drafting a letter to establish your identity and authority." Thorne got up and walked over to Shin. He fingered the name label on his uniform, and Shin froze at the general's touch. "I suppose that'll have to wait," he said disappointedly. "Then again, maybe not. Instead of going to Winds on the way back, stop there on the way to Edge. The officers' tailor shop is there. They'll get you relabeled in the time it takes you to evaluate their supply barns."

Shin stood up, trying to suggest it was time for him to leave. "Yes, sir. Just provide me with directions. I've never been to Winds."

Thorne smiled as genuinely as he could. "While you're gone you're going to work on that 'sir,' right? It's not really that hard to say, Lek. *Father?*"

Shin tried to return the smile, but he couldn't make his muscles conform adequately. What he produced seemed to be enough, though.

The general smiled wider and gripped Shin's shoulder. "Promise me you'll be careful, all right? No unnecessary risks. Let lower men of no consequence do the dangerous stuff. I need want you healthy to begin Command School." Before Shin could answer, Thorne caught him in a one-armed embrace, which shocked Shin more than anything in the past few days. The general seemed to actually mean it.

Thorne stepped back and nodded formally. "Get your things ready, Corporal, and advise Onus he's heading north. You can leave in two hours' time."

"Thank you, sir," Shin saluted before heading out the door.

By midmorning Shin, Sergeant Onus, and twenty-five soldiers as guard were mounted with three days’ worth of rations and heading north. General Thorne saw them off. Shin gave the general his best smile and good wishes before turning north. Once he faced where the mountains would eventually appear—right now a haze of grayish blue in the distance—he felt much lighter.

He and Onus rode in the middle of the guard, each soldier told by General Thorne that the safe return of his son in a few weeks would guarantee him a reward such as only Idumea could provide. With that tantalizing thought, each man pledged to guard Corporal Lek Thorne with his life. Sergeant Onus was given the privilege of keeping him company, and heard him sigh in relief.

“So, Shin,” he said quietly as they rode side by side, “we haven’t spoken much since I arrived, but according to that sigh I’d say you’ve had enough excitement. Happy to go home where it’s quiet?”

Shin glanced over at him. “Is it that obvious?”

Onus chuckled. “Only to someone who’s known you since your initial training. So what’s been harder to get used to: walking for days on end then digging out of a mudslide, or becoming the son of the most powerful man in the world?”

“Sir, I hardly know how to answer that question!”

Onus nodded in understanding. “Do you know what I’m looking forward to?” he said with a smirk. “Watching Major Kroop’s expression when he learns who you are! Promise me I get to be there?”

Shin snorted. It was the closest thing to a laugh he had made in nearly a year. “Maybe we should have a large mug of mead ready for him. And a soft pillow for his landing.”

Onus laughed out loud. “Hili ought to be interesting to watch as well. He told me he knew Shin from when he was a boy and Shin was only a captain. Hili also served under him for a few weeks as a soldier before he got transferred away from the mountains.”

“Mountains. It’ll be nice to see the mountains again,” Shin said. “I didn’t realize how little I enjoyed flat land until I came here.”

“Well, you best get used to it. Once you begin Command School, you won’t be leaving Idumea except during Weeding Season.”

“I hadn’t considered that,” he mumbled.

They rode in silence and Shin tried to conjure up the voice in his head. Why he couldn’t hear *him* was troubling. Maybe all he had was one year, then he disappeared or was reassigned or something. It wasn’t that Shin needed him, he just was curious as to where he was.

With no voices in his head, he thought instead about General Thorne and their last meeting in the command office before he left. The general had shut the door, sat on the desk to be near Shin, and gave him his first lesson in worldly leadership.

“Enjoy the benefits of power, son. When everyone realizes you’re mine, they’ll treat you differently. Savor it. Otherwise, what’s the point? But don’t misuse your power. While you’re the master, remember to throw the dogs a few bones, pat them on the head occasionally, and they’ll remain loyal. But remember, loyalty is *not* the same as love. Your grandfather learned that the hard way. Never reveal too much of what you know, and never trust anyone more than you’d trust your worst enemy. And understand this: *everyone* is potentially your worst enemy.”

Shin had nodded obediently, ignorantly.

Thorne held up the letter Shin was to carry with him at all times. “This gives you the power to act in my name, to a degree. I don’t give this to you lightly. Only a man with the blood of all the great former High Generals in his veins can carry it properly. You alone carry that blood—Shins, Cush, and Thornes. You spoke once of respect and fear. Well, Lek, people respect what they *fear*. As long as you create fear, but not hatred, they *will* respect you. That’s one of the principles of leadership, and that’s what I want you to practice during the next few weeks—invoking enough fear to demand respect. The name alone will open many doors. Then it’ll be up to you to do the rest.”

There were a few more things Thorne said, but Shin’s mind was fixated on ‘power’ and ‘fear,’ and how to use the first to get the second.

That morning as he rode the large, black stallion, whom he’d secretly dubbed Clarker, a stray thought drifted into his mind. He tried to push away the image, but it kept floating back annoyingly in front of every other idea.

It was Shem Zenos last year, changing the soiled cloths of his grand-nephew on the trail to the ancient temple site.

KING OF SALEM.

Shin shook his head. Ridiculous. What king would change a baby’s cloths?

NO MAN IS MORE RESPECTED THAN HIM. OR LOVED. THERE’S ONLY ONE MAN WHO FEARS HIM, AND SOON HE’LL BE ISSUING ORDERS FROM THE GARRISON IN IDUMEA.

Shin rolled his eyes, because Thorne feared no man and no thing.

But he was secretly relieved the voice was back and he shifted his thoughts to it.

I wondered where you were. Is it appropriate to wish you a Happy Anniversary on your death?

He heard a cosmic scoff. *AH, PRACTICING ‘LEADERSHIP’? I DON’T REMEMBER THORNE SPECIFYING A TONE OF DISDAIN, BUT THAT MUST BE IN AN UPCOMING LESSON.*

Leadership is different in the world.

YES, IT IS. IT SHOULDN’T BE, BUT IT IS. COME ON, YOUNG PERE! YOU DON’T REALLY BELIEVE ALL OF THIS, DO YOU?

Shin bristled because already the criticism was beginning.

Look, old man—look where I am! In my pocket is a letter from the General of the World granting me his name and his power.

BECAUSE MY NAME AND POWER AREN’T ENOUGH? YOU’RE UNBELIEVABLE, YOUNG PERE. LAST NIGHT YOU WHIMPERED IN TERROR WHILE USING THAT BEAUTIFUL ANIMAL AS A SHIELD, BEGGING FOR HELP, SURE THAT YOU WERE GOING TO BE EXECUTED BY THE NEWEST LEADER OF THE WORLD. AND TODAY YOU THINK YOU’RE ON TOP OF EVERYTHING AGAIN, DON’T YOU? AND CLARKER, BY THE WAY, IS A STUPID NAME.

Shin sighed before thinking a response. Well, I *am*, aren’t I? I mean, on top of things again?

HAVE YOU EVER ASKED YOURSELF, WHY? WHY FOUR ARROWS THAT SHOULD HAVE HIT YOU LAST NIGHT TOOK ODD TURNS INSTEAD AND FELL HARMLESSLY TO THE ASH?

He didn’t have an answer.

I’LL TELL YOU WHY. IT’S NOT BECAUSE YOU’RE ANYTHING SPECIAL. IT’S BECAUSE A WOMAN IN SALEM SPENDS EVERY MORNING AND NIGHT ON HER KNEES BEGGING THAT HER SON WILL BE PRESERVED. BECAUSE A MAN IN SALEM WEARIES THE CREATOR WITH PLEAS THAT HIS SON WILL BE GIVEN ENOUGH TIME TO COME TO HIS SENSES. BECAUSE A GRANDMOTHER ASKED HER HUSBAND TO NEVER LEAVE HER GRANDSON’S SIDE UNTIL HE COMES HOME. IT’S NOTHING YOU’VE DONE SPECIAL, BOY. IT’S BECAUSE YOUR FAMILY PRAYS FOR YOU ALL THE TIME. YOU’VE LASTED THIS LONG BECAUSE OF THEM, NOT BECAUSE OF YOU.

Shin was quiet for a moment before he responded. So why has Thorne been preserved, old man?

Another cosmic sigh. *BECAUSE THERE HAS TO BE AN OPPOSITE TO EVERYTHING. FOR EVERY PUSH THERE IS A PULL. FOR EVERY GOOD THERE IS AN EVIL.*

Thorne’s not evil, Shin thought.

The Soldier in the Middle of the World

EVERY MAN BELIEVES HE'S THE HERO OF HIS OWN STORY. THORNE BELIEVES HE'S NOBLE IN ALL THAT HE DOES, THAT HE ALONE CAN RULE THE WORLD, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH . . .

Well, he *is* noble in many ways—

OH, REALLY? SHALL WE SEE ABOUT THAT?

Shin didn't respond but stared ahead as they continued to ride.

JUST DO SOMETHING BEFORE YOU GO TO WINDS. STOP AT THE STABLES AT POOLS. ROAK DESERVES TO KNOW WHY HE WON'T FIND HIS HERDS AGAIN.

Shin cleared his throat. "Sergeant, would you mind if we made a quick stop to the northeast of here? I want to go to the stables from where I took the horses and apologize about our not returning them. Maybe I could return this stallion when I come back in a few weeks, and they'll have him to reestablish their herds with."

Onus nodded. "Of course, Shin. I mean, Thorne. *That'll* take some getting used to," he muttered. "You know, you don't have to do that. I'm sure they know their horses aren't coming back."

"I'll just feel better about everything if I . . . Anyway," the corporal switched in midsentence, "you don't have to do that either. Call me Thorne? I'm still wearing the Shin badge."

Onus grinned in agreement. "But everyone will accept it more if I start calling you Thorne, Corporal. What's your first name?"

"Lek."

"Wasn't that your original first name?"

"No. I mean, yes. Lek. Yes."

Onus chuckled sadly. "You'll figure out who you really are someday, Corporal. Don't worry. It will all come back to you."

The fields around the Stables at Pools were just as quiet and empty as they were when Shin first arrived a week ago in search of transportation. The house, too, looked quiet. But then again, so did the handful of other houses they passed. No one was out if they didn't have to be.

The men stopped their horses and Shin slid off his mount. "I'll go alone. They know me. This shouldn't take long."

He walked up the front steps and knocked loudly on the door. "Sir?" he called. "It's Captain Nelt. The one who took the horses from you. Sir, I've come to talk to you about returning the black stallion."

He pounded on the door again which, worryingly, wasn't fully latched. It creaked open.

"Roak? It's just me, the captain. Actually, I'm a corporal—" He

pushed into the quiet house and a horrific stench greeted him, wrinkling his nose.

“Oh, no,” he whispered when he realized the gathering room had been ransacked. “Sir? Ma’am?” he called loudly. “Are you here?”

He picked his way through the room listening for signs of movement and wandered to the kitchen where he stopped.

The stable owner and his wife were there, sprawled on the floor, dead.

“NO!” Shin cried out and he rushed over to them. Roak’s bloodied body was cold, so whatever happened wasn’t recent. Shin looked wildly around the kitchen. The cupboards were opened and depleted of food. That must have been what they were after, whoever it was.

Suddenly he remembered their teenage daughter. “Hello!” he shouted. “Do you need help? Where are you?” He hurried out of the kitchen and to the stairs that led to the bedrooms on the second floor. He raced up them three at a time and stopped at the first bedroom. It was torn up, but no one was there.

Shin rushed to the next room and threw open the door. It was the daughter’s room and she was there. And her death was terrible.

The shock of it was more than he was prepared for and he vomited on a rug. Bracing himself against the door frame, he tried to control his panicked breathing but felt himself growing lightheaded as he slumped to the floor.

“No, no, no, no . . . Who could have done this!?” he whimpered. “She was Kanthi and Huldah and Sewzi’s age!” Saying those names, ones that he hadn’t uttered in almost a year, was jolting.

He looked at the debris strewn around the room and spied a soldier’s jacket. He must have taken it off before he—

Shin’s stomach spasmed again, throwing up the last in his belly.

“Did I cause this?” he pleaded to the ceiling, wiping his chin. “Did I lead the soldiers here? Was this because of the men Thorne sent to tell them about our not returning their horses?”

YES, YOUNG PERE. HIS SOLDIERS DID ALL OF THIS.

Shin collapsed on the floor, sobbing. Now he knew why his grandfather told him to go there, and it felt like a cruel trick. “Puggah! Puggah, *no!* No . . . I didn’t mean for this to happen! Roak and his family didn’t do anything wrong! Please, please don’t let this be my fault!”

IT’S NOT YOUR FAULT, YOUNG PERE. YOU DIDN’T TELL THE SOLDIERS TO BRUTALIZE THE FAMILY.

“Then who did?!”

YOU REALLY CAN'T THINK OF ANYONE?

“Thorne?! But he said they don't encourage this sort of thing! He told me that last night! He said—”

THEY DON'T ENCOURAGE THE WIDESPREAD TAKING OF GIRLS. BUT THIS ISN'T 'WIDESPREAD,' YOUNG PERE, THIS IS A REWARD FOR A JOB WELL DONE. THORNE ORDERS THEM TO BURN THE HOUSES WHEN THEY'RE FINISHED TO HIDE THE EVIDENCE, BUT THIS GROUP EXPECTED TO RETURN. THERE'S STILL MORE TO STEAL.

“Puggah, Puggah—Why the girl? She was so young—”

THAT'S PRECISELY WHY. SHE'S JUST LIKE SARGON'S DAUGHTERS. THE ONES YOU SPENT HALF THE NIGHT THINKING ABOUT—

“Puggah, no! It's not the same. I know, *I know!*” he gripped his head in agony. “I know what I *was* thinking, but it wasn't *this*.”

ARE YOU SURE?

The smell from the room was overwhelming. Gasping for breath, he scrambled away to the stairwell and leaned against the banister.

NOT MUCH DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHAT YOU FANTASIZED AND WHAT YOU SEE HERE. A SWEET GIRL SUFFERS EXCRUCIATINGLY. DEATH IS PREFERABLE TO WHAT SHE EXPERIENCED AT THE HANDS OF THE SOLDIERS. SHE WAS THANKFUL WHEN IT CAME—

“Enough!” Shin shouted. “Enough!” He held his face in his hands and whimpered. “Thorne couldn't know what they did. He couldn't imagine *this*. He wouldn't approve—”

WHY NOT, YOUNG PERE? WHY CAN'T YOU BELIEVE HE DOESN'T KNOW? THAT HE HASN'T DONE IT HIMSELF? THAT HE DIDN'T TRY TO DO IT TO YOUR AUNT WHOM HE CLAIMS HE STILL LOVES? CAN YOU NOT BELIEVE IT BECAUSE HE CALLS YOU 'SON'? BECAUSE YOU CAN'T IMAGINE A MAN WILLING TO TAKE YOU AS HIS COULD REALLY BE SUCH A SELFISH ANIMAL?

“I don't really want to be his son, Puggah,” he said. “I don't want to call him Father. I just want to stay alive. I just want—”

COMMAND SCHOOL? AND WHAT KIND OF MAN WILL COMMAND SCHOOL MAKE OF YOU? I CAN TELL YOU—ANOTHER GENERAL THORNE. APPLES DON'T FALL TOO FAR FROM THEIR TREES, YOUNG PERE, UNLESS THEY'RE ON A HILL. LOOK AROUND. IDUMEA IS VERY FLAT.

“I won't be like him, Puggah,” Shin promised. “I'll be different. I'll be better.”

HOW? WHO WILL SHOW YOU HOW TO BE BETTER? NAME ONE OFFICER IN THE WORLD ALIVE WHO CAN TEACH YOU TO BE BETTER.

Shin had no ready answer.

THAT’S WHAT I THOUGHT. ONE OF THE LAST GOOD MEN IN THE WORLD WAS KILLED HERE. HE LIES IN HIS KITCHEN WITH HIS EXCELLENT WIFE, AND IN HIS POCKET IS SOMETHING HE HOPED YOU’D COME BACK FOR.

Shin looked up bleakly. “What is it?”

GO DOWN TO HIS BODY. RIGHT NOW HE’S TELLING ME HE KEPT IT IN HIS FRONT SHIRT POCKET, WAITING FOR YOUR RETURN.

Shin stood up and trembled his way down the stairs. He turned to the kitchen and approached the still body of the stable owner where he could see the folded parchment in the man’s front shirt pocket. His eyes filled with tears as he carefully pulled it out and opened it.

Roak, I’m sorry this note is coming to you so late. I haven’t been well, but I wanted you to know . . .

Shin’s vision grew too blurry to read further and he fought back a sob. It was the letter Colonel Shin had sent a nineteen-year-old Roak, many years ago. Roak had been the first of hundreds in the world who had sent Colonel Shin a note of condolence after his parents had been killed. The Shin family had responded to every letter, Perrin Shin writing this response himself. His grandson could see clearly only the last lines.

*Always remember who you really are and you’ll always succeed.
Perrin Shin*

“I know who I am, Puggah,” he whispered to the parchment.

THEN WHY ARE YOU HERE, YOUNG PERE?

“Puggah, if I run away now they’ll follow me to Salem. It’s too dangerous. But I can handle this. I know so much more than I did. And all the pheasants are being flushed, so I’ll be safer—”

PHEASANTS HAVE A WAY OF REPRODUCING. YOU’LL NEVER BE COMPLETELY SAFE AND YOU STILL DON’T KNOW HALF OF WHAT’S GOING ON.

Shin folded the old note and shoved it in his back pocket. “I can do this, Puggah. I just need more time, a little more training—”

YOUNG PERE, SOMETIMES YOU’RE JUST SO THICK—

“Is *this* why you came back to me?” His patience growing thin. “Just to criticize me? This is why I left the Eztates!”

The Soldier in the Middle of the World

NO! LOOK, I'M SORRY. I WAS TRYING TO SAY THAT I KNOW THE REAL REASON YOU DON'T WANT TO GO HOME; YOU'RE NOT AFRAID IDUMEA WILL FIND SALEM; YOU'RE AFRAID SALEM WILL FIND OUT ABOUT YOU.

Clenching his fists, he seethed, "You know NOTHING, old man." He spun and marched to the front door.

YOUNG PERE! THEY STILL WANT YOU BACK, NO MATTER WHAT—

He paused to wipe the wetness from his face before trotting down the stairs and back to his horse.

Sergeant Onus was getting off his mount. "Corporal! I was getting worried about you." Noticing that the corporal was flustered and twitching, he asked, "Is everything all right?"

"Yes," Shin said shortly as he took the reins of his horse. "You and the others torch the house. We won't be returning."

Onus's eyebrows shot up. "Are you serious, Shin?" he whispered. "Burn it? What did you just do—"

"You have any objections to *Thorne's* orders?" Shin cut him off.

Onus paled, knowing why General Thorne burned houses. "No, Corporal Thorne," he said steadily. "None at all."

Chapter 8--“No symptoms? Then get in here, quickly.”

Shin and his party rode northeast to Winds. The ash thinned the further they went so it didn't slow them down as much as expected. Still, they wouldn't reach the village until tomorrow morning.

That was fine with the corporal. There was a lot he needed to think about and he appreciated the silence. Why Sergeant Onus stopped talking after the house was torched, Shin didn't know nor did he care.

Instead he passed the plodding hours of gray landscape trying to figure out how much Thorne knew and didn't know, and how much Puggah should be believed and not believed. He was quiet in his mind right now for which Shin was grateful.

They camped that night by a fresh spring which, until they arrived, was the gathering spot for farmers and ranchers who filled their buckets and discussed their situation.

Once the party of twenty-seven soldiers arrived, however, the men dispersed and the soldiers rested undisturbed all night. Sergeant Onus said nothing more than necessary. Maybe because he noticed Shin's brooding or felt the dark confusion surrounding him.

Peto grinned as he watched his mother give fourteen-year-old Kew a lesson in standing soldierly. He was wearing Colonel Shin's jacket but was so shy that he cowered in it. The sleeves and torso were long enough, but his chest was woefully too skinny. That's why Mahrree was shoving a pillow up the jacket trying to fill it out properly, while the combined family laughed at Kew's growing discomfort.

Mahrree noticed too, and was purposely trying to make her grandson squirm as she “fluffed” up his chest.

Kew had been the last to put on the jacket; everyone had worn it, except for Peto. After Lilla had put it on—buttoning it wasn't possible—and did her best Papa Pere impersonation by deepening her voice to demand steak for dinner, Peto knew no one could top that.

As anniversaries for someone's death go, this one must have been the funniest. Peto initially worried that maybe it was irreverent, and he felt some guilt for enjoying himself so much. But seeing his extended family wiping tears of laughter from their eyes as Deck and twenty-two-year-old Holling did their reenactment of how Perrin first met Deck, Peto knew everyone needed this evening.

The food was now eaten, the youngest grandchildren were dozing on the sofas, and Kew was trying to get out of the jacket he was sure he'd never fill out properly, dropping pillows around him as his grandmother kissed his cheek for trying. The married children were preparing to go home when Shem caught Peto's eye. He tipped his head and Peto followed him down the hall.

"Do you have a moment, Rector Shin?" Shem asked.

When he called him Rector Shin, Peto knew they were on duty.

In his office, Peto said, "What do you need, Guide Zenos?"

"Two items," Shem said. "One's a problem, the other's an idea. What do you want first?"

Peto was already pulling out his files where he recorded the daily issues. "Problem first. Who is it and what's the problem?"

"Your mother because she's too happy."

Peto dropped his file and frowned. "My mother? She had a wonderful evening, as we all deserved, and you say this is a problem."

"Her demeanor is markedly changed since Deceit," Shem pointed out. "Surely you see that and also realize it's not quite right. You know that I brought her home a couple of days ago. Did she tell you about our conversation?"

When Peto shook his head, he continued.

"She's happy because she thinks that in a matter of weeks, or maybe even days, Perrin will return."

Peto's frown deepened. "Return? As in . . ."

"The Last Day, Peto. She thinks it's any time now. Deceit's gone, Perrin's on his way home with Young Pere, and she'll be in his arms by Snowing Season," Shem said bluntly.

Peto slumped in his chair and rubbed his forehead. "Oh, Mother," he whispered. "I had no idea. But now that you mention it—she's been far too happy. Oh, the poor woman. What did you say to her?"

“Oh, I sufficiently quashed all her hopes and dreams,” Shem said resignedly. “Noticed that she didn’t talk to me tonight? She thinks I’m betraying her by not telling her when the Last Day is—”

“You know?” Peto asked eagerly.

“Of course I don’t!” Shem said in exasperation. “You’re just like your mother.”

“Well, you *are* the guide—”

“Yes, her accusation as well.”

“Sorry,” Peto said with a faint smile. “So what do we do for her?”

“Nothing, I guess,” Shem sighed. “Just be aware that’s what is sustaining her right now, and be ready to comfort her when she finally falls off that lovely dream. She’ll likely crash hard and not mention a word of her misery to anyone. Tell Jaytsy and Lilla to be aware, and I’ll talk to Calla. Once she falls she’s going to fade again, I’m sure.”

“I think you’re right. This has been the most I’ve seen her talk to the grandchildren since Young Pere left,” Peto acknowledged. “I thought, ‘Oh, look—she’s back to normal again.’ But it’s all just a beautiful fantasy,” he whispered.

The men sat in sad silence for a moment until Peto remembered. “Wait—you said you had an idea? About Mother or something else?”

Shem smiled genuinely. “Something else. About a strange idea I remembered that Perrin had when I was bringing you all to Salem.”

Perplexed, Peto said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Peto, are we going to need all of that block we’re making?”

Now Peto was completely confused. “No. In fact, one of the supervisors told me they’re wondering what to do with all of it.”

Shem grinned. “Then I’ve got the perfect project to not only keep Salemites busy but also to block the world once it decides to find us.”

Peto pondered that for a moment, and . . .

Perhaps it was because the evening had been so enjoyable, or because he’d been thinking about his father unceasingly that the notion seemed to Peto like one last request—one last strange yet absolutely perfect request—that he burst out in laughter.

By midmorning, the village of Winds came into view for Corporal Shin/Thorne and his party. As the soldiers rode on the swept-clean cobblestones, Shin felt a sense of normalcy. The village seemed quieter than it should, but Shin assumed it was out of fear of the ash or

the approaching soldiers. Peculiarly, several doors had a strip of white cloth hanging over them.

Most of the houses were also clean and some gardens bloomed as if nothing worse had hit than an early snowstorm. But Shin eyed the fruit trees and vegetables in worry. Their produce hadn't been harvested and many of the trees were withering.

As the party turned to the main gates of the fort, Shin pulled out of his pocket the letter from General Thorne. A sergeant standing guard at the closed gates looked at them expectantly.

Sergeant Onus announced, "Corporal Lek Thorne, *son of General Lemuel Thorne*, comes to the fort at Winds to meet with your commander and conduct a survey of the remaining supplies."

The sergeant was appropriately surprised. "Thorne's *son*?"

Shin held up the letter. Time for power and fear. "Open the gates!" he ordered. "We don't have time to waste. Direct us to your commander, now!" No one could be louder than a Shin.

The sergeant jumped and knocked rhythmically on the gates. One of the large wooden doors swung open slowly, powered by the men behind it. A second man came out, eyeing the soldiers carefully.

"First, I need to know—are any of you suffering from fever?"

Onus's eyes grew large and he glanced at the soldiers under his command, but they shook their heads. Shin glared at the lieutenant.

The lieutenant met his hardened gaze. "Any itching?" he demanded. "Hallucinations?"

"You mean, are any of us showing symptoms of the pox?" Shin asked heavily.

The lieutenant raised his chin. "There's an outbreak in the village. It began two days ago so we're keeping the fort quarantined."

Shin's guards anxiously twisted to look behind as if worried that a sick villager might be running at them, ready to cough.

"We have none showing symptoms," Shin said. "We've come from Pools bringing only the most excellent of news: General Thorne has defeated General Sargon. The world will once again be reunited!"

The lieutenant merely shrugged at that. "No symptoms? Then get in here, quickly." He motioned for the gates to be opened.

Shin was disappointed as they rode in. The lieutenant didn't show the slightest hint of joy about the reunification.

From a large building came jogging a captain, looking wary.

"No symptoms, sir," the lieutenant told him as he reached Shin's

party. “But news from Pools. Thorne’s defeated Sargon,” he said, almost as an afterthought.

“Defeated or *killed*?” the captain asked, looking up at Shin.

Shin hesitated, unsure of how to explain the mess of the battle. “Sargon’s dead. Thorne is now in Idumea.”

“And how much of Idumea has been damaged by the volcano?”

“We’re still finding out, sir.”

The captain nodded wearily, as if he didn’t expect anything more than that. “I’m in command here until Colonel Ferrim returns—”

Shin cleared his throat. “I regret to inform you that Colonel Ferrim was killed in the battle. A new commander will be arriving shortly.”

The captain closed his eyes and the lieutenant groaned softly.

“Ferrim was a good man,” the captain whispered. He sighed and said to the lieutenant, “I’ll bring the news to his wife and son—”

But the lieutenant shook his head. “Sir, don’t. They’ve hung a white cloth on their front door this morning. Let’s see if they survive, first. They don’t need that kind of news right now.”

“White cloth?” Onus asked.

“To signal pox at the house,” the captain explained. “We’re trying to track it. Were you in contact with anyone ill, anywhere?”

Shin answered, “The only outbreak of pox I saw was in Pools.”

The men around him gasped.

“Pools?!” Onus cried. “Where we’ve been for the past few days?”

The captain and lieutenant exchanged looks of panic.

“Calm down!” Shin bellowed. “It was only one man and I had him quarantined immediately! He hadn’t even broken out in pocks yet.”

“But you were exposed!” the captain exclaimed.

“But I’m immune!” Shin shouted back at him. “I can’t fall ill.”

The captain scoffed. “How can you be so sure, *Corporal*?”

“Because my family is immune,” Shin snapped back, losing patience. “My grandfather never became ill the first time it came around, nor did his children. Therefore, I will not fall ill.”

The captain and lieutenant glanced at each other in doubt.

Sergeant Onus cleared his throat. “Sirs,” he began cautiously, “there’s something you should understand about the corporal here.” He nodded at Shin to hand them the letter.

The captain took it reluctantly as if it were covered with pocks,

and the lieutenant stood next to him to read over his shoulder. A moment later both men looked up from the parchment, paler than when they'd heard Pools had the pox.

"You're really *his grandson*?" the captain whispered.

Onus nodded once as Shin maintained a calculated glare.

"It seems very likely. Those who knew the colonel say the resemblance is remarkable," Onus said. "And as *General Thorne's son*," he reminded them, "the corporal here is to have all demands met. Sirs."

The captain refolded the letter. "Well, then, *Corporal Thorne*, according to this you want to see the supply barns?" He gingerly handed the letter back to Shin. "We can begin compiling the inventory numbers for you. We'll see to your horses in the meantime."

Shin nodded once in a Thorne-like way. By the way the captain shrunk just a little, Shin was sure he'd nailed it.

"While you do so," Shin said, "have someone direct me to the officers' tailor shop. General Thorne wanted my uniform altered."

The captain and lieutenant shared inquisitive glances.

"I haven't been to see it," the lieutenant said to the captain. "But I can't imagine why it wouldn't be open."

The captain turned to Shin. "We can have someone take you there while we see to the rest of your men's needs."

"Thank you, Captain, but I insist that Sergeant Onus accompany me to the tailor shop. General's orders are that he stays by my side."

"Of course, sir—I mean, *Corporal*." The captain shook himself, trying to figure out exactly how to handle the tall soldier. He waved over a sergeant. "Take them over to the tailor shop. See to it that whatever the corporal needs is taken care of immediately."

Shin smiled inwardly. Benefits of power; he could see it already. The first tactic he tried—never stating anything as a question but as a command—was working. Officers jumped to fulfill his demands. Sergeants nodded nervously and held the bridle of his horse as he dismounted. Lieutenants watched him warily. Soldiers in the compound stared at awe at the name of 'Corporal Thorne.'

And not a baby cloth to change anywhere to earn their respect.

Yes, he could *definitely* handle this.

The sergeant assigned to them said, "Do you have kerchiefs? Our fort surgeon thinks wearing them may help filter out the pox. The tailor shop is just outside of the fort and down the road," he said as he tied his kerchief around his nose and mouth.

Onus and Shin pulled theirs out and put them on. Soon they were

out of the gates and jogging down the road toward two low buildings that sat by themselves on the edge of a field. Shin wondered why it was out of the way of the other shops in the village, then realized the only ones using it were officers.

“Hmm,” the sergeant said as they slowed to a walk. “Doesn’t seem to have been cleaned up yet. Then again, this wasn’t a priority. No offense, but it wasn’t considered that officers would be concerned about getting a uniform tailored right now.” He chuckled nervously.

“The general just wants me to replace my name badge,” Shin explained.

The sergeant glanced at it. “The enlisted tailor’s shop in Mountseen probably has a whole box of SHINs. By the way, do we know how Mountseen fared?”

Onus cleared his throat roughly. “Mountseen is gone, Sergeant.”

The sergeant stopped walking. “Gone?”

Onus and Shin stopped as well. “Yes,” Onus said quietly. “Completely buried. We’re still trying to find out about the other villages, but it may take some time.”

The sergeant slowly started walking again. “Yes . . . yes,” he said, lost in thought. “Mountseen was my first posting. *Gone* . . . Sergeant, do you know anything about Rivers? That’s where my mother lives.”

“No, *he doesn’t*,” Shin said shortly with a warning glare to Onus to not reveal that Rivers was destroyed as well. “But once the news is known, it’ll be sent to every fort. Sergeant, we don’t have much time. The tailor shop? Which one of these buildings is it?”

“Yes, yes,” the sergeant said pulling himself out of his thoughts. He gestured to the nearer one, about thirty paces away. “I’m afraid it doesn’t look too promising. The ash is undisturbed to the door. Still, someone’s usually in . . . Oh, slaggers.” He flinched as a smell reached his nose. “Something died over here, didn’t it? Must have been some of the cattle that graze around here. Well, let’s be quick about it.”

Shin and Onus readjusted their kerchiefs to filter out the stench, then tugged on the front door. Shin was the first to step in to the small outer office, the two sergeants following. The front room was beautifully decorated and expertly fashioned, with highly polished wooden counters and brass accents on the corners. Hanging on brass displays were uniforms for every rank of officer. A door against the opposite wall lead to the rest of the building, but no one else was there.

“Hmm,” the sergeant from the fort said again. “Mrs. Batting is

supposed to always be here, according to the captain. She lives in the next building with the seamstresses. Mrs. Batting?” he called loudly.

“Where does this door lead to?” Shin asked, walking behind the counter.

“To the seamstresses, where they work. Maybe someone’s there?”

Shin turned the handle and pushed the door but it didn’t budge.

Onus came over to look at it. “It’s locked.”

“Yes,” Shin noticed. “In several places. Look, a bolt on top of the door, two more on the bottom. Why such security?”

Onus shrugged. “Maybe because a regular man in a stolen officer’s uniform could do a great deal of damage to the army?”

Shin felt a kick to his conscience. That was what he intended to do one year ago when he planned to take over Thorne’s territories in Gari Yordin’s lieutenant jacket; the jacket he took from Eltana Yordin, brought back to the world, and promptly lost his first night while drinking the vials and dancing with grassena girls.

“But shouldn’t the locks be on the outer door?” he pointed out. “There are half a dozen uniforms on display to steal.” He unlatched the two bottom bolts, then the top, and pushed open the door.

The first thing that hit the three men was the stench. They doubled over and backed hurriedly away. The sergeant from the fort ran out the front door, gagging for air, with Shin and Onus on his heels.

“How many were there?” the sergeant gasped. “Did you see?”

Onus shook his head in dismay. “I don’t know, I don’t know,” he said, holding his hand over his mouth. “A few.”

Shin braced himself against the building, trying to slow his breathing. “Why were they there? Who were they?”

“The seamstresses,” the sergeant wailed. “They must have been! They were all at the sewing tables.”

“But why?” Onus asked, his eyes going watery. “When Deceit exploded, it was early in the morning. No one should have been at work that early. And why didn’t they leave?”

“I don’t know!” Shin exclaimed, readjusting his kerchief. “But I’m going to find out!” He took a deep breath, held it, and ran again to the back room. He quickly assessed the situation then ran back out. Once he hit the fresher air he exhaled.

“Well?” Onus asked.

“Four women,” Shin said, breathing deeply. “Dead at their work and covered in ash. No kerchiefs. They must have breathed in the ash.”

The walls and ceiling were not air tight. Cracks, all over the place.”

“Then why didn’t they leave?” cried the sergeant.

“They *couldn’t*,” Shin snarled. “They were chained to the floor!”

The sergeants stared at him in shock.

“*Chained?*” Onus whispered in horror.

“Around their ankles,” Shin seethed. “And those chains were attached to heavy bolts embedded in the wood. There’s no way any of them could’ve escaped.” He punched the wall in fury. “WHY?”

The sergeant withered. “I . . . I don’t know! I’ve never been here before! I’m not an officer! This is terrible—”

“Well I want to know *why*,” Shin growled. He took off in a run back to the fort, the sergeants trying vainly to catch up to him.

The gates opened for him and he sprinted into the compound. “CAPTAIN!” he bellowed loudly, not sure where the command office was. “CAPTAIN! I DEMAND TO SPEAK TO YOU, NOW!”

The handful of soldiers in the compound froze in astonishment. The captain came running out of the stables and straight to Shin, stopping mere inches from his face.

“I don’t care WHO you think your father is, *boy*—you do NOT command ME!”

Shin was in no mood for an argument. “Then answer me this—why are their four dead seamstresses in the officers’ tailor shop?!”

The captain gripped his arm and yanked him toward a building. “*Come with me!*” he hissed. He steered Shin to the command office and slammed the door behind them.

The captain walked to the back of the desk and leaned forward on it aggressively. “Because your *father* ordered it!”

Shin was stunned silent. Eventually, he muttered, “No . . . That can’t be . . . Why would he—”

“I don’t know *why* he did, Corporal!” the captain spat at him. “Maybe one of them couldn’t birth him a son. Maybe one of them was caught stealing food from the trash heaps of the forts. I don’t know why those women were given *prison sentences*, but that’s where they served their time instead of sitting in incarceration or a dungeon!”

Shin shook his head. “There are no dungeons in the forts!”

“Want to wager on that? Care to see ours?”

Shin’s mouth fell open as he tried to remember the descriptions of the fort at Edge from Aunt Calla’s book. No, no—he was sure of it—there was no dungeon. That was something the kings had built

years ago at the garrison, but not the forts.

The captain must have it wrong, somehow. Thorne wouldn't have women chained to the floors to sew officers' uniforms. And in such conditions, and at the crack of dawn . . .

Calmer, the captain sat down. "You really didn't know, did you?"

Shin stared blankly at the desk.

"How long have you been in the army, Corporal?"

"Not quite a year, sir," he said with new meekness.

"And how long have you been attached to Thorne?"

Shin scoffed. "A lot less time than that."

"Son," the captain said gently, "I didn't know until I came to serve here that the officers' uniforms are stitched by those who have committed serious crimes. It's been done this way for years. Someone probably just forgot about them. It's tragic. I agree." He leaned back in his chair. "Then again, *it is their fault*. If they didn't break the law they wouldn't have been chained there. When men commit serious crimes, they're usually executed," he said offhandedly. "But if we did that with the women, who'd sew our uniforms?"

Shin felt all his strength leave him. What kind of crime could have been terrible enough to deserve execution? Imprisonment in a dungeon? There was no incarceration or execution in Salem—

HE'S NOT SO BAD. ISN'T THAT WHAT YOU SAID? YOU'RE RIGHT: EDGE'S FORT DIDN'T HAVE A DUNGEON UNTIL THORNE TOOK IT OVER. WHAT KIND OF A MAN ORDERS DUNGEONS TO BE DUG, CORPORAL? NOT THE KING OF SALEM. AND THEIR CRIMES AREN'T AS GRAVE AS YOU'D THINK. AT LEAST, I DON'T THINK STEALING A PAIR OF BOOTS WHEN IT'S SNOWING OUTSIDE SHOULD BE PUNISHABLE BY BEING CHAINED TO THE FLOOR. ASK YOURSELF: WHY IS THE WORLD TERRIFIED OF ITS LEADER?

Shin rubbed his forehead. "Captain, my apologies," he said quietly. "I shouldn't have lost my temper in the compound."

"It's all right. I imagine it was rather a shock to discover them like that. We'll take care of it this afternoon."

"How?" Shin asked.

"Considering the odor, probably best to just burn it."

Shin closed his eyes. How many more buildings with dead women would he see burned on this ride?

"Quite a shame," the captain continued somberly. "Probably about thirty uniforms in there that will never be worn. Such a waste."

Shin was preoccupied with death as he calculated the numbers for the supply barns, and as he told the captain to find healthy—and *will-ing*—people to harvest what was left in the gardens and farms. The food Winds had left would have to last until Planting Season, and already the outlook was grim. They were throwing away as much as they usually did, assuming another village would share with them.

Onus recommended they spend the night in Winds, but Shin wanted to return to Edge as quickly as possible. The further away he got from Idumea, the better he felt.

By midafternoon they were on their way northwest, skirting the miles of marshes that lead to the sea in the distant east. By the time they camped that night, Shin was deep in brooding silence.

Onus noticed. He sat nearby as Shin stared at the fire. “Doing all right, Corporal?” he asked quietly out of earshot of the other men who were unrolling their bedrolls. “You haven’t seemed yourself lately.”

“I’m fine,” Shin said after a while. “Just a lot to think about. Supply barns, rationing, that sort of thing.”

“Nothing else?” Onus probed. “It’s been quite a remarkable week and a half for you.”

Shin didn’t know how to answer so he didn’t.

“Once we get to Province 8,” Onus said, “things are going to be different. I want you to know that if you need anything or have any questions, I’m available. You haven’t completed your first full year, you know. I’m still responsible for you,” he said with a small smile.

“Yes, sir.”

Late the next morning, Corporal Shin was holding his breath in anticipation as Edge came into view. He wished he could spur the horse into a run to get there quicker, but even though the ash wasn’t as deep, he didn’t want to risk kicking it up into the air, nor revealing just how eager he was to be at the base of the mountains again.

The blue banners rose at the towers as they approached, and by the time they reached the fort gates, several soldiers were waiting.

“Victory, men!” Onus shouted. “Post announcements everywhere that Sargon is dead and Thorne is in control of Idumea!”

A few of the men cheered, but some were clearly taken aback. “He still went through with the offensive?” one lieutenant asked.

“Not completely,” Onus said with an odd smile as they stopped their horses in the compound. “I’ll explain it inside. There’s a *great deal* to explain.”

Shin glanced around. “Is there a pox outbreak here?”

The soldiers looked at each other worriedly. “Yes, Corporal,” said the lieutenant, frowning at his directness. “Two days ago, but it’s only a couple of cases.”

“Sir, it’s going to get much worse,” Shin told him. “We need to begin confinement measures immediately.”

The lieutenant raised an eyebrow, but Onus said. “Sir, gather the officers. We have some things to discuss, *immediately*.”

Ten minutes later Onus wasn’t disappointed. As he walked with Corporal Shin up the stairs to the command tower, Major Kroop’s eyes widened in disbelief to realize that the missing corporal hadn’t been “reabsorbed into the forest” after all.

And it was good planning that a lieutenant and Sergeant Major Hili stood on either side of Kroop as he read the letter from General Thorne, because he blanched and gasped and began to breathe so heavily they laid him on the floor before he lost consciousness.

The lanky man rolled up, looking like a little child as he gripped his curly hair in fear. His first words, when he could form some again were, “So I was right! I was right, in a way, about the Shins still being alive! Oh, slugging Zenoses, I’m not an idiot!”

Poe Hili scoffed nervously and responded with, “That’s still debatable,” before he turned cautiously to Corporal Shin. “I knew it,” he whispered, his dark brown eyes warming. “From the first time you gave that name as you signed up, it was if I could feel *him* right next to me again. Creet, I feel him now!” Hili stumbled to a chair, held his graying head in his hands, and trembled.

Shin, growing uncomfortable with the behavior of men older than him, decided it was time to establish his authority. “Sirs, we need to begin quarantine measures. Anyone showing signs of the pox should hang a white cloth on their front door, and everyone should keep their noses and mouths covered at all times to reduce the spread. Major Kroop, I need the current inventory numbers of our supply barns. If all the farms and orchards haven’t yet been gleaned, get volunteers doing so within the hour. We’re dealing with a crisis unlike any we’ve faced before, and if we’re going to make it through until next year, we need to act now! And Sergeant Major Hili?”

Poe Hili was dumbfounded as Shin repeated the words which flowed effortlessly into his mind: “There’ll be no midnight rides or a caravan of supplies coming to rescue Edge this time.”

That’s who they should have brought the pillow for. Poe crumpled to the floor in a dead faint.

Only after Shin left with a shaking Kroop to inspect the barns, and Hili was composed enough to sit at the command desk without assistance, did Sergeant Onus pull another letter out of his jacket and hand it to the sergeant major.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised,” Hili muttered as he read. “Although he’s more generous than in the past.”

“Sir, if I may know?” Onus asked. He’d been wondering about the letter ever since General Thorne handed it to him.

“The mansion staff is to dispose of her possessions, but she’s allowed to take her clothing. Thorne wants her moved to the old rectory on the west side. He wants his *son* to have sole possession of the mansion, but also wants Miss Amory available for when he returns and feels in the need of company. He’ll provide her a maid and a small allowance—probably smaller than she’d expect—for their upkeep.” Hili folded the letter again. “She’s not going to be happy about this.”

“That’s an understatement,” Onus said. “But it’s not as if she did her duty and conceived a son.”

Hili snorted. “Is it really *her* fault?”

Onus blinked in surprise. “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing. And I didn’t say that, either!” Hili added severely.

Onus pressed his lips together to keep from smirking and gave the sergeant major an agreeing nod.

“Besides,” Hili said, “even if she *was* expecting, and if by some slim chance it’s a boy, Thorne would have to wait years for him to mature. Why wait when you can have what you want now?”

Onus glanced around to make sure they were still alone. “Hili, do you *really* think Shin’s who they say he is? You told me before the resemblance was remarkable, back when Kroop was first terrified that he was Colonel Shin returned from the dead.”

“Onus,” Hili whispered, “I tried to talk myself out of it, but now? This is going to sound strange, but that boy’s *never alone*. Not until I met him did I believe we have spirits that live on after death. But Colonel Shin *is* with him. I swear I can even smell him, kind of earthy-sweet. And because of that,” Hili began to smile, “for the first

time since Deceit exploded, I feel like we're going to make it."

Amory gasped in dread as six soldiers came to the front door of the mansion. "Oh, no," she whispered. "Is he, is he . . . *dead*?"

"No, ma'am," said a sergeant. "On the contrary. General Thorne is now sole commander of the world, having killed General Sargon at a battle at the southern border!"

Amory burst into a grin and clapped her hands. "Idumea is ours? That's wonderful!" She spun to one of her maids. "Did you hear that? Start packing my things, and don't forget the silk gown—I'll need that for our first dinner!" She squealed in delight.

"Ma'am," said the sergeant, "you're only partly correct. Yes, your maids should pack your clothing, but you're not going to Idumea."

Shin walked alone to the general's mansion on the eastern side of the fort shortly before dinner.

So you agree, he thought to the right side of his mind, that pulling Edge out of this disaster is the correct thing to do.

FOR NOW. FOR A FEW WEEKS WE'LL STAY TO HELP. THERE ARE SOME GOOD PEOPLE HERE WHO I'D LIKE TO HELP. OLD HABITS DIE HARD, EVEN FOR THE DEAD. YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO LAUGH AT THAT, BY THE WAY.

Shin only smirked.

The afternoon had been busy with readying the fort and village to ride out the next few seasons. The harvest was only partially completed because the citizens thought as people in Winds had: someone would bring them something better. It'd happened before, it'd happen again.

Reports were that few people wanted to go back outside in the ash to work, until they heard that the command came from the grandson of Colonel Perrin Shin. The name still meant something to the older generation, who forced the younger out to work in the fields and orchards.

Thorne's evaluation of Kroop's food distribution had proven sadly accurate; he'd struggled to know which animals should receive the better feed, until Shin pointed out the 'feed' should be supplying

humans instead of billy goats that should be tomorrow’s stew.

It wasn’t hard to get Kroop to follow Shin’s suggestions. In fact, he wouldn’t respond past a nervous, “Yes, Colonel—I mean, *Corporal*.” As they were recounting the bags of grain, Shin was sure he heard Kroop add a ‘sir’ every now and then.

Benefits of leadership. With Thorne’s name and Colonel Shin’s looks, he just might be unstoppable.

All in all, it was a satisfying day. He’d assumed the remaining soldiers in the fort would resent or doubt him once he returned. But he saw nothing but fear, respect, and even awe in the eyes of his fellow first-year soldiers who he didn’t speak to as he marched proudly past. Even older soldiers and officers watched him guardedly. It helped that Shin walked like the colonel—long strides, purposeful steps, and just a little faster than everyone else.

But as he approached the mansion, his steps slowed. He’d never been that close before to the massive house with two full stories crafted out of chipped and mortared stone. It held up well considering the strength of the land tremor. Then again, it looked like it was designed to take a shaking. Dozens of houses in Edge were not, and now were piles of rubble no one seemed interested in cleaning up.

Shin walked up the wide stairs that led to the majestic entry. Supposedly the mansion looked like the houses in the wealthy sections of Idumea, but here in Edge it looked completely out of place.

Still, it was obvious who held the greatest power in the northern half of the world, and where he lived.

When he reached the door, he didn’t know if he should knock or walk right in. Thorne had told him he’d have the third bedroom from the top of the stairs. Since he knew right where to go, maybe he—

The door opened to reveal a soldier. “Corporal Thorne, you have been expected. Your things from your barracks have already been brought over. Would you care for dinner before seeing your room?”

Shin nodded in surprise as the soldier stepped aside to let him in the house. The entry was grand and beautiful, with long, deep blue curtains lining the windows and elegantly carved furniture in the large gathering room to the side of the airy entry. Shin swallowed nervously as he followed another soldier to the eating room.

“Your dinner will be ready in just a few minutes, sir.”

Shin furrowed his eyebrows at the title of ‘sir,’ but the soldier seemed to think that was fitting.

“You may wish to look around a bit before it’s served, to get acquainted with your new home.”

Shin nodded again, and the soldier went to another room. Alone, Shin released his breath. The general’s mansion was now his *home*.

How the High Generals’ mansion in Idumea could have been any grander than this was beyond his comprehension. The table in the eating room, where he wandered to, could seat twenty people, and the workmanship on the carved chairs was more elaborate than anything he’d ever seen. Ornate mirrors highlighted with gold leafing covered the walls, giving him more views of himself than he cared to have.

He really needed to bathe. And have his uniform washed—

Noise from an adjoining room made Shin turn before he could evaluate the state of his hair.

“I don’t understand it! I mean, why? What have I done wrong?” a woman wailed.

Shin crept to one of the several doors that led from the eating room and peered into a smaller sitting room. He cringed when he recognized the speaker.

“Not even tonight? I can’t even stay *tonight*? But he’s not coming back, so why do I—” She stopped when she saw the tall soldier spying on her. “Leave me, NOW!” she commanded her maids and the waiting soldiers. “I just need a few minutes.”

The maids hurried away but the soldiers remained at the door.

Shin stepped into the room. “She needs only a few minutes.”

The soldiers reluctantly turned and left the room, closing the door behind them.

Speechless, Amory stared at him that he was in the mansion and that the soldiers were following his orders.

“I’m sorry about that, really—” he began.

“*Pere!*” she whispered in earnest. “What are *you* doing here? Do you realize how much trouble you could get into?”

“It’s all right,” he assured her. “I can be here. As I was saying, I’m really sorry, but . . .” He hesitated, unsure of how to continue.

“Can you help me?” she pleaded, rushing over to him. “Do you know something? *Pere*, he’s kicking me out! Do you *know* what happens to the women he kicks out of his houses?”

“No, I don’t.” He tried not to think of what the captain in Winds suggested, because Thorne now had a severe seamstress shortage.

“Well neither do I!” she whispered, folding her arms as tears trickled down her face. “Last season I sent my maids to find out about

the women who didn't produce him a son and they couldn't find anything. His wife and first three daughters were rumored to be living in the south for a time, then about a year ago someone thought they saw them in Midplain, wherever *that* is. What's going to happen to me? Why is he doing this?"

Seeing her so distressed was more than he could bear, so he took her into a half-hearted hug. "I'm sorry, Amory. I heard you're moving to the old rectory. It's supposed to be rather nice and spacious. Some administrator lived there years ago. Thorne still wants you around, just not *here*."

She leaned against his chest and sobbed. "It's not my fault, you know. I can't control these things! It's not even been a full year and he's already given up on me?" She pulled back. "It's another woman, isn't it? Do you know who? Is she already expecting?"

"Uhh, Amory, it's not another woman. It's—"

Someone clearing his throat at the door stopped him. "Corporal Thorne? Your dinner is ready whenever you are, sir."

"Thank you. Shut the door, please. Miss Amory needs a few more minutes before she leaves."

The soldier obliged and Shin turned back to Amory.

Her face was white and furious. "Corporal *THORNE*?"

Shin winced. "He's convinced that I am Jaytsy's son . . . and *his*. He claimed me in Pools and renamed me Lek Thorne. I'm *his son*." He was surprised that he didn't gag on the words.

"Lemuel thinks *WHAT*?" Amory roared. "That's . . . that's *ridiculous*! Why, you're not even twenty—"

Shin clamped a hand over her mouth and wrapped an arm around her to hold her still. "Hush!" he whispered sternly. "Whatever you reveal about me will be revealed about you, don't forget that! Your life is in a very tenuous position right now. I'll do what I can to make sure you're safe, but *only* if you keep your mouth shut!"

Amory's eyes were wide with fear. Shin was getting better at this authority and power thing all the time.

"Now, before I remove my hand, promise me you'll not reveal anything about our origins to anyone, or just like Captain Lick, *Salem* will be the last word on your lips as you die."

She nodded as terrified tears trickled on to his hand.

He released her and stepped back.

Amory wiped her face. "Lick's dead? How?"

"Thorne stabbed him."

“Why? And Lick knew about Salem? From who?”

“That’s what I’m hoping to find out,” Shin said coldly.

Amory looked stricken. “You don’t think it was *me*, do you? I only met the man a few times! All that I know about him came from Lemuel.”

“And what did he say about Lick?”

She shrugged helplessly. “Only that he got on his nerves, but everyone gets on Lemuel’s nerves. Lick helped get some general in Sands killed, but I don’t know anything else. Honestly, Pere. Please!”

Shin held her worried gaze in his fierce one. “If you remember *anything* else, I expect you to let me know. Do you understand?”

She bit her lip and nodded. “Whatever I can do to help you, I will. I won’t reveal either of us, I promise. Besides, what would it matter? Salem’s probably wiped out by Deceit,” she said shakily.

“It’s not,” Shin whispered. “It’s safe. The mountain blew south, not north. And Salem has all those food reserves . . .” His voice trailed off as he remembered that. For years he’d thought it was a fruitless endeavor, growing extra crops and building cavernous storehouses. But his opinion on that was rapidly changing.

“That’s *right*,” Amory breathed. “I’d forgotten all about those. I wonder what the trail looks like now—”

“Obliterated,” Shin said resolutely. “All the routes are destroyed.”

“How can you be so sure—”

“I just *know*!” he snapped.

I NEVER SAID THAT—

“So don’t speak of *there* again!”

She blinked in surprise, then said, “Pere, can you please help me?”

“I told you as long as you’re silent, you’re safe.”

Amory shook her head and, peculiarly, began to smile. “I had something else in mind. Let me stay the night, just one last time?”

Shin sighed. This might have been one of those ‘pat the dog’ moments. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt.”

She stepped closer and put a hand on his chest. “Thank you. You know, I never *did* thank you properly for helping me get here so many moons ago,” she whispered. “Let me do that tonight. Please?”

Shin went rigid under her touch. “What did you have in mind?”

“A way you can help me and I can help you.”

He could barely breathe. “Explain yourself.”

Amory put her other hand on his arm, gripping his ample bicep.

“If Lemuel believes I’m expecting, he’ll want me in Idumea.”

“But . . . you’re *not*, are you?”

She smiled saucily. “No, but *you* could do the job he couldn’t.”

He took a large step out of her grasp. “Are you insane?” he whispered hotly. “What if we get caught?”

“Don’t worry!” Amory said. “I can trust everyone here. No one would tell—”

“You *ARE* insane!” he roared in a whisper. “And tell me what happens *if* by chance you have a boy, and he has my black hair and dark brown eyes? Thorne would kill us all!”

“He’ll kill me when he’s tired of me,” she snapped back. “Don’t you think I’ve figured out that much? I’ve got nothing to lose!”

“Well, I do!” Shin hissed. “I have everything now! So why would I want to spend the night with Thorne’s used up sow?”

It took him a moment to comprehend why his face was stinging. Amory’s hard slap was faster than anything he’d experienced. He caught her by the wrist as her arm came up for the second time.

“Don’t you ever, *ever* hit me again!” he growled.

“Don’t you call me a sow!” she whimpered, her eyes brimming with tears. She wrenched out of his hold and ran for the tall double doors at the end of the room.

As she pushed through them Shin called out, “Soldiers! Miss Amory is ready to leave. Make sure she doesn’t forget anything so she has *no reason to return!*”

Lek Thorne rubbed his reddening cheek, straightened his jacket, turned to the eating room, and sat down to the best meal he’d had in almost a year.

Chapter 9--“Citizens of Edge!”

On his third day as Corporal Thorne, he discovered the benefit of keeping SHIN on his uniform. As the general’s authority to the fort, the corporal was afforded privileges and power such that no one was quite certain what to do with him except agree with whatever the general’s son suggested. As long as he was reasonable, not even the new commanding major saw a need to control or confront him.

Realizing that a lot of withering crops still weren’t harvested, and dozens of ruined houses weren’t being stabilized, Corporal Thorne called for a mandatory meeting at the amphitheater, requiring that all healthy citizens over age thirty to attend. They, after all, were ones who remembered his grandfather,

When he first returned, word that a lost Shin grandson had been found spread faster than the good news that General Thorne wouldn’t be returning anytime soon. It traveled even swifter than the devastating news that the entertainments were canceled until the world was stable again.

After dinner on his third evening back, Corporal Thorne wearing the SHIN label went to the amphitheater by the back entrance. Early in his career no one paid attention to his name or his stature. He was just another soldier on duty to make sure no villagers mauled the actors. But after tonight, they would remember him.

While Major Kroop addressed the crowd about Idumea, the eruption, and the need to start cleaning, the corporal waited at the back of the amphitheater at the base of the steps that led up to the platform. No one sat in the seats behind him in the circular theater because fewer than half of Edge was of age and healthy enough to attend.

As he waited for his turn, he found himself staring at the large oak, oddly growing in the middle of the amphitheater despite being frequently covered by a thick canvas to keep out the elements.

But the sturdy oak flourished, even now after the eruption, shading the back areas of the immense platform. Often higher branches

that overflowed the platform were incorporated into the performances. Occasionally someone suggested taking it down but the tree had been there ever since they could remember, so it should stay.

He noticed another strange feature of the amphitheater—a small warm spring on the ground which usually bubbled merrily. Performers often freshened their hands and faces in the natural basin, no larger than a dinner plate. He marveled how the tree survived next to the spring. Or perhaps the spring sustained the tree?

He knelt to investigate it, but nothing was happening. He was sure it was still bubbling last year when it was pointed out to him. But as he palmed the stone basin, and put a finger experimentally into the hole where the water used to come up, it was dry. He didn’t know why that disappointed him so much.

He stood up, shook out his hands, lifted off his cap to smooth back his hair, straightened his jacket and waited for Major Kroop to announce him.

When he heard his name, Corporal Lek Shin Thorne inflated his already broad chest and marched confidently up the steps to the platform. The collective gasp of the audience was most rewarding. He hid his smirk and kept up a solid Perrin Shin demeanor as strode to the front. The citizens of Edge shrank back in surprise.

Whispers flew as Major Kroop slinked to the edge and sat down nervously on a chair. He glanced out to the audience, nodding that he agreed with all their hushed sentiments.

He *was* back.

Shin paused, allowing the audience to finish their murmured exclamations. When he began with, “Citizens of Edge!” he purposely lowered his voice just to make sure it sounded colonel enough. He could hit that gravelly point as well as his brother Relf could.

An older woman whimpering and passing out on the fourth row told him that he nailed the impersonation better than Major Kroop could ever hope to.

He spent only five minutes telling them the importance of gathering as much food as possible and of slaughtering all livestock not necessary for propagating the herds, that rationing of food was crucial to their survival, and that anyone seen wasting food would be severely punished. He told them also the need to keep the spread of the pox to a minimum, and how to do so.

But five minutes was all it took. When he asked if there were any questions, no one twitched. He followed Thorne’s advice and enjoyed

the moment, staring out at the stunned citizens wondering who may have been his grandmother's students, who might have played kick-ball with his father, or looked longingly at his aunt. And he wondered how many staring back with enormous eyes might have chanted "General Shin!" so many years ago.

Finally he nodded in a Thorne-like manner and announced that if there were no further questions he'd dismiss them to get in an hour's worth of work before the sun set.

Immediately the audience stood up and hastily filed out of the amphitheater.

Well, *almost* everyone filed out.

One old man hesitated. His eyes were too small for his face, his nose too pointy, the rest of his body too short. But as the older villagers made their ways to the exits, many paused to watch him because he was watching Corporal Thorne.

Another gray-haired man slipped over to him. "Director?"

Everyone called him Director, even though he was retired. He quit after his wife died because he'd seen other men retire early and die themselves. So far he kept on living but he didn't know why.

He turned to the gray-haired man who looked at him expectantly.

"What do you think?" He asked the director, bobbing his head ever-so-subtly at the tall corporal who turned and trotted down the back stairs of the platform. "Rather eerie, isn't it?"

The director shrugged. "I don't know. Not yet, at least."

"But you knew *him* so well! You debated *him*! You worked with *them* for many years—"

The director looked at the man incredulously. "You were their neighbor for twenty years, Hersh! Your wife dropping in a faint at his first words wasn't enough for you? How is she, by the way?"

"The doctor's told her to remain down for another half hour before I try to take her home." Mr. Hersh fidgeted. "We've tried not to think about *them*. We even moved to the other side of the village after they disappeared. Couldn't bear to look at the ruins of their house. There *are* a great many things familiar about the boy, but . . ."

The director sighed. "We best be leaving," he nudged Mr. Hersh. "Shouldn't draw attention to ourselves. But I must admit," he said in a low voice as they headed to an exit, "there's something familiar

about him. However, I don’t see a drop of General Thorne in him. But you didn’t hear that from me.”

“Didn’t hear what?” Mr. Hersh winked.

When they left through the wooden doors, there was a crowd waiting: all of them over retirement age and all of them irritated.

“Can you believe the nerve?”

“Do you think he’s really a Shin?”

“Why should *we* harvest more dying crops? I spent half an hour on that just the other day!”

The director held up his hands to stop the onslaught, but people of a certain age insist on being heard.

“Do you really want to attract the attention of the soldiers?” he asked the crowd pointedly. He wasn’t loud, but he cut through the inane complaining. Yet another thing he’d learned from years of being in education. Don’t shout, but be sharp.

When everyone was silent, he asked, “Who else should bring in the rest of our food, if not us?”

“I’ve done my work!”

“What do you think ‘retirement’ means?”

“It’s time for *them* to do something for *me*!”

The director closed his eyes. The affect was always the same. People seemed to think he didn’t hear them with his eyes closed, so they shut their mouths and looked at each other, daring silently for someone to poke him in case he was asleep on his feet.

“I, for one,” he said with his eyes still closed so as to not spoil the moment, “want to scavenge the gardens so that I know it’s done correctly and that I get my share.” He opened his eyes and looked at the faces around him, almost all of them taller than him. “No one’s told Deceit that you’ve retired. It doesn’t care. But if *you* care to survive, you’ll do this.”

“Make the young do it!” someone said.

“The young?” the director scoffed. “You really trust them to harvest without our direction? To not throw away something merely because it’s under ripe or icky?” He blinked rapidly at their naiveté.

“Someone will teach them!” a cranky older man declared.

“Who?” the director challenged.

The cranky man looked around for volunteers. There were none. “That was to have been your job, Director. To have the schools teach the young what to do!”

The director sighed inwardly. *She* had warned him something like

this would happen.

“My job was to train the teachers of your children and grandchildren how to pass the Administrators’ Tests. After the Administrators were killed, my job was then to train your offspring to pass whatever tests Thorne devised. Over the years I don’t recall a single one of you coming to my office to tell me these children needed to learn how to harvest damaged crops.”

“You should have thought of it!” someone insisted.

“Why didn’t YOU teach your own grandchildren what you thought was important?” the director snapped back.

Everyone stared at him in surprise.

She’d warned him this would happen. *Take the parents out of their children’s education and they’ll never step back in. They’ll see it’s easier to make someone else responsible, not themselves.*

“Yes, yes, yes,” the director muttered in annoyance, partially to the memory, partially in admonition to the crowd around him that were now looking guiltily at their feet.

“The colonel wouldn’t have made us work,” someone from the back said softly. “He would have found another way. He would have brought us help.”

“Let it be heard!” several others chimed in agreement. “That’s not his grandson. His grandson would save us.”

The director exhaled loudly. “Perrin Shin would’ve been shaking his sword at you long ago, shouting at all of you to get to work! I was here the first time Deceit rumbled. Shin organized cleanup crews within an hour, set folks to hunt for deer and fish in the river, and ordered several of you to stop fretting about your houses and start planting your crops!”

His audience inspected their feet again.

“Only *after* that late snowstorm did he steal those wagonloads of food! And then he ordered us to plant extra to pay it back that following Harvest season. Remember? I certainly do, because that was the first time I ever planted and harvested a garden.”

Never argue the facts with someone else who was also there. The older his neighbors grew, the more selective their memories became. They remembered everyone was smarter when they were young, the air smelled sweeter, and the elders were respected.

Maybe that’s because *those* elders were worth respecting, the director thought. But this sad, sorry lot of adults were as lazy and selfish as their grandchildren. If the retired folks of Edge didn’t think their

youth had any work ethic, it was because the young had never witnessed any.

“Now,” the director said in his best teacher tone, “I don’t have a sword but I just might try to find one so I can shake it at each of you. Let’s get to work, let’s save ourselves, and let’s teach these youngsters a thing or two about what’s edible. Now!”

His crowd dispersed, grumbling under their breath, and he scanned the group looking for someone but didn’t see her. Worried, he set off in a brisk walk to the last book shop in Edge. He tried not to make a habit of being seen there because of the nature of books it contained, but Miss Sareen was a reliable resource, contacting for him other book sellers who still held high on their shelves the ancient classics no one except old educational directors seemed interested in.

There was a connection between them, since on both of their shelves were books from the Shins’ vast library. Together they had harvested them, like the last perfect apples from a most unique tree. And because they shared such a treasure they kept in touch.

He reached her shop tucked away on a back road, and felt a pang of guilt that he hadn’t thought to check on her when Deceit blew last week. He tried the handle and the door opened easily. He’d never known anyone to keep their doors unlocked.

“Miss Sareen?” he called into the quiet shop. “Miss Sareen, are you here? Are you well?”

Silence came back at him, and he swallowed nervously. Closing the door behind him, he crept into the shop. “Miss Sareen! I wanted your opinion on our new soldier. Word is that he’s Colonel Shin’s grandson, and I’m starting to think that might be true. But if anyone would remember a younger Perrin Shin, I figured it’d be you since you met him when he was just a captain. Sareen?” He made it through her tiny shop, peering into the back room which held stacks of books, going up her stairs to her living quarters, and timidly pushing open her door, anxious he’d find her covered in pox, or worse.

But the bed was empty, her kitchen smelled foul as if something were rotting, and the fireplace was cold.

“You haven’t been here for days,” he muttered sadly. “Oh, Sareen. Did you visit the grassena boys and girls again to spend the night so you could help teach . . .” Realizing that he was likely speaking of the dead, he said, tactfully, “Teach them in *your ways*?”

Weak at the thought that she was likely lost to Deceit, he sat down on an old stuffed chair. “Oh, Sareen. I’m so sorry. So sorry no one

noticed until now that you were gone. But I'm going to keep coming by each day, hoping to find that you've merely gone on a trip next door and simply haven't come back—"

Tears began. It wasn't as if he liked the vulgar woman, but they shared cordiality. They shared books. They shared love for the Shins.

And now he was alone, again. Almost as alone as when his wife had died, as when he heard that the village where his son, daughter-in-law, and grandson lived was possibly gone. He still held out hope that they'd come walking down the road, asking to live with him since they now had a bit of an ash problem. He had a room ready—

He shoved the aloneness into a dark corner of his gut, stood up, wiped his face, and trotted down the stairs. There was food to harvest.

Shin rode around on Clarker that evening to make sure Edge was working. He'd never seen the villagers so active outside of the amphitheater and arena, and he received many nervous nods and curious stares as he observed their efforts.

But one older man's response was most unusual. He was small and gray-haired, and was pulling green tomatoes from a withering vine. He looked up at Shin and said, "If ever you want to meet at the amphitheater to *discuss* nature's forces," he said quietly, "I'm your man." He paused and added, "*Shin.*"

The corporal, confused by that odd sentence, went on his way.

The director sighed as the corporal rode on. His features were definitely Perrin Shin. Even Sareen would gasp. But as for his demeanor, there was something missing. The young man—more like a massive boy—was merely playing dress-up, and the words with which he made the amphitheater tremble couldn't have come entirely from him, but were perhaps part of a script he'd memorized—

Or were words whispered to him by someone else.

The director paused in his picking at that thought and smiled.

But the boy was hollow, with no more depth than anyone else in the world.

She had warned this would happen. They'd argued in the privacy

of his shack of an office long after debating was officially gone.

“When people stop debating and wondering for themselves if something is right, they’ll stop thinking. And then where will the world be?” Mahrree had asked him. “They’ll become as complacent as dumb sheep, led by anyone promising them food and security.”

He was sure she’d kept debating with her students, the thieving and absurd boys of Edge. That was probably how she accomplished so much with them. Many passed their final tests with outstanding scores, and one of them even became an officer but probably only because he had a great deal of inside help.

He still didn’t understand Lannard Kroop’s success, and the senseless man still squirmed when he saw him, as if the director would somehow figure out his secret, whatever it was.

No one had talked about debating for decades . . . Except for that one man, about two years ago.

He was older and in excellent condition: sturdy, with strong shoulders and a mischievous twinkle in his eye that had reminded him of Perrin Shin.

The director had been standing outside a shop scowling at the men’s shirts on display—fluffy, frilly things—hoping for something less ridiculous. His wife had been gone for a couple of years by then, and his clothing was becoming thin. He’d never purchased something for himself before and the experience was excruciating.

That’s when he noticed the man who, like him, didn’t wear outlandish face paint.

“So these are the latest fashions from Idumea?” he asked.

“They look more like leftovers from the time of the Administrators. All of them used to wear these shirts with such ruffles.”

“You met the Administrators?” the man asked him casually.

“Yes, they hired me to be the director of schools here years ago,” he explained. “I faced them once in their large conference room.”

“Sorry, Director, I’m new here. My name’s Honri.”

“Good to meet you, Honri,” the director said, “but I’m retired.”

“Facing the Administrators—that must have been an experience!” Honri chuckled.

“Fortunately I wasn’t alone. I was able to hide among the other directors. But their shirts?” He scoffed.

“As useful as these for catching dribbled gravy at dinner?”

“Definitely!” the director chuckled. “I suppose I could cut off all the ruffles,” he mused, but with great doubt.

“That’s debatable,” Honri replied.

It was only two words, but it was the *way* he said them, as if it was code. *That’s debatable.*

The director looked the man in the eyes, and Honri tried to communicate all kinds of things back. Dangerous things.

“No,” the director said quietly, automatically. Years of serving the Administrators, then the generals, had a way of pricking immediate conformity. “It’s not. There is *nothing* debatable in the world.”

“Surely you don’t believe that,” the man whispered. “You used to debate, I’m sure of it. And you saw the value of it, too. The Administrators are long gone now, so Director—what color is the sky?”

“No!” the director exclaimed loudly, stepping back so suddenly that passing shoppers looked at him in surprise. While he wanted to scream, “It’s *not* blue!”, self-preservation overpowered him. Years of indoctrination had forced him to again be the ever-obedient extension of a group of short-sighted dead men.

He regained his composure as Honri said, loudly, “Then I won’t buy that shirt for you!” Honri chuckled and put an arm around the director’s shoulders as if they were old friends and steered him away.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” Honri said genially once they were alone on the road. “But I *know* about you, Director Hegek.”

It was only later that Hegek realized he’d never told the man his name.

“I know this isn’t what you want. I know you think the world has changed too much, and I know that you have a good heart and mind.”

Hegek could only gape in amazement.

“And I’d like to discuss with you those ideas that have been bouncing around in that mind of yours for so many years. What I know would be quite intriguing to you.”

Hegek still wasn’t sure why he said, “No.” Why he ducked out of the man’s gentle grip and stared at him as if he was the pox returned to the world.

Because he did, even though he said, “I can’t.”

Honri had squinted at Hegek’s response, then slowly nodded, perhaps recognizing the silent yearning. “I’ll be in the village for the next three or four moons, at the old rectory. I’ve rented a room. Should you change your mind—”

Hegek sat back on his heels now, tomatoes gripped in each hand.

“Why did I never go back to talk to him?” he asked himself.

He looked up at where the young corporal had been and wondered

Chapter 9--“Citizens of Edge!”

why he suddenly remembered that incident from two years ago.

Memories of Perrin Shin were so fresh in his mind, as if he could smell him there in that garden, a scent that was somehow a combination of strength and concern, of power that was gentle . . .

Of something earthy and sweet.

Chapter 10--“I’m going to check out the forest for activity.”

The five weeks since he returned to Edge had been most eventful for Lieutenant Lek Shin Thorne. He’d been there for two weeks, procrastinating returning Idumea to begin Command School, when an urgent message from General Thorne arrived. The pox was breaking out in huge numbers, and since the general had become sick as a young man, his son was susceptible as well and should stay far away. That was fine with Lek.

Shortly after that, a crate arrived filled with books on command and tactics, along with a gold lieutenant’s braid: the corporal had been promoted to Lieutenant Thorne. He was also expected to study on his own since the start of Command School was delayed while the pox raged and the world continued to crumble.

Reports from all over had been reaching General Thorne, and little of the news was good. Scouts verified that much of the northern half of the world was gone. Mountseen, Quake, Rivers, Midplain, and Vines were all buried under the new massive hill which ran thirty miles to the south, sloping on the sides and tapering after Midplain.

Some had thought to call the new hill Sleeping Deceit, since the mountain had seemingly flopped useless, like a drunk on the world. That was why others wanted to call it Drunken Deceit. Others suggested The Tomb, since it had buried so many thousands of people. Someone even suggested That Slagging Piece of Mountain Filth but it didn’t roll off the tongue easily.

For now, it was called the Hill, the brief name feeling ominous on its own. Beyond the Hill, debris from the mudslide rendered an immense swath of land down through Idumea unusable.

However, there was some good news. The Idumean River was trickling again, cutting a new path on either side of the Hill. On the west of the Hill still remained Scrub, covered in ash, and beyond that

was Sands, virtually untouched. Except now the Edge River was running a mile to the north, creating a water shortage for the villages.

The village of Grasses to the south was in better condition, and in the east, Coast fared well, except they hadn’t harvested most of their crops, sure that someone would bring them something less dusty.

Thorne sent a private message to his son that Sargon had indeed been in a far better position. In the south, the mudslide had traveled through the city to Orchards, past Trades, down to Flax, and out to sea, but otherwise the southern half of the world received only a few inches of ash. While the trees were wilting, crops were still growing.

Still, Thorne ordered everyone in the south to harvest and preserve everything as quickly as possible. He didn’t, however, tell them that the pox was on the move. Getting in the food was critical, the general confided to his son, because much of it would be needed in the north. If people thought they might catch the pox while they worked, they’d hide themselves away. It was logical to not concern them about a disease they had only a one in three chance of contracting.

Lieutenant Thorne couldn’t argue with that, because the general’s timing was correct. Just as the southern half of the world finished bringing in whatever they could, the pox exploded.

The first outbreak in Flax and Marsh was reported a week after Thorne took over Idumea, and it was severe. Thirty years ago there were deaths from the pox, but this time the losses were far greater, as if the plague was twice as strong as before. Lieutenant Thorne remembered what his brother Relf said about the estimated losses in Salem, and he wondered if he should warn the general that up to one-fifth of the remaining world might die.

But that was just a guess. Perhaps many of the potentially susceptible families had already died in the eruption. And, the lieutenant had to admit, the deaths from pox could be beneficial: fewer mouths to feed would mean the food supplies would last longer.

Perhaps the general hadn’t been too off in his explanation that all the world needed was a few rams and ewes. The lieutenant just needed to make sure he was one of those surviving rams. When he reported for duty each day at the fort, he made sure he kept on his kerchief, although he was sure he was immune.

Every day at midday meal the fort sent out a soldier to count the number of white and black cloths on the doors. White cloths meant pox was at the house; black meant there was a death. So far the levels

of illness had been staggering. Forty percent of Edge was ill and twenty percent had died.

Disposing of the bodies had been another problem the fort had to resolve. But nature had provided a way. The Edge River had been thrown from its course by the eruption, sending the new trickle of it on a parallel course to the west a few hundred paces away. The old empty river bed became a massive grave. Each night, first-year soldiers had the grisly task of burying the dozens of bodies brought that day.

They had already been using the river bed as a burial place, once it was realized that the residents of the grassy arena had all perished during the eruption, and the stench had died down enough for them to retrieve the bodies.

Debris, possibly from another mudslide that came down the Edge River, littered the former grassy arena. It wasn't until the soldiers tasked with the gruesome job got closer that they realized bodies were covered in mud and entangled with the uprooted trees, bushes, and occasional boulders.

As the lieutenant, Major Kroop, and several other soldiers picked their way through the remains of a couple hundred grassena boys and girls, Shin/Thorne felt a pang of guilt which he quickly recovered from. He hadn't thought of anyone there since he'd left it, and those dead in the ash deserved to die.

He, on the other hand, deserved better and got it.

The lieutenant thought only once of Lolo. It's not as if she would've contributed anything to the rebuilding of the world. No vial head could. They just leeches onto society, so their deaths were timely. Realizing that they must have been the very first to die, the lieutenant recognized once again the efficiency of nature's laws.

Bodies not hopelessly entangled in the debris but found strewn elsewhere were carted to the old river bed. Shortly after the soldiers finished that task, the first of the pox victims began to perish. For the past five weeks, Edge had been one continuous burial service.

Today, the lieutenant was hoping the burials may be ending, and wanted to make the counting-of-flags rounds himself. The sergeant yesterday reported that several white cloths had been taken down and that no new ones had gone up. And the lieutenant was wanting to escape the fort for a while.

Maybe because he noticed the date that morning as he was dressing: the 10th Day of Harvest. Young Perrin Shin's 19th birthday.

But Lieutenant Thorne had turned twenty-seven a couple of seasons ago, a few weeks before Salema Briter Zenos did.

He slipped on his old corporal’s jacket, still bearing the name of SHIN since no one could be found to stitch him a THORNE patch. The general had suggested the lieutenant wear Thorne’s old uniform, but the sleeves were too short and the jacket too tight. He considered removing the THORNE label for his jacket, but Edge still regarded the SHIN patch with respect and fear, so he kept it.

As he took long strides toward the gates of the fort, he enjoyed the triumph of being saluted, the pleasure of watching the enlisted scatter, the pride of causing citizens to pause and stare. He had everything—power, influence, and respect.

How the old colonel could have given all of this up years ago was still beyond his comprehension.

Occasionally he still heard the colonel, but his droning about doing the right things had become so tiresome that the lieutenant shut him out. But sometimes he was caught off guard, such as when he sat in the quiet mansion late at night thumbing through a dull text, and the words, *THE EZTATES IS A LOT MORE NOISY AND ENTERTAINING THAN THIS*, would suddenly form in his mind.

When he sat down to dinner alone in the grand eating room, the words, *WHAT THIS PLACE NEEDS IS A WELL-THROWN ROLL*, boorishly barged into his meal.

And when he walked from the mansion to the fort, the canyon within his view, the words, *WONDER WHAT THEY’RE DOING OVER THERE TODAY?* forced themselves into his thoughts. Each time he’d shake them off, forgetting about the voice until it rudely interrupted again.

He rather anticipated the voice would come today, it being a significant date for some people but no longer for him.

SO, IS IT APPROPRIATE TO WISH YOU A HAPPY 19TH BIRTHDAY? OR HAVE YOU CHANGED YOUR BIRTHDATE AS WELL?

“Only if you got me a gift, old man,” he mumbled as he walked along the barren field outside the fort gates.

I’LL GIVE YOU A GIFT. I’LL SHOW YOU THE WAY HOME.

The lieutenant sighed. “Give me a gift of something new. Can’t you think of anything else to say?”

OH, I CAN THINK OF PLENTY. BUT UNTIL YOU LISTEN TO WHAT I SAY FIRST, I CAN’T TELL YOU WHAT I HAVE TO SAY NEXT.

The lieutenant grumbled.

THE FOREST’S QUIET. HAD YOU NOTICED?

The Soldier in the Middle of the World

“Yes,” he lied. “I was thinking about recommending to Major Twigg that he send someone out to see what’s happening there.”

AH, BUT THAT’S AGAINST THE LONG-STANDING RULES THAT NO SOLDIERS SHOULD ENTER THE FORESTS. THAT WAS YOUR GREAT-GRANDFATHER’S ADMONITION, AFTER ALL.

The lieutenant narrowed his eyes. “Great-grandfather?”

YES, CUSH. HE LOVED THE UNIFORM BUT NOTHING OF ARMY LIFE EXCEPT THE DINNERS AND DANCES. AND HE ESPECIALLY HATED CONFLICT, DANGER, AND GOING INTO THE FOREST.

The lieutenant rolled his eyes. “Not my great-grandfather.”

REALLY? I THOUGHT YOU WERE A THORNE, THEREFORE A CUSH. AND A SHIN. MAYBE A BRITER, WHEN IT’S CONVENIENT . . . MAYBE A PETO—

“What do you want?” he asked shortly.

I WANT YOU TO LOOK AT THE FOREST.

“Why? It’s dying.”

YES, ISN’T THAT TROUBLING?

“We can still burn the wood or use it for construction.”

BUT IT’S ALL BLACKENING, LIEUTENANT. SURE, IT’S STILL THERE BUT ARE THERE ANY MARKINGS?

The lieutenant slowed his gait. “Doesn’t matter, does it?”

WHY DON’T YOU GO SEE? CHECK OUT THE FOREST. NO ONE’S WATCHING ANYMORE, ARE THEY?

“Not really,” he confessed. “Haven’t seen much need to patrol it, with all the grassena people dead and no one else interested in it.”

THEN GO TO THE FOREST. THIS MORNING, BEFORE YOU REPORT TO THE COMMAND TOWER. JUST TAKE A LOOK.

“I know what you’re trying to do. You’ll get me there, then get me to go further and further until I’m halfway up the mountain.”

NO, YOUNG PERE—DO YOU MIND IF I STILL CALL YOU YOUNG PERE? “LEK THORNE” MAKES ME GAG, AND CONSIDERING THAT I DON’T HAVE A PHYSICAL BODY ANYMORE, THAT’S QUITE AN ACCOMPLISHMENT. NO, YOUNG PERE, I DON’T WANT YOU TO GO HALFWAY UP THE MOUNTAIN. I WANT YOU TO GO UP AND OVER IT. YOU COULD DO IT, TODAY. THE PATH IS NAVIGABLE. GO GET CLARK. I KNOW THAT’S NOT WHAT YOU NAMED HIM, BUT HE’S A DESCENDANT OF THE FIRST CLARK, AND THAT’S A FAR BETTER NAME THAN WHAT YOU SETTLED ON. YOU COULD BE OVER THE MOUNTAIN BEFORE DINNER. YOU’VE NEVER MISSED A BIRTHDAY DINNER YET. THIS YEAR HAS BEEN UNBEARABLY DIFFICULT FOR THEM. YOU CAN CHANGE IT—CHANGE IT ALL. YOUNG PERE, ARE YOU STILL LISTENING TO ME?

Lieutenant Thorne walked through the gates and over to the stables.

“Saddle up Trigger,” he said to the stable hands. “I’m going to check out the forest. We really should be observing it closer. Send a messenger to Major Twigg about my doings. I may be a few hours.”

YES!

No one was quite sure what to do *with* or *for* Lilla Shin that day. But Mahrree, Calla, and Salema were working on a plan.

The day had been creeping up on them, hard to ignore, especially when Cephas celebrated his nineteenth birthday just days before. But ignoring the day didn’t seem right, either. It’d been a bookend week for the past eighteen years. All the family gathered for one birthday dinner, then again a few days later for the next. Whatever someone wanted but didn’t get at Cephas’s dinner party would find it at Young Pere’s.

But Cephas’s dinner party was a somber affair, not only because of the volcano and the absence of his biggest aggravation—his cousin—but because everything in Salem was grave.

Even with the great care taken to reduce exposure to the pox, it hit Salem with full force two weeks after the eruption. Guide Zenos called for mass quarantines of anyone susceptible, and Salem ground to a halt, the ash-to-block yard temporarily abandoned. The doctors’ estimates that one-third in Salem could fall ill and that half of those might die were blessedly lower, probably because of the quarantine. But Salem was still devastated.

Thirty percent of Salem became feverish and pocked; forty-five thousand sick people brought the valley to its knees, and suddenly it was a blessing that so many crops and livestock had perished in the eruption. There were barely enough healthy people to take care of everyone and their animals.

With the careful attention to those ill, the death rates were also lower than initially feared. Of the forty-five thousand who became ill, eighteen thousand died.

Shem was grateful, but that was still four hundred burials a day, and more than five hundred during the worst week. Reluctantly, and at Mahrree’s reminder that he’d already seen himself in vision doing it, Shem called for mass graves to be dug, the dead from each day to

be brought to the pits for burial. He promised that each person would be remembered on a large marker to be placed at the graves.

In the cases where entire families died, he ordered their houses burned, along with their possessions, in hopes of killing the pox.

If Salem had seemed gray and dreary when it was covered in ash, it became even worse with the smoke from another house being destroyed, and new pits being dug to receive the remains of those who would die the next day.

Somber wasn't nearly a heavy enough term to describe the mood in Salem, Mahrree decided one day. It bordered on despondent. There were moments when she felt truly sorry that she'd been so delighted that the Last Day was coming. She'd even memorized the passage in The Writings, as a sort of checklist as to what should come next:

Before the Last Day will be a land tremor more powerful than any ever experienced. It will awaken the largest mountain and change all that we know in the world. Those changes will bring famine, death, and desperation to the world. And that desperation will cause the world's army to seek to destroy the faithful of the Creator.

Largest mountain awakened—check.

Change all that we know—check.

Famine—maybe check? The pox might be that. It certainly was death and desperation . . .

That Mahrree considered those words so detachedly, as if making a list for the storehouse, alarmed her. People were suffering and she was merely counting down the days in happy anticipation. Her own awfulness surprised her. But all she had to do to jar her back into reasonableness was look at Shem.

He lived Salem's suffering, spending weeks making the rounds all over Salem and the northern colonies trying to visit each burial pit, trying to comfort every weeping parent, child, and spouse. But it took its toll.

After three weeks of endless travel, he collapsed in exhaustion as he arrived home one evening. Calla and Peto assured him that the Salemites knew he shared in their grief, and that he had a dozen assistants and over three hundred rectors who could provide comfort as well. Reluctantly, he agreed to slow his pace.

Calla stayed by his side while he slept that night and well into the next day, worriedly feeling his forehead and watching for any signs of pocks. Even though it was assumed their family was immune, Boskos had become feverish and achy for two days after attending non-stop to dozens of ailing families.

The Eztatates weren’t entirely immune. For almost four weeks while the pox raged through Salem dropping families left and right, no one was in or out of the Briters’ house except for Deck and Jaytsy.

Jaytsy had panicked when, five days after Cambo had taken Mahrree to the block fields, he awoke with a high fever and hallucinations. His wife Tessina immediately sent for Jaytsy, and soon Cambo was carried by Deck and Peto to the Shins’ house.

Since the original Cambozola Briter, a healthy farmer in his prime, had passed away with his wife Sewzi within hours of developing the pox fever, the younger Cambo’s parents weren’t going to take any chances.

Mahrree and Lilla cared for Cambo in isolation in Young Pere’s empty bedroom until he finally broke out in spots three days later and the fever abated. Since all schools and the university were closed due to illness, Mahrree had plenty of time to worry about her oldest grandson. She put her unreasonable joy on a back shelf so that she could fret full-time with everyone else in Salem.

Jaytsy and Deck were the only Briters anyone saw for those weeks. They retrieved goods from the storehouse, tended to the animals, and checked several times each day on their oldest son at the Shins, but no one else saw their other children or grandchildren until the threat had passed.

By the time Cephas Briter’s birthday rolled around, the pox was fading in Salem. No new cases had been reported and the Briters felt free to step outside and breathe the air again.

Jaytsy said it couldn’t have happened soon enough. During one frustrating day, Jaytsy confided to her mother, as she dabbed her oldest son’s hot head, that if one or two *particular* children fell ill with a fever for a few days and were as still as poor Cambo, she wouldn’t have minded.

So when Harvest Season came, it was not only appropriate but necessary to celebrate everyone’s liberation and Cambo’s recuperation by having the families together for Cephas’s birthday.

But Cephas wasn’t sure about that. He suggested to his mother that they not have a birthday dinner for him that year, considering

everything. He'd still turn nineteen if they celebrated it or not.

When Lilla overheard their conversation, she insisted that Cephas would have his dinner and everyone would come and be happy *or else*. And considering the extreme agitation of Lilla, they decided to avoid that *or else*.

To prepare for Cephas's birthday, and Lilla's potential response to it, Mahrree held a secret meeting at the Zenos' house a week before Young Pere's birthday. Mahrree invited Shem, Calla, Salema, Lek, and Boskos to help figure out what to do with, for, or to Lilla.

"Honestly," Salema said to the others as they sat around the table in the kitchen, "Aunt Lilla's making Mama really nervous. She came over three times today with suggestions for Cephas's dinner. Now she's insisting on cooking it herself, and it sounds like there'll be enough food for everyone in the congregation! Uncle Peto promised to rein her in, but I don't think he knows how. Muggah and I have spoken to almost all the Shins since I saw Jori and Lori two days ago, and everyone says the same thing—Lilla's got them worried and they're afraid she'll do something alarming on 10th."

"More alarming than usual, that is," Mahrree added.

Calla rested her head on her hand. "I knew when Young Pere's birthday would come around she'd be a mess, but I thought she'd just wail and cry a lot. I can help her with that. I just didn't expect her to be so . . ." Failing to find an apt description, she turned to her husband.

Shem shrugged. "She's wearing the fakest smile I've ever seen. And she's trying to force everyone else to feel 'happy' as well. She's almost *creepy* in her insistence that everything is fine," he said with an apologetic wince to his wife. "Bos, any professional suggestions?"

Boskos exhaled. "We have very little experience with this in Salem. I couldn't find a reference in any of the books of how someone copes when a family member had run away. The few who left usually had little or no connections to miss them. We tended to be involved in the *taking*, Papa, not the *losing*. Sorry," he added when he saw the pained expression on his father's face.

Most of the "taking" in the world had been Shem's doing.

Mahrree nodded sadly. "This is one thing the world knows more about than we do. How, on their birthday, do we remember the one who is missing?"

They all looked at the table for an answer.

"Brutally happy," Lek said quietly.

Everyone turned to him.

He looked up to see his family’s confused expressions. “I was just thinking about Mama’s label for Aunt Lilla. ‘Brutally happy’?”

“That’s about as close as we’re going to get,” Shem agreed.

“I’ve been thinking,” Mahrree said, “that she needs a distraction yet still some way to acknowledge his birthday.”

“But what?” Calla asked. “I don’t even know how to talk to her about it. I’ve tried a few times, but as soon as I say the word ‘birthday’ she starts going on and on about Cephas. She’s becoming obsessive. And when his birthday’s over, then what will she become?”

They all fell silent again, thinking.

“Bossy,” Lek said quietly.

Everyone looked him again.

“Uhh,” he fidgeted. He hated being the center of attention and now he’d been it twice.

Salema elbowed him gently. “Usually you only call *me* ‘bossy’.”

Lek blushed. “No, no! That’s not what I meant. I, uh, I was thinking about *Bossy*—one of the cows. A year or two ago she had that calf, the one that died right after it was born.”

“I remember,” said Shem. “She was distraught and the only way Deck could calm her was find her another calf. Bossy just needed something to replace what she lost.”

Mahrree tapped her lips. “Somehow I suspect Lilla will notice if we slip another nineteen-year-old into Young Pere’s room and dress him up in his clothes. Nor is she overly fond of calves in the house.”

Everyone chuckled sadly.

Calla said, “I know what you mean, though, Lek. And that’s what she’s doing to poor Jaytsy with Cephas—adopting him as her own.”

Boskos nodded. “She’s connecting to the closest thing who reminds her of her own son.”

“You know,” Calla said, her eyes getting brighter, “Jori *is* getting closer to birthing, isn’t she?”

Salema bobbed her head back and forth. “She is, but I think she has about three weeks to go still.”

Mahrree started grinning.

Shem pointed at her. “You’re planning something, Most Dangerous Woman, and I don’t think I’m going to like it.”

Mahrree glared playfully at him before turning to Calla. “Do you think Jori’s baby might be a girl?”

Calla shrugged. “I try not work my ‘power’ until it’s a week before the baby’s due. But maybe I can make an exception—”

The loud scoffing of Shem stopped her. “Calla, we’ve talked about this before—I really don’t think you have any special ‘power’. You just have excellent timing!”

Calla was affronted. “For a man with as much faith as you, you have very little in me!”

Her children and daughter-in-law chuckled.

But Salema shrugged. “I have to agree, Mama Calla—you probably just have good timing when you put your hands on a swollen belly and a little girl is born the next day. I don’t think there’s anything you do but bring hope.”

“But isn’t that what expecting mothers need? Hope?” said Lek.

Salema had to chuckle at that. “Yes, yes it is.”

Mahrree pointed at them. “Exactly! If there’s ever been an ‘expecting’ mother in need of hope, it’s Lilla! She’s *expecting* the arrival of her son every day. She needs *something*.”

Shem sat back. “What are you planning, Mahrree?”

“Nothing drastic,” she assured him. “But what if Jori just *pretends* to be close to birthing? Calla, what if you visit her the day before, do your little belly holding thing, then on the morning of Young Pere’s birthday, she sends for Lilla to help her because she thinks the baby may be coming? She could drag it out all day long.”

Shem was shaking his head so hard it was amazing it stayed on.

But Salema was grinning at her grandmother. “I’m sure she’d do it! Jori and Lori are more worried about their mother than anyone. Jori’s been through it often enough to know what symptoms to fake. I could send her some ideas, though—”

“I don’t believe what I’m hearing!” Shem exclaimed. “You women are creating a *lie*! While I expect this kind of behavior from Mahrree—”

Mahrree scoffed. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?” she demanded as Lek and Boskos tried to stifle their laughs.

“—but Salema? *My* daughter-in-law?”

Salema blushed and shrugged at Shem. “Sorry, Guide Zenos. But I still think it’s a good idea.”

Shem gave her a forgiving wink but continued to shake his head at Mahrree. He didn’t notice the far-off look of his wife.

“It really could work,” Calla said softly.

Shem twisted to her. “What?!”

“Just as a distraction, Shem,” Calla explained. “Something to do. Help with her grandchildren, clean the houses, pet the lambs, count

the minutes between the pains, then it all *stops*. We’ve all been through that—false labor? What would it hurt?”

Shem stared at her with his mouth hanging open.

Boskos gently pushed up his father’s chin.

Mahrree snorted into her arm.

“My *wife*? My gentle, kind, *honest* wife concocting a lie?” Shem said. “In Salem?”

For the first time ever, Mahrree saw Calla roll her eyes. “Do you have a better idea? Because you haven’t said anything helpful!”

It was also the first time Mahrree had ever heard Calla raise her voice. By the surprised look on her sons, it was the first time they’d heard her angry as well.

“This is my *baby sister*, Shem. I need to help her! Mama’s not well enough to come down, and after Lilla smothers poor Jaytsy and Cephas, who knows what she’s going to do next. Probably something to Peto. We haven’t even discussed him yet! The more aggressive *she* gets, the more introverted *he* becomes. What are we going to do with him on that day? Besides,” she said, her voice dropping to a whisper, “who are *you* to lecture me on honesty? I don’t know of another man who told more lies in his life than you, and yes, *for good reasons!*”

Mahrree and Salema exchanged the same look—they wondered if they could get up and sneak out of the room unnoticed.

Shem’s eyebrows went up at his wife’s words. “This is *hardly* the same thing! And what are you planning to do to Peto? Another dishonest distraction? I think Rector Shin is dealing with enough *real* problems without you creating a new one for him to chase!”

Lek cringed in worry as he watched his parents.

Boskos noticed his brother’s concern and knew he had to break the tension. He winked at Mahrree and said, “We *could* send Uncle Peto on a chase. Tell him someone saw Aunt Mahrree sneaking out again but this time she was headed to the volcano, just for a peek.”

Shem’s mouth dropped open again as he stared at his second son.

Now it was Mahrree’s turn to lean over and push his chin back up. “I think he’s just teasing, Shem,” Mahrree said. “Although I *would* like to take a peek . . .”

Boskos pointed at his father. “I *am* just teasing, Papa, because I think you’re taking this too seriously. What’s the harm in giving Aunt Lilla something useful to do? I think if Lilla’s occupied, Uncle Peto will handle everything better. He’s closing up because he doesn’t know how to help his wife. But if she’s helped, he’ll do better.”

Shem sighed and turned to Lek. “And *your* suggestion is?”

Lek glanced around the table. “Agree with my wife. That’s always the safest thing to do, I’ve found.”

Salema smiled in triumph and kissed him on the cheek. “I have him trained so well.”

Boskos pounded on the table. “Hear, hear! I always find it’s safest when we all agree with . . . Salema.”

“Hey!” said Salema as Mahrree chuckled and Calla smiled.

Shem’s face finally softened. “You’re right, Lek. Agree with your wife as often as you can.” He put a hand on Calla’s and squeezed it.

She leaned her head against his shoulder.

Lek sighed in relief.

Mahrree pursed her lips. It was all over much too fast. She and Perrin would have had it out for at least another ten minutes to let things get *really* interesting before one of them developed that glint in their eyes.

But then that’s why Perrin never would’ve been called to be the guide.

“But Calla,” Shem said, “I do have a useful suggestion. We have another Remembrance day, but for Young Pere.”

Mahrree frowned. “Oh, I don’t think I like the idea of—”

“I don’t mean like the night we had for Perrin,” he interrupted, and began to smile just thinking about it. “I mean a more sober day with a family fast the day before and a combined family prayer for him the morning of his birthday,” Shem explained. “To show Peto and Lilla that we feel *with* them and *for* them. Together we can ask the Creator to sustain us until it’s all resolved.”

Calla kissed his shoulder. “That’s an excellent idea, Shem.”

Mahrree sighed. She had to agree it had its merits.

“But Shem,” Calla said quietly, “if during the day she becomes uncontrollably agitated . . .”

Salema raised one eyebrow in expectation.

The guide sighed. “Then you may ‘check on Jori’ and send along a message through the towers so Lilla can visit her grandchildren.”

Mahrree smiled, pretending that she, too, was awaiting his approval. But she was going to stage a Get-Lilla-Out-of-the-House day if she had his agreement or not.

So it was her task on the 10th of Harvest to keep an eye on Lilla. At the earliest sign of Lilla losing it, Mahrree would secretly send seventeen-year-old Nool on horseback to his sisters’ houses on the

other side of Salem. He would give Jori and Lori an update so they could send an ‘urgent’ message to the tower calling for assistance.

Jori had been growing very large and uncomfortable. At Cephas’s birthday dinner, she could hardly find a comfortable position in which to sit. Mahrree wondered if Jori might not have been playing up her condition a little to divert Lilla’s attentions away from Jaytsy. Mahrree was sure she saw Jori give her Aunt Jaytsy a wink, and when the Cadby families climbed into their wagons for a bumpy ride home, Jaytsy whispered into Jori’s ear and squeezed her arm.

To spare Jori and Lori from another long ride with their large bellies, they didn’t join the combined families on the morning of the 10th but promised they would pray for Young Pere at the same time.

Shem’s idea had proven to be a good one, as Mahrree had to admit she knew it would be. Bringing everyone together on behalf of Young Pere was a soothing balm for the entire day. Everyone still thought of him, worried about him, and Lilla and Peto were reminded how much their pain was shared and felt.

Still, Mahrree had her doubts, and even though Lilla was calmer than she’d been in the past two weeks, she still seemed to Mahrree like a short-tempered cat, lying in wait to reach out and slash someone’s leg just because they passed by.

The night before Young Pere’s birthday, Mahrree put her arm around Lilla. “Just so you know, I’m not going to leave you alone tomorrow unless it’s with Calla. No one wants you to be alone, and no one *dares* to be alone with you, so you’re stuck with me and your sister.”

Lilla at first chuckled then sobbed. “I think you might be the only one who really understands.”

Mahrree was waiting by Peto and Lilla’s bedroom door when it opened in the morning. Lilla came out to start breakfast and Mahrree put an arm around her and wiped away her first tears of the day. After their combined family prayer and breakfast, Lilla seemed to be holding up all right but was frequently weepy.

Peto, however, was Shem’s special assignment. The two of them rode to the southeast to check on the latest delivery of blocks, and to give Peto plenty of time to chat with Shem.

In the midafternoon, when Calla came over to relieve Mahrree on ‘Lilla duty,’ Mahrree was beginning to think that Lilla might be all right. The blessing that Shem asked for, that the family would feel comfort and hope, seemed to be sinking in.

Mahrree strolled over to the Briter house to check on Young Shem's math when Jaytsy met her at the door. "Is she that bad?"

Mahrree looked at her in surprise. "Lilla? No, she's doing quite well. Why?"

Jaytsy nodded at the tower where a line of banners was rising. Emergency. Rector Shin. Second Resting Station.

Mahrree frowned. "That's not the right message for Lilla. Wait. *Second Resting Station!* Oh Jaytsy, you don't think—"

Jaytsy's eyebrows creased. "Mother, what are you thinking?"

She could hardly breathe. "It's *his birthday!* What if he . . . what if he *came home* on his birthday?"

Jaytsy took her mother by the shoulders. "I really don't think so. That would be just too—"

But someone else already had the same idea. They both heard the scream from the Shins' house and turned to see Lilla come bolting out the door with Calla on her heels.

"Mahrree! Jaytsy! The tower message!"

Calla was shaking her head in time with Jaytsy's. "Lilla, really, I don't think it's—"

Lilla ran straight for Mahrree who wore the same hopeful expression "It would be perfect!" she panted as she reached her mother-in-law. "For him to come home today? Oh, Mahrree! Can you imagine?"

"You shouldn't!" Calla said firmly, catching her sister. "Lilla, the message is for *Peto*. It's the general's banner so it's a security issue."

The tower chimed, signaling they should look up again. The Guide's banner had gone up as well, calling for him to help.

Calla furrowed her eyebrows at that. "Shem too?"

Lilla shook her sister. "It's *him!* It has to be!"

"Stop!" Calla ordered. "Lilla, you *must stop!* I can't believe it's what you hope it is." She called up to the tower, "They went to the block storage barns in the southeast. Send along the message to the towers there."

The men nodded down to her.

Calla gripped her sister firmly by the shoulders. "Lilla, listen to me. It's *not* Young Pere. He's not coming home today."

"Why are you saying that?" Lilla shouted at her. "How can you be so sure? You don't *know!*"

"But Lilla, *I feel* it," said Calla in her best calming tone. "Sweetie, it's not him. It's likely a problem with the Thornes. They still live at the Second Resting Station and would call for both Peto and Shem."

The look on Lilla’s face told her she didn’t believe any of that.

Calla sighed. “You need to get out for a while and I know exactly what you need. We’ll get Nool and Kew to hitch up the wagon, then you and I are going to go visit some very large and expecting daughters. While we’re there we’ll wash all the laundry and clean every inch of their houses and cook several days’ worth of food until you’re exhausted and it’s the 11th. All right?”

Lilla’s chin quivered. “Can we go to the Second Resting Station first? Just to see?”

Jaytsy grimaced again in sympathy, and Mahrree held her breath, her hands balled up in anxious yet hopeful fists by her face.

Calla sighed. “Sure. Whatever you need.”

“Thank you!” Lilla squealed. She ran back to the house calling, “Nool! Kew! Ready the wagon! Quickly!”

Calla’s shoulders sagged. “What am I going to do for her when she sees it’s not him?”

“But it might be, Calla!” Mahrree insisted.

Jaytsy put an arm around her mother. “I’ll keep this one under control, Calla. Good luck with that one,” she said, nodding to Lilla who was now dragging her two sons to the large barn. She was shouting about just saddling the horses so they could travel faster.

Calla smiled feebly at Jaytsy and walked over to the large barn rubbing her behind in anticipation. There wasn’t even going to be time to change into breeches or find padding for the saddle.

Chapter II--“Any . . . any news here?”

Rector Shin and Guide Zenos were finishing their review of the latest delivery of block, comparing notes as to how much more would be needed, when the chimes at the nearby tower clanged.

They both looked up to see the message. The general’s banner, the Guide’s banner, and the code for the Second Resting Station.

Peto began to breathe heavily while Shem slowly shook his head. “I know what you’re thinking, Peto,” he said. “That’s not it.”

Peto closed his eyes. “You don’t know that!”

The guide took him by the shoulders. “Yes, I do. I would have felt it if it was *him*—”

Furious, Peto’s eyes flashed open. “But he’s not *your* son! You don’t know *everything*, Shem!”

Shem was glad the two of them were alone. It wouldn’t have been good for Salem to see the guide and rector arguing, although there wasn’t a person in the valley that didn’t know of their heartache. They would have been understanding but shocked at first, just as Shem was.

Peto had been quiet and detached all day. Shem assumed he’d been handling the stress rather well, but instead it was handling him. Shem fought the urge to take a step away from his fuming brother-in-law and instead held his shoulders more tightly.

“No, Peto, I don’t know everything. But we’ll find out in about five minutes. We’re done here. Let’s mount up.”

The horses raced to the Second Resting Station, Shem not worrying that Peto won. Peto slid off of Clark 14 and looked up at the canyon entrance. The tower there was bannerless, not signaling the arrival of anyone. Frantically, he scanned the trail leading to the station, looking for signs of any activity on the road, but there was no one.

Shem tied up Clark 14 and Silver, and strolled to the Second Resting Station, chewing on his lower lip, equally worried about his brother-in-law and the Thornes. He fully expected to open the door

to discover five pocked victims. A couple of late cases still popped up.

Shem waited on the porch, watching Peto as he gazed longingly at the canyon. He was about to call him over when he heard a commotion inside. A man’s voice came heatedly through the door.

“So I’m trapped with *you* as well? I don’t think so!”

The door swung open to reveal an angry Anoki Kiah, a pack slung over his shoulder. His eyes bulged when he saw the guide.

Shem repressed a sigh. “Well, it looks like I may have interrupted something,” he said pleasantly as Versa appeared behind her husband. She sighed in relief and Shem knew who had sent the message. He felt someone come up the stairs to join him.

Peto, his nerves already ragged and his disappointment peaking, was less than congenial. “Anoki! What do you think you’re doing?!”

Anoki shot a look at his wife. “*Nothing*, now!”

Shem continued to smile warmly as he put a hand on Anoki’s arm. “Let’s go inside and see what we can do for you, Mr. and Mrs. Kiah.” He tugged Anoki back into the station.

Peto paused, glanced one last time at the empty canyon entrance, blinked back a few tears, and headed into the station.

A while later two more horses came rushing up the road to the Second Resting Station. Calla cringed when she saw her husband’s and brother-in-law’s horses tied to the hitching post, and the station seemed very quiet. If it was Young Pere, there would have been much more noise and a new message at the tower, she was sure of it.

But Lilla wasn’t. All she saw was the two familiar horses. “Calla! They’re here already!” she cried as she slid off her mount. She stumbled to the station just as Druses Thorne came around the side of the building, appearing distressed.

She blinked in surprise to see the two women. “Mrs. Zenos? Mrs. Shin? Something wrong?”

Lilla stopped in her tracks, trying to interpret Mrs. Thorne’s face.

Calla jogged over to put a bracing arm around her sister and spoke before Lilla could. “Uh . . . we didn’t know if our husbands received the message that they were needed here, but I see they did. Any . . . any *news* here? Anything we can do?”

Mrs. Thorne sighed heavily. “It’s Versa and Anoki again. He wants to leave. Your husbands got here just in time. Anoki had his pack ready and was on his way out the door.”

Calla could feel her sister trembling next to her, finally realizing

that Young Pere was not the purpose of the message.

“Do you need any help?” Calla asked, hoping the answer would be something that would allow her to drag Lilla away.

Druses Thorne smiled drearily. “No, but thank you. It means so much to me that you came all this way. Your husbands have things well in hand but I’m not sure they’ll make much progress with Anoki. He’s become more and more agitated these past few weeks.”

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Thorne. Please, feel free to call us if you or your daughters need anything. And speaking of daughters, we’re going to check on Lilla’s oldest girls. They’re both expecting soon.”

“Of course,” Druses said, trying to come up with a genuine smile. “How wonderful. Go, give them my best.”

Calla nodded and steered away her sister who hadn’t said a word. It was a good thing Mrs. Thorne didn’t know Lilla well or she would have realized her complete silence was completely unnatural.

The two women went back to the horses, mounted, and headed northeast. Calla leaned over frequently, trying to guide Lilla’s horse as well as her own, because Lilla couldn’t see where they were going with all of the tears bubbling out of her eyes.

ARE YOU GOING TO DO IT?

The lieutenant, still on top of Trigger where he’d been all day, looked down upon the houses that lay before him. He could see an endless flow of gray farms and orchards.

YOU MADE IT THIS FAR, IT’S ONLY A LITTLE FURTHER.

“No it’s not,” he mumbled. “It’s still very far away.”

JUST TURN AROUND AND GO UP, YOUNG PERE. THAT’S ALL.

“That’s not what I planned to do today. I planned to see if I could make it through the forest, to see if anything was still growling and spewing. And I found nothing. The forest truly is dead.”

YES. WORRISOME, ISN’T IT. HOW EASILY DID YOU MAKE IT THROUGH?

The lieutenant smiled smugly. “Quite easily. I thought I’d be here till dinner.”

I CAN SHOW YOU WHERE THE ROCK ENTRANCE IS, BUT ONLY IF YOU AGREE TO GO THROUGH IT.

The lieutenant looked down upon Edge, much easier to survey now that all the leaves and pine needles had fallen off the few trees that remained. He hadn’t realized how much the forest actually rose

up the mountain until he saw it from that vantage point, and figured he was probably the first person ever to see Edge that way.

He turned in his saddle and looked behind him to the pile of massive boulders that served as a barrier between the forest and the mountain beyond. “Not sure I’m in the mood to pick my way through that today, old man. I’ve seen enough. I need to make my report then get back home for dinner.”

The words, although they came out casually, caught in his throat.
. . . *back home for dinner.*

He wondered if anyone had made a special one today—

Why would they? Today of all days? Why would they even remember? There were twelve other children, after all.

NO, YOU DON’T NEED TO MAKE ANY REPORTS FOR LEMUEL. BUT YOU NEED TO DO THE RIGHT THING FOR YOURSELF, YOUR FAMILY, AND YOUR CREATOR. LOOK HOW CLOSE YOU ARE! SHEM COULD DO IT IN LESS THAN FOUR HOURS. YOU CAN BEAT SHEM, CAN’T YOU?

The lieutenant gazed at the boulder field.

The two women rode in silence to the eastern side of Salem. Calla hoped Sam or Con wouldn’t mind hitching up the wagon to take them home in the morning. She was getting too old—or rather, *her behind* was getting too old for this. Frequently she glanced over to her sister.

Lilla’s face was set and determined, but her eyes were filled with pain. Calla sent up another prayer of pleading.

Dear Creator, if there’s *any* way Jori can deliver today, please may she? It’d be such a wonderful end to such a terrible day. The healing balm of babies . . .

As they neared the vineyards before the two Cadby homes, where brothers Sam and Con had built houses next door to each other for their twin wives Lori and Jori, Calla noticed a familiar rider heading for them.

“Mama Lilla!” Con called in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

Lilla smiled weakly. “I needed to see my girls today.”

“Well, thank goodness!” Con grinned. “I was on my way to the tower to send a message for you to come.”

Lilla gasped. “The baby? Con, if your wife’s having birthing pains, you shouldn’t leave her!”

“It’s not Jori,” he chuckled. “It’s *Lori!*”

“What?” now Calla gasped. “But . . . but she’s due later than Jori!”

“That’s what Jori’s telling her,” Con said. “She’s not too happy, so Calla, we certainly could use your calming influence today.”

Without another word, Lilla kicked her horse into a run to the Cadby houses.

Calla looked up to the sky and grinned, then followed. She knew what had happened—she had seen Lori yesterday in the storehouse at the east side of Salem and had patted her niece’s belly before she left.

It was going to be a girl. Calla couldn’t wait to hear Shem and Salema’s explanation for *this* one.



It was almost dark when Shem and Peto finally left the Second Resting Station. Anoki had agreed to stay and discuss his frustrations with Guide Zenos in two days’ time, and Versa agreed to be less confrontational. Shem suggested she start considering that people thought of things in different ways than she did, and Anoki promised to not raise his voice or threaten to raise his fist.

As the two men walked to their mounts, Peto glanced one last time at the mouth of the canyon. Shem put a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m so sorry, Peto,” he whispered. “But he’s still alive. I know that. There’s still hope.”

Peto sighed. “Does it ever end for you, Shem? The negotiating and comforting?”

“No, I don’t think it ever does,” he said, climbing on to Silver. “But that’s all right. I need something to fill my days, now, don’t I?”

Peto smiled sadly at him as he mounted. A chime from the tower spun him around. Maybe . . . just maybe . . .

The banners were rising.

Rector Shin. Emergency. Tower number 21. The tower nearest the Cadby homes.

It wasn’t what he wanted, but it was the next best thing. He turned to Shem and smiled for the first time. “Did Calla visit Jori yesterday?”

Shem smiled back. “Not that I know of. Let me guess—you’re not going home yet, right?”

“Care to join me?”

“Of course. I could use a little good news tonight.”

Mahrree looked to the tower when the chime sounded later that evening. She could barely make out the banners in the dying light but she smiled when she saw it. It wasn't the message she was hoping for, but it was the next best thing.

By tomorrow morning she'd have someone new to meet again.

The lieutenant stared at the large table full of food in the mansion and something gnawed at him. There was enough there for half a dozen people, but he was the only one eating. Where did the rest of it go when he finished? He might have to ask about that later, if he remembered.

Slowly he climbed the stairs to his bedroom and told himself that he really *did* enjoy the quiet of the large house because it gave him plenty of time to think.

Shem and Peto were dismounting as Calla rushed out of the house.

“Shem, back on your horse!” she ordered as Peto was tying up Clark 14. “Thank the Creator you're both here! Now I don't have to retrieve a midwife.”

“Don't you have one yet?” Shem asked, alarmed.

“We do, but for Lori.”

“Lori?” Peto said. “Are you sure *Lori*?”

Calla nodded. “But five minutes ago Jori's waters gushed, followed by a very large pain. It looks like they're insisting on doing this together! Peto, go take care of Jori's children while Con stays with her. Looch and Weel just took Lori and Sam's children to their house for the night. Shem, get back on Silver and GO!”

Ten minutes later Peto brought two more excited children to their Cadby grandparents' house down the road for a sleepover with their cousins. Weel's and Looch's eyes grew big when they realized what

that meant.

Weel rushed to Jori's house while Peto helped Looch feed the little ones their dinner. Soon Shem arrived, having brought a second midwife to the Cadby homes.

The two grandfathers and one great uncle entertained the four little ones until their eyes finally became as heavy as the men's.

When Calla went over to the grandparents' house it was still dark, but it could have been considered morning. She found three men and four little children sprawled on the sofas in the gathering room. The two boys and two girls seemed quite comfortable, but because of their sleeping positions, the three men would be stiff and achy the next day. She decided to let them rest, but before she could sneak out she heard an urgent whisper.

"Calla! Well?"

She grinned at Peto. "Come see for yourself, Grandpa!"

Peto gently lifted off four-year-old Cori and leaned him against Shem, who already had two-year-old Annly sprawled across his chest.

Shem grunted softly. "Didn't really need another one."

"I'll be back with a report," Peto promised. He left with Calla and they rushed over to the houses. "Well? Who finished first and who finished last?"

Calla chuckled. "That's still a matter of confusion, actually."

"How could that be?"

"I think we should start with Jori," she said as they picked their way through the dark gardens to Jori's house. They saw the two midwives in conversation by their horses.

"What, leaving the party so early?" Peto teased as they approached the women.

They grinned back. "We could use a few hours of sleep, but we're sending out fresh help, Rector Shin," one of them said. "Then we'll be back in the morning, because it's going to be *quite* lively around here for a time." The women chuckled.

"Have a wonderful night, Rector," the other midwife said, her tone full of additional meanings as she mounted her horse.

Peto nudged Calla. "All right, something's up."

"Why, you're a grandfather again! That's what's up, Peto!"

He glared at her playfully as they made their way to Jori and Con's house. In her bedroom they found Jori resting as Con cuddled a small bundle. Weel sat next to Con and Jori, beaming proudly.

Peto grinned as Con held the baby out to him.

“A new grandson for you, Grandpa Peto! I think he looks a little like you. We’ll have to ask Muggah about that, though.”

Peto took his newest grandson and sniffed his sweet head. “Ah, well done, Jori! How’d it go?”

Jori sighed. “Once he decided to come, it was surprisingly fast, thank goodness. I think I’m getting the hang of this birthing thing.”

Peto gazed at the newborn. “Does he have a name?”

“Still working on it,” Jori said. “I really thought it’d be a girl.”

Peto looked up at her with clouded eyes. “Not *Perrin* Cadby, please,” he whispered.

“All right, Papa. But we were just discussing *Peto* Cadby.”

Peto pulled a face and nuzzled the baby. “Is she really that upset you’re not a girl? And I thought they loved you!” he crooned to the sleeping infant.

Jori and Con chuckled. “Says the man who insisted on naming his first daughter *Lorixania*!” Jori exclaimed. “Speaking of which, have you been over to see Lori yet?”

“We came over here first,” Peto said as he stroked the baby’s fuzzy head. “Excellent timing, by the way, Jori,” he said softly. “I didn’t know what to do with your mother today. I was sure by the evening she would’ve been a complete mess.”

“Actually, Papa, I was praying I could deliver now to give Mama something to do besides think of *him*. But when Lori started having pains, I began to wonder if the Creator got mixed up as to who was petitioning Him! We’re not identical twins, but we definitely look alike.”

Peto chuckled and kissed the sleeping baby. “He’s perfect, Jori, as usual. I’m so proud of you.”

“You better go check on Lori, Papa,” Jori reminded him. “She was so worried when she started having early pains yesterday.”

“Of course,” Peto said, putting the baby into Jori’s arms. “Enjoy the quiet while you can. As soon as Cori and Annly get over here, that’s the end.” He kissed his weary daughter on her forehead and gently cuffed Con on the shoulder, who also looked ready for a nap.

Peto nudged Calla as they left the house and walked to the other Cadbys next door. “So what’s with Lori? I think I have an idea.”

Calla smiled. “Just let her show you. She’s so excited.”

They made their way to Sam and Lori’s bedroom and Peto called softly as they walked in, “So what does my oldest daughter have to

show me—” He stopped when he saw Sam.

“Surprise!” cried Lori, but because she was so exhausted it came out merely as a happy murmur.

In each of Sam’s bulky arms was a tiny bundle. “*Two* more granddaughters, Grandpa Peto! And they might be identical because already I’m getting them confused,” he chortled nervously.

Peto chuckled as he went to take the two girls. “Well, I was wondering when someone would do this to us! Even the Briters got twins from Bubba before we got any from our children.”

He put one little girl in the crook of one arm, and twisted his other to take the second that Sam offered. “You’ll get used to doing this, Sam,” Peto assured him. “I learned how to be a father on twins.” He winked at his wife who, tired but grinning, sat by Lori’s bed.

“We’re not even sure which of the babies came first,” Lilla sighed cheerfully. “Lori’s girls or Jori’s boy! The girls came so quickly, one right after the other—”

“And Jori’s son was out and beginning to cough when I heard the first cries from over here!” Calla added.

“Wait a minute,” Peto said as he sat down with the newborns and grinned at their soft features. “So we have three birthdays on the *11th* Day of Harvest?” Peto wasn’t entirely sure of the time. Cloud cover had obscured the position of the stars.

Calla shrugged. “Or the 10th. Or both? We’re not entirely sure. They all came somewhere close to midnight. I guess the parents could choose which day to celebrate their birthdays.”

“Whatever you decide,” Peto said to Lori, “I have a suggestion—don’t tell any of the three who the oldest is, if you ever figure it out. The oldest will never let the other two forget it!”

Lori blushed. “I *did* tell Jori yesterday that I should deliver first since I was older than her by five minutes,” she confessed.

Peto smiled and looked down at the tiny faces. “Any names yet?”

Sam sighed. “Sort of. If it was a girl, we planned on naming her Mahrree. No one’s honored her yet. But now that there’s *two* . . .”

“Not a problem,” Peto declared. “This one’s Mahr, and this one’s Ree.”

Sam scowled as Lori giggled. “I don’t think so, Papa!”

“Well, then,” Peto said with a mischievous grin, “Mahrree One and Mahrree Two!”

“No!” Lori laughed.

“How about this,” Peto was on a roll, “Mahrree and Muggah:

Mahr and Mugg, just to cut down on confusion.”

“Ew! Stop! We’ll come up with something ourselves, Papa.”

Peto leaned back in the chair. “Ah, this takes me back to when I was a naïve first-time father. I remember lying next to Lilla with my two tiny girls that morning wondering what in the world I’d gotten myself into. And there was no turning back.”

Everyone laughed as Peto positioned the babies on his chest. “Yep. Feels just the same. But much better.”

“How so, Papa Peto?” Sam asked.

Peto waggled his eyebrows. “These aren’t *mine* during the night—they’re *yours*! Ah, my dear Lori and Sam. You thought you had some rough nights before? Twins? Well, they have to be extra beautiful or they’ll drive you insane every time you take care of them in the night.”

Lilla rolled her eyes. “And he’s acting as if *he* nursed them all night! All he ever did was poke me in the side and say, ‘Someone’s hungry. And while you’re up, get me a sandwich!’”

Everyone laughed but Peto, who didn’t want to disturb his granddaughters.

“I *still* have no memory of that, Lilla,” he said with feigned hurt. “And by your admission I said that only once. A man can’t be held responsible for what he mumbles in his sleep. Besides, I took care of changing their cloths.”

Over their chuckling they heard a soft knock at the door.

“I have two little ones named Ensio and Gersh who want to see their mama,” Shem said as he quietly walked into the room holding the children’s hands. His mouth fell open when he saw what Peto was holding. “No! Lori, *really*? Please tell me they’re twin girls.”

“They are, Uncle Shem,” Lori sighed happily as her son and daughter came hesitantly into the room, tired and disoriented to see so many people. “Look,” she said to her children, “I had one for each of you! Now you don’t have to argue over who gets to hold the baby.”

As Ensio and Gersh timidly crawled on to their mother’s bed, Shem took one baby girl from Peto, kissed her, and laid her gently on her four-year-old brother’s lap, then took the other baby girl, kissed her, and laid her on her two-year-old sister’s lap.

Sam was watching Shem closely, pointing at his motions, then dropped his hand. “Oh, no,” he whispered to Lori. “Now he’s mixed them up and I can’t remember which is which.”

Lilla chuckled softly and patted her son-in-law’s arm. “We did

that a few times. While not identical, they were very, very similar as newborns. Your wife may actually be Jori for all we know.”

Sam’s eyes widened in worry and he glanced at his wife as if making sure she was the right one.

Ensio and Gersh stared at the newly borns taking up their laps.

“Look at this,” Shem whispered. “Four small children and not one peep. A miracle! I’m truly impressed, Lori and Sam.”

Calla put her arm around her husband. “Have you been over to see Jori yet?”

“She didn’t have twins too, did she?” he exclaimed quietly.

“No, thank goodness!” Lilla laughed. “One *very* large baby boy.”

Shem looked down at his wife. “Let me guess—you saw Lori when you made that delivery to the storehouse here, didn’t you?”

Calla nodded proudly. “And I patted her belly. *Twice!*”

The lieutenant opened his eyes that morning and looked at the high ceiling of his bedroom. It was just another ordinary day.

Just like yesterday. Just like tomorrow. Nothing special.

He went to eat his breakfast alone in the large eating room.

By the time Lilla, Peto, Calla, and Shem headed west for the Eztates, the sun was high in the morning sky. They’d tried to get a few hours of sleep after the babies arrived and their siblings had settled down, but not successfully.

At first light, Weel let the neighbors know what happened, and the first shift of teenage girls eager to help the new mothers had arrived not long ago. Some of their brothers were already at work in the barn taking care of the sheep so the new fathers could sleep.

The Zenoses and Shins willingly handed over the four overexcited big brothers and sisters, and wearily mounted their horses, ready for a nap.

“And a hot soak,” Calla said, wincing on her saddle. Even with the sheepskins Looch gave her, she was very uncomfortable.

Lilla nodded in shared misery. “This used to feel different when I was younger,” she chuckled.

“You were just *shaped* differently when you were younger,” Peto said, thinking that would make her feel better.

Her raised eyebrows told him it didn't.

Shem burst out laughing. “Oh, Peto—you'll be paying for that one for a while. And there were witnesses, too!”

The four of them laughed as they nudged their horses to walk back to the Eztates.

Calla noticed Lilla was beaming. “Wonderful evening and night, wasn't it?” she asked her youngest sister.

“Hmm,” Lilla smiled. “Completely. Like a pot pie, where the golden crust is perfectly flaky, the carrots and potatoes are cut to the same size as the peas, and when you slice into it, you realize someone made the surprising inclusion of spinach leaves and just the right amount of fresh thyme. Perfection!”

“Ooh,” Shem muttered. “I know what I want for dinner tonight.”

“I'll give you my recipe,” Lilla said, a bit saucily, “and you can make plenty for all of us because today I am sleeping—not cooking!”

Every laughed, and Peto grinned at his wife. “So last night made up for yesterday?” he asked.

“Oh, yes,” she said fervently. “The Creator made up for it in grand style.” She looked up at the sky. “THANK YOU!” she hollered.

Peto and Shem flinched in embarrassment as a few people in their fields looked around in confusion. They waved uncertainly at the four riders, not sure what the loud thanks was for, and Shem and Peto waved back, trying not to snort.

Calla chuckled at her sister. “Why not? THANK YOU!” she called to the sky too.

Peto rubbed his forehead and glanced over at Shem.

He was regarding his wife oddly, and promptly smiled when she beamed at him.

Peto looked up as well. “Thank you!” he mouthed silently.

Chapter 12--“The Kiahs again?”

Three weeks later, on the 31st Day of Harvest, Anoki Kiah peered out the back door of the Second Resting Station. It was still dark but the sun would be rising in less than an hour. It'd be more appropriate for him to go out the front door as if he was off to milk the cow.

He crept across the Second Resting Station to the front door, opened it, stole down the stairs and over to the large barn. The two horses were ready, just as he'd left them a few hours before. He led them out of the barn hoping no one would hear the bridles jangling.

The front door opened again and Anoki watched the figure hurry to join him.

“You're sure you still want to do this?” he asked.

“I just want to be with you,” she answered. “And not be *here* anymore. It's so boring!”

Anoki grabbed her roughly and gave her a quick kiss. “This won't be, so mount up. We don't have much time.”

Priscill mounted as Anoki got on his horse. Without a word, they kicked their animals into a quiet walk to the canyon entrance.

Peto was making his way across Salem's greens, now back in full block production since the pox had passed. He was to receive the latest estimates of block production to make sure there'd be enough for their latest project. Peto sent up another prayer of gratitude that they had something to do since there were no crops to harvest.

Through the bustle of people and horses and wagons of ash, Peto spied his nephew and the supervisor waiting for him. But just as he waved to them, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

“Rector Shin, the tower message went up for you, but I don't think you heard the chimes over the noise here.”

Peto looked to the tower and exhaled.

Emergency. Second Resting Station. Rector Shin. Again.

Peto added that last part. This would be the fifth time in four weeks, and he knew what he'd find: Anoki Kiah likely violent. Again.

He was, however, a little surprised the message was for him, because after the last incident Shem told Peto he'd handle the next one himself. Shem felt that the former soldier and law enforcer probably needed a more forceful hand, and Shem didn't want any witnesses. He was only half joking when he said that.

Then again, there were probably more pressing matters than the troubled marriage of the Kiahs to call Shem away. Peto would do what he could and prayed he might be inspired with something more.

He turned to shrug in apology to Cephas and the supervisor, but they were already approaching.

His nephew asked discretely, “The Kiahs again?”

Peto only grumbled.

“I can hold down the fort, so to speak,” Cephas assured him.

“And I'll give him all the numbers,” the supervisor promised. “So far we seem to be on target with our projections.”

“Well, that's all I really wanted to know,” Peto said, shoving his notes into Cephas's hands. “Just update the lists, please. I'm needed elsewhere,” he sighed.

“Be sure to duck quicker this time, Uncle Peto,” Cephas said.

“Thanks for the reminder,” he mumbled as he rubbed his jaw. And it was just starting to feel better, too.

Shem rode his fastest up the narrow canyon trail. Years ago he would've made quicker progress, but large sections of the trail were still covered in ash and fallen trees, and normally surefooted Silver was skittish. Shem wasn't even sure if they came this way, but the ash before him looked recently disturbed.

Foolish! Foolish, dangerous, and stupid!

What were they thinking?! Where'd they think they were going?

Shem sighed in frustration as he again slid off his horse to lead her through another tangle of fallen trees. At least if *he* was slowed by the debris, they might be too. But they still had several hours' lead.

Shem climbed back on his horse and coaxed her into an uneasy trot up the ashy trail. He scanned below to see if any horses or bodies

had slipped down the steep slope to the river. How could they succeed on this terrain? Shem was one of the best horsemen around, and even he was struggling. He hoped they had stopped at the temporarily abandoned glacial valley fort. He could surprise them and then . . .

He needed some inspiration as to know what to do then. The image that kept coming was him beating Anoki into a bloody blob.

Shem shook his head to try to lose the thought. After all these years his aggressive nature still plagued him.

Perrin had said frequently that Shem had lost his fighting spirit after coming home to Salem, but that wasn't true. He just suppressed his urges again and again. He had plenty of practice at restraining his impulses for other inappropriate behavior while he still lived in the world. When he came home he just shifted his focus.

More often than he cared to admit he wanted nothing more than to act on the aggression he learned to hone in the army. But a man prone to violence was not what the Creator needed as guide.

Yet sometimes he wondered if at times like this the Creator didn't expect the former sergeant major to reach back into his training in order to level a man in less than two seconds.

As for Priscill . . . Shem shook his head in dismay.

She was barely sixteen and maybe didn't really know what she was agreeing to. Anoki was older by ten years, much larger and stronger, and maybe he pressured her into joining him.

But Shem knew he was being overly optimistic about her. Each time he saw the Thornes or received a report from Peto, Priscill was significantly less than satisfied with Salem. Her mind was still in Midplain and all the diversions it afforded. She was just starting to get the attentions of the young men there, had found ways to sneak away to watch the fights at the arenas, and thought the world was hers for the taking before she was taken from it.

Even after the quarantines had been lifted, Priscill wasn't interested in getting to know any of the neighboring girls or helping them with any of the cleanup projects, nor did she look at any of the young men who looked at her. Delia had made several fast friends, but no one was quite up to Priscill's expectations, much to Druses' grief.

As if Druses Thorne didn't have a hard enough life, she now had an utterly selfish daughter to add to her misery. It just wasn't fair. Somehow, sometime, the Creator would make it up to Druses Thorne. Shem already knew He would, but as his horse struggled against the drifting ash, he prayed the suggestion up one more time.

When Peto arrived at the Second Resting Station it was to find an incensed Versa hoeing the withered vegetable garden with ferocity that told Peto he best stay out of swinging range.

“Versa?” he called cautiously from twenty paces away and behind a wooden railed fence. “Something happen?”

“Oh, *nothing*, Rector Shin. Nothing *at all*.” A large clump of dirt flew off her hoe and landed somewhere behind Peto.

“So,” he said, “you’re just in the mood to . . . loosen the dirt?”

Her hoe came down hard on a rock, and Peto was amazed it didn’t crumble into gravel. She threw down the hoe, picked up the large rock, and heaved it toward the fence down from Peto. It cleared with impressive distance.

Peto took a few more steps backward.

“You’d think,” she said breathlessly as she picked up the hoe again, “that after all these years of being used as a garden there would be no rocks *left*!”

“Never quite understood that myself,” Peto responded. “The ground seems to have a way of pushing new ones up every year.”

“Well *why* would it do that?!” she shouted at him.

Peto took another step back and held up his hands. “I don’t really know, Versa. Seems to be one of the ground’s mysteries.”

He looked over to the back porch and saw Druses and Delia standing by the back door, their eyes red and puffy. Peto nodded to Druses and hoped she’d save him a safe spot on the covered porch.

He turned back to the garden. “Versa, I’m glad to see you’re doing something useful—” he ducked instinctively as another rock was hurled in his direction, “—but you’re going to be quite sore if you keep up this pace. In your state I don’t want to see you get hurt—”

She spun around to him. “Oh *really*? Well then, you’d be the *first* man who ever worried about me getting hurt!”

That took all the fight out of her and she dropped the hoe.

Peto ducked under the crossbeams of the fence and strode over to her. Gingerly he touched her on her arm. “Versa?”

“He’s gone,” Versa whispered bitterly. “And he took Priscill.”

Devastated for her, he did the bravest thing he could: he put his arms around her. “Oh, Versa, Versa . . . I’m so sorry.” She stood stiff and angry as Peto moved in closer to hold her. “You deserve so much

better than this.”

“I used to think that,” she said, trying to remain in control of her emotions. “But now I’ve decided I want no one. Nothing personal, Rector Shin, but men are nothing more than *selfish animals!*” She shouted those last words.

“Versula!” her mother admonished loudly from the back porch.

Peto waved it off. “No offense taken, Versa. With your past, I fully understand. But can I suggest something?” he said, pulling back to look at her but still holding her arms. “Consider that men are . . . men are *dogs*—”

“That’s the truth!” Versa exclaimed.

Peto chuckled. “Good! So we’re in agreement. But what I mean is, some dogs are sweet and gentle, others are barkers, others are good protectors, while others do nothing but eat whatever falls on the floor. It all depends on the kind of *breed* you get, Versa. The world breeds only the worst kinds of mutts. But in Salem we have many other kinds. Consider that you have yet to see all that’s available. Don’t dismiss all men just yet. A *couple* of us aren’t that bad.”

Versa’s eyes softened a notch. “You’re probably right. You and Guide Zenos are unlike any *dogs* I’ve ever met. But right now I’m not in the mood for any pets!”

“Understood, Versa. And you don’t have to be for a long time, either. Let’s go inside and talk.” He put his arm around her to steer her to the station.

Versa sighed. “We *do* need to talk. Rector Shin, I think we may have a bigger problem than you realize.”

“Oh?” he said as they approached the back porch.

“Anoki didn’t head for the dissenter colony as he was talking about the last time. He left a note. He went south, back to the world.”

Peto stopped. “No! He can’t! We need to tell Shem—”

“He already knows, Rector,” Druses said from the top of the stairs. “He left over an hour ago to track them down.”

“Alone?!”

Druses nodded and wrung her hands in worry. “There wasn’t time to get him any help. But he said he could handle it.”

Peto spun and looked to the canyon as if he could see anything. “You’re *sixty-three*, Shem,” he whispered. “You’re not as young as you used to be.” He turned back to the women. “Delia, run to the tower and have them send a message to Cephas, my assistant. Four men are needed here urgently on horseback and with emergency

packs. Then also tell the tower men to send a messenger to Woodson. It’s time to reopen the glacial fort.”

Delia ran down the steps to the tower as Peto and Versa went into the station and the vast eating room. An agitated Versa plopped on a chair and Peto sat down next to her, wringing his hands in worry. Druses sat across the table from them.

“Versa,” Peto began, his mind reeling but still trying to comfort the livid young woman next to him, “at times like this it’s—”

“Rector,” Versa interrupted him, “there’s something more you should know. Mother, go get the book please.”

Druses hurried to the gathering room.

“What is it?” Peto asked.

Versa sighed. “I don’t have any proof, just a suspicion. That’s why Guide Zenos pursued them without waiting for help.”

Her mother returned with a copy of Calla’s book and set it in front of Versa. She opened it to a marked page. “Here. This.”

Peto took the book. “The first Strongest Soldier Race?”

Versa pointed to a spot further down the page. “Right here.”

“Walickiah? He was a Guarder spy sent to keep an eye on Shem and my father. He stayed at the fort for less than two weeks. I was only a toddler at the time. I don’t see the significance, though.”

“He came to Salem, right? After Guide Zenos had him kidnapped?” Versa reminded him.

“Yes, but he disappeared before my family and I arrived here—oh, wait.” A thought came to him and he thumbed to a later chapter.

“I know what you’re looking for,” Versa said. “I have it marked. He changed his name once he came to Salem. He dropped the first two letters and was known instead as *Lickiah*.”

Peto’s face fell. “Lick-Kiah! Oh, no . . . no—”

“It gets worse, Rector,” Versa warned him. “Anoki told me once he had a brother—a captain in the army who called himself Lick. The brothers were ashamed of their father. Apparently he was an older man and a little crazed, always talking about secret places and spies influencing the politics of the world, and that if he was ever discovered by the Guarders he was supposed to kill himself. Anoki told me his father was sure people all around him were being abducted. When the sons became old enough to leave home, each took only a part of his name: Lick and Kiah.”

Peto held his face, nauseated with worry. “Is he still alive?”

Versa shook her head. “He died a few years ago. His wife died

when their sons were small.”

“So he made it back!” Peto breathed. “We were still in Edge when he vanished from Salem. He’d been here for years. Guide Gleace was working with him and he told us that Lickiah seemed happy, then suddenly he stopped meeting with Gleace and was gone. They assumed he died trying to get back to the world, but he *made it!*”

Versa sighed worriedly. “Not only did he make it back to the world but we may have brought one of his sons to Salem. I suppose coming here and learning what Salemites have done over the years— Well, all the crazy talk of his father now seems a lot less crazy.”

“Did Anoki tell you this?” Peto asked. “Mention anything at all about his father since he came here? Did he read this book?”

Versa shook her head. “Anoki reads nothing, and the last time he told me about his father we were still in Midplain. I didn’t put all of it together until Delia came across Walickiah’s name last night in her reading. But Anoki’s been so agitated, Rector. You’ve seen him. You even felt him! By the way, the bruise on your jaw has mostly faded.”

Peto unconsciously rubbed it. “That may explain his agitation. Shem and I could never get a reason from him as to why he was so angry and abusive. But if he suspects the man who had his father kidnapped, which lead to his instability later, was *also* the man trying to fix his marriage?” He gripped his head. “What a mess.”

“I’m so sorry,” Druses whispered. “If only I’d come when Guide Zenos tried to bring me years ago we would have avoided all this.”

Peto reached across the table and took her hand. “Don’t you dare try to take any blame for this. The only one responsible for Anoki’s behavior is Anoki. You did nothing but try to take care of your family the best you knew how.”

Druses sighed, unconvinced.

Delia bounded into the room. “Messages are sent, Rector.” She glanced down at the book. “I see you told him.”

Peto narrowed his eyes as another thought came to him. “Versa,” he said to her, “exactly *when* did you meet Anoki?”

Versa scrunched up her mouth as she pondered. “Uh, a little while after we moved to Midplain. About the same time your scouts found us that second time.”

“Think carefully, Versa. *Before* or *after* we found you?”

Versa began to squint. “After. *Right* after. Anoki was in law enforcement in Midplain. Their fort still employed enforcement officers. He was the one who came to our door late at night after the scouts

left. There’d been a report of someone lurking around our house.” She covered her mouth in understanding and turned to her mother.

Druses paled. “The next day there were soldiers, too. One was a captain and he asked us a lot of questions. I told them what I told everyone. I had two daughters, that Priscill was a niece, and we just moved there from Coast.”

“Do you remember that captain’s name?” Peto asked.

Druses shook her head. “No. What are you suspecting, Rector?”

“Could it be that the captain figured out who you were? Even though Lemuel was no longer actively searching for you, do you think that maybe the captain realized you were the general’s family and were still in hiding?”

Druses turned worriedly to her daughters, and Delia shrugged.

“Why?” Druses asked in dread.

Peto breathed out. “If someone suspected there was a ‘secret society’ that ‘influenced the politics’ and ‘kidnapped’ people in danger, who in the world would that society try to take away?”

Versa moaned loudly. “Lemuel Thorne’s family! Someone from that ‘society’ would try to rescue them!”

“I really hope I’m wrong,” Peto said, “but the more I think about it, the more I feel I’m not. Versa, if Anoki was Walickiah’s son, and if he and his brother were trying to vindicate their father somehow, wouldn’t it be a good idea to connect to the family most likely to be taken to Salem to find out if it existed?”

Versa’s upper lip curled in a sneer. “He never wanted me to meet his brother! If it *was* his brother who questioned us, I would’ve remembered his sniveling little face! Anoki probably sent him to question us to find out if we were the Thornes. He started courting me barely a week later and after a season I told him who we really were—NO!” she roared, shoved her chair away, and bolted for the door.

Peto caught up to her before she reached the handle. He wrapped his arms around her from behind as she flailed for the door. “What are you planning to do, Versa?”

“HE USED ME!” she shrieked as she fought against Peto’s grip. “He said he loved me, but it was just to find Salem! *I’LL KILL HIM!*”

“That’s what I thought,” Peto said calmly, struggling to keep her in his arms.

Druses only sat miserably and watched their wrestling match. Peto was alarmed at her lack of response until he realized Druses was likely used to Versa’s moments of rage.

As her rector fought to keep her daughter from clawing at the door, Druses said sadly, “Anoki came to me once and said if ever anyone came to take us away, we should go with them to be safe! He was waiting for that!”

Versa thrashed to free herself from Peto. “He told us to . . . follow your scouts! He was so eager . . . to leave, then as soon as we got on the trail, he—AUGH!”

She tried vainly to break from Peto’s locked-arms grip, but he was experienced in restraining much larger and stronger men.

“A MAP!” Versa screeched. “Rector, he wanted your son Relf to draw a map on the ground for him!”

Peto held her fast. “Versa, calm down. There’s no way you can catch him, but Guide Zenos is chasing him *right now*.”

Versa writhed again, almost freeing herself from Peto’s clutches. “If he hurts the guide, I’ll RIP HIM APART!”

“Right now—*oof*—I believe you could.”

Druses and Delia shrank at Versa’s fury.

“Now, Versa,” Peto said in his best soothing voice as he labored to hold on to her, “no one’s more protected than Guide Zenos. He can handle this. You need to believe that we can—*ow*— take care of this.”

Versa lunged one more time but her strength was failing.

Peto was relieved—he was taxed as well.

She eventually went limp in his arms. Peto released her just enough to turn her around and catch her in a hug. This time she let him hold her as she began to quake in a tremendous effort to not release any tears.

“Why did he leave, Rector? If he was so eager to get here, why was he so eager to go?”

“I’m not sure,” Peto said, “Unless . . .”

“Unless what? Just say it, Rector.”

Peto sighed as he smoothed her wild blond locks in a fatherly manner. “Unless he only wanted to know the way here. Once he had that, there was no more reason to stay. I’m so sorry,” he said as he felt her body shudder.

“So why take my sister?” she whimpered.

Peto looked at Druses and Delia for ideas.

But Druses had new tears trickling down her cheeks and Delia only stared blankly at the table.

“I guess we’re all wondering that, Versa.”

Shem sucked in his breath as the glacial valley opened in front of him. It was covered in ash, looking like the Snowing Season had dropped two feet of gray snow instead of white. A distinct furrow was cut straight for the hidden fort, but from that distance he couldn't tell if the tracks extended beyond it. He kicked Silver into a run and reached the fort in nearly record time.

He bounded into the fort and found it silent. He ran down to the supply room; someone had been there. The carefully folded blankets and stacked packs of dried food were in disarray, as if someone had rushed in there, grabbed as many supplies as they could, and ran back out. Shem snatched an emergency pack and headed to his horse.

“Sorry, girl,” he whispered as he mounted again. “No rest just yet. See those tracks ahead of us? Salem's about to be exposed.”

He rode as quickly as he dared, turning over in his mind events from over forty years ago. Had he made a mistake in bringing Captain Walickiah to the forest?

No, the impression had come to him very clearly then: Walickiah couldn't stay in Edge. He'd trained by the Guardians to capture and kill Perrin's children and mother-in-law. It took Salem several moons of talking and working with Walickiah to turn him right, but he *was* a changed man, no doubt. Shem had even visited with him a couple of years later and they laughed about the past. Then a few years after that Walickiah was gone.

Shem was sure he hadn't made a mistake all those years ago, so why did he feel terrible about it now?

Peto was waiting outside of the Second Resting Station as Cephas and the four requested scouts came riding up fast.

“Thank you for your willingness and speed,” he called as they reined their horses to a stop. “We have a real problem. Anoki Kiah and Priscill Thorne have decided to return to the world.”

The five men groaned.

“My reaction exactly,” Peto said. “They left approximately four hours ago—”

“Four hours?!” Cephas exclaimed. “Uncle Peto—”

“I know, but the trail’s in bad condition so there’s still hope. Especially since two hours ago Guide Zenos headed out after them.”

Cephas paled. That didn’t sound like good news at all.

One of the scouts winced. “But Rector Shin, Guide Zenos has said he was never to return to the world. The danger would be—”

“Yes, there’s a bit of a concern there as you can see,” Peto cut him off. “You four need to help Guide Zenos. Catch up to him, help him find Anoki and Priscill, do whatever else you can . . . I don’t even know what you’ll find up there. Woodson’s gathering another dozen scouts right now to send as back-up.”

The men somberly nodded.

Peto sighed before saying, “Please, just find Shem. He still thinks he’s only twenty-three years old.”

The men smiled sadly and kicked their horses in a run.

Peto turned to Cephas. Before he could speak, Cephas said, “Twelve more men? I’ll see if Woodson needs any help supplying them. We’ve notified the regular glacial fort staff and they’re getting ready to head back up now since the volcano seems quiet again. The fort should be back in operation before dinner.”

Peto smiled at his nephew whose steadiness he coveted for himself. “Well done, Cephas. Please, tell no one else about Uncle Shem chasing after two runaways. We don’t need to alarm everyone. Oh, and Cephas—”

“Tell Aunt Lilla and Aunt Calla that you and Shem don’t know when you’ll be home tonight, right?”

Peto squeezed Cephas’s arm. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Cephas nodded and turned his horse back to Salem.

Shem reached the end of the glacial valley and evaluated the footing at the narrow path going down the canyon. It was worse than the ride up.

“How’d they make it down there?!”

His horse’s ears twitched in wonderment too.

“Guess we’re going to follow the disturbance in the ash,” he muttered, “and look for anything that might have slipped and fallen.”

Silver stepped nervously at that, but slowly began down the obscured path.

“Wish I had a long knife,” Shem murmured.

Versa was stewing on one of the long sofas in the gathering room when Peto came back into the station. Druses was waiting for him.

“Are they going up the mountain?” she asked.

“Yes. The mountain will be crawling with Salemites again soon, as it should be. We’ll find them, I’m sure.”

Druses’ face was drawn and pale. “I’m so sorry about all of this trouble. After all you’ve done for us—”

Peto pulled her into a hug and she stiffened at his touch, even though it was nothing but fraternal. He had discovered early on that the Thorne women weren’t comfortable with physical contact, especially from males.

But Lilla had told Peto repeatedly that just because someone wasn’t comfortable with hugging it didn’t mean they didn’t want the comfort. She had taught him the art of the benign brotherly embrace.

“Not at all, Druses, not at all,” he told Druses as she softened. “The Creator’s work is to find those who are lost, confused, or alone. There’s nothing greater that we can do than to bring people home.”

“What will they do to Priscill?” she asked nervously.

“They’ll treat her very well, Druses. Except for Shem. He’ll give her a mighty lecture before he hugs her and hauls her back.”

Druses snorted softly as she stepped out of his embrace, but kept a hand on his arm. Progress.

“Sometimes I wonder what Priscill would’ve been like with a father like you, or a grandfather like Guide Zenos. I did all that I could, but raising children alone . . .” She sighed in frustration.

“But raising children is so difficult,” Peto continued her thought, “that even two parents are overwhelmed. Many of us are lucky to have grandparents to help.” His voice quieted. “But even that’s no guarantee. Once I lost my father I knew I’d lose my son Young Pere as well. Even with two parents, two sets of aunts and uncles, and a grandmother, we couldn’t keep him here. I really do understand how you feel,” he assured her. “While our family produced a responsible Relf, we also produced an irrational Young Perrin. That must say something about who they are as individuals. You were given a powerful Versa and a flighty Priscill. Parts of them were decided long ago, before they were born. Those parts are out of our control.”

Druses began to cry softly and allowed Peto to hug her again. “I

believe you're right but I still feel like such a failure. How do you get your heart to believe what your mind already knows?"

Peto patted her back. "As soon as I figure it out I'll let you know."



Shem went around every bend, past every blind point, and through every low hanging tree expecting to see the two horses and riders ahead of him, but there was no one.

Every mile he became more restless. He hadn't been this close to the world since he left it twenty-six years ago. So many memories came back as he rode closer to the overlook. It was like hearing a melody from long ago, and it was a melody he hated.

The canyon was eerie—there wasn't an animal or bird anywhere—but still familiar enough. He decided he would stop at the overlook and go no further. If he didn't see Anoki and Priscill, then it meant they'd gone to the boulders and it'd be hopeless after that.

He reached the overlook but saw no one. Discouraged, he gazed at Edge as he'd done so many times in the past.

It was still there. He was overcome with an odd mixture of nostalgia and loathing as he viewed the mostly gray village.

To the right was the fort, and his eyes bulged at its size: five times larger than when he left. The Briters' old farm was completely engulfed, and the new front gates sat at the edge of the village. Shem let out a low whistle as he considered how many soldiers could be housed there. He'd heard how large the fort had grown, but it didn't seem real until he saw it sprawled out sloppily across the northern edge of Edge. His eyes traveled up to the tree line and his favorite fresh spring, but he startled when he noticed the condition of the forest: bare. Half of the trees had fallen and the rest of the standing trees were stripped of all vegetation. Shem gasped in surprise.

You understand now, don't you? You had to see it for yourself.

"It's dead!" he whispered.

Yes, it is.

"All of it! I mean, not just the trees. I don't see *any* steam rising or any geysers or—"

That's right. The eruption changed everything. All the pressure that fed the mud volcanoes, the hot springs, the poisonous gases—all of it was channeled to awaken Deceit. There's nothing left. Look in the distance and you can see Deceit. Or what's left of it.

Shem sagged in disbelief. “That enormous hill flowing south? It’s . . . That’s . . .” Only after a long time of staring in astonishment was he able to focus again on the forest and the boulder field below him. “What about the trails through the boulder field?”

The First Resting Station collapsed in the land tremor, as did four of the paths. There’s only one way through now.

“Does anyone down there know that?”

Only one person, three weeks ago, discovered just how dead the forest is. But that will change soon. Patrols began again two weeks ago and eventually they’ll be brave enough to enter the forest.

“Was that one person Young Pere?”

Yes. He made it all the way through the forest on his birthday.

“Was he trying to come home?”

Not really. His heart wasn’t in it but Perrin got him as far as the boulder field. Young Pere was right in front of the entrance to the remaining foot path, but Perrin didn’t reveal it.

“I can almost feel him,” Shem said wistfully. “Seeing the command tower, it’s almost as if Perrin’s there again.”

That’s because he is.

“Can’t he break away? Only for a moment?”

No. He promised Mahrree he’d always stay by his side. You really don’t need him, though.

Shem sighed. “I know. It’d just be good to feel him again.”

He knows you’re here and he wants your opinion about the fort.

Shem grinned. “It’s an abomination! Look at that thing! Lemuel has no sense of style or organization.”

He’ll be glad to hear of your disapproval. He was relieved to see some of the letters for FORT SHIN had fallen off the inner wall. He didn’t want his name attached to it anymore.

“What letters are remaining?”

Just the T, H, I, and N.

Shem smiled. “So it’s THIN? Rather weak and appropriate,” he chuckled. As he surveyed the sprawling compound, a thought formed.

I know what you’re thinking and you can’t do it.

“Why not?”

You know why not.

“I used to do it. Sneak in, take things, sneak out. No one ever saw me. I could do it again. I could go right in there and take *him* out.”

Now tell me the reasons why you can’t.

Shem blinked back tears. “Because it’s not the Creator’s will. Because Young Pere has to make that choice for himself.”

And because they’d hear your knees cracking as you’d sneak in during the night, according to Perrin.

Shem snorted. “True, true. Oh, but I’m so close,” he whispered.

That’s not why you were allowed to come this far.

“It was to see the forest, wasn’t it?”

Yes. You realize what this means?

Shem exhaled. “Salem’s no longer protected by nature. Anyone can stroll up through the trees and find their way to the boulder field. But at least that’s still a barrier.”

And how much of a barrier will it be to desperate people?

Shem frowned. “We tried that once. Climbing over the boulders? It was difficult but it took only a few hours to traverse.”

And with the threat of the terrifying forest gone, traversing the boulders will no longer seem so daunting.

“But no horses can make it through, can they?”

No, they can’t. That will give you time.

“You mean, time once they begin to come?”

Yes.

“When? How long?”

When they feel the need. When they become desperate. How long would it take you to become desperate if you lived in the world?

Shem rubbed his face anxiously. “One day! But then, that’s because I’m a Salemite and know there’s a better way. We need to get ready, don’t we? We’re prepared already, but when are they coming?”

Just remain prepared, Shem, then it won’t matter when they come, be it next season or in ten years. Just always be ready and there’ll be no need to fear. Head back now, before it gets dark.

“There’s nothing more I can do here? No one I can see?”

No, I’m sorry. Go home.

“What about Anoki and Priscill?”

They’ve brought their own troubles upon themselves. There’s no help for them now. Go home, Shem.

Shem turned his horse and started back up the trail.

Peto didn't know what else to do but sit next to a glowering Versa. He positioned himself judiciously on the sofa—close enough to help but far enough away out of swinging distance. She hadn't touched her midday meal, and now Peto held a full plate of dinner.

Delia didn't dare come into the gathering room anymore, and a tearful Druses had gone to lie down in her room. Two neighbor women who had come to help comfort Druses were now cleaning up the kitchen. They peered through the doorway to see what else they could do but seemed to hope that Peto didn't need assistance.

Versa continued to stare the wall, and Peto was sure that at any moment the wood planking would splinter in shame.

“It's all right to weep, Versa. It'll make you feel better.”

“Never let them see your tears,” she muttered severely.

“What was that?”

Her glare met his eyes. “Never let them see your tears. It's what I learned, Rector. But since you were never a girl in the world, it's little wonder that you don't know that. You heard about the rape gangs?”

“Yes, unfortunately I have.”

“Soldiers,” Versa said with measured fury. “They always had their pick of sows, but occasionally they'd go out as a group looking for something new. Usually it was after they took over a village or there'd been unrest in an area. They'd wait for the girls leaving a shop or coming home from school. The ones who cried and trembled when they saw them, that's who they went for. *The weak ones.*”

“I'm guessing you never appeared weak,” Peto ventured.

She nodded, gazing at the wall again. “I'd stare them down. They wanted tears and I refused to give them any. I think they felt powerless and bullied by their commanders and the general, so they went out and bullied someone else. They'd take the girls who whimpered and pleaded, but I'd stand my ground, pull out my knife, and never shed a tear. A few still tried,” she glanced at Peto, who was subtly leaning back to a safer distance, “but I was too practiced with my knife.” She smiled partway, a dark, terrifying smile.

“I remember what you told me about that,” Peto said, “with the men who tried to take advantage of you, and I'll *never* forget.” He fought the urge to protectively cross his legs.

She nodded smugly, but he noticed the growing despair behind her confident façade.

Again she turned to the wall. “Don't give anyone your tears or you give him control over you. That's just the way I see it, Rector.”

“No one wants to control you. We just want you to feel better.”

She scoffed at that, but Peto tried one more time. “Have I told you lately how sorry I am for the existence you had in the world?”

A corner of her mouth went upward. “After the fifth time, I told you to quit it. But . . . I appreciate hearing it today.”

They sat in silence until Peto picked up her plate.

“You need to eat something, Versa,” he said gently. “I’m not going to promise this will make you feel better, but at least your stomach will stop rumbling.”

“Why?” Versa said shortly.

Peto blinked. “Because when your stomach has food in it, it—”

Versa rolled her eyes. “I mean, why should I bother eating? Why do *you* care? I still don’t understand that.” She turned to face him properly. “All we’ve done is bring aggravation to Salem. You and the guide should have left us Thornes down there, Rector Shin. We would’ve been better off covered in ash. Everyone would be.”

Peto set the plate down and experimentally put his hand on her shoulder. Even that felt cold and rigid. But when she didn’t shrug him off, he said, “I don’t believe that, and neither do you. You’re not like *him*, Versa. You’re not like your father. I know you worry about that.”

Peto could see she wasn’t accepting that.

“Remember how we strained the water for the first two weeks after Deceit erupted? To make sure all the particles were removed before we drank it?”

Versa sighed before answering a slow, “Yes.” It had been a tedious and messy task that everyone was glad to be done with.

“And the water that ran from the cloth filters was clear and palatable. Versa, you are like that filter. All the filth the Thornes possessed, you’ve cleaned from the water. Their influences can go no further than you. Your mother says you’re like the general, but you’re nothing like him. You’re strong and solid in ways he’ll never be but wishes he were. The destruction of the Thorne line ends with you and your sister Delia. Your mother ended the muck of the Snyder line herself. Your descendants will look to you as the best beginning, as the women who changed their futures.”

Versa scoffed. “Rector Shin, you Salemites are far too optimistic.”

“I grew up in the world, Versa,” he reminded her. “I still possess a great deal of its cynicism, but not about you. You belong in Salem.”

“I just can’t see it,” she whispered, and Peto heard her desperate

wish that she could.

“Then it’s a good thing that the Creator can,” Peto told her. “He was the one who impressed the guide that it was time to try again to retrieve your family.”

“Maybe Guide Zenos misunderstood the Creator.”

Peto shook his head. “I’ve known Shem my entire life. He never misses anything. You were meant to be here, and whatever sacrifice it takes to keep you safe is worth it. Even my father wanted to bring your family here for many years, and every time we tried, it was because he had asked to send out the scouts. He’d be thrilled to know you finally made it. I’ve never regretted you coming, nor has Shem. It seems our families are meant to intertwine this way. I often find myself thinking of you and your sisters as my nieces. Because Versa, we *are* all family.”

Versa’s gaze fixed again upon the wall, her eyes red and puffy but with no tears. “I fear Anoki’s going to ruin everything, Rector Shin,” she whispered.

Peto sat back and stared at the wall as well. “The world’s a lot tougher than we realize. I joked with my father and brother-in-law a long time ago that if my middle son were let loose on the world, he’d destroy it. It’s been a year now and I’m fairly confident Young Pere didn’t cause Mt. Deceit to erupt, although some of his cousins believe he must have had something to do with it.” He smiled feebly and looked askance at Versa.

Her face didn’t move.

Peto sighed. “We just need to trust the Creator will take care of everything, somehow. It’s all part of His plan.”

“And what if the Creator doesn’t want to this time?” Versa asked. “What if we’ve disappointed Him too often?”

Peto exhaled. He’d asked himself that very question before. “Versa, there’s a lot you don’t know about fathers since you never had a good one. But the very best will love you no matter how often you disappoint them, and they’ll do everything they can to help you fix the problems as long as you’re doing your part. The Creator is the father of us all, and the very best there’s ever been. Have some faith that He can still make miracles for you.”

Versa scoffed. “Place of miracles. That’s what Guide Zenos said. If the Creator can fix *this* and prove to me that men aren’t dogs—present company excluded—then I really will believe in miracles.”

Chapter 13--“If you don’t win, what’s the point in playing?”

The lieutenant stared at the stack of books that towered precariously on the grand desk of the main study in Thorne’s mansion. Command School had come to him, along with his own personal professor. He was an elderly man with a fringe of white hair around his bald head, and a face wrinkled in a permanent and flabby scowl.

He’d arrived the afternoon before, on the 31st Day of Harvest, in a carriage filled with textbooks. Idumea was still unstable, now battling outbreaks of violence, so General Thorne decided it best to keep Lieutenant Thorne away where he could study without distractions, beginning the 32nd Day of Harvest.

The lieutenant wasn’t entirely happy about that. He’d had free rein in Edge and the fort for several weeks, only glancing at the books the general had sent up earlier with his promotion. But now his long holiday was over.

He eyed Professor Slither warily, who huffed and creaked with every step. He’d retired a few years ago, having had the distinction of being the only professor to teach every topic in Command School.

“The general wishes you to be prepared for any situation,” the professor droned, “so our task is to complete your education as quickly as possible.” He dropped himself into a large padded chair behind the desk and regarded his luxurious surroundings. “What a marvelous setting for my retirement,” he decided.

Professor Slither made it clear to Lieutenant Thorne that he now had not only a tutor but a chaperone, guardian, and all-around busy-body. Slither had been given the main floor bedroom where he could watch on the lieutenant’s movements in and out of the mansion. The lieutenant could see his angle: as long as Slither made himself useful,

he could live nearly like a king in the general’s mansion.

“So, let’s get to it,” Slither said, popping into his mouth a pastry that he’d requested the cook whip up for him.

The lieutenant obediently removed the top book from the pile, careful not to topple it. The book was leather-bound with the pages cut precisely. *Basic Combat*.

At least the titles were to the point. Hopefully the writing would be just as concise or this could take years. He opened the book to see the name of the author: Qayin Thorne.

“We’ll begin with that one,” Slither intoned. “I’ve brought the full collection of Command School works and even a couple of the classics from the old High Generals mansion.”

The lieutenant nodded dully as he pulled book after book off of the pile. *Mace Strategies in the Great War. Negotiation Tactics. World Leadership. Caring for Your Horse so It Cares for You.*

The lieutenant tried not to smirk as he lifted another title: *World History*. He’d already read that one, but by another author with a different take on events. The book at the bottom of the pile surprised him because he’d already seen that title: *Basic Combat*.

“One of the classics that I mentioned,” Slither said. “Written by your *alleged* great-grandfather, Relf Shin. Apparently Thorne was rather fond of the old text and wanted you to have this.”

The lieutenant tried not to sigh. He’d envisioned Command School to be like his first few weeks of training, only with more action and swordplay. But as he looked at the list of terms, dates, and names he was expected to memorize for next week’s test, he realized this was going to be as tedious as studying to be a doctor.

And it was, as Slither merely read from the texts, droning on dully for half an hour about Qayin’s Thorne Basic Combat theories until the lieutenant finally heard something perplexing.

“—battle is always a game of Dices, with fate choosing the victor, favoring the man with an extra silver chip.’ You have a question, Lieutenant?”

The lieutenant’s mouth was pursed. Fate? Extra silver chips that didn’t belong? Did that mean planning was useless? Witness his “perfectly planned” attempt to enter the world just over a year ago and how that was a dismal failure. But extra silver chips?

“How many men play Dices with their own silver chips, sir?”

Slither smiled slyly. “Only the ones who intend to win, Lieutenant. We can’t leave important matters up to fate. Dices is a game of fate, and we have to force fate.”

Well, none of that made any sense. So success was neither planning nor fate but force?

“But isn’t it obvious, sir, that in Dices some of the silver chips are counterfeit? If suddenly there are three chips instead of one—”

Slither held up a finger. “That’s when ‘force’ comes into play. If the general is playing Dices, do you really think anyone is going to accuse *him* of throwing in the counterfeit chip?”

So it was force that won. Cheating. ‘Fate’ favored the bullies.

“So do whatever it takes to win?” the lieutenant said, his old cynicism reviving.

“Of course,” said Slither easily. “By the scowl on your face you think I’m talking about cheating, don’t you? But that’s not what it is. The point is to thwart your enemy’s plans then take advantage of the situation gone wrong. The general’s masterful at that. Witness what happened at the border battle for Idumea. Thorne knew there were men on both sides hoping to take out Sargon and himself, so he threw in a few unexpected silver chips to confuse the game. Killing Lick was one of them. According to tradition, the Assisting Battle Commander, Captain Lick, should have been riding on Thorne’s *left* side, where you were. But he was on his right so Thorne could kill him with his sword arm more easily. There was at least one plot to eliminate you, Lieutenant, and its mastermind was Lick.

“With Lick gone, his men—whoever they were—were confused. Was that cheating, to preserve you and dispatch your enemy? Only a fool would think so. Then Thorne pulled out another silver chip—you. Sending you to the other side confused the plotters against him and changed all the angles.”

“The angles?” the lieutenant repeated, barely keeping up.

“The angles at striking him, of course. You and your horse going to Sargon’s side shifted the line down several feet. Thorne had recognized the soldier who he suspects fired the first shot. Years ago that officer had sworn to Thorne’s face that he’d kill him someday. So he positioned you right next to him.

“When Thorne stepped out into the neutral area, he purposely walked in a diagonal to further shift the angles of those he suspected

to take a shot at him. When he shook Sargon’s hand, he stepped in such a way that Sargon acted as his shield. But the officer next to you was still determined to take the shot. Of course, the small arrow that hit Sargon was intended for Thorne.

“Thorne also suspected Yordin was going to attack Sargon, then himself. Thorne’s rearranging of the players changed all of that. Yordin’s man panicked, misfired, and hit Thorne’s body shield instead of his arm. Then everyone else panicked. Thorne created chaos.” Slither held out his hands as if displaying a work of art. “The same chaos that occurred in Moorland decades ago, the same chaos that defeated the Guarders and let your supposed grandfather claim victory. Chaos, with a little bit of fate and his secret body armor, allowed Thorne to prevail once again.”

The lieutenant wasn’t sure of any of that. “Chaos *is* fate?” When Slither rolled his eyes, he asked, “So what do you mean by fate?”

Slither raised his eyebrows. “Fate! The will of the stars, boy! The desire of nature and its laws. Who it decides should prevail.”

The lieutenant frowned. “Decides? So fate has a *consciousness*?”

Slither cocked his head. “Consciousness? Of course not!”

“But if it *decides* and has a *desire*, that suggests some kind of knowledge, ability to think—”

“Are you saying that I claim there’s a higher consciousness at work in the world?!” he boomed.

Not sure why that notion agitated the old man so much, the lieutenant said a meek, “No, sir.”

Slither exhaled. “Consider it’s luck, when nature agrees—” He stopped, realizing the word ‘agrees’ would also suggest a consciousness. “When what you want is in harmony with nature’s will—”

Again he stopped, and the lieutenant nearly smirked because “will” also suggested a higher consciousness which seemed to irk Slither to no end.

“It’s random,” Slither finally decided. “Like waves at the sea. Ever been to the sea, boy?”

The lieutenant shook his head.

Slither nodded authoritatively. “The waves at the sea move in random ways. Some speculate it’s tied to the moons’ phases, but that’s foolishness. Every once in a while a giant wave crashes down on visitors. Now, is nature manifesting fury that people are walking on its

sands? Of course not! It's just coincidence. The lucky ones are those who nature's coincidences favor. Pure chance. Understand?"

The lieutenant didn't, seeing too many problems with the logic where nature and fate favor, yet don't favor, and where things happen purely by luck because nature says so without saying anything.

"So take advantage of the situation? Like march on Idumea *because* of the volcano?"

"Yes," Slither said. "Work the situation. Now some people think that's cheating, but those are people of lower intelligence. *We* play smart. There *is* no cheating. At least, not for people like us."

"How so?"

Slither's permanent scowl deepened, as if he were offended. "Cheating implies going against rules but rules change. Citizens are opposed to us *breaking* the rules but not with us *changing* them."

How convenient, the lieutenant nearly blurted. Instead he said, "So leaders are *above* the rules and change them when necessary, just like in Dices where the players can decide which silver chip they agree is the real one. Just toss the rules?"

Slither sighed, his patience thinning like his hair. "The citizenry needs to follow the rules, otherwise we'd have too much disorder to manipulate. We aren't *above* the rules, just to the *side* of them. Why is this so difficult for you?!"

The lieutenant shrugged. "I'm just trying to understand—"

"You don't *need* to understand, boy. You need to *accept* or you start sounding like a debat—" He stopped before finishing the word and instead glared at the young officer.

"Yes, sir." He hadn't realized until then that Mahrree Shin was coming out of his mouth again. "Sorry. So the general needs the citizens to follow his rules which are in the best interest of the world—"

Slither scoffed. "In the best interest of the *general*, boy! Start thinking like one of the elite! We let the world *believe* the laws are in their best interest, but every leader knows the first interest is himself. Why do you think so many men are hungry for the position? Harmony is maintained when the citizenry *believes* their leader has them as the first priority.

"If they believe their general is not concerned about them, they'll rebel like they did against the Administrators," Slither continued ear-

nestly. “So Thorne provides what they want as long as it doesn’t conflict with his personal goals. Free entertainment at the arenas and amphitheaters. No restrictions caused by marriage. Access to cheap vials and mead. He gives the sheep what they want, within reason. And those who are unreasonable, he eliminates. ‘The braying donkey takes the arrow.’ It’s simple and it’s worked for decades.”

The lieutenant remembered how his grandmother supposedly was killed by arrows in the forest. He hoped he didn’t appear to be braying, but he really wanted to know. “Sir, what happens when people speak the truth but it’s in conflict with what General Thorne says?”

Slither narrowed his eyes. “You need to be careful how you *phrase things*, Lieutenant Thorne,” he said evenly, pointing a chubby finger at him. “You’re suggesting there are truths that are unconditional. But you and I both know, *don’t we*, that truth is whatever someone believes to be the truth. There’s no one set of true guidelines. Oh, there was as one time,” he waved impatiently, “a whole book my generation was forced to believe. The best thing the Administrators did was demonstrate that The Writings was an elaborate scheme developed by the greatest ancient dictator, some man who styled himself the Creator. All he did was ‘create’ a totalitarian society that believed whatever he told them. They followed his teachings without question—” Slither stopped, seemingly caught up in a thought.

The lieutenant shifted in his chair, waiting.

Shaking himself, Slither focused back on the lieutenant. “Understand this very carefully: whatever one man, or *woman*, proclaims to be the truth is true only to that person. It’s not as if there are any truths that all people agree to—”

“Sir,” the lieutenant interrupted, knowing that it’d provoke the old man, but he really wanted to know, “are you *sure*? Wouldn’t all people agree that murder is wrong?”

Slither’s smile seemed more like a sneer. “You know, at first I didn’t believe who they said you were, but you really are *her* grandson, aren’t you?” he said quietly. “You sound just like her, as if you inherited her mind. What a pity.”

The lieutenant bit the tongue he inherited. “I’m sorry, sir. I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but if I understand the reasoning, then I can accept the ideas. I just feel the need to discuss them.”

Slither slammed the book on the side table. “No, you don’t. Especially *you!*”

“Sir, please . . . why?”

Slither pointed. “That question, right there—causes the biggest problems in the world. Accept that it’s not for you to know why because the more often you ask that question the harder life will be! Creet, you really *are her* grandson, aren’t you!” he said in disgust.

The lieutenant had to ask. “You mean Mahrree Shin?”

“Who else? Probably not a man alive who knows more about her than I do besides Thorne. I was attending the university in Mountseen when she attended the women’s college. Her father used to be a respected teacher, but his daughter?” Slither scoffed a bitter laugh. “That was her downfall, Lieutenant Thorne. Her insisting to know the truth, which no one can know because there is *no one truth!* She wasted hours of her life in debate, insisting on asking ‘Why’ to everything. She was insufferable and I had to endure her for hours each week because no women would debate her. The professors thought it’d be amusing to have her take on the men!” He exhaled irately and looked out the window.

Lieutenant Thorne couldn’t help himself. “Did you ever have to debate her?”

Slither’s brittle gaze shifted from the window to the lieutenant. “Exceptionally fortunate for you that you look nothing like her, or we wouldn’t even be in the same room, but yes, I did.”

Feeling brave, the lieutenant asked, “What was the topic, sir?”

Slither’s face barely moved. “Why is there violence in the world.”

The lieutenant, considering the old man wasn’t armed, risked one more question. “And what was the conclusion to the debate?”

Slither’s jaw shifted. “Men cause wars. The world would be better with women in charge,” he said coldly.

The lieutenant smirked, knowing it’d make Slither smirk as well. “Rather ironic conclusion, isn’t it, sir? Considering everything she did and caused?”

“Indeed,” Slither smiled as well.

The lieutenant nearly grinned, because Slither had fallen for an old debater’s trick: get the other side to smile with you. Common ground, then upper hand.

“Your grandmother caused more violence than any man, before

Chapter 13--“If you don’t win, what’s the point in playing?”

or since!” Slither declared, almost cheerfully as if regaling a young admirer with tales of great heroics. “It was only later that I was able to dissect her arguments and realize how she twisted ideas to completely confuse me. It was no surprise years later to hear how she deceived the hapless colonel.”

He looked back out the window, pensive.

“Remember, Lieutenant—the more beautiful the woman, the greater her ability to destroy you. When you look for companionship, love only the homely ones. They’ll always adore you for the attention you give them since no one ever gives them any. The beautiful ones will twist you, and even when you come around to their side they’ll never give you a second glance.”

Slither stopped, suddenly aware he had drifted far off topic. “You can finish the chapter yourself,” he said, nudging the book on the side table. “Write me a summary of it when you’re finished.” He stood up and shuffled off to the kitchen.

Chapter 14--“The first thing we do is remove a problem.”

The next day, Sergeant Onus looked up from his desk in his office on the western edge of the fort. His window gave him an excellent view of what used to be the forest.

Today was the 33rd Day of Harvest. They'd expected news by the 87th Day of Weeding, but their estimates were just guesses. No one knew the real distance. The time of five weeks was just a goal.

And then Mt. Deceit got in the way.

What that did to the timetable, Onus couldn't imagine. It was now a full ten weeks since they left. While it appeared that the majority of Mt. Deceit had traveled south, there was no way to see how much may have gone north. There might be nothing left at all.

Onus watched the dying tree line. Two soldiers on horseback trotted along it, scanning up into the forest easily now that there was nothing but gray tree trunks. Major Twigg had begun patrols a few weeks ago. Onus had been itching to get soldiers along the edge again, just to see. Having someone else suggest the patrols removed Onus from any suspicion, but he did, however, volunteer to supervise the soldiers so that he'd be the first to receive their reports.

But they needed to get *into* the forests. There was nothing left there to harm anyone, but centuries of fear and mistrust were hard to overcome. Conquering the forest would be first, then the boulders—

Shouts came from the compound, his name being called by a soldier sprinting to his office.

“Sergeant Onus! Come quickly! We've found survivors!”

Onus jumped from his chair and rushed out the door. “Where?” he said, running for the tree line.

“Up there, sir,” the soldier panted as he ran back to the dead forest. “Looks like two bodies, up in the woods up a few hundred paces. Should we retrieve them?”

“You left them there?!” Onus bellowed. “Why?”

They were almost at the forest’s edge and a collection of thirty soldiers stood along the border pointing to shapes along a ridge.

Onus didn’t even pause but ran straight into the ashy forest. “Three brave men, follow me!” he shouted as he scrambled up an incline to the two bodies. He heard a few more men following him, tripping and stumbling as they tried to catch up.

Onus reached the two people and cautiously touched their hands. “They’re alive!” he shouted. “Unconscious and probably dehydrated, but alive! Let’s get them to the surgeon!”

Ten minutes later the soldiers and Onus, carrying a man and a teenage girl, jogged to the surgery of the fort. Shouts went ahead of them that survivors had been found alive in the forest.

By the time they reached the surgery, several officers were running to meet them, including the young lieutenant who must have snuck past his new tutor.

“Survivors?!” Lieutenant Thorne exclaimed as the two people were rushed down the hall to private rooms. “From the volcano? That was two moons ago! Where were they found?”

A soldier gestured. “Up past where the fresh spring used to be.”

“*In the forest?*” Thorne clarified.

“Yes, sir!”

Surprised, Thorne turned to Sergeant Major Hili next to him.

Hili shrugged. “Maybe they came from somewhere else?”

“But from *where?*” The lieutenant seemed to choke on his words but quickly recovered.

Onus drew nearer to hear the conversation.

“No, they must be from the village,” the lieutenant said decidedly, “and wandered up there to explore or . . . something.”

“That seems most plausible,” Hili suggested with a smirk. “I’m leaning toward *something*. She seems a bit young to be with an adult man. They probably went up there, did their *exploring*,” he said as two other men sniggered, “then got lost or disoriented. I heard the surgeon say he thinks they’re dehydrated and exhausted.”

More ugly chortling followed, but the lieutenant didn’t seem to understand why. Troubled, he said, “Well, as soon as they wake up, we should question them. Find out what they saw.”

Hili nodded. “Seems a little odd they got lost when we can see them and they can’t see us.”

Onus waved that off. “Surgeon thinks they’ve been unconscious

for several hours. They probably were lost in the dark, never realizing just how close they were to the village. I'll stay, sirs, and question them when they awake."

The lieutenant nodded, still strangely agitated. "All right, Sergeant. Let me know as soon as you know something?"

"Of course, Thorne."

An hour later the man began to wake. Onus was by his side and as he focused on the sergeant, his eyes widened in disbelief.

Sergeant Onus merely cocked his head. "Doctor, one of our lost souls is awake."

The fort surgeon came over. "Well, young man—it seems you had quite an adventure. Lucky we found you."

"Allow me to guess," Onus simpered. "You and your *friend* went out for a midnight stroll looking for a private place and got lost?"

The man nodded. "Yeah, nearly exactly that. I'd heard there were fresh water springs, but we didn't find any—"

A sharp look from Onus told him to say no more.

The surgeon chuckled as he checked the man's pulse. "Well, the next time you need some privacy, may I recommend some place less hostile? Like the hay loft of a barn?"

The man smiled weakly. "Better idea. Is she all right?"

"She should be. I expect her to wake soon." He motioned for an assistant to bring him a mug of water.

The man licked his dry lips anxiously. "Doctor, she was saying some strange things last night. When she wakes, please don't listen too carefully. She was weaker than I was, and—"

The surgeon handed him the mug. "Don't worry. When the mind has been deprived of nourishment and is fearing punishment—" He lowered his voice. "Do her parents know where she is?"

The man gulped down the water and handed back the empty mug. "Uh, sort of. But they won't be looking for her for a while."

The surgeon indicated for more water. "Get her home as soon as she's stable. Think of a good story in the meantime, if you hope to see her again."

The man scoffed. "Already working on it, sir. Where is she?"

"We have her in a private room down the hall. I was just on my way to check on her."

“Go ahead, sir,” Onus said. “I can take care of this man here.”

The surgeon left, followed by the assistant. Onus closed the door behind him then came back.

“So?” Onus whispered.

The man shook his head. “I speak only to my brother.”

“That’s not going to be possible,” Onus whispered. “Lick’s dead.”

The man paled. “What?! How?”

“Seems Captain Lick wearied the general too much. Thorne killed him in front of everyone at the border battle for Idumea.”

“No . . . no, I don’t believe it!”

“You can ask anyone you want—there were thousands of witnesses.” Onus leaned in closer. “You *have* to believe it if you want to survive, Anoki.”

Anoki Kiah closed his eyes in anguish. “Why? What happened?”

“A lot, since you two parted ways. Thorne has a new favorite and even claimed him as his son at that battle. He seemed to think Captain Lick saw his new son as a threat.”

“No,” Anoki whimpered. “He was to claim *my brother*—”

“I *told* him he was coming on too strong,” Onus said. “Your brother’s ambition got on the general’s last nerves.”

“So who did he claim?” Anoki asked wretchedly.

“I’m hoping you might know. But tell me—what’d you find?”

Anoki, still trying to comprehend the news of his brother, also knew there was little time before the surgeon returned.

“Salem,” he whispered.

“Really?” Onus said, almost too loudly. “How far away?”

“Ludicrously close. Just over the mountain. Literally.”

“Size?”

“Enormous. Over one hundred thousand, even with the deaths from the pox.”

Onus released a low whistle. “That’s incredible! How badly hit by the volcano?”

“Just some ash. They’re making it into block, of all things!”

Onus rubbed his palms on his trousers. “So where’s the route?”

“Just to the east of here. But it’s much different than it was. There used to be a channel through the rock—”

“*Through* the rock?”

“But I couldn’t find it again,” Anoki sighed. “I think it might have been destroyed. There were all kinds of markings as to how to get

through, but everything's changed. We were trapped above the boulders. Took us forever to get down here and we haven't had water in two days. Couldn't find the springs."

"The whole forest is dead," Onus told him. "So it's no longer a barrier. But the boulder field sounds like a problem."

"There's no way to take horses through. They used to, but now?" Anoki groaned softly. "What do we do now? Everything's lost . . ."

"I'm working on it. The first thing we do is remove a problem."

"Who the general claimed?" Anoki asked.

"Yes, and you're not going to believe this, but they think he's Colonel Shin's grandson."

Anoki scoffed. "I believe it. He had something like a dozen—"

"Really?" Onus exclaimed again, barely remembering to keep his voice low. "So they made it out?"

"Oh yes, they made it out all right, with Zenos! We even *rode* to Salem with one of the Shin grandsons. Their families have even intermarried. Get this—there's a boy named Briter Zenos."

"Unbelievable," Onus muttered. "So he might *really* be a Shin."

"Who?" Anoki asked.

"A tall, black-haired boy. You'll see him soon. He's been made a lieutenant for no discernible reason, the little Zenos upstart. They say he looks just like the colonel."

Anoki tried to sit up. "They're missing a boy, about nineteen or twenty years old. He ran away just over a year ago."

Onus sat back in his chair. "That's when I first got him as a new recruit. Who's his father?"

Anoki scoffed again. "Rector Peto Shin. I had the pleasure of punching him in the jaw myself."

"Fantastic," Onus whispered. "This could change everything. Anoki, what about the colonel? Is he—"

"Dead. And Salem made him their general. He died last year sometime. But *she*'s still alive."

Onus let out another low whistle. "And Zenos?"

Anoki rolled his eyes. "He's the *guide*! All of Salem worships him! The slagging man who abducted my father—"

But Onus didn't care to hear more about his crazed father. He ran his hands through his hair, nearly pulling some of it out in his enthusiasm. "This is . . . this is unbelievable!" A grin spread across his face. "So many possibilities!"

"I'm so happy for you," Anoki said sarcastically. "So what will I

get for all my suffering?”

Onus scoffed. “You got the daughter. I saw her. Pretty enough, looks rather young, though.”

Anoki sneered. “She’s not the one who insisted on that old man marrying us. I left that one back in Salem. Beautiful, but as mean as a wasp. I came back with the youngest. She hated Salem as much as I did. I thought we could present her to her father if necessary.”

“Does she know that?”

“Sort of. She’s rather open to ideas, if you know what I mean. We can use her however we need to.”

Onus nodded. “You’ll be rewarded, don’t worry. I can get you a uniform like I did for your brother and say you came from Winds. But all I have left in your size is a lieutenant’s uniform. They had to burn the tailor shop.”

“I’ve got nowhere else to go, do I?” Anoki flopped on his cot again. “What happened to Midplain?”

“It’s gone,” Onus whispered. “Everything that used to be on the Idumea River is gone until Pools. Be glad you weren’t here.”

Anoki sighed in pain. “So who holds Idumea now?”

Onus smiled. “That’s the one part of the plan that came through. General Thorne’s got the world and he’s going to be looking for some help soon.”

Anoki sat up part way. “Thorne’s got it all? That’s the first good news I’ve had in a long time.”

“Can you see the possibilities?” Onus poked him gently. “The world’s devastated, Anoki. Food supplies are already running low and the citizens will be panicking. Thorne’s got huge problems trying to unite the north and south while cleaning up the mess left by Deceit. And his ‘son’ up here thinks he rules the world.”

Anoki sneered. “Oh, he *does*, does he?”

Onus smiled thinly. “So far, everyone lets him think that, but they’re getting tired of him strutting around the fort and telling people what to do. Who wants to take orders from a general wanna-be? No, Anoki, it’ll still work. This game of Dices has more silver chips than anyone’s ever considered playing with. And we still have one more.”

Anoki looked at him confused. “Who?”

“Thorne’s last mistress. Something your brother said to me once now makes sense. He was sure our new lieutenant came with her. So that means Miss Amory is *also* from Salem.”

Anoki sniggered. “It’s an invasion!”

“Not yet, Anoki,” Onus said with a smile, “but it *will* be.”

They heard a knock at the door and turned to see it open.

A tall, black-haired lieutenant stood there. “I was curious to see the patient. Are you well enough to talk?”

Anoki raised an eyebrow and glanced at Sergeant Onus. Lieutenant Thorne may have looked just like his grandfather, but he also looked a great deal like Rector Shin.

“So what’s the official story about the two people found up in the forest?” Professor Slither asked as he shoved a sugary pastry into his mouth, bits of it falling sloppily to the table.

Lieutenant Thorne clenched his fist. Dinner had been dull by himself, and while he sometimes wished he had company he didn’t want *this* kind of company. Watching the professor eat was like watching one-year-olds feed themselves. “Seems he snuck her away for a little private time in the forest but they got lost,” he said, pushing around the food on his plate.

“I heard he was an officer?” Slither said before he took another enormous bite.

The lieutenant shrugged. “Still trying to establish that. He says he can get his uniform as proof, and that he left it in the forest where he changed his clothes.”

“Odd clothing, too, I heard,” Slither said. “Not like any of the current fashions.”

“No,” the lieutenant agreed and tried not to fidget. They’d looked suspiciously like the plain clothing Salemites wore, but maybe that was a coincidence. “He said they were clothes his girlfriend had made them. That’s why they were so simple. Not a lot of cloth to work with right now.”

“Ah,” Slither said. “And we’re believing that?”

The lieutenant looked up. “What else would we believe?”

Slither shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know,” he said as he reached for another pastry. “Sergeant Major Hili was by earlier, asking what I remembered about Guarder clothing. He thought their tunics and trousers were reminiscent of the old Guarder outfits. You may not realize it, but Hili had some dealings with Guarders when he was a teenager. He met a few, but only late at night and in the dark. His recollection of their clothing wasn’t too clear.”

The lieutenant was nodding before he realized that maybe he shouldn't be. There had been Salemites in the forests, always, in plain tunics and trousers, but dyed mottled greens and browns to camouflage themselves. In the rare times they were spotted, villagers had assumed they were *Guarders*. But *Guarders*, who were simply raiders from other villages, always wore black—

Slither watched him closely as he chewed, probably seeing the confusion racing across the lieutenant's face as he tried to sort out what was truth and what was the accepted story in the world.

The lieutenant cleared his throat, realizing that he wasn't sure what that official story was now about the old *Guarders*. “Sir, I heard that once about Hili, that he was involved with them as a young man. He thinks they are *Guarders*?” He held his breath, hoping his question was leading enough.

Slither shrugged again as he shoved the rest of the pastry into his mouth. “Maybe she found some old clothing somewhere,” he gabbled, “desperate to find something new to wear. Wish we had a way to investigate her background. Maybe her ancestors were *Guarders* with secrets stashed in a trunk in the attic. Or maybe someone's trying to start something again in the forest?”

The lieutenant frowned. “But why? I mean, there are no more *Guarders*—haven't been for years. Why would someone want to start anything in the forests now? Seems unnecessary.”

Slither scoffed. “Unnecessary?! I can think of plenty of reasons. First, there's not enough food! *Guarders* were excellent thieves, you know. That's all they really were—thieves and murderers.”

The lieutenant looked at the full table. “What are you talking about? There's plenty of food.”

“There's plenty for *us*,” Slither said. “In an emergency, you need to preserve the hierarchy to prevent anarchy. But everyone else?” He bit another pastry. “They don't have you on patrols for a reason, Lieutenant, to keep you away from the violence—”

“Violence? What violence?”

“—can't have anything happening to the General's son, now,” Slither droned on as if the lieutenant hadn't interrupted. “That's why they keep you to the fort and won't allow any more little forays into the forest, which was most senseless and dangerous.”

The lieutenant sighed. Major Twigg had yelled at him for fifteen minutes about that when he returned to make his report. Twigg told him that even though he hadn't encountered anything alive, there

were still bottomless caverns and other unknown hazards, and under no circumstance was the lieutenant to go out on his own, ever again.

He pretty much ignored the lecture and did what he always did when he was in trouble—counted the number of planks on the back wall. There were thirty-seven.

“I thought it important for you to know what’s *really* happening,” the old professor went on, “so you don’t end up in a dangerous situation. However, Major Twigg, who’s the most *obedient*,” his tone suggested *boot-licking sycophant*, “officer I’ve ever met, told me he had instructions from Thorne to keep you out of trouble. But since you asked, as your professor I’m obligated to answer your every question.” He smiled in satisfaction.

The lieutenant shook his head in dismay. “No . . . no there’s enough. I looked at the inventory pages myself. The emergency storehouses in the village have enough grain for a full year—”

Slither’s smirk stopped him. “Do they really? Have you inspected the storehouses yourself? Because if they’re the same here as they are in Idumea, the only bags of grain are on paper. It’ll be empty, I assure you. You know,” he said thoughtfully, “it always seemed unnecessary to keep those things stocked.” He tossed some raisins into his mouth. “And since it was Colonel Shin’s idea, many thought it was influenced by that wife of his as a way of making the citizenry do extra work each Harvest.” He chuckled mirthlessly. “Now it seems to not have been a bad idea after all. Who would’ve guessed.” He leaned back and patted his belly in satisfaction.

The lieutenant had no more appetite as he stared at the full platters on the table. “So where does this all come from?”

“The general’s private store,” Slither said. “Biggest cellar in Edge, I imagine. It’s guarded. Of course, all the commanders keep their cellars guarded. Even in the best of times there are thieves at work.”

A guarded cellar? The lieutenant had never explored the entire mansion. There were his sections, and then the maids’ and servants’ and soldiers’ sections that he never concerned himself with.

Still staring at the remains of their dinner, he asked, “So where does all of this go?”

Slither waved casually. “Divided up between the help and the soldiers guarding the mansion. Benefits of serving the general,

you know. They get treated well too. Why do you think they’re so loyal?”

The lieutenant’s eyes narrowed. “Are they?”

“Do you know of any who aren’t?”

“No, not really. I just . . . it hadn’t occurred to me that everyone wasn’t eating like we are.”

“There’s a coming famine, boy!” he motioned to the windows and the world beyond. “Not enough crops were harvested, there may be no reserves in the storehouses, and everyone’s on rationed grain. Things were better further south when I left, but for how long? If you were allowed to ride around Edge you could take a look at people and see they’re losing weight, but if you ask me, they look better for it.”

He let a loud belch escape and patted his belly again.

“It’s been a long day and I’m ready for an early evening. But you have a few chapters to read before you turn in, Lieutenant Thorne. I expect your analysis of the next three chapters of *Negotiations* on my desk before midday meal tomorrow.” He stood up with a groan and waddled out of the eating room.

The lieutenant stared at the food on the table. Why shouldn’t he eat well? He was the future general of the world and a large man.

But he also found himself haunted by the memory of foraging through the waste heaps looking for anything edible.

Pushing his plate away, he realized that there was enough still for half a dozen people. The help of the mansion would eat well because of him. Wasn’t that enough payment? His leftovers?

He got up, went to the kitchen door, and stuck his head in. “I’m finished here. So is the professor.”

The cook, a slender, middle-aged woman, regarded him uncertainly. She’d never seen the lieutenant peer into the kitchen before. “Very good, sir,” she nodded, and looked as if she wanted the door to be shut again.

The lieutenant closed it and slipped into the small gathering room off the eating room. A moment later he heard the dishes being collected. He strode out of the gathering room, down the hall, and out of a back service door.

The sun was beginning to set as he crept alongside the mansion, hidden by the shriveled shrubs until he came to the kitchen door. The window next to it was opened slightly and he heard several voices entering the kitchen.

He heard the guards and maids dividing up what was left. Although there were eight of them, they would eat well *enough*. He couldn't make out their conversation, but it was punctuated by hard laughter. Voices moved to the back door.

"I told you, it's my night! We agreed to the rotation, and just because you were late yesterday doesn't mean you get to take my night."

"But it's not fair! You went last night in my stead and now you're going *again*?"

"I'm one of the favorites—what can I say? Besides, it'll make up for the week I missed when I had the pox. Good evening to you all, and don't bother waiting up."

The lieutenant crouched as the kitchen door opened. One of the guards came bounding out, a small bundle under his arm, and he jogged into the growing darkness.

The lieutenant glanced around before following the soldier at a safe distance. He walked briskly along the quiet roads of Edge heading west, turning down one road then another. The lieutenant kept back but the soldier never looked behind. Finally he stopped at a large house and marched up to the front door.

The lieutenant ducked behind a tree and grumbled under his breath. It was the old rectory where Amory was staying.

The soldier knocked rhythmically and a moment later the door swung open. In the twilight the lieutenant could just make out Amory. The soldier held up the bundle and she let him in.

Feeding Amory! The lieutenant growled quietly and stole across the road. She *did* say she trusted her staff completely. And here they were, using *his* food to feed her. What did she offer the world? Nothing! Why should his provisions go to feed a used up sow?

He slipped around the house to the back door where he assumed the eating room was and could hear voices: Amory's, then the soldier's, then another woman's voice. It sounded like a good-natured quarrel. He slid over to the window to better listen in.

"So where's Clamid? I thought it was his night."

"Ah, come on, Miss Amory. You really want Clamid when you can have me? I'm doing you a favor—"

"Hey, you know the rules! Not until I see what you brought. You break my rules, you go back to the mansion."

The soldier snickered. "Then you don't get what I brought."

“You really think you’re my only one?” Amory said. “There are five other soldiers in that house, Heff, all of them as eager as you to provide me with what I want. This is a privilege. I’ve taught you things and you know it. Now, are you going to show me what you have or am I going to kick you out? My maid and I have other things we can be doing. Take your hand off of me, now!”

“All right,” Heff said in a low voice. “All right. I even stole you a sugared pastry. That’s got to be worth at least ten minutes.”

The lieutenant eyebrows furrowed, trying to puzzle out why a sugared pastry would be worth ten minutes. Ten minutes of what?

A moment later he heard Amory again. “Heff, I hate to admit it, but you did rather well. The poor lieutenant’s appetite must be waning. There’s a reason you’re one of my favorites, even though you think too highly of yourself. Fifteen minutes.”

“Fifteen? Come on, this is some great eating here. Do you have any idea how much this goes for in the village?”

“Fifteen minutes with *me*,” Amory clarified. “My maid’s been tired lately. And do you have any idea how much I go for? Now when have you been able to claim I gave you two nights in a row?”

The lieutenant’s mouth dropped open in shock. He’d heard about women like this, and several hung around the gates of the fort, but Amory? Becoming one of *them*?

He slumped to the ground and tried to ignore the sounds of footsteps going upstairs. His food was a commodity for—

Disgusted, he resolved to confront her as soon as Heff left.

The lieutenant stewed in fury, forgetting he was there as a spy when another soldier timidly made his way to the front door. There was knocking, the maid giggling, and more footsteps fading away as the maid undoubtedly led that soldier upstairs.

The lieutenant wondered if anything else had been stolen from the mansion to win a few minutes with the ‘tired’ maid.

Eventually he heard the front door open again and saw Heff trotting down the stairs and into the dark night, whistling.

The lieutenant bolted from his hiding place, marched to the front door, and pounded on it until it flew open.

“How dare you pound on my door like—oh,” Amory said shortly. She leaned against the doorway. “What do you want?”

He was momentarily startled by her appearance. While her countenance had changed over the past year, when she left the mansion two moons ago she still appeared beautiful.

Now her features were hard and disfigured, aging her beyond her years. But the lieutenant was alarmed that, despite everything, she still aroused something in him.

“You are in possession of stolen property!” the lieutenant barked at her. “And I want it back!”

To his surprise, Amory chuckled. “Ah, word got back to you, did it? Well it’s too late, *Pere*. What I offered to you for free many weeks ago now comes at a price. And the only way you’ll get it is to pay for it. What are you offering?”

“How *dare* you!” the lieutenant snapped at her.

She didn’t even blink at his tirade but stared at him, bored.

So he tried again. “How *dare* you assume the son of the general would want something like *that* from someone like *you*!”

“The general used to,” she said easily. “And he’ll want it again when he returns. So why not his son?”

The lieutenant was beyond astonished. “What has happened to you, Amory?” he whispered.

“YOU!” she shouted. She looked around quickly before continuing in a furious whisper. “*YOU* are what happened to me! I refuse to starve and die a slow death like everyone else. Eight weeks ago I had everything, *Perrin Shin*! A home! A man! A future! And now? You came along and stole all of it. Well I’m warning you,” she held up a thin and angry finger, “I’m going to get it *back*. Even if I have to destroy you like you’ve destroyed me! Just watch your back, *Lieutenant*, because from what I hear, I’m not the only one who’s losing patience watching you strut around the fort!”

“What are you talking about?” he said, trying to sound angry but feeling suddenly fearful.

She noticed. “Seriously, *Lieutenant*, you really think everyone adores you? That the army is happy that Thorne found his so-called long lost son? Oh, please. You just leap-frogged over all of the enlisted men to become a lieutenant who hasn’t even completed one year of Command School, and every officer now knows he’s not next in line to inherit whatever Thorne leaves behind once he dies because it all will go to *you*. Even the citizens are sick of you. They have a name: the Little Lieutenant. They say the old colonel walked *with* them but you swagger *past* them, like a rooster on parade without the slightest idea he’s about to become tomorrow’s dinner!”

The lieutenant glared, not daring to believe a word of it.

She met his glare. “Lemuel knew he had enemies before, but now he doesn’t have a single one. You know why? Because everyone now hates *you*. All I have to do is wait for someone’s patience to snap and take you out. Then I get to move back into the mansion. Honestly, I’m surprised you’ve survived this long. I think everyone’s hoping someone else will take you out and save them the trouble. I know I am.”

The lieutenant gulped as he stared into Amory’s hard eyes. She wasn’t lying.

“So,” she said, “do you still want to see if I have any stolen property? Because if you barge into my house and take food from my table, there’ll be a dozen angry men ready to hunt you down. I’m developing *friends* all over Edge, *Lieutenant*. Friends who value my services and will come to my defense. So if I were you, *Lieutenant*, I’d get off this front porch, scurry back to my little mansion, and watch my back all the way there. Remember,” she said in barely a whisper, “I know who your father and mother *really* are.” And she slammed the door.

Lieutenant Thorne was breathless when he reached the mansion. His run-walk home was filled with anxiety he’d never felt before. The citizens were sick of him? The soldiers and officers resented him? Everyone *always* liked him, in Salem *and* here. He was charming and handsome and Perrin Shin’s grandson. What was there not to like? Nothing! He was just . . . he was just Thorne’s son.

He remembered Nelt’s words back in Pools—everyone hangs back from Thorne, waiting for him to be cut down. Now everyone was hanging back from his son as well, out of striking distance should someone swing at him. Would anyone defend him?

The only man he could think of was Sergeant Onus.

Occasionally he still waved kindly at him as he passed, but Onus was the only one. The lieutenant had to admit he had no friends among the enlisted. That was probably his fault. Since he was no longer in their ranks, he’d snubbed his lowly group of Twenty. They were beneath him now, after all.

But he also didn’t fit in the ranks of the rest of the officers, although he tried by giving recommendations and ideas as often as possible. Usually they just looked at him blankly then went back to their discussions.

Their lack of interaction might be because they . . . *didn’t* like

him. Could that be true? He thought they were intimidated by who he was, but maybe . . . maybe, the reasons were worse.

Maybe Amory was right—there just might be more plots against him now than there were in Pools.

He barged through the front doors of the mansion, slammed them shut behind him, and held his breath when he saw the armed soldier standing at attention in the entry.

“I could have gotten the door for you, sir,” he said.

“Not at all. You work hard enough!” he said with an uncomfortable chuckle. “I can certainly get the door myself. And while I’m here, if you wish to . . . sit down for a while when you’re on guard, I don’t have a problem with that. Really.”

The guard cocked his head slightly. “But General Thorne would, sir, and I wouldn’t want to do anything that would upset the general. Would *you* wish me to upset the general?”

“No, no, no—not at all. I wouldn’t want you to upset the general, either,” he said, trying to control his panic. “I just meant that . . . things are so *quiet* here that if you wanted to rest—”

“Sir,” the soldier interrupted carefully, “it’s never as quiet as it seems. I remain at my post and on guard.” He took a more formal stance and stared off into the distance.

The lieutenant gestured uselessly. “Um, yes. Very well. Thank you. Good work,” he added lamely, hoping that maybe he’d just made a friend in the mansion. At Professor Slither’s room he paused to glance in since the door was partially open.

The professor was slumped in a large cushioned chair, snoring lightly, a book propped open on his chest.

The lieutenant bit his lip. The old professor might be another defender since he was the only man in the village who stood to benefit from the lieutenant’s success.

He crept in quietly and lifted the book off his chest to set on the side table, but was surprised at the title: *The Writings*.

For some reason, the lieutenant wanted to put the book down as quickly as possible. But first he glanced to see what pages Slither had been reading. He made a face when he saw the book was opened to where the Creator established His rule of law for the people. Why would Professor Slither care about that?

He placed the book on the table and noticed a stack of notes there. The professor’s handwriting was shaking and scrawling, but the lieutenant could just make out some of the words in the

dim light.

Commanded to be obedient.

Great blessings promised those who are faithful.

Guides provided to ensure the laws are followed.

Guides receive continued inspiration on leading the people.

The lieutenant covered the notes with the still-open book, not wanting to read or remember any of that. It was odd that such a man was taking notes about The Writings.

The lieutenant pulled a small blanket from the bed and gently covered the professor with it before blowing out the candles that still burned in the room.

He left the guest room, walked up the stairs, nodded with what he hoped was an amiable smile to the soldier standing guard at the top, and made his way to his bedroom.

Once inside, he closed the door and locked it. He never did that before, but then again, he never felt the need. Each of those guards had pledged to keep Amory safe, now they were to keep him safe. But what if they didn't want to? Perhaps they left their posts at night to visit her, supplying her with more than just food. Maybe even information about what he was doing each day.

Then another thought hit him: who else in the village or fort visited Amory, and what kind of gossip could she supply them?

It was a mess. A dangerous mess where he realized the only man who really cared about his welfare, in addition to a mid-ranking sergeant and the old fat man downstairs, was over eighty miles away in Idumea. And even *he* was willing to hand him over to his greatest enemy on a gamble.

The lieutenant stepped to his bed, glanced underneath to make sure there wasn't anyone under it, then hopped on top. He didn't light any candles in case their soft glow would reveal someone else waiting in his bedroom. If they were to strike, they would have done so by now, right?

Still in his uniform, he curled up into a ball on the corner of his bed, his back against the corner, and stared anxiously at the door, the window, the door again—

Everyone hated him.

The words sent a shiver down his spine. Not even his cousins or brothers really *hated* him . . .

But maybe they did. Maybe they felt about him the same way as

Edgers did. He didn't swagger as far as he knew. True, he made people harvest the crops and created rationing lists—

Maybe *that* would be something people hated him for: he limited the amount of grain and everyone ate less because of his calculations. But it wasn't *his* fault there wasn't enough food! It was the volcano's!

What had he done to annoy the soldiers? He went to officers' briefings and gave his suggestions, inspected the fort and gave his recommendations for improvement—

He gripped his face, because he *was* strutting and telling everyone what to do. That was precisely what irritated him so much in Salem: his relatives telling him what he was doing wrong and what he needed to do better. And now he was doing it to the fort and Edge?

He groaned as he realized that in an extraordinarily bizarre set of circumstances, he had become as annoying and self-righteous as Cephas Briter. No wonder everyone hated him.

Rubbing his forehead, he decided that tomorrow he'd have to start fixing things. He almost felt like praying for help.

Chapter 15--“That’s sure to win over a few hearts and minds.

Early the next morning, Lieutenant Thorne got up, nodded kindly to the guards he always ignored, and jogged to the fort well before Professor Slither would start to pull himself from bed.

Bounding through the gates, he headed to his old barracks and the sergeants’ command building. He knocked lightly on the open door to get Sergeant Onus’s attention.

“Shin! I mean, Thorne! To what do I owe this visit?”

“Sergeant,” the lieutenant said in a low voice, “you said once that if I ever needed anything, I could . . .” He hesitated, but Onus gave him a welcoming smile.

“Of course. Come in and sit down. What do you need?”

The lieutenant sat in a chair across from his desk and massaged his hands. “I think I’m messing up but I’m not sure how. I’ve heard that soldiers don’t care for me and the villagers don’t like me either. It’s even been suggested that, that, that some are trying to *get rid* of me.” He looked at his former sergeant with pleading in his eyes.

Onus nodded slowly. “Not so great up there at the mansion, is it? Don’t know who to trust, don’t know who’s watching you? I can only imagine. But I’m not sure how I can help.”

The lieutenant leaned forward. “Help me find a way to win their trust, to get the soldiers and the villagers to . . . to *like* me or something! What can I do? We’ve started some of the entertainments again, but I don’t know what else. The general would have suggestions I’m sure, but it’s not like I can write him about this.”

“What about Slither?” Onus asked. “He might have some suggestions on improving your leadership skills.”

The lieutenant rolled his eyes. “I don’t think he knows what he’s talking about. He’s so old, you know? Sergeant, you can help me think of something, can’t you? What do the people really want? What

do the soldiers want?”

Onus sat back and pursed his mouth. “I know of something they really want but it’s not easy to provide.”

“What!? What is it?”

“More food, Lieutenant,” Onus said. “If their stomachs are grumbling, people won’t be happy no matter how peaceful the world is or how entertained they are.”

The lieutenant sagged. “There’s simply not enough. The few food shops that are still operating are on rationing—”

“And charging up to a hundred times as much as they used. A loaf of bread is going for the price of a used saddle,” Onus told him.

“Really?!”

“And a jug of mead is worth an entire silk wardrobe. You don’t know this,” Onus said, “because Twigg and Thorne don’t want you out in the village too much.”

“Slither mentioned that,” the lieutenant sighed. “I didn’t know. I really didn’t. I’m going to put the mansion on rations, too. Slither won’t be happy about that but we need to set the example. The supplies in the south are relatively sound, the general wrote me . . .”

Onus leaned forward. “Anything from there would take at least another week to arrive, maybe longer. You need a solution faster than that, and I have an idea. Find out the status of the storehouses in Edge and the fort, and reconfigure your estimates to give everyone larger rations. Then send a message to General Thorne requesting additional supplies and maybe a larger variety. You can treat the people to extra food beginning tonight if you get it all figured out, then promise them more supplies in two weeks.”

For the first time, the lieutenant began to feel hopeful. “Yes . . . yes, that’s good! If the storehouses are in better shape than we assumed, then we can begin feeding people today! That’s sure to win over a few hearts and minds. Thank you, Sergeant, for everything. I’ll start inspections immediately.”

Onus smiled as if it were nothing. “I recommend going to the southern storehouse first, then move north, then check the status of the fort. Maybe do spot inspections. You can always come back here if you need some help with the inventory. I feel like I know the procedures as well as you do, now.”

The lieutenant leaped to his feet and reached across the desk to shake the sergeant’s hand. “Thank you again, Sergeant!”

Onus grinned as the lieutenant pumped his arm. “Any time, Lek. Any time.” He chuckled as the lieutenant bounded out of his office and out the building.

A moment later Onus pulled out a scrap of paper and jotted down a few words.

“Private!” he called out to the hallway. A soldier stepped in. “Take this to Captain Varice immediately. Tell him I’m in my office if he has any questions.”

The soldier took the folded scrap and jogged out of the office.

Onus sighed. “Sorry, Little Lieutenant, but how can I resist when you hand it to me on a golden platter?”

The lieutenant retrieved Trigger from the stables, knowing Major Twigg would lecture him again about putting himself in risky situations, so that’s why he didn’t bother checking in with him first, and rode south to the first of the two emergency storehouses of Edge. He knew all about the status of the fort storehouses, but he’d never checked the village’s supplies. Supposedly the neighborhoods were to keep their storehouse supplied and report their doings to Major Kroop, but the lieutenant knew that anything given to Kroop was lost in a pit of pages.

When he arrived at the storehouse, he knew things wouldn’t be good. If there *was* anything in there, someone from the neighborhood should have been guarding it, but no one was.

He dismounted, walked up to the doors, and threw them open.

Nothing.

“Are you really surprised?”

The unexpected words spun him around. He immediately unsheathed his sword and faced the voice behind him.

The small old man raised his eyebrows at the shining blade. “Would I be standing here if I was the one who had emptied the storehouse?” he asked conversationally.

“Where’s the food?” The lieutenant’s voice was more panicked than he wanted it to be.

“You really thought something would be in there? Maybe a few teenagers taking advantage of the privacy, but otherwise?” He shrugged as if that was obvious.

“When was the last time this was stocked?” he demanded.

The old man stepped away from the blade pointed at his throat, completely unruffled, and peered into the open doors. “Probably at least ten years since Thorne put out the call to stock it.”

“Ten years?!”

“Now, down in the south they were more vigilant about it. At least, back when General Karna was still in charge—”

“But it’s supposed to be stocked for times of emergency! There’s supposed to be enough for a season! Where are people getting their food?”

The man made his way to a shelf and wiped a finger through the thick dust. “That’s a good question, Lieutenant. You should find out.”

“What do you know, old man?”

“Director,” he said calmly. “Most people call me Director, since I held a position of some *respect* for many years.”

The lieutenant’s shoulder twitched that someone else besides him may have been important, and then he remembered, belatedly, that he was supposed to be making friends with the citizenry.

“This village, like so many others, has been raised in a culture of thievery,” the director said as if delivering a lecture. “You can thank the long-gone Guardians for that. What they did in secret and in the dark everyone does now brazenly in the open. There are plenty of ways to justify dishonesty in all of its manifestations.”

The lieutenant sighed impatiently.

“I can tell you one thing, though: when Colonel Shin was in Edge, these storehouses were filled with grain and even dried fruits. I always felt secure in those days. I haven’t for quite some time, now. You need to find out why, Shin.”

The lieutenant stormed out angrily, not even noticing that the old man called him Shin instead of Thorne. He mounted his horse again and headed north to the other storehouse. Maybe that one was filled and supplying everyone.

The director sighed as he watched the young officer ride away. “That wasn’t the right response. The colonel would always say, ‘What can I do for you, Hegek?’”

He flinched as he heard another shout from across the road. The lieutenant hadn’t realized there was an altercation behind him, just a stone’s throw away. Colonel Shin would have noticed, though.

Hegek slipped further back into the empty storehouse and behind a supporting post to wait it out, as he frequently did. He was grateful that no one yet had raided the structure for wood to burn. With the growing cold, people would be looking for easy fuel. The grassena boys used to do the cheap, menial labor of chopping wood, but since there were all gone, things were going to get more desperate.

Hegek sighed as pottery was smashed on the road. The men rooting through his neighbor’s house weren’t finding what they were looking for. Mead, likely.

The soldiers would show up late, again. Perhaps Hegek’s part of the village wasn’t bribing them enough for protection, but what was there left to bribe with?

At least the thieves wouldn’t be pillaging his house again. Last week they found nothing aside from his collection of books and heaps of documents from his time with the Administrators, which made for excellent kindling.

Maybe the world had forgotten Shin’s admonition to store up for an emergency, but Hegek didn’t. The shelves he’d had built purposely deep secured enough grain and preserves for nearly a year, fronted by stacks of textbooks. He’d slip a few of those bags out later to share with his neighbors, an older couple like himself who would have nothing left for their dinner tonight.

Hegek waited until the violence quieted down and the weeping of his neighbors told him it was safe to come out because the thieves had moved on, destroying everything in their path, as if somehow that would make everything right again.

A few minutes later, the lieutenant threw open the doors of the

northern storehouse and cried in exasperation. Nothing again.

He tried not to panic as he rode for the fort and to the large storehouses full with grain for the soldiers. He needed some of it to win over the citizenry and eliminate the enemies which, until last night, he didn't know he had.

Without a word to anyone, he strode past the soldier on guard and into the first storehouse. He sighed in relief that the shelves were full of bags, but paused when he remembered what Sergeant Onus suggested. He walked down a narrow aisle to the back of a row and examined a bag which was stamped with the word wheat.

"Sir? Can I offer assistance?" a voice called to him.

The lieutenant turned to the sergeant. "I'm just checking the supply, soldier."

The sergeant walked quickly over to him, waving a paper. "I have the numbers right here, sir."

"I know what the numbers are, Sergeant," the lieutenant said, trying to control the agitation in his voice. He was the one who'd been compiling those numbers for many moons before the volcano erupted. "But I want to know what's actually *out* here. I'd been told the storehouses in the village were adequately stocked, but I just learned that was a gross inaccuracy. Now I want to check these bags."

The sergeant blinked, a little too rapidly. "As you can see, sir, the shelves are filled with bags! No problems here, I can assure you that."

The lieutenant heard the almost desperate tone in his voice. Staring at the soldier, he reached out blindly and grabbed a bag at random. He squeezed it and his gut sank.

"This," he said coldly, "does NOT feel like wheat!" He yanked the bag off the shelf and dropped it on the ground. The sergeant held his breath as the lieutenant pulled out his long knife and cut the top of the bag open. The lieutenant, furious at what he found, looked up in accusation at the soldier.

"We have a serious problem here, Sergeant. It seems even the wheat has turned to ash!" he bellowed.

The sergeant had the good sense to let his mouth drop open in shock. "Why . . . why I'm *stunned*, sir! This is . . . this is *unbelievable*, sir! I'll get my men on it as soon as possible. I'm sure it's just an odd bag or two—"

The lieutenant stood up to loom over the babbly sergeant. "An

odd bag or two? I want every bag in this storehouse checked and verified that it actually contains wheat!”

“Is there a problem, Lieutenant Thorne?” another voice called. A wiry captain with light hair and a tanned face made his way down to them. “It’s not every day someone comes to my storehouses and accuses my men of deceit.”

“Captain Varice, this bag is filled with ash!” the lieutenant exclaimed. “Someone’s purposely deceived our fort, sir. I’m not accusing any soldiers, yet, but I just learned that the village storehouses are empty, and probably the only way anyone is still eating is by stealing it from us! We need to examine every bag in each storehouse to ensure it actually *is* wheat or oats or corn! How widespread this is, I can’t even begin to imagine!”

The captain folded his arms and looked steadily at the lieutenant. “I think you’re blowing this out of proportion, Thorne. It may only be a bag or two slipped in here as a joke. *But,*” he said, reading the rage on the lieutenant’s face, he turned to his sergeant. “Go to the command tower and tell Major Kroop we may have an inventory problem. Have him bring all the inventory sheets from the past few seasons, if he can find them.”

The lieutenant nodded in approval as the sergeant ran out of the storehouse. “Thank you, sir. We should begin checking every row beginning here in the back. I’ll get some soldiers—”

The captain stepped up to him. “*I* will get some soldiers. This is MY storehouse, and NOT under your control. Understood?”

The lieutenant swallowed, remembering he was supposed to be making friends among the soldiers, not alienating every last one of them. “Of course, sir. I didn’t mean any disrespect. I just wanted to lend my assistance. What would you have me do?”

The captain tipped his head to the doors. “Stand outside and count the bags as they come out.”

The last thing Major Lannard Kroop wanted to hear was that there was another inventory problem. He sagged as the sergeant explained what Lieutenant Thorne had discovered.

The fort’s commander, Major Twigg, a man in his late thirties who, because of thinning hair and perpetually strained expression, seemed much older, clenched and unclenched his fists.

When the sergeant finished, Twigg said to Kroop, “Get the sheets and get over there, immediately!”

Kroop jumped a little and began to search a crate on the floor. “Major Twigg,” he said as he thumbed through pages, “wouldn’t *you* rather go down to the storehouse? Seems like a *commander* kind of issue to me . . .”

Twigg narrowed his eyes. “Does Lieutenant Thorne still make you nervous, Kroop?”

“No, no,” he said, unconvincingly. “Not at all. It’s just . . .” He didn’t know what else to say but, *he still makes me nervous*. He took the stack of inventory sheets and, hoping he might have changed his mind in the last two seconds, held them out for Major Twigg.

Twigg shook his head. “I’ll be down there in a while, Kroop. You start getting a handle on what’s going on.”

Kroop sighed and slouched out the door.

When he reached the first storehouse, he was stunned by the amount of soldiers and bags on the field. It wasn’t hard to find the young lieutenant. He was slashing bag after bag and shaking his head.

Captain Varice was keeping the tally on a scrap of paper. So far it was over one hundred bags of nearly everything *besides* wheat. Kroop’s walk slowed as he approached the two younger officers.

Lieutenant Thorne looked up at him as he neared. “Major Kroop! There might not be a single bag of grain in this entire storehouse! It’s all ash or dirt or sand! This was supposed to keep this fort fed throughout the Raining Season, and now? We have a major problem, Major!”

“No, no that can’t be,” Kroop said, waving the pages. “I have records that all of this is grain. This isn’t my fault!” He looked at Captain Varice. “No, this is *your* fault, Varice! You’re supposed to be making sure everything that comes in and goes out is what it really is!”

Varice marched over to Kroop. “MY fault?! Who’s ultimately in charge of inventory, Kroop? Who’s responsible for making sure the numbers are accurate? YOU!”

“Sirs!” Lieutenant Thorne said, stepping up to them. “Arguing isn’t solving anything! What we need to do is find out how widespread the problem is, then contact General Thorne and tell

him of our need for more food. We can still fix this but we need to understand the problem, then discover who’s been stealing from the fort so we can stop them! Major Kroop, the inventory sheets?”

Kroop thrust the sheets into the lieutenant’s hands, still staring hard at Varice.

A few more soldiers jogged to the scene to help the fifty already there pulling bags out of the storehouse. Sergeant Onus broke away and approached the officers. He was considerably shorter than the three men glaring at each other, and they looked down at the stocky man as he stopped in their huddle.

“Sirs,” he said in a low voice, “your raised voices are alarming the men. May I suggest we keep this discussion to more level tone before we incite panic?” He glanced around at the dozens of soldiers regarding the officers with varying degrees of worry.

Lieutenant Thorne nodded. “Agreed,” he said quietly. “There’s plenty of blame to spread around, I’m sure.”

Captain Varice scoffed. “I’m not about to take any. I’ve done my duty here, watched these soldiers, manned these doors. If someone’s profiteering from the storehouses, it’s not my fault!”

Kroop stood to his full height, slightly taller than the captain. “Are you suggesting it’s *my* fault? I’d like to know how you’d prove that! Show me how I’m profiting, I dare you!”

“Sirs!” the lieutenant whispered sharply. “Enough!”

Varice rounded on him. “I’ll tell you what I’ve had enough of, *Mr. Thorne*—YOU! How *dare* you interrupt a discussion between two officers with seniority? You’ve got your papers so get to work!”

That silenced the lieutenant.

Varice snatched the papers out of his hand. “Right here, *little boy wonder*. Start with these numbers and names right here. Supplier. Stocker. Verifier—”

His stopped suddenly as he stared at the sheets.

“Verifier,” he repeated slowly. He looked at Kroop and then turned to the lieutenant with a small, nasty smile. “Sergeant Onus?” he said, still eyeing the lieutenant whose brows were knitting together. “Would you *verify* something for me?”

Varice handed Onus the stack.

“Onus, would you tell me whose name is signed at the bottom of these forms?”

Onus took the forms and shifted nervously as he looked at one, then another below it, and several more below those. “Uh, yes, this is

accurate. I witnessed the signings myself, every week.”

Varice, still staring at the lieutenant with his ugly smile, said, “That’s what I thought. So what have *you* been up to, Lieutenant Thorne?”

The lieutenant felt sick. “What are you talking about?”

“I realize your name recently changed,” Varice said in an oily tone, “but Onus here can attest that the signatures verifying that the storehouses have the correct amounts in them belongs to someone formerly known as ‘Corporal Shin.’”

The lieutenant took a hard step back. “What?! Are you suggesting these bags of dirt are MY fault? How can that be?!”

His former sergeant cleared his throat. “Shin, I mean, *Lieutenant*, by signing these forms you were stating that Major Kroop’s inventory numbers coincided with what was on the shelves in the storehouses. You *did* do a physical count a few times, right?”

The lieutenant could only splutter, “Well . . . I . . . I . . .”

Varice stepped closer. “Did you actually verify what was in those bags you counted? Or did you do what I’ve been doing—assuming that the word painted on the bag is what’s actually in it?”

Dumbfounded and nauseated, the lieutenant couldn’t respond.

“The last signature on the form is the verifying one,” Varice leered, “and is ultimately responsible for what’s in the storehouses.”

The lieutenant could hardly breathe. He looked to Onus for help.

Onus shrugged. “That’s true, Lieutenant.” He put a bracing hand on his shoulder. “Is there anything you’d like to confess to us, just to get it off your chest? After all, we need to find out—”

“NO!” the lieutenant found his voice. “I didn’t do anything wrong! The verifying signature? I was just doing a favor to the major, trying to get his numbers in order so that the general wouldn’t be angry with him for messing up the inventories!”

Kroop flushed red in embarrassment and fury.

“*His* should have been the verifying signature!” he pointed at Kroop. “All I verified was that the numbers were added up correctly! No one ever told me the bags should’ve been opened and inspected! I was only a first year soldier!”

Varice nodded officiously to Kroop, and the major waved

over two soldiers. “Sergeants, please escort Lieutenant Thorne to the command tower,” Kroop said in his best imitation of an officer in charge. “Get some assistance if you need it.”

The lieutenant stammered in shock. “What, I’m, I’m, I’m under arrest?! For *what*?!”

Kroop shook his head. “Certainly not under arrest, Lieutenant. We just need to discuss a few matters in private.”

Onus took the lieutenant’s arm. “Just go with them, quietly,” he whispered. “We’ll get this all straightened out, I’m sure. Let everyone cool down a bit, have a chat with Major Twigg, and then we can get to solving this problem. All right?”

The lieutenant nodded helplessly at his former sergeant and looked to the command tower. The soldiers on either side of him started walking, each keeping a hand on the lieutenant’s elbows.

Kroop looked back at Varice who gave him a brief nod. “Captain, let me know the final tally as soon as you have it, all right?”

“Of course,” Varice said. “I’ll have Onus bring it to you.”

“Very good.” Kroop followed a few paces behind the lieutenant and his escorts.

Varice turned to the soldiers who had all paused in their work to take in the entertainment. “Keep moving bags, men!” he ordered. “We have four more storehouses to check!”

The soldiers went back to their task as Onus turned to Varice. The sergeant barely moved his lips. “Fantastically done!”

“You’re welcome,” the captain breathed back. Sure that no one was listening, he murmured, “Incidentally, I didn’t get my share of the last profits yet.”

“All suspicion is now focused on one person. Isn’t that share enough?” Onus said quietly. “You were nervous we’d be detected, but now you’ve got nothing to be nervous about. Soon the crisis will be fully appreciated, the finger of blame pointed at the soldier we need to eliminate, the general will become desperate for supplies, and then we can give him the good news that we’ve *just* heard about a land to the north *bursting* with food.”

Varice snickered quietly.

“You were on your way to wealth earlier,” Onus reminded him, “but in the past eight weeks we’ve become the wealthiest men in the

world after Thorne, even with the payouts to the soldiers for their silence. What more could you want? Besides, I did all the work today.”

Varice scoffed good-naturedly. “So *you’ve* been overseeing loading the bags with ash, stacking them on the shelves, and getting the real grain to the highest bidders?”

Onus glanced at him. “You wouldn’t have been able to accomplish any of that without my telling you a week in advance what supplies to expect. Remember, we’re a good partnership. Always have been. Maybe someday we should thank the Little Lieutenant for all of his help,” he said with feigned affection. “It’s all been thanks to him that we’ve had the numbers. And I’m sure you remember that *I’m* the one who set up the entire Kroop-Shin-help-me-with-the-numbers situation to begin with, correct?”

Varice glanced back with a smile. “All right, Onus. You earned the share for today,” he muttered. “Just keep me informed.” He turned to another row of soldiers who were shouting in excitement. “What? Is it finally a bag of corn?” he called out as many soldiers cheered. “Excellent! The news just keeps getting better, men!”



Major Twigg’s glare wasn’t quite enough to penetrate the thick skull of the lieutenant. He watched Thorne’s son squirm in the chair, readjust his position, and bounce his leg anxiously. Twigg hadn’t been aware that tending the general’s son would be part of his new duties. But he’d never question the orders of General Thorne. He’d just have to deal with this little Zenos upstart while keeping the general’s pride upheld. That’s how he could remain valuable to the most powerful man in the world.

The lieutenant leaned forward. “Sir, please—”

The major held up his hand. “As I’ve told you twice, we’re waiting on Professor Slither. Until your appointed guardian arrives, we discuss nothing. Kroop took a wagon to retrieve him.”

The lieutenant scoffed. “What do I need a guardian for?”

The major raised his eyebrows. “Oh, I can think of a few reasons. One is that you are under suspicion of sabotaging the entire stability of the fort and the village of Edge through profiteering. If people starve to death, it just might be your fault.”

“I was under Onus’s command at the time. Please, sir, Onus knows all about me. When would I have done this? It doesn’t add up! Where are my profits? Why would I expose myself?”

“Makes you look innocent, doesn’t it, Lieutenant?” Twigg said coldly, “*discovering* the crime before anyone else does?”

The lieutenant rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Sir, Onus can help straighten all of this out! Professor Slither, he knows nothing. What can he do?” He cringed when he recognized the wheezing coming up the command tower stairs.

“What can I do?” called the strained voice. “First, I can *not* have a heart attack by the time I reach the top. Who designed this ridiculous building anyway?” Slither took a deep breath as he reached the top of the stairs and shambled into the office, leaning on the arm of Major Kroop who did his best to not look at the lieutenant.

“Twigg!” Slither said as the major stood up and shook his hand. “I failed you in something, didn’t I?”

Twigg smiled obligingly. “Not me, Professor. I was one of your best students before Sargon took over Idumea. You must be thinking of one of your other southern students.”

Kroop cleared his throat. “Major Twigg, I’d like to get back to the storehouses. I want to see just how deeply in trouble we are.”

“I can handle things here, Lannard. Go ahead.”

As Kroop jogged back down the stairs, Slither sat down heavily in a chair and pointed at the major. “Give me time—I’ll remember what course you failed. Now, what has this one failed?” he said, jabbing a thumb toward the lieutenant.

The lieutenant rolled his eyes like a fourteen-year-old. “The only thing I’m guilty of is trying to make Kroop look good!”

“HEY!” Major Twigg shouted at him. “You will speak *only* when addressed, Lieutenant! Is that understood? Professor, first thing you best teach this little Ze—*upstart* is proper respect for his superiors!”

“Indeed,” Slither intoned. “There’s a great deal this boy needs to learn. I think he’s been given far too much freedom merely because of his new name. He needs some reining in. I think his father is overconfident about his abilities.”

“I can see why he sent you here, Professor,” Twigg nodded. “He’s been known to violate the rules—”

The lieutenant couldn’t sit quietly anymore. “Sirs, please, if I may defend myself—”

“WERE WE SPEAKING TO YOU?” the major roared.

The lieutenant blinked in surprise and shook his head.

In a calmer tone, Twigg turned back to Slither. “As I was saying, the lieutenant here has a record of rule breaking. He abandoned his Twenty to join the battle before his first year of duty was completed. He lied to several officers about his name, his rank, his home fort, and his age. He was recently seen visiting the house of Miss Amory—”

It wasn’t as if the lieutenant *said* anything, but his loud scoff and waving in protest was enough to make Twigg point angrily at him. He fell helplessly back into his chair and Twigg picked up again.

“Miss Amory, it seems, has developed a new *business* to keep herself supplied during this crisis. Soldiers are being sent to inspect her residence for anything suspicious. Now, while the general has been gracious enough to not allow the previous serious offenses cloud the lieutenant’s record, nor, I am sure, would he be pleased to hear about these new developments, Lek Thorne’s behavior does show a pattern of disrespect for the rules as well as flagrant disregard for behavior becoming an officer, especially for the son of General Lemuel Thorne.”

Slither nodded. “Agreed.”

“Therefore,” the major continued, ignoring the lieutenant’s open mouthed protests, “I recommend that the lieutenant remain confined to the mansion until this situation is resolved. Once the guilty parties are identified, we can then decide what should be done in regard to the lieutenant here. By no means should he become an embarrassment to General Thorne.”

The lieutenant sunk in stunned silence.

“Again, agreed,” Slither said. “If the lieutenant is in the mansion all day and night, we can get through his coursework three times as quickly. You can trust him to my care, Twigg. Perhaps a few more guards stationed at the mansion, just to be sure of *everyone’s* security, would be prudent. Wouldn’t want anything to happen to the general’s son now, would we?”

“Excellent idea,” Twigg said. “I’ll get right on it. In the meantime, Lieutenant, you may help the professor down the stairs.”

“Sir, in my defense, may I please—”

The major looked at him sharply. “If it comes to a trial, then yes, you can make your own defense. But for now, I’ve heard enough *about* and *from* you. DISMISSED!”



It felt wrong to be in the study after midday meal, but the lieutenant knew there was no point in begging to go to the fort to find out the status of the grain reserves.

Instead, he went over his eighth draft of his letter to the general. A messenger had been called for to take a letter from Slither to General Thorne about the *situation*. But the lieutenant wasn’t about to let others speak for him.

His letter explained his searching the storehouses, his discovery, his innocence, his desire to serve the general, the need for more food to be sent north, and his suggestion that he join the general in Idumea as soon as possible.

He even signed it, “Your son, Lek,” for good measure, although he stopped short of addressing it to “Father.” He tried to do that a few drafts before, but it looked so grotesque on the parchment that he tossed those pages into the fireplace to be burned.

He heard a knock at the door, leaped to his feet, and ran to the front doors just as the guard opened it.

“Messenger to Idumea has arrived,” the guard announced.

“Good,” wheezed Slither from his bedroom. “I’m finished—”

“Sir, I’ll get that,” the lieutenant called as he walked to his room. “I can bring your message to the door for you.”

Slither squinted. “Will it reach the messenger if I hand it to you?”

The lieutenant forced a smile. “Sir, I have nothing to hide and I’m sure the general will recognize that. Let me help you seal that, sir,” he said, taking the several pages from Slither and wondering what the shaky writing might reveal. He slipped his folded message in the middle of the stack, put it in an envelope, and closed it with the wax and seal of the mansion. “If it makes you feel better, you can accompany me to the door just to see.”

Slither put a fat foot up on a stool. “I suppose I can trust you as far as the front door. But you come back immediately.”

“Of course, sir,” the lieutenant promised as he walked the envelope out and handed it to the messenger. “To Idumea, straightway.”

But the messenger shook his head. “I’m to return to the command tower and wait for the final tallies from the storehouses to be reported to General Thorne. Those numbers should be ready soon.”

The lieutenant swallowed. “Just how bad is it?”

“I want to know too!” shouted Slither from his bedroom.

The messenger stepped into the entry and called back to the professor. “Nearly all of the first storehouse is dirt. Half of the second and one-third of two more are also packed with only ash or dirt. Seems the thieves have been removing planking from the backs of the buildings, taking the grain, then replacing them with bags of dirt.” The messenger shot an accusatory look at the lieutenant.

“Clever, clever,” Slither called back. “So how long until the grain runs out?”

“Those are the numbers they’re working on, sir. I’ll have someone notify you as soon as it’s known.”

The lieutenant felt the need to prove his innocence. “Yes, please do. We’re both anxious to see how we can help.”

The messenger regarded him dubiously, slipped the message into his inner jacket pocket, and marched out of the mansion.

Chapter 16--“I know everything.”

General Thorne took the thick envelope without looking up at the delivery soldier. The heavy-set colonel sitting across from him merely raised an eyebrow at the number of messages.

“Seems Edge has been busy lately,” Thorne commented as he dropped the envelope on the large desk of the vast commander’s office in the garrison. “That will be all, soldier.”

“Sir,” he replied, “I’m to bring back a message as soon as possible, according to Major Twigg.”

“I’m rather confident I know what’s happening,” Thorne said lazily. “Food supplies are low, they’re asking for help, and my son has gotten himself in trouble. Right?”

The messenger’s jaw worked without any words coming out until he could stammer, “Uh, yes . . . yes, sir! How’d you know?”

Thorne leaned back in his chair. “I’m the general, boy. I know everything. That’s why I rule the world. I’ll call for you in a while, once I have a response composed.” He saluted the messenger away.

The colonel nodded to the envelope once the messenger was gone. “So you think they’ve finally figured it out?”

“They better have,” Thorne said. “They’ve had enough time. And I had a feeling they’d implicate my son in it. Care to make predictions about the contents of the official message?”

The colonel shrugged. “You know far more about the north than I do. This was your little trouble, not mine. I have enough to work out in Orchards.”

Thorne tossed the envelope to the colonel. “Open it while I give you my predictions, then you tell me how accurate I am.”

The colonel complied as General Thorne leaned back in his chair. “Grain supply has been compromised by profiteering,” Thorne said, gazing up at the ceiling. “They have . . . five weeks left of food.”

The colonel nodded as he scanned the message from Major Twigg. “Very good. And who are they blaming for the shortages?”

Thorne spread out his left hand. “Who else? My dear son, Lek Thorne. He’s been at it since last year, they say, ever since he started doing the figures for Kroop and could manipulate the numbers.”

“Impressive,” the colonel nodded, scanning the letter. “So who’s really behind it, General?”

“Who first made the accusations?”

The colonel read further. “A sergeant named Onus and a captain named Varice. And Major Kroop,” he scoffed lightly.

“Two of those are the guilty parties,” said Thorne decidedly. “And I’ll give you one guess as to who is not.”

The colonel chuckled. “I remember Kroop from Command School. He was in his third year when I was in my first, and I once helped *him* finish a paper. The man was caught cheating so many times I still don’t know how you got him graduated.” The colonel began to smile. “Ah—you *needed* him to graduate, didn’t you?”

Thorne pointed at him. “Wanes, you can do this almost as well as I can. That’s why you’re my number two. I can’t believe Sargon never recognized your abilities. Perhaps he was afraid you’d outshine him if he moved you to Idumea. You’re correct about Kroop. Lannard could never keep a straight face or pull off a convincing lie. That’s why he always got caught cheating, and that’s how I knew I could trust him to never successfully deceive me. He’s the most useful idiot I’ve ever commanded and he’s pointing the finger at Lek because Lek signed the papers that Lannard should have. Poor Lannard’s terrified it’ll all come down to his fault that the village may starve, but anyone who knows him realizes he could never be guilty of any wrongdoing without exposing himself on the first day of it.”

Wanes nodded in appreciation. “So, General, nine weeks ago a little thieving from the storehouses wouldn’t have been a problem, but now? Sir, Edge just *might* starve to death. The south has barely enough food to keep all of its population going until next year, but enough for the remaining villages in the north as well?” The colonel shook his head. “Have you read my proposal yet?”

Thorne pointed to a thick stack of bound parchment on the corner of the desk. “Yes, people *are* going to die in the next few seasons, Wanes. And your proposal is intriguing. I finished it last night and I approve of your idea to eliminate those unnecessary to the furthering of the world. I see a few problems, though.”

Wanes tipped his head. "Such as?"

"Helping the citizenry to understand the *necessity* of those deaths," said Thorne casually. "Look at the amount of terrain left. Before Deceit we barely had enough land to sustain the population. Every chunk of ground was used for herds or crops or orchards. Now we've lost a great deal of the land to the Hill.

"But nature is addressing that issue for us, as you suggested. I, too, am convinced that the number of people who will die from starvation will be exactly the amount who *needed* to die in order to bring our population back to a sustainable number. Whatever we end up with by next Weeding Season is what the world can support. Yes, it'll be difficult for some people to see their loved ones die, but I agree that we can make that easier as well. What's the progress on those herbs?"

Wanes beamed proudly. "I've tasked the best doctors and they've created a few combinations that are quite deadly now. If someone wishes to die, they merely swallow one combination or inhale another and in just moments they're gone." He snapped his fingers. "Painless, quick."

"Good, good," said Thorne. "Nature's helping us hasten its own weeding process, if you will. We'll begin by administering it to anyone elderly or permanently injured. Eliminating everyone over a certain age will thin the herd considerably."

"How about those who are a burden to the world?" Wanes suggested. "I'm thinking about that school down in Trades that takes in those deaf and blind children. Why feed them if they won't help increase a healthy population?"

Thorne pointed at him. "Excellent idea. We shouldn't sustain those who provide nothing back. For that matter, let's wipe out all of Sands," he suggested, only partly in jest. "Even though the lieutenant colonel thinks he's executed the last of the Yordin supporters, I never met anyone from there who I liked."

Wanes choked out a laugh. "Oh, keep some of the better-looking children," he said. "They eat less than adults. Those who are still living are obviously strong. Plus, it's easier to influence the minds of children than adults."

"Ah, you have so much potential, Wanes," Thorne sighed in satisfaction. "Sargon was such a complacent fool."

Wanes shifted in his too-tight seat. "I always thought so. Sir,

about the older generation—what age were you thinking for elimination?”

Thorne considered that. “There’s no need to sustain anyone who can’t reproduce or provide a needed service to the world. Fifty years old seems an appropriate cut-off age. Those older will need to demonstrate their use to the world. Perhaps through a petition of some sort, with a couple of witnesses for verification.”

Wanes nodded in agreement, then leaned forward. “But sir, might not that raise some questions? *You* happen to be over fifty.”

Thorne gave him a half smile. “Barely. And I said those who can’t reproduce or provide a needed service. I do *both*, Wanes.”

“Indeed, sir!” Wanes smiled back. “So what kinds of needed services are we talking about? What about people like Julia?”

Thorne pursed his lips knowing what Wanes was suggesting. “Hmm. Julia.”

“She’s well beyond reproducing years, even if she didn’t take The Drink but, sir, living in the garrison *without* Julia’s meals? I’m not sure I’d *want* to survive.” He patted his ample belly.

“Her skills in the kitchen providing for the officers of the garrison warrants her continued life in the world,” Thorne declared.

Wanes relaxed and leaned back. “Good. Thank you, sir.”

“I hope this won’t be a tendency with you, Wanes—finding a purpose for every old woman.”

“Of course not. In fact, I’m thinking of other positions we can eliminate. For example, the soldiers can wash their own uniforms and clean up after themselves, can’t they? We could reduce the laundry and cleaning staffs to less than half. That’s at least another thirty old women who eat too much.”

Thorne nodded once. “Not a bad idea, but, Wanes, *I’m* not about to wash my own uniform.”

Wanes scoffed. “Of course not. None of the officers need to. I was referring to the enlisted men. We might even be able to get it down to ten women to maintain the garrison if we keep only the younger, healthier ones. They could be persuaded to take on extra duties when they realize the alternative is to no longer be a drain on society.”

“You’ve been thinking a lot about this,” said Thorne appreciatively. “Have you any thoughts about older men? Besides me?”

Wanes smiled faintly. “I *have* been thinking about this, just waiting for the right commander with vision. We certainly don’t

need to keep all the older men. Only those who are virile and of superior intelligence, such as yourself. That should eliminate about seventy-five percent of the men, probably even more.”

“And how exactly will you verify who is virile?”

Wanes scoffed. “That wouldn’t be up to *me* to verify! Maybe some of the women fighting for their laundry jobs will lend us a hand in that?”

Thorne smiled thinly. “I know who I’m going to put in charge of this new endeavor, Wanes. Interested in the position of redistributing workers and evaluating the petitions of those who are self-important enough to think they’re still useful?”

Wanes attempted to puff up his chest larger than his belly and almost succeeded. “I’d be honored, sir! When do we begin?”

Thorne held up his left hand. “Slow down, now. The food status reports from the rest of the villages should be coming in soon. Once we have the total amounts, as well as a fairly accurate count of survivors—”

“The message on conducting that count went out yesterday, sir,” Wanes interrupted eagerly. “We should have reliable numbers by early next week.”

“Then by early next week we’ll know how many citizens we can feed and how many need to die to ensure everyone else’s survival.”

“It should happen soon,” Wanes suggested. “The sooner the unnecessary die, the more food we have for the survivors. I do have a concern about implementing this, sir,” he wavered. “Something that I haven’t been able to discover a solution for.”

Thorne gestured for him to continue.

Wanes sighed. “Most people aren’t as forward thinking as you and me, and they may fight our efforts believing vainly that there must be another alternative. What if the bulk of the citizenry rebel against this,” he searched for a term, “*right-sizing*?”

“I know,” Thorne said casually. “That’s what I meant earlier, that we may have a few problems. But I’m working on that.”

“Really, sir? How?”

“By utilizing one of the few men left in the world over fifty who is of superior intelligence: Professor Slither.”

“Slither?” Wanes exclaimed in surprise. “He’s still alive?”

“No, I have a *dead man* running my son through Command School in Edge!”

Wanes flinched apologetically.

Thorne continued. "I've tasked him to work on an idea I had come to me during the eruption. I'm hoping that packet there," he pointed to the thick envelope Wanes still held, "has something of use. Otherwise, Slither may have to join those pleading for their lives."

Wanes removed the rest of the messages, found one from Slither, broke the seal, and unwrapped the message, then saw another folded parchment inside. Wanes held it up and Thorne nodded at him to open it as well. Wanes smirked and handed it over to Thorne. "Looks like the first apology letter from your son."

Thorne read the message. "Good. He's defensive and scared. And *now* he wants to come to Idumea. I couldn't tempt him to come here before, even with dangling Sargon's daughters in front of him, but now he's willing to do anything to get away from his accusers." He put down the note and held out his hand for Slither's message, which he read while bobbing his head back and forth. "Just get to the point."

Wanes scoffed quietly. "Remember that name for him at Command School? Blithering Slither?"

Thorne scoffed back as he continued to read, but he began to smile. "Yes," he whispered, "Excellent . . . Well, it certainly worked once before . . ."

Wanes cleared his throat. "Sir? If I may know?"

Thorne waved the message. "Slither just demonstrated why he should be allowed to live. He's found the way to convince the world to obey my commands without question."

"How, sir?"

Thorne leaned back in his chair. "What do the people need in a time of crisis, Wanes?"

"Leadership, sir."

"Typical first year Command School answer but you're exactly right. But this situation calls for *more* than just leadership," Thorne said with a faraway look in his eyes. "The people need someone to believe in implicitly. Someone to not only lead them but *inspire* them. And in the dire situations they'll soon be facing, they'll need someone with more than just worldly knowledge, but someone with knowledge of nature—*supernatural*, if you will."

"*Supernatural?*" Wanes was mystified.

Thorne looked off into the distance. "Someone with the ability to . . . read the stars . . . read the intentions of nature. Someone

to whom a greater being speaks . . . to *guide* this people.”

Wanes’ mouth was now hanging open in shock. “Sir . . . sir, that sounds like you are describing a . . .”

“Does it, now?” Thorne smiled sanctimoniously. “Tell me, Wanes: what were the men around you whispering in a panic when they saw the effects of Deceit? Honestly, now.”

Wanes harrumphed in disgust. “Many were thinking it was the Last Day. Some were trying to find a copy of The Writings. I even caught a few men praying.”

Thorne leaned forward. “I saw the same thing—battle-hardened soldiers stuck in the mudslide crying out for a rector to pray for them. Those terrified men were hardly an isolated event. Even my son referred to Mt. Deceit as ‘awakening.’ I found that phrase in The Writings, in a so-called prophecy by a guide. Slither has sent me a list of references describing the guides.

“I’ve realized that everyone needs something to worship,” Thorne continued thoughtfully. “If not themselves, then some greater cause. What if we provide that cause? That object to worship? What better time for a guide to return to the world than now? How will the people, still traumatized from the volcano and now facing the prospect of dying, feel about the Creator sending them a new guide to lead them through these troubling days?”

Wanes’ mouth was now fully open. “Sir, but the Administrators proved decades ago there *was* no Creator or true guides. Just dictators who controlled the people—”

The colonel’s shoulders dropped in comprehension.

“A cosmic dictator!” he breathed. “Brilliant, sir!”

Thorne nodded once in agreement. “The Administrators were wrong about a great many things, Wanes, and the world is ready for one more revelation—that the Administrators were wrong about the Creator, because He does exist. He’s merely been *gone* for the past one hundred sixty-five years,” Thorne waved his hand vaguely. “Some universal holiday or something. Supernatural beings lose track of time. But now,” he pointed, “He’s returned to check on his little flock down here, and He’s saddened by what’s happened with the volcano. He’s decided to send another guide to His people, to help them recover from this devastation.”

“Magnificent!” Wanes exhaled. “Please, allow me to guess—this guide will require sacrifices, won’t he?”

“Of course,” Thorne said. “No great reward without first a great

sacrifice. But they'll do it, Wanes, if the right person demands it, because they'll believe they'll receive a great reward once they die. The eruption demonstrated how many people are desperate for a, a *spiritual* guide, if you will. That's what these people want more than anything, Wanes: food for the souls they believe they have."

Wanes leaned forward in anticipation. "And who will be the guide, sir, who will undoubtedly fall under your brilliant influence?"

Thorne smiled thinly. "Who they will follow with blind obedience just like our ancestors followed the first Creator when he convinced them to submit to every little demand he made of them? Tell me, Wanes—how do the words *Guide Lannard* strike you?"

Wanes shuddered but grinned. "I think I just felt a chill!"



One week later, on the 42nd Day of Harvest—a date to be remembered for all time—the garrison in Idumea was buzzing.

No officer had ever seen General Thorne more passionate, agitated, or demonstrative. The story of what happened that early morning traveled from barracks to blacksmith to barns in record time. The details were garbled and mangled, but the message reached everyone and made every soldier and citizen in Idumea stop in utter shock.

General Lemuel Thorne had been visited by the Creator.

And He had called a new guide to lead the people under the general's protection. Thorne would be setting out to retrieve him immediately.

The official version of the story, related by a group of still-shaken officers, was posted throughout Idumea and sent by the fastest messengers to every surviving village in the world. And even though the composers of the message tried to tone down the peculiarity of the incident, there was just no way of getting around the story.

A group of officers were eating breakfast together early in the morning as they usually did, swapping stories and frustrations, when General Thorne burst in. He was unshaven and disheveled, as if he had slept in his uniform. His eyes were wide and bulging,

and he panted as he collapsed in an empty chair. He ran his left hand wildly through his hair and begged someone for a drink of water.

A colonel quickly poured him one as the rest of the officers stared nervously, unsure of how to interpret his strange behavior.

“Sir,” a brave lieutenant colonel finally asked, “what is it? What’s happened?”

The general finished his water and shook his head. “Men, I hardly know how to explain,” he said, clumsily dropping the mug on the table. “But I stayed up all evening trying to find ways to keep our people fed during the upcoming Raining Season. Honestly, men—our situation is grim. I worked and reworked the numbers, trying to find alternatives, looking for solutions . . . I must have fallen asleep at my desk because the next thing I know I was standing in a field and there was a great light all around me. Brilliant white. Then—”

Thorne began to breathe heavily and gripped the table as if he would topple over. An officer grabbed his mug and filled it again, but Thorne was staring off in the distance, his face pale, his eyes strangely vacant.

“And then . . . I heard a *voice*. It was loud, like thunder, and crashed down all around me, but there were no clouds or storms. Just white light. And the voice said, ‘Lemuel, you are My chosen leader, and now you must find My chosen guide who will again speak My words to all the people.’”

The officers sat in frozen silence.

Thorne continued to stare at a vague spot on the wall, his body stiff. “Men,” he whispered, “it was the Creator. I never believed before that He existed, but I cannot doubt any more. He left us for many years, angry with the kings for allowing His last guide to die, then angry with the Administrators and their lies about His existence. But now He’s back. He said the world is ready to listen to Him again and those of us who lead the world have hearts ready to do His bidding. He has returned to see us through this crisis. And He has chosen for us a new guide.”

According to the official—and several unofficial—versions of the story, it was several minutes before any of the officers could utter a word. Later a few said they felt something come over them as Thorne spoke. The general, who’d they known as a profane and vulgar man, was markedly changed. As much as they wanted to disbelieve him, the transformation in his countenance was undeniable. Thorne’s pale face even seemed to glow as he spoke, and two officers said they felt

as if they were transported out of their bodies for a moment and could see what Thorne had seen, if only for a second. Even the air in the room became still, cool, and strangely heavy.

Finally the silence was broken by Colonel Wanes, who, with a trembling chin and a voice choking with emotion said, “Dear General—what a glorious vision! Tell me, what can I do to serve the Creator and save our people?”

The other officers, now knowing what to do, also said, “Sir, what can we do to serve the Creator and save our people?”

Thorne continued to stare at the spot on the wall, a tear sliding down his cheek as he heard each of the officers affirm their trust in his vision.

“Thank you, men,” Thorne finally whispered, his voice tremulous. “I’m about to find out. I need to clean up and leave immediately to get our guide. And now I know why I spent so many years in the north. The Creator told me the guide was born and raised in Edge, and I’ll know him the moment I see him.”

He stood up abruptly.

“Tell the world, men—tell the world!” he cried out. “The Creator has returned to us! He will save us! In front of all of you as witnesses, I pledge my life to serving the Creator and saving the world! We are REMEMBERED!” he bellowed as he raised his left arm into the air.

Wanes leaped to his feet. “We are REMEMBERED!”

The rest of the officers took the cue and jumped to their feet as well. “We are REMEMBERED!”

Thorne’s shoulders shook as he began to weep. Wanes and another officer rushed to his side to brace him up.

“What a glorious day,” Thorne muttered through his tears. “Glorious! Send the message, now!” he sobbed to the officers.

They rushed out the main door, not exactly sure what to do next, but filled with a remarkable sense of purpose and energy that sent them running in different directions retelling the story in disjointed bits to anyone who would listen, until they calmed down enough to compose a more coherent notice to be posted all over Idumea and distributed to the world.

In the meantime, Thorne whispered to Wanes, “Colonel, would you help me back to the mansion? I need to make myself presentable before the Creator to find His guide.”

“Of course, sir! Of course!”

Thorne turned to the lieutenant colonel at his other side. “Go to the stables, have them prepare my horse and find thirty strong, faithful men to ride with me to Edge. We leave within the hour.”

“Certainly, sir. With great pleasure!” and the lieutenant colonel ran for the stable.

Once Thorne and Wanes were alone, Wanes exhaled. “They ate that up like starving cats at a mouse party. Brilliant, sir. Just brilliant,” he whispered as he led the general out the door.

“Yes, it was,” Thorne whispered back. “The light—brighter than anything I’ve ever seen. Completely brilliant . . .”

Chapter 17--“That’s the word: unbelievable.”

“The general’s coming *back*?” Major Kroop said nervously.

The messenger tried to calm his panting, but his long, fast ride ending in a quick run up the command tower stairs took all his breath. He bobbed his head at Major Kroop, still unable to talk.

“Tonight or tomorrow morning? Why?”

Major Twigg was sitting at the command desk studying the message, his face growing more rigid by the moment.

Kroop licked his lips. “It’s because of me, isn’t it?” he demanded. “And the bags of ash in the storehouses. I AM in trouble!” He rubbed his face and turned when he heard another set of footsteps coming up to the office. He sighed in relief when he recognized Sergeant Hili.

“Poe,” Kroop whispered in a panic, “Thorne’s returning—now! He’s going to want answers about the grain but we still don’t know who’s guilty! What am I going to do?!”

Twigg hadn’t moved as he stared at the message.

Hili noticed. “Major Twigg? What’s the general have to say?”

Twigg finally looked up at the messenger. “This is for *real*? Seriously?”

The messenger caught his breath enough to speak. “Yes, sir, it is. I’ve never seen the garrison in such a state. I saw the general just before I left. Something definitely has happened to him. The look on his face—unbelievable, sir.”

Twigg dropped the message. “That’s the word: unbelievable.”

“What?” Hili asked. “What is it?”

Twigg shook his head as he picked up the message again. “It seems that General Thorne has . . . had a *vision* of sorts.”

“*Vision*? What kind of vision?” Hili snapped.

Kroop snorted a laugh. “I thought he quit doing vials years

ago! Ever since we got that batch delivered to us at the mansion and he spent the night with that old cook thinking she was the new maid. At least *she* woke up happy . . .” He trailed off when he saw the stern expression on Twigg and he knew he’d said too much again.

Twigg said, “He says he spoke with . . . *the Creator.*”

None of the men moved or even blinked.

“This message was written personally by Colonel Wanes, *just for us,*” Twigg continued heavily. “I’ve known Wanes for years. He was the commander in Orchards but is now second to Thorne. He’s a no-nonsense, analytical man who’d see right through a vial-enhanced vision, Lannard. Read it yourself.”

Kroop swallowed hard as he took the message and Hili read next to him. Moments later they both looked up, sober and astonished.

“The new guide is *here?*” Hili asked. “In Edge? Why Edge, of all places?”

Twigg shrugged. “Who knows? If there really is a Creator, and He really has called a new guide . . . I guess you should be asking Him, not me.” Twigg glanced upward toward the ceiling, as if suddenly suspicious that someone up there spying on them. “Unbelievable! A guide. After all this time. More than one hundred fifty years, I’d guess.”

Kroop frowned, confused. “Well, what does a guide *do?*”

“Talks with the Creator,” Hili explained, still staring at the message. “Or, he doesn’t always *talk*, exactly. He receives ideas, thoughts, inspiration on how to do things or what the people need to do. Sometimes he has dreams. Only occasionally does he hear words from the clear blue sky. Usually it’s much more subtle.”

Kroop and Twigg stared at the sergeant major and his shocking amount of knowledge.

“How do you know all of that?” Twigg probed.

Hili turned slightly red. “At least . . . that’s what I was told years ago.”

“By who?”

Hili sighed. “By someone who said he knew all about guides. We were building a bedroom together, after that first big land tremor we had here about thirty years ago. I just . . . remember some things.”

Twigg narrowed his eyes. “Who was it, Hili?”

“Shem Zenos,” he whispered. “We talked while we worked.”

Kroop shuddered in sympathy. “You suffered so much, Poe,” he said as he put the message cautiously back on the desk. “According

to that, we're to make sure the mansion is ready to receive the general. Who's going to break the good news to his son and Professor Slither?"

Twigg picked up the message and handed it back to Kroop. "Why don't you do the honors? You look like you need a little fresh air and a good walk. I'm sure you won't run into *him*. Slither's had him practically chained to a desk for the last week."

Kroop frowned as he took the message, holding it at arm's length as if it'd been used to wipe something nasty off of one's boot.

"All right," he mumbled. "Better than sitting here watching for the blue banner to be hoisted."

Lannard could make it to the mansion in five minutes, but today he didn't see the purpose. He strolled leisurely to the large building that, when Thorne didn't have a current mistress, was the site of many late night parties where mead and vials were endless, and so were women. Then, after a season of parties where Lannard and a couple of hand-selected officers enjoyed their status as special guests, Thorne would choose one of the women and the parties ended for a year until she produced a daughter, was sent away, and another season of parties resumed to find a new woman.

But the Little Lieutenant's arrival put an end to all of that. Lannard had been sure Amory was on her way out soon, failing to even conceive, so he'd been expecting the late night get-to-know-you-sessions to resume. Probably no one was more disappointed to hear about the lieutenant's promotion to 'son' than Lannard. Now there were no parties where Lannard could comfort the general's castoffs.

And now that he hadn't had a castoff in well over a year, it was starting to gnaw at him. And Amory charged too much.

The mansion loomed in front of him, looking somber in the late afternoon light that dimly burned through the haze. Still the gunk lingered almost a full season after the eruption. It didn't seem as if the sun would ever be able to burn through it, and even the air felt cooler than normal. Already he could see his breath, but there'd be no mead party tonight to warm him, he was sure.

That was tragic. The general was different when he had several mugs in him. He was like an experienced older brother when he put his good arm unsteadily around Lannard and revealed to

him the way of conquering the enemy and women. Interestingly, they were the same: surprise, confusion, coercion, domination. Sometimes he messed up the order, but it didn’t seem to matter.

Lannard didn’t know how to do any of those things anyway. He was more of an ‘office officer’ rather than a ‘battle soldier.’ Battle was too . . . *complicated*.

Then again, so was the inventory, but those didn’t bleed. He was more than content to let Thorne march off to war and leave him in Edge to ‘hold down the fort,’ whatever that meant.

But now Thorne had no need for women in Edge and had his son. So where’d that leave Kroop? Trying to figure out how to find a woman on his own. Even at forty-three he still didn’t feel quite ready for so much responsibility. But he was still a young man with plenty of time.

Maybe Amory’s maid charged less than Amory.

He walked up the wide steps to the grand front doors. It was always a risk to meet Thorne when he returned. He could either be in a good mood from another conquest and almost forgiving of Lannard’s latest mistakes, or he could be a short-tempered dog trying to take off the major’s head in one brutal bite.

Although the general was still miles away, Lannard felt the nervousness he always encountered coming to the mansion, unsure of which Thorne would be inhabiting it that evening. He hesitated before knocking.

“Major Kroop to see Professor Slither,” he said to the guard who opened the door.

“In here,” he heard the old man call.

The guard stepped aside and Lannard went to the elaborate main study. Behind the grand desk he saw Professor Slither seated not in the hard oak chair General Thorne usually kept there, but in a stuffed chair and propped up by pillows.

Only once Lannard entered the study did he notice the lieutenant scribbling in the corner at a small desk. He couldn’t help but trip over his feet when he spied the young officer.

The lieutenant dropped his quill, stood up, and saluted.

Lannard felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up as it always did, and he saluted back just to get the lieutenant to sit.

“Don’t let me stop your work, Thorne,” Kroop said, trying to sound casual.

He handed Slither the message. “Some very unusual news,” he

prefaced it, thinking the professor deserved more warning than he had. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the lieutenant was looking anxiously over at the professor who began to scan the letter.

“Major Kroop, sir?” the lieutenant said quietly.

Lannard reluctantly turned to look at him, ignoring his neck hairs.

“What’s it about?” The lieutenant was genuinely timid. “The storehouses?”

“Hardly!” Slither chuckled.

Lannard spun around to stare at Slither. Chuckling was the last response on his mind when he heard the news.

“No,” Slither said as he continued to read, “something far more interesting than missing grain reserves.” He held it out for the lieutenant. “Guard!”

A soldier came to the door.

“Spread the word that Thorne is on his way back. He may be here in as little as two hours if he can find horses along the way.”

“Yes, sir!” the soldier said and left, shouting orders to the staff.

“So what do you think, Professor?” Lannard asked hesitantly. “What’s your impression of Thorne’s experience?”

Slither glanced over at the lieutenant who was reading the message, his eyebrows furrowing, then answered, “It’s what we would call *miraculous*, Kroop!”

“Miraculous?” he repeated. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Not old enough to have heard about miracles?”

Kroop frowned. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a copy of The Writings. My family was never into that stuff.”

Slither smiled in understanding. “A miracle is an unexplained phenomenon. Something happens that no one can understand. In my day they used the word to mean something that was good for those who experienced it. This,” he gestured to the message the lieutenant was still holding and seemed to be reading a second time, “is a *good* thing.”

Both men heard the lieutenant lightly scoff.

“—*got* to be kidding me,” he was whispering under his breath.

“Lek!” Slither barked. “Have something you wish to say?”

The lieutenant looked up, startled that anyone heard him. “Uh, no, sir. Not really,” he stalled, folding the message again. He

handed it to Lannard who took it without looking at the lieutenant. “I’d, I’d just be surprised if anyone would deny General Thorne the use of their horses, sir. Professor, may I help in getting the mansion prepared for his arrival? I can finish writing my evaluation later.”

Slither eyed him critically before waving his hand. “The staff doesn’t need your assistance, boy. But there’s an old copy of *The Writings* in my room that I brought from Idumea. I doubt anyone in the command tower has one. They’ll need it to help the new guide. You may accompany the major back to the fort and bring them *The Writings*.”

“I can carry it myself, sir,” Lannard chimed in. “No need to send the boy—”

“Nonsense!” Slither said. “Besides, I need a nap before the general arrives but I also need someone to keep an eye on him. I’m sure you can handle the task, Kroop.”

Lieutenant Thorne looked at the major apologetically.

“Get the book,” Lannard said drearily, “and let’s get going.”

Two minutes later the officers strode down the stairs of the mansion and across the dusty field to the fort. They walked in silence, Lannard hoping the lieutenant wouldn’t say anything.

The silence lasted only thirty seconds before the lieutenant said, “Quite an interesting message, eh sir?”

“Yep,” Lannard said shortly. He picked up his pace, but the lieutenant, with slightly longer legs, easily kept up.

“Fascinating timing, I thought.”

“Yep.”

“I’m supposing the general will be finding the guide, then.”

“Yep.”

Silence.

“Sir, I haven’t had a chance to say this yet, but I wanted you to know I feel bad about what happened last week. I know you didn’t have anything to do with the grain disappearance—”

“You’ve got that right!” Lannard snarled.

“Yes, sir, and neither have I. I never took advantage of your trust in me and I really did just want to help. I shouldn’t have said what I did about you in front of the other men. All I’ve *ever* wanted to do is help, but I keep messing that up somehow,” he finished quietly.

Lannard sighed. He was never good in situations like this, where people seemed to be one way, then acted another, and he had to try to figure out which was the real thing.

“I understand,” he lied.

The lieutenant nearly gasped. “You do, sir? Thank you!”

Lannard narrowed his eyes, trying to understand how what he said had earned him a “thank you.”

“Honestly, sir,” the lieutenant plowed on, probably with something else to puzzle the major, “of all the men I’ve met at the fort, I think you’re the most trustworthy one. I can see why the general has so much faith in you. You just get a little confused sometimes, but all of us do. You’re the last man I could imagine ever successfully deceiving anyone.”

Lannard blinked a few times. “All right,” he said slowly. “Thank you,” he added. It seemed appropriate.

The lieutenant exhaled cheerfully. “I’m glad we got that straightened out, sir! Maybe we could work together to figure out who’s been stealing—”

“No!” Lannard said sharply. “We will NOT work together, Shin . . . I mean, Thorne!”

“Sir?”

“Wouldn’t be . . . proper.”

“Of course, sir. Whatever you feel.”

What Lannard felt at that moment was like running away from the lieutenant. His voice, his walk, the way he was rubbing his forehead right now—all of it was too familiar and he’d never get used to his presence. It was as if the colonel was walking beside the lieutenant, reading Lannard’s thoughts, demanding to know why he acted as an unsuspecting informant about his wife.

“Major, look!” the lieutenant said suddenly. “The blue banner’s already up! How’d he travel so quickly?”

Lannard whimpered softly. He thought he had more time, but now he was walking with one nightmare to meet another. Why couldn’t everyone just stay where they were supposed to and let him live at the fort in peace and quiet? Hopefully the general’s guide-finding project would be completed soon, and Lannard could go back to hanging out at the command tower and doing what he did best. Whatever that was.

They reached the fort to find the soldiers rushing around in excitement.

“I’m guessing everyone here has heard the news by now,” the lieutenant said. “I’ve never seen everyone so frantic.”

“This is crazy,” Lannard said. “Where’s everyone going?”

Hili saw them and jogged over. “Good! You’re both here! The general has called everyone to formation in the parade grounds. He wants to begin reviewing the troops before he starts inspecting the village.”

“Reviewing the troops?” Lannard repeated. “For what?”

“For *him*,” Hili said. “The guide. He told Twigg when he met him at the gates that he was supposed to look at every man and the Creator would tell him who the guide is supposed to be. He’s already waiting on the parade hill. Lieutenant, he wants you by his side immediately.”

The lieutenant nodded and took off in a run to the parade hill.

Lannard sighed in relief. “So he’s not in the tower? Maybe I’ll stay up there, take care of things while he’s reviewing—”

Hili caught his arm. “Not so fast, Lannard. Thorne was very clear about this—*every last man* needs to be there. And Lannard, the look on his face? I wouldn’t disappoint him right now. I’ve never seen him more determined.”

Lannard exhaled. “Poe, really—”

“Yes, Lannard, *really!*”

Lannard trudged to the parade grounds, pouting. He could be getting a nice nap in the tower instead of standing at attention. He never understood the point of that. Soldiers just standing?

All around him soldiers rushed to the grounds at the southwest of the fort, scrambling to find their sergeants and getting into formation. Kroop strolled easily, knowing no one else would get confused in the rush and accidentally stand next to Major Twigg.

By the time his slow gait brought him to the parade field, nearly all of the soldiers had assembled. Lannard glanced up to the hill as he meandered through the lines to get to his position at the front. Thorne stood at the edge of the hill looking over the troops. It didn’t seem like he’d found his man yet. He *did* seem different, though. His posture was hunched slightly, which wasn’t Thorne-like at all. His son stood a little behind and to the side while his father intently scanned the collection of soldiers.

Lannard snaked his way between two more lines of soldiers who were adjusting their positions, and glanced up at Thorne. Immediately he knew that was a mistake.

Thorne’s eyes locked with Lannard’s, and the major found himself rooted to the ground. Thorne slowly raised his left arm and pointed at him. Stupid storehouses. The investigation was painfully slow, as if Captain Varice didn’t *want* to discover anything.

Lannard forced himself to continue walking, the empty space he was to occupy now only a few paces away. But Thorne was slowly shaking his head, still holding his gaze.

“MAJOR!” Thorne roared.

The entire area fell silent. Soldiers stopped in mid-stride while hundreds of men craned their necks to see which major Thorne was yelling for.

Lannard froze in terror. “General?”

Thorne spun to his son and said something quietly and urgently.

The lieutenant’s eyebrows went up in surprise. “Really?” he seemed to say, then he, too, looked at Major Kroop.

Thorne twisted again to stare at him.

Lannard swallowed nervously.

Thorne raised his left arm high into the air. “PRAISE THE CREATOR!” he thundered. “HE HAS REVEALED HIS GUIDE! ALL KNEEL BEFORE GUIDE LANNARD KROOP!”

Lannard couldn’t move. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t blink. His blood probably stopped flowing, too, but he didn’t fall to the ground, which he really wished would’ve happened right then. Anything to stop the stares of every last man.

“KNEEL!” Thorne bellowed again as he dropped to his knees, his son immediately following his father’s example.

Lannard still couldn’t make his body fall down. All around him soldiers fell to their knees, unsure of what to do next, but watched both the general and Kroop, looking for clues. Lannard couldn’t give them any hints as he remained motionless, waiting for Thorne to say something like, “Oh wait . . . hold on, my mistake.”

Because . . . *Guide*? He didn’t even know what a guide *did* an hour ago. Now he *was* one?

“PRAY TO THE CREATOR!” Thorne bellowed. “THANK HIM FOR HIS GIFT! CLOSE YOUR EYES AND THANK HIM IN YOUR MIND!”

Unsure if he was supposed to do that, too, Lannard started to squint his eyes shut, but instead found the wherewithal to look around him. Every man was bowing his head obediently, except for one across the field who wasn’t kneeling or bowing his head.

Poe Hili stared at him, slowly shaking his head in disbelief.

Lannard shrugged back.

“GUIDE LANNARD KROOP! JOIN ME HERE!”

Lannard turned to General Thorne. Without meaning to, he began to shuffle over to the short hill in front of him. Several soldiers still on their knees scooted to the side to make way. With his mouth dry and his arms trembling, Lannard began to climb the steep hill to reach the general.

“Come, oh Great One!” Thorne encouraged loudly. “Come!”

Lannard tried to steady his footing on the slick, dry grasses, knowing it wouldn’t be too impressive for him to slip and fall in front of everyone.

And it probably would’ve been more impressive if he’d thought of taking stone steps on the side. But it was too late now. He could tell that everyone had stopped praying and was watching him clumsily crawl up the hill. He sighed in relief as he successfully reached the top and stood up.

Thorne stood up as well, as did his son. Lannard had never seen such a look in Thorne’s eyes. They were passionate, determined, and a little scarier than usual. Thorne took him by the shoulder and cried, “He is here! He has climbed the hill just as the Creator revealed to me he would, and he stands before you ready to lead! I have been called to protect and assist him, and I promise that I will devote my life to providing for the guide and saving our world! Hail our Guide! Hail the Creator!” He gripped Lannard’s hand and raised it high above their heads.

The soldiers stood up with loud cheers.

Lannard stared at the masses shouting in joy. He ventured a small smile. They cheered even louder. Lannard held up his other arm in triumph, and the shouting nearly deafened him. Maybe this wasn’t so bad after all. Even Hili shrugged and shouted with the soldiers.

Suddenly he heard the general’s voice in his ear. “I’ve never been prouder to call you my friend, Lannard.”

Guide Lannard grinned. This was better than getting fogged. It might even help him get a woman.

Lieutenant Thorne sat in the corner of the command office trying to be inconspicuous. No one was paying any attention to him, which was good because it gave him time to think. And all he could think was: You have *got* to be kidding me!

At one point, as he helped escort the guide to the command tower, he heard words that cut through the shouts of praise and gratitude. The familiar voice said, *UN-BE-LIEVE-ABLE!*

But it had to be believable. Who would dare question General Thorne? His enthusiasm for the new guide was contagious. No one had ever seen the general so energized, and just like lightning his energy jumped from one person to another until the entire fort was charged with a desire to believe in the Creator and learn from the guide.

General Thorne told them that the guide's first proclamation would come soon, and he'd make sure everyone received it as soon as it was uttered. But Guide Lannard Kroop hadn't uttered anything the entire way back to the command tower. He was still pale and surprised when he sat down in the big chair behind the command desk.

Thorne, Twigg, Hili, and a couple other officers followed him in, with the lieutenant last of all. He sat down on a narrow stool trying to stay out of Kroop's view, knowing he still made the major nervous.

Or rather, *the guide* nervous.

The lieutenant found himself subtly shaking his head and tried to stop it. While he hadn't been around a guide for a while, he *had* spent seven years living, working, and hiking next to one. And Lannard Kroop was no guide.

He suspected—*feared*—the whole thing was a sham. But why would Thorne do this? It didn't make any sense.

Then again, maybe Thorne really believed he'd had a vision, that all of this was the right thing to do. The general was hardly like himself at all. Maybe the lieutenant was just being too cynical. Maybe there *was* something to all of this.

Really, wouldn't now be a good time for the world to be saved?

The lieutenant watched as General Thorne, kneeling humbly next to Kroop, thumbed through the pages of *The Writings* that Slither had sent over with Lannard himself. In a surprisingly soft voice, Thorne was explaining passages to the stunned guide while Hili wrote down the pages for him to review later.

The lieutenant wished he was closer to see and hear what sections Thorne was pointing out. Not that he would have been much help. On the few occasions he tried to remember something from

The Writings, he found the words didn’t come back to him easily.

But the scene in front of him was dismaying. Thorne seemed sincere and almost kind as he attempted to tutor poor Kroop. But something just felt *off*; not the same as when he was with the guide in Salem. Whenever *he* entered a room there was a feeling of warmth and peace that arrived a moment before he appeared. Even when he was just Uncle Sh—*that man*, the feeling accompanied him.

But the air in the command tower was markedly different. Heavy. Cool. Almost disorienting in a way, and that’s what was pricking at the lieutenant. *Something* was there, but it was *not*—the lieutenant was quite confident—the influence of the Creator.

It was the influence of something else entirely—

“Lek!”

The lieutenant jumped when he heard the general’s voice. “Yes, sir?”

Thorne was shaking his head. “Where have you been, son? I’ve said your name three times now.”

The lieutenant looked around at the room at the amused faces of the officers. “Sorry, sir. Just a little . . . preoccupied.”

Thorne nodded kindly. “Lots to think about tonight, isn’t there? Now that I have your attention, I’ve been *trying* to tell you to go to the mansion. Tell Slither we’ll be there shortly. The guide will be staying with us until we’re ready to leave.”

“*Leave?*” Kroop finally spoke. “Sir, where are we going?”

“To the world, Guide! We’re going to Idumea as soon as possible. The world deserves to meet its new guide, right?”

Kroop’s mouth opened slightly. “I’m going . . . *with you?*”

“Of course! I’ve vowed to keep you safe. You’ll go *nowhere* without me. *Ever*. You are mine and I am yours.”

Guide Lannard hesitated. “Oh. How unexpected. Sir.” His gaze slid reluctantly over to the lieutenant. “And will your son be accompanying us as well? To . . . *everywhere?*”

“We’ll discuss his arrangements later,” Thorne said. “Go on, now, son. Tell the cook we’ll be there within half an hour for dinner.”

The lieutenant stood up, saluted, and trotted down the stairs. The air around him grew lighter and fresher as he descended. When he finally stepped outside into the cool evening, he felt he could breathe again and he walked briskly to the mansion.

DON’T GO WITH THEM, DON’T GO WITH THEM, DON’T GO WITH THEM, DON’T GO WITH THEM, DON’T GO—

“All right already!” he whispered as he approached the gates.
YOU’RE HEARING ME? TONIGHT YOU’RE ACTUALLY LISTENING?

“What do you want?” he breathed.

TO SAVE YOU, YOUNG PERE.

That name struck him strangely. For a moment he almost wondered who he was talking about.

YES, THAT’S STILL YOUR NAME.

“Why shouldn’t I go?”

JUST DON’T.

He rolled his eyes. “Give me more than that, will you?”

CONSIDER THIS—YOU HAVE A MAN SUCH AS LEMUEL THORNE IN CHARGE OF THE WORLD, AND A MAN AS MALLEABLE AND SUGGESTIBLE AS LANNARD KROOP ACTING AS THE GUIDE. TELL ME, WHO’S REALLY GOING TO BE THE GUIDE?

The lieutenant sighed. “But I already asked to go to Idumea in a message I sent him last week.”

BUT YOUR EDUCATION WILL SUFFER IF YOU LEAVE. THERE’S NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT THAN FINISHING YOUR SCHOOLING AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE SO THAT YOU CAN STAND LEGITIMATELY NEXT TO THORNE IN A COMMAND SITUATION.

The lieutenant began to smile. “You *really* want me to do that? Finally you understand what I’m trying to do?”

There was a cosmic sigh. *LEMUEL PROBABLY SHOULD’VE MADE YOU THE GUIDE. YOU’RE JUST AS GULLIBLE AS LANNARD.*

The lieutenant marched faster as if he could get away from the voice.

I’M SORRY—I SHOULDN’T HAVE SAID THAT. JUST PLEASE, YOUNG PERE, STAY AT THE MANSION AND SPEND YOUR TIME STUDYING. WHAT’S COMING IS NOT ANYTHING THAT YOU SHOULD BE A PART OF.

“So then tell me what’s coming,” he breathed as the mansion came into view, “so that I can know that staying behind is the best decision.”

I CAN’T DO THAT, YOUNG PERE . . . LIEUTENANT. I LIKE THE NEW DESIGN OF THE JACKETS, BY THE WAY. REMINDS ME OF WHAT I WORE AT THAT AGE. YOU LOOK VERY IMPRESSIVE. I LIKE THE GOLD BRAID—

“Thank you, but you’re not addressing my request.”

REMEMBER BEFORE MT. DECEIT ERUPTED THAT I TOLD YOU THAT YOU HAD NO IDEA WHAT WAS COMING?

“Yes.”

WAS I RIGHT?

“Yes,” he admitted.

WELL THEN, LIEUTENANT, AS TO WHAT’S COMING NEXT—YOU HAVE NO IDEA. PLEASE, STAY IN EDGE.

“All right, Colonel,” he said flippantly, “I’ll try to explain my need to stay here and study.”

GOOD, LIEUTENANT! AND IT’S GENERAL, BY THE WAY.

The lieutenant smirked. “Not according to what I read in a book written by your father. According to ‘Basic Command,’ the original version, the only way an officer can be promoted is by appointment of a higher ranking officer or the chairman of the Administrators. You resigned your general’s commission before the chairman ever swore you in.” He was nearly to the steps of the mansion.

AH, VERY GOOD! I SAW YOU READING THAT PAGE. INTERESTING THING, THE PROMOTION PROCEDURE. BY THE WAY, WHEN YOU WERE LOOKING AT THORNE’S PAST UNIFORMS TO SEE IF ANY WOULD FIT YOU WHEN YOU FIRST ARRIVED AT THE MANSION, DID YOU SEE HIS LIEUTENANT COLONEL’S UNIFORM? OR COLONEL’S?

The lieutenant paused on the steps. “No, I didn’t.”

SO WHO APPOINTED HIM GENERAL?

The lieutenant remembered what Eltana Yordin had told him. “No one. He did it himself.”

HE MADE HIMSELF A GENERAL, WITHOUT POWER HANDED TO HIM BY THOSE IN AUTHORITY. HE JUST TOOK IT. THAT’S THE SAME WAY HE MADE HIS SON AND HIS GUIDE. NO AUTHORITY OR POWER BESTOWED FROM THE CREATOR—HE’S JUST CLAIMING IT HIMSELF.

“So Guide Lannard Kroop—it’s *not* for real?”

OF COURSE NOT! YOU KNOW THAT! IT’S ONE THING TO TAKE THE WORLD’S POWER AND CLAIM TO BE A GENERAL, BUT IT’S ANOTHER THING ENTIRELY TO CLAIM THE CREATOR’S POWER. LEMUEL DOES INDEED HAVE POWER, BUT FROM THE REFUSER.

“The Refuser?”

SURELY YOU HAVEN’T FORGOTTEN HIM. THE ONE WHO HAD NO FAITH IN THE CREATOR’S PLAN? THE ONE WHO REFUSED TO TAKE THE TEST? MANY FOLLOWED HIM HERE AND NOW THEIR GOAL IS TO DESTROY ALL THE CREATOR HAS DONE. THE REFUSER TAKES WHATEVER THE CREATOR MAKES AND TWISTS IT TO HIS OWN DESIGN. AND HE DOES HAVE SOME POWER, JUST NOT AS GREAT AS THE CREATOR’S.

The lieutenant nodded obligingly. “Yeah, yeah . . . I remember.”

THE WORLD IS UNDER HIS POWER, LIEUTENANT. EVERYONE WHO EMBRACES THE WORLD EMBRACES HIM.

The Soldier in the Middle of the World

The lieutenant sighed. “You’re saying I embrace him.”

THE REFUSER HAS A FIRM HOLD ON YOU, YES. NOT AN UNBREAKABLE HOLD, BUT STILL FIRM. HE CAN’T AFFECT ME BUT HE CAN STOP YOU FROM LISTENING TO ME. BUT IF YOU GO WITH THORNE, HIS GRIP ON YOU WILL BECOME SO TIGHT IT’LL BE PAINFUL BEYOND COMPREHENSION.

The lieutenant rolled his eyes. “Tiresome, old man—”

JUST GIVE ME ONE MORE MINUTE, YOUNG PERE. YOU COULD FEEL IT WAS WRONG, COULDN’T YOU? BUT NO ONE IN THE WORLD HAS FELT THE POWER OF A REAL GUIDE. INSTEAD, THEY’LL FEEL WHAT YOU FELT—SOMETHING HEAVY AND COLD, AND BECAUSE THEY DON’T KNOW ANY BETTER THEY’LL INTERPRET THAT AS THE CREATOR. THE WORLD IS SO NUMB AND DESPERATE TO FEEL ANYTHING THAT THEY’LL GRASP AT EVEN THE LOWLIEST THING OFFERED. YOU CAN’T REALLY GET MUCH MORE LOWLY THAN LANNARD KROOP AS GUIDE.

The lieutenant snorted in spite of himself. “The general is nothing if not a reasonable man. I’ll try to get him to agree to let me stay, but I can’t guarantee anything.”

JUST KEEP YOUR DISTANCE FROM THEM. YOU’RE DRIFTING FURTHER AWAY FROM WHO YOU REALLY ARE. IT’S BEEN SO HARD TO REACH YOU LATELY, I’M AMAZED YOU HEARD . . .

The lieutenant was already through the front doors.

HOGAL, HE CAN’T GO WITH THEM. PLEASE, HOGAL—I’M BEGINNING TO FEEL DESPERATE.

I know, my boy. I know. And your plan has been approved.

THANK THE CREATOR!

He already said, You’re Welcome.

Chapter 18--“You have it. The gift of sight.”

After dinner, the lieutenant sat on one of the long sofas in the gathering room, and across from him on the other sofa were General Thorne and Guide Lannard. Professor Slither sat in a soft chair with his feet up on a low table, intently observing the two men.

The lieutenant watched, fascinated by what was unfolding.

“So,” Guide Lannard said slowly, “the Creator said I would understand how to do all of this in time?”

Thorne nodded. “Yes, but Lannard—*Guide*—I already feel something from you. It’s extraordinary, really!”

Slither nodded. “I feel it too, Guide,” he said reverently.

Fortunately neither of them asked what the lieutenant was feeling.

Slither continued. “It’s as if my mind is *opening up* in your presence. I can think of things in new ways . . .”

Guide Lannard frowned. “Really?”

“Oh, yes!” General Thorne agreed. “I’m experiencing it too. A clearing of my mind, a *cleansing* almost, as if all unnecessary thoughts are being swept away to allow me to receive new ones—” He stopped short and looked off into the distance.

Guide Lannard looked off too, trying to see what Thorne was. His eyes shifted around the wall and up to the ceiling but saw nothing more than painted stucco.

Thorne’s mouth slowly opened. “Yes,” he breathed, “Yes! I see! Oh, that explains so much!”

Guide Lannard squinted in the same direction. He closed one eye as if that might help.

The lieutenant rubbed his forehead and tried not to snigger.

Thorne shook himself a little and turned back at the guide. “The investigation about the missing grain . . . You haven’t had much success with that, have you?”

The guide sank back into the sofa. “Had a feeling that was coming,” he muttered. “No.”

Thorne nodded soberly. “That’s all right. I know why. Sitting here with you has opened my eyes.”

Slither’s hand slowly lifted off the armrest and gestured at another indistinct point on the wall. “There!” he whispered earnestly. “I see the guilty man! Lemuel, do you see? A captain?”

Thorne’s face brightened. “Yes, yes, Professor, I do. And it makes perfect sense!”

“Who is it?” Guide Lannard demanded.

“Varice!” Thorne proclaimed. “And he’s not alone.”

The guide licked his lips eagerly. “Who else?”

“A sergeant!” Slither gasped. “Shorter and stockier than the captain, but . . . but familiar . . . I think I’ve seen him before.”

Thorne tilted his head. “I see him too. Ah, no *wonder*. Lek, Lannard—it’s Onus.”

The lieutenant couldn’t keep silent any longer. “Onus? *My* Sergeant Onus? But sir, you said he was trustworthy—”

Thorne shook his head. “Until today my eyes have not been fully opened to know the truth of all things. But now that we have the guide whose presence clears our vision, nothing can be held back. I was wrong about Onus, son. But I was never wrong about you, was I? You always were innocent, as was our chosen guide. It’s a miracle! The Creator has proven your innocence and revealed the guilty men.”

Guide Lannard slowly began to smile. “So . . . Onus and Varice? Maybe that’s why Varice hasn’t been too helpful . . . Of course! Who else knew what supply numbers were coming in and going out? Who else but Sergeant Onus could have *remembered* those numbers, then . . . *given* them to Varice? Then Varice . . .” Lannard’s lips pursed as he tried to work out the rest.

Thorne and Slither were on the edge of their seats, holding their breath, waiting for the guide’s next words.

The lieutenant fought the urge to roll his eyes at the obvious conclusion Lannard must surely come to, if he could stay focused.

“Then Varice . . . since he’s in *charge* of stocking the supplies did *something* . . . to sell them off?”

Thorne and Slither exhaled and smiled.

“Excellent, Guide!” Thorne slapped his leg enthusiastically. “You have it. The gift of sight. You see it too.”

Slither shook his head. “I’m in the presence of true greatness!”

Guide Lannard smiled sheepishly. “Wasn’t that hard, really. I just cleared my mind and . . . there it was.”

The lieutenant leaned forward and held his head in his hands. It was becoming too painful to watch.

“Ah, Lek,” he heard the general say. “Quite a relief, isn’t it? To know no one will be accusing you anymore?”

The lieutenant looked up with a forced smile. “Indeed, sir. Glad to have that *cleared* up. What will you do with them, sir?”

A familiar coldness came back to Thorne’s blue eyes. “We’ll concern ourselves with that in the morning. In the meantime, I’ll dispatch soldiers to keep an eye on them. But tonight belongs to the guide, here!” The warm smile he’d been wearing all evening, which had a chilling effect, returned. “He always had the gift and I never saw it.”

Guide Lannard looked at him, confused. “The gift?”

“To be able to see what no one else can! To know the future! You’ve been doing it for years but we never understood it until now.”

The guide blinked, baffled. “What did I see?”

“So modest,” the general said softly, almost sweetly. “You saw my *son* coming to me, Lannard. Every Raining Season, when the nights were long and the days were cold, there you were, having your fit of ‘The colonel’s returned!’” Thorne chuckled.

The lieutenant bit his tongue, knowing that in Raining Season Lannard Kroop had extra jugs of mead delivered to his quarters. And on more than one occasion last year, Kroop’s eyes were bloodshot and glazed over, and he was useless until well after midday meal. Well, more useless than normal.

Thorne was still gushing. “Every year you thought you saw or heard or felt the colonel’s presence, but we just laughed at you. Until now. What you were experiencing wasn’t lingering effects of vials or mead, although we always told you it was. It was instead a . . . a *prophecy*, Lannard! Look at my son,” he gestured to the increasingly uncomfortable lieutenant. “Those dark eyes, that straight nose, the black hair . . . even his smile, the rare times I’ve seen it, is Colonel Perrin Shin. What you saw was *my son* coming to me, in the image of his grandfather. You saw him—you prophesied, even before you were called to be Guide!”

Guide Lannard’s face softened. “I *did*, didn’t I?” he breathed. “And all of you laughed at me! But I was *right*. General! I really think . . . I *feel* it. My mind’s clearing. I’m receiving another idea.”

Thorne's eyebrows went up. "Oh really, Lannard?"

"Yes . . . yes! I have an *idea*! Let's celebrate, General! My becoming guide? Like we used to? Back in my quarters I've got an unopened jug of mead I've been saving, and we could find a few women, and we could even teach your son to—"

Thorne held up his good hand. "*Guide*," he began carefully, "you need to understand your position now, as spiritual leader of this people."

Lannard's countenance fell. "Meaning?"

"The guide isn't one who drinks a whole jug himself. Nor does he," Thorne glanced over at his son then back to Lannard, who was starting to pout, "enjoy the company of women."

"At *all*?"

Thorne shrugged. "I think the past guides were married, but now really wouldn't be an appropriate time for you to become *involved* in that way."

Guide Lannard slumped back into the sofa. "Well *that's* not fair. Where's the fun in—"

"Guide," Thorne said, a little sternly, "this isn't the time for *fun*, it's the time to *save our people*. The insight you're to receive will be to help us make it through this crisis."

"Crisis?"

Thorne remained uncharacteristically patient. "Lannard, there simply isn't enough food, the people feel it and are terrified. There's violence breaking out everywhere. We need to pray for guidance as to how to deal with this crisis. I've known you since you were sixteen. It'll be very difficult for you to *concentrate* if you're entangled with a woman."

When Thorne said 'entangled,' Lannard's eyes brightened, until he realized he might not be 'entangled' again for a long time.

"But the mansion in Idumea is so big, and I'd hardly ever see her—"

"Lannard!" Thorne said sharply. "This is a sacrifice *everyone* must make. I recently found myself a very diverting woman, but she'll be moving out of the mansion as soon as we return. *We all* need to postpone our desires for the greater good of the world. Besides, do you have any idea how much an expecting woman eats?"

Lannard shrugged.

"Once she's past that initial sick period, she can eat more than

three soldiers who’ve been starved on emergency rations. At least, when she’s expecting a girl, that is . . .” Thorne mumbled.

“So,” Lannard tried one last time, “no—”

Thorne began to look weary as he interrupted the guide. “Lannard, I haven’t slept for several nights and I haven’t ridden so far and so hard in twenty years. I’m exhausted. We’ll discuss more in the morning, all right, *Guide*? You can take the second guest room upstairs. I know that’s your favorite. Until tomorrow, my friend.”

Thorne stood up and nodded to Slither. “Professor.”

He looked over at the lieutenant with a smile. “Son, we *must* get you a decent officer’s uniform some time. And that SHIN label,” he shook his head. “Sure none of my old jackets fit you?”

The lieutenant smiled faintly. “I’m sure, sir. But then again, I found only your earlier jackets. Perhaps your colonel’s jacket is a little larger?” he suggested, knowing there was no colonel’s jacket.

Thorne’s face didn’t change as he said, “I’ll look into it, Lek. Good night, son.”

“Good night, sir.”

Thorne cocked his head. “You were going to work on that, remember, son? *Sir*?”

The lieutenant swallowed hard. “Your sudden arrival caught me by surprise. And with all the extra studying I’ve been doing, I really hadn’t had time to ‘work’ on it.”

“He *has* been studying a lot,” Slither said with a heavy sigh. “Can’t fault him on that, General.”

Thorne nodded. “Good. Tell the cook I want breakfast late.”

He walked out the door but didn’t head up the stairs to the bedrooms. Instead, he stopped at the back door and gestured to one of the soldiers standing guard.

“I want twelve men sent immediately to keep an eye on Varice and Onus. Six for each man. Use their own soldiers. Tell them if none of them are seen or detected when I send the word to retrieve them, they’ll each receive a general’s reward. And it’ll be *more* than whatever those two men paid for their silence. Understand?”

The guard nodded.

“Report to me at breakfast as to their whereabouts and doings for the evening.”

“Yes, sir!” The guard saluted and ran into the night.

The man sat on the log looking up at the dead trees waiting for something dreadful to happen. No one had seen him sneak into the forest and no soldiers would dare follow, he was sure. So a movement to the south startled him, and he leaped to his feet before he recognized who it was.

The approaching man chuckled. “Feeling jumpy about playing Guarder?”

The first man chuckled tightly back and stowed the long knife he’d drawn. “Some. But I have to admit it gets the blood flowing.”

“And with it being so cold lately, we need everything we can get to keep it flowing.” The newcomer grinned and held up a jug. He sat down on a log next to the first man. “He won’t be needing this tonight or ever.”

The first man laughed. “Onus, is this Kroop’s?”

“Varice, can you tell me any other man who would keep a full supply under his *bed*? And he really thought no one knew.”

The men laughed quietly as Varice uncorked the jug and held it up in triumph. “I thank you, O Great Guide Lannard Kroop, for being the Creator’s chosen! Now you’re off my back and out of our lives forever!” He took a long drink.

“Hear, hear!” Onus grinned, reaching for the mead. “Everyone’s happy with their payoff, and now with him and Thorne gone—and the Little Lieutenant sure to follow—we’re as good as home free.” He drained a portion of mead.

The captain sighed in relief. “Been waiting to hear those words, Onus. When we lost Lick I started to get worried about this arrangement, but when I began to lose hope, hope is restored. Maybe there is a Creator, and He’s on our side. When are they leaving?”

Onus shrugged. “I imagine pretty quickly.”

“So how are the modifications on the plan coming?”

Onus took another swallow before handing the jug back to Varice. “Very well. Kiah’s slipped into position without anyone questioning him and his girlfriend is staying at some shack with two former grassena girls. They’ll stay quiet until we figure out this guide business and Thorne grows desperate. Soon enough the food stores will be down to nothing, and then he’ll be willing to do anything, and *pay* anything, to anyone who can offer him a solution. And that, my dear Varice, is when we act.”

“Any guess of when that might be?” Varice asked, taking another swig.

Onus looked thoughtfully up at the dark trees. “If my estimates about the conditions of the other forts are right, the world will be near starvation in less than six weeks.” He tipped the jug back again. “I have a few visits to make, but soon everything will be in place for a desperate General Thorne.” With that, he corked the jug.

“Hey!” Varice exclaimed, “There’s still plenty in there.”

“But not for us, Varice.”

The captain scowled. “What are you doing with the rest of it?”

Onus smiled patiently. “You’ve spent all your life in the army and don’t understand much about the market. But I’m going to give you another lesson in supply and demand. Now, in the army that means if we need more *supply*, we *demand* it from the citizens. But everyone else has to follow other rules. Someone wants a new saddle in Edge they can go to four different places. Whoever has the better deal gets the sale, right?”

“Yes,” Varice said, with irritation. “So why does someone wanting a saddle mean I can’t finish off Kroop’s mead?”

“Just listen. The four saddle makers compete and lower their prices accordingly. But Varice, what if there was only one saddle maker? How much could he charge?”

Varice shrugged. “I guess as much as he wanted.”

“Especially if the customer is desperate for that saddle, right?”

“Yes,” Varice said slowly. “I still don’t follow how this is taking away my mead, which is becoming more valuable by the minute since no one is allowed to brew any grain.”

“Giving up this mead now will mean basins of it for you to swim in later, we need this to buy out the other saddleries. How valuable will our information about Salem’s storehouses be to Thorne once all the food here is gone?”

Varice scoffed. “It’d be worth the world. Isn’t that what we were planning to charge him?”

“Yes, it will be,” Onus agreed, “unless there’s someone *else* with the same information willing to sell to Thorne for less.”

“Who?”

“Several seasons ago Captain Lick told me, back when he suspected Salemites had come to the grassy arena, that he saw a tall, dark-haired man and a blond woman emerge from the forest. Lick was positive that woman was Miss Amory.”

Varice nearly fell of the log. “Miss Amory? Is from *Salem*? Wouldn’t she have told Thorne?”

Onus scoffed. “She hasn’t yet or Thorne would already be there. She probably was running away from something and doesn’t want to go back. But if she’s desperate enough, if she’s *starving*, wouldn’t she consider going back then?”

“And she might tell Thorne,” Varice said, disappointed.

“But would she charge him as much as we would?” Onus prodded.

“What’s she’s charging now for something considerably less valuable is quite high, but for Thorne she’d probably lower her rates,” Varice sniggered.

“The market hates competition, even more than Thorne does,” Onus told him. “Becoming the king is the goal of *everything*. Only then can you sit back and watch everyone labor for you. We need to eliminate the competition or buy them out.” He held up the jug.

“You think you can buy her out for just half a jug of mead, Onus?”

“Half a jug of mead *and* the threat of revealing her to her former lover. When she believes I’ll expose her origins to Thorne and claim she was a spy—for which the penalty is his sword through her heart—I’m sure she’ll be more than willing to cooperate with us.”

Varice leaned back a little from Onus. “I never realized owning a saddlery was so complicated. Or brutal. It’s worse than the army.”

“That’s because every ‘saddlery’ wants what the army has—complete market control. And with enough control, one could even control the army,” Onus held out his hands proudly.

“But Onus, what Kiah told us about Lek Thorne—is he really a Shin from Salem?”

Onus shrugged. “Kiah said he bears a strong resemblance to Peto Shin who he met a few times. And supposedly they had a son who ran away over a year ago. He matches the description Lick gave me of the man accompanying Amory. But to be sure? That’s what the rest of this,” he held up the jug, “will hopefully reveal. And if he is? Well, he better hope there really is a Creator because it’ll take a miracle for him to survive once Thorne finds out!”

It was well past midnight when Amory heard someone knocking. She'd been sleeping lightly on the sofa and glared at the door.

“Go away!” she hollered. “It's past hours!”

The knocking on the door began again.

“I said, go away! We're closed!”

The knocking continued.

Annoyed and exhausted, Amory got up and grabbed the fireplace poker. She unbolted the door and flung it open. “I said—” She stopped when she saw the jug held up in front of her face.

“I'm not here for your services,” the sergeant said in a low voice. “But for *information*, for which I'll pay.”

Amory firmed her grip. “Information about who?”

“Not a ‘who’,” the sergeant said, lowering the jug to look Amory in the face. “But a ‘what’.”

Amory squinted at him in confusion.

Sergeant Onus knew what to do next. To find out the truth from someone, catch that person off guard and watch their eyes closely. The very first reaction, which may happen in only an instant, will tell you all you need to know. He leaned closer to see her eyes fully in the moons' light.

“Salem,” he whispered.

It was quick but it was there. She *was* from Salem and she didn't want anyone to know.

Sergeant Onus put his foot in the open doorway before she could slam it shut, then grabbed the end of the fire poker and wrenched it out of her hands.

“You'll be letting me in now, Miss Amory. We have a few things to discuss, don't we?”

Lemuel collapsed wearily on his large bed. There was a faint, sweet smell there that took him a moment to identify. Amory. The scent of her perfumed oils still lingered.

He hadn't thought of her, not even as he pushed aside some of her forgotten cloaks to check his old uniforms in the back of a storage

wardrobe. The jackets definitely were too tight for Lek. Even though Lemuel had been a strapping young man—and still was—no one was quite as strapping as his son.

When he crawled under the covers a few moments later, he was completely spent. The past few days had been a blur of planning, researching, and analyzing. And it'd all come together better than he ever would've imagined.

But then again, why would he expect to be less than completely impressed with his execution. If he'd appointed a guide the last time he held Idumea, he could've held off Sargon far easier by claiming he was influenced by the Refuser. He'd have to explain that concept to Lannard in the morning so that the guide would understand why some may reject and even fight them.

Guide Lannard would also need an assistant. Traditionally there were twelve, but Lemuel saw the need for only one man who would take over as the guide when the citizens inevitably grew weary of the demands of the Guide Lannard and insisted upon his death.

That one assistant would then become guide for the remaining three hundred thousand citizens; the one who would stand before them—handsome, charismatic, and reminiscent of a former leader the world once desired as High General.

And also conveniently gullible, as Lek had proven himself on enough occasions to convince Lemuel this was going to work. The world would embrace him wholeheartedly, and through him his father would finally establish the perfect kingdom.

Lemuel closed his eyes and sighed in triumph—

He was standing in a field, vast and open. He spun around, staring in surprise. Everything was green and bright. *Brilliantly* bright, exactly as he'd imagined—

“It's a dream,” he reminded himself. “I'm in a dream, and I can wake myself up. I will do so now.”

He remained in the field, a bright light approaching.

Lemuel shifted nervously. “I will wake up *now*.”

“Not until you hear me out, Lemuel.”

The voice originated from the light, and it filled and surrounded him like thunder pouring down from the clear sky.

“Who are you?” he demanded bravely, assuring himself that it was just a dream from which he could wake up at any moment. Only his curiosity kept him there.

The light developed into a blurry form, wearing a blue uniform, and the form became clearer until Lemuel gasped.

Colonel Perrin Shin.

“Lemuel, you believe you have my grandson.”

“Colonel! Yes, sir, I do!” Lemuel responded instinctively. He calmed his breathing and reminded himself he wasn’t a twenty-two-year-old captain anymore. Recovering, he stared boldly into the dark eyes of the man he was desperate to impress all those years ago. *He* was the general now, after all.

“He called himself Pere Shin,” he said coolly, “unaware of the coincidence of the name. But I am caring for him now as I always should have. He is the perfect blend of his grandfather and father, as I always knew he would be.”

Colonel Shin paced slowly around Lemuel, glaring.

Lemuel pivoted to watch the colonel circle him. He was exactly as he remembered him: tall, broad, black hair speckled with gray, and humorless.

“Perfect blend of his grandfather and father, you say? Fascinating. Your words are completely accurate but your meaning is all wrong. What do you intend to do with him, Lemuel?”

Lemuel narrowed his eyes, puzzled by the colonel’s words. He shook it off and squared his shoulders. “To make him the greatest leader the world has ever known!”

The colonel stopped pacing. “With you controlling his every word and move? Never. Leave him out of this nonsense that you and Waness and Slither have concocted. What you’re doing to poor Lannard Kroop is already appalling. Don’t you dare drag anyone else into it.”

Lemuel scoffed. “Nonsense? You call a visit from the Creator *nonsense*? I heard you speak of him enough. He’s real, Colonel!”

The colonel stepped so close to Lemuel that he leaned backward as Shin hovered over him. “I know the Creator—I’ve knelt in His presence. But you . . . you kneel to no one! Stop these lies, Lemuel. Stop before you destroy yourself and the world.”

“I’m destroying nothing,” Lemuel insisted. “I’m saving the world! The volcano destroyed everything. Oh, I *see*,” he sniggered.

He was merely addressing an illusion induced by his late dinner. And besides, he always wanted this opportunity.

“I see what’s happening here, Colonel. You see my power and influence, and you miss your little glory days. You miss hearing them

chanting ‘General Shin’ like they did after that measly little land tremor in Edge all those years ago. And you *certainly* don’t want anyone chanting General Thorne. But they have before, *Colonel*, and they will again. No one will ever forget the name of *General* Lemuel Thorne. I’m going to fix the world, far better than you ever could have!”

The colonel sighed sadly. “I care nothing for the past, son. I’m here to tell you the volcano was a warning. Read The Writings. You already read the prophecy about Mt. Deceit as you studied how to fashion a guide. Believe in the Last Day, Lemuel, that it’s coming! There’s another way to fix the world and a way to feed all these people. Choose to change your path and I can show you the way. There’s still time. Let me help you, son. You don’t have to march to your own destruction.”

For half a second Lemuel was intrigued. Another way to feed the world?

But he shook it off.

“Who could destroy me, Colonel? You know how many times I’ve chased death? It’s terrified of me. Nothing will stop me or my plans. Not even my dead colonel!”

The colonel took one more step closer. He was nearly on top of Lemuel as he gripped his dead right arm, but it was no longer dead, and Lemuel writhed at the intense sensation.

“If you continue on this morbid path you insist on taking, *I* will destroy you. Stop now! Leave my grandson out of this! Leave him in Edge, or you’ll be tormented by my memory every night of what remains of your very short life. I promise you, Lemuel, my face will be the last you’ll see before you die.”

Lemuel sat up, panicked, with sweat pouring down his face and his right arm burning. Frantically, he looked around the dark bedroom. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a light and cried out in terror before he realized it was only the dim sunrise peeking through a narrow gap in the curtains.

The door opened. Thorne gasped as a tall figure filled the shadowy doorway.

“Sir,” said a quiet voice. “Are you all right? I heard you and wondered if you needed anything—”

Lemuel fought to control his breathing as the figure slowly approached. His right arm throbbed and he absent-mindedly

grabbed it with his left hand. It was if he'd been hit by the lightning just yesterday.

“Sir,” his son Lek said, his voice full of concern when he saw the general clutching his arm and gasping, “sir, you don't look well at all. Should I get the surgeon?”

“No . . . no,” Lemuel panted. “Don't touch me again!”

Lek furrowed his eyebrows. “Again? Sir, I barely came into the room—”

“I know,” Lemuel whispered, realizing his words were absurd. “I don't need anyone. It's nothing. Just . . . nothing.” He didn't dare look his son in the eyes, terrified of what—or who—he would see in them.

Instead he looked only vaguely in his direction. “Lek, I know you requested to go to Idumea, and I had every intention of taking you with me, but now with you cleared of any wrongdoing, and I needing to take care of the guide—”

“You wish me to stay in Edge? To complete my schooling?”

“Yes!” Lemuel practically shouted. “Yes, excellent idea, son. Now's just not the time. You can study here with Slither, and when he deems you ready you can join me. We can do . . . we can do all of this . . . *later*.”

In the light coming through the curtains, Thorne could make out Lek nodding. “Sounds like a good *fatherly* plan,” he said awkwardly.

Lemuel still didn't look at him directly. “Keep working on that, son. Leave me now. I need more rest.”

“Of course, sir.”

The lieutenant slipped out of the room and quietly shut the door. He smirked to himself as he walked down the hall to his adjoining bedroom.

“Told you he's reasonable,” he whispered to no one in particular.

OH YES. OF COURSE. VERY REASONABLE. YES, YOU JUST NEEDED TO TALK TO HIM. YOU ALREADY HAD IT ALL FIGURED OUT.

“I always do, old man.”

Chapter 19--“I can’t *do* that?”

Peto walked into his office and stopped abruptly. “So you *are* here. Sakal said she thought she saw you slip in the house but I couldn’t figure out what would bring you over here so early.”

Shem looked up from Peto’s desk. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to wake you but I needed to check your numbers.”

Peto sat in a chair on the other side of the desk. “What’s mine is yours, Shem. You know that. The way of Salem.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Shem said, the corner of his mouth going up. “Just remember that.”

“So what numbers are you looking for?”

Shem held up some pages. “The totals from the storehouses—how much we have in long-term storage. These are the most recent figures, right?”

Peto nodded. “That’s the copy everyone at the council meeting got last night. We’re doing well with distribution. There are still a few panicking individuals here and there, a few nervous about the food running out, but we have enough for over four years and no one will even lose weight.

“And Shem,” Peto leaned closer, “I have to agree with the scientists at the council—the world *is* getting cooler. Already the ponds and lakes have ice thicker than ever recorded for this time of year, and it’s only the 43rd Day of Harvest. With the sun not burning through the haze, and if this cold lasts, we might not warm up enough for a Planting or Weeding Season next year. The eruption may have permanently chilled the world.”

Shem nodded soberly as he looked at the page. “I know.”

“You should,” Peto smirked at him. “You’re the one who compiled those numbers with the scientists to distribute to the council! So I wonder why you’re here reading my copy?”

Shem dropped the page guiltily and leaned back. “Because I wonder, Peto, if this food is really meant just for us.”

Peto tipped his head. “What are you talking about?”

“I woke up early this morning from an unusual dream,” Shem said quietly. “At the end of it I saw myself figuring out the surviving population of the world

“The *world*?” Peto exclaimed. “Why?”

“Do you realize that at our current distribution rate, there’s enough reserves to feed 560,000 people for one year?”

Peto narrowed his eyes. “Go on,” he said, a little coldly.

Shem picked up a sheet full of calculations he’d made. “I’ve been doing some figuring based on what villages we think were destroyed by the volcano, and at what rates the pox may have killed off the world’s population. My last estimate of their population was around 920,000, considering the reduction during the past two decades since so few babies are being born.

“But if villages along the Idumea River are gone,” he continued, and Peto began to squint more fiercely, “which was about 140,000 people, and if the pox eliminated one-third of the survivors, I have an estimate of how many people are left.” He held up the paper: 515,000.

Peto’s eyebrows shot up. “Their population is nearly cut in half!”

Shem nodded gravely. “And we’re down to around 110,000. But Peto, if we were to cut back *just a little*, so that no one will really miss it, look how many people we can feed for an entire year.”

He held up another paper: 625,000.

Peto couldn’t believe what Shem was suggesting. “You want us to *feed the entire world*?!”

“We could, for a year—”

Peto stood up. “Why?” he exclaimed angrily. “Do you know how hard we’ve worked to plant extra crops, build enormous storehouses, develop ways to keep the food preserved and now, *now* you want to just *give* it to those who’ve done nothing to deserve it?”

Shem rocked back in surprise. “What’s mine is yours—Salem’s way. Remember? Nothing to *deserve* it? Peto, what do you deserve?”

Peto stepped awkwardly. “What do *I* deserve?”

“When we brought you here when you were seventeen years old, what had *you* done for Salem then?”

Peto sighed resignedly, already seeing the direction of the conversation. “Nothing.”

“And what did we give you?”

“Everything.”

“Did you deserve that?”

“No,” Peto admitted.

“But we gave it anyway, right? Because who gave it all to us, as undeserving as we *all* are?”

“The Creator,” Peto mumbled.

Shem cocked his head. “What was that again, *Rector* Shin?”

Peto managed an embarrassed smile. “The Creator, Guide Zenos.”

“That’s right.”

Peto sat back down, disheartened. “Feed the world. Shem—*Guide*—I must confess that’s not an option I *ever* considered.”

The guide sighed. “Nor I, Rector. I don’t know if we will but it’s important to know that we *could*, and that we make it available.”

Peto stared at the desk until he remembered. “You mentioned that a dream brought you here. May I know what it was? I’ve never heard you talk of a specific dream before.”

“I haven’t, Peto,” Shem said. “Usually inspiration comes to me as images in my mind. I see what’s happening somewhere or an action I should be taking. But a vivid dream?” He smiled. “It was . . . it was *wonderful*, Peto! I really wish you could’ve seen it.”

Peto leaned forward. “So can you tell me? Should I record this? I know I’m not an assistant, but—”

“Uh, probably don’t record it,” Shem said, uncomfortably. “It wasn’t exactly, um, well . . . I don’t know, really.”

Peto frowned at his odd reluctance. “Tell me what you saw.”

Shem sighed. “It was short. Far too short. I wept when I woke up to realize it was already over and he was gone.”

Peto was on the edge of his seat. “Was *he* the Creator?”

Shem smiled faintly. “No, not last night. But Peto, it was your father: Perrin!”

“Really?” he breathed. “How’d he look?”

“Fantastic!” Shem grinned. “He was in his colonel’s uniform and looked as he did in his forties. I never realized before how much you resemble him at that age—same face, just different build. I always thought when he was the colonel that was when he was the most impressive—”

“So?” Peto motioned eagerly. “Go on!”

“Well, suddenly there he was,” Shem related, “in full uniform, shaking me by the shoulder to wake me in my dream and he said,

‘Hey, Shem! We’ve stored enough to feed the entire world for a year, right?’ And I said, ‘I’m not sure, but probably. I’d have to run some numbers, but, Perrin, why?’ Then he was gone, and I saw myself sitting at your desk looking at these papers.”

Peto tipped his head in disappointment. “‘*Hey Shem?*’ Not exactly the kind of prophetic vision I’d expect for the guide.”

Shem shrugged. “That’s how Perrin was—*is.*”

Peto began to smirk. “You’re right—I didn’t need to write it down. ‘*Hey, Shem,*’” Peto said, lowering his voice to sound remarkably like his father, “—*inquired the general, ‘How much elk jerky is in the barrels?’*”

Shem chuckled. “All right, all right. You asked, and I told you.” He sat back and looked thoughtfully at the wall. “But it did get me thinking. And you have to admit, the numbers are intriguing.”

“Why didn’t he come to me?” Peto wondered. “I *did* take over his job. I’m now in charge of securing Salem, and am part of the council over the storehouses—”

Shem cleared his throat. “And how did you first react when I suggested we feed the world?”

Peto winced guiltily. “I see your point. Maybe if he’d come to me we could’ve had a lively argument for a few minutes.”

Shem shook his head. “He didn’t seem to have much time. Only seconds. And you wouldn’t have argued with him about the supplies. You would’ve been asking him about Young Pere. He didn’t have that kind of time.”

Peto looked down at his hands. “At least you got to see him, to know he’s still out there.”

Shem smiled. “He is. It really *was* him, coming to plant an idea in my mind.”

Peto sighed. “So what do we do, Guide Zenos? Wait for Lemuel to send a messenger asking if he can borrow a cup of flour?”

“Or do we go down and *offer* it, Rector Shin?”

The lieutenant enjoyed the quiet breakfast at the table. In honor of the general’s arrival, the spread was as grand as usual. The lieutenant felt only a little guilty for indulging himself, remembering that the leftovers would go to the staff.

Even though the sun was rising in the hazy sky, he was the only

one up. Slither had stayed up late trying to explain passages of The Writings to Guide Lannard, his eyes going glassier the later it became. When they went to bed, Guide Lannard was in a daze.

The lieutenant heard the major's familiar steps coming to the eating room, and they stopped when he saw the lieutenant already at the table. "Slagging Zenoses!" Kroop hissed under his breath.

The lieutenant pretended not to hear but stood up and saluted.

Kroop sighed and saluted back. "Didn't think anyone else would be up this early," he said as he took a seat as far away as he could.

The lieutenant shrugged. "I was awoken early this morning and couldn't get back to sleep."

Kroop rubbed his eyes. "Never had such a hard time sleeping here before. Then again, there wasn't any mead or interesting company last night." He reached for a bowl of porridge.

"I imagine you have a great deal on your mind," the lieutenant said helpfully.

Kroop grunted and took a small green apple from a bowl of under ripe fruit.

"When . . . when do you think you'll be leaving for Idumea?" the lieutenant tried again.

"No idea."

"Well, if I don't see you before then, I wish you a good journey."

Kroop finally looked at him. "You're not going?"

"It's best if I stay here and continue my studies with Professor Slither," the lieutenant said. "As soon as Varice and Onus are apprehended, I'll return to the command tower. Someone will need to take over your duties. Exactly what *are* your duties, sir?"

"So you're not going." Kroop almost smiled. "Sure, you can take over some of my duties. Twigg can fill you in. Mostly has to do with supplies anyway. But you already know all about that," he added quietly.

Mahrree heard the knock on her gathering room door and opened it. "Shem?"

"I hope I didn't wake you," he said apologetically.

"Not at all. Come in!" she said, gesturing for him to sit.

“I’m only staying a minute, Mahrree,” he said, as he sat down in Perrin’s large chair. Immediately he stood back up and gave Mahrree another remorseful look.

She waved it off. “Sit, Shem. He’s not going to mind. He’s not here anyway,” she added quietly.

Shem took her by the shoulders. “That’s what I’m here to tell you—he *was* briefly, during the night!”

“What?”

“He came to me in a dream, just for a few seconds, then he had to rush off again.”

“About Young Pere?” Mahrree’s eyes lit up.

“No, I’m sorry. He wanted to know if we had enough food stored to feed the world.”

Mahrree’s eyes grew large. “Really? *And?*”

“He already knew the numbers himself, I’m sure. He was just there to put the idea in my mind.” Then he smiled slyly. “But by the expression on your face, your initial reaction is the same as your son’s.”

Mahrree stiffened. “*We* feed the world?” she said through gritted teeth.

“Yep,” Shem nodded, “he’s your son, all right. Look, I don’t know if anything will come of it, but that’s not the main reason I came to see you—I thought you’d want to know about Perrin.”

Immediately Mahrree’s eyes brightened again. “Yes—yes, I do! How did he look?”

Shem grinned. “Wonderful—just as he did when he was the colonel. Now that I think about it, he appeared *exactly* as those in the world would’ve remembered him. I have a feeling someone down there had a disturbing dream last night. I wonder if it was Lemuel,” he added wistfully.

Mahrree grinned. “So . . . he seemed happy?”

“He *was perfect*, Mahrree. But he had only seconds. That’s as long as I saw him, or I’m sure he would have come by to give you a kiss.”

Mahrree’s eyes bubbled with tears. “Thank you, Shem,” she whispered. “If he comes again, will you tell him it takes only a second to give me a kiss?”

Shem raised an eyebrow. “Perrin? Take only a *second* to kiss you?” He chuckled. “Not the Perrin I know . . .”



The lieutenant was just about to get up from the table when a haggard General Thorne stumbled in to the eating room. He slumped into a chair at the head and propped up his head in his good hand.

Kroop was surprised at his condition, but the lieutenant wasn't.

"Sir," the lieutenant said softly, "can I get you something?"

"Another night's sleep." He rubbed his eyes, then clutched his right arm.

Kroop flinched at the motion. "Is it bothering you again? It hasn't done that since—"

"It's *fine*, Lannard!" Thorne snarled, then sighed penitently. "I'm sorry, Guide. Just a . . . a bad night." He glanced at the lieutenant and involuntarily shuddered. "Call me the back guard, Lek. We have some business this morning."

"Yes, sir." He went to the back door and returned a moment later with the guard.

"Well?" Thorne asked the soldiers.

"General, none of our soldiers were detected. Captain Varice was seen leaving the forest with Sergeant Onus—"

"The forest?" The lieutenant couldn't stop himself from interrupting.

General Thorne smiled thinly. "History has proven that only the most traitorous criminals meet in the forest, Lek. We need no more evidence to convict them than that. Where did they go next, soldier?"

"Captain Varice returned to his quarters while Sergeant Onus went . . ." He hesitated.

Thorne nodded once for him to continue.

"Sergeant Onus was seen carrying a jug of mead to . . . Miss Amory's. As of this morning he still hadn't left. Probably because his duty shift doesn't begin until after midday meal today, sir."

Thorne's thin smile continued.

"Mead?" Kroop gasped. "Was it mine?"

The soldier shifted uncomfortably. "Unknown, sir."

"My *mead*—"

"Will be the last drink those two men will have, Guide Lannard!" Thorne said sharply.

The lieutenant paled. “Sir? What will their punishment be?”

The general finally dared look him in the eyes. “They are the means for causing death to Edge. So their punishment will also be death!”

The lieutenant recoiled. “Sir! You can’t do that! It’s not proven! Couldn’t they be incarcerated until evidence—”

“I can’t *do* that?” Thorne interrupted, repeating the words slowly to verify the lieutenant had actually told *him* what to do.

The lieutenant knew he’d gone too far, but in the back of his mind he remembered why he was still in Edge.

TO SAVE LIVES. TO SAVE LIVES—

“*Incarcerate* them? For how long, Lek? How long should we *feed* the swine who tried to *starve* everyone else? Till they’re old men? Creet, they’re not worth the grain, Lek!”

A part of the lieutenant almost agreed—it did seem wrong to give them food when they were stealing it to sell . . .

But nothing was proven yet. “Sir, you can’t take their lives because of what *might* happen. How is that reasonable? Besides, Sergeant Onus has been my help in many ways—”

“He *used* you, Lieutenant Thorne!” the general shouted. “To further his greed and his ambition! Can you understand *that*?”

The world was all about using others for their own greed and ambition, and the most glaring example sat across from him, his blood-shot eyes staring back.

“I’m beginning to understand, sir,” he answered tightly.

The general analyzed him, likely having heard his accusatory undertones. “We have no room for criminals, Lek. People *will* die during the next few weeks. Only those worthy and faithful should continue. Varice and Onus have both proven they are neither.”

“Faithful to *what*, sir?” the lieutenant asked boldly.

“Faithful to *ME*, Lek!” the general shouted back. He turned to the guard. “I want both of them, *NOW!* Brought here! Tell the soldiers to break into Amory’s house and pull Onus from her clutches if necessary. *NOW!*”

The soldier jumped and rushed from the room, and the general turned back to glare at his son.

The lieutenant had no choice but to match it. He wasn’t sure what the voice in the back of his head was saying—something about *MIS-CARRIAGE OF JUSTICE* and *ARROGANCE OF POWER*—but he could feel its anger, and the lieutenant drew from that furious strength. He knew

the staring match wasn't entirely his but that he was channeling someone else's eyes.

Thorne, on the receiving end of his glare, wilted ever so slightly.

Professor Slither was at the door, shaking his head and tsk-tsking.

"General, you can see how difficult my task has been. Since I arrived I've been trying to teach the lieutenant that it's not his task to question but to *accept*. Sometimes he just can't hold his tongue. I blame it on an unfortunately inherited trait from his grandmother."

"Indeed," the general seethed, ending the staring match which he was beginning to lose. "*Both* of his grandparents enjoyed arguing. Questioning. Challenging. And look where it got them, Lek—*dead!*" He leaned aggressively on the table, daring to meet his eyes again. "You were spared his fate, son, so don't you dare disgrace your grandfather. He could've been a great man, the greatest who ever lived! But he gave it all up and *ruined* his reputation. Don't you DARE turn into *him*. Don't you DARE try to destroy everything we're working so hard to create!"

The lieutenant followed most of his ranting, the words forming in his head, *THERE'S NOTHING I WANT MORE THAN FOR HIM TO TURN INTO ME*, until Thorne spat out that last sentence which made no sense to him at all.

The lieutenant frowned. "Sir, I don't understand. What are we working to create?"

"Just . . . NO!" Thorne roared at him, completely frazzled. "*Don't* understand—just *accept!* Just *learn* to . . ." He spluttered in frustration. "*OBEY ME!*"

Having never seen the general reduced to frothing, the lieutenant knew better than to say anything more than a meek, "Yes, sir." He'd learned at least that much in Command School.

"I've been watching Onus for a long time now," Thorne said in a tone which tried to sound controlled but was barely steady. "When Captain Lick came from Sands, having delivered that fop of a general Yordin to his death, he recommended soldiers who would *serve me well*, in his estimation. Now, I already knew Lick wasn't to be trusted—he betrayed one commander, so what was going to keep him from betraying another? It was obvious that any man he recommended would be as equally as distrustful."

Guide Lannard, who’d been cowering in his chair for the past few minutes, sat up taller. “So . . . why did you bring him to our fort if he knew you couldn’t trust him?” he asked, insulted.

Thorne sighed a growl. “Because if there’s going to be insurrection, I want it where I can see it unfolding! Creet, Lannard—haven’t you learned anything yet? When I took over the records from Sands I could see there was a supply problem. Not surprisingly, the older Yordin either didn’t notice it or didn’t care to address it. And also not surprisingly, as soon as Lick and Onus arrived, we began to have a supply problem as well.”

Kroop sagged. “So it *wasn’t* me?”

Thorne glared at his new guide. “No, *Lannard!* It was NOT you. I put Major Yordin over the supplies to see what happened with the numbers, and he began to cover up the losses successfully. When I sent him to Sands, I put you in charge to see if those who returned with him to his father’s old fort were the same ones stealing from me. Since the losses continued here, I narrowed down the culprits to four of Yordin’s former soldiers still here.”

Slither, who sat down at the table, was nodding in approval.

Kroop’s lips were pursed, trying to follow the thread of the story. He’d soon be making a knot out of it but would pretend otherwise.

The lieutenant only stared at the general, realizing who, *really*, was at the heart of the supply problem.

“Handing the supply lists over to you—” the general continued, watching Lannard closely to see if he was following.

Lannard seemed to be stuck in Sands.

“—allowed for greater thievery since your idea of figuring is writing down random numbers until the page is full. I knew it wouldn’t be long before you asked for help. And Lannard, when you brought up the subject with various sergeants to find out who in their ranks was good with numbers, who was the most eager to offer assistance?”

Lannard blinked a few times. “No one wanted to get involved with the supply problem except for Sergeant Onus. He said he’d find me someone to help.” He was beginning to comprehend what had happened. The lieutenant guessed that by dinner Kroop would be smacking his forehead.

“And how long after that did he provide you with a willing soldier?” Thorne queried.

“The next day.”

“And how closely did the sergeant watch that corporal?”

“Well, once the corporal told him the extent of the problems—”

“And Onus knew that even *you* had figured out there was loss, some covering up had to occur,” Thorne said. “And then you became spooked when my son reminded you of *someone else*?”

Lannard shrugged, turned pink, and looked down at the table.

“So then you *handed* the *entire* inventory procedure over to the corporal?”

Kroop looked up. “The sergeant said he’d watch him closely!” It took another couple of seconds for him to recognize the mistake. “*Onus* watched him closely—”

“That’s when the problems cleared up, didn’t they?” Thorne said coldly. “Once Onus got a hold of the supply sheet, he knew what every number was supposed to be and they could cover their tracks. That’s also, I suspect, was when the storehouses started to be filled with bags of dirt instead of wheat and corn. Ever since Deceit blew, they’ve probably been busier than ever, and the sergeant and the captain are now the richest men in Edge.”

“How long did you know?” the lieutenant asked evenly, although his blood had been growing hot.

Thorne’s eyes flicked at him. “All the time.”

“Then *why* didn’t you stop it?” the lieutenant demanded, feeling the words flow from the back of his mind. “So much has been lost! People are going to suffer because *you failed* to—”

“How DARE you!” Thorne bellowed. “How *dare* you suggest I’ve done nothing less than sacrifice *all* I have for this village, for the world! I’ve given my *whole life* and even my right arm to bring peace to the world. I couldn’t stop the thievery because I didn’t have enough evidence nor did I know precisely who to stop. Even changing procedures *as you did* didn’t stop it, did it now? Letting the thieves continue until they exposed themselves through exposing you was the only way to put an end to the problem!”

The lieutenant’s bravery must have come from the fury in the back of his head, from someone who once stole caravans of food for his village and didn’t understand how a commander could idly let food be stolen away from it.

“But you claim that you *knew* all the time—”

“ENOUGH!” Thorne shouted and pounded the table, rattling the dishes. “Enough of your slugging arguments. You are to obey,

boy. *Not* to question and certainly *not to debate*. Get the last of *her* out of you right NOW, or you’ll never live to become general yourself! Is that understood?”

The lieutenant was stunned silent, the words in his head stopping, likely knowing this battle couldn’t be won today.

“I know what the real problem is,” Thorne said in an unnervingly calm tone. “You finally realize you were manipulated. You trusted an authority figure and now you understand he didn’t care for you but only for how you could further his purposes. You feel betrayed, don’t you?”

The lieutenant narrowed his eyes, able to answer this one without any voices in his head. “Oh, yes. Very much so, sir.”

The general squinted back. “Then at least you’ve learned to not let it happen again.”

The lieutenant nodded once.

The soldiers pounding on Miss Amory’s front door sniggered. Two were at the front, two more at the back, and six more positioned themselves around the house, watching the windows for anyone trying to escape. Another dozen were on their way to provide back-up and also to watch the show.

“Sergeant Onus!” a master sergeant shouted through the door, “you’ve been requested to visit the general at the mansion, immediately!”

The door flung open to reveal Miss Amory, dressed in a silk gown, her hair styled, and her face precisely painted as if she were going to a fancy dinner even though it was barely time for breakfast.

“There’s no Onus here,” she declared with a saucy smile. “Are you sure the general wasn’t requesting me?”

The two soldiers pushed past her into the house. “No mention of you at all, ma’am. Sergeant Onus!” the master sergeant shouted. “We’ve been watching you all night. We know you’re here and that you came with a jug of mead. Do you need us to carry you out?”

The soldiers laughed as they started up the stairs.

“I told you,” Amory rushed after them, “no one’s here—”

Several more soldiers now came in through the front door.

“Search the house, men! He may be exhausted,” called a staff sergeant who winked at Amory.

She scowled back at him and leaned against the wall of her gathering room, knowing it was only a matter of time.

A moment later a commotion was heard upstairs.

“You have no right! How dare you! When I get back to the fort I’ll—”

Onus couldn’t finish his threat because of the fist that smashed into his mouth.

Two soldiers dragged a bleeding Onus down the stairs. “We got him, men!” called the master sergeant cheerfully, following them. “To the mansion!”

“Amory!” Onus garbled as he tried to wipe the blood, but the soldiers holding his arms wouldn’t let him touch his mouth. He spat on the stairs instead. “Amory, help me! We have an agreement, remember? You and me—we can *still* do this. Think of what we can gain! Stand up for me and we can turn all of this around—”

The soldiers let him stumble down the last stairs then yanked him up again. Still, he tried to conduct business. “You don’t *know the way*, remember?” he shouted at Amory, blood bubbling out of his mouth. “And *he* won’t help you, I promise you that.”

“What’s he blabbering about?” asked the staff sergeant standing at the door as Onus struggled against his guards.

Amory folded her arms. “I haven’t understood a word he’s said since he got here.”

“Amory!” Onus pleaded as the guards dragged him to the door. “Amory—*Salem!*”

The master sergeant frowned at her. “Who’s Salem?”

She shrugged wearily. “Probably a dead dog. Who knows. He’s been like this all night. I’m relieved you’re taking him away. I think it was a bad jug of mead and he drank it all himself. Just get him out of here.”

The staff sergeant tipped his cap. “As you wish, ma’am.”

“AMORY!” Onus shouted one last time as they dragged him out the door.

When the last of the laughing soldiers followed him out, she slammed the door and locked it. She slumped on the sofa not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Her biggest threat was now out the door and gone. Maybe.

She nibbled on a fingernail. Who else knows? Who else might pound on the door in the middle of the night? Who else knows?



General Thorne was waiting on his front steps looking exhausted, furious, and all around terrifying. Behind him stood a reluctant Lieutenant Thorne and next to him was a tense Major Kroop—*Guide Lannard*.

Major Twigg had just joined them and held two official-looking pieces of parchment. Lining the long walk to the front stairs were forty soldiers, twenty on each side, with their swords drawn.

The lieutenant swallowed as he heard the shouts. Two clusters of soldiers were approaching the mansion—one from the fort, the other from the village. In the midst of each cluster of twenty-five was a man shouting and screaming his innocence.

The lieutenant’s chin trembled when he recognized Sergeant Onus, his arms in chains and blood drooling from his mouth. “No! You’ve got it all wrong! No!”

The lieutenant wondered how long he was expected to stand there. The general had said only, “Stand as a witness against them,” but how much he was to witness, he didn’t know.

The two clusters were now closing in on the mansion and combined into one. Varice and Onus began to shout at each other.

“What have you done to me?”

“ME?! You! This was all your idea!”

“How dare you?! How dare you accuse me!”

“SHUT UP!” Thorne roared at the men.

The soldiers escorted the two men in shackles between the lines of soldiers and shoved them to their knees before Thorne.

Onus peered around the general up to the lieutenant on the stairs. “Shin! Shin, *please!* I never did anything against you. I know *you* can fix all of this. You know where—”

Thorne’s boot in his face shut him up more effectively than anything else had that morning.

The lieutenant flinched and shut his eyes as his former sergeant went face down into the gravel, more blood flowing from his face.

“How *dare* you speak to my son that way?” Thorne snapped. “He is an officer and his name is Thorne! For your disrespect alone you deserve to die!”

From the gravel, Onus whimpered, “I’m sorry, sir. I’m sorry! Please, sir—just listen for one minute—”

“You *used* my boy!” Thorne bellowed.

“He wasn’t your boy, then,” Onus sobbed.

“He was always my boy! And now I have your confession—you knew exactly what you were doing, didn’t you? Varice! Your confession! Now!”

The captain stared in disgust at the sobbing, bloody Onus. “I’ve done nothing wrong, sir. You have no proof that I ever did.”

“Oh,” Thorne sneered, “but I do. Right here.” He reached behind him and grabbed Kroop by the jacket. He pulled him down the stairs to his level. Kroop’s eyes were wide and worried.

“Last night Guide Lannard had a vision,” Thorne announced, “and he saw Onus and you conspiring to decimate the food supplies of Edge for your own financial gain. He saw you in the forest conversing and sharing a jug of mead. *His* jug of mead.”

Captain Varice’s jaw dropped in dismay and shock.

Before he could form an answer, Thorne said, “I take your stunned silence as your admission of guilt. That saves us the task of holding a hearing. Major Twigg, read the declarations.”

Major Twigg cleared his throat and read loudly from the parchment. “Captain Varice and Sergeant Onus are condemned this day, the 43rd Day of Harvest, to be executed for their crimes of gross disloyalty to General Thorne, the army of Idumea, and the citizens of Edge, with the intent to cause death to innocent men, women, and children—”

“No!” Onus cried. “No! That wasn’t the intent, sir. Please! There’s another way—I beg you, let me tell you of another way—no one need die. There’s another way—”

“LIES!” General Thorne shouted. “Enough of lies! People will die because of you, Onus! When children are starving, their parents will tell them it’s because of a smear of a man named Onus who sold away their food!”

“No, no, no!” Onus gasped.

The lieutenant couldn’t bear any more. “Sir, please! Listen to the sergeant! Maybe he knows something—”

He didn’t expect the hard slap across his face that nearly knocked him off the stair. Through the tearing of his eyes he could make out the furious expression of General Thorne.

“No one asked you for your opinion, boy!” he snarled. The general spun around to Onus’s pleading face. “I’ve heard enough from him! Squad, your blades are needed NOW!”

“SIR!” Onus screamed.

But it was too late. The execution squad of ten soldiers already plunged their blades into Onus.

The lieutenant gasped in horror.

Onus’s lips moved, but no sound came out of them. But the lieutenant could make out Onus’s last word.

“Salem!”

Captain Varice stared in shock at what happened to the sergeant, but he had little time to plead for his life. Within seconds the execution squad had spun and plunged their swords into him, and Captain Varice, too, crumpled to the ground.

The lieutenant felt he’d collapse as well.

Because they *knew*.

Just like Captain Lick, they knew somehow. Salem was known to the army . . .

He couldn’t think more on that because a strange sound reached his ears. It was cheering. The soldiers along the path were shouting and soon were chanting, “General Thorne! General Thorne! Long live General Thorne!”

The lieutenant’s head pounded. Two men lay dead at General Thorne’s feet and he was actually smiling about it. He held up his left fist in triumph.

“Excellent work last night and this morning, men! You will all be amply rewarded. But praise for rooting out this terrible crime belongs to our great Guide Lannard Kroop. The Creator revealed to him the plot and showed to him the perpetrators. Already the Creator is providing for our deliverance from this terrible crisis! Long live Guide Lannard, the Creator’s chosen!”

The soldiers immediately took up the chant as General Thorne held up Guide Lannard’s hand. “Long Live Guide Lannard, the Creator’s chosen!”

The lieutenant was astounded. But even more astonishing was that he found his lips also forming the words, “Long live Guide Lannard, the Creator’s chosen.”

Chapter 20--“What kind of a world would allow . . .”

If ever there was a time he was ready to run away from the world, it was right now.

The lieutenant was sitting at his desk in the main study, pretending to read another dull chapter in *World History* while trying not to think about Sergeant Onus’s terrified face, watching him die. Was there something more he could’ve done? Step in front of the general?

That would’ve been useless. It’d been over two hours ago, but still his face stung from Thorne’s slap. He hadn’t said another word to the general since. While the general and the majors marched to the fort in front of the bodies which the execution squad carried, the lieutenant headed into the mansion.

Slither watched him throw himself angrily in a chair and snatch a textbook from the pile. From the window, Slither motioned to someone, probably Thorne. The professor showed the remarkable good sense, or maybe even more remarkably *pity*, in not speaking to the lieutenant but let him get back to studying.

But that wasn’t happening, either, because he couldn’t focus on any of the words. Slither didn’t seem to notice as he, too, aimlessly turned pages in a book. Maybe this had been his first execution, as well.

The study was quiet, the only sound a scratching outside as two maids swept away the bloody gravel.

The lieutenant’s eyes blurred thinking of another book he’d read over a year ago. Nowhere in the history of Shin-Zenos years was there any mention of executions. No lives were ever taken outside of battle, and even then restraint was demonstrated in taking prisoners instead of killing them. Not that it mattered much because the Guarder prisoners then killed themselves.

And while Colonel Shin *had* sent men to their graves, over

fifty, none were killed as the two men were executed today.

The lieutenant scanned the *World History* page in front of him and was surprised to focus on, “The first execution squads were created by High General Pere Shin to put to an end the proliferation of Guarder spies living in Idumea intent upon undermining the king.”

Seeing the name “Pere Shin” startled him until he realized it wasn’t him but his great-great-grandfather. Thorne hadn’t created execution squads; his own ancestor had.

The words sat heavy on his mind, like two dead bodies pushing him deeper into his chair, as he read how his ancestor developed such a crude method of punishment.

“At the time, a small faction of Guarders were suspected of living in Idumea, trying to destroy the leadership that forced their families into exile. High General Shin, through his own spy ring, gathered evidence and presented the case of treason against twenty-seven individuals. Each man was tried, eighteen were found guilty and summarily executed by the simultaneous sword plunges of no fewer than ten soldiers. The reason for that number, High General Shin argued, was that no member of the execution squad would feel undue remorse in the taking of the traitors’ lives. He could believe the blades of the other nine men killed the man. The selection of those in the execution squads was determined—”

HE TOOK NO PLEASURE IN IT. THERE WAS NEVER ANY CHEERING.

The lieutenant stopped reading.

It doesn’t matter, he thought back.

PERE SAW NO OTHER OPTIONS.

“What kind of a world would allow . . .” he whispered, but already knew the answer. He was living in it.

HE TRIED TO DEVISE THE FASTEST AND MOST HUMANE WAY TO EXECUTE. NONE OF THE SQUADS WERE PERMANENT, AND THEY WERE VOLUNTARY. HE WAS DISTURBED FOR WEEKS AFTER AN EXECUTION. HE HAD A HARD TIME SLEEPING. I THINK I INHERITED HIS SLEEP PROBLEM.

The lieutenant stared at the page. He thought he should try to find a quiet place to mourn in private, but oddly he didn’t feel the need to. Actually, he wasn’t feeling much of anything beyond a heaviness that numbed every emotion.

STRANGE SENSATION, ISN’T IT? THE LONGER YOU’RE HERE THE LESS YOU FEEL. YOU’RE GETTING USED TO THE WORLD. INJUSTICE, DEATH, GETTING BACK TO WORK AFTER A MORNING OF EXECUTIONS . . . JUST ANOTHER DAY IN THE ARMY.

The lieutenant closed his eyes. I have no other option, he thought. Just like Pere Shin. No other option.

THAT'S NOT TRUE. I TOLD YOU THAT YOU COULD STAY HERE FOR A FEW WEEKS TO HELP SAVE LIVES. THOSE WEEKS ARE OVER.

He opened his eyes and stared at the words “gathered evidence,” and “presented the case of treason,” and “found guilty.” There was a process then, and not all of the men were found guilty.

But today there was no evidence, no trial, but assumption of guilt because of . . . what was it? Meeting in the forest?

Onus didn't seem to be the kind of man to cause death on purpose. He was planning something. Yes, for his own profit, but Thorne didn't get to hear it—

Or Thorne didn't *want* to hear it. He seemed so insistent on quieting Onus. He must have his own plans and he wasn't about to let anyone get in the way.

The lieutenant clenched his fist. Thorne *knew* supplies were dwindling, yet he did nothing about it. Almost as if he didn't care that thousands of people might die . . .

IT'S THE SHEEP AND THE WOLVES.

Back in Pools, Thorne had insisted that all the world needed was a few good rams and ewes to repopulate the flocks. Did he really care so little about the world that he was willing to let so much of it die?

The lieutenant stared helplessly. He didn't know what Thorne was up to nor could he pretend to know anything. He had to admit it—he was naïve: hopelessly stupid about the world and its workings. It was obvious now—

No. It'd been obvious from the first day when he woke up at the grass arena to find he had lost his pack, his plans, and his principles all in one night. He'd been trying to convince himself ever since that he was still on top of everything and knew what he was doing. But he never did.

And now he was in a mess. A horrible, bloody, numbing mess. If he said the wrong things he could be cut down as quickly as Captain Lick, and Thorne would show just as little remorse. He was at the mercy of the most powerful man in the world. And what had he done today? Challenged Thorne repeatedly, even before the army on the steps!

The lieutenant recoiled in dread. What would the general say

or do when he came home? Was he next for an execution squad?

No. No, he wasn't next because Thorne still needed him to be his 'son'. He was furious that Onus had used the lieutenant because *Thorne* intended to use him.

Thorne even told him he was his 'silver chip.' Just a playing piece in his game. Despite his behavior at the fort in Pools when he acted as a concerned father, he felt no love. He was an actor. The way he 'chose' Major Kroop in front of the army last night was nothing more than a hammy scene from a sappy play. But everyone licked it up.

Even the lieutenant believed it for a moment, and he felt humiliated as he remembered. The emotion was so intense, the power of the crowd chanting together so moving that it all seemed genuine.

But he had looked into Thorne's eyes as he stood on that hill. They were like mirrors, reflecting back only what others expected to see. He suspected the only time he would have seen what was really in the general's eyes would have been this morning when he entered Thorne's room after hearing him cry out. But Thorne had refused to meet his eyes.

Because Thorne was hiding plans upon plans, and the lieutenant could see only parts of them. From the sudden choosing of the guide, to the executions, and probably many other events that the lieutenant would not recognize until too late.

But one thing was obvious: Salem was at the root, and just how much Thorne knew about Salem, the lieutenant didn't know. But he decided something: he'd never let Thorne take Salem.

He had to preserve Salem, keep it secure, just like his grandfather had, until the right moment, whenever that might be. And, he realized as the thoughts of running away faded, there was only one way to find out what Thorne was planning to do with Salem: he had to remain Thorne's son, and convincingly so.

But that would be an immense task, the lieutenant thought as he rubbed his smarting cheek. Peto Shin had never hit him. Even when he found out that the forest fire he'd rescued his son from was actually *caused* by that same boy because he wanted to see a forest burn, Peto Shin never struck anyone. Whenever the lieutenant and his brothers and cousins got into a fight, Peto was always the first on the scene to break it up.

“Hitting never fixes problems; it only causes more,” he'd say as he dragged him off of someone, usually Cephas. The lieutenant had outgrown him when he was twelve, but Peto was exceptionally strong

despite his lean frame and could immobilize an enraged man.

“You can’t force your will on someone,” he’d say as he hauled the flailing teenager to the barn, “and demand they do what you want. That’s the Refuser’s way, not the Creator’s way.”

He’d heard the speech so many times he had it memorized.

“The Creator allows everyone to choose their way, even if it’s the stupid way. But the Refuser wants to control everyone’s lives. That’s not our way!”

He stopped rubbing his cheek, realizing something.

The Refuser’s way was force, total control. And people rarely realized how much under the Refuser’s control they were because he was a superior actor, convincing unthinking people to believe what he wanted them to believe.

And he’d just decided who was also a successful and manipulative actor: Lemuel Thorne. He maneuvered his audiences to control their ideas, their fears, and their futures.

He did it to the lieutenant in Pools, then to the fort when he convinced everyone that the hapless Lannard Kroop was the guide. And he’d be doing it later this afternoon to Edge as he’d introduce to them their new ‘chosen’ leader. Then he’d be off to manipulate the rest of the world.

The lieutenant felt an outraged chill run down his back. He’d been so stupid, so gullible—he’d even *admired* Thorne! He’d been flattered that he was his chosen son!

But Thorne had a plan for him as well, he was sure—

Something was opening in his mind, as if it were a large house and he was finally unlocking a door he’d been neglecting. As he opened it, it revealed an entire wing he had forgotten even existed, filled with brightly lit rooms of ideas and windows of possibilities. Until then he didn’t realize how trapped in a dark closet he’d been. But now he was finally letting in some light.

“He’s been using me,” the lieutenant whispered to the text. “He’s been using me, but I can use him back. General, I’m tired of being naïve and gullible. And when the time is right, you’ll see just how rebellious a son I can be. You thought I was troublesome before? That’s what they thought of me on the other side of the mountain, too. Even though I never *tried* to cause trouble, I think I will now. No one’s seen anything yet. And, *my dear general*, you’ll never see anything in my eyes, either.”

It was time for a counteroffensive.

AH, YOUNG PERE—YOU GET SO CLOSE BUT THEN YOU . . . ARE YOU LISTENING? LOOK, YOUNG PERE, YOU’RE RIGHT ABOUT LEMUEL, FINALLY! YOU’RE NOT ENTIRELY NUMB, NOT ENTIRELY THE REFUSER’S BECAUSE YOU’RE SEEING HOW HE WORKS. WELL DONE! BUT YOU CAN’T BEAT HIM. PLEASE, SON, YOU CAN’T—YOUNG PERE? LIEUTENANT?

After a silent midday meal, where the lieutenant and Slither picked at their plates, the lieutenant found Guide Lannard in Thorne’s immense bedroom, staring blankly into a big wardrobe.

“Professor Slither told me to give you a hand, sir,” the lieutenant said quietly as he walked in. A devoted son, after all, does everything he’s told.

Guide Lannard winced when he heard the lieutenant’s voice. Without looking at him, Kroop scoffed at the array of clothing hanging in front of him. “I’m supposed to choose something that makes me look *distinctive* for the presentation to Edge. The general said I’d find something appropriate in here, but I can’t imagine what he was thinking.” The wardrobe was full of fancy dresses, thick cloaks, and old uniforms.

“Actually,” the lieutenant said, gingerly reaching past the major and pulling out a deep red cloak, “Slither suggested this is what you should be wearing.”

“It’s a *woman’s* cloak!” Guide Lannard exclaimed. “Have you ever seen a man wearing a woman’s cloak?”

The lieutenant shrugged in sympathy. “Actually, I have. Everyone wears everything . . . and nothing.”

“Citizens will wear *anything*,” Guide Lannard said with a sneer. “They have no sense of self-respect. If I put that on I’ll be as embarrassing as everyone else. Might as well find me some face paint while you’re at it!”

“But the cloak *will* draw attention to you,” the lieutenant tried to explain. “And that’s the point—”

“No!” Guide Lannard shook his head violently. “I refuse!”

The lieutenant held up the cloak and tipped his head objectively. “It really doesn’t look like something only a woman would wear. It’s quite long, too. I didn’t realize Miss Amory was this tall.”

“That wasn’t Amory’s,” Guide Lannard said, frowning at it. “It was Sylvie’s. She left with her baby a few weeks before Amory

moved in.” He took the cloak and turned it this way and that. “Maybe it’s not that bad. I’ve never worn silk before.”

But the lieutenant was curious. “What kind of baby did Sylvie have?”

“The only kind Thorne knows how to produce since you—a girl, of course. Turn around. Let me see this on you first.”

The lieutenant obediently presented his back and Kroop draped the cloak on his shoulders. “Sir, how many daughters does the general have?” he asked as he fastened the cloak in the front and turned around.

The major bobbed his head as he evaluated the effect of a soldier in red silk. “Not bad, not bad I guess. I think he has maybe nine or ten now? I’ve lost count.” Refusing to look the lieutenant anywhere near his eyes, Kroop deliberated. “Certainly stands out in a crowd, doesn’t it? Turn around slowly.”

The lieutenant tried not to feel ridiculous as he pivoted like a horse at auction. “It’s surprisingly warm,” he pointed out. “Lined with wool. With it getting colder, that might be useful.”

Kroop scowled. “If it were anything but *red*. Black maybe, or blue. What else is in there?” He turned to the wardrobe and began pushing aside old uniforms and dresses in search of alternatives.

“Uh, Lieutenant?” he said, his voice slightly muffled by something pink. “Since you’re here, I should probably say that . . .” He sighed. “I don’t know why,” he mumbled to the clothing. “Not as if I care, but . . .” He cleared his throat again and said louder, “About the general—you’ll get used to him. My father used to hit me all the time, but it was fine. I deserved it. He made me the man I am today.”

The lieutenant looked down at his boots, surprised at the major’s attempt at . . . whatever he was attempting. “Yes, sir,” he muttered.

“You have to realize you really did sound a lot like *her* this morning. And he really hated *her*.” The major pulled out another cloak and scowled at the pale green of it. “Worse than red.”

He tossed it aside and searched for something else.

“I’m not really sure why he hated her so much,” Kroop said. “She wasn’t *entirely* awful. I don’t know if you know this, Lieutenant, but she was my teacher for two years when I was a teenager.”

The lieutenant wasn’t sure how to respond. Mahrree Shin had

been *his* teacher for far longer than that. “I heard she taught here.”

The major nodded, still pushing around clothing. “Really, she wasn’t that bad. At the time I thought she was terrible, but as I’ve gotten older and thought about how we treated her and how she just waited each day for us to finish complaining about the world and our parents before she started on her lectures . . . Well, she was a very patient woman. I did learn a few things from her. And she *did* listen to us and ask us questions. The only other adult who ever paid attention to me was Captain Thorne.”

The lieutenant waited breathlessly for more.

“It wasn’t until later that I realized he was listening to me to learn about her,” the major said barely above a whisper. He was now just aimlessly moving clothing back and forth. “He saw things in her I didn’t see. But, Lieutenant, I don’t think your grandmother meant to be traitorous. She just wanted us to think. She let us argue and complain about everything. But I don’t think she ever wanted to destroy her husband. That was Zenos’s influence. I think your grandmother really did love your grandfather. Until Zenos turned her.”

The major almost sounded regretful, absent-mindedly gripping a frilly purple dress.

“Thank you, sir. Why are you telling me this?”

The major stared into the wardrobe. “He should have just let her go, Lieutenant. The colonel? He should have just let Zenos take her away. There were plenty of women willing to comfort him. My mother was one of them,” he chuckled mirthlessly. “She even said so in front of my father. ‘If I could’ve had just five minutes alone with Perrin Shin, I could’ve made him forget all about his wife.’ A lot of women were saying things like that at the Remembrance Ceremony. Of course, my father later hit my mother for that, then she kicked him back . . .”

Lannard looked into the wardrobe as if watching the past.

“They put his old lieutenant colonel’s uniform on display, and put up the names of your mother, her husband, and your uncle on a big board with flowers all around it, along with some of their clothing, propped up like weird body-less figures. But nothing about your grandmother. She lived here her whole life and no one even mentioned her name. Or Zenos’s. Everyone was crying.

“It didn’t have to happen, Lieutenant. General Thorne was trying to save Perrin Shin. He admired him, you know. He talks more about the colonel than he ever does about his own father. I think Thorne

hoped to be an advisor when your grandfather was made High General. Somehow Thorne knew what was happening with your grandmother. But I only told him about what she taught—nothing else, Lieutenant, I swear it!” he declared to a linen dress. “He was putting together a case against her but he wasn’t fast enough. I guess that’s why he moves so quickly now, like he did today,” he muttered. “End it before anyone can run away . . .”

He cleared his throat again and spoke quietly to the wardrobe. “Before Thorne could finish gathering evidence, the colonel resigned his commission. And before Thorne could make sure you were born safely, the girl he wanted ran into the forest looking for her mother. They all chased after Mrs. Shin, trying to stop her.

“It was all Zenos’s fault. It didn’t have to be. As much as women in Edge stared at your grandfather, they wanted Zenos even more. He was available and I suppose they considered him handsome, but he never looked at anyone but your grandmother. Everyone said the colonel should have killed the sergeant major, but I know what should have happened. The colonel should have just let her go. If he had, everything would have been different. He would’ve gotten over her in time, and your mother Jaytsy wouldn’t have died . . .”

He paused, cleared his throat roughly, then said into the wardrobe, “So that’s why I’m telling you this, Lieutenant. Mahrree Shin’s a part of you but you should let her go. When I look at you, I see *him*, but when you talk, I hear *her*. So does the general. You *have* to let her go. Whenever you feel the need to argue, just stop. Whenever you think someone’s doing something wrong, just shut up about it. Don’t be like her. She never knew when to shut up so she destroyed everything. Just listen to Thorne, don’t fight him, and don’t sound like her *ever* again. That’s the only way you’ll survive to become a general yourself.”

The lieutenant, amazed, whispered, “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Guide Lannard turned suddenly from the wardrobe. “Red will suffice,” he said, unfastening the clasp around the lieutenant’s throat without looking at him. He slid the cloak off of the lieutenant, glanced briefly into his eyes—Lannard’s were as red as the cloak—then strode out of the bedroom.

By dinner time the lieutenant knew how he was going to behave. Major Kroop’s words had echoed in his mind all afternoon. He sounded like *her*.

Well, of course he did; he and his grandmother had spent hours debating, but he hadn’t realized that his manner was so like hers. She’d always told him to be inquisitive and never felt threatened when he challenged her on something. If it was the truth, she explained, their arguing about it would reveal it. If it wasn’t, their arguing would reveal its deceit, and it was vital for them to uncover every deception.

Usually their arguments were spirited and even occasionally heated, and at times Puggah would come out of his office to glare at them in warning. But they never became *angry* with each other.

Except for that last debate. He was livid with her. She told him he was illogical, emotional, and just plain wrong. And, the lieutenant had to admit, she *was* right. He wasn’t thinking clearly then.

But he was now. And to hear that he reminded others of Mahrree Shin’s rebellion made him feel strangely satisfied. He just better not show it. It was time to become the model son.

A variety of plans had occupied him that afternoon as his mind wandered the new corridors he’d opened. He’d found himself staring at Thorne’s past uniforms in the wardrobe that afternoon, remembering that he’d promoted himself. No one could be promoted now without General Thorne’s approval.

But there had been *other* generals in the world, men named Karna, Fadh, and Yordin who combined forces, promoted their own men, and declared their own authority. And the citizenry let them.

That was all a man *really* needed: others to follow him. Then he could proclaim himself any rank in *his* own army. He only needed enough citizens and soldiers to rally around him, and they would, because not only had Perrin Shin returned to the world, but secretly so had Mahrree Shin.

He had the textbooks, he had a tutor, he knew the world’s deceits, pride, and weaknesses, and with all that knowledge he’d eventually become the greatest general the world ever knew: General Perrin Shin.

And General Lemuel Thorne would be a forgotten footnote in the back of a dull world history book.

The lieutenant made sure his smug smile of planning was wiped from his face when Thorne and Kroop returned to the mansion that

evening. Guide Lannard, dressed in his red cloak, was also wearing a simple pale blue silk tunic and trousers. He looked both impressively majestic and completely miserable.

Professor Slither stood at the door of the study, waiting with the lieutenant. He nodded approvingly at the silky guide.

“So how was the presentation of Guide Lannard?”

“The citizens of Edge were most impressed,” Thorne announced, “and welcomed their guide with all due adulation. Except for one minor exception.”

Slither’s eyebrows rose. “Who dared oppose our new guide?”

Guide Lannard sighed. “My brother. He shouted, ‘What, *him?!*’ before the guards could silence him. He never was very pleasant without his mead. I’ll bet he’s been dry for weeks now.”

Slither smiled in consolation. “One’s family never can accept the success of a member. Despite their achievements they forever remain in memory as nothing more than the annoying brother or the senseless cousin. That’s why it’s critical to sever family ties in order to fully develop one’s potential.”

Kroop shrugged. “My mother seemed happy enough. She wouldn’t admit to knowing my brother as they dragged him out of the amphitheater, though. I’ll bet she locks him out of the house when they release him from incarceration.”

The lieutenant continued to stand at attention, hoping his renewed show of respect would soften whatever words the general had for him.

Thorne had yet to look him in the eyes as he took off his sword and sheath and laid them on the side table of the large entry. “Early night tonight, gentlemen. The guide and I leave for Idumea at dawn. We need to sleep well before the journey.” He gave Kroop a meaningful look that assured him mead and women would not be part of this night, either. “Dinner ready?” he asked, looking past the lieutenant to the eating room.

“Yes,” Slither said patting his belly in anticipation. “Cook said we can eat as soon as you arrived.”

Thorne marched right past the lieutenant still standing stiffly and into the eating room. The lieutenant waited until Kroop and Slither followed before he entered. He wouldn’t speak until addressed.

The men sat down to their usual places at the table and the lieutenant sat down a moment later. Thorne didn’t look at him.

Two soldiers brought out the food, took customary bites from all the dishes before setting them on the table, and still Thorne ignored the lieutenant.

The four men served themselves, Slither droning on about a few more sections he'd read in *The Writings* that Kroop should consult, as the lieutenant slowly ate his meal, watching Thorne out of the corner of his eye.

The general never once acknowledged him.

Chapter 21--“I mean, what’s the point of all of this?”

Lieutenant Kiah knocked on the back door of the small, unkempt house and looked impatiently around. A moment later the door swung open.

“Finally!” Priscill said. “I’ve been waiting for you for hours!”

“What do you want?” Anoki asked brusquely. “I don’t have a lot of time.”

“That’s it—we don’t have any more time! He’s leaving in the morning for Idumea.”

Anoki frowned. “Who?”

“My father! We need to go see him tonight—”

Lieutenant Kiah grabbed her arm to pull her out of the house. “What have I told you about saying such things out loud?”

“I don’t know what the problem is . . . I mean, he’s only—”

Anoki clamped his hand over her mouth. “He’s only the most powerful man in the world who just this morning executed two men without another thought.”

Priscill pulled his hand off her mouth. “That’s what I mean! Didn’t you say Onus was our contact? And now he’s dead? So we need to contact the general directly, and—”

“Do you not understand *anything*?”

She sighed. “I understand I’m *bored*. This place is far worse than Sal—”

Anoki slapped his hand over her mouth again. “You don’t ever say that word here! EVER!”

She yanked his hand off again. “This is stupid!” she wailed. “There’s nothing to do, hardly anything to eat, but Idumea would be so much better. We just go to him, introduce ourselves as his daughter and *son-in-law*,” she giggled mischievously, “then he’ll take us to Idumea. There’s got to be something to do there.”

“Seriously? You’re worried about finding something to do? Do you have any idea what’s going on?”

Priscill shrugged. “I went to that meeting at the amphitheater. Looks like we have a guide now, although he doesn’t act at all like Guide Ze—” For the third time she felt a hand smack over her mouth. It was beginning to hurt.

“Another name you should not utter! Priscill, you want to destroy everything?”

Again she pulled off his hand. “Everything is destroyed, isn’t it?” she said rubbing her face and stepping out of range of Anoki.

“No, no it’s not,” he whispered urgently. “It keeps changing, but to our advantage.”

Priscill rolled her eyes. “And what are you going to do now?” she whispered back. “What’s the point of all of this? I just don’t get it.”

“That’s obvious,” he answered, looking around to make sure no one could hear them. “Look, you don’t understand what my brother and I went through for so many years.”

“So tell me,” she whined.

“Will you listen this time?” Anoki glanced around one more time, he pushed her down on a log and sat next to her. “For years my father was the joke of Scrub. From the day he arrived, in tattered clothing and nearly starved to death, people thought he was insane. My mother felt sorry for him and eventually married him. But he was always talking crazy about secret organizations—two of them. One controlled by someone in the Administrators, the other controlled by an unknown city over the mountains. My mother tried to tell him it was all in his head, and the neighbors who heard his stories kept their children away from our house. He couldn’t even work because he made everyone around him nervous, going on about his secret training for the Guardians, then his abduction, then his secret life over the mountains, then his journey of three moons back to the world, and that if any of the old Guardians discovered him, he’d be killed.

“We even thought he was crazy. We went along with his stories just to calm him down. He was sure he was going to run into some old Guardian, so for years he tried to disguise himself. But everyone knew about crazy Lickiah, and when he tied black wool onto his graying hair, he was even more noticeable.

“We spent our whole lives covering for him, checking under the bed for spies and assuring him the chickens weren’t out to reveal him. It was a relief when he died four years ago. I was twenty-two, my

brother twenty-one. But before he died he told us to find Salem. He wanted us to prove he wasn't insane."

Anoki shrugged. "Until last season, I was sure he was. Then I saw Salem with my own eyes and met Shem Zenos and Peto Shin. It all still seems so unreal. . ."

He shook his head and backtracked. "My brother wanted to prove our father was right. He'd started to believe him, thinking that maybe there *was* something to the stories. He came up with a plan: he'd join the army like I had and try to find out if anyone had heard anything about Salem. He met Sergeant Onus who was in charge of supplies at the Sands fort and confided in him about what our father had said about a hidden city with all kinds of land and resources. I always thought it was a mistake to tell anyone else what we were trying to do, but Onus could steal my brother an officer's uniform, and wearing that would get him closer to General Yordin. He called himself Captain Lick and started working in the general's office.

"One afternoon he confided to General Yordin about Salem, going so far as to tell him our father's greatest secret: Zenos was from Salem, and he most likely got the entire Shin family out of the world and to Salem. My father had never believed that Shin and the others were killed in the forest. He figured Zenos got them out the same way he got out.

"And he was right, of course," Anoki scoffed. "My brother knew General Yordin had been a friend of Colonel Shin and he thought the news that he still might be alive would get the general interested in finding Salem. But General Yordin insisted my brother was as disturbed as Colonel Offra. Yordin said he'd seen Zenos and Shin arguing a few times, and he was sure that Zenos had stolen away Mrs. Shin. He was so angry with my brother for bringing up bad memories that he had him assigned to garbage patrols. My brother realized then that Yordin would never help us find Salem, but maybe Thorne would.

"He defected to Edge, along with Major Yordin, and tried to tell General Thorne about expanding his territory to the north. To win Thorne's trust, he gave him the information Thorne needed to have Yordin killed. But my brother didn't think it wise to tell him about the Shins or Zenos until the time was right. He knew Thorne was considering claiming for himself a son, and if my brother could be claimed not only could he avenge our father, but

maybe claim Salem as his own and rule the place that destroyed our father.

“My duty was to find the route to Salem. I quit the army and worked for the law enforcement groups the forts hired. Our father had said Salemites had been smuggling people out of the world for years, and it occurred to us that families like yours might be ones they’d try to take. Working for law enforcement, I’d hear where trouble was and if people were sneaking around. Discovering your family and putting together the stories about Thorne’s wife and three daughters hiding in different villages gave me what I needed. The late night visitors, the ones I came out to investigate when I was working with the enforcers and I first met your family? They were Salemites, weren’t they?”

Engrossed, Priscill nodded.

“My father said Salemites were very persistent, so they’d be back. If I could get close to your family, I could go with you, find the way to Salem, and bring back the news to my brother. Well, I did. But only to come back to find my brother was dead, killed by Thorne, the man we thought would work with us.”

Priscill sighed in despair because for once she’d paid attention and understood that things weren’t going their way. “So it *is* all lost!”

“No, no!” Anoki whispered. “It’s not. We have something General Thorne doesn’t: knowledge of where to find food! Don’t you see? It’s even better now. With Onus and Varice out of the way, all the profits and influence can be ours. But we have to present this opportunity to your father at the right moment. We need him to *need* us, *then* he’ll keep us safe. He doesn’t need us yet.”

Priscill nodded slowly. “I think I get it. But Anoki, what about his son Lek Thorne? I saw him once in the village and I think he looks a lot like Rector Shin. He might be their missing son.”

“He is,” he said in barely a whisper. “I’m sure of it. But I doubt he’s told the general about Salem, or he would’ve charged up there by now. Thorne believes that the Shin boy is his own, that Jaytsy Briter gave birth to him in the forest, that he was found and raised by the Briter family, but now he’s returned to his father.”

Priscill squinted. “But . . . Shin is *not* my father’s son, right?”

“Of course not. He’s too young. But he’s apparently letting the general think otherwise. I’m not sure what he’s trying to accomplish, but if he has designs to take over Salem or Idumea for himself, then we better make sure we act before he does.”

“So let’s go see my father now!” Priscill whined. “He said at the meeting that we’re low on food, so we can tell him tonight about the food in Salem and get everything taken care of.”

Anoki gripped her shoulders. “Not yet! It’s too soon.”

“So what are we waiting for?”

“Him to get desperate enough to—” Anoki stopped when he saw three soldiers coming down the alley. “We’ll discuss this later. Just spend five minutes thinking for once and you might understand something. And don’t say anything to anyone.” He released her and jogged out of the yard to join the soldiers.

“But, Anoki—” Priscill called after him.

He didn’t turn around but marched away.

Priscill kicked at the dirt, folded her arms, and thought for five minutes. She came to a conclusion, got up, and started for the fort.



Lieutenant Thorne heard the knock at the front door, so he knew the other men did as well but they ignored it as they continued their dinner. The lieutenant leaned for a view of the front doors. The soldier on guard was talking to a young woman who was very insistent. Her voice, growing shriller, reached the eating room.

“But he *will* want to see me. I know it! Just ask him to come to the door if you won’t let me in.”

The general heard the commotion but didn’t bother to look up. Intrigued, the lieutenant continued to try to get a view of the girl who the guard was pushing down the steps.

“Please! When he knows who I am, he’ll want to see me.”

The general sighed, dropped his fork, and finally looked at his son. “Go see what she wants. I can tell you want to. She can stay the night if you want.”

The lieutenant blushed as he stood up and left, deciding not to correct the general’s assumption that the girl was his.

Guide Lannard watched him with jealousy in his eyes.

“Guard!” the lieutenant said as he approached the front doors. “What’s the problem?”

The girl stopped pushing against the soldier and looked up into the lieutenant’s face. “You’re him, aren’t you?”

The lieutenant furrowed his brows. “Do I know you?”

The guard took a half step away.

“Not yet, but you will,” she said, smiling as she smoothed back her ratty blond hair. Judging by her face and scent, she hadn’t bathed in days, and her clothing was more tattered than what the vial heads wore. “I guess . . . I guess I’m *your sister*,” the teenager said coyly.

The lieutenant’s eyebrows went up. “My *what*?”

She stood as officially as she could. “I know he’s here. I want to see him, please? I want to see *MY FATHER*,” she called loudly.

The lieutenant gulped as he heard a fork slam on the table.

“Her *what*?” the general’s voice boomed.

The girl’s smile faded and she licked her lips nervously. “Um, sir?” she called again but with less enthusiasm. “I’m your daughter?”

There was the sound of a chair being knocked down, heavy footsteps, and suddenly the general was striding to the door.

“You? My daughter?” he said shortly. He scowled and jabbed his thumb toward the lieutenant. “What, are you with him or something?”

The girl recoiled. “No! Of course not. Father, I’m Priscill . . . Priscill Thorne? Your third daughter?”

The general stared at her, visibly startled. “I guess one of them was named that. But you’re too old,” he decided. “How old are you?”

The girl was obviously disappointed. Maybe she expected him to embrace her or to at least invite her in. “I’m . . . I’m sixteen. You don’t even know how old I’m supposed to be?”

The general frowned. “Sixteen? What do you want?”

Priscill’s mouth dropped open. “What . . . what do I want? I want to see my father! I want to, to . . . get to know you!”

Thorne’s face contorted into a sneer. “No you don’t. You want something from me. What is it? Tell me. My dinner’s getting cold.”

Priscill shrank in surprise. “I . . . I . . . Can I come in?”

“Why?” he snapped. “I have no need of you and you certainly can’t keep my son entertained tonight. So what more do I want?”

Priscill was thrown off course. The confusion on her dirty face suggested she hadn’t expected any of this. “I was . . . I was hoping I could . . . go with you. To Idumea.”

“What would I want with a sixteen-year-old girl on a trip to Idumea? You’re useless to me. Unless you have something else to say, *GET OFF MY PORCH!*”

Priscill stepped back, stunned, but looked at the lieutenant with pleading in her eyes.

The lieutenant shrugged helplessly at her.

The scruffy girl turned back to her father. “I . . .”

But Thorne sighed in exasperation. “Shut the door,” he gestured to the guard, and headed back to his dinner.

The lieutenant’s last view of her was with her mouth hanging open as the door slammed in her face. Feeling guilty for usurping her place in the mansion—she even reminded him of a cousin or two the same age—he stepped over to the window to watch her walk down the stairs in a daze. When she reached the bottom stair, she turned back around and looked at the front doors, perhaps hoping they’d open again and someone would invite her in. But when nothing happened, she burst into tears and took off in a run.

The lieutenant, seeing how easily Thorne could reject his own child, returned to the eating room and sat down to a quiet table.

Slither and Kroop were watching Thorne who was tearing savagely at his bread.

“Does that happen often?” Professor Slither asked. “Daughters turn up looking for something?”

Thorne grunted and picked up a fork. “First time. Guess as they get older they’re going to think I owe them something. If that one was prettier she wouldn’t be needing anything from me. But sixteen’s old enough to find herself a man to take care of her.”

Slither nodded. “She was the third? Might the second and first be coming as well?”

Thorne stopped chewing, his fork stalled in the air. “The other two?” he whispered, taken aback by the idea. “Why should they? They’re old enough now. Maybe nineteen, seventeen . . . probably already have men of their own. They probably sent her away to . . .” He took another bite without finishing his sentence.

Slither gave Kroop a questioning look, and Kroop shrugged.

“Wonder where she’s staying,” Slither said. “Maybe she lives in Edge now—”

“What does it matter?” Thorne cut him off. “She’s her mother’s responsibility. What do I want with daughters?”

The lieutenant had a variety of thoughts to express, many originating from the mind of Mahrree Shin, but he bit his tongue.

“Well,” said Slither, “at least we know she’s not the responsibility of the lieutenant here. But if he does have a girl hiding somewhere, perhaps you should meet her so you can make sure he’s not pursuing a relationship with his half-sister. How awkward would *that* be?” He chuckled at his words but he was the

only one.

Alarmed by the idea, Thorne twisted to the lieutenant, “Do you have someone?”

“No, sir. There’s no time for women when I’m trying to get three years of studying done in one. I’m more interested in learning to command at your side than I am in having a woman in—” He found himself unable to utter the rest of the sentence that he’d so cleverly composed in his head.

But Slither smiled in approval anyway. “No need to hurry, I always believed. Women only cause you troubles, as you can witness by the little demonstration at the front doors. Sorry, General, but I never understood your need.”

General Thorne had returned to his dinner. “Good strategy, Lek. But Slither, in time he’ll need a son himself. I recommend, though, Lek,” he said, concentrating on his plate, “that you don’t bother looking for someone until this crisis has passed. No sense in wanting someone who might not still be alive in a year.”

The lieutenant wanted clarification on what Thorne meant, but instead he only said, “Yes, sir.”

Thorne up. “Good answer. Remember that answer.”

“Yes, sir,” he said again. “And sir, I wish to apologize for my behavior earlier today.”

Kroop paused in his eating to watch the general’s reaction.

Thorne looked into the lieutenant’s eyes again. “You should. You were completely out of line, grossly incorrect, and utterly disrespectful. You were a disgrace!”

“Yes, sir,” he said, staring back and making sure to not reveal anything more.

The general continued to watch him for a moment then nodded once. “Your punishment for your insubordination today is to have no contact with any females until I say so. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

Priscill Thorne ran all the way back to the abandoned house she shared with two girls who did nothing all day but lay around on old sofas and occasionally have a visitor in the form of equally dull and dirty boys. She stopped at the back porch, sat down hard on the rock steps, and held her head in her hands to sob. She ignored the gnawing

in her belly that again wouldn't be filled and wished someone would come to her rescue.

All she could whimper as she huddled in the growing cold was, "Mother—come find me, Mother. Please—come find me!"

"What's that noise?" came the impatient snip. Priscill heard the door open but didn't look up to meet the hard look of one of the girls she lived with. "You again. I think that's all you do—cry and mope."

"Ah, take it easy on her," came a gentler male voice. It had the unsteady quality of one who didn't spend a lot of time upright. The young man fell out of the doorway and onto the hard ground. Only after a moment did he say, "Ouch."

"She's whining about going home again," the angry girl said, stepping out on to the porch and slamming the door behind her.

"So go home," the boy said lazily, rubbing his arm.

"I can't," Priscill whispered.

"Deceit," the boy nodded. "The one time I leave the grassy arena. Stupid. I survived it, too," he declared the obvious.

"They didn't die under Deceit," Priscill sniffled.

The girl sat on a stair behind her and exhaled so loudly her lips flapped. "Yes, they did," she intoned. "Everyone did. Accept it, Prissy. This isn't doing anyone any good."

"They're alive!" Priscill insisted. She was going to say it. She had nothing left to lose. "In Salem!"

"Salem?" the boy said casually. "Oooh, you didn't say she was *that* severe a vial head."

"I'm not a vial head!" Priscill insisted.

"Salem," the boy said longingly. "Prissers, everyone on the vials is looking for Salem."

Priscill stared at him. "What?"

"It's true," said the girl behind her, in a kinder tone. "Everyone's heard the stories of Salem. Their people hide in the forests. Sometimes they come out but usually they just watch us. They tell us if we stop doing the vials, they'll take us back to Salem where we'll get food, clothes, and a family. Just over the mountain. Just stop the vials . . . Ha!" she snorted bitterly. "I stopped the vials, so where are the men in green clothes? The women in brown? I was so sure I saw one once, too."

The boy nodded. "Me too. Talked to one once. Old man. Told me to follow him, get cleaned up, and we could talk. I didn't

leave, though. Why do you think everyone hung around the trees?” he asked Priscill. “We were hoping to see Salem. It was supposed to open up at a certain time of the night, like a crack in the forest. You’d see a light, then you were supposed to get up and run to it. Never saw the light, though. Was always passed out.”

“But . . . but,” Priscill stammered, amazed that the word Salem was so readily known, “that’s not how you get there! There were paths through the forest, then you had to go through the boulder field, then up into the canyon—” It was the loud laughter that stopped her short.

“Paths through the forest!” the girl hooted.

“Through the boulder field? *Through* it?” mocked the boy. “Tell me she’s not a vial head!”

“She’s not a vial head!” the girl burst out and they laughed.

Priscill gripped her head. Not even the vial heads believed her. It was hopeless.



The lieutenant and Professor Slither were up at dawn to see off the general and Guide Lannard. The guide was wearing the red cloak fastened over a thick coat. He silently brooded as he looked around the mansion one last time.

Outside, thirty soldiers on horseback were waiting in the cold morning. A thick frost already lay on the ground, far earlier than there should be for that time of year. General Thorne was buttoning, one handed, his heavy waist coat.

“I suppose it’s a good thing I had to return. I didn’t think I’d need this coat already, but Raining Season seems intent on coming early this year.”

“It’s because of the sun, General,” Slither suggested. “It can’t burn through the haze left by the volcano. We may need to consider that Planting Season will come late . . . if it comes at all,” he added quietly.

Thorne picked up his sheath and sword from the side table and glanced at the old professor. “Now why would you say something like that?” he asked as he flipped the belt around his waist and easily buckled it.

Slither shrugged. “Just something for you to consider, General.”

“That’s why we have the guide,” Thorne said grandly, “to see us

through these dark days.”

Guide Lannard sighed. “Sir, I just hope I’m up to the challenge. I know you said I would feel inspiration come, but honestly, I just . . .” He shrugged lamely.

Thorne put on a strange smile as he grasped the guide’s shoulder. “It will come, Guide. When I am with you, I feel inspiration. Perhaps this is how the Creator will work—through you to me.”

Slither nodded. “That’s most likely true. I read a great deal about this. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if the general receives inspiration while in your presence. You act as a . . . a pipe in a way, channeling the Creator like water to our general.”

The lieutenant was glad they’d be leaving soon. The tip of his tongue would soon start bleeding for all the biting it was receiving.

Thorne put on his cap and turned to Slither. “Keep up on his studies, Professor, and keep me informed on his progress.”

“Of course, General.”

Thorne turned to the lieutenant. His eyes were the mirrors again, but so were the lieutenant’s. “Behave yourself, Lek. You’re free to spend a few hours at the fort each day reviewing the supply lists. Twig will expect you this afternoon.”

“Yes, sir.”

Thorne squinted. “Still can’t say it? *Father?*”

The lieutenant kept his eyes solid. “Doesn’t seem appropriate right now, sir. In front of others in a formal situation,” he added as explanation. “Perhaps when you return?”

Thorne squinted as if looking for something. “All right, then. The next time I see you, I expect more respect.” His face softened and he took the lieutenant’s shoulder, patting it awkwardly. “It was good to see you again, son. I’m sorry it was such a short visit, but hopefully you can join me soon. I look forward to . . . to showing you Idumea.”

The general stumbled on his last sentence, as if almost frightened by the words. He covered by giving his best fatherly smile, which needed more practice.

The lieutenant stared deep into the general’s eyes and he noticed that under his practiced stare was a hint of fear. Something about having the lieutenant in Idumea made the general nervous.

The lieutenant squared his shoulders. “I look forward to seeing it, sir. Have a safe trip.”

Then—although he knew he shouldn’t he couldn’t help himself—he said, “I hope you sleep well in the High General’s mansion, sir.”

Perhaps the general would think the lieutenant was referring to his recent bad night, or maybe he’d remember that the lieutenant’s great-grandparents were murdered there as they slept, or that his grandfather had a year of disturbed sleep, the effects of which frequently startled a young Captain Thorne.

The lieutenant kept his face still as he waited for the response.

Thorne didn’t move for several seconds. He didn’t even blink, but there was a slight twitch in the corner of one that didn’t escape the lieutenant’s notice. He would smirk about it later.

Finally the general nodded once and said, “Thank you, Lek,” before he headed out the door.

Chapter 22--“You have a famine on your hands, Major.”

Nearly a week later, on the 50th Day of Harvest, the sun wasn't yet up when a sergeant major was first spotted marching briskly through the compound. The few soldiers who saw him wondered briefly who he was since the only sergeant major assigned to the fort was Qualipoe Hili. But with the continued changes in command, no one thought much of the man with the cap pulled down over his eyes who seemed to know his way around.

The sergeant major headed straight for the command tower and jogged easily up the stairs. At the top he turned to the staff sergeant and two privates sitting at the desk. They saluted.

The sergeant major saluted smartly back. “Where will I find General Thorne right now?”

“Sir, he's in Idumea,” the staff sergeant told him. “Left last week.”

The sergeant major nodded once. “Then I need to see your commander, immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” the sergeant answered. “He should be finishing his breakfast . . .”

The determined look of the sergeant major told him that didn't matter.

“But I'll go get him now, sir.” He glanced at the sergeant major's name patch, but the man had already turned to the command office.

“I'll wait in here,” he said as he stepped into the office and shut the door.

The privates looked at each other in surprise while the sergeant trotted down the stairs. A few moments later he returned with an irritated Major Twigg.

“So he just walked right in? What was his name?”

“Unsure, sir. I didn’t see his name badge.”

“Humph!” Twigg said as he opened the door to the still-dark command office. He saw no one immediately.

“Shut the door,” said a quiet voice from the corner. “Then sit down at your desk.”

Twigg squinted in the dim light but couldn’t see more than a shadowy figure. “Who are you?”

“Shut the door,” the shadow repeated patiently. “Then sit down at your desk.”

Twigg shut the door and, keeping his eyes on the figure, went behind the desk. It was only because he was intrigued, and obedient to a fault to authoritative tones, that he sat down.

The man sat down in a chair across the desk, his face shadowed by the brim of his cap. “You have a famine on your hands, Major.”

“You interrupted my sparse breakfast for that?” Twigg scoffed. “Anything new you can tell me?”

The man leaned forward and some of the insignias on his uniform became more recognizable. A few were missing, most noticeably the name badge. “I’m here to tell you I can fix that problem.”

Twigg glared at him. “Who are you? Onus’s contact? Are you who he sold all the grain to? And now you’ve come to sell it back at a profit, haven’t you? Well, it was *stolen property* and as such I demand its return immediately!”

The man shook his head. “I have nothing from anyone named Onus, nor do I want anything. I am here to offer what I have *freely*.”

Twigg narrowed his eyes. “What’s the catch?”

The man smiled faintly. “Transporting it here is a little difficult. While I have men under my command, we have no ability to use horses or wagons to transport what we have to Edge. We would need several thousand soldiers to meet us at a designated point.”

“Uh-huh,” Twigg said tonelessly. “Just send a few thousand soldiers. Have them waiting?”

“Yes,” the man said. “Five thousand soldiers should be enough to help Thorne save the world.”

Twigg smiled coldly. “That’s all? Just hand you his northern army? He’s not going to agree to that. Tell you what,” he said, leaning on the desk, trying to get closer to see the man’s face. The room was slowly beginning to lighten with the coming dawn, but not enough. “Tell me where the food is and we’ll come get it.”

“Not possible,” the man said shortly. “I want to speak to the general. I have more news for him.”

Twigg leaned back. “That’s not possible. He left for Idumea some days ago with the new guide.”

The man’s eyebrow went up. “The new guide. Interesting. Send General Thorne a message, then. I know that if you dispatch one now it’ll reach Idumea by dinner. Tell him I can provide enough food to feed 500,000 people until this crisis is over. That’s what I estimate he has left after the pox and the volcano.”

Twigg exclaimed loudly, but the sergeant major plowed on.

“I’ll need five thousand men to move it, and using horses and wagons is not an option. Also tell him he needs to remove all the ash from the farm lands. Tilling it into the soil will harden it like mortar and it’ll be impenetrable by Planting Season. I’m willing to help him further to save the world, but he needs to do it on my terms. We can begin moving the food by next week if he agrees.”

Twigg waved his arms about aimlessly, trying to find which of the many ridiculous points to swat down first. “Food for 500,000? I’d be a slugging Zenos to believe you have those kinds of resources! Where is it? He’s not going to believe you—I don’t believe you!”

The man nodded calmly. “That’s fine. You don’t have to believe it until you’re eating it. Major, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. I’m not asking for payment, I’m not asking for power. All I’m asking for is *a little faith*.” He glanced at the eastern window where the sun was beginning to rise. “Send the message to the general. I’ll return tomorrow at sundown to receive his response. Be waiting in the reception area downstairs, *alone*.” The man stood abruptly, opened the door, and jogged down the stairs.

“HEY!” Major Twigg yelled after him. “Stop him!” he shouted as he scrambled around his desk to follow.

The staff sergeant was already ahead of him. Together they ran out of the main building and looked around the compound to see where the sergeant major had gone.

No one was in sight.

While the forest was dead, it wasn't completely transparent.

Half a mile below the only remaining trail through the boulder barrier was a thick stand of dead trees, with tangled vines and bushes that created a large and conveniently placed barrier. Ten men could stand behind the dead foliage to watch for activity that occurred several hundred paces away at the edge of the fort.

And, not surprisingly, ten men *were* standing there, dressed in gray and black mottled clothing to blend into the gray ash and blackened trees. Anxiously they awaited the arrival of the eleventh.

The sun was creeping over the horizon and the men held their breath that someone in a blue uniform would soon arrive. A moment later, from an adjacent ravine, a man in a sergeant major's uniform suddenly appeared. The gray-and-black men sighed in relief.

“Well?” Woodson whispered urgently as the soldier, still hunched over and dodging through the dead trees, reached them.

“Wasn't seen entering the forest, I'm sure,” he said as he pulled off the cap. He ran his hand through his brown hair speckled with gray and smiled. “But Shem was right—the fort is an abomination, sprawling everywhere! At least the command tower is in the same place. I had no problem getting there. And everything was the same—they even kept his desk. I got to sit next to it, waiting. I even found the spot where I once colored the side with ink when I was seven.”

Woodson took a deep breath. “Rector Shin, I'm glad you got to enjoy your little trip back to your memories, but what I really want to know is—”

Peto put a hand on Woodson's shoulder. “I know what you want to know, but it's going to take some time. Thorne is in Idumea which must mean he controls the world again.”

“We're not going to Idumea, right?” asked a nervous scout.

“No,” Peto assured him, “that was *not* one of the possibilities. But at least we don't have to search for him.” He turned back to Woodson. “I *did*, however, tell the commanding major to send him a message, and that I'd return tomorrow evening to get Thorne's response.”

A blond man next to him grabbed his arm. “Papa, I thought you and Shem decided *against* that option! The entire fort will be—”

“I know, Relf: looking for me. But as I sat in that office I just had a feeling this was the right thing to do. Shem will forgive me.”

Relf had learned long ago that when his father “just had a feeling,” there was no arguing him out of the decision. And his decisions were always correct.

“I’ll bring the news to Salem,” Relf volunteered. “Uncle Shem may understand, but *Mama*, on the other hand—”

“She knew this might happen,” Peto told him. “I explained it to her before we left.”

Relf groaned quietly, thinking about delivering the news to his mother that his father was staying above Edge. “Papa, did you by any chance see . . .”

“No. No sign,” Peto sighed. “It would’ve been a long shot anyway. We don’t even know if he’s posted there. The first thing Thorne would do after gaining control of Idumea would be to redistribute the soldiers to different forts, breaking apart potential traitors. We don’t even know if Young Pere is still in the army.” He looked at his hands, rubbing off invisible dirt.

Woodson cleared his throat. “Rector Shin, now what do we do? You’ve thrown out all of our scenarios and created your own.”

Peto looked up with a contrite smile. “Sorry about that, Woodson. I kind of figured you had enough experience with Shins to know we tend to do that.”

Woodson sighed loudly. “Yes, I have, but I’m still not used to my plans being undercut.”

Peto winked at him. “Makes life more interesting, doesn’t it?”

Woodson was good-natured as long as things went according to plan, but that wasn’t the case today. Tensely, he said, “So again I ask, Rector Shin, what do we do *now*?”

Peto looked around at the scouts. “All of us will stay here while Relf goes back to Salem. I’ve been working on an idea or two that will let me get back into the fort,” he said, eyeing the dead forest around him. “I’ll need all of your help. In the meantime,” he turned back to his eldest son, “tell Shem that I made it in securely, no one noticed or recognized me in his old uniform which blended in quite nicely. I didn’t know who the major was, a message of our offer will be sent to Idumea because Thorne now holds it, *and*,” Peto paused for emphasis, “tell Shem that the world now has a guide.”

Relf’s frowned, as did everyone else. “A guide? Papa, how can that be?”

Peto scoffed a chuckle. “I have no idea. But I have a feeling Thorne’s behind it. If ever there was a time to have scouts in the world again, this would be it. Ask Shem if that’s a possibility.

Something’s going on, and we need to know about it.”

Relf nodded, jotting down the list on a scrap piece of paper. “Any suggestions on how to give Mama the news you’re going back to the fort?”

“Yes, get Calla to help you. Now, go—don’t waste any more time.”

Relf embraced his father and darted up noiselessly through the trees toward the boulders.

Woodson squinted at Peto and folded his arms. “So what ideas do you have in mind, Rector? Every last soldier will be watching for you tomorrow. Each scenario Guide Zenos and I discussed purposely avoided that outcome.”

Peto smiled consolingly. “I remember the night we met in these very woods, a few miles to the east. We were just teenagers then. *You* were so eager to get into the world just to do *something*, and *I* was the one glaring cynically. Seems our roles have reversed today?”

Woodson didn’t blink as he said, “The world changes people. I’m not so naïve anymore. And Rector Shin, neither are *you*.”

“I know,” Peto said, realizing he couldn’t stall anymore. “Shem and I had discussed one additional option, but he thought it was too risky. I think he’s just getting too old,” he grinned.

Only some of the scouts returned his smile.

Woodson remained steely-eyed.

Peto cleared his throat and turned to a man in his thirties. “Newt, you wondered why I wanted a physics professor as a scout, right?”

Professor Newt nodded apprehensively. “My wife never imagined I’d be asked to go on a scouting mission, although I was eager for the opportunity.” He raised his eyebrows in anticipation.

Peto looked around the forest again until his attention was captured by a boulder, taller than him, that had sometime in the past slipped down from the boulder field hoping for a better view of the village below. He smiled at it.

“Mass, speed, angle, distance—I never had as good a grasp on those concepts as my father did.” Peto picked up a shovel and a hatchet. “Men, after Newt makes a few calculations, we’ll have a lot of work to do in the next two days.”

Thorne and Wanes were walking to the carriage which was to take them back to the High General's mansion for dinner when the messenger came panting up to them.

"Sir! Urgent message from Edge—a response is requested to be sent at first light tomorrow morning!"

Thorne took the message and scowled at it as the two men climbed into the carriage.

"Not expecting anything, were you?" Colonel Wanes asked him as the carriage lurched into motion.

"For once, no. I left there less than a week ago—what could have gone wrong now?" He handed it to Wanes. "Open it. It's from Major Twigg, by the handwriting."

Wanes undid the message and handed it back to the general.

Thorne's brows furrowed as he read.

Wanes leaned forward, straining to see. "Problem, sir?"

Thorne shook his head slowly, still staring at the parchment. "This doesn't make any sense," he whispered. "How? Where?"

"Sir?"

Thorne handed the message to Wanes. "Someone in a sergeant major uniform showed up in Edge early this morning claiming to have enough food to feed 500,000 people!"

"Impossible!" Wanes exclaimed as he scanned the message. "And how convenient—he wants 5,000 soldiers to bring it to the world."

"I don't like it," Thorne said. "It makes no sense. First, who would have such resources? Second, why would they just *give* it to us? Completely illogical," he said, looking out the window.

"It's a ploy for men," Wanes concluded. "Someone wants to snatch all the available soldiers in the north for themselves."

"Of course they are!" Thorne barked. "Someone's trying to steal my army under the guise of providing food to the world. No wonder they won't tell us where it is. I'd be a fool to fall for such a flimsy takeover attempt."

Wanes nodded slowly. "So the real concern is . . ."

Thorne sighed, still staring out the window, "The real concern is, who *now* is trying to take away my army? Twigg said no one who saw the man recognized him, and he didn't wear a name badge. We have to consider that the man isn't even in the army but just stole a uniform."

Wanes glanced back at the message. "The major thought the

style was a bit older.”

“Maybe from someone’s storage wardrobe. Well he’s not going to get anything from me!” Thorne said, turning back to the colonel.

Wanes nodded in agreement. “But the major suggests following his plan for a time, just to see what it reveals,” he continued to read. “Sir, consider: if there *is* food, then—”

“If there *is* food, then all of *our* plans are destroyed!” Thorne exclaimed. “It’ll be far easier to control the world when there are fewer people in it. We already agreed on that. This is our opportunity to rid the world of all that holds it back from progressing. The aged, the crippled, the stupid, the beggars, those who live for the vials, even those groups of children that live at the trash heaps. How did Sargon let *that* get out of control? Must be hundreds of the little beasts now,” he shuddered in disgust. “No wonder their parents abandon them, the filthy little animals.

“When I held Idumea we conducted night raids several times a season to eliminate that problem,” Thorne continued. “But now there’s far too many to dump in the river without someone noticing. No, Wanes, if we let *everyone* live then our ability to establish a new kingdom becomes much more complicated. We must reduce the population, especially those over fifty. They’re the only ones who remember the old version of The Writings, and once they’re all dead we can finally establish the world as it should be! Creet, Wanes—who’s side are you on, anyway?”

Wanes puffed up immediately. “Yours, sir! Of course yours.”

Thorne glared at him. “Half of this was your idea, remember?”

“Of course! And I still believe in it. I just thought that perhaps if there *was* food, we could avoid the problem of so *many* deaths. If you were seen to have found us a source—”

“I know what you’re thinking,” Thorne said steadily. “If I feed the world, the world will be more loyal. But it won’t work that way, Colonel. Do you know why?”

Wanes shook his head.

Thorne leaned forward menacingly, “Because whoever *he* is will take all the credit. If there is food—and I highly, highly doubt it—the people will revere the man who provided them that food. Not the man who found it, Wanes, but the man who stored it away and gives it freely to the world! *That’s* the man the world will want as king, Wanes! That imposter in a sergeant major’s uniform who probably

stole the reserves from my forts. He's NOT going to steal my kingdom, Wanes. Is that clear?"

Colonel Wanes pressed back as far he could on the bench. "Very clear, sir. You make an excellent point."

Thorne leaned back. "Of course I do." He snatched the message out of Wanes' hand. "And this? This is ridiculous. Remove the ash from the farmlands? How are we supposed to do that!?"

Wanes shrugged. "Maybe we should run some tests—"

"There's nothing wrong with the ash! It'll just . . . *fluff* up the soil."

Wanes furrowed his brow at the general's declaration, especially since the only things the man ever planted were spies.

"No," Thorne murmured, looking out the window, deep in thought, "my plan is still better. Let the world become disgruntled with Guide Lannard, then bring in Lek who will restore all hope, then I can rule as king unimpeded with my son as the guide."

Wanes cleared his throat. "Sir, I'm afraid I still fail to understand why you left him in Edge. He really should be *here*, letting the people of Idumea see him. I was rather looking forward to meeting Perrin Shin's grandson myself."

Thorne's jaw shifted. "I have my reasons, Wanes," he said heavily. "The time is not right. And only I will know when to bring my son here."

Wanes nodded, knowing better than to press the issue. "So, the message returning to Edge will be . . ."

Thorne glowered at him as if it was obvious.

Late the next afternoon, Relf finally came out of the rock channel and jogged noiselessly to the wooded hiding place.

Peto caught him in a quick hug as the rest of the scouting party sighed in relief.

"Everything all right?" Peto asked. "I was getting worried when you didn't return last night."

"I'm fine. We had something to take care of," Relf said cryptically. "First, a message from Uncle Shem: he's not happy about your going back for a second visit. He thinks it's too risky and you're going to be discovered."

"Yes, I've heard that before," Peto murmured. "But we've

been working on that all day yesterday and today. You know, I think I really would have enjoyed being a Guarder,” he said, grinning.

“Well,” Relf said, taking off his pack and opening it up, “after Shem calmed down a bit—and then helped Calla calm down Mama—they came up with another idea, influenced heavily by Muggah, of course. This is why I’m getting here late. The fort will be looking for a sergeant major, but not *this*.” He held up another dark blue jacket.

Peto sucked in his breath as he took it.

“Meiki and Sewzi were up most the night altering it and didn’t get the finishing touches on it until this morning,” Relf explained as his father gingerly fingered the jacket. “Mama said it was a good thing we have two excellent seamstresses in the family. They took apart one of your jackets as a pattern to get the right fit. Try it on.”

Peto slipped on the uniform which fit perfectly. He didn’t need a mirror to know how it looked; Relf’s smile was enough.

“Colonel Shin!” he whispered. “Returning to the world!”

Woodson and the other men grinned. “I was only a teenager when your family came to Salem,” Woodson said, eyeing the colonel’s jacket in admiration, “and that was inside-out when I first met your father in this forest, but Rector Shin, I don’t think he ever looked more impressive than you do right now.”

Peto went pink. “It’s all the work of talented nieces,” he said dismissively. A thought struck him, and he looked with alarm at Relf. “Wait, Shem doesn’t want me to *impersonate* him—”

“No, no, no—not at all.” Relf gestured to where the SHIN patch would have been, removed by his cousins. “Shem thought with everyone watching for *his* jacket to return to the fort you could slip in more subtly as a colonel.”

Peto sighed in relief.

“And now, two unofficial messages,” Relf said with a smile. “First from Mama: don’t you dare get hurt while wearing that!”

Peto chuckled. “And second?”

“Second’s from Muggah: don’t you dare get hurt while wearing that because she wants to see what you look like in it.”

Peto laughed. “I don’t think she’s going to get her wish.”

Relf folded his arms. “Why not? Muggah said you never put on his jacket. At his remembrance party, even little Morah tried it on, but you never did. Why?”

Peto unconsciously smoothed the tightly woven wool and fingered one of the insignias. “Because, Relf,” he said in a whisper, “we

descend from a long line of army officers. It's in our blood but I didn't want it to be. I never wanted to take another man's life. But I also feared that if I ever *did* put one of these on, what I felt while wearing it—well, I might have a hard time taking it off.”

Relf nodded in understanding. “It carries a power all its own, doesn't it?”

“It carries Perrin Shin's power,” Peto whispered, “still. And tonight, on his 74th birthday, I'm going to need him.”

The fort was buzzing that evening of the 51st Day. Word had gone out, although no one knew why, for every soldier to be watching for a sergeant major not wearing a name badge who'd arrive at sundown. Whoever apprehended him and brought him to Major Twigg would be rewarded amply.

Twigg stood outside the command tower stroking his smooth chin as he scanned the area. He glanced frequently to check on the position of the sun, watching it set. The strained look he normally wore threatened to stretch him beyond recognition. The darker it grew, the more contorted his face became.

Sergeant Major Hili took his post not far from the major, as did every other officer and higher ranking enlisted man, along with several dozen soldiers. The idea was for them to be subtly walking back and forth in the compound as if going about their business, but as the sun fell lower in the sky, the more than one hundred men pretending to be milling about stopped in their tracks and looked expectantly around.

The lieutenant stood at his post near the northeast gates, watching the forest in front of him and checking on the compound behind him. Twigg, a few hundred paces away, strolled pointlessly back and forth in front of the reception area.

The major had been acting oddly for the past two days. He pulled out maps, sent patrols in all directions, and frequently stepped outside to look around the compound. He didn't reveal why to anyone.

In the late afternoon a messenger from Idumea arrived, and at dinner Twigg announced in the mess hall that every soldier should be looking for a man in a sergeant major's jacket. He'd be of average height, lean, and maybe had brown hair. The fact that

he described the majority of the men in the Edge and the fort didn't help. But at least everyone knew to look for the uniform.

Lieutenant Thorne stared up into the darkening forest and sighed at the lack of subtlety. It was obvious they were all waiting for something, even though those in the compound were shuffling their feet again because the major shouted at them after a hundred extra torches were lit to reveal that no one was moving.

All that was needed were a handful of soldiers lying in wait to ambush the man at his destination. But elusiveness wasn't taught in training or Command School. Maybe it was because no one had dealt with Guarders in over twenty-five years.

Growing bored, the lieutenant looked back up into the darkening forest, the sun now fully down, and he starting thinking about—

There was a noise, originating far up the hill. The lieutenant squinted absurdly as if that would help him see it.

It was something cracking, echoing, snapping, followed by another crack, and another. The lieutenant knew he'd heard that sound before, but couldn't immediately identify—

Suddenly he remembered. After the forest fire he started when he was ten, the woods were blackened for acres. Atop one of the hills, a boulder became dislodged. It came crashing down the hillside taking out dead trees left and right. Each tree fell with a mighty crack—

The lieutenant's mouth went dry as he realized what was happening. The crashing noise was approaching the fort, triggering louder cracks, then more and more.

Every soldier in the compound was now looking north, perplexed. The patrols along the forest stopped and stared.

“Get away from the trees!” the lieutenant shouted. “A boulder's coming down! Get away from the forest!” He ran at the patrols waving his arms. “RUN! RUN!”

Only a couple of soldiers turned to look at him, the rest kept staring stupidly up into the darkness.

Another voice shouted behind the lieutenant. “Get away! Run to the fort! *That's an order! RUN!*”

In the dim twilight, the lieutenant could barely make out the officer as he raced past, frantically gesturing to the soldiers to follow him.

A few dozen men turned and obediently ran after the officer to the northeast gates.

The lieutenant twisted to look behind him into the forest as the

splintering noises grew louder. It was now clear to everyone what was happening: a large swath of forest was coming down, falling like an avalanche toward the fort, and nearly all of the soldiers started running and shouting.

Suddenly a dark mass rolled heavily out of the trees and to the fort walls. The lieutenant held his breath as the immense boulder came to a stop in the field just before the fort wall, miraculously not hitting any soldiers as if it were calculated to stop where it did.

But the crashing continued. The last few soldiers still standing in shock at the forest's edge finally came to their senses and screamed as they ran from the dead trees coming down on top of them.

A large log rolled out of the forest, knocking down trees at the perimeter. The lieutenant cringed as two running soldiers were knocked down by it. Its momentum carried it unimpeded to the fort walls, and the soldiers ahead of it cried out in a panic and raced for the open northeast gates.

More logs came rolling down, by the dozens then by the hundreds, most stopping just beyond the forest's edge as their remaining branches slowed them down, tangled up with other trees. But a few continued with great energy, rolling to the tall wooden fence that surrounded the fort and splintering against it.

The lieutenant sprinted for the northeast gates. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw another man go down as a log rolled over him. The lieutenant dodged and leaped over another dead tree and soon was through the gates. He ducked to the side where the tall outer wall stood and hoped the timbers were strong enough to keep back the onslaught of logs. He didn't even have time to catch his breath before he realized the situation inside the compound.

Chaos.

Men were screaming in a panic, even though the walls seemed to be holding back the avalanche of dead wood. Most of the soldiers were running for the southwest entrance only to find the log fall was happening to the west of the fort as well. Hundreds, if not thousands, of timbers all dead and waiting for just the right force were crashing down to the fort, sending stray logs rolling into the fort walls, and to the hay barns and fields beyond.

The lieutenant glanced to the command tower and saw Major Twigg shouting orders to panicked soldiers. Suddenly an officer

appeared next to him, caught him by the arm, and dragged him into the reception area of the command tower.

The lieutenant staggered as he saw the reception area darken. He started jogging to assist the major, but he didn't make it. Swarms of soldiers rushed around him, calling for surgeons, screaming for help.

“I told you to be waiting *in here*.” The voice hissed in Major Twigg's ear as he stood in the now-dark reception area.

As Twigg was dragged into the building by the man in the uniform, the officer purposely knocked down the two lanterns on the front desk dousing all light in the room. An instant later Twigg felt cold steel pressed against his throat and a strong hand twist his arm.

“You didn't have to make this so difficult. All you had to do was wait here by yourself, but now you have a terrified fort to deal with. Now, tell me the response to my proposal—will Thorne take my help and my food on my terms?”

Twigg, stunned by the sudden turn of events, and even more surprised to realize he was alone and with a blade to his throat, panted before he regained control of himself.

“Thorne follows no one's terms but his own. He demands that you identify yourself and draw him a map as to where the reserves are stored.”

“That's not going to happen and he knows it.”

“Then he refuses your so-called help and demands your surrender!”

The man holding him sighed. “Then we have nothing more to discuss. Sorry about the mess in the forest.” He threw down Twigg and bolted out the doors.

The lieutenant noticed a soldier with blood dripping from his head staggering from the southwest gates, and he grunted in frustration. He wanted to see what was happening with the major in the command tower, but no one was helping the wounded soldier.

The lieutenant grabbed the disoriented private, laid him down in a safe spot near a wall, pulled out his kerchief, and wiped away the

blood. Seeing nothing more serious than a bleeding bump, he said, “You’ll be all right. Minor concussion. Here, hold this on your head. I need to check something.”

The lieutenant got to his feet and started to run for the command tower, but before he could reach it an officer charged out the door. In the torch light, the lieutenant could just make out the insignias on the uniform as the man streaked past, brass buttons reflecting the light. Colonel. But there were no colonels posted to the fort, especially with brass buttons.

The lieutenant turned to chase the man headed for the northeast entrance, but a new rush of soldiers blocked his sight. He pushed through the panicked men who were fleeing the open fields and finally broke free. In front of him were only the empty gates. Maybe the officer was looking for more wounded—

Or maybe he wasn’t an officer at all.

The lieutenant sprinted out of the compound. The noise of falling timbers was dying away, and only a couple of dead trees were still rolling to the fort, late for the excitement.

He scanned the tangled mess and debris, looking desperately for any movement, but saw only dark blobs. The man in the colonel’s jacket had to be there somewhere; there was nowhere else he could’ve gone.

Except for . . .

The lieutenant sprinted for the forest, hurdling logs and dodging branches. His foot caught on something and he went down, banging his chin on another log.

Ignoring the pain, he scrambled back to his feet only to trip over another dead tree in the dark, this time taking a branch to his gut and knocking the wind out of him.

He pushed himself back up, gasping for breath, still searching for any movement in the forest, or what was left of it. He thought he saw a flash of blue dart up the now bare and dark hillside, but then it was gone. He couldn’t even shout at it. There was nothing else he could do but slump onto the log and wait until he could breathe again.

Peto trotted in an uneasy jog up the forest’s hillside, avoiding broken stumps and felled branches. He slipped and stumbled a

few times, but quickly got back up again and continued up the slope.

The distance seemed longer in the dark. He tried to concentrate as he ran up the now unfamiliar terrain.

Everything had changed in the last ten minutes, triggered by strategically weakening hundreds of dead tree roots with jagged knives and hatchets over the past two days, then removing precisely the right amount of dirt from under a large boulder so that the force of nine men pushing it would send it rolling down the hillside to begin the cascade of falling timbers.

Now he was hoping to run into one of the scouts who pushed that boulder to create an enormous triangle meadow in the forest which continued all the way down to the fort.

That many of the logs continued past the tree fall and rolled on surprised Peto. He only expected to create a loud diversion, not a destructive force of nature that bounced up against the fort walls. Maybe he'd been a little too thorough in his dead root cuttings.

He dodged around another felled tree wondering if he overshot his goal. Nothing looked right, but then again it was a dark night. He continued to run uphill, fighting down his fear that someone might be following him, but no one else had left the fort after him, he was sure.

Finally he heard someone whisper loudly. “Rector! HERE!”

Peto cut to his right and ran straight into one of the scouts.

“Thank the Creator you made it!”

“Papa!” Relf ran over and caught him in an embrace. “When I saw you running to the soldiers where the trees were falling—”

“I know,” Peto panted, “I know. I imagined myself . . . getting knocked down by them as well. The stupid soldiers . . . just *stood* there. Had to do something.” He collapsed on the ground and held his head as he calmed his breathing.

The rest of the scouting party soon joined them.

Professor Newt was jumping up and down like an eight-year-old. “Did you see it roll? It was fantastic! The noise itself was incredible, then the trees . . . Rector, where'd the boulder stop?”

Peto grinned as he panted. “Right where . . . you calculated it would.”

Newt turned to Woodson. “I've got to go down and see it. Please, just to verify the resting spot—”

Woodson shook his head. “It's too risky.”

“But it's so dark! I'll wait a couple of hours—”

“Soldiers will be all over that field!”

“Not in a few hours. This is for scientific research!”

While Woodson and Newt debated, Relf kneeled in front of his father whose breathing was normalizing. “So?”

Peto took a deep breath and wiped the sweat from his face. Woodson and Newt stopped their arguing to hear Peto’s response.

“Thorne wants only my identity, my map, and my surrender.”

Woodson scoffed while the rest of the scouts sighed in frustration.

“So what did you say?” Relf asked.

“I told the major that wasn’t going to happen. Then the major said Thorne refuses our so-called help. Then I left,” Peto said quietly. He held his head again.

Relf sat down in the dirt beside him. “We tried, Papa. You took a tremendous risk, twice. Thorne’s too stubborn. He probably thought it was a trap of some kind—someone trying to upstage him or take away his army.”

Woodson nodded. “Very insightful, Relf. You must have been studying up on the world and General Thorne.”

Relf smiled dimly, but his father’s behavior caught his attention. He was still holding his head. “Papa? Is something wrong?”

Peto could only whisper. “You saw me, right, Relf? Shouting to get the patrols moving?”

“Yes. I was still at the edge of the forest where we parted ways.”

“Relf, did you see *who* I ran past to get them moving?”

Relf’s hand went up to his mouth. “Oh, Papa . . .”

“I heard him, too. Shouting. It was his voice.” Peto’s shoulders shook as he began to weep. “Relf, at least we know Young Pere’s still alive and still in Edge.”

Chapter 23--“No! No, it wasn’t a coincidence.”

It was very late by the time the lieutenant got back to the mansion and to bed. The fort had spent two hours searching by torchlight in the debris for wounded and any sign of the unknown officer.

Surprisingly no one was killed in the tree fall, as they were now calling it. There were only five soldiers trapped by the logs with broken legs, cracked ribs, and concussions; more injuries were caused by panicked soldiers running into each other in the dark.

Despite the good news of few injuries, Major Twigg was furious. The lieutenant was approaching the stairs to the command tower with the report that no more wounded could be seen when he heard Twigg’s shouts float down the stairs.

“Don’t you get it? He *caused* all of this! As a diversion! I’m sure of it!”

“Twigg, Twigg,” Sergeant Major Hili said soothingly as the lieutenant silently climbed the stairs. “It was a remarkable coincidence, nothing else. Boulders have dislodged before—”

“No! No, it wasn’t a coincidence. As he left he said, ‘Sorry about the mess in the forest.’ Hili, he’s *got* to be an officer or a soldier or something. He was using Qayin Thorne’s Tactic of Diversionary Chaos, and tonight he was wearing a colonel’s uniform. Who else, besides someone who served in the army, would know that tactic *and* have access to both a sergeant major’s uniform and a colonel’s uniform?”

The lieutenant stopped at the middle of the stairwell with his mouth agape. He knew the answer to that, but it was too remarkable to consider.

And then he remembered: the uniform he saw had brass buttons. No officers wore brass buttons anymore—

“Or, Hili,” the major’s voice became so low the lieutenant

strained to hear him. "What if the Guarders have returned?"

Hili sighed. "I suspected that a few weeks ago when we pulled that couple out of the forest, the ones wearing those unusual clothes. But now I really doubt it. Twigg, you may not realize this," he answered quietly, "but I worked for the Guarders as a teen stealing goods. I knew a few of them and they didn't live in the forests. They lived in Mountseen and Rivers. The Guarders took to the forests only to attack or to frighten villages. I don't think there ever were real Guarders. And once General Qayin Thorne was dead, so were the Guarders."

"But that's precisely it!" Twigg replied. "You're not the only one who knows the Guarders were frauds. What if someone else is trying to bring back the old secret ways? Did you ever take their oaths, Hili?"

The lieutenant, still on the stairs, continued to hold his breath trying to hear an answer. Hili must have just been moving his head.

The major spoke again. "Well, maybe there were others in your generation who did, who've come back now to wage a secret war on the general!"

"Twigg, Twigg, you're reading too much into this. I think it's more likely this was the work of some of Sargon's men. Thorne said there were a few officers unaccounted for. They would have access to the uniforms."

"I know the ones missing, Hili! They're cowards! They're probably hiding between Flax and Waves pretending to herd cattle. They'd never bother to come so far north, especially now that it's cold. Besides, why not torment the general in Idumea instead?"

"I don't know, Twigg. Maybe this is a statement of some kind, that they can make it all the way to Edge and attack the general's home fort. So," Hili asked quietly, "was the man who attacked you the one you were looking for?"

"Yes!" Twigg said, seething. "Not only did we not capture or identify him, he injured several in my fort and probably destroyed half the forest getting in!"

The lieutenant heard noises below him in the reception area and realized he would soon be seen. He faked a cough to announce someone was on the stairs and resumed climbing.

Major Twigg, huffing, came to the top of the stairs. “Lieutenant! What do you want?”

“Sir,” he said as he reached the office, “I’m here to report there are no more wounded and no fatalities.”

Twigg glanced at Hili. “Well I suppose *that’s* good news.” He turned back to the lieutenant, seemingly eager to be rid of him. “I heard you were trying to get the soldiers away from the tree fall. I’ll be sure to mention that to your father in my next message. Good work.” Twigg waved at the lieutenant to dismiss him.

Along the walk home he couldn’t get the words out of his mind: Who else would have access to both a master’s sergeant uniform *and* a colonel’s uniform?

It must have been Colonel Shin’s jacket, the only one with brass buttons. But who would they allow to take them? His grandmother treasured the jacket too much to let just anyone wear it.

The lieutenant entered the quiet mansion, passed Slither’s room where he was already snoring, and went up to his bedroom. He undressed, still lost in thought, and laid down on his bed to stare up at the ceiling.

The unknown man must have been the officer who ran past him at the forest. The lieutenant shut his eyes to concentrate on the voice. The noise of the forest was loud, but the officer shouting next to him, then in front of him, was even louder—

It was his father. His *real* father.

To his surprise, tears streamed out of his eyes and slid into his ears. Peto Shin was the only man who’d be trusted to wear both Zenos’s and Shin’s old uniforms.

He was the correct height and weight, And that voice . . .

Again his eyes welled with tears. Why was he here? Looking for his son? Heard about the guide? Or maybe they knew they were exposed?

His chin trembled as he realized he wouldn’t know, maybe for years, why his father was there. It hadn’t occurred to him before how long this all could take. And he hadn’t realized until then just how much he missed his father. His real father.

He was still alive and certainly well, running fast and, naturally, in the forest. No one else would have thought of creating a tree fall as a diversion, triggered by a boulder.

The lieutenant smiled with pride. What had his father, his *real* father, done so as to fluster the commander and terrify the soldiers?

It was obviously in the Shins' blood to cause chaos.

The lieutenant grinned in the dark.

My papa, he thought. The Guarder!



Peto laid on his bedroll and stared up at the stars. The Side-ways Swordsman was pointing to Salem.

The scouting party was above the boulder line, safely sleeping in the narrow trail normally used by horses. Around him, Peto heard the breathing and soft snores of the other men. Newt and two other scouts had finally returned from inspecting the position of the boulder, having had to wait until the last of the soldiers had gone back into the fort. That Newt had fallen asleep, after his fit of, "It worked! It really *worked!*" Peto found remarkable. He'd thought the physics professor would be bouncing all night long.

Relf lay next to Peto, having finally drifted off to sleep. But before, he couldn't stop talking about Young Pere.

"I saw him! I should have recognized his size. I wasn't even looking for him. I was too worried about the trees . . . I should have run down there and grabbed him—"

"There was no time, Relf," Peto consoled him. "You would've been caught by the logs. Young Pere might have been hit, too—I don't know. I didn't see him again. You were right to stay in the forest and I was right to continue with the plan. The Creator gave us a gift to see him. There was nothing more we were to do tonight. So stop tormenting yourself and be grateful for the gift."

Relf finally believed it but Peto still struggled. He knew it was Young Pere as soon as he ran past the tall young man, recognizing his voice as he was shouting at the soldiers to run.

The urge to grab his son had been overwhelming when he caught sight of him, and he briefly saw his son's surprised expression. Maybe he recognized him, but Peto doubted it. Maybe if he spotted the jacket in that short moment he would've thought of his grandfather instead.

At least Young Pere was trying to do some good by shouting at the soldiers to run away. He may even have been wearing a lieutenant's braid on his shoulder, Peto wasn't sure. How his son could have been promoted to lieutenant would be an interesting

story to hear someday, if—*when*—he returned.

This whole night would be intriguing to hear from his perspective. Someday.

Peto’s eyes filled with tears and he let them spill out unheeded, just as he had earlier that night.

It was the greatest hope he’d felt since Young Pere ran away. It may take years to bring him home, but if that’s what it took, well, then that’s what it took. Peto could still run through the fort every now and then at twilight, just to catch sight of his son.

After all, he *was*, Peto thought as he grinned into the dark, a Guarder.

He closed his eyes and soon was dreaming, but it felt far more real than a mere dream. He had on the jacket again, and his father was standing in front of him wearing all white, with his hands on his waist and grinning from ear to ear.

“I always knew some day you’d be in uniform, son,” Perrin chuckled. “What a great birthday present for my 74th—watching you in action as Colonel Shin. Excellent work! Messages communicated with no loss of life? Better than I could do. We knew Thorne wasn’t about to bite but it was the Creator’s will that he be given an opportunity. I’m proud of you, Peto! Tell your mother I miss her. Wear the jacket home for her, all right? As a gift? She knows what day today was, too.”

Before Peto could respond, Perrin was gone.

As the lieutenant drifted off to sleep, he heard, *YOUR FATHER LOOKED GREAT AS A GUARDER COLONEL, DIDN’T HE? I DON’T KNOW WHEN I’VE EVER HAD SO MUCH FUN ON MY BIRTHDAY . . .*

The scouting party was still half a mile away from the canyon entrance, but Peto chuckled when he heard the distinctive squeal of joy echoing up the canyon that could have only come from his wife. They’d been sighted. The dark blue jacket must have stood out in the gray canyon.

Relf chortled. “Mama was waiting at the entrance two days ago.

When you weren't with me I thought for sure she'd ride up and go to Edge to find you herself. Good thing Uncle Shem and Aunt Calla were there to hold her horse."

Peto looked back to Woodson. "I think I better ride ahead."

Woodson grinned. "I think you better, too."

Peto prodded Clark 14 into a gallop down the narrow trail. As he neared the entrance he spied the dozen or so horses, but also a wagon waiting. There'd be only one person who'd insist on a wagon.

He quickly checked the jacket to see if all of the brass buttons were still fastened because Mahrree Shin would lecture him on the proper wearing of a uniform if they weren't.

"PETO!" Lilla yelled as he rode up to them. "You're all right! I was so worried!" She slid off her horse and rushed to her husband.

Peto dismounted and caught her in a hug. "I'm fine, Lilla," he said and he kissed her. "Always was."

She kissed him again and he stepped back for inspection. Lilla held his hands as she looked him up and down. "Colonel Perrin Shin rides again," she whispered with a shudder.

"Indeed he does!"

Peto looked behind Lilla to see Shem helping his mother get down from the wagon. Mahrree burst into a grin and strode over to him for a hug.

"Look at you!" she said as she pulled away. "So much like your father! I wish Perrin could have seen you."

Peto was already choking up. "Mother, *he did*."

Shem, now standing next to them, regarded Peto with surprise.

Peto smiled. "I saw him last night in a dream, Mother. He said he always expected to see me someday in the uniform. He told me to wear it home for you. I guess for his birthday present."

Mahrree was already crying, making the next thing Peto needed to say even more difficult.

"He said to tell you he misses you," he choked out.

Mahrree nodded vigorously and hugged him again. "Thank you! Now why can't I have a dream of him?" She stomped her foot.

Peto, Lilla, and Shem chuckled.

"Just not the right time, Mahrree," Shem explained. "But

Peto, what news?”

Peto turned to Shem, remembering there was business to take care of. “Thorne received the message and he sent one back. He wanted my identity, the location of the food, and my surrender. His terms, not ours. I don’t think anybody believed we really had anything to offer.”

Shem closed his eyes and shook his head. Three of his assistants, sitting on the horses behind him, sighed in disappointment.

“Guide,” Peto said softly, “General Shin also told me they didn’t expect Thorne to accept the offer, but it was the Creator’s will that he be given the opportunity.”

Shem opened his eyes, red and damp, and cleared his throat. “Excellent work, Rector Shin.” He leaned closer to his brother-in-law. “But, Peto, I’m dying to hear how you made it into the fort and back out again with everyone waiting for you!”

Peto grinned. “It was great, Shem. I’ll tell it to everyone back at the Eztates. I’m a regular Guarder!”

Lilla put her hands on her hips. “A Guarder? You are never leaving me again, Peto Shin! Don’t you DARE think about going back down!”

Peto grabbed her and kissed her again. “Don’t worry. It’s not my calling, and I did a few things with my knife that only Colonel Shin would do. I think it’s best I take this jacket off before it feels comfortable. But, Lilla,” he took her face in his hands. His eyes were sparkling as he said, “It’s a good thing I went. I saw *him* and heard him. It was only for a moment, but now we know for certain that Young Pere’s still alive and serving at the fort in—”

Peto should have been ready but he wasn’t. He flinched as he wife squealed again. Her loud and happy sobs echoed up the canyon and reached the approaching scouting party.

Relf smiled in embarrassment at Woodson, Newt, and the others. “He told her.”

The next morning the lieutenant woke up with a smile on his face, filled with defiant energy from Guarder Peto Shin. But there was still too much he needed from General Thorne before he could overthrow him, take over the army, and peacefully unite the world with Salem.

He knew he was on the right road, though. Peto Shin, who had

never completed a day of Command School, had soldiers obeying and following him because he was in the right uniform shouting the right things. The soldiers would follow anyone who'd save them.

The lieutenant studied diligently that morning, then after mid-day meal headed over to the fort for the afternoon. Instead of walking to the command tower, he first went to survey the damage from the night before. The number of felled trees was impressive.

Dozens of citizens stood on the edges of the devastation, watching as many more soldiers pulled out timbers, chopped off the remaining limbs, and stacked them neatly on top of each other.

The lieutenant meandered behind the villagers where several were crouching, inspecting the logs.

"The work of Guarders—it must be."

"No, no, they were wiped out. Where would they live now, anyway? Deceit's gone."

"I think it was natural. All of these trees are dead. My son pushed one over just to see if he could and it came down easily once the dead roots were dislodged. Start one going, it'll take down everything else."

"I don't think so. Only a few would fall before they became entangled. But look how high the cleared section is! A few hundred paces up the hillside."

"I never realized it actually *was* a hillside."

"I never realized how deep the forest is."

"Is that section still considered a forest now? One could just walk right up into it."

"But look at the bottom of this tree. A breaking tree would splinter, but this root is clearly chopped through. It's a clean cut, like from a saw or hatchet. This was deliberate, I'm telling you!"

"Guarders!"

"But why? We have nothing for them to steal."

"Maybe they're even worse off than we are."

The lieutenant hid his smirk about Guarders as he strolled over to the soldiers. A few were analyzing the boulder that stood taller than any of them, as if they'd never seen a rock before. They touched it gingerly in case it might explode.

He continued along the missing tree line until he came to the middle of it and looked up the hillside. Hundreds of trees were

felled in an enormous triangle. At the top must have been the boulder, beginning the cascade.

He had to investigate it. He'd know the cuts his father's jagged blade would make but he didn't feel comfortable inspecting the trees among the soldiers and villagers.

Without another thought, he headed up the hillside picking his way through the litter of timbers and branches into that which was no longer a forest.

“Lieutenant!” came a shout came from below. “And just where do you think you're going?”

He turned around to see an angry captain standing several dozen paces away, his hands on his waist.

“Just to inspect the damage, sir,” he said with an easy smile.

“No soldiers are to go into the forest, Lieutenant, except to save a life! The general has yet to lift that rule and until he does, you and everyone else is to stay out of the of the forest.”

“But it's not a forest anymore,” the lieutenant pointed out. “No more trees, so now it's a meadow.”

The captain gave him a quizzical look. “What's a meh-doe?”

The lieutenant was startled. It'd never occurred to him that no one here knew what a meadow was. Then again, no one in the world ventured into the mountains, never knew more than they could see from the villages.

All work had ceased, and every soldier and villager was staring at him, waiting for an explanation.

He kept the smile on his face as he tried to fix his mistake.

“Why, sir, a meadow is . . . what we can call this now. An empty space in the trees. You can change the name if you wish, but it certainly doesn't seem to qualify as a forest anymore. I promise I won't leave this ‘meadow.’ I just wanted to see if I can discern what caused this.” Without waiting for a response he continued to pick his way through the timbers.

The captain grumbled and looked around. “Back to work!” he shouted. “Finish clearing this . . . treeless place.”

The lieutenant grinned at the mess before him. It took him longer to reach the top than he thought it would, climbing through a maze of logs and branches, and often catching his bootlaces. When he finally got to the top he felt the urge to continue on into the forest, climbing into the shelter of the trees. But he also knew there was at least one set of eyes watching him closely.

He looked down at the expanse he'd climbed. The height surprised him, almost as much as noticing he had an audience of about a hundred people watching, along with the captain. He waved awkwardly to the crowd, and the captain, unamused, folded his arms. The lieutenant crouched to inspect the ground at the pinnacle of the triangle.

He grinned to realize the ground had been deliberately disturbed, as if the soil had been shoveled away to undercut a now-missing boulder. Inspecting the remaining tree roots revealed the same thing: they were severed, most likely with a jagged knife that also doubled as a saw. He fingered the wood, knowing exactly who did the precise damage to the trees he'd devoted his adult life to studying.

RECTOR SHIN! HOW LOOK THE TREES?

"You can return now, Lieutenant," the words drifted up to him. Down below, the captain was tapping his foot impatiently.

The lieutenant smiled to the forest. "Some other time, Pughah," he whispered. "But they look fantastic." He made his way back down to the flat ground again.

The captain was waiting. Not knowing what else to say, especially since they'd eventually come to the same conclusion, the lieutenant tried something different: the truth.

"Sir, it appears that the roots were cut. Probably by a saw or hatchet of some sort."

The captain was dubious. "We would've heard the noise."

"Not necessarily. If a sharp knife were used it'd be very quiet. And hatchet sounds can be muffled by the ash in the forest. Besides, I don't think too much effort was needed to weaken the trees. Shall I report my suspicions to Major Twigg? I'm due in the command tower now anyway."

"Go ahead. Tell him cleanup efforts here are going as expected."

The lieutenant ignored the stares from the villagers and soldiers as he made his way to the northeast gates.

But one citizen murmured, "They *did* become Guardians in the forest. And now the Shins are coming back!"

The lieutenant nearly laughed.

At the command tower, Sergeant Major Hili nodded in greeting. "You're almost late, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir, but I'm not," he pointed out. "I wanted to see the

damage to the forest.”

“And?” Hili asked, not looking up from a document he was reviewing.

“I think it was caused by men,” the lieutenant said. “I checked the top of the tree fall and the remaining roots show signs of cutting. The ground where the boulder likely rested also shows signs of being compromised.”

Hili's head shot up when the lieutenant mentioned having gone to the top of the clearing.

Major Twigg now stood at the door of the command office. “You went to the *top*, Lieutenant?” the major bristled. “*Into* the forest?”

The lieutenant shook his head. “No sir, I didn't go *into* the forest. Really, with no trees, it's not a forest anymore, is it, sir? The captain says cleanup is going according to schedule, sir.”

Major Twigg stared at him. “It's still the forest, Thorne! And you shouldn't have done it.”

“I didn't do anything dangerous, sir. Last night I heard you suggesting that it was caused by the man we failed to apprehend. From what I saw, I think you're correct.”

Twigg twitched. “I thank you for your efforts but I don't need you violating the rules of the army to verify my suspicions. What would your father say?”

The lieutenant smiled. “I think *my father* would be very proud of my decisions, sir.”

It was getting easier to tell the truth all the time.

Chapter 24--“It seems that the guide has . . . solved our famine problem.”

It was late afternoon on the 55th Day of Harvest, less than a week since the meadow in the forest was created, and the lieutenant was going through the inventory lists in the forward office. He'd spent the last two hours inspecting the storehouses to make sure they weren't off by so much as a pinch of grain. They weren't.

He felt a mixture of satisfaction and despair realizing that since the executions almost two weeks ago there were no more problems. The executions had worked. Either the two men responsible *had* been eliminated or those who'd been stealing were too frightened to try again, especially now that there was a “guide” who might find them out.

He was tallying the columns when footsteps hurried up the stairwell. An official messenger from Idumea rushed to Major Twigg's door and knocked.

“Urgent message from General Thorne, sir!”

The door opened and Major Twigg took the message. “Reply needed?”

“No, sir. Not unless there are complications.”

Twigg's face tensed at that answer. “Then go eat and rest before you return in the morning.” Twigg turned back to the command office leaving the door opened as the messenger trotted down the stairs.

The lieutenant squirmed in his chair, wondering what the message might be about and if it was anything he could use. His leg bounced in anticipation as he heard a page turn but no other sound from the major.

The lieutenant waited for a minute, then five minutes. Restless with wonder, he stood up and walked to the command office door.

Twigg was seated behind the desk, supporting his head in his hands, staring at the message. Something about his perpetually stressed demeanor seemed heavier than normal.

“Sir? Do you need anything?”

Twigg didn’t look up but shook his head. “No, thank you, Lieutenant,” he whispered.

The lieutenant pursed his lips in disappointment and was starting to walk away when Twigg spoke again. “Thorne.”

“Yes, sir?”

Twigg brushed a hand across his eyes and nose before continuing. “You *can* do something. I suppose I shouldn’t put this off . . .” He looked up at the lieutenant with unexpectedly distraught eyes. “Gather the other officers and higher ranked sergeants. It seems that the guide has . . . solved our famine problem.”

The lieutenant smiled hesitantly. “That’s good news, sir.”

Twigg only said, “We’ll see about that.” Then he added, “Thorne, if your parents—your *other* parents—were still alive, would they be older than fifty?”

The lieutenant, confused by the question, frowned. “No, sir.”

“Well, Lieutenant, my father is fifty-three, and just last season my mother turned fifty. She was barely seventeen when I was born. They live down in Marsh. Both survived the pox and Deceit.”

The lieutenant, unsure of what to do with that information, came up with, “Congratulations, sir?”

Twigg looked down at the desk and again held his head in his hands. “Lieutenant, go get the others.”

Half an hour later every man seated in the large command office wore a similar look of shock.

The lieutenant fought the urge to cry out, “That can’t be right! The Creator would never demand that!” Instead he sat on a stool in the corner, horrified, as Major Twigg soberly read the message. A voice only the lieutenant could hear provided commentary.

“Guide Lannard has received a vision.”

WITH HELP FROM SOME NEWLY DISCOVERED SEEDS THAT CAN BE CRUSHED AND INHALED FOR VISIONARY RESULTS.

“General Thorne and Colonel Waness were witnesses.”

YOU SAW HOW THORNE AND SLITHER MANIPULATED LANNARD BEFORE. THEY DID IT AGAIN.

“The Creator has demanded a sacrifice before He will save the world.”

DON'T SAY A WORD, YOUNG PERE. YOU KNOW AS WELL AS I DO THEY'RE USING THE IDEA OF THE CREATOR FOR THEIR OWN PURPOSES. STAY QUIET.

“He requires as the sacrifice the life of every citizen aged fifty or older, unless they have unusual circumstances such as providing a needed service or being solely responsible for caring for a viable child or grandchild. All individuals, *no matter what their age*, who are crippled, chronically ill, mentally infirm, blind, or deaf will also sacrifice their lives for the good of the world.”

INTERESTING THAT LEMUEL THORNE IS OVER FIFTY AND CRIPPLED. AND I'D SUGGEST THAT HE'S ALSO MENTALLY INFIRM. SUPPOSEDLY HE BELIEVES HE PROVIDES A NEEDED SERVICE TO THE WORLD, BUT WHO NEEDS THIS KIND OF SERVICE?

“All children orphaned by the volcano will also be evaluated as to their ability to add to the future world's development. If they are found lacking, they will also be sacrificed so that they can join their parents in death.”

IF THORNE CARES NOTHING FOR HIS NINE DAUGHTERS, SURELY IT'S NOT DIFFICULT TO DISMISS OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN. ESSENTIALLY HE WANTS THE UGLY CHILDREN GONE. BY THE WAY, YOU'RE CONSIDERED AN ORPHAN, EVEN AT THE MATURE AGE OF SUPPOSEDLY TWENTY-SEVEN, AND HE'S THE ONLY PARENT PROVIDING FOR YOUR SUPPORT, EVEN THOUGH YOU'RE WORKING AS A LIEUTENANT, SO HE HAS YET ANOTHER DUBIOUS REASON TO BE ALLOWED TO CONTINUE.

Major Twigg finished reading the message, concluding with the news that each fort was responsible for notifying the citizens of the “vision” and informing them that the herbs to assist with their painless passing would be arriving soon. All individuals deemed necessary to die would do so within seven days.

Not a single man in the office said a word. There was nothing they could say.

“Gentlemen,” Twigg said quietly as he held up a second piece of paper, “there is a petition process where those over fifty who believe they should be exempt from sacrificing themselves may send a document to Colonel Wanes, with the testimonies of three non-relatives verifying the person's importance, as well as a form

filled out by the fort confirming the person’s worth.”

Sergeant Major Hili, sitting next to the major, suddenly began to huff. “Creet! I’m over fifty! No, no—”

“Hili!” Twigg interrupted him before he passed out. “You are *needed*. The general sent an additional note specifying that.” He slapped a small piece of paper in front of Hili.

He snatched it up, read it, and exhaled. The other men nodded a somber congratulations.

“Now,” Major Twigg continued, “as I was saying, there’s a petition process, but people have only two days to put together their appeals. According to the guide’s vision, the population of the world needs to be reduced by about one-third.”

The officers gasped.

“There’s only enough food to sustain approximately 325,000 people,” he continued in a low voice. “According to the recent count, there are about 520,000 people who survived the eruption and the pox. This sacrifice is necessary to prevent the survivors from suffering a slow, painful death by starvation. Those who sacrifice themselves now, the guide promised, will be assured of a glorious afterlife with the Creator. The guide has also sent a list of statements from The Writings,” he waved a page disinterestedly, “demonstrating that those who sacrifice in this life will be given greater possessions in the next.” His voice began to falter. “We’ll post these passages,” he said half-heartedly, “as if it’ll do any good.”

Hili looked around the room at the shocked faces before turning to Twigg. “The village won’t go for it. How does Thorne think this is going to work? Even if death is painless, it’s still death!”

Twigg sighed heavily as he held up another paper. “*This* statement, also to be posted, declares that any in opposition to the guide’s edict reveal themselves as aligned with the Refuser. The Writings speak of a spirit who rebelled against the Creator, and he and his followers were cast out. They roam the world trying to get others to rebel. Any citizens who find themselves opposing the Guide must conclude that they are under the Refuser’s influence. Those who continue to fight . . .” he paused, “will be executed by the fort.”

That finally brought shouts of anger.

“What?” cried one staff sergeant. “So if some grandfather or old aunt won’t voluntarily kill themselves, I have to put together an execution squad? No! I refuse!”

Several other men chorused their objections until Major Twigg

glared at them.

“Gentlemen!” he said sternly. “According to *this* decree, you’re demonstrating that *you* are under the influence of the Refuser, and because of your refusal to follow the guide you too should be sacrificed.”

Every man fell silent.

AND THAT’S HOW IT WORKS.

Twigg swallowed hard. “Do you realize the situation we have here, men? We *must* be the examples. We have to deliver this news and see that it’s followed. If we’re not loyal to the guide and the general, we’ll be examples of how swiftly one can lose one’s life. Don’t make me do that,” he pleaded earnestly. “This is hard for everyone, men.” His voice began to quaver. “My own parents will die. Not only is my father over fifty but he has a bad leg. I won’t even get to leave the fort to say goodbye—” He sat down heavily on the chair and began to massage his forehead.

Hili put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

The rest of the men sat in silence, tallying who they knew that would fall. There was no hope, nothing they could do.

The lieutenant tried to swallow but his throat wouldn’t move. The idea of watching an execution squad run down someone like Muggah who was always willing to give a fight . . . Would he take a life because General Thorne demanded it?

“When do we tell the village?” one man asked quietly, breaking the oppressive silence.

“Tonight,” Twigg whispered.

“Who’s going to do it?”

“I have an idea,” said another. “Let Lieutenant Thorne do it. Most of the old people think he’s Colonel Shin come back to life anyway. If anyone can soften the blow, it might be him—”

The lieutenant bit his lip in worry, trying to imagine what he could possibly say, when Twigg spoke up.

“No,” he said gruffly. “No. General Thorne was very specific that his son not be involved in any of this. He doesn’t want him at the amphitheater, he doesn’t want him distributing the herbs, and he doesn’t want him digging the mass graves. Lieutenant Thorne, you are to remain in the mansion until the 63rd Day.”

The lieutenant was surprised and relieved, but said, “I don’t understand. Not that I *want* to see this happen, but I have a duty to—”

“To obey your father!” Twigg said savagely. “As do I! We must all remember our allegiance is solely to General Thorne, and whatever he declares is our will. You have questions? Ask him yourself.” He took a deep breath and turned to the rest of the men. “In the meantime, we need to figure out the best way to present this. We need a good story. I’m open to your suggestions.”

Half an hour later the officers and sergeants quietly filed out of the office to tell the soldiers to send the word: there was a mandatory meeting in the amphitheater. Everyone would be expected to attend, no matter their condition. Except for Lieutenant Thorne, who wandered numbly back to the mansion.

Twigg held the drafted speech in his hands as he slowly, unwillingly walked down the stairs. They decided to begin with the report of just how serious the famine was, how many people were expected to die agonizing deaths from starvation if nothing was done, and how the guide, in their greatest hour of need, had received a marvelous and beautiful revelation from the Creator.

Guide Lannard had a plan . . .

Shem sat up in bed in the middle of the night, panting.

“Dear Creator,” he whispered to his bedroom. “He can’t do this!”

“Shemmy, what’s wrong?” Calla asked, sitting up next to him. She touched his face and realized he was sweating. “Shem! What’s happened?”

He caught her hand. “Not what has happened—what *will* happen. What Lemuel’s planning—he’s going to kill one-third of the world and say it was the Creator’s will.”

“How, how, how . . . can he do that?” she stammered.

“The guide he made. I’ve been pondering it for days trying to understand what Thorne would want with a guide. But now it’s been revealed to me. He’s *using* him. They don’t have enough food so the guide is calling for . . .” It was too terrible to share with her.

Calla knelt on the bed in front of him and took his face in her hands. “Tell me, Shemmy,” she said gently. “Tell me what’s going to happen. That’s part of my calling as your wife—to provide comfort to the guide, remember?”

Shem kissed her hands. She’d find out eventually anyway. “Calla,

they're going to force everyone over fifty to breathe in a lethal concoction of herbs. They need to reduce the population to match the amount of food they have. Everyone crippled or injured is to die as well. Even children, Calla. He's found a way to eliminate the remaining dump children, the ones we couldn't convince to come to Salem. This is why he wouldn't take our offer of food. He'd rather kill than accept help." His shoulders began to shake.

Calla wrapped her arms around him. "Oh, Shem," was all she could say.

They sat together in silent horror for several minutes before Shem spoke again. "He's murdering hundreds of thousands of people in the Creator's name," he whispered. "Those in the world will never believe the Creator is anything more than a cruel Being. How can we teach them now? How can they ever learn to trust Him if they believe Him to be the sacrifice-demanding monster Lemuel is making Him to be?"

Calla kissed his cheek. "Shemmy, maybe . . . maybe we're past that time."

"What do you mean?"

"Shem, maybe there'll be no more opportunities to send scouts to the world. Maybe this is another big step toward the Last Day."

"My love, have you been talking to Mahrree?"

"She's shared her, 'It's around the corner,' theory with me." Calla admitted. "But that's not why I'm saying it. The signs are all there, Shem. The land tremors, Mt. Deceit awakening, now famine—"

He sighed. "I know. I can see the signs too. And you're right, I know you are. I just . . . I just don't feel ready for it."

"Salem is fantastically ready, Guide Zenos! You and Rector Shin have done all that is humanly possible to prepare us for the Last Day. We have reserves, we have plans, we have a place of escape—everyone is ready."

Shem felt in the dark for her face and ran his hand gently through her black silky locks highlighted with silver strands. "Did I ever tell you about the time I sent Captain Karna on a wild turkey chase around Edge looking for Guardians who weren't there?"

Calla sought out his features in the dark, trying to understand the abrupt shift of topic. "Uh, I don't see how this has—"

Shem put his finger on her lips. “You see, the second Strongest Soldier Race was exceptionally grueling. Karna planned it all. He purposely made my route harder than Perrin’s just to annoy me. So, on a cold, rainy night, I staged a Guarder sighting. I’d waited for weeks until Perrin would be away inspecting a new fort so Karna would be responsible for finding the Guarders who were supposedly running through Edge. He took thirty soldiers and went through the village up and down, back and forth, following clues that, when he was finished, had him as exhausted as if he’d run his own Strongest Soldier Race. In fact, I used the same route he planned for me the first year, but in reverse.

“By dawn, he limped back into the fort wet, cold, in pain, and frustrated for not finding any Guarders. I patted him on the back like a concerned brother and told him that there were no reports of anyone injured or anything missing, so he did a good job after all. He smiled gratefully and thanked me for my encouragement. He never realized that I staged it all just to get revenge.”

“Shemmy,” Calla said delicately, “exactly what does this have to do with—”

Shem’s sigh was despondent. “Don’t you see, Calla? What kind of a man would deliberately send another man out on a cold night just for payback? What kind of a man *am* I?”

Calla hid her smirk, easy enough to do in the dark. “Shem, how do you feel about it now?”

“Terrible. Back then I laughed about it well into the next Planting Season. But now? What a horrible thing to do just because I was angry at losing.”

“Shem, how old were you then?”

He sighed again. “Almost twenty-three.”

“How old are you now?”

“Sixty-three.”

“Haven’t you improved over the past forty years?”

Shem didn’t answer.

Calla kissed him softly. “I know the answer—yes, you have. If you didn’t feel any regret right now, I’d be worried. But Shem, you’re a man of incredible conscience. I’m sure Karna on the other side knows what you did to him and I’m sure he’s forgiven you, and probably even chuckled about it. But I know what you’re really trying to say: you don’t think you’re worthy to lead our people to the Last Day.”

Shem nodded, still unable to speak.

“Shem, the Creator doesn’t make mistakes. He knows exactly who He calls. He knows your abilities better than you do. He also knows your weaknesses and what you’ve done in the past, and *still* He says you’re the right man to lead this people. I have complete faith in you. Now have a little faith in yourself. And if you can’t do that, then have faith in the Creator that He knows what He’s doing by having you as the guide.”

Shem kissed his wife. “Thank you,” he whispered. “He certainly knew what He was doing when He led me to you. How could I ever do anything without you?”

Calla smiled. “There’s no place I’d rather be than by your side, especially on the Last Day. You may be dreading it, but I have to be honest: I’m in Mahrree’s camp—I can hardly wait.”

“Well,” Shem said in resignation, “I have to be in charge only until the Deliverer comes. Then I can turn it all over to him and sit back to watch the Destruction.”

“*The Deliverer*, Shemmy?” Calla said, almost sounding amused in spite of all the horrible news he’d given her.

That confused Shem. “Yes. You know—whoever the Creator will send at the very end to save our people before the Destroyer, or destruction, or whatever occurs to wipe out our enemies? *The Deliverer*,” he repeated slowly, astonished his wife had no idea what he was talking about although he was sure she did.

“Oh, how I love you,” she said. “You’re so sweet, even after all those years in the world. And sometimes you’re so naïve.”

“Me? Naïve?! Calla, what are you talking about?”

She snuggled into him. “Waiting for *the Deliverer* . . .”

It was the banging on the front door of the mansion that woke the lieutenant early the next morning. He cringed before he forced himself to crawl out of bed. Today was going to continue yesterday’s horribleness.

Yesterday afternoon, as he trudged home to the mansion before the announcement was made in the amphitheater, he could feel a change in the air turning it colder and heavier, just as it had when the new “guide” was brought to the command tower.

At the time of the announcement, he stepped outside and sat

on the front steps looking toward the center of Edge as if he could see the amphitheater. The four soldiers posted to the front walkway of the mansion watched anxiously as well.

It wasn't long before they heard the faint wails of mourning, then screams, cries, and sobbing as people made their ways back home. Every soldier stood on guard in the village to make sure no one reacted violently, or if they were over fifty, dispatched them since they were doomed to die anyway.

The mansion was set in a large field, but even at that distance the lieutenant could feel the waves of terror flowing over to him as people realized that while they may have survived the eruption of Mt. Deceit thirteen weeks ago, and then the pox that followed, they couldn't survive the decrees of the Creator.

Feeling nauseated, the lieutenant held his head as he listened to the distant cries and soldier shouts, until the door opened behind him.

“Get in here, Lek,” Professor Slither said in an unexpectedly tender tone. “You shouldn't be out here. It's not safe.”

The lieutenant didn't move.

“*Son*,” Slither said, adopting the general's annoying habit of assuming the lieutenant was somehow his, “this is the kind of news that turns decent people into murderers. What do they have to lose? They're dead in less than a week anyway, so they might as well go out having made an impression. And although you aren't responsible, you're the closest target they have to vent their frustration toward the general.”

The lieutenant still didn't move.

“*Please, Lek!*” the old professor implored. “If not for your sake, then for mine. Get inside!”

The lieutenant, surprised at the professor's nervousness, reluctantly stood up. He was taken aback by the worry creasing Slither's plump face.

“Thank you,” he whispered as the lieutenant went inside. “And get your sword back on. Preserving you is the most important thing we can do right now. Preserving *me* would also be a good idea.”

The lieutenant sat in a chair by the gathering room windows most of that night, watching. Extra soldiers were posted, and on several occasions angry citizens came running to the mansion, stopping only when they saw that the guards didn't care who died or when. No one lost their lives at the mansion, but wailing and shouts signaled that others in Edge did. Many first year soldiers got to initiate their swords

that night.

He wondered if there'd be anyone left to take the herbs later in the week, and when he went to bed he could hardly sleep.

So when the pounding on the front door came, he wasn't surprised. He trotted down the stairs, still in his uniform which he hadn't changed out of, to see a small elderly man standing at the door, holding his hat in his hands.

"I promise," the director said in a calm voice to the two soldiers blocking the door, their swords unsheathed, "I mean no harm or mischief. I just have a message for the lieutenant about his safety. Please, your guards around the house believed me, why can't you?"

"I'll speak to him," the lieutenant said. "Let him in."

The director shook his head. "No, thank you. I'll speak to you here on your doorstep. I'll take only a minute."

"All right," the lieutenant said, slightly nervous as to what this was all about. "What did you want to tell me?"

The old man took a bracing breath, but his voice was strong as he said, "I told you once, *Shin*, that if you wanted to discuss the forces of nature, I was your man. Last night I changed my mind. I don't want anything more to do with this world. My wife died five years ago, my son and his family were in Rivers—" he paused to collect himself, because no survivors had been found there, "so there's nothing left for me. There's only one man I'd want to debate with now, and I suppose I'll have my opportunity to do so at the end of this week." He cleared his throat and looked the lieutenant in the eyes. "The way I see it, you have two legacies, Young Perrin Shin—"

The lieutenant swallowed hard at the name he hadn't heard in a very long time.

"—and it's vital to your survival that you decide which to follow. Don't believe for one moment that old people like me will fade away without a fight. There are many who have no faith in this *guide*," he said derisively. "The rest of the world may believe in him, but there are too many of us in Edge who know all about the senselessness of Lannard. His teacher almost reached him on a few occasions, but the pulls of everyone else were just too strong.

"If the colonel were still alive today and in my position, he'd

be strapping on his sword and marching over here to further reduce the number of mouths needing food. I’m here to warn you, I know of a dozen men who served under him who are planning to do just that!”

But then the man’s face softened. “No, he wouldn’t,” he sighed in defeat. “No, Colonel Shin would be sending a group of men out to Terry’s ruins in search of edible seeds and plants. As if anyone remembers Terry,” he added in an annoyed murmur. “The blast of the volcano didn’t reach that far west, I’m sure of it. If ever there was a poisoned land, it’s *this* one! That’s probably why every other civilization that lived in this world established their villages to the west, not *here*,” he said in exasperation. He took another deep breath to calm himself.

The lieutenant watched him, fascinated and thoughtful.

“The colonel would try using a trick the beggars do—scavenging sawdust to use as flour in bread. He’d have every citizen who lives along the sea search for surviving fish, and he’d task some creative cooks to find ways to bake up or preserve everything they could harvest, including the kelp that washes ashore.”

“Sir,” the lieutenant exclaimed with first optimism he’d felt in days, “those are excellent ideas! Have you sent a message to the general about them?”

The director scoffed. “Several. He doesn’t care. He has his own plans,” he said heavily, “and won’t listen to any others. But the colonel would have, Lieutenant. He would have taken everyone’s ideas and would’ve worked a way through this crisis. He’d find a way to feed all of us and he’d go to any lengths to do so. He’d give up his life to preserve *us* instead of taking ours to preserve *him*.”

The small man straightened up. “In less than a week the world will be a very different place. You could still be a force for good in it, but only if you decide which legacy you’ll follow. Personally, I’d rather be a dead reminder of Perrin Shin than a living remnant of Lemuel Thorne.

“Now,” he said glancing to the soldiers who still stood on either side of the doorway, fidgeting in fury, “in the past, talk like that would get me executed, but I’ll be dead in a few days anyway, so what does that matter?”

He put on his hat, nodded to the lieutenant, and said, “When I see my old friend the colonel again, I’ll be sure to tell him about you. Maybe there’s some truth to the stories of the dead officers and maybe he can still reach you. Goodbye, Lieutenant Thorne. And good luck

in the new world.”

Dumbfounded, the lieutenant wondered how much the director knew as he plodded down the stairs.

The soldiers looked at him in expectation. “Sir,” one of them finally said, “should we bring him back?”

“Why?”

“Didn’t you hear what he said about the guide and general?”

“He’s right,” the lieutenant said, almost wanting to smile. When he saw the shock on the guards’ faces, he quickly amended, “I mean, he’ll be dead in a week anyway. Let him die believing he said his piece.”

The second guard sighed. “I always hated Hegek. I’d love to rid the world of him right now. Major Kroop does a great impersonation of him. Usually gets on his knees so he’s smaller—”

The lieutenant heard nothing more as he watched the small man make his way between two more leering guards on his way out of the mansion grounds. The lieutenant couldn’t help but feel he was watching the last of what was connected to his grandparents in Edge walk away.

But . . .

Terry’s land, untouched. Maybe Hegek didn’t think anyone remembered it, but the lieutenant had been there, twice. Of course the ash hadn’t hit there! There was likely plenty of vegetation remaining and even animals. Byson were delicious but no one in the world knew that. Yet.

It wasn’t time—the lieutenant knew that. Snow would be falling soon, and that’d make exploration impossible.

But . . .

By Planting Season? Oh, the world will be desperate for Terry’s land! Mr. Hegek was right. There was a new world coming, a new regime. One that the lieutenant fully intended to have as his legacy.

Even Director Hegek would be proud.

Priscill wrung her hands anxiously, waiting behind her shack of a house. Finally she saw someone come down the alley.

“Anoki!” she whispered loudly and rushed over to him. She caught him in a hug and tried to kiss him, but he pushed her away.

“No time for that! What’s so urgent?”

“I want to go home,” she whimpered.

Anoki looked around. “You *are* home.”

“No, I want to go back to my mother and sisters in Salem.”

“*Shh!*” he clamped his hand over her mouth. “Why?”

Priscill began to cry. “Because . . . because I’m so lonely! These girls are . . .” She shrugged since she couldn’t think of the words. “And I hardly ever see you and . . . I went to see my father before he left,” she admitted in a whisper.

“You WHAT?!” Anoki barely kept his voice quiet.

Priscill winced. “I went to see my father?” she repeated. “But he didn’t even want to talk me. He thought I was there to take something.” The tears came faster. “He didn’t even care! He didn’t—”

Anoki gripped her by the shoulders. “You didn’t tell him about Salem, did you?”

Priscill shook her head. “I couldn’t. I was just so surprised—he was so mean to me! He just . . .” Sobs took over her words.

Anoki rolled his eyes. “Well, of course. What’d you expect? Did you never listen to the stories about him? Ever wonder why he didn’t send you birthday gifts?”

“I don’t know,” she whined. “I hate it here. Take me home.”

“You’re kidding, right? I’m not going back *there*. I’ve got too much to do here.”

“But . . . but,” Priscill stammered.

Anoki exhaled at her childishness. “Look, you want to go back? Then go back. You know the way. Just go through the forest, climb over the boulders, then head up the canyon. Get to that hidden fort. I’m sure it’s manned again, ever since we left.”

Priscill shriveled in fear. “But . . . that’s scary all alone. And I’m not that good on horses—”

“Horses?” Anoki interrupted. “There are no horses, Priscill. The two we left up there probably died the day after we abandoned them. You have to do it on foot. Oh, *please*—don’t give me that look. You’re healthy enough. Take a pack of food and a flask of water. You can make it in a few days.”

Priscill stared at him. “You’d let me go—*alone*?”

“Why not?”

“Because . . . because you should protect me!”

“Why? *You* wanted to follow *me*, remember?”

“But . . . you should take care of me!”

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“You know, you’re starting to sound as selfish as your sister.”

Priscill pouted. “Well maybe she was right.”

“Then go find her!” Anoki said, pushing her away. “I’ve had it with Thorne women. No wonder the general wants nothing to do with any of you.”

He marched away without another word.

Priscill crumpled into the weeds in despair.

Chapter 25--“Why wait for the inevitable doom?”

That week was one of the strangest the lieutenant had ever witnessed, the parts he was allowed to witness.

The afternoon of the 56th day, many older people came to the mansion after hearing about Director Hegek’s morning visit, hoping to spend a few minutes pleading with the lieutenant.

“I knew the colonel . . .”

“I sold his mother Jaytsy a baby gown intended for him . . .”

“I used to be their neighbor . . .”

“Mahrree was my teacher . . .”

“My daughter used to have a crush on his uncle Peto . . .”

But Slither wouldn’t let any of them in. He was furious with the lieutenant for talking to Mr. Hegek.

“What if he’d been armed?!” he shouted at the lieutenant. “He could have had a long knife on him. You could be dead right now!”

The lieutenant knew better than to respond with, “Then we wouldn’t be having this dreary conversation now, would we?”

Instead he watched from an upstairs window as person after person was turned away, told that if they wanted to appeal they needed to follow the procedure outlined by Colonel Waness.

Slither requested updates about conditions, and at dinner time the first report came in. After the announcement the night before, twenty-six citizens were killed after becoming violent, including Guide Lannard’s brother who swore in front of Major Twigg that he’d find and kill his brother before anyone could give the herbs to his mother. In his fury he refused to listen to the major trying to tell him that the guide’s mother was exempt from the decree since she was considered “necessary.” Lannard’s brother was finally cut down after he grabbed

a long knife and charged Major Twigg. He was forty-nine years old. His fiftieth birthday was the 65th Day of Harvest. He'd been spared by two days, but that didn't matter.

The tone in the village was considerably more somber by morning. The citizens realized there was no other choice than to accept the decree.

That afternoon a carriage carrying four men, dressed in blue silks with red cloaks reminiscent of Guide Lannard's, arrived to announce they were rectors returned to the world to provide spiritual healing in this time of need. Every village, depending upon their population, received a carriage or two of Holy Men to prepare them for the Holy Day.

For the first time in years, people remembered that "holiday" meant "Holy Day." Now it would be again as thousands of older and disabled citizens would meet the Great Holy One Himself.

The rectors positioned themselves throughout Edge shouting praises to the Creator, the Guide, and General Thorne. They quoted passages from The Writings about the great love of the Creator, His desire for them to be reunited with Him forever, and His promises of great rewards when they joined Him.

It was the mention of those rewards that caught the villagers' attention. By dinner time, each rector had offers from families to join them for their meager meal so they could hear more about what kind of deal they might get in dying.

From the front stairs of the mansion, the lieutenant could hear faintly one of the rectors as he called out quotations that, according to the lieutenant's faded memory, seemed accurate *enough*. What he shouted *was* true but the context was off.

He met the rector later that night when he came to the mansion to assure him that General Thorne was concerned about his safety. The lieutenant recognized the rector—one of the most popular actors in the northern world. He nearly applauded that selection: assigning the greatest performers to where there may be the greatest outcries. At least actors found work in the new world.

The rector was everything opposite from what the lieutenant knew a rector to be. The fancy clothing, the dramatic arm waving, the casting of his eyes skyward as if in communication with something other than the ceiling, the fluttering of his eyelids to hold

back the joyful tears which the lieutenant saw no evidence of, and a face caked in paints. The closer he was, the more hideous he appeared.

Then there was the strange manner of his speaking, ranging from low and commanding to high and weepy as he related his ‘calling’ to be a rector. All of it smacked of a hastily written skit by a romantic spinster.

By the time the rector left, the lieutenant was nauseated, Slither was complimentary, and the guards listening by the front door were moved to tears.

The lieutenant realized the soldiers’ responses were probably like everyone else’s: so desperate to grasp anything hopeful about the dire situation around them that they latched on to the ridiculous rectors.

It proved his theory again: the right man saying the right things could get anyone to follow him, even to death. No experience or qualifications necessary—just charisma.

That first day after the announcement, the fort was filled with people begging to appeal their deaths. But by the next day, incredibly no one wanted to appeal anymore. The villagers who had listened to the rectors extol the heroics of those who’d be willing to leave this miserable, bleak world had changed their minds. It was probably because they said even the roads in Paradise were paved with gold.

Soon the allure of dying a glorious death was more infectious than the pox. And it was guaranteed to be glorious, because the entire village would congregate around the mass grave being dug so that those taking the herbs could do so while musicians—younger ones who wouldn’t be dying—played a heroic march, and the rest of the crowd applauded and cheered the bodies falling into the pit.

By the afternoon on the 57th Day, the messenger sent to Idumea with the appeals for Colonel Wanes had only five requests.

By the evening of the 58th Day, when a master sergeant from the fort came to update Slither and the lieutenant about the day’s happenings, he brought with him even stranger news: now there were people petitioning to be allowed to die with their loved ones so that they could at the same time inherit their solid gold mansions with solid gold carriages to ride along the solid gold roads of Paradise. What was the point of living when dying was obviously better?

At the news, the lieutenant stared, stunned, at the master sergeant.

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But Professor Slither chuckled. “How many people are choosing to die?”

The sergeant shrugged. “No exact numbers yet because there may be more in the next three days, but so far we’ve received requests from nearly four hundred people.”

“Who . . . who,” the lieutenant stammered, “who exactly are we talking about?”

“All kinds,” the sergeant said. “A few younger adults with small children who worry about them having to grow up in this miserable sphere—”

The lieutenant recognized that phrase from the rector. Never in The Writings had he ever heard of the world being described as a ‘miserable sphere.’ It had its problems, yes, because it was *supposed* to have problems to test those who came to it. But the world was always described by the guides as beautiful, amazing, a wonderful creation for the Creator’s children . . .

“—some of the last grassena boys and girls who can’t adapt to a world without vials,” the sergeant continued, “a lot of single people who currently have no love interests . . . All kinds of people, really. Why wait for the inevitable doom?” he said, sounding almost convinced that death wasn’t a bad idea. “It’s not as if things will ever get better—”

“Nothing is inevitable!” the lieutenant cried. “We can endure this season and the next, then by Planting next year we can begin again with crops and herds and—”

The sergeant’s scoff stopped the lieutenant. “*Endure?* Who wants to endure? There’s nothing in that word that’s appealing in *any* way. Honestly, I’ve been thinking about sacrificing myself as well. Do you realize how much work there’s going to be to reclaim the world? They want to build roads over the Hill to connect the eastern and the western villages, but no one’s volunteering to do it. No one wants to work that hard, and why should they? It’s not like Sands can give us anything. So why should we care about their side of the world? And then the plantings? Tilling the land is back-breaking work. No one wants to do it and I don’t blame them. Why endure this existence when I can be living in a solid gold mansion at the end of the week?”

The lieutenant rubbed his forehead in frustration. “Who says

there’s going to be solid gold mansions in Paradise? That’s illogical. And why would anyone even *want* a solid gold mansion? Gold is too soft and malleable—it makes no sense!”

The sergeant glared at him. “Do you *doubt* the rectors, Lieutenant Thorne? Their prophecies? I, for one, would find ways to be happy with a solid gold mansion. Think of how valuable it’d be!”

The lieutenant couldn’t help himself. “Valuable? What, you’re going to *sell* it? To whom? If they pave the roads with gold, doesn’t that give you an idea of how *unimportant* gold might be? Do you have any idea what Paradise is about—”

Professor Slither clearing his throat stopped the lieutenant.

He grimaced, knowing he’d gone too far again. He had to stop that or he’d never achieve anything.

“I’m sorry,” the lieutenant said. “I’m just surprised at the villagers’ willingness to do this. I don’t doubt the rectors’ sincerity—,” he congratulated himself on his convincing delivery of that line, “—and I’ll do better to be more understanding of the situation.”

Slither nodded in satisfaction.

The next day, the 59th, the lieutenant stood at the front door anxiously waiting for the day’s report, wondering if, by the end of the week, there’d even be anyone left to help him unite the world again.

Another lieutenant came by that evening to describe how the guide was allowing for anyone choosing to die to do so. After all, Paradise was far larger and wealthier than the world, and there was plenty of room there. The village was humming with excitement and plans about what they’d do in Paradise.

The lieutenant later tried to calculate what the population of Edge might be by the end of the week, but dropped his quill in frustration when he realized the number was leaning toward less than half its original six thousand, two hundred.

By the next day a new development was taking place. Those who would remain alive were now staking claims to houses that would be abandoned by those who would die. Not everyone was convinced Paradise would be better, especially when so much property in Edge would suddenly become available.

The fort sent out soldiers again, this time to control the fights breaking out over who would get what house. Owners trying to write contracts deeding over their homes to their friends were stopped by

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those insisting that once they were dead, so were their wishes.

The lieutenant wondered if the villagers who remained were more ambitious, aggressive, and scheming than those willing to die. Or maybe they were too cynical to believe the promises of waiting wealth in Paradise. Otherwise, they'd be killing themselves now to stake claim to the best solid gold mansions.

The lieutenant decided that whatever he was planning to do in the future would have to appeal to the most acquisitive personalities still alive. There *was* plenty in Salem to covet . . .

When the sixth day came around, the 61st of Harvest and last full day of life for many in Edge, a surprisingly early and heavy snowfall put a solemn hush over the village.

But it didn't last. That evening was to be a great gathering with everyone in Edge—the lieutenant and Professor Slither excepted, of course—coming to the amphitheater for an evening of praises, music, and a last motivational speech to firm the resolve of all those willing to die in the morning.

The lieutenant heard part of the speech that afternoon, because the rector who visited them a few nights before spent an hour locked in the study with Professor Slither going over his delivery.

The lieutenant sat outside the door listening to the different inflections the actor tried, changing his cadence and volume according to Slither's suggestions. The lieutenant wondered just how much Professor Slither had influenced all of this. He was, after all, the one with a copy of *The Writings*. And from the promptings that he could hear through the door, Slither also authored the speech.

The lieutenant was struck with the thought—and he knew where it came from—that he'd never heard Rector Shin practicing his sermons. He'd spend hours each week reading and meditating then composing his messages, calling on members of the congregation each week to share their experiences and beliefs with the congregation, but he never "performed." Rector Shin didn't have the commanding presence of Colonel Shin, nor the boldness of Mahrree Shin; he was just a regular man with a quick wit which he revealed only occasionally.

But he'd heard Rector Shin say that as long as he prepared the

correct message, the spirit of his words would reach the hearts of his hearers. No amount of posturing or gesturing could carry the power of his words more effectively than the Creator.

The lieutenant listened with a scowl at the phrases that reached him through the door, the words turned into labored rhymes producing an almost hypnotic rhythm when the ‘rector’ paced their delivery just right.

“Your sacrifices are as great and heroic in scope,
As the first Guide’s was to give us all hope.
As he died to fight the dark that grew,
You too will die to give us hope anew!
Your names will be praised longer than his!
Your deeds will be hailed as greater than his!
Your memories will linger longer than his!
We praise you! We honor you! We adore you!”

NEVER MIND, said the voice in his mind, THAT NONE OF THESE PEOPLE REMEMBER THE SACRIFICE OF THE FIRST GREAT GUIDE HIERUM, THE FIRST SON OF THE CREATOR TO DIE ONLY SIX YEARS AFTER THE CREATOR PLACED THEM HERE. IT TOOK ONLY THREE YEARS FOR THE WORLD TO BECOME CORRUPTED ENOUGH TO WILLINGLY DESTROY THE CREATOR’S CHOSEN.

The lieutenant smiled faintly at the voice. Today it was a most welcomed visitor, an opposing opinion he needed to hear.

“You’ll shed this body which hampers and shackles you,
which torments and plagues and troubles you.
Your spirits will live unchained and free,
as they were always meant to be!”

UNTIL THEY ARE AGAIN REUNITED WITH THEIR PERFECTED BODIES. BODIES WHICH, IF THEY DIDN’T SKIP THOSE LINES IN THE WRITINGS, THEY WOULD REMEMBER WERE AN EAGERLY AWAITED GIFT FROM THE CREATOR TO HIS CHILDREN. BUT, YOU KNOW, WHATEVER.

“You will receive mansions on high, encased in gold!
Jewels, treasures, silks, and wealth untold!”

EXACTLY HOW DOES AN INTANGIBLE SPIRIT WEAR JEWELS AND SILKS?

The lieutenant smirked.

So . . . are all of you *naked* over there? he thought.

He heard a cosmic chuckle. *AH, SO YOU ARE LISTENING TODAY.*

So . . . what *ARE* you wearing? he thought back.

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I PROMISE YOU, IT'S NOT SILK AND I'M NOT NAKED.

The lieutenant smiled and thought, Can you believe what's going on, Colonel?

UNFORTUNATELY, I CAN. AND FOR ONCE I AGREE WITH LEMUEL—I'M GLAD YOU'RE NOT PART OF ANY OF THIS. THIS IS WHY I DIDN'T WANT YOU IN IDUMEA.

I understand.

YOU UNDERSTAND SOME THINGS, BUT NOT EVERYTHING.

Like what?

YOU UNDERSTAND THE DEPRAVITY OF WHAT LEMUEL'S DOING, AND I THINK YOU ALSO REALIZE WHY.

He's culling the herd, isn't he?

EXACTLY. SMALLER, YOUNGER HERDS ARE EASIER TO MANAGE THAN LARGER, MORE MATURE ONES. YOU CAN CONTROL THEIR MOVEMENTS, THEIR GRAZING, EVEN THEIR BREEDING. BUT AS DETESTABLE AS HIS PLAN IS, YOURS, LIEUTENANT, IS ALSO FLAWED. WHAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND IS THAT YOUR PLAN TO UNITE THE WORLD AND SALEM IS NOT THE CREATOR'S WILL.

The lieutenant closed his eyes in frustration. Why not, Colonel? Why can't it be?

WHY DO YOU WANT TO DO THIS?

Because it should be done!

ACCORDING TO WHO?

The lieutenant couldn't think of an answer that the colonel wouldn't challenge.

ACCORDING TO YOU, RIGHT? LIEUTENANT, THERE'S NO NEED FOR IT. THERE'S NO REASON EXCEPT THAT YOU WANT GLORY AND FAME. YOU WANT YOUR NAME KNOWN FOREVER.

The lieutenant sighed. What's wrong with that?

IT'S NOT THE GREATEST LIFE, SOLDIER. EVERYONE KNEW MY NAME AND AT TIMES I FELT I NEVER HAD A PRIVATE MOMENT. NOT EVEN IN SALEM. BUT WHAT'S REALLY WRONG WITH IT IS THIS: IT'S NOT THE CREATOR'S WILL FOR YOU.

The lieutenant grumbled. Don't I get to exercise my own will?

YES, YOU DO. AND YOU ALSO GET TO EXPERIENCE ALL THE CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR WILL, TOO. ALL THE GLORY, ALL THE SHAME, ALL THE PLEASURES, ALL THE PAIN. HMM. THAT WASN'T AS GOOD A RHYME AS THE RECTOR'S SPEECH, IS IT? SUPPOSE I SHOULD WORK ON THAT.

Please don't rhyme. Not really necessary. Trust me.

SAME WITH UNITING THE WORLD. NOT REALLY NECESSARY. TRUST ME. IN FACT, THERE'S NO WAY IT CAN SUCCEED. THE WORLD AND SALEM ARE FAR TOO DIFFERENT. IT TOOK YOUR GRANDMOTHER AND ME YEARS TO ADJUST TO SALEM, AND WE CAME WILLINGLY. EVEN AFTER TWENTY-FIVE YEARS WE STILL STRUGGLED TO MAKE OUR HEARTS PURE. SOMEONE PUT TWO PINECONES IN MY HAND DURING A MARKING TRIP, AND I JUST COULDN'T HELP MYSELF. ESPECIALLY WHEN A YOUNG MAN ACROSS THE FIRE WOULDN'T BE QUIET, NO MATTER HOW LATE AT NIGHT IT WAS.

The lieutenant's smirk returned. I *knew* that was you who hit me on the head, General! he thought, remembering their last marking trip and the evening when Puggah was stabbed by the stick that would eventually take his life. The lieutenant had been telling his cousins and brothers a story, and out of the darkness he was rudely conked on the head by two sharp pinecones.

I knew it was you, he thought, but I didn't have any evidence!

His smirk faded as the voice continued.

YOU CAN'T TAKE THE WORLD IN ITS PRESENT STATE OF MIND AND FORCE IT TO LIVE LIKE SALEM. EVEN THOUGH IT'S A FAR BETTER WAY, THE PEOPLE OF THE WORLD SIMPLY AREN'T READY—OR WILLING—TO LIVE IT. NOR WOULD SALEMITES BE EAGER TO EMBRACE THE COMPETITIVE AND MATERIALISTIC WAYS OF THE WORLD. IT WOULD DESTROY ALL THAT SALEM IS. BRINGING THE TWO TOGETHER WOULD BE LIKE FORCING YOU AND CEPHAS TO SHARE THE SAME BEDROOM. BLOODSHED AND DESTRUCTION WOULD INEVITABLY FOLLOW.

The lieutenant snorted softly. But Colonel, he thought, somehow it *could* work. It *has* to work.

WHY? HOW?

I'll force it! Just like you and Muggah forced me to see reason so many times, I can force the world to see reason as well—

WE FORCED YOU TO SEE REASON?

Yes!

OBVIOUSLY IT DIDN'T WORK, DID IT? YOU LEFT US AND NOW YOU'RE THE SON OF LEMUEL THORNE. IT SEEMS THAT FORCING SOMEONE TO ACCEPT YOUR POSITION ONLY FORCES THEM TO FIND NEW WAYS AROUND IT.

The lieutenant stared at a small crack in the wall that he never noticed before.



The next morning, the 62nd Day of Harvest, was the first observed Holy Day in years, requiring the few shops still functioning to close for the day. Everyone gathered to the southwest of Edge along the former banks of the river.

The lieutenant heard about what happened later from Major Twigg, since he and Professor Slither were to remain at the mansion under heavy guard in case anyone changed their minds.

A massive pit had been dug, using the dry river banks as a beginning. Major Twigg reported that the citizens of Edge came early, orderly, and almost with an air of celebration. Those preparing to die were dressed in the most lavish clothing they had. If a stranger, not knowing the nature of the day, had wandered into the village, he may have interpreted the proceedings as a fashion show primarily for older citizens.

The four rectors assigned to Edge stood at regular intervals in front of the pit, holding boxes made of wood. Each rector had a thick handkerchief of red silk wrapped around his nose and mouth to avoid accidentally breathing in the herbs. Five soldiers, with their noses and mouths also covered, accompanied each rector to provide ‘assistance,’ should any be required. The rest of the soldiers stood on guard, maintaining a wide ring around the riverbed grave and gathered villagers.

Only a handful of the more than three thousand people dying that day needed encouragement. At the appointed time, with the remaining musicians playing a well-known dance tune slowed down to sound more majestic, those to sacrifice themselves began to line up behind the four rectors.

The first in each line were four elderly women who seemed to be trying to outdo each other in their dress and face paint. Or perhaps they were hoping to impress the Creator with their wealth and beauty.

When it came time to open the wooden boxes which held the herb bundles, one of the rectors called out in a muffled but grand voice, “Who wishes to be first to greet the Creator?”

That was when Major Twigg paused in his narrative. He said that recently he’d seen two squirrels fighting in an alley and was

surprised by their ferocity, with screeching and fur flying and gravel kicked into the air. He said what happened next between those elderly women was more bizarre than that.

One of the women grabbed the box to open it, but her neighbor, first in another line, saw the movement and rushed over to stop her. Apparently she'd been intending to be the first to Paradise. Twigg had thought the soldiers would be needed to assist those who changed their minds, but instead the soldiers tried to pry the clawing and spitting women apart.

In the meantime, the two remaining women tried to pry the boxes away from their rectors so they could be first while the other two fought.

One of the rectors finally opened his box, grabbed a bundle, and shoved it in the woman's nose just to get her to stop. With great pleasure on her face, she sighed and fell face first into the rocky pit.

That brought an immediate end to the fighting.

Everyone froze in place and gasped to realize how swift her end was. The only sound was the rustling from her fluffy dress as her body tumbled to the bottom.

Twigg said he worried what might occur next. The entire village stared in amazement as if finally realizing that thousands of people would be dying—*were dying*—right then, right in front of them. He was right to be worried.

The old woman who first started the ruckus put her hands on her hips and shouted, “That SOW! That's just like her to have to be *first!* Gimme that!”

She grabbed the box out of the nearest rector's hands, pried the lid off with shocking strength, and inhaled deeply. Twigg wasn't sure which hit the ground first, the woman or the box. The other two women quickly followed behind, the soldiers nudging their fallen bodies with their boots to send them rolling down the pit.

It was chaos after that for the first few minutes. The rectors could barely hand the herbs out fast enough to get through the initial wave of eager dyers, each probably trying to be next in line to meet the Creator.

After a few minutes a tall, stout man stood at the edge of the pit, held his hands out with a flourish waiting until he had everyone's attention, then cleared his throat as he took the herbs in hand.

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“I stand here now as a mere mortal,” he began in a dramatic tone. “In moments I will be at Paradise’s Portal.” Then with majestic motions, he took the herbs, inhaled, and fell gracefully into the pit on top of other bodies.

Major Twigg paused again in his retelling, his face troubled. After that man’s attention-getting exit—which everyone cheered and applauded, but of course he never knew it because he was already dead—everyone else felt they had to do something memorable. Some sang a few lines of a song while others tried to create their own little poems while standing at the brink of death, causing those behind them to become impatient and hasten their passing so they could have their five seconds of memorable dying. One man even tried to leap into the pit while inhaling the herbs, as if ‘flying’ to Paradise. Twigg wouldn’t go into detail, but by the disturbed look on his face the final affect wasn’t quite what the man was probably hoping for when he hit the bottom of the rocky pit. But he *did* get the job done.

Twigg’s chin trembled when he talked about the families that decided to die together. Most young children willingly accompanied their parents, seemingly not sure what was going to happen, but a few became terrified when they saw the bodies piling up and they didn’t want to do it.

Twigg sat quietly for several moments, struggling to finish the descriptions of their ends forced by their parents who followed after. But his tone grew tight as he said, “Then there were the parents who brought their children, gave them a kiss, gave them the herbs, watched their bodies tumble away, then left. Those children weren’t ill or deformed or anything. Probably about fifty of them were dumped by their mothers or fathers who then walked away without another care. There are very few children left in Edge now.” He sat ponderously, as if trying to figure out if that was a good or bad thing.

Not coming to a conclusion, he went on to describe how a grassena boy and girl were passionately kissing as they breathed in the herbs together. Since they wore next to nothing in spite of the frigid weather, it was apparent they’d been planning to do a bit *more* together as they died, but the rectors were growing impatient.

Mr. Hegek, the lieutenant’s visitor, was one of the last men to stand in line. He wore only a simple work shirt and trousers, no face paint, made no performance, and said nothing to capture anyone’s attention. But Major Twigg did hear him mumble sadly as he took the herbs.

“Please forgive me,” he said to no one in particular. “I see no other alternative. You know I’ve tried for days to find one. This isn’t my choice.” He looked to the forest and whispered, “Colonel, please be waiting for me.” Then he sighed, inhaled, and fell into the pit like the 3,186 people had before him.

“They’re still covering it,” Major Twigg said in a low voice to the professor and lieutenant. “The soldiers should have the last of the bodies buried by nightfall. The dirt pile is freezing and making it difficult to move, but topping the pit with rock should help.”

Professor Slither nodded and said in an equally subdued tone, “Sounds like you did an excellent job today, Major. Very few problems, no disturbances at the mansion, the village has been peaceful for the last few hours—your duty well done, sir.”

Major Twigg shrugged as he stood up to leave. “I don’t remember mass executions being part of my job description.”

He paused before he walked to the front door.

“Professor, you said you’d remember what class you’d failed me in. I’ll save you bother. It was Structure and Duty in the Army—the most boring course you ever taught. On days like this, I wished I’d never retaken the test to pass it.” He put on his cap. “If you’ll excuse me, Professor, Lieutenant—I’m done for a while.”

The 62nd Day of Harvest had been a long Holy Day. Holy Days were to be days of rest, but they rarely were for the guide whose obligations tripled. By evening, he was always ready for an early night. But not today. By afternoon, he was extremely edgy as he knew he would be.

So did Calla and Mahrree. They could feel his agitation building all week, leading up to the dreadful day in the world he knew from the Creator he was powerless to stop. That was why Mahrree suggested that Lori, Sam, and their four little ones come spend Holy Day

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with them and not leave until the next morning. Guide Zenos was going to need at least two babies to rock that evening to soothe his heart.

Mahrree sat across from him in his gathering room in one rocking chair, cuddling Marey, while Shem rocked Maggee.

Calla sat on the sofa, listening to them remember names.

“Karna’s widow’s been gone for eight years,” Mahrree said to Calla who had asked. “But she would have fallen today anyway,” she ended with a whisper.

Shem stroked Maggee’s soft light hair. “Mahrree?”

“Who?” she asked, cringing in worry.

“Mr. Hegek.”

Mahrree whimpered and kissed Marey’s sleeping head.

“Didn’t Honri see his wife’s grave marker?” Calla reminded them. “She died maybe . . . five or six years ago now?”

“That’s right,” Shem said.

Mahrree smiled faintly. “Then perhaps . . . perhaps this *was* a good day for him.”

Shem kissed the small head sleeping peacefully on his chest and prayed that it was.

Colonel? Colonel Shin?

YOU WANTED ME TO BE WAITING, DIDN’T YOU, HEGEK? HERE I AM! JUST CALL ME PERRIN. EVERYONE HERE DOES.

It’s really you! For so many years—

LET ME STOP YOU RIGHT THERE. ACTUALLY, IT HASN’T BEEN. YOU SEE, YOU BELIEVE YOU KNOW EVERYTHING THAT HAS HAPPENED, BUT I’M HERE TO PROVE TO YOU THAT YOU ACTUALLY DON’T KNOW ANYTHING—

Wait. This sounds like it could turn into a debate.

ISN’T THAT WHAT YOU TOLD MY GRANDSON YOU WERE PLANNING TO DO TODAY?

This is Paradise, isn’t it?

YES, IT IS. AND YOU’RE ONE OF THE FEW WHO MADE IT HERE. WOULD YOU LIKE THE TOUR? NO SOLID GOLD MANSIONS, BUT SOMETHING MUCH BETTER. THERE ARE A FEW MORE PEOPLE WAITING FOR

YOU THAT I’M SURE YOU’LL BE HAPPY TO SEE AGAIN. JUST RIGHT OVER THERE . . . YES, THE TOUR CAN WAIT.

Shem grunted and so did the sleeping baby he rocked. When she was still again, he whispered, “Do you think . . . Poe Hili?”

Mahrree bit her lip. “Oh, Shem. I don’t know. He’d be in his early fifties now. Maybe he’s still in the army, though?”

“He’d have to be loyal to Thorne.”

“Then I don’t know,” Mahrree said miserably. “What about Sa-reen?” she asked, suppressing a smirk as Shem frowned.

Calla cleared her throat. “The first girl who kissed you, right?”

“And she kissed *me*, remember that,” Shem said. His smile lasted only a moment. “Hadn’t heard about her for quite a while. But she’d be about sixty-three or four. My age.”

They were quiet again, looking past each other thinking of names and people, until Shem said, “Who’s on your mind, Mahrree?”

“Teeria,” she confessed. “I’ve been thinking about her for days.”

“Teeria?” Calla asked.

“One of my favorite students,” Mahrree smiled faintly. “She married Milo Rigoff,” she reminded Calla. “Milo died after Karna and Fadh, killed in one of those battles with Sargon,” she said sadly. “We tried once to send a midwife scout down south for her, remember?” she said to Shem.

“Of course I do,” he said. “The Hifadhis’ cousin. She even talked to Teeria a few times, but couldn’t get close enough to make any progress. I’m sorry again about that, Mahrree.”

“I know.” She kissed her baby’s head. “It was a dangerous place and a dangerous time. We tried to rescue her, but—”

“But we get to try again in Paradise, Mahrree,” Calla reminded gently. “No one’s ever *entirely* lost, you know that. We’ll find her again, and all of them—the Hegeks, Fadhs, Karnas, Poe—just over there. Perrin will find them, and once we get over there we’ll help him. We’ll still rescue them all.”

Chapter 26--“It’s not the end, not the Last Day.”

The next morning Lieutenant Thorne left the mansion for the first time in nearly a week and walked the cold, quiet roads of Edge. The professor gave him the day off to return to the fort, and he suspected that Slither needed some time away from him as much as the young officer wanted to escape.

He was a little surprised by the condition of the roads. He expected them to be empty, but there were several people moving their belongings into the now-abandoned houses. He paid little attention to them as he strode to the burial pit at the old riverbank. He wasn’t sure what he was expecting to see, but he was a little surprised that the area was already completely filled in and piled over with rock. There wasn’t a shred of evidence that so many people had lost their lives there only the day before. There wasn’t even a marker of any kind, nor would there be.

The lieutenant stared at the pile, feeling unsatisfied.

Mahrree woke that morning with the realization that no one in the world would be holding a funeral. No one would remember the newly dead—well, except to steal their goods and houses—and no one would care that her friends from years ago were now gone.

She dressed and walked outside to the orchard. She wanted to honor them somehow, because she was an old woman who’d escaped their forced death. Her ponderings were interrupted, however, by noticing that the slush on the ground was frozen, not melting as early snows usually did. It was a bad sign and she gulped in worry.

To the end of the orchard she trudged, and looked up to the sky that hadn’t been blue for many, many weeks.

“Dear Creator,” she said out loud, “Tell them all that I remember. That I won’t forget them. That I mourn them. That I miss them—”

That was all she could choke out as the tears bubbled up in her eyes. Wasn’t much of a funeral, she knew, but it was all she could manage for thousands of people with only five minutes of planning.

And because she was suddenly overwhelmed with worldliness.

“Why did you let me come here?” she whispered to the cosmos. “I’m such a selfish woman, undeserving of all You’ve given me. You know what I’m feeling? Jealousy! Of all the un-Salem-like behaviors! Jealous of Teeria, who should be with Milo by now, and Mr. Hegek, who should be surrounded by his wife and family today, and jealous because they may have spent a moment with my husband . . .”

Her chin bobbed dangerously.

“ . . . who I now realize is not coming back.”

“Not soon, anyway,” she admitted glumly a minute later and leaned against the cattle fence.

“Oh, how stupid I was,” she told the leafless trees. “How cruelly optimistic. ‘Deceit’s awakened!’” she mimicked herself. “‘Perrin will be back in my arms in no time!’ Oh, how stupid I was. And I was *happy*,” she confessed to a walnut tree. “When everyone else was frightened and worried, I was more chipper than a chipmunk! How utterly obtuse of me.”

She stared at a gray leaf rolling gently on the layer of frozen snow, pushed along by a frigid breeze.

“It’s not the end, not the Last Day,” she admitted out loud. It was the first time she’d done that, acknowledged what a cynical part of her brain already knew.

“Not going to be for quite a while. We have food for four years. Thorne and the world didn’t want it, so we can use it till it’s gone. By then we could grow more and it could be yet *another* four years, or ten years, or more, and I’ll eventually die a quiet, boring death when I’m a hundred but still be waiting—still hoping—for the Last Day. For Perrin. And I’ll look back on these days, twenty-five years previous, and consider how foolish I was to think anything glorious was going to happen at any moment—”

The snow startled her, coming down in enormous fluffy flakes. It never snowed so heavily so early in the year. Snowing season was a full six weeks early.

She looked up at the sky—light gray, predictably—and caught a few flakes on her face.

Sighing in despair, she murmured, “It’s going to take a very, very long time still, isn’t it?”

She trudged back to the house, her demeanor as bleak as the world around her.

Chilled nearly to his bone, the lieutenant left the quiet pit where nothing stirred and about which no one cared, and headed back to the fort where he was sure to discover that there was now plenty of food to feed those who remained alive in Edge, since its population was only half.

As he marched through the gates he felt as if he had been away for an entire season. Piles of snow pushed to the edges of the tall timber walls showed no signs of melting as such early snowfalls usually did. The compound seemed quieter than normal—maybe because of the bitter cold.

He walked up the stairs to the command tower and nodded a greeting to the captain at the front desk. At the command office door, he knocked lightly.

“Come in!”

The lieutenant opened the door and saluted Sergeant Major Hili who sat behind the big desk.

Hili nodded back. “Lieutenant—good to see you again. I imagine you’re glad to get out of the mansion. But then again, maybe not?”

“No, sir, I *am* glad. Professor Slither’s company is . . . Well, I probably shouldn’t say anything more.”

Hili smiled. “Well said. Or rather, *unsaid*. Time to go over the inventory in the storehouses again, as you might expect. Sit down.” He gestured to the chair across from the desk. “I’m just compiling the list of dead to compare to the list of living. We need to ration the food down to the last remaining person, just to make sure we don’t lose anything.”

“Sir,” the lieutenant said as he sat down, “are we retaining anything for planting next year?”

Hili nodded. “We’re setting aside a reserve to store in a secret location. At first I was thinking the dungeon might be the best

place, but it tends to stink, so I think instead we’ll move it to the general’s cellar. It’s already under guard.”

“Good idea, sir.” He paused. “The dungeon, exactly where is it?”

Hili pointed straight down. “Below the command tower, about fifteen feet underground.”

“How often is it used?”

Hili squinted. “Why do you want to know?”

The lieutenant shrugged. “Just . . . curious.”

“Used too often, in my opinion,” Hili sighed. “Only *special cases* go there. Otherwise they’re sent to the holding cells of the old enforcement building.”

“Is that any better?”

Hili smiled partway. “I know a little of the enforcement building. Trust me—it’s a lot better than the dungeon. At least you glimpse the sun every now and then.” He straightened the pages in front of him. “I’m going to put you in charge of this. Major Twigg and I want a new map of Edge drafted with the names of each person living in each house recorded. The fort will deliver the rations twice a week to each house, bringing only enough to feed those living there. So as you can see, we need an accurate count. I was thinking that with your face and name you might be able to—”

The lieutenant nodded eagerly. “Of course, sir. I’ll be more than happy to walk around and stretch my legs again!” More soberly he added, “And I’ll do my best to project the correct image of the fort.”

Hili folded his hands and leaned forward, his dark brown eyes searching. “And what image might that be, Lieutenant?”

“Shouldn’t Edge believe the fort is here to *help* them? That the count is occurring to make sure they receive the *maximum* amount of rations? Now more than ever they need to see the fort as its rescuer.”

Hili nodded once. “And how are you going to do that?”

The lieutenant smiled fully. “Just by . . . being Lieutenant Lek Shin Thorne, sir.”

Hili rolled his eyes before giving him a genuine smile. “All right, Lieutenant. Do your best to *charm* the village. Just don’t find yourself a girlfriend in every neighborhood.”

“Don’t worry, sir. The general won’t allow that kind of behavior at this time, nor do I have any interest right now.”

Hili sat back. “Probably best, considering . . .” He reached over and picked up some pages. “This one’s the list of known survivors. Make a copy so I can keep the original here. And this,” he held up

additional pages, “is a list of those who died. I’ll have the captain make a copy of this to send to Idumea this afternoon.” He studied the list for a moment.

“Sir,” the lieutenant said, “something wrong?”

Hili shrugged. “Not sure what to do about something. There’s one name here . . . Well, I’m not sure how he’ll respond to it.”

The lieutenant stood up and leaned to see. “Where?”

Hili pointed.

Priscill Thorne.

“Oh,” the lieutenant whispered.

“Not that I ever knew him to care about his daughters. Never mentioned them that I remember. Still, knowing your own flesh and blood decided there was nothing left worth living for?” He shook his head. “Twiggy told me they tried to talk her out of it when she gave her name. One of the rectors even told her this wasn’t meant for her, but apparently she said she had nothing left in the world and could never find her mother again. No one knows what happened to Druses or her other two daughters. Probably buried by Deceit.” Hili sighed. “Do I draw the general’s attention to the fact that one of his daughters has died?”

The lieutenant thought for a moment. “I think you should. He should know. How he responds to that news isn’t your responsibility, it’s his. And right now he’s far away, too.”

Hili scoffed lightly. “You’ve learned that principle, I see. The nature and detail of news delivered is dictated by the distance away the receiver is when he hears it. At this rate, you should graduate from Command School by Planting Season, Lieutenant.”

“That’s the plan, sir. Not much else to do.”

“Well, this will keep you occupied for a week. Enjoy a break from Slither. Take a few soldiers with you as you do your count.”

“Sir, I have an idea about that. How would you and Major Twigg feel about the soldiers and I going out unarmed?”

“Unarmed?”

The lieutenant nodded. “Just to demonstrate we’re there as a service, not as a threat. Maybe we could unbutton the top few buttons of our jackets, too, just to look less intimidating.”

Oddly, Hili’s face drained of all color. “Where’d you get such an idea?”

The lieutenant shrugged. “Just . . . came to me. We can show

the citizens we trust them so they can trust us. Sir?”

“Just came to you. Naturally.” Hili’s eyes darted around the lieutenant as if expecting to see someone standing next to him. “Just don’t tell General Thorne,” he whispered again. “Since he’s far away, I can’t imagine it’d be a problem.”

The lieutenant grinned. “Thank you, sir. I promise this will work.” He took the list of survivors’ names and bounded out of the office.

Hili sat back in his chair and shook his head. “I was only a boy then, but I well remember the soldiers going door-to-door without swords and with their top buttons unbuttoned. Worked once before, Major Shin. It should work again.”

When the lieutenant headed out after midday meal, he was stunned by the falling snow. Not just small, wet flakes that forgot they were to be rain, but massive ones like they saw only in the middle of Snowing Season.

“Wow, those are pretty!” exclaimed one of the privates he’d tasked to help him that afternoon. He’d chosen three of the most baby-faced soldiers he could find, and now he felt like they were acting no older than toddlers. The other two soldiers were sticking out their tongues to catch the snow.

“This isn’t good,” the lieutenant told them.

“Why?” one of them asked. “I don’t think we’ll be cold just because we unbuttoned our top buttons.”

“I’m not worried about the cold,” the lieutenant told them irritably. “But about the earliness of the snow . . . Oh, never mind. Probably just a fluke. We’ve got a duty to do, men.”

With their weapons at the fort and their friendliest smiles in place, they knocked on the first door.

It was by the third door that the lieutenant discovered that, “Good afternoon, we’re from the fort and we’re here to help,” was the scariest sentence he could utter. They were met with huge eyes and nervous glances until the lieutenant yelled kindly through the door which slammed in his face that he was only there to make sure they could deliver the most food possible. That usually resulted in the door re-opening.

By the end of the first road, the lieutenant knew what to say:

“Good afternoon. I’m here to make sure you get the most rations possible. May we ask a few questions about who’s living here?”

The next day his work was far easier. Not only because the snow ended, after dropping an astounding ten inches, but because word had spread about his task. Doors swung open eagerly to give the lieutenant the name of each occupant of the house.

But by that afternoon he began to see a trend. Some houses had residents with similar names, and a tally made revealed that some people apparently lived in multiple homes. They had to go back to a few in the evening to insist that each member of the family come to the door to be properly counted. No ‘ill uncles’ in the back room or ‘sick daughters in bed’ would receive rations. They uncovered thirty cases of residents ‘living’ in multiple houses.

But by the end of the week, the lieutenant and his assistants had the entire village counted and he was *almost* sure the count was accurate.

During those days he noticed something: a little kindness went a long way. At each door the lieutenant flashed his grin and the residents warmed up to his affable nature. Even those he had to revisit for a more accurate count seemed sorry for deceiving the handsome young officer.

As he strolled through Edge, people made a point of waving to him and a few young women did their best to flirt. He allowed them to think they were successful, just to give them hope. While he could feel the heaviness that lingered in Edge, it seemed to lighten when people saw the smiling officer. The reputation of the Little Lieutenant was finally turning around.

He knew he needed to continue the feelings of goodwill, so when the first dispersals of the new rations were delivered by the soldiers on the 70th of the next week, the lieutenant went along. He stopped at several houses to explain how he *sincerely* hoped it’d be enough.

The affect was amazing. Just a few pleasant words, a warm smile, and half a minute at someone’s door convinced them that he really cared. Lieutenant Thorne, whose label still read SHIN, was *there* for them. If they had any concerns, he was their man.

A few weeks later, by the end of Harvest Season, he was the most popular person in Edge. Everyone made a point of mentioning that to Major Twigg when they saw him.

Twigg was relieved to see the lieutenant was doing something useful with his face and name for the fort. He made sure General Thorne heard about it, too.

And in Idumea, at the beginning of Raining Season three weeks after the first rations were delivered by Lieutenant Lek Thorne, General Thorne read about the efforts of his son. Everyone in Edge seemed most pleased to feel his son’s concern.

The general sat back in his large chair and smiled. He may have had a few rough patches, but Lek was proving to be quite skilled in diplomacy. Slither was also complimentary, and Lek had sent a message hoping that all was well with him and the guide, and he even signed it, Your Son.

He was, Lemuel had to admit, behaving quite admirably.

So what the slag was the little manipulator up to now?

Thorne smiled at the worthy challenge growing in Edge before putting down the messages. As he did, he noticed the pages below it—the list of dead from Edge. He’d left it out to make sure that a few key names were there. He scanned the list that had sat on his desk untouched for the past few weeks and nodded in approval that a few old annoyances were now under a pile of dirt and rock.

But a notation next to one name caught his eye.

Priscill Thorne.

“Huh,” the general said. At least she wouldn’t be interrupting his dinner again.

He put the page on top of the stack needing to be filed, and picked up the next packet of messages from Flax to see if anything interesting was happening there.

Predictably, they were telling him about the unusual depths of the snow. “As if I can do anything about that,” he grumbled and glanced out the window at the white surrounding the garrison.

And the snows fell.

And fell.

For weeks.

For moons.

As if it didn’t know how to stop, which maybe it didn’t.

Chapter 27--“Could still be years . . .”

“Jaytsy?” Mahrree called as she walked into her daughter’s kitchen sometime in Snowing Season. She’d quit looking at the date weeks ago because the calendar had ceased being concerned with what the weather was doing. “Do you have your list for the storehouse? I’m leaving in just a moment.”

Jaytsy picked up a scrap from the work table where her husband was cutting out a piece of leather. “Right here, Mother. Are you working there every week now?”

Mahrree smiled as she pocketed the list underneath her thick cloak. “Might as well. Since the university has cut back to classes only twice a week because of the weather, I don’t have as much to do. And I certainly don’t want to get on Lilla’s nerves even more. The storehouse is a good diversion.”

“Mahrree,” Deck said from where he was mending a torn stirrup on a saddle, “please let me take you over there in the sleigh. It’s so cold—”

She shook her head. “Thank you again, but no. The snow shoes work well enough, so I’ll see you in six hours when you pick me and the goods up.”

“But Mahrree,” Deck sighed, “I appreciate diversions too.”

Mahrree groaned inwardly at her son-in-law’s somber face. He had very little to do right now.

Twenty-three head of cattle. That was all that was left of the nearly seven hundred he, Cambo, Lek, and Bubba herded together. When Deceit blew, the cattle stampeded into the hills. Most died within days, inhaling too much ash. They were slaughtered where they fell and their usable meat turned into jerky. Deck ate none of it.

He was quiet for weeks after that, mourning his favorite cows, strongest bulls, and most promising calves. Now he and his sons

were left with only twenty-three head, which they took turns caring for most attentively. But it was the fewest number of cattle Deck had since he was forced into becoming a farmer by his parents’ early death because of the pox back in Edge.

He was now repairing a saddle that he would later bring to the storehouse. The families were down to four horses: Clark 14, Gray-Clark 10, and two others. They’d lost another horse yesterday, its meat prepared to feed to the remaining sheep dogs on the east side of the valley. But while the Briters and Shins had four horses, they had five saddles. Salem wasn’t a place of holding on to anything unneeded. Once the saddle was in good order again, it’d be donated back to the storehouse for someone who may need it.

Deck had murmured yesterday, as he watched from a distance the butchers working to salvage the horse meat, that he suspected there’d soon be a surplus of tackle and a lack of horses. The saddle and tackle makers would need to find new work until the balance shifted again. Just like Deck had to.

Mahrree’s heart nearly broke to see her favorite son-in-law with so little to do. She walked over to him and kissed his forehead.

“Dear Deckett, I understand. That’s why I’m having you pick me up. But the walking there does me good.”

“Well, if you change your mind—” he began, then noticed his wife doing something.

Mahrree turned to Jaytsy.

She moved suddenly, as if trying to stop whatever it was she’d been doing. “Deck’s got plenty of things to repair,” Jaytsy said, a practiced tone to her voice. “But I know of *someone else* who’d be willing to give you a ride.”

“Who?” Mahrree asked, suspiciously.

“Well,” Jaytsy said, “just yesterday I ran into Sarra, Honri’s granddaughter, and she told me—”

Her mother held up her hand. “No, Jaytsy—”

“Mother, just consider,” Jaytsy pleaded.

“I already said—”

“Mother, you’re fading again!”

Deck rolled his eyes. Apparently that wasn’t the way they rehearsed this.

“I’m *what*?” Mahrree asked.

Her daughter sighed. “What I mean is, back in Weeding after Deceit awoke, you began to seem . . . you were more—”

“Normal?” her husband suggested.

“*Better*,” Jaytsy glared at him. She turned back to her mother with softer eyes. “You were laughing, joking with the children, but lately you’ve become quieter again.” Her voice became softer as well. “I miss you. Everyone misses you. I thought maybe you need . . . you might be ready to . . . to . . .” She looked over at her husband for help.

Deck opened his mouth but wasn’t sure what to add.

“Jayts, Deck,” Mahrree said gently, “I understand what you’re trying to say. I was foolish to be cheerful after the eruption. I was so sure the Last Day was just around the corner, and that—ridiculously—made me happy.”

Jaytsy squeezed her mother’s arm. “I know you thought that. But how long until the Last Day? None of us knows. The famine that will strike the world may last a long time. They might limp along for several years. The famine may even reach us. The Writings never specified a time frame.”

“Unfortunately,” Deck muttered and went back to working on the repair. “Could still be years . . .”

“It’s just that,” Jaytsy hesitated again, “considering that it *may* still be many more years, maybe you don’t want to be alone for all that time. Honri is still—”

Mahrree closed her eyes. “Ah, Jaytsy. It’s not that simple—” Jaytsy cleared her throat expectantly.

Mahrree opened her eyes and saw her daughter giving her husband a deliberate look.

Deck’s mouth formed a small o and he set down the leather. Apparently it was time to say his part. “Mahrree, I won’t pretend to know the mind of Perrin, but if something were to happen to me I wouldn’t want Jaytsy to fade away. I wouldn’t have a problem if she spent her remaining life with someone like one of Shem’s nephews. The Creator doesn’t want us to be alone or lonely.” He glanced at his wife to see if he said it right.

She smiled at him in approval, then turned to her mother. “Just think about it. You probably thought Father was on his way back home to us, didn’t you? That in just a season or two you’d be back together again?”

Mahrree clenched her teeth to keep her chin from trembling. That was exactly what she thought, but now it was the middle of an endless Snowing Season—so long that it felt like they were

experiencing the third manifestation of it—and there was no hope, no end, no Last Day in sight. There was nothing.

She turned to her son-in-law. “Deck, I’ll meet you and the sleigh in six hours.”

She walked out of the door without another word. Outside of the Briter house, she strapped on one of the several pairs of snow shoes waiting on the porch—making enough for all of Salem had given the cobblers a couple weeks’ worth of work—wrapped the cloak around her tighter and set off for the storehouse feeling taller than she ever had. Then again, when the snow’s nearly four feet deep—deeper than it’s ever been—everyone’s taller. But that didn’t elevate her spirits at all.

The sky was gray. The dingy, ash-tinted snow was a lighter gray, and every tree, bush, and uncovered rock was also white-gray.

She always thought gray was the ugliest color.

Maybe it even wasn’t really a color, Mahrree thought as she walked toward the center of Salem. Sure, she heard the debates that white was the absence of all color—no, black was the absence of all color—but to Mahrree, gray was the death of all color.

She thought of the different grays she knew. Peto’s gray eyes, which was the only shade of gray she truly loved, tinged light blue like her father’s. Her smoky gray silk dress in Idumea. It was beautiful in the candlelight but nowhere else. The gray of the stone in her house in Edge, which had tans and whites mottled through to give the gray variety. The weathered gray of the wood on her home which was even larger and warmer than her dreams remembered. Her gray hair.

And that was the end of her “Things that are gray that I don’t *completely* hate” list.

Except for her hair. Each week she vainly inspected it, looking for remnants of light brown. They must have been hiding on the back of her head where she couldn’t see them, for all she ever found was gray. Surrounding her head, surrounding her whole being. It was the ugliest Snowing Season she’d ever endured. It was bleak, dead, bland, dead, boring, and dead.

Nothing had been different for many, many weeks now. If the Last Day was coming, surely there would’ve been something else interesting happening. But no. There was snow and now frequent fog, which was also gray.

All of Salem felt the heaviness and was trying to fight it. She could see it in their eyes when they came to the storehouse, or she

spent a moment talking after the congregational meetings. The grayness was eating at everyone.

Usually Salem was alive every night in the Snowing Season, people gathering at the rectories for dances, story-telling, tasting new recipes, enjoying performances and arts . . .

But traveling to the evening activities was hampered because of the incredible snow depths. Many of the rectors considered reducing the events, but Guide Zenos asked them to keep going. If only a handful of people could come, then at least a handful of people felt joy for a few hours.

Mahrree walked past their neighbors, the snow halfway up the windows, and smiled dimly at the pale green of the house. She glanced to her right to see the three brightly painted yellow homes of the Zenoses, sitting in the gray like defiant daffodils. Many of the houses and even barns in Salem were now vibrantly hued in rebellion against the ash.

It began when the first block houses were constructed back in Harvest, just before the weather turned bitterly cold. To hide the fact that ash created the block, the new houses were painted in bright colors—red, yellow, green, blue. The bleak block suddenly was beautiful.

Shem saw the painted block houses and he recommended to the paint makers that they create massive amounts of pigment. Everyone would be wanting to paint their houses, no matter what they were made out of. The gray and dying landscape needed something to brighten it.

That Harvest Season, when they were usually bringing in crops, preparing storage, and sending families to restock the emergency shelters along the routes to the ancient temple site, Salem instead painted with gusto. Usually Harvest was one of the most beautiful times of the year, with trees throughout the valley and the mountainsides turning into vibrant reds, oranges, and yellows. But long ago the leaves had turned a predictable gray before crumbling.

So instead the houses became red, orange, and yellow. A few became purple, some even pink, and many became green since nothing else was. Other houses became the same blue the sky used to be, and one woman went so far as to paint their family's barn blue with a variety of fluffy clouds floating across it, just to remember what the sky was *supposed* to look like.

She started a trend, the first ever in Salem. Soon every barn was blue, and she was asked to paint clouds all over Salem. She taught others her methods, and additional artists took to painting life-size pine trees under the clouds. By the time the temperatures became too cold to keep the paint fluid, every neighborhood in Salem had at least one barn to remind them how their valley used to look.

Mahrree frequently looked from her bedroom window to see the blue, white, and green of the Eztat's shared barn. Before the deep snows came, she could see the splotchy flowers her grand and great-grandchildren painted along the bottom. The last tall red tulip Young Shem had created by stretching as high as he could was covered by a layer of drifting snow last week. But once the snows decided to melt, there'd be Planting Season flowers again; ones that would never fade.

Deck and Jaytsy and their children had painted their house a deep red, Relf's house looked like a pumpkin now, Cambo and his family lived in a dark green bushy house, while Bubba and Barnos both had army-blue houses.

But Peto was still holding out on painting his corner of the Eztat's. While he appreciated the cheery variety of yellows of the Zenos' homes down the lane, he wanted something a little different for his house. He wanted it to look like the peaches he didn't get to harvest that year. He'd seen a few attempts at peach on other houses, but too often they turned out pink. That color may have been fine for Mrs. Yordin and the two widows she lived with, but Rector Shin's house—and the former house of the General of Salem—just shouldn't be *pink*.

Mahrree heartily agreed. She didn't mind his holding off until someone created the perfect peach paint when the weather warmed again. While she hated gray, the gray of her wooden home was still acceptable. It was the color in her dreams, after all.

She trekked along the hard-packed snow following the paths of many before her until she came to the storehouse. She went into the side entrance, hung up her wraps, and nodded a greeting to others arriving. She put on the long apron with several deep pockets, perfect for carrying smaller items Salemites needed help finding, and went to the front counter in the welcome room to see who she could help next. Because of the sheer size of the storehouse, it was often difficult for people to remember where everything was; volunteers like Mahrree helped gather supplies, especially for young mothers already wrestling with an infant or toddler.

There was a short line of Salemites waiting in the welcome room for the next assistant, and Mahrree produced her cheeriest face which, considering her mood, was likely rather dreary.

“What can I get for you?” she asked a woman in her mid-thirties.

“Professor Shin?!” the woman exclaimed. “What are . . . what are you doing here?”

She got that a lot, people surprised to see her out and working, as if she had anything else better to do. Maybe they thought she should be sitting on a shelf looking properly widow-ish.

Mahrree usually skipped past their surprise with something like, “I see you have a list. May I help you with that?”

Fifteen minutes later she and the woman returned to the check-out counter in the welcome room with several baskets of goods, the items to be recorded in the receipts book, and Mahrree turned to see the next person in line.

And bristled.

The woman facing her this time had a much different attitude. “Well, if it isn’t *Mahrree Shin*,” Eltana Yordin sneered. “I wondered where you’ve been holed up. Figured you’d be hiding away like everyone else.”

Mahrree clenched her fist, a very un-Salem-like thing to do. “Eltana,” she said coldly.

Mahrree had seen Mrs. Yordin only sporadically since Young Pere ran away. She never went to the congregational meetings, not seeing the point of them, and certainly didn’t bother to visit the Shins. But she’d taken over the Armchair Generals gatherings quite handily, holding meetings every moon at her home to discuss strategies and to speculate on the current status of the army. Calla went once to see what General Yordin’s widow was up to and discovered that the tone of the meetings had turned to how easily the world could be taken over. After the eruption of Deceit, reports had come back to Shem that Mrs. Yordin was pulling out maps to demonstrate to the former army members, and now dozens of interested Salemites, just how vulnerable the world was.

Mahrree wondered briefly if the first battle was about to commence right there. “How may I help you?” She struggled to get those words out.

Mrs. Yordin scoffed. “A Shin helping me? Isn’t there someone else available?” She looked around haughtily. “It’s been my

experience that Shins aren't very good at completing a task, despite their inherent talent.”

The two dozen people in the room turned to Mrs. Yordin with expressions of shock.

Mahrree clamped her jaw tight. No doubt she was alluding to Young Pere and his obvious inability to do whatever she had sent him into the world to do.

“No one here will help you do what's not in the Creator's will, Eltana,” Mahrree said steadily.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, enough with that creator nonsense. I swear, you all hide behind that to shield yourselves from doing anything interesting or brave.”

Mahrree clenched her other fist. “Bravery is not blindly running into—” She stopped herself, trying to remember what she was there for. “Mrs. Yordin, I'm here to assist you. Now, what may I retrieve?”

“I'm serious,” Mrs. Yordin said, her eyes as hard as iron. “I don't want anything more to do with Shins. Your family's nothing but one disappointment after—” Mercifully, she didn't get to finish her sentence because Salemites were being very un-Salem-like and shouting.

“How dare you?!”

“Do you have any idea what they've done for us?”

“This is the general's widow, one of the most revered women in Salem—”

Mahrree knew she was turning red, not from fury but from embarrassment. Most revered woman? For forcing nearly everyone through her History of the World class when they entered the university? And then what did she do?

It was her husband they revered, who they still loved. They respected her simply because she was the closest thing attached to him. It's not as if Mahrree had ever wielded a sword or prepared a way for the Salemites to escape. And she certainly wasn't about to do anything braver than try to stare down Eltana Yordin, either. She did nothing other than help them find spoons and bootlaces.

And then there was that label: *widow*. Men were *widowers*, and for some reason that made the men seem stronger, abler, like Honri. The label widow, however, added fifteen years to whatever woman wore it. And a dozen more wrinkles.

“Please, please!” Assistant Ahno came into the area from a back records room, his wide girth barely clearing the door frame. He held up his hands and called for quiet. “What's going on here? This isn't

our way, to shout and argue! What's the problem?"

Eltana and Mahrree stood in the middle of it all, glowering at each other with so much heat the snow around the storehouse should have melted instantly.

"Nothing's wrong," Mahrree said in a harsh whisper, not shifting her gaze.

"No," Eltana said with a nasty smile. "Just a *little* matter," she looked Mahrree up and down with disdain.

The Widow Shin felt she'd just been given a stooped back.

And why was it, Mahrree's thoughts wandered enviously, did the term "widow" sit on Eltana like a whip on a warhorse?

"Nothing a couple of *women of the world* can't handle. Go back to your little office," Mrs. Yordin said with a dismissive wave. "Off with you now, you *little* man."

Assistant Ahno puffed up his ample chest, innocent of Mrs. Yordin's sarcasm. "Now, now . . . Whenever we have a conflict in Salem, we bring it to—"

Mrs. Yordin's sharp glare shifted to stop the poor man in mid-sentence. "Go on home to your little wife," she snapped. "The two of us can handle this!"

Ahno, taken aback, stammered, "My-my wife passed away a few years ago."

If that was supposed to soften Mrs. Yordin, it didn't work. She chortled mirthlessly as she said, "Well I don't blame her. I'd die to get away from such a pathetic man like you—"

"Eltana!" Mahrree cried. "Enough!" She didn't dare glance at poor Ahno to see the devastation on his face. The rest of the Salemites took an instinctive step back from the two women now eyeing each other like hungry coyotes.

"It *is* enough!" Eltana shouted back. "How long are you people going to pretend nothing's wrong in the world? They're facing certain disaster, and now's the perfect time to form an army and march down there. It's open and desperate and ready to be conquered! Lemuel's leading it all, which means he'll be at the head of the army. He's an easy target now! Yet you all sit here doing nothing for those miserable people suffering under his rule!"

"*Still*, Eltana?" Mahrree said, trying to keep her own voice calm. "After all this time, still you want revenge? It won't change anything. It won't bring back Gari or make you feel better—"

"Living here hasn't made me feel any better, either!" Eltana

interrupted. “Perrin could’ve done it but he was too cowardly. Shem could do it but he’s lost his fight. And your grandson—”

“You stop *right there*, Eltana!” Mahrree growled.

The Salemites took another step back.

But Mrs. Yordin wasn’t in the mood to stop. “He’s as useless and timid as the rest of this valley. Peaceful, gentle people are as worthless as a flock of lambs against a wolf. But they could be *so* much more! They could—”

“Eltana, SHUT UP!” Mahrree roared so loudly that Mrs. Yordin blinked in surprise.

Several of the Salemites were now with their backs up against the walls. Assistant Ahno remained stunned and motionless.

“Any quarrel you may have, you have with only me,” Mahrree hissed. “You leave these people out of it. It’s my husband you’re bitter against, my grandson you deceived with delusions of grandeur, my brother who you have no faith in. It’s bad enough you don’t even *try* to understand what we’re accomplishing here, that you take advantage of our generosity. And now you dare insult the people who have done nothing but welcome you to their homes from the day you arrived? You ungrateful, selfish cow! Now, I’m going to ask this only one more time—” she balled up both fists again, “—*what can I do to help you, Mrs. Yordin?*”

“You know,” said an unexpected voice from the door, “I think I can take care of this.”

Yudit, Shem’s oldest sister, strode in with a calculated smile, her white-gray hair swept up into a tight and disciplined bun. Being the oldest of seven children, then matriarch over a large posterity, had taught her how to say something sweetly yet with an undercurrent that suggested one best not disagree with her. “Mrs. Yordin, if you’ll follow me into the storehouse, I’ll be happy to help you find what you need.”

With a gaze so sharp it could have severed a limb, Mrs. Yordin sent one last wounding glance at Mahrree, then turned to Yudit, clearly unaware she was the oldest sister of one of her greatest enemies. “I’m sure *you* can help me. I have a list . . .”

Mahrree remained stiff and unyielding in the welcome room which hadn’t been feeling very welcoming, until Mrs. Yordin followed Yudit into the storehouse. Only once she was out of her sight did Mahrree finally exhale.

So did everyone else in the room.

“She’s something else, isn’t she?” one woman in her forties voiced everyone’s thoughts. “My goodness! I’ve heard about the hardness of women from the world, but I had no idea. Mrs. Shin, you’re *nothing* like her.”

Mahrree chuckled sadly. “Ah, but that’s the problem, Mrs. Imago; I fear that in many ways, I am.”

“Well,” Mrs. Imago said firmly, “you suppress it quite successfully, then. You’re truly a Salemite. For a moment there I thought you just might strike her, but you held back.”

Mahrree smiled wanly as the Salemites patted her shoulder and assured her of their support. She turned to Assistant Ahno, who still looked pale.

“I’m so sorry about her, Assistant,” she said quietly. “She’s had a traumatic life and seems to think the only way to make herself feel better is to make everyone feel worse. That makes no sense, I know, but—”

“It’s all right,” the assistant assured her. But still he wiped a bead of nervous sweat from off his forehead. He took Mahrree by the arm and led her over to a quiet corner. “I didn’t handle that very well, did I? She caught me completely off guard. And that was only up against one person from the world! How could I possibly—”

Mahrree cut him off. “That’s because she’s the meanest—” she hesitated to say it, but realized she’s already called Eltana the term in front of everyone, “—*cow* to ever exist in the world.”

Ahno was shocked but he nodded his agreement.

“Your lessons *are* coming along quite well,” Mahrree assured him. “It’s difficult to face someone with no respect for others or themselves. There’s a hardness and darkness in their souls that you need to learn *not* to empathize with. I realize that goes against all you’ve ever done, but if you are to learn to communicate with people of the world, and *lie to them*,” she whispered the last words, “you cannot allow yourself to be sucked into their pain and anger. You need to deflect it, like you would shoo away a mosquito, and continue on your course. Let them rail and rant; it should not, and will not, affect you.”

Ahno’s face fell. “I didn’t do any of that, Mrs. Shin. She struck me a personal blow and suddenly I froze.”

“Well, this was a good experience then,” Mahrree said

brightly. “Now we know what your weakness is so we can practice making it a strength in our lying sessions.”

Ahno sighed, dubious.

“I promise you, Assistant,” Mahrree said in a low tone, “should you ever face the world as you volunteered to, they will poke at every tender point. Let them. Ignore them. They cannot hurt you permanently. Even death is only temporary. You stay on your course and they’ll find themselves believing every word you tell them.”

“I trust you, Mrs. Shin,” Ahno said, not lying very well. “I really do. I just don’t trust myself.”

“That’s what Shem and I are training you to do, Ahno,” Mahrree said. “No one has a more innocent face than you. Believe that.”

“I’m trying to, Mrs. Shin. I just hope that if and when the time comes, I’ll be ready.”

Mahrree sighed. “It could be *years*, Assistant,” she whispered sadly as she looked out a window to the gray world that seemed to get darker. “Still years. We have plenty of time to get you ready.”

The lieutenant looked out his windows and decided gray was the ugliest color ever. Maybe it wasn’t even a color. Somehow it seemed like the death of colors.

Maybe that was because after the mass deaths, the sun didn’t shine again. The bleakness of that snowy day remained as if cursing the land that allowed so many to die.

And then it snowed, and snowed, and snowed.

Occasionally the lieutenant glanced up the canyon trying to see if the sky was clearing to the north. But all he saw was the gray-white sameness that dominated the countryside around Edge.

That morning, the something Day of Raining—*Snowing* Season, he was sure he’d get everyone to agree to call it, and it didn’t really matter the date since every single day was exactly the same—he had the usual breakfast of cooked wheat, which had the gall to be gray as well, tinged a little with brown. He swallowed it down quickly, as tasteless as the deep snow outside, and made his way over to the study. Slither wouldn’t be up until almost midday meal, but the lieutenant had his work laid out for him.

He picked up the copy of *The Writings, Revised Version*, and sneered. Everyone had a new copy, delivered weeks ago to every

house with the directive that everyone should read it as soon as possible.

Few likely did, even with the promise from the guide, *and general*, that the words would help each family get through the bleak season which seemed would never end.

Holy Day meetings were also mandatory, with citizens required to sign a ledger as they arrived in order to their get their rations for the next week. The rectors then tried to guide Edgers in understanding the new order in the world.

The lieutenant struggled to keep his face passive at the meetings which were nothing like he remembered congregational meetings. Just like the thin book before him—while the title was familiar, nothing else in it was.

THAT'S BECAUSE HE TWEAKED IT.

The lieutenant smirked and looked around the study. Sure that he was alone, he whispered, “Define *tweaked*.”

GOOD MORNING TO YOU, TOO. TWEAKED: ALTER, CHANGE, MANIPULATE. SLITHER WOULD CALL IT “FINE-TUNING” BUT THAT’S AN UNDERSTATEMENT.

He thumbed through the pages. “The little I’ve seen of this seems to read differently than I remember.”

OF COURSE. THE LANGUAGE HAS BEEN BROUGHT ‘UP-TO-DATE,’ OR SO THEY SAY. THEY THOUGHT THE WAY WE SPOKE THREE HUNDRED SIXTY YEARS AGO WAS SO DIFFERENT THAT NO ONE COULD UNDERSTAND IT NOW.

“Has our language really changed that much?”

NO, BUT IT WAS AN EXCUSE TO REVISE THE WRITINGS—WAIT, I BELIEVE THE WORD THEY USED WAS ‘CLARIFY.’

“It seems a lot smaller, too.”

EVEN BY IDUMEAN STANDARDS. WHO NEEDS ALL THE EXPLANATIONS AND NAMES AND DATES ANYWAY? ALL PEOPLE NEED ARE SNIPPETS OF IDEAS TO MAKE THEM FEEL GOOD FOR A MOMENT. BUT LIKE EATING, A MERE SNIPPET ISN’T SUSTAINING FOR MORE THAN A FEW HOURS.

The lieutenant turned a couple of pages. “Hey, they took out the section about the first horse riders! I always liked that part.”

YOU WOULD. ANYTHING RISKY, YOU’D LIKE IT.

“Looks like they took out *everything* about the first families. It only says, ‘Thus the first pairings began in the world.’ Pairings? What happened to ‘families’?”

‘PAIRINGS’ IS FAR MORE ACCOMMODATING. ‘COUPLES’ AND ‘FAMILIES’ IMPLY COMMITMENT. ‘PAIRINGS’ SOUNDS MORE LIKE A PARTNER YOU FOUND FOR PLAYING A GAME. IN A FEW HOURS OR DAYS, YOU’RE FREE TO FIND ANOTHER ‘PAIRING.’

The lieutenant let out a low whistle. “Just how much ‘updating’ did they do?”

AS MUCH AS THEY NEEDED TO CREATE THE WORLD AFTER THEIR OWN IMAGE. LEMUEL HAS HIS OWN VISION, AND SLITHER AND WANES SUPPORT IT BECAUSE THEY WANT WHATEVER CRUMBS FALL FROM HIS TABLE. LEMUEL’S ON HIS WAY TO MAKING HIS PERFECT WORLD.

“For him but no one else?”

NOW WHY SHOULD HE CARE ABOUT ANYONE ELSE?

“Never has before,” he mumbled. “So why take out the interesting parts?”

NO ONE CARES ABOUT READING ANYMORE. IF THE CHAPTERS WERE LONGER THAN A PAGE, NO ONE WOULD GET THROUGH IT. SPEND TIME THINKING, PONDERING, UNDERSTANDING? WELL, NO ONE’S BEEN DOING THAT IN YEARS. THEY JUST WANT TO HURRY THROUGH THE ASSIGNMENT SO THEY CAN GO BE ENTERTAINED. I THINK SCHOOLING TAUGHT THEM THAT.

“Likely,” the lieutenant scoffed quietly. “Were you at the last Holy Day meeting?”

WHEREVER YOU GO, I GO.

Ignoring that assurance, he said, “That was something *different*, wasn’t it? The rector spent less than two minutes explaining the idea of patience, read two short passages, then spent the rest of the half hour singing those melodies from some ridiculous play. Even Mama would have lost patience with that!” His voice caught on that last sentence.

FROM WHAT I UNDERSTAND, HE’S SUPPOSED TO TEACH FOR HALF AN HOUR EACH HOLY DAY. I DON’T THINK GUIDE LANNARD SPECIFIED WHAT HE WAS SUPPOSED TO TEACH AS LONG AS SOMETHING COMES FROM THE WRITINGS.

“The people loved it—have to admit that,” the lieutenant said. “It was the first time in weeks I saw anyone smiling. They were singing along, shouting out requests . . . I don’t think they’ll have to make attendance mandatory anymore. He’s becoming quite popular, especially after he invited that girl up and pulled a slip of silver from behind her ear. They may have to move him to the amphitheater when

everyone decides to go to his services. That's where he's used to performing anyway."

THE SINGING RECTOR. HMM. MAYBE PETO SHOULD TRY THAT.

The lieutenant smiled. "Except he'd be too preoccupied with trying to teach something useful." After a moment he asked, "Puggah, how are they? On the other side of the mountain?"

GO FIND OUT FOR YOURSELF, YOUNG PERE.

The lieutenant closed his eyes. "You know I can't do that. Not only because the snow is ridiculously deep, especially up the mountain, but—"

TEACH THESE PEOPLE HOW TO MAKE SNOWSHOES LIKE THEY HAVE IN SALEM.

The lieutenant blinked. "I forgot about those. They'd be really helpful here. Sometimes," he began and felt the need to utter the words out loud, "sometimes I feel like I've forgotten a lot of important things," he murmured. But shaking that off before the voice in his head could comment, he said, "Just tell me, Puggah, since I don't have snowshoes—how's Mama?"

I DON'T KNOW. REMEMBER, WHEREVER YOU GO, I GO.

"Come on—you've got *connections*, don't you? Send someone to find out!"

IF YOU'RE SO WORRIED ABOUT HER, SEND YOURSELF TO FIND OUT.

"I can't . . . yet. I have to fix things first, Colonel. I have to go back as a success, somehow. Otherwise all of this will seem like a waste of time."

The cosmos sighed. *THEY WON'T CARE IN WHAT CONDITION YOU RETURN. JUST RETURN. THEY DON'T CARE ABOUT WHAT YOU CONSIDER "SUCCESS." TO THEM, SUCCESS IS A CHILD IN EVERY CHAIR AT THE DINNER TABLE. YOURS IS STILL EMPTY, WAITING.*

The lieutenant rubbed his forehead. "I can't go back empty-handed, Colonel. I have to bring—"

IT'S NOT A WEDDING, YOUNG PERE! JUST BRING YOURSELF. AND YOU COULD FASHION SNOWSHOES IN A DAY—

"Maybe in time, Colonel," the lieutenant whispered. "Just give me a little more time, just to see what I can do."

LIEUTENANT, I DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH TIME YOU HAVE. THINGS AREN'T GOING AS LEMUEL WAS HOPING. HE HAS PLANS FOR YOU, AND THEY'RE STARTING TO CHANGE.

"What do you mean? What was the general hoping?"

*LEMUEL EXPECTED THE WORLD WOULD BE GROWING MORE DISAF-
FECTED WITH THE GUIDE. HE THOUGHT BY NOW THAT THE WORLD WOULD
BE READY TO DESTROY THE GUIDE AND DEMAND A NEW ONE.*

He frowned. “But that’s not happening. At least, not around here. People are depressed but they’re just *accepting* that.”

*EXACTLY. INSTEAD OF RISING UP IN ANGER, EVERYONE IS FALLING
INTO DESPAIR. THE WEATHER HAS A GREAT DEAL TO DO WITH THAT, BUT
SO DOES THE RATIONING OF FOOD AND THE REALIZATION THAT SO MANY
FRIENDS AND FAMILY WHO DIED REALLY ARE GONE. IT’S FINALLY SINKING
IN AND EVERYONE IS SINKING WITH IT.*

*LEMUEL DIDN’T ANTICIPATE THIS BECAUSE HE’S NEVER LOST ANYONE
HE CARED ABOUT. WHEN YOU DON’T CARE ABOUT ANYONE, YOU DON’T
UNDERSTAND THE WEIGHT OF GRIEF. NOW HE DOESN’T KNOW HOW TO
PROCEED.*

“Interesting. Exactly how was I to fit into his plans?”

*PEOPLE SHOULD’VE BEEN CALLING FOR GUIDE LANNARD’S EXECU-
TION BY NOW. AND, IF THEY WERE . . . WELL, HOW DOES THE NAME GUIDE
LEK STRIKE YOU?*

The lieutenant flinched.

GOOD. THAT’S WHAT I WAS HOPING.

“You can’t be serious!” he whispered, something heavy building in his belly. “Me? Turned into the guide?”

*CAN YOU THINK OF A BETTER SCENARIO FOR LEMUEL? HE’D CON-
TROL YOUR EVERY WORD. AND SINCE YOU’RE HIS SON, HOW COULD YOU
NOT BE PERFECT AND OBEY HIM? YOU’VE MADE QUITE A GOOD IMPRES-
SION ON THE CITIZENS OF EDGE AND LEMUEL’S HEARD ABOUT IT. WHEN
PLANTING SEASON ARRIVES, PEOPLE WILL BE HOPING FOR SOMEONE TO
BRING THEM HOPE. YOU STILL MAY BE LEMUEL’S FIRST PICK. HOW FOR-
TUNATE—THE CREATOR CHOOSING GENERAL THORNE’S SON TO BE THE
NEXT GUIDE! BUT FIRST HE HAS TO FIND A WAY TO ELIMINATE LANNARD.*

The lieutenant sank in his chair, dismayed. “Lannard thinks Thorne is his friend! How can he just *dispose* of people like that?”

*THAT’S A QUESTION YOU SHOULD SERIOUSLY BE CONSIDERING BE-
CAUSE YOU COULD EASILY BE NEXT, LIEUTENANT. HE DOESN’T KNOW
GRIEF BECAUSE HE DOESN’T KNOW LOVE. HE CERTAINLY DOESN’T LOVE
YOU. HE DOESN’T EVEN LIKE YOU. YOU REMIND HIM TOO MUCH OF ME.
BUT HE DESPERATELY WANTS TO USE YOU, JUST LIKE YOU’RE USING HIM.
BUT IF YOU GO TOO FAR, HE’LL DISPOSE OF YOU AND FIND SOMEONE ELSE
TO BECOME HIS SON. MAYBE LIEUTENANT KIAH. HE HAS A GREATER
CLAIM THAN YOU DO, ANYWAY.*

The Soldier in the Middle of the World

The lieutenant blinked. “What, *Kiah*? I’ve run into him a couple of times, but he’s nothing special. Just a regular young officer like me—”

ARE YOU ENTIRELY SURE ABOUT THAT?

The lieutenant rolled his eyes in aggravation. “*NOW* what?! Does it *ever* end around here? Now I need to be worried about *Kiah*? How does he have a greater claim? What do you know, old man?”

Silence.

“Well?!”

Nothing.

“Colonel!”

The cosmos didn’t reply.

“General!”

Still quiet.

The lieutenant sighed. “Puggah?”

YES, YOUNG PERE?

“What do you know?”

I KNOW IT’S TIME FOR YOU TO GIVE UP PLAYING THEIR GAMES, THAT THERE’LL ALWAYS BE ANOTHER TO TAKE YOUR PLACE.

“Tell me about *Kiah*. Please, Puggah. Tell me what to do, who to avoid.”

WHY? WILL YOU GO HOME?

“Eventually.”

NOT GOOD ENOUGH, LIEUTENANT! WILL YOU GO HOME?

He sighed. “Colonel—”

FUNNY HOW OFTEN I CHANGE RANK WITH YOU DEPENDING UPON YOUR MOOD. COLONEL. GENERAL. PUGGAH. OLD MAN. . .

“Puggah,” the lieutenant whispered, “please, just help me.”

I WILL NOT HELP YOU AGAINST THE CREATOR’S WILL, YOUNG PERE. I’VE TOLD YOU THAT BEFORE.

“So I’m on my own?”

DO YOU EVEN KNOW WHAT YOU’RE PLANNING?

“Not *entirely*. I’m still working on it. I’m just kind of waiting for inspiration, I guess.”

THE QUESTION IS THEN, YOUNG PERE, WHEN THAT INSPIRATION FINALLY COMES, WHO IS IT THAT’S INSPIRING YOU?

The lieutenant sighed, picked up *The Writings*, and began to read his assignment for the day: the first three pages of *The Writings*.

We are all citizens.

We have always been citizens.

We have always been progressing.

We have a duty to the Creator, to the Guide, and to the General as we progress.

The lieutenant rolled his eyes and heard a disgusted sigh next to him.

WAKE ME WHEN IT'S OVER . . .

Lemuel Thorne marched the roads of Idumea, his guard of ten surrounding but several paces away so that Lemuel could look into the faces of the people who passed their perimeter.

No one looked back. No one *ever* met the penetrating gaze of General Lemuel Thorne. But neither did anyone dare cross the road to the other side, just in case they were questioned later about their deliberate avoidance.

Lemuel tried to gauge their demeanors, their anxiety. Their level of stress were crucial to his next step. But everyone kept their heads down, trying to keep from slipping on the patches of snow and thick ice that covered every road and path in Idumea. No one had ever known such a cold season as this.

Thorne didn't quit trying, though, and occasionally he caught the eye of someone shuffling past. It was always the same thing: fear. Nothing else? At all?

He wished he could walk among the people in disguise to discover what they thought. But there was no way he could hide his perfect physique, his chiseled face, or his blonde hair with distinguished gray highlights. He simply was too unforgettable a man to be disguised as something more common.

Yesterday he'd strolled with Guide Lannard through Idumea, watching how people reacted to him, but it was the same: eyes cast down, their steps quickening to pass them.

Lannard didn't notice as he marched proudly through the shopping district, his chest puffed up, occasionally checking his profile in the glass of the few shops that weren't boarded over.

Over the past season, Lannard had grown into the part. He eagerly donned his red silk cape to spend half an hour greeting those who came to see him during his public time. Trembling in his presence, citizens usually just asked for a blessing. Guide Lannard would take a deep breath, raise his hands to the ceiling, then after great arm waving place his hands on the shoulders of the person kneeling before him. He'd mumble incomprehensibly for a few moments, then remove his hands and nod. Blessing granted.

Thorne asked him once what he said in those mumbles, and Lannard merely shrugged. "It's too marvelous for even *me* to understand," he said with his sloppy grin.

Thorne was confused, which was rare for him. Not just because the simple people willingly accepted that Guide Lannard's nonsensical blessings were granted, but because no one was protesting, or beating on the mansion gates, or throwing rocks at the garrison, or—most frustratingly—attempting to take Lannard's life.

They were acted as pitifully as his mother's old dog who always cowered, especially when his father came home each evening. Maybe it was because Qayin kicked the dog every day, so it crowded under a small kitchen table for years.

Why that dog never attacked Qayin always was a mystery to Lemuel. It was a large animal with sharp teeth, but it never had the will to fight back. Just like the people of the world.

It wasn't only in Idumea that the citizens hid in a corner; the phenomenon was happening everywhere. Each week Lemuel received updates from every fort, and the news was mystifyingly similar: villages were quiet; rationing was going smoothly; citizens rarely ventured out of their houses except to attend the mandatory weekly congregational meetings; soldiers were obedient.

Not that Lemuel didn't want obedience. In a way everyone was behaving as he wanted them to, but they were doing so prematurely. They were supposed to blindly obey Guide *Lek*, after demanding the life of Guide Lannard for causing so many people to die.

But apparently the world just wasn't angered enough by the event. They seemed to actually see the reasoning behind his decision—the *Creator's* decision. Whatever the Creator wanted, whatever the guide told them, and whatever the general enforced

was just fine by them.

They were so complacent. Dully, boringly, complacent.

Lemuel had to rethink the situation.

His son should still become the next guide, that was clear. But he'd have to find a way to eliminate Lannard, perhaps through something quick and innocent, like an accident or bad mead.

But not until his son was ready to come to Idumea. It'd be convenient if the lieutenant completed his education first. Once he was the guide and handing out blessings to the masses of beautiful girls who'd be lining up for him to lay hands upon, he wouldn't have any time, especially considering the additional duties Lemuel was considering.

The population would need rebuilding, and Lemuel wanted his blood line to dominate the new generation. He dismissed the reasoning of Qayin that the blood of the Thornes be rare. His father had argued that more than one child would make each child less special. It'd be like watering down the mead until its potency was lost.

But Lemuel had seen it differently: he'd be making an extra-large batch of mead, full strength, and there'd be more to go around. Sheep didn't become less “sheep-ish” if a ram had several offspring. His strengths would become even more dominant. And that's what needed to happen in the world.

There was no better way than for Lek to become the main breeding ram for his new flock. Certainly no females that Lemuel selected for his son would reject the opportunity to serve as a mate for the guide. Lemuel could even allow him to father a few girls here and there, just to keep balance in the population.

It was the numbers he needed to work out. A capable ram could easily handle a dozen ewes or more. Twelve offspring a year, then twelve different ewes the next year to produce another dozen children, then alternate the ewes each year so the ram could service twenty-four different ewes . . .

But would that be enough? Lemuel wondered as he strode briskly down another road, lost in thought. Twelve children a year, keep up the rate for ten years, then cycle out those worn out ewes for another set of younger ones . . . Lek could be productive until he was well into his fifties, just like Lemuel. And Lemuel could certainly help with repopulation efforts for a few more years, with half a dozen ewes, but only with ones who produced males . . .

Lemuel calculated. In twenty-five years when he was in his late

seventies, he could preside over three hundred fifty descendants. Provided, that is, if Lek was as capable in that regard as his father. And because of his past reticence to prove that he was, Lemuel could only assume he was as vigorous as all Thorne men were. At least *half* of those descendants *should* be males, ready to lead the world with the Thorne name . . .

Lemuel didn't realize he'd marched past the road that led to his mansion, too lost in adding up how many grandsons and maybe even more sons he should have, until he glanced up to see he was on his way to the garrison.

None of his guards said anything, prudently, as the general abruptly turned around and headed back to the correct road.

He needed to see his son again. It'd been a full season since he last spoke with him. They sent messages back and forth with predictable pleasantries and reports of his progress, but he hadn't had the opportunity to look him in the eyes. Everything that reached Lemuel about his son was quite complimentary, so likely quite suspicious. Who willingly acted as a perfect son without another motive?

Lemuel had also presented himself as a perfect young man, plotting to become the youngest High General ever. Becoming *his* son-in-law, then exposing his own father's secret behavior to eliminate his bid as High General was the flawless plan. Until *that woman* destroyed it all. She turned Jaytsy's heart away from him, tore Perrin's heart from his chest, then gave her own heart to Zenos—

Lemuel's pace quickened as he strode back to the mansion, his guards scanning the area for threats that weren't materializing.

Surely, he thought, with such a scheming ancestry, Lek also had to have some kind of plan up his sleeve, a silver chip all his own. Lek had too much time on his hands, that was the real problem. He needed to be tempted and diverted by a plan that was mutually advantageous to both of them.

For a moment Lemuel wondered if he was considering the right temptation, but he shook it off. Surely every young man wanted power, attention, and the willingness of dozens of young women. What could be more appealing than that?

Chapter 28--“ I have a plan, and it’s not a selfish one.”

Planning Season was coming. The last of that horrible year would be over in four days, and the new year was approaching. There was to be a celebration at the arena to welcome the year 365. The year *had* to be significant. It was the same number of years as it was the number of days in the year. The guide had declared that each village should be given extra rations on the first day to commemorate the new season when planting and everything else in their lives would begin again.

The problem, the lieutenant realized, was that no one had told Planting Season it was expected. The snow on the ground was still a foot deep when normally the last dusting of snow would have happened four weeks ago. None of the trees that survived showed any signs of budding, nor had any of the early flowers pushed up through the snows that still covered them.

Everything still acted as if it was the middle of Raining—*Snowing* Season.

The lieutenant was nervous but no one else at the fort seemed to be. Perhaps it was because none of them had grown up on a farm. At this time of year in the past in Salem, he’d be hoeing a long row in Aunt Jaytsy’s garden while a cousin or sister would drop dried peas or tiny lettuce seeds behind him.

But there was never this much snow still on the ground, not even in Salem. There *could* be no planting, at least not yet. Maybe not for many more weeks. And if the weather didn’t warm soon enough, he couldn’t imagine how the grain would be sown, or the corn have enough time to mature. The blossoms on the few remaining fruit trees might not even have enough time to . . .

That’s when he had to stop thinking because his breathing would become so rapid that he feared passing out. The food reserves would last only until the end of Weeding Season. It was assumed there’d be

crops to harvest by that time, but the lieutenant couldn't see how that could be possible.

And the trouble wasn't only with the crops; unless it warmed up, there wouldn't be any grasses to graze the few select cattle, sheep, horses, and swine to propagate the herds. Several animals were already expecting, but feed was running low.

The lieutenant tried to figure how quickly grasses could grow in relation to how long the snow was lingering, and when the livestock might be delivering their young. So far he couldn't see how anything, or *anyone*, would survive beyond Weeding Season.

He'd been worrying about this for weeks. A few times he tried to talk to Slither about it, but the old man, whose daily naps were longer and more frequent, just waved off his concerns.

"I'd considered that the snows would last longer this season as well. You remember me telling your father that, don't you? But that happens sometimes. Then suddenly the sun breaks out, the air warms up, and the next week everyone's complaining about the mosquitoes. Stop worrying and wake me when it's time for dinner."

But the lieutenant could see concern in his eyes.

The lieutenant knew something had to be done, but he worried that writing the wrong things to General Thorne might move him out of his place and move someone like Kiah, whom he still couldn't find anything about, to be next in line.

He decided that if he hadn't seen the first tiny purple flowers pushing through the snows today—they should've arrived over a moon ago—he was going to send a letter to General Thorne. An idea planted inadvertently by Director Hegek was the only growing around him.

He slipped outside, nodded to the guard on duty, then trotted carefully down the icy stairs and looked surreptitiously around before stepping over to the flower beds. He remembered seeing all kinds of blossoms there the Planting Season before. He crouched and started pulling away the packed snow, digging until he came to the frozen ground.

Nothing.

He moved more snow away in a wider area, his fingers growing red and numb until he finally exposed a large section of bare dirt.

The ground was solid, and he realized it wasn’t dirt but hardened ash. He pulled out his long knife, apologized internally for what he was about to do to it, and plunged it into the ground.

It was like trying to chip mortar. The tip of his knife was more damaged than the ground it struck. Nothing *could* come up. Maybe not even the yellow weedy flowers that covered the fields.

With growing despair, he sat back on his heels. It was time to send the general a message.

“It’s the right thing to do, right, Puggah?” he whispered.

IT’S AN INTRIGUING IDEA, YOUNG PERE. BUT IS IT THE RIGHT IDEA?

“Well, you did it! At least, you were trying to do it, then did it in *another way—*”

YOUNG PERE, THINK ABOUT THAT—I TRIED TO DO IT BUT FAILED. IT WASN’T MEANT TO BE. IT ISN’T MEANT TO BE WITH YOU, EITHER. ABANDON THE IDEA.

He scoffed. “But you just said it was intriguing!”

YES IT IS. MANY THINGS THAT AREN’T RIGHT FOR US TO DO ARE INTRIGUING. IT’S NOT THAT THEY ARE INHERENTLY WRONG, THEY JUST AREN’T RIGHT FOR US TO PURSUE AT THAT TIME.

The lieutenant rubbed his forehead in frustration. “So what am I supposed to do? And don’t say, ‘Go home.’”

Silence greeted him.

“Puggah?”

I’VE GOT NOTHING ELSE BUT, GO HOME. AND YOUNG PERE, PLEASE DO IT. YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT’S COMING . . .

“I’ve heard you say that before,” he grumbled.

IF THERE WAS SOMETHING YOU COULD DO TO HELP THE WORLD NOW, I’D TELL YOU TO STAY. WE DID THAT BEFORE, DOWN IN POOLS WITH HARVESTING THE CROPS AFTER THE ERUPTION, THEN STAYING IN EDGE TO HELP STRAIGHTEN OUT THE VILLAGE. BUT NOW? THERE’S NOTHING MORE TO BE DONE.

“But I think there is. I have a plan, and it’s not a selfish one. Puggah, I want to save this world. I want to feed it, I want to help these people survive and then thrive. Not because my name, and therefore *your* name, will become famous for it—although it might, and I can’t help it if it does—but because I really want to do something good. How is that wrong?”

YOUNG PERE, IT’S NOT WRONG TO WANT TO DO SOMETHING GOOD, ALTHOUGH I THINK SOME OF YOUR MOTIVATION IS SUSPECT. BUT IT JUST WON’T WORK. NOT EVERY PLAN INTENDING TO DO SOMETHING GOOD WILL

BE SUCCESSFUL.

“Can’t I at least try?”

*OF COURSE YOU CAN TRY. AND FAIL. AND TRY SOMETHING ELSE.
AND FAIL SOMETHING ELSE. AND . . .*

“Tedious again, old man,” the lieutenant sighed as he stood up. He kicked the snow back into place to complete the covering of white. “Tedious.”

That afternoon, after he did his usual inventory of the storage barns—which took less time each week since the inventory was shrinking—he sat down at the large desk and drafted his message. He rewrote it carefully then handed it to the messenger. “Please personally be sure General Thorne receives this. It’s of the utmost importance.”

He watched from the window as the messenger rode away, then he pulled out another sheet of paper and began to draft his next great plan. He wasn’t about to leave any detail to chance. Survival of everyone was too important.

General Thorne nodded to the messenger from Edge as he took the packet.

“And, sir,” the corporal said as he handed him one more folded parchment, “Lieutenant Thorne was most eager that you receive this.”

Thorne’s eyebrows went up. “Break the seal and open it for me,” he ordered. The corporal did so before leaving the office.

“And what does my perfectly obedient son have to say to me today?” Thorne snickered as he leaned back in his chair.

A moment later he leaned forward again. His head snapped to the calendar, then he swiveled to look out the window at the snow still covering the grounds of the garrison. He continued to read and by the time he finished his mouth was hanging open.

“Why, that little . . .” He started to breathe more heavily. “*Zenos upstart!* How could he know the way?!”

He was startled by a knock at the door and Colonel Wanes stood there.

“General? You may not realize how far your voice carries. You may want to consider keeping it down when you’re getting angry at your messages—”

“Sit down!” Thorne demanded.

Wanes closed the door behind him and dutifully took a seat across the desk from him, squeezing his heft between the armrests which creaked in protest. “Where’s the trouble, who’s causing it, and what are they planning to do?”

“Planting Season is severely delayed, *according to some!*” Thorne answered the first question, “My *son*,” he spat to address the second. “And he wants permission to take soldiers to find Terry’s land in search of food! He claims to know the way!”

Wanes sat back. “Why . . . that *is* bold!” He smiled in appreciation. “I must meet this boy. Sounds like something Perrin Shin would propose—”

“Or Shem Zenos!” Thorne barked at him. “He was the last possessor of Terry’s map!”

“Found in the Shin home,” Wanes reminded him.

“What are you suggesting?”

“General,” Wanes said, holding out his hands. “Come on. I know you suspect Shin had it all along. How could Zenos have ever acquired it? Shin was known to have all kinds of old maps taken from the garrison’s trash heaps. I’m sure it was Shin who secretly made the copy sent to the Administrators, Shin who wanted to find Terry’s land, and Shin who got the Administrators to send the science team to look for it. The boy’s instinctively following in his grandfather’s footsteps. Take it as a good sign. He really is Shin’s grandson!” Wanes looked thoughtfully to the ceiling, missing the general’s irritation. “I wonder, how does he even *know* about Terry? We haven’t had him taught in the schools for decades—”

Thorne rocked back in his chair and glared at Wanes. “Are you really such an idiot?”

Surprised at the insinuation, Wanes shrank back.

“Do you realize what he’s trying *to do* to me?”

The colonel shifted uncomfortably, which meant other parts of the chair creaked.

“He claims Planting Season is delayed, that none of the early flowers are coming up as they should. He thinks there might not even *be* a Weeding Season this year, and therefore not a Harvest, and therefore no one alive in a year’s time!”

Wanes tried to shift some more. “General, I have to tell you—a few farmers and scientists have come to me in the past weeks expressing the same concern,” he admitted. “They said they usually plant

early vegetables at this time of year, and while the snow isn't that big of a problem and many plants can tolerate the cold, they can't even get their plows to break through the ground. General, it seems the ash may have combined with the snows to create a hard surface that—"

Thorne pounded his left fist on the desk. "They're just too early!" he bellowed. "They're being unreasonable! The snow will be gone soon! *It has to be!* It always has been before!"

Wanes swallowed. "Of course, General. They must be mistaken about when they planted last year."

Thorne growled quietly and turned to look out the window to the same scenery he'd stared for six moons. "Lek thinks that maybe the west wasn't affected by the volcano," he said more calmly. "He thinks there may be animals to hunt, and seeds and other produce to scavenge. The ground might also be more conducive to farming and grazing if the ash didn't reach it."

Wanes hesitated, weighing his response. "Intriguing theory."

Thorne sighed. "Possibly."

Wanes, sensing Thorne's openness, cleared his throat. "Consider, General, that if he *were* sent to find Terry's land and was successful, the world would surely embrace him as the guide, and he'd be far more successful in acquiring mates."

Thorne continued to stare out the window. "But what if he fails, Wanes? What if he's met with an accident? What if I lose him because he feels like a little exploring?"

Wanes was growing impatient. "General, what if he's *right*? Didn't he grow up on a farm? Wouldn't he realize there's too much snow? If there *is* no growing season this year, we'll all be dead anyway before it's over! General, consider that this is a good idea! If you don't want your son to go, send others instead."

"Send them where?!" Thorne shouted at the window. "How many times did the Administrators send groups looking for Terry's land only to have them come back a year later in terror for what they've seen? There aren't even any more maps of it! The Administrators destroyed all of Perrin's collection before their end. This is the *ONLY* land we can inhabit. This is the *only* place where we can survive."

Wanes' jaw shifted. "*This* land is beginning to terrify me. How small a herd do you think you might be left with in a year? We have to consider that we may not be able to plant anything,

that the last of the animals may die because of starvation or starving villagers, and that there won’t even be any ‘ewes’ left for your chosen ‘ram’ to create your perfect herd. One year from now, you may be the king of *no one*. Please, Lemuel, consider all options.”

Thorne continued to stare out the window, his jaw working menacingly. Wanes sat waiting, beads of sweat forming on his balding head.

The silence continued for a minute, two minutes . . .

Wanes fidgeted and wiped his brow.

“There is one more option,” Thorne finally said quietly. “I doubt it’s even *real*, but two of my soldiers were so convinced it was that its name was their last word. Maybe *they’re* the ones with food for 500,000 . . .”

Wanes licked his lips in anticipation.

“If you really want to pursue options, if you really think there might be another place to inhabit . . .” Thorne paused before he whispered the last word.

“*Salem.*”

“Who?”

“Request *DENIED!*?” the lieutenant yelled at the message. He’d forgotten he wasn’t alone in the command tower until he felt the stares of five pairs of eyes.

Hili blinked in amusement. “Problem, Lieutenant?”

“Uh,” he started, embarrassed by his outburst. A movement by the command office door caught his attention.

“Oh, *yes*,” Major Twigg said, waving his own message from Idumea. “There’s a *problem*. With an overly ambitious lieutenant! Boy, what in the slugging world were you thinking writing him about this ridiculous plan of yours?”

Hili, with a faint smile, reached for the parchment in Twigg’s hands. “What’s he done now? We’re overdue for something interesting out of him anyway.”

He read the message, and when he finally looked up, his eyes were unexpectedly damp.

“Brave, boy. Exceptionally brave. *Too* brave, by the sound of it. How could you *possibly* know where Terry’s land is?”

The other younger soldiers in the office looked at each other.

“Terry? What’s a terry?”

“Sirs, my grandmother told me all about him and what he found,” the lieutenant answered honestly.

Hili’s face paled. “She told me, too,” he whispered. “I mean,” he shook himself a little, “your *real* grandmother,” he clarified. The look on his face suggested he wished he hadn’t said anything.

The lieutenant held back the words, *I meant her, too*.

Twigg threw his hands in the air. “Even if you knew where it was, you’d still have to traverse the new Hill, *in the snow*, travel past Sands, then go on for who knows how many more miles!”

“Thirty-four, sir. That’s all.”

“*What?*”

The lieutenant cleared his throat. “It’s only thirty-four miles to the *ruins* from Sands, according to my grandmother. The Briters came from Sands,” he invented madly, combining a real grandmother with real Briter knowledge to create a new story.

Thorne did it all the time, and since he had the Thorne name—

“They seemed to know a few things. But the wide open lands start many miles before the ruins, so the distance to *seeing* all of Terry’s land is much shorter. The desert past Sands is barely two miles wide. You’re correct that the Hill is a formidable obstacle, but we could go around it instead. And once we’re past that, we could be surveying Terry’s land in less than a week.

“Sir,” he plowed on boldly as he stepped up to the major who stared at him as if he’d grown two new heads. The lieutenant wasn’t about to be stopped by a small piece of paper from eighty miles away. “Sir, if you give me permission, I could be there and back in a mere three weeks. Give me thirty men, supplies, horses, and I promise you I can find new options for the world. In Terry’s land there are wild animals, *still*. There have to be!”

He gestured wildly, ignoring Twigg’s dismay.

“There’s . . . there are these huge herds of ugly cattle with humped backs and horns that Terry named byson, but they taste better than beef. Thousands of them—maybe even *millions*, running in herds beyond the desert, just waiting for someone to take them down with arrows. Sir, that was one of the terrors that King Querul’s guards who accompanied Terry encountered, and the Administrators’ scientists faced enormous herds of ugly stamped-ing cattle! They . . . they probably thought they were *deformed* or something because the land was poisoned, but they’re not!

They’re just a different kind of animal, a source of food.”

He was oblivious to the shocked faces of the men as he enthusiastically went on.

“And over there, the ash didn’t hit! I’m sure of it! Sands got only a few inches, so the desert likely received nothing. And beyond *that*, miles and miles of flat, farmable land! And seeds, and vegetation, I’m sure. It may still be cold and snowy there too, I don’t know about that, but at least the soil is plantable, unlike here. Sergeant Major Hili,” he grabbed the sergeant’s shoulders in eagerness.

No one stopped him, too stunned to hear him rambling on about something no one had ever heard before.

“You know the stories, Hili! You *must* realize the kings and Administrators exaggerated the ‘terrors’ of the ruins, which are merely carved crumbles of rock, in order to keep us from exploring and leaving this tiny piece of land. They wanted to keep us *here*, trapped, to control us! But why should we stay trapped? Sir, I know you know! There’s nothing wrong there! Come with me. Let’s find Terry’s land, let’s bring back pack horses’ full of byson meat, let’s feed the world and leave this cursed land. Yes, Sergeant Hili—*THIS* is the cursed land, and you know it! You’re one of the few left alive who would. Please, sir—help me!”

Hili’s stared at him in astonishment. “What . . . what . . . what *are* you talking about? What . . . what would *I* know?”

The lieutenant shook his shoulders. “Please, *the stories!* People lived over there, for hundreds and thousands of years! You learned this, back in school when you were a boy. You were taught this by your teachers. I *know* you were!”

“Son, I learned stories, that’s true,” Hili said, astonished. “But they were only stories. Mythologies. Fantastical ideas that—”

“But many of them were true! Please, believe me—my grandmother . . . *My grandmother* knew the stories too. There . . . there were these books, written by Terry,” he gestured frantically as if the book were in his hands. “He described what he saw, but changed it to be children’s tales that the king didn’t find offensive. Several copies survived for many years. Sir, didn’t you ever see any of those copies?”

Hili’s face lost all color as he nodded ever so slightly. “I did see a book. Held it only for a few hours and read only about elephants. And I remember monkeys. But the book was returned to its owner and I never saw it again.”

“Sir, monkeys and elephants are *real*.”

“*How can you know that?*” whispered Hili in hopeful wonder.

“ENOUGH!” Major Twigg roared, causing every man in the office to jump. “Lieutenant! Inside my office, NOW! Hili, you too! The rest of you, back to work!” Twigg grabbed the lieutenant by the arm and dragged him into the office, Hili following close behind. He shut the door behind him as the major shoved the lieutenant into a chair.

“What are you doing?! Why are you saying such things? What is going on with you?”

The lieutenant, still filled with endless energy, bounced as he spoke. “Sir, we can’t grow anything here! The ground is rock hard, the snows aren’t melting, and the new year is just days away. But no one can plant anything. Sir, we will die when the reserves run out. We have no choice but to find something else and we need to do it *now*, while there’s still time to plant in the western lands.”

Twigg continued to shake his head. “You’ve been so good and so quiet that I should’ve known something was up with you. Who told you about Terry’s ruins?”

The lieutenant sighed. “I told you—my grandmother.”

The major positioned himself in front of the lieutenant and took the classic interrogation stance. “You realize she wasn’t your grandmother, not even related to you at all, right?”

The lieutenant sighed. “Yes, sir. I know.”

“Your real grandmothers—Versula Thorne and Mahrree Shin—are dead. Have been for years.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your so-called grandmother lied to you about your parentage. You were never Deckett Briter’s son.”

“Yes, sir. I know I’m not Deckett Briter’s son.”

“Then why would *anything* else she ever told you be correct?”

The lieutenant took a deep breath. “Sir, what was wrong with her telling me about the ruins? About Terry’s stories? They stopped teaching him in schools then everyone ignored him. He wasn’t even forbidden, just forgotten. But my grandmother shared the stories with me when I was a boy. Sir, it’s been my experience that every story is rooted in *some* kind of truth. We’re going to be desperate for food, very soon. Many of the farmers aren’t trying to break the ground yet, but soon they will be and

they’ll discover it’s like rock. But further west the land is many times bigger than here! With no volcano, no ash, and plenty of game to feed us until we’re as fat as Slither—”

“You don’t know that!” the major spat. “No one can know that.”

“So let me find out!” he tried to stand up, but the major was leaning too close to his face. “Sir, I’m willing to take the risk, and I bet I can find volunteers willing to risk it with me. Please, Major, Sergeant Major,” he turned to Hili, “haven’t enough people died this year? Do we really need everyone else to die in the next?”

Major Twigg exhaled. The tension in his face could have strained a pumpkin. “Lieutenant, Lieutenant . . . I just don’t know what to do with you. Why Thorne didn’t drag you along with him to Idumea but kept you here with me as your—”

“I’ll go with him.”

The statement from Hili was so unexpected that the lieutenant blinked, trying to make sense of his words, and Twigg staggered.

Hili nodded, cleared his throat, and said more distinctly. “I will go with him.”

The lieutenant started to grin until Twigg shot him look.

“Poe,” Twigg said, turning to the sergeant major, “you can’t be serious. I’m not even entertaining *the idea* of going against General Thorne’s wishes! What are you . . . what are you—”

“I can’t help but think he’s right,” Hili interrupted quietly. “And I also can’t help but be curious. Years ago, when Terryp’s map surfaced, I signed up to join the party that went to find the land. My application was rejected but my desire to go never diminished. That’s what got *her* so angry, you know. That they came back and said it was a cursed land. *She* knew it was a lie. She was the one who gave me the book—” his voice turned almost reverent. Until he added, “—that my mother gave back. But she told me all the stories anyway. Wapiti. Elephants. Monkeys.” A faraway smile grew on his face. “Images of them were carved all over the ruins. Those animals were supposedly even further west. How far west it all goes, no one knows. No one has cared for years, but I have.” Hili firmed his stance. “Major Twigg, we have to find something else. Let’s go find those byson, see what condition the land is in, and do some exploring for once!”

The lieutenant slapped the armrest. “Yes!” He leaped to his feet.

“NO!” Twigg shouted, shoving him back down. He turned to Hili. “Do you realize what you’re suggesting? Poe, we can’t go against General Thorne’s command!” He waved the message like a banner in

a windstorm. "To allow soldiers to—"

"What if they aren't soldiers?" Hili interrupted quietly.

Twigg's voice turned shrill. "*What?*"

The lieutenant bit his lip eagerly.

"What if they are *not* soldiers?" Hili suggested calmly, his dark eyes twinkling with possibilities. "What if we get together a group of volunteers, *citizens*, who want to find what's west of Sands?"

Twigg shook his head. "I won't let you go, Hili!"

"What if I resign?"

The major froze. The lieutenant held his breath, his admiration for the sergeant major increasing by one thousand times.

Hili began to unbutton his jacket, the hard lines on his face softening into a smile. "It's happened before, you know. Someone didn't agree with the leadership and decided to make his own way. Why can't I resign today and start organizing the citizens tomorrow? I was a citizen for six years, you know, and I survived it."

The lieutenant was grinning from ear to ear.

Hili glanced over at him and winked.

That snapped Twigg out of his shock. "Stop it!" he shouted, and grabbed Hili's hands which had his jacket halfway unbuttoned. "Stop it," he pleaded. "Hili—*Poe*—you can't do this! You really think General Thorne would let you just up and *resign*? Let you march out of here with a bunch of civilians and head west? He'd hunt you down! After all, *you* led away the enlisted army when you were a young man, leaving the Sergeants Army to kill his father!"

"And Lemuel was glad for it," Hili said conversationally. "He even told me so once, after he'd been drinking—"

Twigg wasn't going to be tripped up by that. "Then you were fighting on the opposite side of his for many years. But he's forgiven you, Poe, of all of that—"

It was Hili's howl of derision that stopped Twigg cold.

"He *forgave me*? Perhaps, but Twigg, I've *never* forgiven him!" Hili snarled. "Do you realize that Thorne caused the Shins to run away in the first place? That he was chasing Perrin Shin in order to apprehend him and send him to Idumea for trial?"

Twigg's jaw worked up and down. "I, I don't recall that—"

“Of course not,” Hili said dismissively. “That’s not the ‘accepted story’ around here, is it? But it’s the *real* one. Lemuel was chasing the Shins to turn them over to Genev. Another name you probably don’t know. Lemuel was trying to make a name for himself and wasn’t bothered that Mrs. Shin was going to be executed by the Administrators for merely speaking her mind! And the colonel he so admired? Probably locked up in the dungeon of the garrison for the rest of his life!”

Twigg looked genuinely flabbergasted.

When Hili spoke again, his voice was low and bitter. “They were my second family, Twigg. They cared for me when no one else would. They fed me, clothed me, worried about me when not even my own mother could be bothered to. I joined the army because of *him*. To make him proud. *To thank him*. And what did Lemuel do? Guarantee their deaths!”

Never before had the lieutenant wanted so much to shout the truth about his grandparents just to see Poe’s miserable expression improve, but he knew that would be the worst thing to do right now.

Twigg had been shaking his head in consternation for the past minute. “That all may be true, I don’t know. But no matter what, Poe, you can’t do this and live. The only reason you were on that list to be spared is because the fort needs you. If you resign, then—”

The lieutenant stood up. “What about me? Would Thorne kill me if I resigned?”

The two older men looked at him.

“Why do you ask such a thing?” Twigg whispered desperately.

“I’m just . . . wondering,” he said, not wanting to give any more of his ideas away to the major.

“Don’t do it,” Twigg begged earnestly. “Whatever you’re planning, *don’t do it*. Even if you think you’re faster and sneakier than us—just don’t do anything that has me hunting you down or waiting at the edges of the desert for you, boy.” He spun to Hili. “That goes for you, too! Please, Poe—see reason. Thorne would execute us all!”

Hili looked deep into the major’s eyes. “I should be dead right now, along with everyone else I grew up with in Edge.”

“And if you resign you will be!” The major bordered on frantic.

“Let me do something good,” Hili persisted. “Let me be worth the grain I’ve eaten. Let me justify why I lived and why every other man I knew in Miss Mahrree’s After School Care died. I watched each one of them, Twigg. I stood across the pit, and each man I knew as a boy

looked me in the eyes as he breathed in his death. Only I was spared. Let me help save what remains of the world, Twigg.”

The lieutenant smiled in admiration. He’d have to tell Mughah about this day when he saw her again.

“You really want to help save the world, Poe? Then keep serving here with me.” Twigg started buttoning up Hili’s jacket as if to seal the deal. “You know this village better than anyone. You’ve earned their respect. If you abandon Edge, what will the rest of us do?”

Hili caught his hands and pulled them off his jacket. “Major, I want to save this village. It gave me a second chance when I didn’t deserve one. Let me do something for their grandchildren!”

Twigg exhaled. “Just . . . give me some time. This, this is all happening far too fast. We need to think this through. Lieutenant,” Twigg turned to him, “give me a few days to investigate the nature of the soil. Let’s talk to some of the farmers and find out what they think. Hili,” he squinted before he continued, “*quietly* figure out what would be needed for a journey for thirty men. But say nothing to anyone, *either of you*, about any of this! Maybe if we put together a carefully worded proposal with testimonies and concerns from more than just the lieutenant here maybe, *just maybe*, the general *might* consider allowing an expedition to the west. But I really doubt you’ll be one to go, Lieutenant.”

The lieutenant held out his hands. “But I know the way!” He quickly added, “I think.”

“Draw me a map,” Hili whispered. “I got to see the copy of Terry’s map when it was at the fort where I was posted. I remember a few things on it. Maybe together we can recreate it.”

The lieutenant grinned. “Thank you, sir! You won’t regret this!”

Hili gave him a wan smile back. “I already do.”

A few minutes later, Hili and the lieutenant were drafting preliminary notes at a private desk. Out of the corner of his eye, the lieutenant watched Hili, his face cheerful for maybe the first time ever.

“Sir?” the lieutenant ventured, “may I ask a personal question?”

“Certainly. There’s no guarantee I’ll answer it, though.”

“Why did you come back to Edge? Rejoin the army?”

Hili dropped the sharpened charcoal he was using and exhaled

loudly. “Sometimes I still ask myself the same question,” he murmured. “The truth is, Lemuel caught me on a bad day.”

The lieutenant waited for more. When it didn’t come, he said, “That’s it?”

Hili sent him a sidelong glance. “A *very* bad day.”

The lieutenant couldn’t have been more intrigued. Taking a shot, he said, “What was her name?”

“Yeah, that’s about right!” Hili ruefully shook his head and his smile faded. “I’d been interested in a few girls over the years, but nothing much came from it. Then I met her. I’d been out of the army for a few years and was head of security at one of the housing developments in Rivers. I was making a lot of silver at it, too. She lived nearby, was in her forties, a lovely thing. A sweet laugh,” he said, almost longingly. “We’d go walking and talking. I bought her a few things, took her to eat at the best inns. I was beginning to think things might finally work out for me. Then,” he said, his expression hardening, “I did my job too well. So well that they realized no one was even *trying* to break in at the housing development, and hadn’t since I took over. So, they let me and all my staff go. They didn’t need securing after all.”

“But,” the lieutenant spluttered, “but that’s stupid! With security gone, that’s when the thieves show up!”

“Yes, and that’s also what happened, but *later*. Before, it meant more silver slips in the pockets of the developers by not having to pay me and my boys.” Hili sighed. “Suddenly, she wasn’t interested in me anymore. I didn’t have a job or prestige, so . . .”

“I’m sorry,” the lieutenant whispered.

“Ah, well,” Hili shrugged it off. “Showed what she really cared about, didn’t it? To console myself, I bought the best bottle of mead I could and drowned my sorrows in it. Wouldn’t you know, that was the evening Lemuel Thorne knocked on my door. He’d been intending to meet with me for a while, he said, and had tracked me down and found me at my lowest. Sometimes I wonder if he didn’t set all of that up just to bring me down. Waiting for the right moment—”

“Wait, you don’t *really* think he set you up like that? I mean, that would entail him making your bosses fire you and getting that woman to stop seeing you—”

Hili looked at him blankly. “When you put it that way, yes; I’m even *more* sure that Thorne had his hand in everything.”

“But, but—”

Hili leaned in and said in barely a whisper, “Thorne has a hand in everything, Lieutenant. *Everything*. Remember that.”

He sat back and continued, as if that chilling bit of news hadn’t been shared. “Thorne came in that night, pulled up the jug, and finished it off with me. That’s when he told me he didn’t care that my actions led to the death of his father—he was happy about it, actually, even back when it happened. And he needed a man like me in his fort. Well, when no one else wants you and someone says they *need* you?” Hili held out his hands helplessly. “I’m not sure I was even fully sober before I put on the uniform again. Lemuel certainly wasn’t. Had to be carried out in the morning by his men—”

“Do you regret it, sir? Coming back?”

Hili peered at him. “Are you trying to get me into trouble, boy?”

The lieutenant smiled. “I think you *like* being in trouble.”

Hili scoffed a laugh. “I’m not answering any more questions.”

Later that afternoon as the lieutenant trotted back to the mansion, his mind filled with fantastic plans he desperately hoped he could pursue, a familiar voice interrupted his planning.

WHEW. THAT WAS A CLOSE ONE. I REALLY THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO MESS UP BACK THERE.

“Why, old man?” he whispered to the air.

“MY GRANDMOTHER TOLD ME THE STORIES!” I WAS SURE YOU WERE GOING TO SLIP AND SAY SOMETHING ABOUT MAHRREE SHIN. THEN WHEN POE STARTED TALKING ABOUT HER . . . WELL, I REMEMBERED ONCE AT THE ANCIENT TEMPLE SITE WHEN YOU AND BUBBA HAD A CONTEST TO SEE WHO COULD JUMP THE CLOSEST TO THE EDGE OF THE CLIFF. IF WE HADN’T STOPPED YOU—

“I was winning that, by the way. I knew where I could land without going over the edge. There was this outcropping—”

AND WHAT IF YOU SLIPPED, LIEUTENANT? WHAT IF WE LET YOU TAKE THAT LAST JUMP AND YOU MISTIMED YOUR STEP BY JUST A FRACTION, WHERE WOULD YOU HAVE BEEN?

The lieutenant sighed. “Doesn’t matter now, does it?”

TODAY YOU WERE JUMPING ON THE EDGE OF THE CLIFF. I WAS FRANTICALLY TRYING TO KEEP YOU FROM SLIPPING OFF.

“I had it under control today—”

I HAD YOU UNDER CONTROL!

The lieutenant marched on, grumbling in frustration. “Why are you here?”

YOUNG PERE, IF IT WERE ANY OTHER MAN THAN LEMUEL, AND AT ANOTHER TIME, THIS WOULD BE A GOOD IDEA. THE BYSON HERDS YOU SAW A FEW YEARS AGO HAVE THINNED FROM THE HARSH SNOWS, BUT THERE ARE STILL THREE BYSON FOR EVERY CITIZEN OF THE WORLD. THE POPULATION COULD—IN THEORY—MOVE TO THE WESTERN LANDS, PLANT CROPS, LIVE OFF OF BYSON UNTIL THE HARVEST COMES IN, AND SETTLE THAT LAND SUCCESSFULLY.

The lieutenant sighed. “But . . . ?”

BUT . . . IT’S NOT POSSIBLE NOW. MANY YEARS AGO, YES. EVEN WHEN I MADE THE COPY OF THE MAP AND SENT IT TO NICKO MAL, IT WASN’T TOO LATE. THESE PEOPLE COULD HAVE HAD VERY DIFFERENT LIVES AND BEEN SPARED ALL KINDS OF PAIN.

BUT THEY’VE WASTED THEIR TIME. MORE PEOPLE THAN POE HAVE BEEN INTERESTED IN THE WESTERN LANDS OVER THE YEARS. BUT NONE OF THEM DARED TAKE THE RISK TO FIND SOMETHING NEW. ALL OF THEM WERE TOO COMPLACENT TO DO ANYTHING BRAVE. AND NOW THAT LIFE IS UNCOMFORTABLE, IT’S SIMPLY TOO LATE.

“Why? Why is it too late?”

YOUNG PERE, I CAN’T SAY ANY MORE. JUST BELIEVE ME—

“Augh!” the lieutenant kicked the snow. “‘Just believe me.’ WHY? Why do you do this to me? Why do I even bother listening to you? You—you’re so *aggravating!* So tedious! All you do is get in my mind and tell me what’s wrong in there! You know what, old man? *I’ve had it!* I’ve had it with you, with your annoying little commentary about everyone and everything, with your ‘You know nothing, Lieutenant,’ attitude, with your . . . AUGH! You know what?” He stopped walking and jabbed at the sky. “Just *leave!* Just quit annoying me with your uselessness! I don’t need this! If you’re not going to be helpful, just BE GONE!”

The guard at the top of the steps of the mansion acted as if he didn’t hear the lieutenant ranting at the trees before him.

The lieutenant didn’t care who heard him or what they thought. No one knew what they were talking about anyway! He was his own man, his own conscience. He could make decisions as well as anyone—maybe even better.

He knew where the ruins were. Four years ago he and about a

hundred teenagers from their region of Salem, along with many adult chaperones, had taken the journey to explore Terryp's ruins for a week. Uncle Deck had gone with them, and had pulled him and his cousin Cephas aside and pointed. "A mere thirty-four miles that way. That's my ancestors' village of Sands. Of course, there's a bit of a desert before it, but it's a short two miles, then you come to this vast valley. And, as far as I know, not once did anyone in Sands ever try to cross the desert just to see what was on the other side. *Yet here we are!* We even came the long way, boys!"

Well, he would do it. Thorne wasn't in charge of him—he was in charge of himself! He'd taken a long journey before, he could easily do it again. No one in the world had a hold on him. No one *outside* the world had a hold on him either.

It was time to figure out the right words to say to the right people at the right time. He stomped angrily up to the steps and into the mansion, alone.

Chapter 29--“And if we don’t find this mythical Salem?”

Although the men stood nervously with their hats in their hands and their documents on the desk in front of General Thorne, they were most grateful to be there. And they told him that, repeatedly.

“Thank you so much for listening, General,” they dithered and bobbed and shuffled. “Thank you for paying attention—”

“Yes, yes,” he said shortly to stop the head scientist who showed signs of going into another five-minute thank you speech. “You’re sure about this, now? Even all the way down in Trades and over to Waves? They only received a few inches of ash.”

The group of scientists nodded vigorously. “We just assumed that the ash would be good for the soil,” one of them piped up. “In some areas they were able to lift the layers of hardened ash off the frozen ground, but everywhere else, so many followed the orders to till it into the farmland and now it’s like rock.” He shifted, hoping someone would back him up. It was, after all, Thorne’s order to till in the ash.

“Perhaps, General, in hindsight we should have *moved* the ash off the farmland,” another quaking man offered. “Some of our experiments suggest that in a few years the ash will become a wonderful addition to the soil. Just . . . not *this* year.”

The general shifted his hard gaze to the scientist who first gave him the bad news.

The man looked askance at his colleagues who provided no assistance beyond standing behind him, likely so he couldn’t dart out of the door. Maybe if there had been an older scientist, one with more experience and insight and better ideas . . . but all of them had died.

“Tell me, gentlemen,” the general said, “honestly now—will we be able to plant crops in this new year?”

The men signaled each other with jerking motions, trying to get each other to give the answer. They thought they’d already alluded to

this, but someone had to say the actual words.

One of them sighed and announced, “No, sir. There’s no hope of crops this year. Not unless we have some kind of miracle. Does Guide Lannard have any ideas?”

“*Not more sacrifices,*” someone in the back whispered.

Thorne glared in the direction. “We need to discuss the situation. But gentlemen, there may be a miracle coming. There may also be a sacrifice, but it won’t be additional deaths. It will, instead, appeal to the most adventurous men in the world.”

The scientists looked at each other in surprise.

“Sir, can you be more specific?” one dared to ask.

“No,” he said crisply. “Thank you for your information. I recommend you keep your findings among yourselves until I am prepared to announce our next step. Is that understood?”

Every man nodded enthusiastically.

Thorne waved for them to leave, which they also did enthusiastically.

Colonel Wanes, sitting quietly in the corner, waited until the door shut. “So, General—you have their report.”

Thorne frowned at it. “They were rather prompt in producing it, weren’t they.”

“I think they were waiting for you to ask. The snows should have left weeks ago, so I think they began to panic back then.” He leaned forward. “So, General—that next step?”

Thorne glanced over at the new calendar on his wall. “It’s the 2nd Day of Planting. Time is already of the essence, isn’t it?”

Wanes nodded.

“How many weeks did you say you thought we needed?”

“Two to three weeks for training would be ideal. But really, how much of a fight can they offer?”

“*If* they exist, Wanes,” Thorne clarified.

“Of course, of course.”

“And our count?”

“How many able-bodied men between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine? I have it right here,” he said, standing up and handing a small sheet of paper to the general.

“It’s 130,000.” Thorne stared at the numbers. “I expected it to be higher.”

Wanes shrugged in apology. “All the *non*-able-bodied men and boys took the herbs—”

“I suppose it should be enough,” Thorne decided, cutting him off. “So how many do you want?” Wanes asked.

Thorne looked up. “A fraction should remain here to keep the villages functioning. But I want the rest with me. The more men we have the more territory we can cover. I want an army of 80,000 men. Every man will show up to his local fort for inspection to see if he is fit enough, which means able to walk a mile and carry a blade. We’ll also need four thousand women initially—probably more—to help with menial tasks.”

Wanes was taking notes. “And by when do you want them?”

Thorne turned again to the calendar. “I want them armed, trained, and ready by . . . the 30th Day of Planting. In four weeks. One week to notify the world and conscript the army; two and a half weeks to train; another four days to get everyone to Edge,” he said, marking the dates on the calendar, “Get there by the 29th, then the day after, that’s when the army leaves on its search for Salem: the 30th Day of Planting.”

“And if we don’t find this mythical Salem?” Wanes asked cautiously.

“We’ll look for two weeks. Then we’ll take Lek on his trip west.”

Major Twigg looked around the forward command office on the 3rd Day of Planting, 365.

The officers and sergeants crammed in the room watched him worriedly. The last time they met like this was when he announced all citizens of a certain age were to die.

But Twigg wasn’t bleak today. He was strangely hopeful, although in an agitated sort of way. Edge just made everyone edgy.

“Men, I’ve received a message from General Thorne. It seems we’re not the only village to send him a report about our unfavorable farming conditions. The problem is as widespread as the ash was. But he and the guide have a solution.”

The officers and sergeants held their collective breath.

“It has been revealed to the guide that there may be *alternative lands*.” Twigg watched Lieutenant Thorne’s face when he said the words.

The lieutenant burst into a grin and eagerly elbowed Sergeant Major Hili sitting next to him.

Hili patted his arm and smiled. They'd been working together for a week now, sequestered in Twigg's office at night making lists, maps, plotting routes, and—it was obvious to Twigg when he opened the message from the general—completely wasting their time.

He sent them both a look of warning.

“In order to find and properly explore these alternatives, Thorne's calling for an immediate increase in the army. He wants eighty thousand men, with at least four thousand support women.”

Each man either gasped, scoffed, or shouted. Some did all three, just as Twigg had when he first read the message half an hour ago.

“*Eighty thousand?!?*”

“That's nearly every man left!”

“Why so many?”

“What is he expecting to find?!”

The lieutenant's face fell as he mouthed the number. He had originally asked for only thirty. He looked at Hili for explanation, but the sergeant major's mouth was hanging open, incredulous.

Twigg paused to let the men settle down before continuing. “The reason for the large number is that . . .” He hesitated again, unsure of how to explain the next part. It was quite unbelievable, but then again, he should be used to unbelievable ideas by now. “It seems that we may *not* be the only ones living in the world.”

He held up his hands in vain to hold back the new onslaught of gasps, scoffs, and shouts of, “What's *that* supposed to mean?!”

“Some moons ago,” he continued loudly over the din of the officers, “you may recall we had an incident with some of the trees coming down. That disaster was staged by a man who claimed he had enough food to feed over five hundred thousand people.”

Twigg kept his hands up to keep the comments down. It didn't work. He had to wait again before the room quieted enough for him to continue.

“After considerable thought about how that may be, as well as receiving some previously unknown information, and,” he remembered to add, “Guide Lannard consulting with the Creator, Thorne has come to the conclusion that there is an unidentified village that may have resources. Thorne wants to begin a search

for that village starting on the 30th, and because of its possible location, the most logical starting point for searching for the village is here in Edge.”

Twigg ignored the outbursts and shouts of surprise from the rest of the officers. Instead he stared intently at the lieutenant.

He’d gone gray. Lek Thorne’s eyes darted back and forth and his lips moved rapidly as if mumbling. Finally Twigg could make out “—no, no, no, *no*.”

Twigg squinted as the sergeants and officers continued to loudly debate the implications of trying to bring so huge an army to their tiny patch of the world. Not even Hili, distracted by the arguing around him, noticed the increasing agitation of the lieutenant next to him.

The lieutenant’s hand went up to his mouth, then down again, and he shook his head rapidly.

Twigg had expected the lieutenant to be disappointed, but this behavior was odder than usual. Finally the lieutenant held his head in his hands and stared at the floor.

Twigg considered his response then turned to the rest of the room, but the men were too involved in loud discussions. Twigg pulled out his long knife, which he decided to keep with him at all times ever since the tree fall, and pounded the handle of it on the desk.

“ORDER!” he called loudly. “ORDER! Enough! We’ve more than enough work to do in the next four weeks that we can’t waste any time arguing!”

The men quieted and turned to the major with expressions suggesting they weren’t at all finished.

“That’s better,” Twigg said, sheathing his knife. “Beginning tonight, we post notices all over Edge. Tomorrow we begin inspections of every man to see his fitness for the army.”

“What kind of standards are we looking for?” asked a captain.

“A heartbeat,” Twigg sighed.

“What about uniforms?” asked another man.

“And weapons?” called another.

“For most of the men, uniforms will be whatever they already own in blue,” Twigg admitted. “There’s a reserve of uniforms in the south. Sargon liked to have a well-dressed army. Those will be for the men selected to be over groups of one hundred and groups of fifty, then the remaining uniforms distributed randomly. As for weapons, each man is to bring what he has. Thorne kept an arsenal of twenty

thousand swords in various secret locations in the north, but several of those are under Deceit. Now he's working with some of Sargon's former officers to find similar stashes in the south. It may not be necessary for every man to have a sword, but it seems there may be enough to outfit at least two-thirds. The rest can carry long knives and bows and arrows that they may already possess. Any shops containing weapons are to turn them over to the fort immediately."

"This is, this is . . . impossible!" said a staff sergeant. "How are we to move so many supplies for so great an army? There simply aren't enough horses, or wagons or—"

"Thorne knows that," Twigg said. "Every man will carry his own food supply, along with his bedroll. This will be an army on foot, gentlemen."

Another officer rolled his eyes. "Just how far does Thorne think this new army will get, untrained and out of shape and laden with supplies?"

Twigg shrugged. "Thorne plans to march the army for two weeks searching for the unknown village. Then, if unsuccessful, the army will return, rest for a few weeks, then continue on to the next plan."

"The next plan? What's that?"

Twigg looked over to the lieutenant and Hili. "March west, beyond Sands and the desert, to look for habitable land there."

The lieutenant's head snapped up at that.

Hili nudged him encouragingly, but the young officer's face was still troubled as the men around him broke out in a new round of surprised shouts and protests.

"West? *Is* there anything west?"

Twigg held up his hands again. "According to ancient texts, our ancestors used to live in the west, moving here three hundred sixty years ago. Perhaps it's time for us to return to our former home?"

"Let's go there first!" Lieutenant Thorne said, suddenly energized. "That makes more sense! We know the west exists, but this mysterious village? Why waste time wandering around who knows where when we can just start west now? We don't even need an army, just a few of us! And I volunteer to go!"

Several of the officers nodded in agreement.

"Let him go, Major!"

“I volunteer some of my men to accompany him.”

“Send him tomorrow!”

Twigg sighed and held up his hands again, calling for silence. “Thorne wants to find the village, *if it exists*, first. If they have food reserves, we can use those immediately. Once we know of their resources, we can then decide if going west is still a necessity.”

The lieutenant kicked the chair in front of him in frustration.

The master sergeant occupying it turned and gave him a dirty look.

The lieutenant sighed angrily. “Stupid,” he muttered. “This is stupid. It’s *all wrong*—”

“Lieutenant!” Twigg barked. “If you have any comments about the present situation, you are certainly free to send your opinions to General Thorne yourself! In the meantime, show some respect for your father’s decisions!”

Twigg had never seen such a fierce look. He involuntarily took a step back as the lieutenant’s bitter glare hit him.

The lieutenant didn’t say another word but folded his arms and stared at a spot on the wall.

Twigg straightened his jacket and faced the room. “We need to get to work, now. We have less than a week to sign up and outfit all the men we can, then only two and a half weeks to train them. Colonel Wanes has sent us an abbreviated training schedule. I’ll be sure each of you has a copy by this evening. General Thorne and the rest of the army will be arriving by the 29th. We need to start thinking about where all of these men coming will camp. I think since our farmers have nothing to grow, we’ll be taking over all their fields. Beginning tomorrow, men, all of you will be recruiting and training soldiers. Dismissed. Except for you, Lieutenant Thorne!”

The lieutenant continued his angry stare at the wall as the rest of the men filed out of the office and down the stairs. Twigg stood in front of the room watching him until the last man left. “In my office, Thorne.”

The lieutenant got up with deliberate slowness, loudly pushing away a chair as he sulked into the command office. Twigg followed him and shut the door with a bang.

“Sit down, boy!” he ordered.

Thorne took the closest chair and sat down in it carelessly.

Twigg moved to the back of his desk and sat down. “I’m assuming you’re disappointed,” he said sardonically.

The lieutenant didn't look at him.

"I demand more respect than that from you, Lek Thorne!"

The lieutenant sighed and sat up straight, then focused his glare on the major.

"That's better. Sort of," Twigg said. "As an officer you need to learn what behavior is appropriate in public and what is not. Your little outburst reminded me of a fourteen-year-old boy pouting because he's just been told to stock the woodpile instead of going fishing! That was deplorable and embarrassing. You should instead be grateful that the general has given your idea any consideration at all. That's a remarkable show of faith and you should've been far more respectful!"

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant mumbled.

Twigg scoffed. "At least *pretend* like you mean it, Thorne. If your father were here—"

"If *my father* were here, he'd—" The lieutenant began, then pressed his lips firmly together.

"Slightly better, but next time keep all those words in your head and let none of them escape." Twigg sighed. "Look, Lieutenant, the next few weeks are going to be unlike anything we've seen before. I need every man in my command willing to *take* my command. This will be a remarkable opportunity for you. You can be in charge of one thousand men if you behave yourself. It's rare that a commander ever has that many men under him, but that's the opportunity before you, right now. But only if you control your impulsiveness! You have a great capacity to lead, but you must do so within the framework the army has established."

Twigg noticed the lieutenant's eyes glazing over. Apparently he'd heard a version of this speech before. Probably from Slither. Or his mother.

"Thorne." He waited until the lieutenant looked him in the eyes, "Can I count on you? And can *your father* count on you?"

The lieutenant's jaw shifted before he answered. "Yes, sir. *My father* can count on me to do the right thing."

For some reason the major felt a chill run up his spine, but he nodded at the lieutenant. "Then you are dismissed. Go inform Slither that your studies will be put on hold for a few weeks and why. Your time will be taken up with more important matters."

The lieutenant marched down the stairs and stomped out of the command tower, letting every footstep reveal the full anger he felt.

It was wrong, wrong, wrong! He could think of nothing else as he strode back to the mansion to deliver the news to Slither. Not as if the professor didn’t already somehow know.

Eighty thousand men? Swarming all over Edge and beyond it?

It’d take much less than two weeks for at least one of those men to get lucky enough to figure out the way to Salem.

It was known, and probably by Thorne. How much he actually knew, the lieutenant didn’t dare guess. Clearly enough to know that Edge was the closest village, and that it should’ve been called “Middle” of the civilized world, not the “Edge” of it. Maybe Thorne knew *everything*. That’s why he wanted such a large army, to invade and take over Salem.

Well, it wasn’t going to happen! The lieutenant wouldn’t let it happen. The timing was all wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

He walked faster, hoping that would somehow inspire him as to what to do next. There was only one thing he could think of and he didn’t even know if it would work, but it was all he had: he needed to find Terryp’s ruins first, before Thorne and the army came to Edge.

It’d be a diversion at least, to slow Thorne from finding Salem. If the lieutenant could bring back several byson as proof of the land and the options it provided, surely the general would decide to go west instead of to Salem. A diversion . . .

Peto Shin had created a diversion—

Suddenly the lieutenant couldn’t get his father out of his mind. Now he knew why Peto had come to the fort, wearing Colonel Shin’s jacket. He’d offered Salem’s food to the world! Their entire reserves that they’d been gathering for his whole life. What a ridiculous thing to do—just *give* it to the world?

“Oh, Papa,” he whispered, “this is all your fault. Why’d you do such a foolish thing? Weren’t you called to secure Salem? And instead you’re giving it away! You’ve invited the invasion!”

Another thought struck the lieutenant. Maybe Peto Shin *wasn’t* in charge of the security of Salem anymore. Maybe he acted on his own, irrationally. Maybe he had no authority to do what he did . . .

The lieutenant growled in anger. Not even his own father, *his real father*, could be trusted? That meant there was only one man who could keep Salem safe.

Good thing the lieutenant was on duty.

Sergeant Major Hili was walking across the compound when he heard the footsteps catch up to him.

“Well, Lieutenant,” he said, glancing to his side, “looks like we’re going to have an adventurous Planting Season after all, aren’t we?”

“Sir,” the lieutenant said, keeping in step with him, “how badly do you want to find Terryp’s land?”

Hili chuckled lightly. “I suppose as badly as you want to.”

“We’ve got everything ready, right?”

“On paper only. Why?”

“How long would it take to get everything together?”

Hili stopped walking. “Lek,” he said in a low voice, “*why?*”

“Sir—*Poe*—looking for this mysterious village is a waste of time. You know it as well as I do! If we wait too long, we won’t have time to get anything planted in the west. By the general’s timetable, we wouldn’t be reaching the western lands until the end of Planting Season, or maybe even later!”

Hili grabbed the lieutenant’s arm and pulled him over to a quiet corner of a building. “What are you wanting to do, Lek?”

“The general’s not expected to be here with the army until the 29th. If we leave tomorrow, we could be to Terryp’s land and *back* before he gets here. We can capture and bring back several byson and convince him to give up the search for that other village!”

Hili looked around to make sure no one was listening. “Is this what Twigg wanted to talk to you about? In his office earlier?”

“No,” he had to admit.

“So this isn’t Twigg’s idea? Lek, I’m not about to do anything without permission from Twigg and Thorne. And neither are you!”

The lieutenant grabbed his arm and shook it. “Don’t you see? We HAVE to! Thorne doesn’t know what’s best—”

“And you do?”

“Yes!”

“If you aren’t the most incorrigible, irrational—”

The lieutenant couldn’t have been more earnest. “Call me all the names you want to. Right now I need to know: are you with

me?”

“Of course not!”

“Poe, why not?”

“Because I’ve sworn allegiance to Thorne!”

“When you were drunk! Just last week you were ready to resign again! Do it now! I will too, and tomorrow we can head west—”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t think it’s a good idea now, that’s why,” Hili told him. “You’re too impulsive. Let Thorne do his little wandering around the forest and mountains for two weeks, then we can go west with the proper supplies, men, and resources to do this safely.”

The lieutenant rolled his eyes. “I can’t believe you. Poe, your childhood dream, just one day away and you’re saying *no*?”

“When you get to be my age, and have waited for ‘childhood dreams,’ as you put it, for so long, there’s nothing wrong with waiting a few more weeks. Lek, what’s wrong with you? Just wait. Thorne’s not going to find anything, then we get to go on our little adventure anyway. Safety in numbers, Lek.”

The lieutenant smacked the wall of the building in frustration. “You’re giving up! You’re just as weak and intimidated by him as everyone else—”

He couldn’t finish because Hili was shoving him hard up against the wall and knocked the wind out of him.

“Don’t you ever, *ever* accuse me of being weak, Lieutenant Thorne!” Hili hissed. “It’s the weak ones who abandon their responsibilities and run away on a whim, soldier. I’m warning you now—speak no more of this or someone will think you’re acting traitorous and you just might find yourself in that dungeon you’ve wondered so much about.”

The sergeant major released the lieutenant, straightened his jacket, and marched on through the compound. But he could feel the lieutenant’s glare boring holes into the back of his head.

Traveling alone would be much faster anyway, the lieutenant decided that night as he reviewed in his bedroom the copies of the notes he’d made with Hili. He learned long ago to always make copies of

important papers, just in case. He looked at the calendar and grumbled silently. Hili did have a point about safety in numbers, but time was crucial now. If he had only a few more days he could have recruited some locals to help him, but a new plan was forming in his mind.

The people of Edge loved him; they always greeted him when he strolled through the village greens and helped deliver their rations for the week. Several girls winked at him on a regular basis. Men patted him on the back. Women gave him part of their bread rations. Little boys followed him, imitating his march. Little girls giggled shyly at him. Edge saw him as their friend in the fort.

He remembered something from his Command School training: the people will follow whoever feeds them. All he needed to do was capture some byson and rope them together like he had helped Uncle Deck do with his cattle a few times, find some evidence of vegetation, and bring it all back to the world. The people of Edge would be swayed to his cause when they saw the promise of fresh meat and large farms, all free for the taking. By the time Thorne would arrive, Edge would be his.

That's when the confrontation would happen, in front of the entire army. There would be more than 80,000 men and women standing there, ready to make the decision: would they follow the man who could guarantee food and land, or the man who killed their grandparents and was now trying to chase down a mythological village?

The choice was obvious.

His chest burned with anticipation. For a moment he considered slipping down to Lemuel's bedroom and retrieving one of his old general's uniforms in preparation for the day, but he remembered how ill-fitting Thorne's old lieutenant's jacket was. It didn't matter.

When he was General Perrin Shin, he could design any kind of jacket he wanted.

Poe looked around him in surprise.

He was standing in a field with a bright light was all around him. He spun, trying to orient himself, trying to remember the last thing he did. He went to bed, right? And now he was . . .

He noticed a figure emerging from the bright light, someone tall wearing dark clothing. As the figure neared and came into focus, Poe was dumbfounded.

The figure grinned at him. “*Sergeant Major Qualipoe Hili!* Look at you! Not a little boy wearing silk shirts anymore, are you?”

Poe’s mouth moved vainly in an attempt to speak. Finally words came out. “Colonel? Colonel Shin!”

Colonel Shin chuckled. “It’s great to see you again too, Poe! I want to tell you I am proud of you. Look at what you’ve become!”

Poe tried to stand taller. He glanced down and saw he was in full dress uniform, just like the colonel before him.

“I owe all of this to you, sir,” he said in a shaking voice. “I always wanted to make you proud of me. I always looked up to you.”

“Even when I put you in chains and brought you to the incarceration building when you were fourteen?” Shin queried.

Poe looked down at the ground with an embarrassed smile. “All right, not then. I must admit I hated you then. And the other three times, too. But I also hated myself, and you did what you had to do, didn’t you?” he said, looking up again.

“It tore me apart to see you like that, in chains,” the colonel said, his dark brown eyes warm and bright, “but eventually you came around.”

“I did, sir, because of you.”

“No, Poe. You give me far too much credit—”

“No, sir,” Poe insisted, elated for the opportunity to say the words he never thought he could. “Because *you* gave me another chance. First, you came to visit me, every single day that I was incarcerated. Not even my parents bothered to check on me. That fourth time, when I was in the inner cell for an entire season, you were the only one who ever cared. You even brought me blankets and extra rations when it became colder. You have no idea how much that meant to me, then and now. I wasn’t the kindest to you then, but you never failed me.

“Then, when I came back to Edge right before that land tremor, no one wanted me. My father seemed disappointed to see I was still alive, and when my parents refused to let me in the house, I had no idea what to do. I wanted a different life, but,” he shrugged. “I was sleeping in the village green that night when the land tremor hit. You found me that morning and put me on your horse—”

“You were so scrawny my horse never noticed your presence,” Colonel Shin interrupted with a self-conscious smile in response to

Poe's gushing. "Glad to see you've bulked up over the years."

Poe smiled. "You brought me to your home, saw that I was fed, let me sit by your fire, let me wear your old coat—"

"*Mahrree* put my old coat on you," the colonel reminded him.

"That's right, she did." He was taken aback by the way the colonel said her name, as if he still loved her. "But sir, *you* visited me when I was locked up. Every day, sir. *Every day*. I never forgot that. Then *you* were the one who put your sword into my hands that night after the land tremor. You're the one who entrusted me with the safety of your family."

His chin trembled.

"Sir, no one ever trusted me like that before. I felt such a responsibility to keep you safe so you could protect all of Edge." He looked down with a faint smile. "It was a good thing no one ever came by that night because I didn't have the foggiest idea of what to do with a sword. That thing was heavy and I was out of shape!"

The colonel chuckled, and Poe was astonished at how familiar it sounded. "Poe, I know I told you this when you left, but I *am* sorry you were the one they had to send to Idumea to tell us about the condition of Edge, that you were transferred for stealing those horses along the way—"

Poe's head shot up. "Please don't be, sir! Riding back to Edge with you was the greatest experience of my life. And Grasses proved to be a very good place. Grandpy Neeks took excellent care of me, I met several good officers and," he turned pink to reveal the next part, "I became a little famous in my own way."

Colonel Shin tipped his head. "Oh, really?"

Poe nodded eagerly, as if he were that nine-year-old boy again, chatting with Captain Shin. "That play they did about you? 'The Midnight Ride of Colonel Shin'? Well, it came to Grasses and I went to see it with some soldiers, and one of them told the actors that I was the real Private Hili. They pulled me up on the stage and everyone stood and applauded. After that, people would take me aside to ask what it was like to defend the supply train with Colonel Shin."

The colonel grinned. "I'm so glad to hear it, Poe."

"I was glad to do it, sir!" Poe said proudly. "I don't know that I ever thanked you enough. I never got to see you again before you . . . before you—"

Colonel Shin held up his hands to stop him. He looked exactly the way Poe remembered him: broad, muscular, black hair with gray around the edges, and sparkling dark eyes. “Seeing you as a successful sergeant major is more than enough thanks. I know that many, many soldiers look up to you. *You* now hold that fort at Edge together, Poe. Well done!” His large hands gripped Poe’s shoulders and squeezed them, like a hug from a distance.

Poe smiled, pleasant heat flushing through his body originating from his shoulders which the colonel released. “I still wish I could do something more.”

“Well,” Colonel Shin said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, “now that you mention it . . . I’m here to ask you to do me a favor.”

“Anything, sir!”

The colonel sighed. “Poe, there’s another young man in Edge who’s about to do something very stupid. And when he does, his father’s not going to want him alive anymore either. No one will care what happens to him, but I care.”

Poe felt himself growing weak. Everyone thought it, but there had been no real evidence . . . “Sir, he really *is* your grandson?”

Colonel Shin nodded. “You’ve known it from the moment you first signed him up. You’ve felt me with him, too. Very perceptive of you.”

And that’s when the scent came to Poe again, something, something earthy sweet. He never before remembered dreaming about a scent.

Maybe this wasn’t entirely a dream . . .

“Few people in the world feel anything anymore,” the colonel continued. “But you do, which says a great deal about your heart. Sometimes my grandson listens to me, but lately?” He shrugged in despair. “He’s ignoring me completely. But Poe, he’s been listening to *you*.”

Poe straightened his back. “Sir, what do you want me to do?”

“What did I do to *you*, Poe?”

“All kinds of things!” he chuckled darkly. “Had me watched, I suppose. You always seemed to be where I’d end up—ah, I see.”

An image came to his mind, a location just outside of Edge. And a young man on a horse with a pack horse approaching it.

“Yes, you do, Poe. And what did it take for you to come around?”

Poe frowned. “I *see* . . .”

He felt the colonel squeeze his shoulders again, but the image of

the lieutenant was still in his eyes. “I love my stupid grandson, Poe. Please help him. You may be the only man who can.”

Poe opened his eyes to tell the colonel he’d be happy to do so, but instead found himself in bed staring up at the dark ceiling.

“No!” he whimpered that the dream was already over. But, wonderfully, his shoulders still felt as if a massive man had recently gripped them. And in the darkness hung a scent—an odd but comforting combination of soil and sweet rolls.

He wiped away his tears because he didn’t have much time.



It was still dark the morning of the 5th Day of Planting when the lieutenant slipped out of a side door of the mansion and crept across the soft snow. He took it as a good sign that the air was warmer than it’d been in more than two seasons. He hadn’t bothered to light a fire last night in his room, and all around him was the unmistakable trickling noise of snow melting. If this weather continued, by the time he reached Terryp’s land the ground might even be clear.

He secured the large pack on his back, but needed to carry it only to the fort where he would saddle up Trigger and give a pack horse the burden of his extra clothing, rations, plans, maps, and bedroll. He knew the soldiers on duty at the stables. It wouldn’t be hard to convince them to let him take the horses and a few bags of feed. He’d be on his way in less than half an hour.

Getting to the fort in the dark wasn’t a problem. Neither was acquiring Trigger and the pack horse. The soldiers believed the story that he was on a secret errand for General Thorne.

Leaving the fort under the cover of darkness also wasn’t difficult. He had a clear road before him, and everything was going his way, just as it had when he first took flight out of Salem.

He should have noticed the similarities but he didn’t.

Not until he was past the village limits and on his way south following the contours of the Hill.

The sun started to rise above the frozen swampy east, bathing the area in shockingly brilliant light—the first time in half a year. As if the world suddenly remembered how to let the sun shine in, it did so in dazzling glory. The intense light illuminated every-

thing, including the ten soldiers on horseback that suddenly appeared in front of him from behind a tangle of trees and boulders.

The lieutenant reined Trigger and the pack horse to a stop as the soldiers formed a barrier in front of him. He licked his lips uncertainly, trying to figure out what this meant and what he could do about it, when he heard the voices behind him. He didn’t even bother to turn around but closed his eyes in defeat.

“You were right, Sergeant Major Hili,” Major Twigg said. “He *is* the thickest officer who’s ever served. Lieutenant Thorne, I’m not surprised to hear myself say this but I *am* disappointed: You are under arrest.”

Chapter 30--“You’ve got some nerve, boy!”

Although the lieutenant spent the last hour trying to think of a way to get himself out of his present mess, nothing came to mind. All the evidence was there, laid out on the forward command office desk for anyone to see. The map, the plans, the list of supplies, the timetable—his own handwriting scrawling out his conviction.

According to the major, he was guilty of plotting against the general and the army of Idumea. He left without permission, he had stolen a pack horse, he was going against the orders of the commanding officer of the fort, and he had lied to enlisted men.

He sat in the hard chair, his hands and feet shackled in chains, and stared at the floor desperately trying to think of anything. But his mind was blank as he listened to the muffled arguing going on in the command office. Twigg and Hili were discussing his situation, but the lieutenant couldn’t make out any of the words. Neither one of the men were happy, though, that much was obvious.

The lieutenant glanced at the door, but quickly looked down again to avoid the sniggers of the six guards posted around him, their swords drawn just waiting for the lieutenant to make another dumb move.

Dumb.

He tried not to think about that word, but it really was the only one that fit. He should’ve been more cautious. He should’ve taken a less-obvious route, but there really wasn’t any other route.

Then again, who’d be traveling so early in the morning anyway? It was as if they *knew* somehow.

Hili’s voice came louder again through the closed door, and the lieutenant’s chest burned with anger.

It was all *his* fault. Hili didn’t want the lieutenant to go by himself and bring home all the glory, so he had him watched and

followed. All Hili had to do was forget the lieutenant ever talked to him yesterday. But no.

The stupid old man who should have died last year anyway had to play Thorne’s little faithful dog and bring his master a bone. Maybe this was vengeance for the lieutenant calling him “weak.”

Well, he just proved it, didn’t he? So weak that he has to run tattling like a four-year-old to the major. Stupid old man. All of them. There was wisdom in eliminating the older generation. Too bad they didn’t get rid of every last one of them.

The command office door flung open to reveal Twigg and Hili, both red-faced.

He glared back defiantly.

“Do you have anything to say in your defense?” Twigg demanded.

“Is this an inquiry?”

“Not yet.”

“Then I have nothing to say yet.”

Twigg stepped closer and leaned to within inches of his face. “Nothing to SAY? I find that exceptionally hard to believe!”

The lieutenant stared past him.

Twigg straightened his back. “But you *will* stand for your crimes against the general and the army, in three days.”

That caught the lieutenant off guard. Thorne would be there in just days?

“Yes,” Twigg said, a smug smile developing on his taut face. “While *the army* will be here on the 29th, *Thorne* will be here day after tomorrow. He wants to begin his search for the unknown village immediately by questioning some people. But I’m sure he’ll find time to conduct your inquiry. In the meantime, think about what you’ll say in your defense while you spend the next few days in confinement at the incarceration building in Edge.”

The lieutenant didn’t know what was more startling—the fact that Thorne would be there soon or that he was going to be locked up. He looked over to Hili imploringly.

Hili tipped his head. “Did you really think we were going to let you stay at the mansion after this? As if Slither could control you.”

Speechless, the lieutenant only blinked in surprise.

“You’ve got some nerve, boy! After everything everyone has done for you . . . I’ve got nothing more to say to you.” Hili motioned to the guards. “Take him to incarceration.”

The lieutenant was too stunned to say or do anything as two guards roughly pulled him out of the chair. He stumbled a little but was yanked into a standing position by another guard. Affronted by his brutishness, the lieutenant shouted, “Hey!”

But the guard smacked him across the face. “No talking!”

The lieutenant, infuriated, looked over at Twigg and Hili, fully expecting them to admonish the guard for his behavior.

But neither of the men moved to his defense. They only nodded at the guards to continue on.

One of them shoved the lieutenant and he barely caught himself before he stumbled down the stairs.

That’s when he realized—he’d messed up. Big. And this time, there was no one rushing to his defense, no friends in the fort to speak for him. Onus was dead, Kroop was gone, and now Hili had regarded him with severe disappointment.

The lieutenant reached the bottom of the stairs and was greeted by every soldier’s stares.

“Make way for the criminal! The betrayer of General Thorne!” shouted one of the guards, a bit too gleefully, as he pushed him along.

The lieutenant groaned as he heard half a dozen whispered conversations erupt around him. He wasn’t a criminal and he certainly didn’t betray the general. He really hadn’t *done* anything except take an early morning ride! But saying so would only earn him another smack across the face.

He stepped out into the compound keeping his eyes on the ground, but still feeling stares as every soldier getting ready for his morning shift stopped and watched the lieutenant, shackled hand and foot.

One of the guards grabbed his arm, as if the lieutenant had the ability to run away, and pulled him over to a wagon. He struggled to climb up, but a kick in his rump from another guard helped him along. He stared numbly at the bottom of the wagon while the rest of the guards climbed around him.

Something was different about the day, the lieutenant noticed. He saw his shadow. Not faint and vague as on other days when the sun struggled to burn through the murky air, but a distinctly sharp shadow.

The sun was out—fully out—and shining brightly.

He’d noticed it earlier, but his observation of the change in

the weather was abruptly halted by the soldiers who stopped his progress. The air, too, felt different. Warmer.

As the wagon lurched on its way out of the compound, the lieutenant took a deep breath. The air smelled clear and promising, like early Planting Season air usually did. He didn’t have time to think about what that might mean, because the wagon now pulled out of the compound and was headed south into Edge.

“Make way for the criminal!” one of the guards shouted happily to whoever might be walking along the roads. “The betrayer of General Thorne!”

And there were lots of people along the roads. Everyone, it seemed, had to come outside to experience the first true sunshine in moons. Facing east and smiling at the light, nearly every villager littered the roads.

The lieutenant sighed quietly and grumbled under his breath. Great, just great. Now everyone in Edge would see him.

No, that *was* great, he decided. They’d be upset to see his mistreatment. They’d rally to his aid when the time was right. The people of Edge would still be behind him!

He lifted up his head to peer between the guards.

Only a couple people could be bothered to pay attention as the wagon rolled by. It was blocking their sunlight, after all. One man sneered. Another man shook his head disapprovingly. A young woman merely glanced over at him then continued to gaze at the brilliant sphere of white in the sky.

The lieutenant bit his lip in worry. She *always* flirted with him. Maybe she didn’t recognize him. Wait a minute, how could she *not* recognize him? No one sat taller in the wagon than him! No one looked *remotely* like him . . .

They came to another intersection and the guard again shouted his announcement. Once more the lieutenant looked eagerly around to see if any of the citizens around would notice him.

Nothing. No one cared.

Or maybe they *did* care but couldn’t show it. Why should they risk drawing the attention of the guards? The lieutenant could understand that. These people had been through so much, of course they’d be concerned about self-preservation.

Or maybe they were just too distracted by the light. Bad timing that he’d be hauled away on the first sunny day in half a year.

After a few more roads, and a few more announcements from

guards, and more impassive and even irritated looks from citizens, the wagon came to a stop in front of a plain block building.

A soldier came out of the building with raised eyebrows. “Well, what do we have here?” The driver of the wagon handed him a note and the soldier smirked. “The *Little Lieutenant* himself! What do you know. I haven’t had such an interesting prisoner in years. I have just the spot for him.”

The lieutenant tried to keep his face set. To know that people in Edge had a nickname for him was one thing, but to hear it said so derisively caught him off guard.

A few minutes later the lieutenant, minus his chains, was installed in his new room. It was constructed of block a few inches shorter than he was so he couldn’t stand up straight. A board with a thin piece of cloth over it served as his bed, which was also a few inches too short, and a small hole in the ground in the opposite corner of the tiny room emitted such a stench that he knew exactly what its purpose was. The narrow door, which he was shoved through, was now shut with a loud thud. The small window, latticed in iron bars in the oak door, was the only source of dim light from the hallway.

Up until that moment the lieutenant remained defiant and proud. But now that he was alone—completely alone—he felt terror that he hadn’t experienced since he was trapped in the ash fall during the eruption. Panic swept through him as he realized there was no escape.

Instinctively he rushed for the door, trying to rattle it, hoping for some give, but the solid wood wouldn’t budge. He looked frantically around, remembering that Hili had said one could still glimpse the sun from the incarceration building, but there were no other cracks where the brilliant light could come through.

The lieutenant began to breathe harder and faster, feeling as if the tiny room was growing smaller by the moment.

“No, no, no, no, no!” he whispered, trying to shake the door again. He peered through the bars hoping to see something, but there was only faint light coming from another room somewhere. Everything was dark, cramped, and foul.

The room felt now like a coffin, closing in with isolation and despair, and he felt the irrational need to push against the wall to keep it from engulfing him. He panted as he pushed, trying to ensure that the walls stayed up, but it was no use. He had no power

to change anything. His strength failed, as did his hope.

Helpless, he slid along the wall to the filthy ground and his shoulders beginning to shake. Tears slid down his face and, like a child, he held his head in his hands and sobbed.



Peto stood outside of his house in the back garden, his arms outstretched in a stance almost akin to worship as he faced east. He was nearly overcome with the strongest urge to take off his coat, shirt, and undershirt to expose as much of his skin as he could to the bright sun that was rising above the mountains that ringed Salem.

But Rector Shin restrained himself. He knew that his wife, mother, and children were watching him from the windows and likely giggling.

The sky was blue that morning: a true *blue*. The sun was blinding, an actual burning sphere that produced just the smallest amount of heat, but it was enough. Peto had to drink it all in. He couldn’t abide sitting at the breakfast table with his family a moment longer, allowing the glorious morning go to waste.

Lilla had assured him they’d all be out in a minute to welcome back the sun with him, but that wasn’t good enough. What if another hazy cloud came by in the meantime?

So he stood out there with his eyes closed, breathing in deeply the air that tasted like Planting Season and thanking the Creator for something *different*.

He grinned as he felt the sun and the Creator tell him, *You Are Welcome*.

Then, suddenly, the sun lost its tiny amount of warmth.

Peto squinted open his eyes to peer at it. It was still shining but bizarrely no longer shone on him. He pulled his arms in and felt as if he was enclosed somehow, as if everything was crushing around him. His breathing quickened as a sense of terror, of darkness, of loneliness overwhelmed him. He could no longer stand but crumpled to his knees. A tremendous wave of remorse engulfed him.

“Dear Creator!” he gasped. “Forgive me, but what have I done?”

As he gripped his head in his hands, the words came clearly to his mind: *It’s not you—it’s your son. So that you will understand.*

Just as quickly as the darkness overcame him, it left, and the sun warmed his face again. Cautiously, Peto looked up and saw blue

skies.

Behind him, a door slammed and Lilla rushed to him.

“Peto, are you all right? I saw you go down, and—”

“Yes, yes,” he assured her as he tried to get to his feet. “I just—” He didn’t know how to tell her.

“I know,” she whispered fretfully. “It’s Young Pere, isn’t it? He’s done something stupid. Very big and very stupid. I felt it a moment ago. As if he’s in a . . . in a *box* of some kind—”

“Like in an incarceration cell?”

Lilla narrowed her eyes. “I’ve heard that phrase before but I don’t remember what it means. What is that?”

“It means . . . he can’t *cause* any more trouble for a while.”

His wife began to tremble. “It’s not as good as you’re trying to make it sound, is it?”



Time moves strangely when one sees no light. Maybe it doesn’t move at all. Maybe it stops, just like everything else. No light, no time, no feeling, no thought, no sense, no direction.

The lieutenant sat there hour after hour, or maybe just minute after minute. Sometimes he sobbed, sometimes he whispered nothing of importance, sometimes he hummed tunelessly.

He wasn’t even sure what the slop on the wooden board was when it came in the evening, but he knew he had to eat it. The water in the mug tasted off but he realized he had no other options.

He waited.

Keeping his mind from thinking was the hardest thing to do. Each time a thought of what he *should* have done or what *might* happen to him flashed into his mind, he shoved it away and rocked back and forth. He was growing sick with waiting but he knew that wouldn’t help him either.

Only one person came to see him—the very man he did *not* want to see, and he refused to look at him when he came by that night.

“How are you doing, Thorne?” Sergeant Major Hili said amiably through the barred window in the door.

How was he doing? He actually had the nerve to ask him how he was doing?

The lieutenant refused to answer. He heard the locks on the

door working and saw out of the corner of his eye the sergeant major coming through the door. It shut behind him loudly.

“So what did you think of the food here?” Hili said. “Heard the cook used to work at Edge’s Inn. For about ten minutes.”

The lieutenant didn’t smile but stared at the wall.

Hili nodded slowly. “I understand. I really do. You’d be surprised how well I understand.”

The lieutenant continued to stare.

“Whew—the smell hasn’t changed in all these years,” Hili commented. “Amazing how scents stay with you. Such persistent memories.”

The lieutenant didn’t move.

“Should you need anything, Lek—anything at all—let the guards know.” Hili put a hand on his back. “Most of them owe me favors.”

The lieutenant pulled away from his touch.

“Understand. Someday you’ll understand too.” Then he left. It wasn’t soon enough.

The next morning the lieutenant’s remaining bravado, rage, and frustration were crushed by the walls. When he woke up on the hard board, chilled because of the inadequacy of the blanket, it all came down on him.

He was a complete failure.

He felt as low and as stupid as he did after his first night in the world when he lost everything in one brainless night dancing to the drums and laying with a sow.

But somehow, this was even worse.

Maybe it was because he wasn’t so naive anymore. Maybe because he knew precisely what he was doing and refused to believe he really wasn’t in control of anything.

He *had* to believe it now. No one cared about him. Even though Hili had visited him, it was likely to get a report to bring to Twigg about how devastated the lieutenant was. If he showed up today, undoubtedly his report would bring even more amusement to the soldiers on duty. The soldiers who hated him.

Everyone hated him. He heard the guards sniggering about the “Little Lieutenant” locked up in the center cell.

He curled up on the board and stared at the block wall inches from his face. He studied the tiny grooves in the mortar and rock wall until his tears made it too blurry to focus. He was beyond help. He was—

No.

No, he remembered something his father had said, repeatedly, as he stood in front of their congregation.

“No one is ever too far gone for the Creator to find them again.”

The lieutenant held on to that thought for a minute, five minutes, then ten minutes hoping that it might be true. The possibility left him nearly breathless with feathers of optimism, and if he exhaled too heavily he'd blow the potential away. There was only one thing he could do, only one thing he had to do: ask for help.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath . . .

And realized the futility of it.

There were those who the Creator wanted to help, no doubt. Then there were the *others*. Others that He'd promised to also help, but really didn't want to. But, duty is duty.

The lieutenant cringed. There was nothing worse than being pitied except begging others to pity and rescue you. He didn't deserve rescue. He couldn't ask for it. It was too embarrassing.

As he lay there on the board, an image came to his mind. He envisioned his family, all of them, including the married siblings and their children at his parents' home. Years ago Puggah had extended the eating room to accommodate the growing family, and two more tables were added.

On Holy Days, not only did everyone come home to eat, but so did many others in the rectory. New refugees or neighbors, visiting families wanting to meet the Shins, or just old friends—there were always extra bodies for dinner, but that was all right; the rector's wife always cooked twice as much, in anticipation. Lilla Shin's dinners were legendary.

The lieutenant saw the feast, with people young and old packed around the tables. They were laughing, passing food, and carrying on loud conversations.

Someone new came to the door and was eagerly shown in. Plates were squeezed in a little tighter, another chair was forced in, and the newcomer laden with food.

Then the lieutenant imagined himself at the door, looking in, and the conversation at the table silenced. No one moved but stared at him in the doorway.

“Oh,” said someone in a monotone. “Forgot about *that* one.”

Instead of eagerly making room, each person looked uncomfortably at their neighbor. Someone cleared their throat, someone else coughed, and Rector Shin stood up.

“Well, we *probably* can make room again,” he said in the same tone the lieutenant used whenever forced to allow a younger brother or cousin join in a game; clearly not wanted, but it was Salem’s duty to never turn someone away.

The lieutenant squeezed his eyes shut tighter, but still remained the image of his family and neighbors grudgingly sliding to make room for him. They didn’t want him yet they couldn’t turn him away. His presence had ruined the evening.

He wouldn’t do it. Just as he wouldn’t force his presence at his parents’ home, neither would he pester the Creator with the pleas of a stupid son. He put himself there, he’d have to stay there. Eventually they’d need the space for an even more important criminal, and they’d toss him out somewhere else to . . .

Well, what did they do with the slag no one wanted? All this time around swordsmiths and metal workers at the fort, and he had no idea what they did with the useless, castoff lumps. They just seemed to vanish away.

He wished he could’ve vanished. Instead he lay there all day until the evening when he heard the voice again.

“Hello, Lek,” Hili said kindly as he came through the door again. He sat down next to the lieutenant on the small cot.

The lieutenant slid closer to the wall, wishing he could become part of the block.

Hili sighed. “I didn’t want to have to do this, Lek. I promise. I was trying to save you from yourself, from your impulsiveness. I set up the catch because, believe it or not, I care about you. I consider you a friend and I didn’t want to see my friend destroy his future.”

The lieutenant almost opened his mouth at that, but he didn’t know what to say. He had no friends. Hili’s purpose was simply information gathering, and the lieutenant had nothing to offer. Why they didn’t just eliminate him now, he couldn’t understand.

“So, the sun’s out again,” Hili said to break the silence. “I thought it might make things outside cheerier, but I promise, you’re not missing much. It’s still cold, the ground’s hard as a rock, the village is as dingy as ever, and the sky just isn’t properly blue.”

Something caught in his throat as he said that.

“Been a long time since I looked at the color of the sky,” he murmured. “Hasn’t been blue for a long time and it still isn’t. Yet we still claim that it is. How ludicrous is that? Why did I never notice that before?”

The lieutenant said nothing. The color of the sky seemed to be a strange thing to worry about right now.

Hili patted his thigh. “Can I get you anything? Blanket? Pillow?”

The lieutenant stared at the wall.

“Understood,” Hili said quietly and went on his way.

Still, a small pillow and a thicker blanket were tossed in the cell before bedtime.

The next day the door unlatched earlier. The lieutenant didn’t know what he should expect, but it must have been close to the time he would be tossed out into the slag heap. This would’ve been the day the general was to have come back, and the lieutenant thought perhaps it’d be better if he could vanish before facing him.

Hili came in the cell with an apologetic look on his face. “Lek, Thorne’s returned. I’m sorry, but he doesn’t want you out yet.”

The lieutenant bit his lip. He didn’t know what to make of that development.

In a low voice, Hili said, “To put it mildly, he’s furious. It’s likely a good idea that you remain here or you might not live to see the morning. I’ve seen the general when he’s like this and there’s simply no reasoning with him. I’ll do what I can for you, but . . .” He shrugged helplessly.

The lieutenant turned away to the wall again, too despondent to know how to respond.

“I’m trying, Lek,” Hili said again, almost pleadingly. “Please, I really am trying.”

He didn’t know why Hili bothered. He actually seemed to be sorry the lieutenant was incarcerated. The fact that the sergeant major showed up each day only filled the lieutenant with regret that Poe felt some odd compulsion to visit him.

That last day was the longest day, even though the past days were fantastically dreadful. He watched the small window, waiting, still unsure of what he’d say when he was finally freed and faced the general. Eventually the door opened and the board with undefinable food came in again, and he realized that Hili hadn’t

been by to visit him.

He watched the door all night, drifting in and out of an uneasy sleep, bracing himself for when it might fly open and he’d face—

And that thought filled him with more fear than any other. He’d never paid attention to the criminal proceedings in the world. Now he wished he knew something. All the things he had avoided thinking about for the past four days plagued him during the night. What would happen to him next?

He pondered again what he *should* have done, but every scenario failed because he never anticipated that Thorne would return to Edge *early*. He came to question people. That’s what Twigg said. But who?

Amory . . . Amory might tell him everything.

Maybe that’s why no one came to get him. Maybe Thorne realized that “his son” wasn’t his son after all, so he was going to leave the little Zenos upstart to rot in the cell. No one in Salem would know what happened to him. He’d never know what happened to Salem—

He remained on his side in the tiny room, curled up in a ball.

Eventually the dim light began to return to the window in the door. He waited for his morning meal, but it didn’t come. He rocked until he heard voices. He scrambled to his feet and tried to smooth out his filthy jacket. The door swung open to reveal soldiers.

“Get him cleaned up,” came an unfamiliar voice. “Washed, shaved. Brush out that jacket, too. He needs to be presentable.”

“For what?” he responded nervously, startled to hear his own voice after so many days of silence.

One of the soldiers reached in the cell and pulled him out, but he went as willingly as he could.

“They always smell so bad when they come out of there, don’t they?” said one of the guards, prodding him down a narrow, dank corridor. “Like a forgotten sow.”

His legs, stiff from disuse, did their best to keep moving, but he stumbled as he went. The corridor opened up to a larger room with narrow windows high up on the walls that let in a little light. In the middle of the room was a large trough filled with water.

“Take off your clothes, get in, and scrub up,” one of the guards ordered as they pushed him toward it. “Give me your jacket. As if anything can be done with this.”

He quickly took off his jacket and handed it over, then willingly removed the rest of his clothing. He didn’t care that the water was cold. He just wanted to get the stench off of him. When he finished

washing he noticed a set of clothing folded on a chair.

“Those are yours, supposedly,” said one of the guards. “Sent over from the mansion. You’ll go without your jacket. That will take longer to clean.”

“Where am I going?” he asked submissively as he used a thin cloth to dry himself.

The guards only sneered as they watched him hurriedly dress. It felt strange to put on clean clothing and his white undershirt. His trousers felt almost stiff, and even though he felt underdressed without his jacket, he felt almost like a new man.

They led him over to a scratched mirror and monitored him closely as he shaved himself, making sure he didn’t attempt to use the blade for anything else.

He avoided looking into his eyes, too worried about what he might see, but ran his fingers through his wet hair that needed a trim and hoped he looked acceptable, but for what?

Nervously, he nodded to the guards that he was ready, but one of them motioned for him to hold out his arms. He obediently held them out and the chains were clapped around his wrists and legs.

So much for a new man. He felt like an animal. A dumb, useless animal fit for nothing but to be slaughtered. Bothering to have him cleaned up seemed like a waste of water.

They led him out of the building and into the blinding light of the morning. The sun still shone brightly and the sky was blue—a real blue. He almost gasped at the intensity of it. After four days of dim nothing, it was as if he had never seen such colors before.

But the air was cold, and he shivered in his thin shirt and wet hair as he climbed clumsily into the wagon, surrounded again by guards. Their bodies did little to break the cold wind that chilled him, but at least the air smelled clean.

He glanced anxiously around as the wagon made its way to the fort. He wondered if he should be memorizing the mountains or noticing that there was one tree that was trying to bud, because it might be the last time he ever saw such things.

He wondered about the date—the 9th day of Planting, right? Was this his Last Day?

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed something as the wagon plodded along. Ruins. They were where the second house on a road should have been, but the house had been burned down ages ago. He knew what it was, yet had always ignored it, like a

spider bite begging to be scratched but he tried to pretend it wasn’t there.

It was *their* house. The one Muggah had purchased, the one Puggah had added rooms to for his children. The one that had burned to ground sometime after they’d left the world.

Today, the melting snows revealed the stone foundation, gray and tan rocks fitted on top of each other, still holding firm. In Weeding Season he’d seen explosions of wildflowers there, and a couple of trees even grew up from the middle of what likely had been the eating and gathering room.

He glimpsed the ruins only for a moment, the foundation impressing deeply into his mind, because it was still there. Everything else had burned away, but someone could have gone to that site today, cleared out the vegetation, and constructed a solid house on top of that foundation that remained firm.

He knew that was supposed to mean something, that his gaze had been directed to the site as they drove past, but right now he was too anxious to think more on it.

He swallowed hard as the wagon turned from the fort road to a side road that led directly to the mansion. He couldn’t tell if it was a promising development or not. The last execution occurred on the front steps. But he wasn’t facing execution, was he? He *couldn’t* be.

He breathed only slightly easier when he saw there were no more than the regular guards stationed at the front door. The wagon pulled up to a service door and the guards yanked him out. The door opened, he was shoved through it, down the back hall, and soon found himself in the grand eating room of the mansion.

General Thorne sat in his regular chair at his breakfast. Without looking up he said casually, “The rest of you wait outside.”

The lieutenant felt exposed and vulnerable as he stood in the corner of the large room, every mirror along the walls reflecting the chains that bound him hand and foot.

Professor Slither sat in another chair, also refusing to look at him but focused intently on a piece of bread.

The lieutenant continued to stand, trying to control his trembling, as he waited patiently for what was going to come next.

Finally General Thorne spoke. “So, I come home expecting to find my *son*,” he said with a snarl while he still fixated on his breakfast, “eagerly awaiting my return, that he’d be excited and willing to

take on the command of one thousand men—an unheard of opportunity for such a young man. But instead,” he looked up at the lieutenant with dead eyes, “I receive a report that my son, Lek Thorne, was sitting in the innermost cell of incarceration.”

The lieutenant swallowed, unsure if he should say anything.

“No,’ I told them at the fort,” Thorne continued with a fake smile on his face, “‘that can’t be right. *My* son? The devoted, hard-working, favorite son of Edge, *in trouble?* He wouldn’t do that to me, to his name.’ But Lek, I was wrong.” He reached behind him and pulled a stack of papers from off a chair.

The lieutenant winced as he recognized his notes which the general dropped casually in front of him.

“You see, Lek, I’m rarely wrong. And there’s nothing I hate more than having my officers give me evidence that I am.”

The lieutenant continued to stand silently at attention, the chain too tight around his left wrist.

Professor Slither went on examining his piece of bread as if it were the most interesting thing he’d ever laid eyes upon.

“Fascinating stack of paper, I thought to myself,” Thorne continued, “as I read *each* and *every* word yesterday. Maps. Lists of supplies. Time tables. You didn’t expect me here until the 29th, isn’t that right? And by then you’d be back, correct? To . . . what, greet me? Surprise me? Ah, but then . . .”

Thorne pulled another sheet of paper from the bottom of the stack. “Just when I thought that perhaps your intentions weren’t malicious or deceitful, just when I had myself convinced that you were trying to do something good for the world and your devoted father, I find *this*.” General Thorne held up a small paper with several scrawls on it.

The lieutenant’s chest seized. That wasn’t in the notes he had in his pack. It was in the fireplace. The one he didn’t light because the evening had been so balmy—

A piece of paper that should’ve been destroyed.

“Tell me, Lek,” Thorne quietly seethed as he turned to read it again, “who’s signature is this, practiced so carefully? Exactly who is *General Perrin Shin*? Someone I *used* to know? Or someone I’m *going* to know?”

The lieutenant didn’t need to look at his reflection in the many mirrors to know that he’d gone gray. He hadn’t expected someone would search his room. Yet another thing he failed to consider

before he headed off in a mad dash for the west.

“I’m waiting for an answer, soldier!” Thorne snapped.

“Sir, it was just . . . nothing,” he burst out. “No meaning at all. Just random scribbling. That’s why it was to be burned.”

The general studied him. “You have no idea how much I want to believe you, Lek. But I can’t ignore the fact that after I give you my name, give you a commission, give you a bedroom in my home, and give you my food to eat, you choose to take another man’s name. *His* name.”

“Just my grandfather’s, sir. Just to see how it looked. But I didn’t like it, sir. That’s why I tossed that in the fireplace.”

“Hm,” Thorne grunted. “Almost believable. So why were you so intent on finding Terryp’s land that you were willing to steal a horse and supplies to do so? That you were willing to abandon your duty and your education in this misguided quest?”

“To . . . to make you proud of me, sir,” he stammered. “To find the western lands without having to risk the lives of anyone else . . . to surprise you when you returned to Edge—”

“*SLAGGING ZENOS LIAR!*” Thorne roared.

The lieutenant jumped in surprise and clamped his jaw shut.

“How DARE you fill my ears with such words?” he said, standing up. “After all I’ve done for you! After all my sacrifice and effort for you, to teach you and train you! *This* is the thanks I get? Your lies? Creet, I should kill you myself, right now—”

“General!” Slither hissed, finally speaking. “You agreed—”

“Yes, yes!” Thorne spat at him. “I know!” He sat back down, his eyes fixed on the lieutenant. “I know all too well how this village feels about the *Little Lieutenant*,” he sneered. “And even though the soldiers hate him, I know how it’d look if I executed my own son.”

The general cocked his head to loosen a tight neck muscle.

“Fortunately for you, Lek, some in the army believe it’d be a bad idea to give you the punishment you have so thoughtlessly earned. This is a time for hope and optimism, so I’ve been told, and not for punishment and executions. Therefore,” he said with his left shoulder twitching in irritation, “you will live, if only to watch me succeed in finding this unknown village so that you can see the kind of man your father is, the kind of example you’re choosing to dishonor.” He picked up the paper with the signature of General Perrin Shin and crushed it into a ball in his left hand. “The name you *should* have been practicing was General Lek Thorne. But that’s a name I doubt

you will ever write, except in your dreams.”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant whispered. “And sir, I am sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Shut up!” Thorne raged. He closed his eyes and massaged his forehead. When he spoke again his voice was different.

“Strange thing about fatherhood—it makes you remember so much of your own childhood. I suppose I should be flattered that you’re as ambitious as I was as a young man. My goal at your age was to become a general—the youngest ever. I suppose it’s a family trait that you would follow in those footsteps.

“But what you don’t understand,” he continued in an oddly tranquil tone, his eyes still closed, “is that my father was not the kind of father I am, Lek. He was cruel and heartless. He cared only for himself and his position. No one else mattered. I shed no tears when I heard that he was killed by the sergeants’ army. As far as I know, neither did my mother. But I am not Qayin Thorne,” he said, opening his eyes and regarding the lieutenant with what could only be described as anguish. “And I deserve to be treated better by my son. My disappointment in you is deep and bitter. But as I said, I’m not Qayin Thorne, and I could see myself eventually forgiving you of your crimes. That’s what fathers do. At least, that’s what the *good* ones do.”

He sighed.

“The timing of this is bad, Lek. I need you now more than ever, and instead you stand in my eating room in chains and smelling like a cesspool. I don’t know what to do with you, I really don’t.”

“General,” Slither began quietly.

“*I know!*” Thorne hissed back at him. “I know,” he sighed again. “It’s been decided, Lieutenant Thorne, that you will continue to serve the army since every able-bodied man is needed for our search. It’s also been decided that you’ll be returned to the fort, stripped of your commission, and reinstated as a private. You’ll be under the constant supervision of Sergeant Major Hili, and you will do *nothing* unless you first check with him—eat, sleep, relieve yourself, *nothing* unless he gives you permission. Hili has been assigned to supervise the distribution of soldiers among commanders as well as arrange for camp positions as the army arrives. He has nine enlisted men helping him run his errands and keep his notes. You will be the tenth. You are nothing

more than another private. Do you understand?”

The lieut—

The *private* nodded.

“I’ve also chosen to strip you of your name. You’ll return to the name of dishonor you so earnestly wrote on this,” he said, throwing the balled up paper into the fireplace. “You are Private Perrin Shin. I cannot deny that you are my flesh and blood, but I can deny you the privilege that goes with it. You now have to *earn* my name, boy. And once you have, you will also earn my forgiveness. You may still someday become Lieutenant Thorne, but I don’t see that happening for a *very* long time. Until then, you’ll be watched every moment day and night until you prove yourself again.

“But know this,” Thorne said, pointing threateningly, “if you do anything, *anything at all*, to embarrass me or this army, you will once again know the joys of solitary confinement, and four days will seem like a pleasant vacation. Anything more serious, you will never again see the light of day. Understood?”

The private could do nothing more than nod.

Chapter 31--“Don’t let him down, Shin.”

Private Shin spent the next hour standing at attention in the corner, watching the general and the professor eat and discuss life in Idumea, who was doing what, and who was coming to Edge. They ignored him but seemed to be extending their time at the table just to keep him standing in the corner.

He did his best to dismiss the chaffing on his wrists and the grumbling of his stomach. He was reduced to nothing. Just as important as a piece of furniture and deserving of so much attention.

His life was about to change abruptly, but in many ways it’d be as it had been over a year and a half ago when he first came to Edge. He’d be a nobody soldier with the name of SHIN on his uniform. Strangely, that thought filled him with unexpected warmth.

But he knew he didn’t deserve to feel comfort, so he continued to stand painfully at attention, trying to hold his face still, trying to figure out what his next moves might be. Maybe for now he shouldn’t make any moves at all except the ones he was ordered to make.

Someone knocked on the front door, and a moment later the guard escorted a sergeant to the eating room. He was carrying the private’s uniform.

“It’s ready sir. Cleaned and *corrected*,” he said, displaying it for the general.

Shin noticed several of the insignias had been removed from his jacket, as well as the lieutenant’s gold braid. All that remained was a patch for the army of Idumea, a thin private’s stripe, and the name of SHIN.

Thorne nodded in approval. “Give it to him,” he said, not looking at the private. “Call in the guards to remove his shackles. Then you can escort him to Hili.”

“Yes, General.”

Shin quietly followed the sergeant out of the mansion a few

minutes later, subtly rubbing his sore wrists. He wouldn’t be returning to the massive house and his large private bedroom for a very long time, if ever. He kept his eyes on the ground as they passed the guards and out the main gates.

In silence they walked to the fort, Shin feeling fine with the idea of not talking with anyone ever again. At least he was still alive. At least he still had a place to sleep that would let him stretch out fully. At least he’d have three meals instead of two.

Actually, it was turning out to be a decent day, when looked at in the right way—

“You should know, Private Shin,” the sergeant said as they approached the gates, “you owe your life to one man. He’s the one who argued with the general for hours yesterday that you are still important to the fort and to Edge. In fact, his future depends upon how well you obey him. If you go down, so does he.”

The private nodded soberly. “Yes, sir. Who’s the man?”

“Sergeant Major Hili.”

Shin had already guessed that.

“Don’t let him down, Shin. Don’t be so arrogant as to destroy a good man. I’m warning you now that it’s already been discussed: if anyone sees you doing anything we find suspicious, we’ll eliminate you before can you destroy Hili. Every single soldier will be watching your every move. Do you understand?”

Maybe it wasn’t such a decent day after all. “Yes, sir. I understand completely.”

By the time Shin reached the sergeant major’s new office, a low building on the north side of the fort, he was an expert at looking ahead without seeing anyone. That way he could avoid the looks and snickers of everyone in the compound.

He had no friends, anywhere. All of the men he signed up with stopped talking to him when he became an officer, mainly because Shin stopped talking to them. He was a lieutenant after all; they were merely enlisted men. Now each of those men outranked him. *Everyone* outranked him.

He heard a familiar voice that had been silent for days.

BE PERFECT. BE ABSOLUTELY PERFECT IN EVERYTHING.

Shin stood quietly in the small reception room looking past the corporals who sniggered at him as they passed. His arrival had been announced to Hili, but he was busy. The sergeant who accompanied Shin wasn’t about to leave until he handed over his charge.

A minute later they heard the familiar voice. "Bring him in."

Shin stepped forward before the sergeant could grab his arm. He walked into the office to see Hili writing. Two more privates stood near the desk, waiting.

"Thank you, Sergeant," Hili said distractedly without looking up. "You may go. I officially relieve you of the Shin Watch."

"Thank you, sir." He added with a scoff, "And good luck."

Shin stood at attention knowing that the privates were eyeing him.

A moment later Hili picked up the paper and handed it to the soldiers. "You have the directions, right? He might give you some hassle, but this will explain why three thousand men will be calling his farm home for a few days. I want exact measurements of his property. We may need to squeeze in up to five hundred more. Report back as soon as you have the proper dimensions."

The two privates saluted and strode out the door, one of them purposefully bumping into Shin as he left.

The newest private didn't move but stood perfectly still.

Hili finally looked at him. "Shut the door, Shin."

The private did so.

"Are you hungry?" Hili asked, leaning back in his chair.

Shin swallowed. "I'm fit for duty, sir."

"But it's time for midday meal, you know. Hungry?"

Shin hesitated. "A little, sir."

"Sit."

"Yes, sir."

Hili reached down and pulled up a plate filled with dried beef, raisins, and bread. "For some reason I brought back two meals. Guess I thought I was more hungry than I was but I'm not anymore. Not allowed to waste any food now, are we?"

Shin was surprised by the wetness in his eyes. He looked at the man he cursed several times over the past few days and realized he was the only one concerned about feeding him.

"Thank you, sir," he whispered as he took the plate of food.

Hili produced a tall mug of water and sat it on the desk.

Shin didn't know when food ever tasted so good.

The sergeant major waited until he was finished eating, which took only a minute. "Has your new position been explained to you?"

Shin nodded as he swallowed the last of the water. "Yes, sir.

Everything, sir.”

“Good. I’ve been moved over here to better supervise the camps we’ll be establishing. In a couple of weeks, Edge will be fully encompassed to become the largest fort the world has ever seen. Rather looking forward to that,” Hili said with a small smile. “In the meantime, we have an extraordinary amount of work to do. First, this office is a mess. They brought over my files and dropped them just anywhere. Those men must have been trained by Kroop. Organizing this room is now your job. Get to work.”

Private Shin was immensely grateful for the task. In none of the scenarios he’d envisioned next for himself had he pictured organizing files. It was simple, menial work but it was in clean air with sunlight frequently glinting through the southern-facing windows. Soldiers streamed in and out of the office bringing Hili reports of farm dimensions and recommendations for where to tether horses and dig latrines with pickaxes.

Shin did his best to work behind and around them, but they went out of their way to nudge, bump, and in one case even stab his hand with a quill.

The message was clear: everyone knew who he was and why he was there, and they were watching him. But Shin behaved as a perfect soldier should and never said a word.

When it was time for dinner, Hili announced they’d be joining the other soldiers in the mess hall. Shin obediently filed in behind him, keeping his eyes down as they walked to the far end of the compound to the hall where Shin was first recruited by Major Yordin.

As they walked into the building, a hush fell over the soldiers until Hili loudly cleared his throat. The regular chatter resumed as Hili and Shin stood in line for their food.

Shin concentrated on his boots to avoid overhearing their conversations that were purposely loud enough for him to hear.

“His days are numbered. He can’t keep this up.”

“Anyone willing to take bets on how long until he’s another dead Shin?”

“Do you *smell* something? I swear it suddenly smells like an old latrine in here . . .”

When he and Hili sat down at an empty table, Shin didn’t look anywhere but at the food on his plate, and Hili didn’t speak. Shin frequently looked at the sergeant major’s plate to pace his own eating

to match. When they finished, Shin, still keeping his eyes down, followed Hili out. In silence they walked back to the office.

“We still have several hours’ worth of work to do,” Hili finally said. “I have a map of Edge and the surrounding area we can use to start plotting camps. We should work until bed time, then get an early start tomorrow. To be honest, even if we worked all day and night I’m not sure we’ll be ready for the arrival of the full army, or to move out by the 30th.”

“Yes, sir,” Shin said quietly. “Whatever you need, sir. And thank you, sir.”

If Shin had looked up he would have seen Poe Hili smiling. “Just doing my duty. Besides, everyone needs someone to give them another chance. But you’re welcome, *Perrin Shin*.”



For the next week and a half that was the private’s life: Sergeant Major Hili’s life. He even slept on a cot in the sergeant major’s quarters. Hili’s bed was pushed next to the door and window, and the private’s cot was set up in a corner away from any exits.

Shin didn’t mind, though. It was comforting to know that he was being saved from himself. Breakfast, midday meal, and dinner were always eaten with the sergeant major, the two of them away from everyone else. Their conversations were about nothing else but the task before them and the needs of the army. They went to bed at the same time and woke up at the same time. Hili had a tall, obedient shadow everywhere he went.

Working on the encampment project every waking moment kept Shin focused. He rarely bothered to notice the enormous activity taking place at the fort. But by the noise of it, nearly every older boy and man in Edge had become a soldier, and clumsy ones at that. The shouts of drills and the clamor of training filled the fort and the tents set up in the compound. All the snow had been pushed up against the fort walls and slowly, very slowly, was beginning to melt. But the ground was still mortar hard, and when the winds from the mountains blew at night, any new soldiers who hadn’t weighted down their flimsy shelters with rocks were chasing after the tents that blew into the village.

But as the world swirled around him, all the private saw were

the papers and plans. The notion that all of this work was in preparation to find Salem occurred to him only occasionally. He pushed it away because there was nothing—*nothing*—he could do to save Salem. Salem would have to save itself. Whoever was in charge of its security better be doing the job correctly.

Already he decided that when the army left on the 30th, he wouldn’t be among them. He’d request to stay behind and be among the few who’d help keep the fort running. Surely there’d be some filing to do for two weeks.

He was quite content with his new existence. It was safe, quiet, and certainly unexciting. After the past year, the monotony was welcome.

That’s why he was completely unprepared for the office door to fly open with a bang. It was the morning of his tenth day as Hili’s Shadow, the 19th Day of Planting. He looked up from the map he and Hili were consulting to discover General Lemuel Thorne filling the doorframe. Shin held his breath in worry as he and Hili stood at attention.

“Sir?” Hili said. “What a surprise. Is everything all right?”

Thorne, his face etched with rage, stared at Shin. “No, Sergeant Major, everything is NOT all right.”

Hili glanced at Shin then back at the general. “Sir, Private Shin has been the model soldier for the past week and a half. He’s done everything precisely as I’ve requested—”

“*I don’t care how he’s been acting!*” Thorne shouted. “Because it’s all an act! SHIN! Come with me!”

Hili’s jaw slacked in surprise. “Sir! We had an agreement—”

Thorne stepped up to his face. “DID YOU KNOW?”

“Know? Know what?”

“*You* recruited him! You and *Yordin*! DID YOU KNOW?”

Hili blinked in surprise. “Please, General, what’s going on? I have no idea what you’re talking about—”

“Captain!” Thorne called over his shoulder. “Bring her in!”

Shin swallowed hard and his knees weakened.

“Took me a few days to track her down,” Thorne said. “Seems she was *missing* for a time, claims she went on a brief holiday *to relax*, but she now understands her time for relaxing is over.”

As she walked into the office, she looked even older and more worn. While her hair was carefully curled and her face was perfectly painted, it didn’t help her appearance.

Amory.

“Hello, Pere,” she said, trying to sound casual.

“Miss Amory,” Shin whispered back.

“What’s this all about?” Hili demanded.

“That’s what I’m about to find out! GUARDS!” Thorne bel-
lowed. “Take him now!”

And it was over. Just like that. Everything. Amory must have
told Thorne about Salem, about him. His long-held secret was out.

The private’s stomach churned as everything went gray.

Hili calling, “Shin?” was the last thing he heard as he crum-
pled to the floor.

It was the sound of something dragging that woke him up. It
took him a few moments to realize the noise was coming from his
boots, and it was because two large guards were dragging him
across the compound. Face down, he watched as the slushy gravel
passed by and he tried to remember what happened.

Thorne was enraged. He saw the general’s boots now slightly
ahead of him, marching quickly. And Amory was with him, her
narrow boots scurrying to match his pace. There were others
around them, too. Probably more guards, but he didn’t know how
many. He’d passed out before they came in.

He hoped Hili was nearby, since he was the only man who
seemed to care what happened to him.

“He’s coming around, General,” a voice above him said.

The guards stopped and pulled him up to a standing position.
Thorne glanced back briefly as the guards started their walk
again, going too fast for the weakened private to keep up properly.
He stumbled repeatedly over his feet as the guards continued.

“It’s all right, Shin,” said a voice behind him. “We’ll get this
worked out. I’ll find out what’s going on,” Hili assured.

Shin nodded but knew there was no hope. Amory glanced
back at him but he couldn’t read her cold eyes.

Soon they reached the command tower and Shin was dragged
into the reception area.

“Take him to the files room!” Thorne ordered, and the guards
pulled Shin into the small back room surrounded by shelves and
papers. They dropped him on to the floor where he stayed in a

heap, then posted themselves at the door. Shin looked up to see Amory slink in and stand over to the side, not looking at him.

In the reception area, Thorne and Hili began a heated debate.

A moment later Major Twigg appeared at the doorway. His face tightened when he saw Shin. “What’s he done *now*?”

“NOTHING!” Hili shouted. “That’s what I’m trying to explain! He’s been *perfect*—”

No one expected Thorne to smack Hili that hard, especially Hili, who fell to the ground from the blow. Major Twigg took a shocked and protective step backward.

Thorne leaned over Hili. “When will you learn to *shut up*, Poe? Now, get in there. You too, Twigg. You still think he doesn’t deserve an execution squad? I’ll prove to you that he does!”

Shin was relieved he was already on the floor, because if he wasn’t he would have been. His head pounded and his stomach churned again as the men filed into the room and stared at him.

Hili slowly got to his feet, slightly dazed and keeping his distance from the general.

Thorne slammed the door behind them. He walked over to Shin and kicked him hard in the leg. “Where were you born?”

Shin quivered in pain, tears filling his eyes. He couldn’t say it. He *wouldn’t* say it. He wouldn’t reveal Salem. They’d have to kill him instead—

“WHERE WERE YOU BORN?”

“In Salem!” Amory shouted. “Just like I was.”

The three men spun to look at her.

“*Salem*?” Hili whispered.

“Is that the mystery village?” Twigg breathed.

Shin peeked opened his eyes to see what was happening.

Thorne nodded, glaring at Amory. “That was what Captain Lick called it, and that was Onus’s last words as he died. *Salem*.”

“Creet,” Hili gasped. “It’s real?”

“SO YOU KNEW?” Thorne shouted.

“NO! NO! Only . . . only rumors . . .” Hili rubbed his face where Thorne had slapped him and turned to the private. “*Are* you from Salem, Shin?”

The private shut his eyes tight. He used to do that when he was little and in trouble, thinking that if he couldn’t see them, they couldn’t see him. Of course, that never worked—

He felt a hard kick to his back and he gasped in pain.

“WHERE IS SALEM?” Thorne shouted.

Shin pressed his lips together and shook his head. He received another kick in the back for his refusal but he didn’t move.

“WHAT’S YOUR NAME?”

That was one answer he would give. “Perrin Shin,” he gasped.

“Your *REAL* name!” Thorne bellowed.

“That *is* his real name!” Amory shouted before Thorne could kick him again.

Thorne twisted to look at her.

“It is,” she whispered, squirming uncomfortably. “They called him Young Perrin Shin. Young Pere. After his grandfather.”

Private Shin wished the wood floor underneath could somehow envelop him. To hear those names spoken here felt wrong.

Thorne turned back to him. “You’re one of THEM!” he bellowed. “Admit it! I want to hear it from your mouth, boy! I want proof!” He kicked him again, hard in the ribs.

Shin writhed and clenched his jaw, refusing to cry out.

“LEMUEL!” Amory cried. “Stop it! Stop it! I have proof!”

Thorne spun again to her. “Last night you said you told me all you knew. And now, suddenly, you know *more*?”

Amory steadied herself and stood taller. “Something I learned from you, General, *my love*—keep a few silver chips in my pocket. In this case, my bag.” She patted the large pack slung over her shoulder and gave Thorne a saucy grin. “I will prove myself to be your equal,” she whispered. “I promised you last night you wouldn’t regret trusting me, *my love*.” She took the bag off her shoulder and opened it.

Shin pushed himself up a little to see, and his stomach lurched when he saw what she had.

His pack from Salem. It had never been lost. It *had* been stolen, by her. He slumped back to the floor in despair. Neither Hili or Twigg noticed because they were watching Amory.

“This,” she said, “is what he planned to wear, I believe, when he was going to infiltrate your army.” She held up Yordin’s old jacket as Shin began to convulse in anger and anguish.

If his head wasn’t pounding and his stomach nauseated, and he didn’t have some cracked ribs and a bruised shin, he would’ve leaped to his feet and strangled Amory, right then and there.

Thorne snatched the jacket away. “Whose is this?” he demanded. “No name label but—” He inspected the inside of the uniform. His face went gray when he saw the name inked on the inside. “Gari Yordin. *Gari Yordin*? How the slag did you get GARI YORDIN’S uniform?” Thorne roared at him.

Shin wasn’t going to answer. It didn’t matter what he did; he was going to die. If not now then in ten minutes. But he wasn’t going to die having given away Salem’s secrets first. He’d keep them safe to his death.

Amory was doing a good enough job of blabbing everything anyway.

“HOW?” He kicked Shin again.

Not going to do it, he thought as he winced in pain. Not going to reveal my family.

“LEMUEL!” Amory shouted at him. “Please, stop! HERE!” She waved several pages in the air. “Names, places in Sands. He was going to go to Sands.”

Thorne took the pages. “I know many of these names,” he murmured. “Sympathizers to Yordin. Most of them are dead now, but there’s only one way he could have had these names.” He turned back to Shin. “Where is she, Shin? Where’s Eltana Yordin? She didn’t drown in a river, did she? TELL ME!”

Shin braced himself for another kick. He’d left one list of names at home when he made his escape to the world; he should have left all of them.

“Mrs. Yordin’s alive?” Hili whispered. “But she . . . she . . .”

“*Vanished*?” Thorne said bitterly. “Like so many other people in the world *vanished*? Did you know Yordin’s grandparents vanished too? Years ago? Guarders! We were always told they were Guarders! But I’m beginning to realize something, and I can’t believe it’s taken me so many years to finally figure this out—they were *taken*! Right under our noses. Eltana Yordin is alive and well in Salem, isn’t she? ISN’T SHE?”

“YES!” Amory shouted as she saw Lemuel ready to kick Shin again. “I saw her when she arrived.”

Thorne threw the papers on the ground. “WHAT ELSE?” he yelled. “WHO ELSE?” His face went white and he collapsed unexpectedly in a chair.

Hili, Twigg, and Amory stared at him but didn’t go to his aid.

“*Who else*?” he demanded, slumping. “*Colonel Perrin Shin*?”

Private Shin peered at Amory and held his breath.

Amory shook her head. "I don't know," she lied. "He would have been old by now. They tried to keep the Shins a secret."

"Her?" Thorne gasped.

Amory shook her head again.

"Peto?"

Amory paused, then nodded.

Thorne sat up. "*Jaytsy?*" he whispered earnestly.

Amory looked at Private Shin, then nodded.

Shin closed his eyes. What was she doing? Revealing that only key members of his family were still alive? Obviously she had a few more silver chips in her bag. He hated Dices.

Twigg and Hili watched General Thorne in anxious anticipation.

Slowly he stood up and, staring at Private Shin, drew his sword. "I've heard enough."

"NO!" Hili rushed over to Thorne and grabbed his left arm. "General, NO! You can't do this! Please, I'm begging you!"

"WHY?" Thorne barked. "Give me one good reason why this lying, traitorous swine deserves to live one moment longer?"

"Because he knows the way to Salem!" Amory said urgently. "He can get you there in a *day*, Lemuel! I know most of the route, but he knows ways to find all of it. Codes, markings—he got me here and he can take us back."

Thorne stared at the private.

Shin held his breath, waiting for the next blow.

"Where is it, Shin?" he demanded. "Where's Salem?"

For some odd reason, his thoughts suddenly filled with his littlest sister, Morah. She was eight when he left, and he pictured her in his position instead, with Thorne hovering over her ready to kick her or run her through because of her terrible crime of being a Shin. He'd never be responsible for letting that happen.

The tears spilled out of his eyes as pure terror filled his entire being, but he whispered, "I'll never tell you."

Then he shut his eyes and readied to utter his last words. It wouldn't be "Salem." They would be, "Puggah—I'm sorry."

He waited, shuddering in fear and remorse, curled up on the hard floor wondering if his parents would ever find out what happened to him. He hoped that if they did, they'd never know how cowardly he'd died, but maybe somehow, some day, someone in

that room could tell them that he never told the way to Salem.

He heard the distinct clank of Thorne’s blade and hoped it’d be quick.

“In the dungeon with him.”

Shin had barely opened his eyes when he saw Thorne throw open the door and repeat his order to the guards. “In the dungeon with him. NOW!”

Hili stepped over to Thorne. “General, please—don’t do this.”

Thorne motioned to the guards to retrieve the private who still cowered on the floor.

“WHY? Should I kill him instead? I think he’ll be far more helpful in locating Salem than he will be decaying in the river bed. In ten or eleven days, I have a feeling he’ll be more open to assisting us. I’m sure he’s eager to go home after all this time. And when he sets his eyes on Salem, *then* I’ll decide if I should kill him!”

The guards forced Shin up to his feet, and Lemuel walked over to a row of shelves. He pushed on one of them, and a board in the floor popped up. Another guard walked over to it, pulled it back, and lifted several more boards out of the way.

Private Shin had been lying on the entrance to the dungeon.

He looked over at Hili with pleading in his eyes, just as he had before he was dragged away to incarceration.

This time Hili’s eyes were soft. *I’m so sorry*, he mouthed.

Imploringly, Shin glanced over at Twigg, but he avoided the private, his jaw set and his expression sober.

It wasn’t as if either man could have done anything to dissuade the general now.

“He won’t be needing his uniform,” Thorne sneered. “Take it off.”

“General, it’s cold—” Hili started, but shut his mouth when Thorne glared at him.

Shin winced in pain as the guards roughly undid his buttons and yanked off his jacket. Definitely a few cracked ribs. They pulled off his boots with just as much care, and when they wrenched off his trousers they purposely jabbed the bruise growing on his leg.

Shin looked up briefly to see Amory staring at him in only his thin undershirt and shorts. She swallowed and looked down at her boots.

“Get him out of here,” Thorne nodded, satisfied.

One of the guards yanked on Shin and started to push him toward

the rickety wooden ladder that now was visible in the gaping hole. Another guard came in with a lantern and handed it to the soldier holding on to Shin's arm. The guard pushed him toward the ladder that led down into darkness.

The tears were already spilling down his face as he struggled to lower his injured and aching body into the hole, his feet searching to find the rungs.

"Climb!" Thorne ordered.

Shin steadied himself, grasped the rungs and started to down the ladder. Immediately he smelled cold wetness, then a rank scent. There was no fresh air there, no light, no . . . *nothing*. He stepped lower and lower, wondering just how far it was. Hili had said fifteen feet, but already he was lower than that, he was sure.

A guard was climbing down after him, and soon a dim light at the top of the hole started to come down as well.

Again Shin experienced the same closed-in feeling, the terror of being trapped. He was normally not afraid of enclosed spaces, but now the same hot panic flooded through his body, worse than two weeks ago. It took every last bit of control to not scream out, begging to escape. He felt the ground underneath his stockinged feet: hard yet also mushy, but from what he didn't want to know. He stepped away from the ladder searching for the sides of the hole to see how big it was, and almost immediately his back hit the wall.

The guard was nearly down the ladder, and the second guard with the lantern was following.

"In irons, men," Thorne called down.

"Sir," Hili's voice was muffled above him, "that's not necessary. Once you pull up the ladder, what can he—"

"Shut up, Hili! I've had enough of you today. My son, my prisoner, my way!"

Shin bit his trembling lip and wished he could call up to tell Hili not to cause himself any more trouble, but he feared that would only cause more.

The first guard held his arm securely until the second guard reached the bottom with the lantern. It was maybe thirty feet down.

Shin looked around while he had the light. It was certainly taller than the incarceration cell, but it wasn't as wide and long, with no smelly hole. The entire pit would become "the hole."

The flickering light revealed large vertical timbers with gaps between them, securing the dirt behind. To one of the timbers was fastened a long iron chain. The guard lashed the chain around Shin’s wrist, then around his ankle, and locked the ends together. Shin would barely be able to sit down, but he wouldn’t be able to recline.

“Good enough,” Thorne called down from his view at the floorboards. “Back up, now. And don’t forget that lantern.”

“Please,” Shin whimpered. He knew it was no use, but he had to try.

No one said anything back.

A few moments later the guards were at the top of the hole. They pulled on a rope and half of the ladder slid up and out of reach. Shin looked up the hole to see Thorne leering down at him.

“How much deceit can one man take from his son, Shin? You’ve done this to yourself. When you’re ready to tell me the way to Salem, I’ll be ready to let you out.” Thorne stood up and said to someone, “Shut up the floor and cover it with the thick rug. No one needs to hear him whimpering.”

A moment later everything went completely black.

Shin sat all alone in silence, trying to convince himself he had more room than he did. But the darkness pressed from all directions, suffocating him. It was impossible to get any lower than he was.

Two emotions began to rise, fighting to be on top. The first was terrified humiliation, causing him to want to start sobbing. The worthlessness he felt in the incarceration cell returned, and he wished he could have sunk into the mushy, cold ground and be done with it all. He *should* have been killed a few minutes ago. Living isn’t always preferable to dying.

But the other emotion that arose suddenly overtook his entire being. It was rage—thick, hot rage. It seemed that nothing he did would ever be good enough, would ever be right. It was wrong! All of this!

“I WAS PERFECT!” he bellowed, rattling the chains. “I did everything RIGHT! Just like you said! And this is my reward? NO!”

He wasn’t shouting at Thorne. Or at Hili. Or even Amory. He was furious, but certainly not at himself. He had been perfect those last ten days—*perfect!*

Deep down he knew who he really was furious with, and listening to General Shin was the last thing he ever wanted to do. Look where it got him this time.

“PERFECT!”



Hili trudged behind Twigg and Thorne up the stairs to the command tower. Amory followed silently, a few steps behind.

When they reached the top, Thorne began to issue commands. “Two guards are to remain in that room at all times. Two more at the door leading into it. They will keep a detailed account of who comes and who goes, and at what times. He will receive one prisoner’s ration a day for the first five days, two rations for the next five, then three for the last day. He’ll need some strength to lead us to Salem in eleven days, if he’s still alive. I want the guards to be listening. As soon as he breaks I want to know about it, day or night. It usually only takes five days for people to begin confessing down there, and I don’t want to miss a word of it. Have paper and quill available at all times. To supervise his confinement I want—”

“Sir, let me do it,” Hili broke in. “I made the commitment to watching him, so please let me continue.”

Thorne squinted at him. “You’re already too busy.”

“This will take only a few minutes a day, sir. I’ll oversee the watch and bring him his rations myself, just to make sure it’s done to your specifications.”

Thorne frowned. “Why?”

“Because it’s my duty, sir. I feel responsible. You’re correct—I did sign him up,” Hili sighed. “Maybe I can get him to break more quickly. He’s been learning to trust me over the past few weeks.”

Thorne considered that. “All right, Poe. He’s all yours. I want reports every morning and night. I want to know every word he says, no matter how meaningless. Men reveal themselves in seemingly innocent ways.”

Hili nodded. “If you’ll excuse me then, sir, I’ll get back to work.”

Thorne waved him away and Hili trotted down the stairs.

Once he was gone, Thorne turned to Twigg. “Anything I should be worried about with Hili?” he whispered.

Twigg shrugged. “He’s the one who set up the catch for him two weeks ago because he suspected Shin would run. He knows him better than anyone. I trust him.”

“Fine. In the meantime, start a rumor in Edge,” Thorne said. “Tell them that it’s been revealed to Guide Kroop that the village’s name is Salem, and that General Thorne is most eager for additional information. Let it be known that I’m offering a great reward to whoever comes forward with information about Salem. Just in case Shin doesn’t talk or doesn’t survive—”

Amory, who had been keeping close to the corner, cleared her throat. “Isn’t that why I’m here?”

Thorne turned to her. “Of course you are,” he said with surprising tenderness. “Without you, I never would have known about Shin, now would I?” He took her hand and kissed it.

Twigg did his best to control the bulging of his eyes.

Amory smiled, suddenly more confident and definitely more saucy. “Proud of me, *my love*? I told you I would deliver, didn’t I?”

“Indeed you did, *my love*. Took you almost two years, but you finally delivered to me something greater than a son.”

“A *kingdom*!” Amory whispered. “The biggest the world has ever seen!” She kissed him full on the mouth.

Twigg turned away. He already lost his appetite by watching the private go down into the wretched pit. Now he might not feel like eating ever again.

Chapter 32--“Have you anything to tell me today, Shin?”

The two men in black and gray mottled clothing were prostrate on the ground, watching the activity far below them. No one would see them or their spyglasses watching the soldiers since they were well above the boulder line. But they both sucked in their breath in surprise as a swarm of soldiers, several hundred, began to march into the forest. Most seemed to hesitate as they entered the trees, but a few strode bravely through and finally, after an hour of nervously picking their ways up the slope through the now-dead forest, they reached the rock.

And that’s as far as they went: the massive boulder field, where tons of rock as large as houses rested on top of each other for hundreds of paces up the mountain. And there the soldiers stood, with their hands on their waists and pointing at areas, as if one narrow crevice might be more inviting than another.

The two men in black and gray clothing held their breath as they watched.

None of the soldiers tried to actually climb the boulders—that would have been too daring, especially after their march into the terrifying forest—but instead poked sticks experimentally into gaps hoping a critter wouldn’t poke back.

One of the watching men looked at his companion. The second man nodded. The first man slid backward on his belly into a small ravine, then jogged silently up the canyon to his waiting horse, mounted, and rode fast up the canyon.

Pass the time . . . pass the time . . . Private Shin needed to pass the time efficiently, carefully, and remain in complete control.

He could not, would not, be reduced to tears and panic. He was greater and stronger than that. It was his will against Lemuel Thorne’s. And Thorne was not about to win this round.

After Shin had recovered from his little temper tantrum, he decided his loud response was partially in shock to his new situation. He was still angry but now he had a plan.

Already he was writing this chapter in his head, the chapter for his book on how he overcame the desperate general who was so glib as to believe he was Shin’s father. The weak, crippled man whom no one ever dared oppose, but who Perrin Shin the Younger would bring to an ultimate shame. The insipid man who was sure he was the greatest thing to walk in the world, who in a flash could knock down any man with the force of his slap—he would eventually feel the same humiliation and anger every other man under him felt.

And everyone in the world would witness his downfall, and they would cheer it. They would cheer the man who destroyed Lemuel Thorne. The world would again chant “General Shin,” and he would lead this world the way it *should* be led. His time in the dungeon would become a most compelling chapter in his book. It wasn’t the end. Far from it. It was only a turning point. Being perfectly obedient didn’t do him any good. But it *would* give him time to think and plan.

But he had to find a way to keep track of the time. The four days in incarceration was bad enough when he could see the faint light on the bars, but here there was no light whatsoever. It had been only a few hours, but already his chest tightened several times in fits of anxiety, which didn’t help his injured ribs.

He started to write his book, laying it out chapter by chapter in his head, but often found his mind rushing through it. He needed to slow it down, to occupy himself between the times he composed his grievances and vengeance.

He tried reciting things, figuring out how long it took to say something, then how often he’d have to repeat it to equal five minutes, thirty minutes, an hour. He couldn’t remember many passages from The Writings, only the shortest ones. He estimated how many times he would need to recite those to equal one hour. Probably about ten times. He could do that three times a day.

Then he started to think of songs. His mother had dozens of songs, and he tried to catalogue as many as he could, then estimate how long it would take to sing each of them. If he quietly whispered them, they went slower, about an hour and fifteen minutes worth, he guessed, to

go through all of Lilla Trovato Shin's repertoire.

He could spend about seven hours that way, reciting passages and singing songs. The rest of the time he could devote to composing and revising his memoirs—

Suddenly he heard a noise from above. The planking was being moved away and a lantern appeared. The rope was shifted and the lower half of the ladder descended to the ground.

He stood up.

A moment later, Sergeant Major Hili started down the ladder, a lantern handle gripped between his teeth. He reached the bottom and set the lantern down.

"I'll be right back with your meal for the day," he told the private. "Don't try anything stupid. The guards are watching and you have nowhere to go."

"I know that, sir."

Hili went back up the ladder while Shin stared at the lantern, grateful for the light. He tried to memorize the flickering of the candle in the brief moments that Hili was gone.

Soon he came back down, the handle of a small bucket in his teeth. He dropped to the ground and nodded up to the hole in the ceiling. "I'm down. I'll let you know when I'm ready to come back up."

Unseen soldiers pulled up the ladder and slid a few boards back into place. That seemed completely unnecessary.

Shin couldn't help himself. His defiant demeanor crumbled and he began to tremble. "Thank you for coming, sir. I want you to know how sorry I am for deceiving you, but—"

"Hush!" Hili whispered. "Be careful. I've told Thorne I'd repeat to him everything you say, so don't say anything incriminating. Once he has what he wants from you, he may not want you anymore."

"I understand."

Hili cleared his throat and said in a normal tone. "Here's your meal. You get only one a day. If you choose to talk, you'll get more. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Shin responded meekly.

Hili handed him the bucket which held a small piece of bread. Shin closed his eyes. He'd be dead in days.

"Now," Hili said in a commanding voice, "begging and pleading for more will do you no good. Best be grateful you're still

alive and ask for nothing else, unless you’re willing to give us something more!” As he spoke, Hili unbuttoned his jacket and reached into a deep inside pocket. Astonishingly, he pulled out a chunk of salted pork and slipped it into Shin’s hand.

Incredulous, the private began to smile.

Hili reached into another inside pocket and pulled out a handful of dried fruits, then another pocket to retrieve a handful of shelled nuts and placed them all in Shin’s other hand. Then he topped it off with another piece of bread, much thicker and larger than what was in the bucket, from his undershirt pocket. “You need to realize that the more you reveal to us, the better you eat.”

“I understand, sir,” Shin said, smiling broadly in relief.

“Good. You will also receive just this mug of water,” he said, showing it to him in the bucket. He placed it on the ground since the private’s hands were already full. “But you can have much more if you give us what we need.” Hili winced apologetically as he unbuttoned his trousers and reached inside to pull out a long, narrow metal flask topped with a cork.

Shin grinned. It was the kind of thigh flask he’d seen many soldiers use to smuggle mead into the barracks.

Hili slipped the narrow flask into the gap between the timbers, concealing it completely. “Each day,” he said in a loud voice again as he began to take off his jacket, “I will bring you your rations. I will come at this same time every day,” he lowered his voice to a whisper, “*just after dinner time*,” then he raised his voice again as he slid something long and dark out from inside the jacket’s sleeves, “so that you can be prepared to present to me what I need.”

Hili produced a piece of cloth that had been tightly bound into narrow folds. He undid the strings holding it together and unfurled a large, dirt-brown wool blanket that would help stave off the cool of the dungeon.

Shin closed his eyes and a tear slid down his cheek.

Hili patted his arm and Shin opened his eyes. Hili motioned to a gap between the timbers and acted out how to stash the blanket there to hide it.

Shin nodded. “I understand, sir,” he said, his voice trembling with gratitude as he slipped the extra rations into the gap, followed by the blanket.

“Good. Have you anything to tell me today, Shin?” Hili said as

he buttoned up his uniform. The private now realized why the sergeant major had the guards replace the floorboards—so they couldn't see the master smuggler at work. "Do you realize what showing us the way to Salem will do for you? For the world? You can save everyone and everything if you cooperate."

Shin stood tall. "Yes, I do realize that. And I have nothing more to say."

Hili nodded. "Then I have nothing more to give you. Drink your water. I need that mug back. Guards!" he shouted upward, his voice appropriately stern. "I'm ready to leave."

The floorboards moved again and the ladder began to lower.

"Sir," Shin whispered between gulps from the meager mug, "thank you!"

Hili flashed a grin. "Thank Colonel Shin," he whispered. He slipped the handle of the empty bucket over his arm, secured the lantern handle between his teeth, and started back up the ladder.

Shin watched him and the light go up the hole. They vanished and the boards were replaced. But still he managed a smile. Every day Hili would come at the same time, with enough food to sustain him. All he had to do was make it to dinner time each day. That he had ever thought poorly of the sergeant major filled him with regret.

He slid down the wall of the pit and sat on the ground again, slipped the blanket and food out of the gap, and felt in the crevice and dirt for every last nut and shriveled grape. He spread the blanket over his cold legs and laid out the food in a triangle on top of it, remembering where he placed each item so he wouldn't lose a morsel of it in the dark. If he ate slowly, *very* slowly, he could convince himself that it was a much larger amount, and it could take him over an hour to eat it. He could even save some of it for the morning, whenever that seemed to be.

He leisurely chewed on the small piece of bread and thought about what Hili said. "Thank Colonel Shin."

Nibbling on the fruit and nuts, alternated with his book writing, recitations, and whispers of his mother's songs maybe, just *maybe*, he might make it through the next ten days.

The messenger knocked tentatively on Guide Zenos’s door.

“He might not hear that,” the five-year-old sitting on the front porch told him. “Go ahead—bang on it.”

The messenger smiled down at the boy who was sorting rocks. “I don’t want to be rude,” he explained. “Maybe if you go get him—”

“Banging isn’t rude. This is rude: HEY!” he shouted as loud as his lungs would let him, “GRANDPA SHEM! GET OUT HERE! SOMEONE WANTS TO TALK TO YOU!”

“Yes, *that’s* rude—”

The door flung open to reveal Guide Zenos’s eighteen-year-old daughter. “Fennic! What has your mama said about shouting?”

“That’s it’s rude, Aunt Ester. I was just showing him.”

“You don’t have to *show* him what’s rude!” Ester looked at the messenger. “Sorry about that. Please, come in.”

The messenger stepped into the house after her.

Guide Zenos came out of the eating room, chuckling. “I hear you met my grandson. We call him Mr. Manners. Takes after his great-grandfather. At least, that’s my excuse for him.” He shook the messenger’s hand. “Come with me to my office.”

A minute later the two men sat down in Guide Zenos’s office. The messenger hesitated to speak.

Shem smiled. “They’ve entered the forest, haven’t they?”

The messenger’s eyebrows went up. “Uh, yes. Two scouts watching the fort saw them head straight through the trees.”

“And they stopped at the boulders?”

The messenger nodded. “Seem to be looking for a path.”

“And you’re afraid to tell me that because . . .”

Squirming, the messenger said, “If they’re looking for a path, then that means someone told them there are, or *were*, paths through the boulder field.”

Shem leaned forward and clasped his hands in front of him. “So you’ve come to tell me instead of Rector Shin, to whom such information should be revealed *first*, since he’s in charge of the security of Salem. Why me, then?”

The messenger looked down at his hands. “Very few people in the world know about the paths, Guide. The guards on duty at the glacial fort suggested that I tell you first. They were concerned that, well, that the army learned about the route to Salem from Young Perin Shin might come as quite a shock to Rector Shin.”

Shem nodded. “Except that we have no evidence that Young Perrin Shin revealed such information, do we? Did they have a spyglass to see who was at the head of the soldiers?”

The messenger nodded. “They didn’t seem him but I’m to bring additional glasses back on my return. They’ll be looking for him specifically.”

“They won’t find him,” the guide declared. “I’m confident someone else revealed the routes. I know of at least three other people in the world with that knowledge, each with a connection to Lemuel Thorne: his daughter, his son-in-law, and his mistress. Don’t be afraid of telling Rector Shin. But,” he leaned closer, “tell *no one else*. Not until they clear the boulder field do I want anyone in Salem to begin to worry. This could still take several days, even weeks. And,” he beckoned the messenger even closer, “whatever you do, do not say *anything* to Mahrree Shin. She’ll be sure to think the Last Day is coming tomorrow.”



The private was pretty sure it was only morning. That’s why he was surprised to hear the floorboards moving above him. In a panic he shoved the blanket into the gap and was grateful he’d hid the last of the crumbs there last night. He brushed himself off quickly in case he missed something. Standing up, he looked toward the ladder that began to descend and held his breath in anticipation. When he heard the voice that was trying to find a way to get down the ladder, he cringed.

Amory.

He stood against the wall as first a soldier came down, holding a lantern. As he reached the ground he scowled and set down the lantern against the opposite wall. Next came Amory, wearing a ridiculously full skirt and tiny silk shoes.

“What is that *smell*?” she muttered as she struggled down the ladder. “That’s just revolting. And they say it’s going to get *worse*?” She reached the bottom, turned, and looked at Shin.

He glared back at her.

To the guard, she said, “Leave us. I’ll call up when I’m ready.”

The guard scoffed. “I heard you’re *always* ready.”

Amory stepped up to him, since there really wasn’t anywhere

else to go in the cramped dungeon. “Do you have any idea who *I am*? Who I *will be*? You watch that mouth of yours or you’ll find yourself as his companion!”

The guard paled. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I’ll be just right up there,” and he quickly climbed away.

Shin stared at the lantern, trying to absorb its light and pretending it was the sun.

But Amory was watching the guard until he went through the ceiling and replaced the boards. She finally looked at Shin. “This is a terrible situation. I’m so sorry.”

Reluctantly he turned from the light to her. She was so haggard and overly painted that she appeared to be sixty years old. “No you’re not,” he said coldly. “I’d guess you’ve never been sorry about anything. Ever.”

Amory shifted. “I realize you haven’t heard, but I have a new position. I am to ride with Lemuel to Salem as *his queen*.”

“His queen? What are you talking about?”

“Lemuel’s going to take Salem,” she said smugly. “He’s going to unite it with the world to create the largest kingdom this world has ever witnessed. And my reward for presenting it to him? I will rule right beside him!”

Shin scoffed. “Thorne will never share his rule with you. He shares nothing. He only takes and uses, then throws away.”

She tipped her head confidently. “Not this time. This time I hold all the silver chips. I even have a few more and he knows it.”

“And you think you can win? He *always* has one more. He’ll let you think you’re controlling the game until the last moment.”

She took a step closer and covered her nose with a lacy handkerchief as the smell of the pit overwhelmed her. Through her hand she said, “I know far too much about Salem. I’m too valuable to him. And he knows I’m the only one *you* will talk to. You can fill in the details I don’t have. Pere, I didn’t want to see you like this. I promise.” Her eyes wandered all over his underdressed body and lingered on his bare shoulders. “I thought he’d incarcerate you or something, but *this*? Well, I just never expected—”

“What are you trying to do?” he exhaled in exasperation. “It won’t work. I’m on to you. You’ve ruined me too many times.”

“I ruined **YOU**?” she exclaimed, her widely painted eyebrows flying upward. “I *saved* your life yesterday when Thorne was about to kill you!”

“You’re the one who exposed me to him in the first place!” he reminded hotly.

“Well, what about you ousting me from the mansion which, I will have you know, I have recently moved back into?” She jabbed him in the chest. “Do you know how I had to live for the past few seasons?”

It was fortunate for her that Shin was chained to the wall, but she was still within grasping range. He fought the overwhelming urge to strangle her. “*You . . . you stole my pack!* That first night! I got you down to the world and then you robbed me?!”

Amory licked her lips, seeming almost contrite. “I couldn’t risk you ruining my chances. I didn’t know what you were up to, if you’d destroy everything before I got my chance to enjoy it. Plus, I knew you had those slips of silver and gold we stole from the glacial fort. I had to buy new clothing if I was going to catch me an officer.”

“Then, then, then . . . why didn’t you just take some of my silver and leave me the pack?”

Amory shrugged lazily. “I was *going* to return it, then I met someone and just . . . forgot.”

Shin rolled his eyes. “Just *forgot*. Amory, you don’t just forget you *robbed* someone. Someone who *helped* you. You know, I actually felt bad about having you kicked out of the mansion, felt just a little guilty watching you become the village sow, but now?” He scoffed a laugh. “You deserved it! You got exactly what you had coming.”

He knew she was going to slap him. As soon as he called her a “sow” he could see it building in her eyes. But he didn’t care. Every part of his body was already aching, adding his face to it wouldn’t make much difference. He leaned back as her hand rose so that she didn’t connect as forcefully as she wanted.

“And to think I came here to tell you I was sorry!” she spat.

“*Of course* you were.”

“I was! Seeing you standing there, chained like a mad dog?” Her chest began to heave and she licked her lips.

He could tell she was trying to entice him, but she only disgusted him. For once, he felt nothing for her. He realized he was finally seeing her for what she was: shameless, scheming, and desperate. And ugly. All the face paint in the world—and it looked like she was wearing half the world’s supply—couldn’t

cover what she really was.

“I could help you get out, Pere,” she said in a sultry voice that nauseated him more than the maggots in the corner chewing on a decaying piece of something. “I have more influence and power than ever before. Whatever I want, Lemuel does.” She took another step closer to him.

He stepped back against the timbers of the dungeon.

She placed a hand on his chest and slowly let it slide down.

His upper lip curled. She was so predictable, so common.

“I don’t remember how to decipher the codes on the trees and the rocks, Pere. But if you help me, I can help *you*.” Her hand continued to slide. “No one can find the route through the boulder field. The one for horses that goes to the first resting station? They’ve been looking all day yesterday and this morning. But *you* could tell me how to find it again.” Her filthy hand kept moving—

In a flash he caught her by the wrist and twisted her arm. She cried out in pain and collapsed to her knees, her fluffy skirt sinking into the muck.

“Get away from me, you *old sow!*” Shin hollered. “You’re so eager to betray Salem? To destroy our families and all they’ve created? For what? For the title of queen? Then go be queen. I’d rather rot here than ever be touched by you!” He shoved her away.

Amory stumbled backward, her hands flying behind her to stop her fall on the filthy ground. Immediately she scrambled to her feet, staring at the muddy sop on her palms and nearly retching at it. Snatching her handkerchief, she frantically tried to wipe her hands.

“You’ll regret that, Shin!” she hissed as she backed to the other side of the dungeon. “Your *whole family* will regret this! You think they’ll be spared? Oh no, they won’t! I’ll lead him to them. I’ll watch him kill your parents and your grandmother and take your sisters and brothers and cousins. Lemuel can be very cruel, Shin. When someone sets him off just right, he’s a ravenous animal. He hates you now—hates the memory of your family and the way they keep popping up and making a mess of his plans. Always there’s a Shin to get in his way! That’s what he said last night. ‘Always Shins interfering!’ He still may have feelings for Jaytsy, but the rest of your family? Reminders of his failures!”

“He’d have a lot fewer failures,” Shin intoned, “if he’d quit doing stupid and wrong things.”

“There’s no such thing as wrong or right,” Amory said flippantly.

“Only people who don’t know how to take advantage of power. But Lemuel does, and he will. He’ll march into Salem and claim all of it for his own, then wipe out the last of the Shins who have always haunted him—”

That didn’t sound quite right. “Amory, listen—this makes no sense. He admired my grandfather yet wants to destroy his family? He was thrilled to think I was his son, that I share his blood and the Shins’ blood, but now he wants to wipe it out? Think about this! Lemuel has created so many lies that he no longer remembers the truth. He doesn’t even know what he really wants! He just runs after one impulse into another—”

She stood taller. “Which is why he’s such a brilliant leader!”

“Which is why he’s seriously unstable!” Shin insisted. “He can’t keep it all straight! It’s all going to fall apart and you’ll go down with him!”

Something worrying flickered in her eyes, as if that thought had occurred to her before, but she shoved it away. After all, Lemuel was the one with the power, and you have to align yourself with whoever has the power . . .

“He’ll succeed,” she declared. “He’ll take over everything and even rid himself of the burden of Shins!”

He scowled. “Burden? What are you talking about?”

But she plowed on as if everything was already settled. “Then I’ll come back here to your little dungeon home and give you a full description of how your family suffered under his hand because *you* wouldn’t help us! Discovering houses full of Shins he can torture and ravage will give him immense pleasure. We don’t need you, Pere. We can find Salem ourselves. It’s not that hard, you know. I was just trying to help you, but now? You’ve just destroyed your whole family. Then you really will be the last Shin alive!”

Shin’s hands clenched into fists as he calculated how far he could lunge before being yanked back by the chain. He could get her, he was sure. He could strangle that skinny little throat and rid the world of the most repugnant woman who ever lived.

Instead he felt something hold him back with the idea that her end was coming soon enough and not by his hand. Shin spat in her face.

“*Get out of my dungeon, sow!*” he bellowed. “Guards! Queen Amory is ready to leave! And she won’t be coming back!”

Two minutes later Shin, still seething in fury, watched as the last floorboard was slipped into place and his world was plunged back into darkness. Tears of frustration and anger slid down his face.

“Why didn’t I kill her?” he whimpered. He lunged in fury only to be yanked back by the chains like an old guard dog. “Why didn’t I just grab her and kill her? She *will* lead them to the Ezstates! He’ll kill them all! He won’t even think of what he’s doing, but just like Lick and Onus and Varice he’ll have them all wiped out as fast as he can.” He slumped to the ground and held his head, tears tracking down his face. “She’s right—they’ll all die because of me. No! Why didn’t I kill her?”

BECAUSE I TOLD YOU NOT TO.

Shin’s head snapped up and he stared into the darkness, half hoping he’d hear words again, half hoping he wouldn’t.

BECAUSE YOU DON’T NEED TO ADD ‘MURDERER’ TO THE LIST OF CRIMES LEMUEL IS COMPILING AGAINST YOU.

“Puggah?”

YOUNG PERE? FINALLY!

Shin was unsure if he should respond the voice. On the one hand, it was *his* fault he was in here. On the other, the next days could go a lot faster with some company, and maybe he could do something about Amory . . .

“Yes, Puggah. I hear you.” He was desperate enough to talk even to *him*. “Where have you been?”

HERE. YOUNG PERE, YOU BLOCKED ME OUT. AGAIN.

Shin sighed. That was probably true. And probably time he stopped doing that. “Well, what do you think of my new home? Impressed?”

YOUNG PERE, YOU’VE GONE TO SOME DEPTHS BEFORE, BUT I HAVE TO SAY, THIS IS RATHER IMPRESSIVE.

Shin chuckled mirthlessly. “You really think I’ve missed your sarcasm, old man?”

OH, I’M NOT BEING SARCASTIC. THIS REALLY IS DEEPLY IMPRESSIVE.

Shin rested his head against the wood timbers behind him. “Puggah, you heard, right? Amory? She’s going to lead Lemuel to them. We have to find a way to stop her.”

DON’T WORRY, YOUNG PERE. SHE WON’T SUCCEED. AND YOU WERE RIGHT ABOUT LEMUEL NOT LETTING HER WIN AT HIS GAME. HAVE YOU BEEN PLAYING DICES WHILE I WASN’T LOOKING?

The Soldier in the Middle of the World

Shin smiled faintly. “No, Puggah. But I’ve learned about it anyway.”

LEMUEL WILL LET AMORY THINK SHE’S WINNING UNTIL THE LAST MOMENT. SHE’LL NEVER SET FOOT IN SALEM, YOUNG PERE. AND THE FAMILY IS SAFE. THEY’RE PREPARED—EVERYONE IN SALEM IS.

He sighed in relief. “Are you sure? Who’s in charge of security now?”

YOUR FATHER. WHO ELSE COULD IT BE?

“Is that a good idea, old man?”

IT’S AN EXCELLENT IDEA. IT’S THE CREATOR’S IDEA. PETO LISTENS TO HIM, AS DOES SHEM, AND BECAUSE OF THAT SALEM WILL REMAIN SAFE.

“If you think so . . .”

I KNOW SO. BUT THEN AGAIN, I GUESS IF SALEM IS SAFE THAT GOES CONTRARY TO YOUR PLANS, DOESN’T IT?

Shin groaned softly.

AND, YOU MUST ADMIT, YOUR PLANS AREN’T ALWAYS THE BEST.

Shin drummed his fingers on his leg. “My plans are fine. Except when others meddle where they shouldn’t.”

DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT YOU JUST SAID ABOUT LEMUEL? THAT HE’D HAVE A LOT FEWER FAILURES IF HE’D QUIT DOING STUPID AND WRONG THINGS?

Shin rolled his eyes, but said, “Fair point. Like father like son?”

OH, DON’T SAY SUCH THINGS! NO, I THOUGHT YOU WERE REFERRING TO POE’S MEDDLING. I NOTICED HE STILL HAS HIS SMUGGLING SKILLS WELL INTACT. CLEVER MAN. I LIKED THE TRICK WITH THE BLANKET—

“I was talking about you! It’s *your* fault I was incarcerated!”

MY FAULT? I WASN’T THE ONE WHO SENT YOU ON THAT FOOLHARDY TRIP TO THE WEST. YOU NEVER WOULD HAVE MADE IT, EITHER.

“You don’t know that—”

YES I DO. I KNOW EVERYTHING.

“If you really know everything, and it wasn’t *your* fault, then what did I do wrong that day?”

FIRST, YOU WOKE UP. THEN IT ALL WENT DOWNHILL FROM THERE.

Shin scoffed. “Figured you’d say that. ”

I’M SORRY, YOUNG PERE. I WOULDN’T HAVE SAID THAT AT THE TIME, YOU KNOW. I COULD HAVE HELPED YOU DURING THOSE TERRIBLE DAYS IN THAT CELL. IT BROKE MY HEART TO WATCH YOU.

“You were there?”

I’M ALWAYS HERE. I NEVER MOVE AWAY FROM YOU—IT’S YOU WHO MOVES AWAY FROM ME. BUT YOU CAME THROUGH IT WELL. I’M PROUD OF YOU. YOUR MORE HUMBLE ATTITUDE HAS HELPED YOU SURVIVE THE LAST SEVERAL DAYS.

“And look where it got me!” he exclaimed. “I was perfect, just like you told me to be. A lot of good that did!” He rattled the chain around his wrist and ankle.

IT KEPT YOU ALIVE. HILI WOULDN’T HAVE DEFENDED YOU IF YOU HADN’T BEEN PERFECT. AND I COULDN’T BE PROUDER OF YOU NOW. YOU’RE HERE BECAUSE OF YOUR BRAVERY.

“My what?”

YOUNG PERE, LEMUEL’S PRESENCE TERRIFIES PEOPLE INTO SAYING AND DOING THINGS THEY WOULDN’T NORMALLY DO. BUT YOU DIDN’T GIVE IN. YOU PREFERRED TO DIE. I KNOW YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE A COWARD AS YOU LAY ON THE FLOOR, BUT I’VE NEVER SEEN A BRAVER MAN THAN YOU AT THAT MOMENT. YOU WERE WILLING TO DIE. REMARKABLE!

A smile began to form around Shin’s mouth. “Really?”

REALLY. IN FACT, WHEN LEMUEL DEMANDED TO KNOW YOUR NAME AND YOU SAID, ‘PERRIN SHIN,’ I SHOUTED, YES! THAT’S MY BOY! I’M RATHER SURPRISED NO ONE HEARD ME.

Shin grinned. “Thank you, Puggah. I was hoping you’d be there when—if—I died.”

I KNOW. I’LL ALWAYS BE HERE. A SMALL PART OF ME IS DISAPPOINTED I COULDN’T EMBRACE YOU THEN. BUT THAT DAY WILL COME SOON ENOUGH, YOUNG PERE.

Those words worried him. “Puggah, what’s going to happen to me in nine days?”

DEPENDS ON WHAT YOU ARE GOING TO DO.

“I won’t tell them about Salem, Puggah.”

I KNOW YOU WON’T. YOU’VE ALREADY PROVED THAT. AND I LIKE TO BELIEVE THAT YOU DIDN’T REVEAL SALEM NOT BECAUSE YOU’RE WANTING TO KEEP IT HIDDEN UNTIL YOU ARE READY TO LEAD THAT NEW KINGDOM, BUT BECAUSE YOU WANTED TO KEEP SALEM SAFE.

“When Thorne was kicking me I wasn’t even thinking about my future, I was thinking about . . . about little Morah.”

SHE THINKS A LOT ABOUT YOU, TOO.

“I’m sorry to confess I haven’t thought that much about her,” he said. “But suddenly I pictured her as me, with Thorne kicking her little body . . . I couldn’t let that happen, Puggah. But I fear that somehow I already have.”

The Soldier in the Middle of the World

YOU'VE DONE NOTHING TO COMPROMISE SALEM'S SECURITY. OTHERS HAVE DONE THAT. YOU DON'T HAVE TO HAVE THE GUILT OF REVEALING SALEM ON YOUR CONSCIENCE.

“But I brought Amory here.”

TRUE, BUT SHE WASN'T THE FIRST TO TELL THORNE ABOUT SALEM. HE'D BEEN HEARING RUMORS ABOUT IT FOR YEARS. AND YOU SHOULD ALSO KNOW IT WASN'T AMORY WHO SAVED YOU FROM LEMUEL'S SWORD. HE WAS SUDDENLY STRUCK WITH THE IDEA THAT IT WOULD BE FAR MORE SATISFYING TO KEEP YOU LOCKED UP THAN TO KILL YOU.

“Wait—wait a minute . . . so I have *you* to thank for my new dungeon home?”

BETTER THAN THE ALTERNATIVE, RIGHT?

Shin scoffed into the darkness. “I don't know, Puggah! I really don't. I feel like I'm in a coffin. Is this what it felt like?”

I DON'T KNOW. I WAS NEVER IN THAT BOX. I WAS STANDING NEXT TO MY SON WHEN THEY WERE CLOSING IT UP, THEN I SAT BY MY WIFE AND DAUGHTER AS YOU THREW IN THE DIRT. THAT WAS ONLY MY BODY. I KEPT GOING. AND YOU NEED TO KEEP GOING. THERE'S STILL WORK FOR YOU TO DO, YOUNG PERE. YESTERDAY, FOR THE FIRST TIME, YOU SHOWED YOUR WILLINGNESS TO BE A TRUE SALEMITE. WE NEED TO GET YOU BACK THERE TO DO SO.

“So I'll survive this?”

YES, YOUNG PERE, IF YOU'RE CAREFUL YOU CAN SURVIVE THIS. BUT REALIZE THAT A LOT OF HOW YOU DESCRIBED THORNE TO AMORY COULD ALSO APPLY TO YOU. NOT SURE OF WHAT YOU WANT ANYMORE? ACTING IMPULSIVELY? EVEN SOME SELF-DECEPTION AS TO WHAT WILL WORK AND WHAT WON'T?

He scratched his chin guiltily. “Yeah, I kind of have to agree that sometimes I'm a *little* like him.”

WELL, HE'LL JUST TAKE IT AS A SIGN THAT YOU'RE REALLY HIS SON, THAT YOU'RE AS STUPID AS HE IS SOMETIMES.

He scoffed. “Thank you for that.”

I MEANT IT WITH LOVE, YOU KNOW THAT. NOW, BE VERY CAREFUL IN THE NEXT FEW DAYS AND WE CAN GET YOU THROUGH THIS. POE WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU, BUT HELP HIM OUT TOO, ALL RIGHT?

Suddenly Hili's last words yesterday made sense. “Puggah, have you been speaking to Sergeant Major Hili?”

IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING, YES. HE WAS ALWAYS A GOOD BOY, JUST NEVER HAD THE RIGHT INFLUENCES IN HIS LIFE. BUT WE GO WAY

BACK, POE AND I. DID YOU KNOW IT WAS YOUR GRANDMOTHER WHO FIRST STARTED CALLING HIM POE? SHE THOUGHT QUALIPOE WAS FAR TOO BIG A NAME FOR A LITTLE SIX-YEAR-OLD BOY. I IMAGINE EVEN HE’S FORGOTTEN SHE’S THE ONE WHO GAVE HIM HIS NICKNAME.

Shin smiled into the darkness. “Tell me more stories, Puggah. Tell me more about the people here, about people in Salem . . . tell me *everything* you know.”

EVERYTHING?

“Yes, everything. One thing I have right now, Puggah, is plenty of time. Tell me about Poe watching you train the soldiers. When I signed up he said you taught him how to hold a sword.”

He heard a cosmic chuckle. *IT WAS ACTUALLY A STICK, WHEN HE WAS NINE YEARS OLD. AND HE WAS PRETTY WORRIED ABOUT SNAGGING HIS SILK SHIRT.*

“Poe Hili? In *silk*?”

YES! BUT IF YOU KNEW HIS MOTHER, IT WASN’T SUCH A SURPRISE. THAT WOMAN—WHEW, SHE WAS SOMETHING ELSE . . .

The ceiling above Shin began to shift and he struggled to get to his feet, shoving the blanket in the crevice behind him.

REMEMBER WHAT I TOLD YOU.

Shin nodded. A lantern above his head appeared and slowly made its way down the ladder. Poe Hili nodded a greeting as he reached the bottom, and Shin smiled back. Hili put the lantern down, went back up, and came back again a moment later with the bucket. “Pull up the ladder!” he called when he was safely down, and a moment later the floorboards slid back into place.

“How are you doing?” Hili whispered to Shin

“A little lonely and hungry, but I’m all right,” he whispered back.

Hili patted him comfortingly on the shoulder. In a loud and harsh voice he said, “Do you finally realize the seriousness of your situation, Shin?”

“Feed me first, sir? I’m so weak. Water, please!”

“Just a sip, then give *me* something that *I* need!” Hili handed him the mug out of the bucket, then placed the bucket on the ground with the ration of bread. He unbuttoned his jacket and again produced a variety of foods from concealed pockets.

“Is there no more, sir?” Shin asked in a sufficiently pitiful voice.

Hili smirked. “Do you have something more for me?”

Shin nodded.

Cocking his head in surprise, Hili whispered, “Be careful.”

“I will be,” he whispered back. Louder, for the benefit of the soldiers listening above, he said, “Sir, Miss Amory was here earlier, wanting to know how to read the markings. But there are no markings on this side. There are signs of how to *get* to the world, but none on how to *get back*. The soldiers will never find any markings on any rocks or trees. Thorne can stare all he wants to at the rocks, but they’ll not reveal the horse trail, just like I won’t!”

“Perfect!” Hili whispered as he pulled out another long flask full of water from his trousers.

Shin took his empty one from the gap and they traded them in silence.

“So,” Hili said loudly, “you really think that’s what I want to hear? That the markings aren’t there? If you want more water, you’ll have to do better than that. No additional water until you reveal what you know. Amory told us you marked the trees to show a way back. But what we need are the markings for the rock paths. She told us there were least four of them—where are they?”

“I told you, I’ve got nothing more to say to you, Sergeant Major.”

“Then I’ve got nothing more to give you!” He glanced around him to make sure his uniform was buttoned properly again before calling, “Ladder!”

“Sir, please! No!”

“Maybe tomorrow you’ll have something useful!” Hili announced. In a tone designed to sound like a concerned superior officer, he continued. “Look, I want to help you, Shin, I really do,” he said as the floorboards moved and the ladder began to slide back down. Hili glanced up at the guards and held up a finger. “Look, Shin,” he said just loud enough for them to hear, “I hate seeing you like this. But my hands are tied until you give me something more. Until you cooperate . . . *Come on, Shin.*”

Shin’s chin trembled and he covered his face with his hands, because a convincing performance was required for the spying soldiers above. “I can’t, sir! I can’t betray my people!”

“It’s not betrayal, Shin,” Hili exclaimed, gripping his shoulder in a dramatic manner; the sergeant major had some acting abilities

as well. “It’s *salvation*. They can save us, we can save them—they must be suffering, too. Each of us can help the other, but the only way we can do it is if *you* help us. You, Shin, are the key to saving the world. Don’t you want to save the world? Thorne will forgive you if you help us. He misses you, but he has to be the general first, your father last. You understand, don’t you? Just tell me—how do we get the horses through?”

Shin shook his head. “I can’t! I can’t!”

“Good,” Hili whispered hurriedly. “Don’t. It’s enough for now.” In a louder voice he said, “Maybe tomorrow? I’ll bring extra water but you have to give me something extra, too.” He picked up the lantern and the bucket and went back up the ladder.

When the dungeon was dark again, Shin whispered into it, “How was that?”

YOU KNOW, WATCHING YOU THIS PAST YEAR AND A HALF HAS MADE ME THINK ABOUT THE MANY TIMES YOU APOLOGIZED AND CRIED IN FRONT OF ME. WERE YOU FAKING ALL OF THOSE TIMES AS WELL?

Shin pulled out the thick piece of jerky Poe gave him. “Consider it practice for my time here. If I didn’t have you to learn on, I might be dead by now.”

AH, YOUNG PERE, YOUNG PERE—

“Not *every* time was an act, Puggah. There were many incidents I sincerely regretted.”

HOW ABOUT JUMPING OFF THE SCHOOL ROOF?

“Did I apologize for that one?”

NO, I DON’T REMEMBER THAT YOU DID.

“Can I apologize for it now?”

WILL YOU MEAN IT?

“Mostly. I’m sorry you had to get help to carry me back because you weren’t strong enough by yourself.”

EAT YOUR JERKY.

Hili jogged up the stairs to the command tower and made his way to the large desk, pulled out paper and a quill, and wrote as fast as he could.

Twigg, standing in the doorway, watched him until he was finished. “Did he talk?”

“And he’ll talk more, in time. He’s terrified down there. The

guards said they've heard him mumbling all day as if he's having a conversation. But I think he's too hungry. We have to increase the rations or he'll become delirious and make no sense at all."

"Maybe," Twigg said. "Thorne's due back from the boulder field. Tell him."

Thorne shouting a few minutes later announced his presence. "Then they're not looking hard enough! There are crevices everywhere. Tell them to start climbing into them. I don't care if they worry about getting lost, they should be more worried about me losing patience! Tie a long rope to a tree then have them crawl in with it. They can crawl back out following the rope. Do I have to come up with a solution to everything? Hili! What'd he say?"

The sergeant major handed him his notes. "We made some progress today, sir. He claims there were never any markings on how to get *out* of the world, only on how to get *in*. I just finished writing down our conversation."

Thorne read through it quickly, sniggering at the end. "So he'll reveal nothing? Like he won't reveal they never marked the way through the boulder fields? Stupid boy. He just verified that there are paths through the boulders, and one for horses! Good work, Hili."

"Thank you, Sir, I was thinking, Shin *is* a large man, and what we're feeding him isn't nearly enough."

"That's the point, Hili. Starve them into talking," he said, holding up the evidence.

"But there's a new concern, sir. The guards heard him mumbling all afternoon, as if he was in conversation with someone there. If he becomes too weak he may become delusional and not give us anything worthwhile. I think it's apparent he knows things, but if we don't control him just right he'll die before we get what we need."

Thorne considered that. "You may have a point, Hili. Give him extra bread, extra water, and a piece of jerky."

"*Three times* a day, sir?"

Thorne sighed.

"Remember, sir," Hili said carefully, "as soon as he breaks, he might be ready to show us the route. But if he's too weak—"

"*Twice* a day, Hili. We don't want him thinking we're breaking before he does, correct?"

"You're right, sir. I didn't consider that."

Chapter 32--“Have you anything to tell me today, Shin?”

“Of course you didn’t. That’s why *I’m* the general.”

“Of course.”

Chapter 33--“They’re looking for us, aren’t they?”

They knew something.

Mahrree could read Shem and Peto’s faces better than their wives. And it was the exchange they shared as Guide Zenos left Rector Shin’s office that evening that clued her in. Something was happening on the other side of the mountain.

She positioned herself at the front door as Shem approached. “Heading home for the evening?” she asked amiably.

“Yep. Just had to go over a few things with Peto, but I finally get to go home. Unless you needed something, Mahrree?”

She folded her arms. “Don’t want to keep you from Calla, so let’s just cut to the point: what’s happening?”

“Nothing’s ‘happening’ Mahrree.” His eyes revealed nothing. Years of living in the world and lying about his identity had made him an excellent liar. But not *perfect*.

Mahrree pointed to his face. “That eyebrow. It twitches ever so slightly when you lie. I’ve always noticed that but never let on until now. And now I want to know—what’s happening? It’s Edge, isn’t it? Tell me.”

Shem took her gently by the shoulders. “There’s *always* something happening, but it’s not always meant for you to know.”

Mahrree peered around him to see Peto a few paces away. “So what is it, Peto? I know that look in your eyes as well.”

Immediately he tried to erase it, yet not knowing exactly what his mother could see, he instead shifted his gaze erratically.

“Oh yes, definitely not Guarder material,” Mahrree decided. “Please, both of you—what’s going on?”

Shem sighed. “The army’s poking about in the forest, Mahrree. That’s all. Really.”

“It’s true, Mother,” Peto chimed in. “They’ve finally noticed

its dead.”

“Did they make it to the boulders?”

Shem hesitated only momentarily. “Yes.”

“They find the foot path?”

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

“How did they know to look north?” she inquired. “And why?”

Shem and Peto glanced at each other.

“And don’t say, ‘Nothing!’” Mahrree said sharply. “I’m not stupid, you know.”

The men smiled sadly at her. “No one was going to say you’re stupid, Mahrree,” Shem promised.

“Perhaps excessively nosy . . .” Peto began.

Mahrree narrowed her eyes. “They’re looking for us, aren’t they?”

Both men sighed heavily.

“And who told them about us?” she pressed. “Was it . . .” she couldn’t bring herself to say his name.

“I’m fairly confident it wasn’t,” Shem assured her. “Maybe Amory, or Anoki Kiah, or Priscill Thorne . . .”

Mahrree looked at Peto for confirmation.

“We don’t know,” he admitted. “I’m just praying it wasn’t *him*.”

A lieutenant walked in wearily to the mess hall line and got his plate for breakfast. A captain at a table signaled for him to join him, and the young officer obliged. He sat down on the long wooden bench across from the captain and sighed.

“Let me guess, Kiah,” the captain smiled, “farmers in the southeast aren’t too interested in housing ten thousand soldiers?”

Lieutenant Kiah shook his head. “Dumbest reasons, too. ‘They’ll make the ground harder,’ ‘They might spook my goats,’ ‘Do they *really* need latrines?’ ‘My woman wants to know what color the tents will be, and if she can arrange them by size on the fields.’”

The captain chuckled. “We expected you back yesterday afternoon. Your corporals arrived and told Hili you were still trying to explain the intricacies of army rights to the citizens. Hili will be wanting an update as soon as possible.”

“I know, I know,” he said spooning the cooked wheat into his mouth. “I was in negotiations until late last night,” he garbled. “By

the time I was finished, I figured I just might as well stay until morning. No sense in riding six miles to the fort in the dark.”

“Negotiations, huh? Was she pretty?”

“Pretty enough in the dark.”

The captain chuckled again. “Well you’ve missed all the excitement the past three days.”

Kiah looked around. “Yeah, I thought something was up. The compound looks quiet for the time of morning. Are we training the new recruits somewhere else?”

“In a way. Nearly everyone at the fort is up at the boulder field beyond the forest.”

It was a good thing the cooked wheat was soft, because Kiah could barely force it down. “Boulder field?!”

“That’s right, and guess why? Thorne found out about the mysterious village—it’s real! It’s called Salem, and the main route to get there is from Edge—Kiah? Kiah! You’re choking!” The captain jumped up and reached over the table to smack Kiah on his back until the food cleared.

Kiah, his face red, coughed and asked, “Who told him?”

The captain sat down. “It seems *Miss Amory* is from Salem.”

Kiah sagged in astonishment. “Miss Amory!”

“She used to be his woman, back before the Little Lieutenant arrived and had her booted out. And get this—*he’s from Salem!*”

“Thorne knows? I mean, I mean,” Kiah panicked to back-track, “Private Shin?”

The captain didn’t notice Kiah’s slip. “All this time Shin was from Salem and no one knew it!”

“How did Thorne respond to the news? That there are people here who know about Salem?”

“He’s looking for more—”

“I’ll bet he is . . .” Kiah said under his breath.

“—to reward them for information.”

“Reward?” Kiah squinted. “You mean, he hasn’t killed Amory or the Little Lieutenant?”

The captain scoffed. “Amory is to be his queen, if you can believe that, once they get to Salem. He’s planning to make a new kingdom.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Then try this—Private Shin is now confined to the dungeon.”

Kiah smiled. “That I’ll believe!”

“Thorne’s trying to extract more information from him. Apparently Miss Amory knows all about Salem, but only Shin knows the way to get there and he’s not talking. At least not yet. He did reveal there are passageways through the boulders. There should even be one that can accommodate horses. That’s the one Thorne’s eager to find.”

Rubbing his hands, Kiah asked, “He hasn’t found it yet?”

“He hasn’t found *anything* yet. He’s got eight hundred men testing every crevice from the marsh lands to the beginning of the Hill.”

Kiah let out a low whistle. “That’s got to be about . . . seven miles? That could take a while.”

“Well, once we have the rest of the army here, it should take only a few hours to explore every remaining crevice.”

“Yes, but the land tremor during the eruption changed the—” Kiah stopped short.

“Changed what?”

“Uh . . . wouldn’t it have changed the boulder field?” he salvaged. “Maybe collapsed the trails?”

“Or maybe it made new ones?”

Kiah tapped his spoon against his bowl. “He’s really offering a reward?”

“To the first man who finds a route through. Word is, he might even get command of his own fort.”

Kiah pushed back the bench and stood up.

“Where are you going?” the captain asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know!”

Soon he was heading out the northeast gates to the forest. His update for Hili could wait. Soldiers streamed in and out of the trees, and it was odd to see so much activity in an area that never saw any.

Instead of joining them, he went east to the canal system. Once he reached it, he dropped into the dry canal and walked along the path next to it heading north. Where the canal turned to go west, he climbed out and continued north, counting his paces. By the twenty-first pace he was in the trees, exactly where he remembered he should be. There were only a couple of soldiers walking up to the boulder field and they ignored Kiah as they passed him.

He counted another seventeen paces to the large boulder that most likely rolled down from the field decades ago. From there he turned northwest and walked again, counting. He knew he would make a large semicircle, as he’d done over two seasons ago, but he also knew

precisely where he'd end up. He didn't recite to himself the directions and number of paces every night and morning for nothing. He'd been waiting for this.

So intent was Lieutenant Kiah in his walking and counting—creeping cautiously along the narrow passage that went between two large caverns that last year were belching a noxious odor but this year were eerily quiet—that he didn't notice the general in the distance watching him, nor Miss Amory tugging on his sleeve.

As he turned north again at a small clearing, he also didn't realize that the general and his consort were now following him at a distance. Kiah turned again, counting, and marched through the trees up a steep slope, past a few more soldiers, and finally reached the boulder field.

Thorne and Amory remained several paces behind him, Thorne frequently putting his finger to his lips to keep other soldiers from speaking to him or alerting anyone to his presence.

At the boulder field, the lieutenant evaluated the rocks before turning east, deliberately counting his steps. Thorne and Amory followed several dozen paces behind.

Kiah had to step over several ropes that had been tied to trees and vanished into low caverns between the boulders. His lips silently moved and occasionally he stopped and looked around before continuing.

Thorne and Amory slowly gained on him, pausing when he did, watching for markers that he seemed to be looking for.

Finally Lieutenant Kiah stopped and stared at the boulders before him. Thorne held out his arm to halt Amory, and the two of them watched the lieutenant searching the rock.

He gestured mutely to the boulders, drawing the attention of Major Twigg who was overseeing that part of the forest.

Twigg sent a quizzical look to the general, but Thorne shook his head and continued to watch Kiah. Twigg jogged noiselessly over to them.

Kiah looked puzzled, put his hands on his hips, pointed lamely, then sighed.

“Soldier?” General Thorne said quietly, and with as friendly a tone as he could produce as he walked over to him. “Are you looking for something specific?”

Startled, Kiah looked around him to notice that he had an audience of about fifty soldiers and officers.

“Uh, General! Uh . . . yes, yes. I mean no . . . I mean—”

Twigg stepped over to the lieutenant. “General Thorne, this is Lieutenant Kiah. He joined the fort shortly after the eruption. I don’t think you’ve met him yet.”

“No, I haven’t,” Thorne said. “Where did you serve before?”

“In Winds, sir.”

“Winds? Are you sure?”

Kiah licked his lips. “Uh, yes, sir?”

“Kiah, right? Because I understand you also spent some time in *Midplain*. Is that right?”

Kiah’s face went white at Thorne’s knowledge. Perhaps his brother Lick had mentioned him, or worse, Onus had said something. “Yes, sir. A while ago.”

“I see . . . I see. So, tell me what you’re looking for!” Thorne said with an encouraging smile. “You seem to have an idea about something.”

“Uh, sir? May I explain a few things? I wasn’t exactly expecting to see you already, you see, and—”

“Yes, that’s obvious,” Thorne cut him off sharply. “You know about the trails, *don’t you?*”

Kiah hesitated, then nodded. Thorne would get the truth out of him one way or another. He might as well get it now.

“How?” Thorne asked.

He took a deep breath. “Because, sir, under direction of two others serving in the army, I went to Salem just before the eruption.”

Thorne took an aggressive step. “You *what?*!”

Kiah tried to stand more confidently but his knees were trembling. “I went to Salem, sir. With your wife and daughters.” He stiffened in worry before letting drop his last piece of information. “Sir, I’m your son-in-law.”

For once, Thorne was speechless.

No one around him dared make a sound as they watched the general who seemed to have lost the ability to blink along with the power to speak.

Kiah withered slightly under his stare.

After nearly a minute of torturous glaring, Thorne whispered, “*My what?!*”

Kiah cleared his throat. “Son-in-law, sir. Anoki Kiah. I made vows with Versa about seven moons ago.”

Thorne narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

“Because she discovered she was . . .” Kiah stopped, swallowed, then continued, “she was *uncomfortable* with our relationship unless we made vows. She dug up some old rector from somewhere. She said we needed to be married.”

Thorne scoffed. “Sounds like her *mother’s* influence. Where are they now?”

Kiah stammered out, “S-s-still in Salem.”

“No they’re not,” Thorne told him.

“They’re not, sir?”

“One of them was here, a while ago. The one named . . .” Thorne searched his memory, “Priscill.” He snapped his fingers. “She came to the mansion.”

Kiah nodded. “Yes, sir. She came back with me. She didn’t want to stay in Salem.”

“Why not?” Thorne asked slowly, suggesting that the answer to that question just might be the means of many ends.

Kiah shrugged, unsure of what more to say than, “She missed the world.”

“Huh. Well, then, she died happily,” said Thorne dismissively.

Kiah’s eyes grew large. “She died, sir? I hadn’t seen her for a while, I just assumed she left—”

“Died breathing the herbs,” Thorne said quickly, ready to move on to more pressing matters. “So tell me, Anoki Kiah, *whose claim to being my son-in-law is still very much in doubt*, when did you return to Edge?”

“About five weeks after the volcano erupted.”

Thorne’s eyes flared. “You’ve been here ALL THAT TIME? You KNEW?”

Kiah took a nervous step back. “Sir, I was told not to reveal anything to you until the time was right!”

“Who told you that?”

“Sergeant Onus,” he squeaked.

“Onus!” Thorne shouted. “As soon as he was dead you should have come to me!”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Kiah stammered. “But I knew what you did to my brother, and I—”

Thorne shifted. “Your *brother*?” he said, now intensely interested.

“Yes . . . yes, sir,” Kiah grew white. “Captain Lick.”

Every man within listening distance gasped.

But to all of their surprise, Thorne began to smile. “Lick’s brother. Slagging Creet, I should have suspected. That little Zenos upstart kept claiming he had a way to know how to get to Salem, and now here he is, standing before me, shaking like a little girl!”

Kiah’s chest heaved. “Sir, I had every intention to return earlier. I didn’t even want to go to Salem. I did all I could to try to convince those taking us to just tell me the way, then I could’ve snuck away to bring you the news. It was during your celebration week. I fully intended to leave after I arrived in Salem and come tell you the location, but I was too closely watched. Several times I tried to escape, but they kept me there.”

Thorne narrowed his eyes with glints of planning. “Salem kept you *hostage*?”

Kiah brightened, seeing his new cover. “Yes, sir, *they did*. Against my will. It took me weeks of planning and timing just to get away. I narrowly escaped with Priscill. We had men chasing us all the way to the boulder field.” He told his story eagerly, as quickly as he could create it. “We had to hide for days before we felt it was safe enough to sneak down into the forest. By then we were so exhausted and dehydrated, I was sure we’d die without ever being rescued. I risked my life to come back, sir, to bring you this information. But then when I got here I learned you were already in Idumea, and the time never seemed right. For the past three days I’ve been speaking to farmers by the marshlands trying to establish the camp for your army, sir. I’m trying to help you. That’s all I’ve been trying to do!”

“Fascinating,” Thorne whispered, the planning in his eyes mushrooming to enormous sizes by the time Kiah finished. “Fascinating that you haven’t felt the need to reveal any of this until now, but you’ll prove to be valuable, won’t you, Kiah?”

“Yes, sir?” the lieutenant answered, losing confidence under the steady gaze of the general.

“So valuable you’ll show me now where the horse trail is?”

Kiah swallowed. “I’m trying to, sir. It should’ve been right here, from what I remember. But none of this rock looks right. It all seems a little lower somehow. It . . . it was *right here!*” He gestured vainly to the pile of boulders. “You had to go around a little corner, but it was tall and wide enough for a horse—that’s how we went, by horse. And there was a notch out of the boulder that spanned the entrance. I

remember that the cut didn't look natural, as if someone took a hammer and purposely knocked off the edge." He stepped up to the boulders and searched for the stone he described.

Several other soldiers joined him, looking at each edge and corner of the boulders.

Suddenly Kiah stopped. "No!" he whispered. He climbed on top of one of the boulders and, balancing on the uneven angle, stretched and ran his hand along to a notch.

"Sir, this is it! This was the spanning boulder but . . . but it's collapsed! The land tremor when Deceit erupted must have destroyed it." Kiah sat down on the boulder in frustration.

"Land tremor destroyed the horse trail. How convenient," Thorne said in a dead tone. "Foot paths?"

Kiah shook his head, still staring at the stone. "I never went on any. But supposedly they were marked from the top of the field."

"That's true," Amory said. "They were marked clearly, but only from way up there."

"Lieutenant," Thorne said steadily, "get down from the boulder."

Kiah obediently slid down to the ground.

"Kiah," Thorne said in a careful tone, "where are Druses and her other daughters?"

"Still in Salem, sir. As far as I know."

"Being held *captive*?"

Kiah squinted in confusion, then lit up. "Sir, if *I* was held captive, then *they* certainly are too."

Thorne nodded. "So Salem *abducts* people from the world and holds them *captive* in their village."

"They did so with my father, sir," Kiah said earnestly. "His name was Walickiah, and Zenos had him abducted many years ago and taken to Salem."

Thorne began to smile. "Zenos! I *knew* it!"

Kiah continued, seeing a reprieve. "It took him several years to break free and return to the world. After two seasons of wandering he finally returned to Scrub. That's where my brother and I were born."

"Lick told me about his father," Thorne said. "That he was an older man and a bit crazed. So the stories weren't just your father's imagination, were they?"

Kiah straightened his back, full of new confidence. “No, sir! And I was lucky to escape with my life, sir!”

Thorne studied Kiah. “Major Twigg? Bring the lieutenant to the command tower. I have a few more questions that best not be discussed out here.”

“Yes, sir,” the major said and gestured to the lieutenant.

Kiah eagerly followed him down the forest.

“I should go with them,” Amory suggested. “Maybe I can help him remember names and places.”

Thorne caught her arm. “No, *my love*. I’m sure we can handle this.”

“But, but,” she stammered, “I really think *I* should question him, *my love*. The most important thing right now is to find a route through the boulders, right? I can help Major Twigg. Tell you what,” she smiled as she slid her hand up his left arm, “I’ll get him *started*, then you can come finish.”

“All right, *my love*,” Thorne simpered. “I wanted to inspect this area more closely. I’ll be only ten minutes behind you.”

“Wonderful!” Amory beamed and turned to follow Twigg and Kiah down the forest.

Thorne watched her progress for a moment, then turned back to the boulder field. “I want EVERY man *HERE*! Fifty to start searching this section, another fifty beginning at that large tree, another fifty ten paces beyond that . . .”

Amory lifted up her skirt and did her best to trot gracefully down the slope to the major and the lieutenant. At a level clearing, she finally caught up to them and walked alongside.

“Major, allow me to take care of questioning the lieutenant here. I’m sure Lemuel could use some assistance up at the rock. Now that we have a good idea of where to look—”

Twigg cleared his throat. “Miss Amory, that’s quite all right. In this case, I think I’m a little more experienced in what General Thorne wants than you are.”

Amory glared at him as the lieutenant sniggered and the major blushed. “But you see, *dear Major*, the nature of the information Lemuel and I desire to know, you are not aware of. We have been hard at work with a great many plans, and you know nothing about

Salem. The general will be coming to the command tower in ten minutes anyway, and he'll only send you back up here."

"Miss Amory, I cannot go against a direct order—"

"Then *I'm* ordering you!" she said fiercely. "As your future queen, I *order* you back to the boulder field. I will take care of the lieutenant!"

Major Twigg stopped in surprise. "As you wish, Miss Amory. I'll notify the general of your decisions."

"You may be excused then," she said waving him away with a jerking motion. "Lieutenant Kiah? You're with me, now," she said as she slipped her arm into his and continued down the hill at a brisk pace.

Twigg shrugged and walked back up into the forest.

"Now," Amory said in a quiet voice, "what do you know of Salem?"

"Ma'am?"

"Come on! We don't have much time! I need to know who's in charge that might give us a problem. Is the guide still Zenos?" she whispered.

Kiah cleared his throat. "When I left, yes," he whispered back.

"Whatever you do, don't tell Lemuel. Let me break it to him. What about the Shins? What do they think happened to their son?"

"They know he left to go to the world, but nothing else."

"Who's died?" she asked urgently.

"Ma'am?"

"I mean, is Mrs. Shin still alive?"

"It's been a while, but she was when I left."

"And how badly did the volcano hit Salem?"

"Covered in about ten inches of ash, but they cleared it out."

"Deaths?" Amory asked. "From the volcano and pox?"

"Tens of thousands, but not as bad as here. The world has just over twice as many people as Salem does now."

"Are they armed?"

"With weapons?"

"Of course with weapons!" she snapped.

"Not that I know of. But I was only there a few weeks and never saw much beyond where I stayed. I was held *captive*," he reminded them both.

“Are the food reserves still intact?” she queried, her grip firming on his arm.

“They have something like four years’ worth.”

“Excellent!” she breathed. “What’s your intention?”

“My intention, ma’am?”

“Are you really his son-in-law?”

“Yes, ma’am. As legally as I can be, I suppose.”

“Do you love her? Your wife?”

“Do I have to?”

Amory snickered. “Was she just convenient?”

“For getting into Salem, yes.”

“And they’re still there? His wife and the two daughters?”

“They were living at the Second Resting Station when I left. They may have moved by now, supposedly to a house up in a northern vil-
lage somewhere.”

“So what do you want from Thorne, Anoki Kiah?” Amory asked, her tone turning strident

“I’m . . . I’m not sure. What’s he offering?”

She repositioned her grip as if afraid he’d slip out of it as they trotted down the hill. “I know all about Onus and his plans, Kiah. He was with me trying to negotiate for my knowledge and my silence when Thorne had him dragged off to be executed. You and Onus and Varice were going to tell Thorne about Salem for a price, weren’t you?”

Kiah’s breathing became more shallow.

“And your brother Lick—the four of you had originally agreed to demand half the riches of Idumea,” Amory continued, pulling Kiah closer as he tried to drift away from her. The end of the forest was approaching, the fort growing nearer. “Lick intended to march the army into Salem and demand to rule it as revenge for what Salem did to his father. So what were *you* going to get?”

“I . . . I . . .” the lieutenant stammered. “None of this was my idea!” he insisted. “It was my brother’s! *He* wanted revenge on Salem, I just went along with it because—”

“Because of your *father-in-law’s* rage, you’re the only one left alive, Lieutenant Kiah,” Amory said in an overly calm voice. “Thorne killed each of them. Or should I say, *Corporal* Kiah? That’s as far as you advanced before you quit the army, isn’t it? This uniform is courtesy of Onus, just as Lick’s was. And just as Lick, you’re serving under an assumed command, aren’t you? With a little bit of mead in

him, Onus was quite open about things. You're no officer, are you?"

Kiah's gait slowed, but Amory kept a hold of him and continued to rush him down through the thinning forest. "Miss Amory, what are you going to tell the general?"

"I'm going to tell him what I think he needs to know, Kiah."

"And what is that, ma'am?" His voice was tremulous.

"That you are dangerous, Kiah. That you are a threat to our plans. You see, this is *my* game. Mine and Lemuel's. There isn't room for a third player. You possess information about Salem and you know who's still *living* there. Well, that could ruin my strategy and I won't allow that."

"Miss Amory," Kiah said, his tone panicked, "I don't want to play *any* game. I don't want any reward, I don't want anything from you or the general. I just want to live in quiet. I don't even want to be acknowledged as the general's son-in-law and I certainly don't want his daughter! *Please* just let me go and I promise I'll never make any demands or ask for anything, nor will I say anything about Salem that you don't want me to say."

They were leaving the edge of the forest, the field before them leading to the fort walls and gates. "What assurance do I have that you'll not go back on your word?" Amory demanded. "That in five or ten years from now you don't show up in King Lemuel's throne room demanding something from our kingdom?"

"I . . . I . . ." Kiah stammered again as she nearly dragged him through the field, "I don't know how to prove it to you, ma'am. I'll even quit the army if you wish. You name it, I'll do it!"

Amory smiled as they strode through the gates. "What an *excellent* answer. Precisely what I wanted to hear. In the meantime," she cleared her throat and shouted, "GUARDS! Arrest this man! He's not a real officer—he's an imposter! Take him to incarceration!"

Amory learned a few things that day about issuing orders. The most important was, when calling for guards make sure guards are *available*. As she looked around the nearly empty compound she remembered too late that whoever wasn't up in the forest was training the new recruits in the fields beyond the fort. The only ones in the compound were the three surgeons, their assistants, and thirty men learning basic aid. None of them were in position to render Amory assistance—even if they wanted to—because

they were already tied up, and quite literally. Most of the men lay on the ground with various “wounds” while the surgeons showed their new aids how to splinter broken limbs and stop bleeding.

A surgeon looked over to Amory, held up handfuls of bandages, and shrugged his apology. No one else looked up from their work.

But one of the “injured,” a hefty man known more for his philosophy than his productivity—not that he couldn’t have been too productive since both of his “broken” legs were at the moment bound in wooden splints—commented loudly.

“An imposter? Truthfully, aren’t we all untrue to the truth within us? Aren’t we all imposters posing as something more imposing than our true natures truly are?”

Several men lying around him nodded in agreement.

“True, true. Very true.”

“Well said.”

“We are all imposters . . .”

Amory didn’t have time to deal with their inadequate responses because the moment she yelled for guards, Kiah yanked at his jacket with the arm Amory wasn’t clutching and quickly undid his buttons, popping a few off in his frantic effort to rid himself of the uniform. In an instant he wriggled free, leaving Amory holding only a sleeve with no Kiah in it anymore.

He was sprinting out of the gates shouting, “Jacket’s yours! I resign!” He undid his sheath and sword as he ran, dropping them outside the gates, and vanished.

Amory threw down the jacket, picked up her skirt, and ran after him. She passed the gates and saw Kiah running full speed to the east and the canal system. She did her best to catch up, cursing her skirt and dainty boots as she went.

Kiah disappeared into the empty canal and a minute later Amory reached it. She looked down to see only the distant back of Kiah, dashing south.

“Slagging Zenoses!” she whispered in fury. “Lemuel’s going to kill me!”

Trying to catch her breath, she planned her next moves.

“He’d be stupid to return, wouldn’t he? But it doesn’t matter, because he revealed all we needed.” She smiled and brushed down her skirt. “Oh yes, *my love*—Kiah will not be a concern or a threat. You see, he confessed all he knew as we walked. Yes, he broke away and ran to escape, realizing that his knowledge was a threat to us, but he

was stopped, Lemuel. Down past the canal where the marshes begin. Some eager soldier chased him down for us. Hacked him to death. His body is in pieces in the marsh. Terrible scene. Thank goodness the ice is beginning to melt so his body can submerge in it. The name of the soldier? I'm not sure, *my love*. He didn't have a uniform, you know. Just blue trousers and work shirt. And he was so excited to have done something with his new sword that he was rushing home to show his woman and friends that he bloodied it for you.

"Don't worry, Lemuel," she practiced her story as she started back to the fort, "I'm sure he'll show up for you to thank him. And if he doesn't then that's one less person who'll be knocking at your door asking for a reward. What did Kiah reveal? Much of what I already know. But Lemuel, it's time you knew the truth, the *entire* truth about Salem. Kiah was right; they are holding prisoners—hostages—for years on end. The situation has become more dire, and there's only one man who can fix it. You, *my love*, are just the man to bring Salem to justice . . ."

Staff Sergeant Beaved looked over the eight men assigned to him and internalized a sigh. It wasn't as if Beaved was one to question the judgment of the general, but to hear that Thorne himself had handpicked Beaved's men made the sergeant wonder exactly how much time the general had spent on the matter.

The men stood in formation, or as close to formation as they could with their week-and-a-half of training, and regarded Beaved with as little confidence as he regarded them. Beaved puffed up his chest importantly. While he was of average size, he was muscular and able. He wished he had let his short curly black hair grow out a bit more, if only for warmth. Edge was cooler than the south. His nearly black eyes evaluated each of the men and they analyzed him back.

Until yesterday, Sergeant Beaved was sure being the nephew of a lieutenant colonel from Trades was a good thing. Even though he'd met that uncle only once, he was sure his connections would land him a choice position when he arrived early in Edge. Now he had no choice but to take this position handed to him by the general.

“Men, I congratulate you in earning this assignment. That General Thorne selected you says something of your ability and dedication.” Beaved couldn’t believe he said all of that with a straight face.

Neither could one of his new privates, a portly man with thinning hair in his late thirties who rolled his eyes. Beaved glared at him for his insubordination, but the man was used to younger men glaring at him: he’d been a school teacher for fifteen years. It’d take a lot more than that to intimidate him.

“As you may or may not know,” Beaved continued, “I am one of the sergeants in charge of security and we’ve been given a most important task for which I’ll be training you in the next week.”

Two new recruits, hulking blond men in their late twenties who, until recently, were blacksmiths, nodded in appreciation and began their own whispered conversation.

“Hey!” Beaved barked. “Iron! Hammer! Pay attention!”

The two men blinked in surprise at their new names and stood a little more stiffly.

Two more soldiers, pasty boys barely at the end of their teens—if what they put on their forms was to be believed—looked at the sergeant with worry.

Another man, with skin as dark brown as Beaved’s, stared off into the distance seemingly captivated by a cloud. Beaved wondered if he’d been given a grassena survivor. It would’ve been too much to hope for that he didn’t get any, since the ones who wandered in to sign up were spread around to every group.

The seventh man stood obediently at attention—the only other man who’d been a member of the army before it exploded in size. An eighth man, oddly gray in complexion, smirked expectantly.

The sergeant made a mental note to keep a close eye on that last one. He looked a little *too* keen.

“In less than a week the rest of the Idumean army will begin to arrive, then General Thorne will lead the entire army north into the mountains beyond.”

He watched their faces. As the date drew closer, soldiers became less apt at hiding their apprehension about the whole venture. His eight reflected sufficient anxiety, except for the last one.

“At that time,” Beaved continued, “our services will be needed. General Thorne will be insisting that his prisoner in the dungeon accompany him in hopes that he’ll reveal information to help us locate Salem.”

The teacher squinted. “Wait a minute—prisoner in the dungeon? How long as he been in there?”

“Three days.”

Several of the soldiers squirmed.

The teacher scoffed. “Will he even still be *alive* in a week?”

“Supposedly, yes.”

“And we are here because . . . ?”

Beaved hesitated before saying, “He may pose a flight risk.”

The teacher barked a laugh. “He’ll be skin and bones! He won’t be able to walk! There needs to be *nine* of us to control him? My grandmother could control him if she weren’t dead.”

“Nine will be exactly what General Thorne’s son needs to keep a close eye on him,” Beaved said firmly.

The teacher’s jaw dropped. “Shin? We’re guarding *Shin*?”

The other soldiers also looked dismayed.

“Yes. Private Lek Thor—I mean, *Perrin Shin* will be our special duty, you could say.”

The teacher frowned. “I heard he was run off somewhere.”

“I heard he was still in incarceration,” said another.

“Do you see that cloud?”

“I heard he was *dead*,” said the gray-faced soldier, sneering.

“You all heard wrong,” Beaved broke in. Before he could continue, someone else spoke up.

“Why’s he in the dungeon?”

“I heard he was doing something with *Miss Amory*,” said another with a snigger.

“I heard he did something to the general’s horse.”

“That cloud looks like a horse. Without a head.”

Beaved opened his mouth to respond, but others were faster.

“It’s got to be more serious than doing something to the general’s horse to get thrown in the pit.”

“Maybe the cloud’s a horse in a pit. Oh look—it’s changing. Now it looks like . . . a blob. Mashed potatoes perhaps. Or cotton.”

“The general’s always throwing someone in the dungeon.”

“No he’s not. That’s just a rumor.”

“Now it looks like a pillow, fluffy and white. Without a head.”

“Why make up rumors about the dungeon?”

“To make people scared of him.”

“I’d be scared—”

“I’d be scared if my pillow was a cloud without a head—”

“ENOUGH!” Beaved bellowed.

The eight men in front of him each did a little jump.

He straightened his jacket and growled under his breath. “You should know that Perrin Shin is supposedly *from* Salem. That’s why he’s so valuable and so dangerous.”

The teacher let out a low whistle. “*From* Salem? Wait—how can that be? If he’s Thorne’s son, found in the woods—”

“No one’s entirely sure how anything *is*,” Beaved said, trying to steer around the doubt that had also entered his mind. Sometimes there were too many stories. “He was, after all, an infant when he was found. No one remembers their infancy—”

“I do! I remember lots of clouds and pillows and a horse—”

“NO, you DON’T!” Beaved shouted at the grassena man, who jumped again, pouted, and looked back up at the sky.

Beaved clenched his fists and released them. “Now,” he said, trying to control his growing impatience, “during the next few days we need to learn methods of restraint—”

“That’s what you have Iron and Hammer over here for,” the teacher jerked his head toward the massive former smiths.

The blond men elbowed each other in agreement.

“Exactly what am *I* needed for in this little security detail?” the teacher complained. “I don’t think I’ve been placed appropriately. I don’t remember taking any tests to see what I’m best suited for. What’s my aptitude? I demand to know!”

Beaved took a deep breath. “You’re right about Iron and Hammer. But you, *Teach*, are to be the ‘brains,’ allegedly. If Thorne’s son begins any little games or tricks, you’re supposed to notice and stop him. But I think you’re right. You don’t belong here.”

A few of the men snickered and Teach folded his arms. “The ‘brains’? I’ve got more than all of you put together!”

“Brains!” shouted the grassena soldier. “That’s what the cloud looks like now! See how it has all those bumps and ridges?”

Teach scoffed. “As if *you* could recognize brains—”

“I know brains,” he insisted. “They look like gray cauliflower. Cauliflower! That cloud looks exactly like—”

“ENOUGH with the CLOUDS!” Beaved shouted again. He closed his eyes, sighed heavily, then opened them to see eight soldiers watching and waiting. “Now, as I was saying . . .” He paused. “What *was* I saying?”

“Our duties, sir!” said the sixth soldier, standing appropriately at

attention.

“Yes, thank you. We have Iron and Hammer, we have the Teach, we also have you,” he pointed to the two youngest soldiers. “You are to keep him ‘company.’ Become his friends. Buddy,” he named the first, “and Pal,” he nodded to the second.

The two young soldiers looked at each other in surprise.

“Um, but we don’t know him—” Pal started.

“You’ll *GET* to know him. That’s your duty. If he becomes your friend he may confide in you where Salem is.”

The light slowly came on in their eyes.

“How about me, sir?” the sixth soldier asked, still at attention. Every inch of his brown skin and perfectly combed brown hair under his army-issued cap was stiff with expectation.

“You’ll be my liaison with General Thorne. Messages, concerns, whatever—you’ll relay them. You signed up last season, right? Regular army?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Well then, *Reg*, you get to behave as regular army.”

“What about me?” asked the next man in line.

Beaved shook his head at his dark, vacant eyes. “I’m not entirely sure yet, Cloud Man.”

Cloud Man smiled.

Beaved turned to the eighth soldier whose eyes were cold and brittle. “And you’ll be our lookout man. Watch the terrain, watch Shin, see if anyone is spying on him from the forest, that kind of thing.”

“Sure. Call me Snarl.”

Beaved’s eyebrows went up. “I was thinking of Eagle—”

The man’s lip curled and something dripped from his unkempt, brown hair.

“Snarl it is,” Beaved decided.

“What about me?” asked Cloud Man eagerly.

“*Still* not entirely sure yet. Remember?”

Cloud Man smiled. “Can I look out for the sky?”

“Yes, make sure it stays in place.”

Cloud Man beamed and gave a warning glare to the sky.

Beaved sighed. Private Shin better be just “skin and bones,” otherwise the sergeant would find himself demoted to private.

Chapter 34--“I’m being released?”

Shin heard the floorboards moving and he looked up. Day six behind him, four or five more to go. He took a deep breath and steeled himself for another morning. It was morning, right?

Shin stuffed the blanket into the gap and watched as Hili came down the ladder again, lantern in his teeth. He set it down and retrieved Shin’s morning rations. The soldiers above closed up the floor, and Hili whispered his usual greeting. “You all right?”

Shin nodded. “I’m all right.”

“Good,” Hili whispered back. In a louder tone he said, “Your bread, your jerky, and your water. If you want bigger rations at dinner, tell us about the routes!” Hili already had his jacket off and was retrieving various foods stashed in his pockets.

Shin smiled in admiration. No one could tell the sergeant major was bulked up with rations. Then again, no one at the fort knew the sergeant major used to be a master thief as a teen.

Last night, Puggah told him that the second time he incarcerated Poe Hili he patted him down first. Even though the chief of enforcement was sure he’d retrieved everything from the fifteen-year-old, Major Shin still found several more pieces of jewelry and even a knife secreted in his clothing. At the time Puggah was sure, by the smirk on young Poe’s face, that he still had even more that no one found.

Shin didn’t know if he should label it ironic or a blessing that the same skills Poe Hili mastered as a young man trying to sneak goods past Perrin Shin were the same skills that were now saving his grandson by the same name.

He was sure there was no way he could’ve survived on the starvation rations he was given. He knew he was losing weight, but he was doing all he could to not lose strength. Each day he spent time doing push-ups against the walls and jogging in place. His ribs were

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mending adequately and the bruise on his shin was tolerable. He stretched, he jumped, he did everything he could that Colonel Shin recommended to keep his body toned and ready. There was no way Thorne would let him stay behind at the fort when the army left. But there might be a possibility that, depending on how the forest in the canyon looked, he could slip away and run to safety.

Funny how something he didn't want to do for the past year and nine moons was all that he wanted to do now.

Hili handed him shriveled berries and nuts, and Shin said loudly, as he stashed them in the gap, "I can't tell you anything more than I did yesterday, sir."

Hili made a quiet noise in his throat and held up a finger. From some inner pocket of his jacket he produced a thick piece of sweetbread, wrapped in a kerchief. He grinned as Shin's mouth dropped open and his lips smacked together eagerly.

"From the general and Amory's own table!" Hili whispered and handed it over.

Shin couldn't bear to shove it into the gap without taking a large bite first. It was the most delicious thing he'd ever eaten.

"Can't tell me anything more?" Hili said loudly.

"I can't remember, sir," Shin garbled with crumbs on his chin.

"Then maybe I won't remember to bring your dinner!"

"Sir, please!"

"The routes, Private!" Hili shouted.

"Sir, there *is* another route. Used in the past. It was much safer."

Hili raised his eyebrows in concern.

Shin nodded to assure him.

"Why have you not told us this before?" he demanded.

"I . . . I didn't remember it until now. I never was on it, but it went past Moorland."

"Moorland is under five hundred feet of mountain, Shin!"

"But sir, please—it was *past* Moorland. Maybe if scouts were sent to the crater they could find the route around it. Salem is maybe fifteen miles behind what was Mt. Deceit."

Hili's mouth hung open in surprise. "Really?" he breathed.

Shin shrugged. "Roughly," he whispered quickly. "I never

went on it. But it’d give Thorne a new lead to chase.”

Hili glanced upward, knowing the guards were listening in. “So how do we get through the rock, Shin?” he yelled.

“Sir, I don’t know. The only way may be *over* the rock.”

Hili sighed. “Can’t get horses over the rock, Shin!”

“Maybe they can make it over Moorland. There should be no rock there, and maybe the new hill has settled enough for horses to traverse it?”

“Good diversion,” Hili whispered.

“Sir,” Shin said loudly, “if you’d consider releasing me, I could probably find—”

“NO!” Hili bellowed.

“But sir, please! I’m so hungry. Feed me today and I can help try looking at Moorland—”

“We don’t need help looking, Shin! Half the army is already arriving. The other thirty-seven thousand will be here in just days. What we need is solid information, soldier! Not ideas and speculations! Guards! I’m ready to come back up.”

“Sir, do I get dinner?” Shin pleaded.

Hili winked reassuringly at him but barked, “I’ll decide that later!” He checked the buttons on his jacket to make sure all of them were fastened as the floorboards above them moved again.

A few minutes later, when Shin’s hole became dark again, he whispered. “How was that, Puggah?”

VERY GOOD. THORNE’S GETTING FRUSTRATED WITH THE LACK OF PROGRESS. HIS MEN ACTUALLY FOUND THE LAST REMAINING FOOT PATH, BUT SINCE IT WON’T ACCOMMODATE HORSES HE DIDN’T EVEN HAVE THEM FINISH EXPLORING IT. HE’LL JUMP ON THE POSSIBILITY OF THE MOORLAND ROUTE. THAT SHOULD KEEP HIM OCCUPIED FOR A COUPLE OF DAYS, I’M GUESSING. BY THEN THE REST OF THE ARMY WILL BE ARRIVING WHICH WILL BE A HUGE MESS TO KEEP HIM BUSY FOR A COUPLE MORE DAYS, AND THEN IT WILL BE THE 30TH.

“The day he plans to leave to find Salem. Then what will happen?”

THERE’S ONLY ONE POSSIBILITY—OVER THE BOULDERS.

Shin released a low whistle. “I’m guessing at least half of the army will have a hard time climbing over that rock. Even with everyone losing weight the past few seasons, there are still some very large

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bellies in the world.”

He heard a cosmic chuckle. *DON'T TELL THEM THAT. THEY LIKE TO BELIEVE THE BULK IS MUSCLE. BUT SINCE THEY DON'T HAVE ANY REAL MUSCLE, THEY DON'T KNOW THAT MUSCLE DOESN'T JIGGLE.*

Shin snorted and reached in the gap for his sweetbread. He sniffed it, sighed in sheer pleasure, and took another big bite, savoring the rare flavor of sugar.

THAT'S WHAT I CAUGHT HIM EATING THE FIRST TIME I APPREHENDED HIM.

“Who?” Shin garbled with a mouthful.

POE HILI. IT WAS THE CRUMBS THAT GAVE HIM AWAY. I KNEW GUARDERS DIDN'T STEAL FOOD, BUT TEENAGE BOYS WOULD. POE STILL HAD SOMETHING LIKE THAT SMEARED ON HIS CHIN WHEN I FIRST NABBED HIM. NOW HE'S STEALING IT FOR YOU. I ALWAYS WONDERED WHAT KIND OF A FATHER POE WOULD'VE BEEN. MAYBE THIS IS A GLIMPSE INTO THAT.

Shin smiled into the darkness and shoved the rest of the thick bread into his mouth.

“Moorland? Are you sure, Poe?”

“Positive, General.”

Thorne exhaled. “I suppose that *could* make sense. The Guardians were taking over Moorland before we blew them out of there. They may have had a route somewhere.”

“Do we want to send a contingency to try to scale the Hill?” Hili asked.

Thorne looked out the command tower windows toward the west. Another five thousand soldiers were arriving in Edge and setting up camp in the barren farmland. A few listened to instructions, thousands more didn't, but by evening the hope was that two thousand, five hundred tents would be properly in place.

“Perhaps fewer bodies in the way of establishing camps would make things easier,” Hili suggested as he gazed out at the terrain which was swarming with men in blue trying to set up sheets of white, as if a cloudy sky had fallen to the ground and was trying to sort itself.

“Possibly,” Thorne muttered. “Five hundred men—send them by horseback if we can find enough animals. See if they can climb the Hill and find anything to the north of it.”

“Excellent idea, sir,” Hili agreed. “Has he earned his dinner?”

Thorne sighed. “Yes, he has. He’s also earned a visit.”

“A visit, sir?”

Thorne watched the attempts at tent raising and scowled at the failures. “He’s going to meet two new friends this evening.”

“Who, sir? Are you sure that’s a good idea? The dungeon is getting rather foul—”

“Bring him out of it, temporarily. He can take his dinner in the records room with his friends.”

“Friends?” Hili had never heard Shin mention he had friends. No one had even come asking after him.

“Yes,” the general continued in a drawl. “Two brave young men who pleaded with me to have some compassion, who had admired the lieutenant when he spoke kindly to them last year. I was so surprised by their earnestness that I actually gave in. They adore him, Poe. And they should deserve to meet him. His father can extend to him this little bit of kindness.”

Hili was confused. “And . . . and what are their names?”

“I believe Beaved designated them Buddy and Pal. If the sergeant would learn to memorize people’s names . . .” Thorne shook his head as he watched the fumbling soldiers in the distance. “But then again, he’s one of the best security sergeants available right now, according to his uncle.”

Hili internalized a sigh. There were no admirers of Shin but two new spies of General Thorne. With any luck they’d be as inept as the rest of the conscripted army.

And hopefully Shin was ready for them, but Hili didn’t know how to warn him.

“Visitors?” Shin asked Hili in amazement. He looked quickly around himself before cringing.

“Not here, but up there,” Hili nodded to the hole above them.

Shin was flabbergasted. “I’m being released?”

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Hili sighed. “No. Just given a reprieve, temporarily.”

“I’ll take it!”

Hili pulled out a set of keys and unlocked Shin’s chains. “Then follow me up.”

Shin climbed the ladder eagerly, not really caring who was at the top but ready to gulp in fresh air and maybe see a bit of daylight. Although it was dinner time—he assumed—there still might be some glimmer of real light coming through the doorway.

As his head came up through the hole in the floor, he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Why had he never before realized how glorious fresh air was?

He pulled himself out of the hole and stood. Instinctively he looked to the door hoping to see light filtering in from the receiving area. While the door was closing, thanks to one of many guards, he did glimpse light—real light, not the candlelight in the records room, but the sun. It was enough to get him through another day.

The sound of a throat clearing brought his attention back to the room. There stood a sergeant, maybe thirty years old with dark skin and eyes watching him expectantly, and two pale, younger soldiers trying not to wince at his odor. They had the gangly, awkward look of boys in mid-growth spurt, their head sizes not yet matching the rest of their bodies. They were seated at a small table that was set for a meager dinner.

“Private Shin? I’m Staff Sergeant Beaved,” the dark skinned man said. “This here is, um . . . Buddy and Pal.”

Shin smiled at the soldiers. “Who is who?”

The soldiers looked at each other and shrugged.

One raised his hand. “Guess I’m Buddy. That must be Pal.”

“All right,” Shin said slowly. “And you’re here because . . .?”

“Your admirers!” Beaved told him. “The reason you’ve been allowed out of the dungeon for dinner is because of these two brave young men.”

Shin raised his eyebrows and looked at them in wonder.

The two boys produced smiles that weren’t completely authentic on their pimply faces.

Shin gave them another smile that he’d learned from his grandfather, appropriate for dinners. “Really?”

Beaved nodded. “They were working alongside Thorne this afternoon and expressed their concern for your well-being. I’m not entirely sure what they said to him, but the next thing I know Thorne’s granting them their request to meet you and allow you a meal at a real table and chair. Extraordinary privates, Shin.”

“Indeed!” Shin said, his muscles aching to sit properly in a chair. “I see I owe you an incredible debt of gratitude. Thank you! I only wished I smelled better for you. Maybe dressed completely . . . bathed . . . had a comb . . .”

The two young men laughed uproariously as if they heard the funniest joke in the world.

Shin blinked and smiled. He glanced over at Hili, trying to send him a message with his eyes.

Hili nodded. “Seems everything is under control here. I’ll excuse myself and allow you three to get better acquainted. Staff Sergeant? I’m sure the six guards posted outside this door can handle anything that may happen in here. Although I’m sure Shin will do nothing to cause him to not have this privilege again.”

Shin was sitting down to the table but stopped. “Again? I get to do this again?”

Hili smiled thinly. “If all goes well, yes. I’m telling you, Shin—these young men had quite the effect on General Thorne. You might be able to take every dinner here until you’re released. They’re very *powerful*.”

Shin smiled thinly back, having caught the message, and turned to the young privates. “I’d love to hear what you said to the general!”

Their plastered smiles began to crack and they glanced at each other nervously.

Sergeant Beaved’s eyes narrowed.

Buddy finally spoke. Or maybe it was Pal. “That’s . . . that’s not really important right now. What we really want to know is, how are you doing? We can’t imagine what it must be like down there.”

“Here,” said Pal. Or Buddy. He pushed over a plate and removed the cloth that was covering it. “Please, eat. Then we can talk. Maybe Sergeant Major Hili will be slow in returning so we can have some time.”

Shin and Hili exchanged looks—Shin’s glance assuring Hili that he understood just how powerful these boys were—and Hili shut the

door. With ravenous gusto, Shin dug into his dinner of warm stew and bread.

When Hili returned over half an hour later, it was to see the two privates sitting across from the table trying to subtly shield their noses, and Beaved in the corner trying to be inconspicuous.

Shin was telling them about his experience in the eruption and how he was so grateful to find General Thorne.

“It was . . . it was a *miracle!*” he was saying earnestly. “Now I can understand why the Creator chose him to find the new guide! The Guide! I can hardly wait for Guide Lannard to return with the army!”

Buddy and Pal nodded and glanced at each other.

“Interesting, interesting,” Buddy said distantly. “But I think I was asking about your childhood. What your home was like?”

Shin’s eyes went blank. “That’s right,” he said slowly. “I forgot. How’d I end up talking about Lannard Kroop?” He shrugged. “Sorry about that. I just haven’t had anyone to talk for so long that I’m just excited to talk to anyone about anything! Have you ever had that feeling? The need to just say words and make noises? Just hear your own voice? To know you’re still alive, that other people are still alive and breathing and that the whole world is still going on, singing and talking and laughing and—”

Hili cleared his throat loudly from the open door.

Shin stopped and regarded Hili with disappointment at his arrival.

But Sergeant Beaved looked over to him in relief, as did the young soldiers. They stood up quickly as Hili came into the room.

“Time’s up, Shin. Sorry.”

Shin stood up reluctantly and smiled at his two companions. “Thank you,” he said fervently. “Thank you for the dinner, for the conversation, for the chance to sit like a real person, for—”

“Shin!” Hili said sharply. “Enough! Guards, get in here and open the floor again.”

A few minutes later, Hili refastened the chain loosely around Shin’s wrist and ankle, giving him as much room to move as possible. As he worked he whispered, “How’d it go?”

“Couldn’t you tell by their faces?” Shin whispered back. “I talked nonstop but never said anything they wanted to hear. Tell

Thorne I *love* my new buddies and pals.”

Hili patted Shin’s arm and grinned. “Good work, Shin.” He paused. “I’ve . . . I’ve been wondering—did they call you Perrin? In Salem?”

Shin looked down. “Young Pere.”

“Because there was an Old Pere?”

“In a way, yes. Not that long ago.”

Hili exhaled heavily. “So much I want to know, so much you better not tell me. I’m sorry I asked.”

Shin looked him in the eyes. “He really liked you, you know. He always worried about you after you were transferred from Edge—”

Hili held up a hand. “Don’t say any more, Shin. Don’t tempt me with information I might accidentally divulge.” He jingled the chains. “Just a few more days, son,” he whispered, and Shin didn’t mind one bit hearing him use that word. “Hang in there, Young Pere.”

“Thank you, Poe.”

For the next few evenings, Sergeant Beaved watched as Shin entertained his new friends with rambling stories about living in the mansion, riding his horse, meeting the people of Edge, counting the bags of grain, and everything else that was dull, tedious, and current. But what they wanted was exciting, unexpected, and in the past.

No matter what they asked, Shin always drifted into something else. Each day Beaved rehearsed with Buddy and Pal questions that only a raving idiot would misunderstand, but apparently living in the dark, stinking dungeon had turned Shin into such an idiot.

Each evening he babbled nonstop and even once broke out into a song about a buzzing butterfly. Then he giggled for several minutes while the two privates smiled uncomfortably.

After dinner on the 28th, Beaved trudged up the command tower steps to General Thorne’s office and reluctantly knocked on the door. When he heard the command, “Enter!” he took a preparatory breath and stepped into the office.

Thorne’s steady gaze stopped him. “Well?”

“He really likes sweetbread. Went on about it for at least fifteen

minutes. He also likes pie. Peach is his favorite. Then berry, then apple, unless the apples are really tart that year, then apple is his second favorite and berry is his third. He hates pumpkin pie, though. The texture is all wrong. Would you like to know why?"

Thorne groaned. "No, thank you." He looked out the darkening window. "Tell me, Beaved—is he sincere or is he playing us?"

Beaved shrugged. "I really don't know, sir. I never met him before this. He certainly *seems* sincere. He hugged the privates today, he was so happy to see them. I thought they were going to pass out because of the stench," he chuckled. He stopped when he realized he was the only one chuckling.

Thorne shifted his gaze. "He's very clever, Beaved. He can read a situation and manipulate it for his own purposes. That's how I'm sure we share the same blood." He looked at the black window again. "Tomorrow is his last day down there and I'm running out of time. The Hill is impassable, there's no path through the rock anywhere—we're going to have to climb over it. If we could just get from him the distance, the routes . . . This strategy hasn't worked as Slither anticipated it would." Thorne went silent, brooding.

Beaved waited for him to speak.

"'Preserve Shin,' he kept saying. 'We'll need him. He'll talk. He'll tell us everything if you treat him just so.' Ha!" Thorne scoffed. "Slither's no longer worth the grain he's eating. Why do I bother listening to anyone else but myself . . ."

Beaved cleared his throat to remind the general he wasn't alone. When Thorne finally looked at him, Beaved spoke tentatively. "Sir, I have some thoughts about Shin. He can't concentrate on anything for more than a moment and seems more starved for attention than for food. If he does know the distance, in his current condition he can't articulate anything of use. He doesn't act like an angry prisoner but like a . . . like a lost puppy, glad to be found again."

Thorne scoffed. "Lost puppy. How does he look? Skinny?"

Beaved shrugged again. "He's pretty large, but I guess he's lost some weight. The guards say they hear him doing things down there and counting as he does them. Maybe exercising."

Thorne tapped his lip with his finger. “One day left. What can I do to get him to talk with only one day left . . .”

Beaved shifted. “Sir, that’s what I’m getting at. I don’t think we need to get him to talk. He might reveal himself in another way. His eyes may give him away.”

Thorne turned back again. “His eyes?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve noticed that men frequently look at the very thing they’re trying to ignore. Shin’s not concealing anything very well right now. He’s unguarded, like an open book, showing us everything about himself. I have a feeling that once we get him up beyond the boulders, and if we watch his eyes, they’ll tell us exactly where to go. Who knows—maybe in his eagerness to be freed from the dungeon he’ll lead us to Salem, just like that lost puppy.”

“Humph,” Thorne grunted. “Seems to be our only option. You better hope you’re correct, Beaved. Or actually, Slither better hope. Because if this fails, I’m coming back here and killing the fat old man myself.”

Shin waited anxiously all the next day, the 29th. His breakfast came from Hili on time, but the sergeant major didn’t know when he would be released.

“Rather frenzied out there, Shin,” he explained as he hurriedly unloaded the morning’s extra rations. “Edge is soon to be a city of nearly 90,000 people! Soldiers have set up their tents too far away from each other so they have to snug them up together to make room for the rest of the army filing in. Naturally, that’s causing some violence. Already we’ve had more than a dozen men die from trying out their new swords and long knives on each other. It’s just going to get worse as the rest of the army arrives this afternoon. Some of the farmers are arguing with the soldiers, horses are wandering untethered—we received news of a small stampede on the eastern side of the village just before I got your breakfast. A surprising number of women have accompanied their men, too. Seems they didn’t want to sit around waiting. The general wanted four thousand women, but more than fifteen thousand are already here. There are rumors that even more will be coming once the army leaves. And where do they think

they're sleeping?"

Hili exhaled in frustration as he put on his jacket to button it.

"Today, I almost envy you, Young Pere," he whispered. "You have more room than anyone else, you don't have to worry about stampedes, and no women will be sneaking in here to sleep tonight. Wait. Maybe they will, once they realize who's down here *all alone*."

"Even with the smell?" Shin squinted.

"Even with the smell. It's not going to smell much better up there by tomorrow. No one wants to try to dig latrines but everyone wants to use one. Edge is going to be in ruins by tomorrow. This is the most undisciplined army I've ever seen."

A thought was birthed in Shin's mind. "Undisciplined? Guess that comes from so little training . . . Or might they be *insubordinate* because they don't believe in General Thorne?"

Hili inspected his uniform. "Don't know, Shin, and I don't like the direction your thoughts are going—" He looked up and rolled his eyes. "Ah, no! You've *got* to be kidding me—Young Pere, after all this time you've learned *nothing*?"

"What do you mean?" Shin asked with his best innocent face.

Hili gestured in exasperation. "I saw your scrawls all over that slagging piece of paper: *General Perrin Shin*. You signed your death decree that night, you know that? Do you know how close I came to losing my position arguing for your life? Don't you dare thank me like this. I just spent ten days risking my own neck smuggling you food to keep you alive. Don't you dare go up there and lose that life tomorrow by thinking you can take over from Thorne. You'll *die*, you know that? There's no way you could ever succeed. He's always three steps ahead of everyone. And who would listen to you, anyway, Young Pere?"

"Sir, sir," Shin said with an easy smile, "I know I'm a nobody. I was just curious about the state of the army, that's all. Besides, what in the world could I possibly do *now*? Honestly, Poe—look at me."

"Just remember that, Young Pere." He sighed and patted Shin on the shoulder. "I'll see what I can do about getting you out and getting you a bath. I already have your cot ready in my quarters, although three more officers are sleeping there, too. All this may

take a little time, though. I’ve got huge messes up there to straighten out. Just hang on, Young Pere.”

“I will, sir. And thank you, Poe. For everything.”

The day moved remarkably slowly. Shin kept watch above him waiting for the floorboards to move. They didn’t.

Not through the morning, not through the afternoon—maybe it wasn’t even afternoon yet. He was so eager to get out he was struggling with keeping track of time. Puggah told him repeatedly to go through Lilla’s repertoire of songs or recite all the passages he could remember from *The Writings*, but as soon as he started he was sure he heard a noise above him, so he’d stop, hold his breath in anticipation, and be disappointed yet again.

IT’S A MESS UP THERE, YOUNG PERE. POE’S IN CHARGE OF SORTING IT ALL OUT. SETTLE IN FOR A LONG WAIT.

“He can send someone else to get me,” Shin said, watching above. “He could’ve told those guards up there to release me—”

HE’S SUPPOSED TO KEEP WATCH OVER YOU. HOW ABOUT I TELL YOU A STORY ABOUT—

But Shin couldn’t concentrate on listening to anything besides the wood scraping above his head. A thought kept rising in his mind, and although he suspected he should probably fight it in his boredom he entertained it instead. The army didn’t believe in this ridiculous notion of an unknown village. They were there only because they were ordered to be there. And even if they *did* find such a village, how could it hold so much food for everyone?

No, in a few days the army of Idumea would not only be insubordinate but treasonous. It’d become frustrated with following Thorne up steep and exhausting mountains. Surely it’d take only a few days for the majority of the army to begin to wonder if someone else couldn’t be a better leader. Maybe someone Thorne feared so much that he locked him up in his dungeon until it was time to leave.

Maybe someone who was a descendant of the last great leader the world ever saw—

DON’T THINK IT, YOUNG PERE. IGNORE THAT LITTLE FANTASY. I KNOW YOU HEAR ME, YOUNG PERE. I SEE YOUR EYE TWITCHING. JUST DON’T THINK IT . . . THERE’S A MUCH BETTER LIFE AWAITING YOU.

Eventually his stomach, which was used to being fed twice a day, grumbled loudly enough to disturb his planning and fantasies. It had

to be dinner time. But still no Hili. Still no movement above.

He felt in the gap to make sure there wasn't a nut or morsel of bread he'd neglected to find on his earlier inspections, and he drained the last of his water before shoving the flask into the gap.

And he waited.

Long past dinner time, there still was nothing.

GO TO SLEEP, YOUNG PERE. PASS THE TIME THAT WAY.

He wrapped the blanket around him in defeat as he leaned against the timbers. Thorne was doing this on purpose, he was sure. Get him full of hope then snatch it all away. Yet another page to write in his memoir about the world's most ridiculous leader. The itching in his eyes told him it was night again and no one had come to retrieve him.

He was careful not to be angry with Hili. Poe had been nothing but exceptionally helpful for the past ten days. Something big must have been happening to keep him away.

No, this neglect had General Thorne written all over it. Exactly what kind of emotion it was meant to provoke in Shin, he wasn't sure. He had to play this correctly, even though he wasn't sure what kind of game they were playing now.

He closed his eyes, although by now he thought he could have slept with his eyes open it was so dark either way—

“Where'd he get that blanket?”

“I don't know. Maybe it's supposed to be part of the dungeon.”

“Dingy enough that it looks like part of the dungeon.”

Shin blinked rapidly to realize there was light coming down the ladder. He sat up quickly and considered stashing the blanket, but it had already been seen. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes to focus on the bodies reaching the bottom of the pit. His heart sank in disappointment that it wasn't Hili, but immediately he began to see what Thorne was playing at.

“You're awake! Good,” Buddy said. “Guess what? You're free!”

Shin's eyebrows went up.

“It's true!” Pal assured him as he reached the bottom, coughing at the stench. He pulled a set of keys out of his pocket.

“Say goodbye to your miserable home, Shin,” Sergeant

Beaved someone called down from the top of the pit. “Because you’ll never see this slagging place again. Ready for a bath?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m ready!” he said, getting to his feet.

Buddy and Pal scowled as they undid his chains. Shin hoped they wouldn’t notice how loosely they’d been wrapped around his wrist and ankle. He rubbed his flesh for good show.

“Let’s go!”

“Yes, let’s,” agreed Buddy as he motioned for Shin to start climbing the ladder.

He glanced around him, decided he wouldn’t miss that place, and climbed as quickly as his tired, hungry body would let him. He had sunshine to see!

He reached the top of the ladder, stood up, and headed for the door. Several guards were there with swords drawn. Each pulled the same grimace as they regarded him.

“Hold on, Shin,” Beaved said. “You go nowhere without the three of us.”

“Of course, of course,” he said, looking past guards, disappointed that he saw only darkness. “What time is it?”

“Probably about 1 a.m.,” Beaved told him as Buddy and Pal came out of the hole, gulping fresh air.

Shin sagged. “It’s 1 a.m.? The 30th Day of Planting?”

“Would you rather we send you back down and retrieve you later in the morning?”

“Sir, no!” Buddy exclaimed. “He’s just disappointed it’s so late at night. Right, Shin?”

Shin nodded. “Yes, yes . . . I was hoping for light.”

Pal laughed sadly. “If you want light, we could take you to the eastern part of the village. Most of it is on fire right now.”

“Fire?”

Beaved nodded in disgust. “You’d think soldiers would know how to properly establish a camp fire, wouldn’t you? But no—we have to be too eager to cook our meager rations so we build monstrous fires that quickly get out of control. Sergeant Major Hili has been running from one disaster to another all day and now it looks like it’ll be all night. Pal and Buddy here pleaded with General Thorne to release you to our care, and your father finally relented. It seems he wanted to be here to bring you out but he’s busy directing

the firefighting efforts.”

The smell of smoke now reached Shin’s nose. “Well then, I thank you for coming to get me. You truly have an extraordinary way with General Thorne, don’t you? Maybe you can teach me your secrets? Get me back into his good graces?”

Buddy and Pal smiled nervously. “Maybe after your bath?”

A few minutes later Shin submerged his body into a large trough set up in the washing area of the barracks. Usually soldiers stood under pipes with holes that poured down water, but obviously Beaved felt a soaking in warm water was in order. He appreciated that, because since Deceit, the warm springs that fed the village had gone cool. Someone had heated up this water, just for him.

He couldn’t control his tears of gratitude and relief as he plunged himself entirely under the water. He remembered when he was eight years old, and was baptized in the river by his father. That was the earliest age children could fully commit to being Salemites: to commit to taking on each other’s burdens; to comfort those around them; to live as the Creator desired them to live, to follow His promptings.

Shin had pretty much failed at all of that.

But there was something else he remembered—the look on his grandfather’s face as he came out of the cold river. His eyes were glistening as he said, “Now, Young Pere, you are pure and clean. The day I was baptized was the day the Creator said to me, ‘Here—start again. I’m giving you another chance.’ Best day of my life.”

Those words didn’t mean anything to an eight-year-old, but as he shivered in the blanket his mother wrapped around him, those words reverberated in his head, seeping deeply into him.

So that they could surface today. As he held his breath under water he wished he could have heard his father’s prayer again, be baptized again, get yet another chance. Today, he was ready to try to be a true Salemite for once, to listen to the Creator . . . almost.

Because listening would mean *first* praying to the Creator, and he didn’t feel ready to do that yet. He was too filthy, still, to approach Him. But, he hoped his longing at that moment was like slipping a note under the door to Paradise saying, “I’m planning

to come back. Just let me get more ready.”

YOU’RE READY NOW, YOUNG PERE. HE MAKES YOU READY. THAT’S WHAT HE DOES.

He stayed completely submerged for nearly half a minute, pondering those words and trying to allow every inch of his body soak off the last ten days. When he finally came up for air he saw Buddy and Pal coming to the trough, worried.

“We . . . we thought you drowned in there or something!”

Shin smiled and took the bar of lavender soap Pal handed him. “I could always make my broth—my *friends* nervous that way. No one can hold their breath longer than me. Once I fell into a freezing pond and they didn’t try to retrieve me for almost a minute because they thought I was faking drowning. It was the only time I wasn’t.”

His smile faded and he stared at the water. He hadn’t thought of his near-drowning since his first day in Edge. Now, on what might be his last day there, it flooded back to him.

His new friends didn’t know what to make of his sudden change in demeanor.

“Well,” Buddy said shortly. “Enjoy your bath. We’ll be waiting outside. You have a change of clothes on that stool in the corner.”

“We’re tossing these,” Pal said, picking up his rancid undershorts and shirt and holding them at arm’s length away, “into the fire.”

When they left, Shin slumped down into the now-soapy water.

“You were there, Puggah,” he whispered into the room lit only by a couple of candles. “That second night. I dreamt about falling into the pond, about dying. You were sitting there by the river, weren’t you? After I . . . after I and Lolo . . .” He closed his eyes as the pain and stupidity of that evening flowed over him.

I WAS, YOUNG PERE. KEEP WASHING. I HOPE THEY BROUGHT YOU ENOUGH SOAP.

Half an hour later Shin emerged from the wash room wearing new underclothing and his old uniform which smelled as if it also had been recently washed. Even the SHIN patch seemed brighter than normal. It was fantastic to be dressed and clean again.

Well, *mostly* clean. Although he’d scrubbed every inch of his body, and did his hair three times, he knew a faint stench still emanated from him. It would’ve been impossible to erase every odor in just one bathing, but already he felt like a new man.

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Buddy and Pal smiled and nodded at his transformation from criminal to private, then handed him a razor so he could shave off the rough beard that was growing in splotches on his face.

When he completed that task, he allowed himself to look at himself in the mirror. He'd lost weight. His cheeks were thinner, but it looked good on him. His hair was longer, but smoothed back and tucked over his ears to be barely within the standards of the army. His eyes were . . .

He stopped, surprised.

He could look into his eyes and they looked back.

So often he'd found it hard to see himself, as if he were looking deep into his soul and was terrified by what he'd find, but tonight he wanted to see what was there. And what he saw someone a little lost but finally on the right track. He also saw his grandfather looking back at him. He suddenly remembered the ruins of their burned house outside of the fort. Despite all that had happened to it, the foundation was still there and strong, and something new could be built upon it. Then he understood. He still had a foundation, and something new could be built for him. That's why he could finally look himself in the eyes, because in a few hours, Young Pere would be starting for home.

"Ready for bed, Shin?" a voice broke him from his gaze.

"Uh, sure," he stammered. "Could I . . . could I get something to eat, first? I haven't had anything since breakfast yesterday."

Buddy and Pal glanced at each other. "General Thorne was adamant that you take your breakfast with him in the morning. There's really nothing available right now."

Shin nodded sadly and turned to the water pump where he had just finished shaving. "Then I'll just get a quick drink."

Several minutes later, once Young Pere was so full of water he could hear it sloshing in his empty belly, he went with them to the officers' quarters.

Sergeant Beaved was waiting at the main doors and escorted him to Hili's room. "You should be able to get about five hours' sleep before breakfast. You're lucky—no one else is here yet. Everyone else is fighting the fires except for me. I get to watch you."

"I promise, sir, I'm doing nothing but sleeping. You might as

well sleep too, here in the hallway.”

“Don’t tempt me, Shin. But I’ve got relief coming soon.”

Shin stumbled into Hili’s quarters and immediately recognized his cot on the opposite side of the room. Tears welled in his eyes as he rushed over to it and flopped on his belly.

The air was fresh. The cot was soft. His body was clean. He could lay flat. The room was peaceful.

How could anything in Paradise be better than this?

“Well, you look so much better I hardly recognized you.”

Young Pere heard the words murmured softly over his head. He opened his eyes and saw the dim image of Sergeant Major Hili.

“Don’t get up,” Poe told him. “I’m just finally getting in and to bed. You have a few hours still to sleep. Need some jerky?” He pulled a chunk of dried meat from his pocket.

“Please!” Young Pere reached up to take it.

Poe held just out of reach. “Promise me you won’t do anything, and I mean *anything*, stupid today? Or tomorrow? Or the next day or the next?”

“Is this the only way I get the jerky?”

“Yes.”

“I promise.”

“Say it, Young Pere: ‘I promise not to do anything stupid ever, *ever* again. I owe my life to Qualipoe Hili.’”

Young Pere grinned. “I promise not to do anything stupid ever, *ever* again. I owe my life to Qualipoe Hili who’s about to give me some jerky.”

Poe handed it to him. “Good boy. If you break that promise I’ll get that jerky back from you, the hard way.

Coming next, Book 8: *The Last Day* (sneak peek)

The 30th Day of Planting

It was the light that woke him up.

It was so unusual, so incredibly bright, and so overwhelming that there was no way he could have slept through it. It poured into the room through a crack in the curtains like a sword slicing the darkness.

Young Pere sat up abruptly and looked around in the dim light. Each of the cots surrounding him in Sergeant Major Poe Hili's crowded room was filled with an exhausted and smoky-smelling officer. As much as he wanted to throw open the curtains and feel the sunshine for the first time in twelve days, he didn't want to disrupt anyone's sleep. Now was not the time to have people, especially officers, angry with him.

So Young Pere crept quietly to the door and opened it.

"Going somewhere?" asked an enormous soldier posted in the hallway. Another on the other side of the door raised an eyebrow menacingly at him.

"To the latrine," he said, thinking that would be obvious.

"You're supposed to go down the hall to use the officers' washroom. Can't risk any *trouble*."

What that really meant was, they didn't want to risk the private running away instead of relieving himself. All Young Pere could think was that there were no windows in the hallway and certainly not in the washroom. The latrine, however, would have afforded a peek at the sun. But that would have to wait.

Then again, he'd spent nearly two weeks in mostly complete darkness while confined to the dungeon below the tower, and the light filtering in around him was already near to overwhelming.

Reluctantly, he headed to the washroom but then realized it'd

be the first time since he was released from the dungeon that he wouldn't be standing in his own filth. That made him smile.

A few minutes later he made his way back to where Staff Sergeant Beaved and the two soldiers were waiting for him.

Beaved smiled. "Ready for breakfast, Private Shin?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Come on," he waved and led him to the main doors of the officers' quarters. "General's waiting for you in the command tower. You'll eat with him there." He opened the doors and headed out to the compound.

While the thought of facing General Thorne for the first time in nearly two weeks made Private Shin hesitate, his yearning to be outside propelled him onward, the two massive guards on his heels. He stepped out into the sunshine that was just coming over the horizon—

And stopped, unable to continue.

It was like standing in the presence of the Creator.

The sun was so bright, so warm, so inviting, as if welcoming him back. His eyes filled with tears and the urge to drop to his knees in worship nearly overwhelmed him. Instead, and not caring who saw him or what they thought, he spread out his arms, closed his eyes, and let the tears wash down his cheeks as the light bathed him.

How was it that he never noticed before how glorious the sun was? How did he take it for granted for all his nineteen years?

Unable to ignore the need any longer, he dropped to his knees and, disregarding the sniggers of soldiers around him, whispered the only word that came to his mind.

"Papa!"

Over and past the mountains, Peto Shin looked up from his breakfast. He turned to the window and noticed the sun peeking over the mountains.

And it hit him.

It hit him with such force that he dropped his fork and covered his face with his hands.

No one else noticed, too involved with eating, but his wife did.

"What is it, Peto?" Lilla whispered anxiously.

Despite the clattering of dishes, loud conversations, and scattered laughter, the word had slid into his ear and manifested itself in his mind as a distinct plea, a hopeful declaration of "Papa!"

Peto trembled, unable to speak. But realizing his wife's grip on his arm was only going to grow stronger until he said something, he finally whispered, "Lilla, Young Pere's been freed."

Young Pere would have knelt there for hours, but he couldn't because a moment later he heard a familiar snicker.

"I guess being in the dungeon *did* do you some good, Shin."

The private opened his eyes, took a deep breath of sun-warmed air which was still cold enough to show his breath, and turned to see General Thorne standing a few feet away, his left hand on his hip, waiting.

Now things were going to get complicated.

Excerpts of The Writings (ancient/Salem version)

We are all family.

We have always been a family.

We have always been progressing.

We have always been. (*Guide Hierum's first writings*)

Before the Last Day even the aged of my people will strike terror in the deadened hearts of the fiercest soldiers.

On the Last Day those who have no power shall discover the greatest power is all around them.

On the Last Day those who stayed true to the Plan will be delivered as the destroyer comes.

I have created this Test, I have given this Plan, and I will reward my faithful children.

I warn you that we cannot continue in the ways we are now. Our lives and existence on this world are not forever. An end will come.

In the arguing among our people I see the seeds of antipathy and apathy that will grow to destroy the world we are striving so hard to create. We're drifting from the structure the Creator left us, and if we continue on this path our descendants will not be found faithful at the Last Day when the test ends. What we do today affects our children and their children. For their sakes, we can't continue down this way you are planning. I know your secrets, and they will destroy us all. I beg you to abandon this!

You know as well as I do that the Last Day will find each one of us facing either the reward of Paradise to enjoy the company of

our family and friends for the next one thousand years and beyond, or the misery of the Dark Deserts to endure the torture of knowing we failed to do His will.

When that Last Day comes, no one knows but our Creator, and its arrival will surprise those who fight against the Creator's people.

On that day do not be one of those surprised to find yourself on the wrong side.

On that day do not find yourself with a blade in hand ready to charge your brother or sister.

On that day be one of the many standing with the guide, having seen the signs and recognizing what is coming.

Before the Last Day will be a land tremor more powerful than any ever experienced. It will awaken the largest mountain and change all that we know in the world. Those changes will bring famine, death, and desperation to the world. And that desperation will cause the world's army to seek to destroy the faithful of the Creator.

Be among those faithful to the Creator!

Be among those standing firm for what you know, having not so quickly forgotten His words to us!

Be among those who see the marvelous deliverance from the enemy the Creator will send us! For He will send deliverance before He sends destruction to those who fight Him!

Don't destroy His structure for our survival. What you're planning to do will ruin— (*Guide Hierum's last words*)

Guide Pax's vision, upon seeing the future of Salem:

The inhabitants of this new city will live in peace until the end comes, when the enemy will threaten to annihilate them. But before that time the Creator will send one to prepare them. From the highest ranks of the enemy will He call one to mark the path of escape for the valiant.

The Deliverer will ensure the safety of the Creator's people, until the coming Destruction.

Shin-Briter-Zenos Family Trees (Year 365)

Jaytsy and Deckett Briter Family (and ages)

Salema(27)

married to Lek Zenos:

--Briter (7)

--Fennic (5)

--Perrin (called Plump Perrin--1)

Cambozola [Cambo] (25)

married to Tessina:

--Decker (5)

Pere [Bubba] (24)

married to Alixan:

--Raishel and Reikel (twins) (4)

Holling (22)

married to Eraliz:

--Jaysie (2)

Viddrow (20)

Cephas (19)

Suzi (17)

Tabbit (16)

Banu (14)

Atlee (12)

Yenali (10)

Young Shem (9)

Peto and Lilla (sister to Calla) Shin family

Lorixania [Lori] (twin) (25)

married to Sam Cadby:

--Ensio (5)

--Annly (4)

--baby twins Maggee and Marey

Joriana [Jori] (twin) (25)

married to Con Cadby:

--Cori (5)

--Gersh (4)

--baby Peto

Relf (23)

married to Mattilin:

--Grunick (3)

--baby daughter

Barnos (21)

married to Ivy

--baby daughter

Hycymum [Hycy] (20)

married to Wes Hifadhi

--baby son

Young Perrin [Young Pere] (19)

Kanthi (twin) (17)

Nool (twin) (17)

Kew (15)

Hogal (14)

Sakal (13)

Centia (11)

Morah (9)

Shem and Calla (sister to Lilla) Zenos family

Lek (26)

married to Salema Briter:

--Briter (7)

--Fennic (5)

-- Perrin (called Plump Perrin--1)

Boskos (24)

married to Noria:

--Utolian [Toli] (4)

--Calia (2)

Zaddick (22)

Meiki (20)

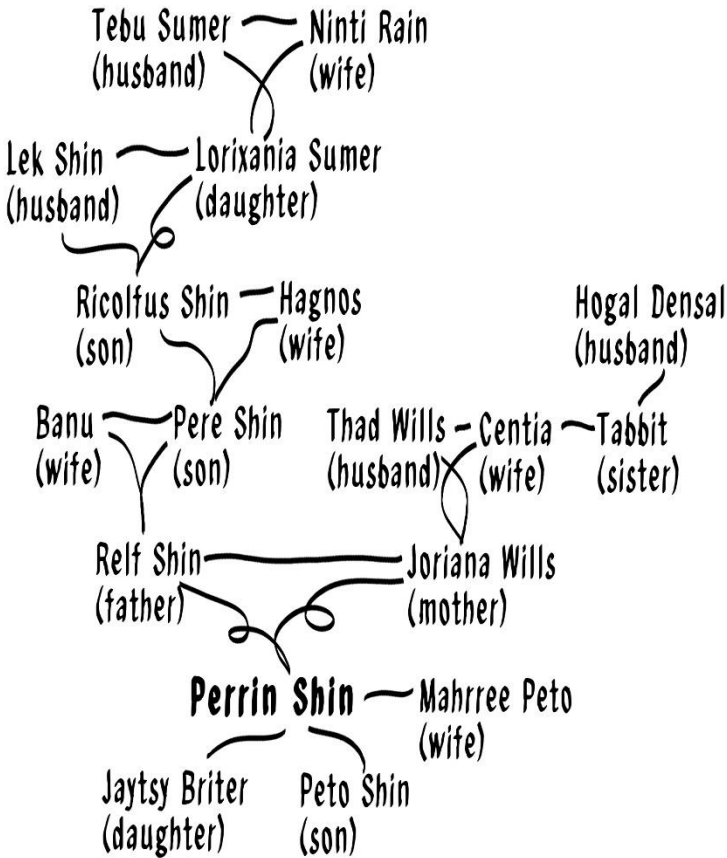
Ester (18)

Huldah (16)

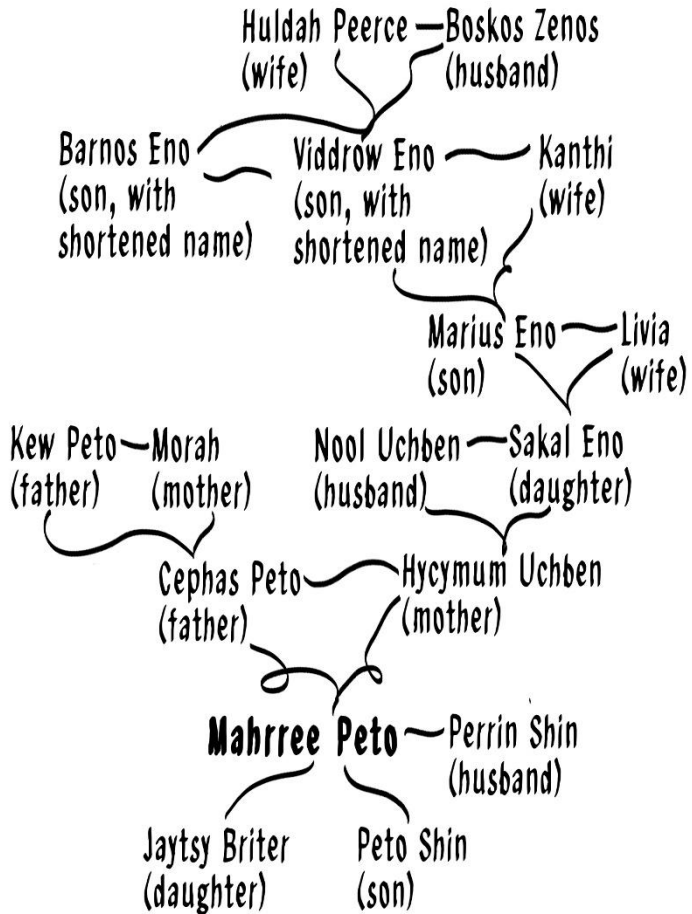
The Soldier in the Middle of the World

Mahrree's Family Lines (vines) charts

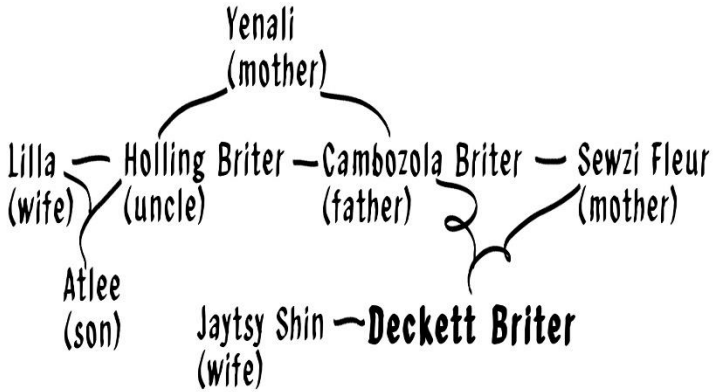
Perrin Shin's Family Lines (Vines)



Mahrree Peto Shin's Family Lines (Vines)



Deckett Briter's Family Lines (Vines)



Shem Zenos's Family Lines~Partial, showing connections to Petos and Shins



Boskos Zenos — Huldah Peerce
(husband) (wife)

Tebu Sumer — Ninti Rain
(husband) (wife)

Alkimos Zenos
(son, with brothers Viddrow
and Barnos Eno in the world)

Kiraxania Sumer
(daughter, with sister
Lorixania Shin in the world)

Sophia Nash
(wife)

Max Neu
(husband)

Dikha Zenos — Doxa Pram
(son) (wife)

Hines Leberts — Dannie Neu
(husband) (daughter)

Ergon Zenos — Ester Guava
(son) (wife)

Zaddick Dedek — Emiko Leberts
(husband) (daughter)

Boskos Zenos
(father)

Meiki Dedek
(mother)

Shem Zenos — Calla Trovato
(wife)

The Soldier in the Middle of the World

Acknowledgements

If you didn't notice the dedication page (and who does) I wrote that this book is because all of us, at some time or another, has been a soldier lost in the middle of the world. I have been, and was also too stubborn to consider that my limited knowledge and ambition was more reliable than God's omniscience and grace. And so I ignored Him, or counseled Him, or reminded Him that He wasn't doing His job to my satisfaction, giving me what I wanted and felt I deserved. Only returning from that world do we have peace, yet too frequently we still insist (well, *I* still insist) on taking little forays into the world to see if anything's changed, if I can get my way now. Someday, I might finally believe I'm in the right places at the right times. After all the times I've succeeded doing things God's way, and failed when doing it my way, you'd think this still wouldn't be a problem, but that's temptation for you. Maybe I wrote this book mostly for me, but I hope a few others may get some comfort and encouragement, too.

As for writing this series, I never would have gotten this far on my own. (Well, I probably would have made it this far, but it would have been very, *very* ugly.) My friends and family who helped read and revise and tell me, "You're not *seriously* going to put THAT in there, are you?" (Ok, I guess not . . .).

Barb Goff, Paula Snyder, Cheryl Passey, David Jensen, Jennifer Merrill, Freddy Thomson, Bob Golding, Stephanie Carver, and Arlyn Collett. All these folks found more niggling issues than Word, Grammarly, and PerfectIT combined, proving, once again, that robots and programming will never take over the world. (Thought you'd appreciate that reassurance.)

Thanks again to my family who now know to automatically find me in my bedroom tapping on the laptop, and are astonished if they find me in the kitchen instead.

And huge thanks to you who were patient when a sudden new job delayed this book's release, and who send me emails or comment on my postings, proving that I'm not just writing to the screen but to many like-minded yet unmet friends.

Someday we'll have a party.

In Salem.

The Soldier in the Middle of the World

About the author . . .

Trish Strebel Mercer has been teaching writing, or editing graduate papers, or changing diapers since the early 1990's. She earned a BA in English from Brigham Young University and an MA in Composition Theory and Rhetoric from Utah State University. She and her husband David have nine children (and now adding grandchildren) and have raised them in Utah, Idaho, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina. They used to live in the rural west and dreamed of the day they would be old enough to be campground managers in Yellowstone National Park. Now they live in rural Maine and pretend they already are.

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Farms and livestock are dying, and what remains of

General Thorne's army is trapped in the village of Pools.

But Lemuel is determined to retake Idumea. After all, he's got

Corporal Shin by his side—undeniably Perrin Shin's grandson

and, quite likely, Lemuel's long-lost son.

Young Pere, while uncomfortable with Lemuel's attention,

still goes along with Thorne's plans, because

how else can he learn to take over the world himself?

Which leaves Perrin Shin wondering how his grandson became

the dumbest man who ever willingly joined the army.

Perrin's determined to preserve Young Pere at all costs,

which is a little tricky to do since Perrin died last year.

But if the world doesn't follow the rules, why should he?



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