These Stones Remember
VALOIS FULCANELLI

For
All my readers.
Thank you for supporting me as I wrote this story.

Cover art:
Sabira | Flower of Laurelin
https://www.sabiralangevin.com/
(commissioned)

These Stones Remember

by

Valois Fulcanelli

"The past changes a little every time we retell it."

A wandering scholar and his ethereal companion find a long-abandoned treasure. At first glance he thinks has simply stumbled upon a ruined ancient capital, filled with the promise of incredible archaeological treasures and riven through with the history of a long-dead civilisation. But when he wakes up one day and finds the city has come alive around him, its people bowing to him as though they know and respect him, he has unknowingly begun a journey toward redemption for a terrible mistake he made two thousand years ago.

FOREWORD

This story started life as what I tentatively (and optimistically) described as a “series of short sketches around the Ancient Capital” wherein it was “doubtful that other Empires members will make actual appearances, but they may be hinted at”.

Reader, it did not end up that way, as evidenced by the sheer size of the document you’re currently looking at. This story grew legs and ran away from me, evolving into something huge and incredible that was an absolute joy to write over the course of 11 months. Within these chapters you'll find love and hope and guilt and time (a lot of time, and it's very slippery!) and redemption, as well as some original characters that I hope you'll fall in love with as much as I did.

This story contains some conlang, but it’s scarce and will be annotated and translated at the end of each page where it appears. All quotes, intros, and end notes/author notes from the original story on AO3 have been removed, as this file is huge enough as it is without those!

Many character names have been altered, and although they are still mostly recognisable, a quick list of the changes is in order before you begin to read.

Please note that this is a Pixlriffs-centric story, and I have listed the MCYT characters below in approximate order of their frequency throughout the story. The only two characters who appear relatively frequently (toward the end of the story) are those of fWhip and GeminiTay.

Pixlriffs = Onorait[1] Paix al-Lareiff
fWhip = N’dachVeip, Grav’n er-Rachzem[2]
GeminiTay = Xsia-Minai’Te
MythicalSausage = Ser’Zhege of Mythland
Scott Smajor = Caelamondorion[3]
GoodTimesWithScar = Astrologer G'tehm ah-Shker
Keralis = Dr Kay Ralis
TangoTek = Guildmaster Teng-ahtk
MumboJumbo = Guildmaster Maah-em Behro
ImpulseSV = Guildmaster Impeh al-Sheveh
EthosLab = Grand Master Ehto al-Selahb
Joey Graceffa = Qazepha

[1] Honoured
[2] Count of the Grym Lands
[3] Elvish for "from the hilly country of the Caels" [AKA, Scotland]

This story was originally posted between February and December 2023 on AO3. If this PDF version has reached you by any other means than a direct download from the endnotes of the final Companion Reader, or from my Tumblr post about it (for example: if it was sent to you by a friend), then – if it has given you any enjoyment at all – I would greatly appreciate it if you would visit the story's page on AO3 and leave a kudos, and, if you wish to, a comment. It doesn't matter how far down the line you read this; I will always be happy to hear from you, even if your comment arrives five or ten years after the story finished posting!

The story contains one romantic M/F relationship and one queerplatonic M/M relationship, and its rating is G (General Audiences). There is no sex, and I've leaned heavily into the 'aroace Copper King' fanon. Please be aware that the story *does* feature major character death (three canon – two of which are implied – and two original characters) but these deaths come at the end of long and loving/loved lives and are treated with tenderness and care. There is also one brief mention of animal death (a trader's llama).

All artwork for the story was commissioned from Sabira Langevin, AKA Flower of Laurelin. The experience of working with them to illustrate this story and subsequent ones has been an absolute delight. You can find out more about their work at https://www.sabiralangevin.com/

Lastly, thank you to all the readers who encouraged me in some way throughout the year that I was writing and posting this story. Whether you left a kudos or a comment, whether your comment was a heart emoji or an incoherent keysmash or a long, detailed analysis; I treasure every one of you. Writing is a solitary hobby; we write for ourselves, but we publish for others to read, and every bit of feedback – no matter how small – is fuel to a writer's engine and keeps us going. As Pixlriffs himself says at the end of every episode of The Spawn Chunks (the Minecraft podcast that he co-hosts) – "If you're getting something out of the show, why not consider putting something back in?" So, if you've read any fanfic, by any author, in any fandom, please consider leaving them a kudos or a comment, just to make them smile and keep them going. It will make a far greater difference than you could possibly even imagine.

My name has been Valois Fulcanelli. May the light of the Vigil ever be on your path.

Valois Fulcanelli, December 2024

CHAPTER 1

The first inkling that he'd found something special came one dusty late afternoon when the scrubby grass underfoot had provided the perfect backdrop for Malin's sudden frozen body and pricked ears.

"Mrowrrr..."

He stopped, crouched down, and tickled a fingertip behind one of those ears. Tiny aqua sparks of static crinkled away from luminescent fur that glowed even more than usual in the golden savannah sunlight. Drawn to the ring around that finger, the sparks danced over its patina of verdigris, etching into it a delicate fern-like pattern of bright burnished copper.

"What have you found, hm?" he murmured, as Malin briefly abandoned their very particular hunter instinct and instead lost themself in the joys of a bloody good ear scritch. "Anything interesting under this thirsty old soil?"

"Mrrrrowr..."

"Oh, under *and* above it, eh?"

He looked up, squinting against the low light of the sun, which was beginning to dip beneath the flat tops of the acacia trees that surrounded them.

"Well, we can take a look in the morning, because now's as good a time as any to set up camp," he said, as he straightened and clapped a hand against the trunk of the tree nearest to him. "Couldn't find a better sort of tree for climbing, too. Going to be the hammock tonight. Far too warm for a tent."

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Before the last glow had dipped below the horizon, he was safely installed in the hammock that he'd slung between two of the thick branches a little way up the tree. With his rucksack as a pillow, and a light fleece blanket tucked around him - because even out here it could get a bit chilly once the moon was up - he waited while Malin circled a few times and then settled in a contented feline doughnut on his belly.

The glow that Malin emitted was not good enough to read by. Even with his glasses on, his eyes were a little too weak to attempt reading in the light of a phosphorescent ghostly cat. But it was perfectly good for scribbling down a few notes from the day's journey, and so he carefully reached down to the small leather bag strapped around his left thigh, flicking open the clasp one-handed, and digging his fingers inside.

The book was old - although not quite as old as the ring - and it was the latest in a line of small, slim volumes that now padded the bottom of his rucksack. A traveller's journal, if you will; bound in soft tan leather, and with smooth unlined pages of creamy paper. A short stub of pencil followed the journal out of the bag, its soft graphite tip worn down but still enough to pen a page or so before he'd need to take a penknife to it.

The first page of the book held a simple inscription, again in that soft pencil:

Journal of Onorait Paix al-Lareiff
vol.33

The name, in the old language of his people, had been bestowed upon him before he was old enough to understand what it meant. But it suited him down to the ground, for he did indeed find Peace in Learning, and so when he was of an age when he could choose his own name, he decided to keep it. As for the Honoured part, well... that was his heritage and his only link to what once had been.

His students, however, had struggled to pronounce it, so when one wit decided to nickname him 'Pix' it had stuck, and eventually made its way around the whole faculty. A few people called him 'Pax' but he answered to both. These days, though, nobody called him by his birth name.

Well, not quite 'nobody'. Malin sometimes touched his mind when they were in the middle of a hunt and called him 'Onorait Paix' to get his attention. It usually worked, too, because it was so rare to hear.

He turned the pages until he found where he'd left off the day before. His penmanship - once so graceful when copper nibs had been his writing tools - suffered greatly when he was forced to write by Malin's actinic glow whilst supine in a hammock. And that glow wouldn't be this bright for much longer, since Malin's outline usually dulled while they slept. Perhaps half a page could be managed in Pix's small, close script before the light was too poor for anything but sleep.

Third day in the savannah. A few small finds amid the dust: a smooth bone arrowhead and some tiny shells with holes bored through them - most likely used as currency. Malin appears to have found something this evening, both above and below the ground. I'm intrigued, but the light has faded too much for further investigation. Overnight spent in the hammock with an acacia leaf roof. It's oddly quiet here, with none of the insect sounds from last night's camp.

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Morning brought with it a welcome dew, and after he'd packed his rucksack once more, Pix scouted for a patch of grass-free soil where he could make a campfire. With Malin sniffing around at the fresh morning air, Pix tugged a small wooden case from the bag strapped to his leg. Inlaid into its lid was a simple emblem: a circle of gold at its centre with a node of copper both above and below it, one bright and one aged green.

He opened the case and extricated a smooth sandstone disc with a penny-sized bubble of glass running through the middle of it. One quick glance up at the sky to ascertain the exact position of the sun, and he held the disc between thumb and forefinger until a wisp of smoke curled up from the small pile of dried twigs and leaves that he'd gathered from around the base of last night's tree home. The smoke became a tiny flame, and Malin whispered closer to watch.

Pix didn't have much water left in his flask, but it was enough for a small cup of the bitter coffee that reminded him so much of home, with a little left over to slake his thirst for the rest of the day. Malin had no need of food or drink, accepting only scritches and attention as their payment for being his companion, and if no water source could be found during the course of the day, Onorait Paix al-Lareiff knew how to create a dew collector. It was one of the first things his people taught their children. Water in a desert is scarce, after all.

"Let's take a look around, hm?" he said to Malin after he'd scuffed out the fire and heaped a pile of sandy dirt on it for good measure. Walking back to his overnight tree home, he clambered up into it once more, hooking one hand around a sturdy branch so he could lean out of the canopy, and reaching down to dig the last of his precious treasures out of the bag strapped to his thigh; treasures so great to him that he always kept them on his person and never relegated them to the rucksack.

Many years ago, he'd walked with kings, and a king had gifted him this treasure on their first meeting. A copper spyglass, which oddly had never lost its shine in all the years he'd owned it, it was inlaid with heraldic symbols in smooth amethyst crystals. He shook it open, smiling at the odd but so familiar little sound that it made, and held the viewfinder up to his eye, looking in the direction that Malin had indicated the night before.

His heart started thumping hard. Up ahead - perhaps a morning's brisk walk away - he could see the obvious shapes of ruined structures, softened by foliage that had grown around and over them. Massive structures of all heights, clearly indicating a city, or at least a large town, for no village would erect buildings of that size.

The buildings were impressive enough, but what stopped his breath for a moment as he panned the spyglass lens across the location was the statue. Towering over everything else, one wing was classically feathered and of a darker stone than the rest, but the other - more stylised and reminding him of a sextant or some other navigational instrument - was catching the glint of the morning sun in a way that hinted at the application of gold.

This had once been a rich empire, but Pix had no interest in the monetary value of it all. He was here for the history, and he suspected there would be enough history here to make this his home for a good number of years.

"Oh, Malin," he said, his eyes gleaming as he closed the spyglass. "You've found a good one here."

CHAPTER 2

It takes a lot to impress a man who has wandered the world as much as he has, meandering through the valleys of its antiquity, brushing away its soils and sands, and coaxing its treasures from its covetous grasp. But here, at the base of that mighty statue, he reached out toward the wall that towered over him, fingers hesitating less than a centimetre away from the great hewn blocks of grey stone. Those blocks fitted together with a precision that was little short of astonishing; plain stone adjoining andesite so closely that not even the thickness of a piece of paper would fit between them.

"A highly advanced civilisation," he murmured, finally permitting his fingertips to graze the stone, picking a fingernail delicately into one of the hairline joints between the blocks. It was cool beneath his touch; the sun's caress having long moved around to the front of the statue.

He wanted to see it in that afternoon sunlight, this angel with the curious wings. Leaving Malin padding and sniffing around the foundations, he picked his way through the piles of dry sandy soil which - loosed from the sparse scrub that held most of the savannah together - had drifted against rocks and tree trunks. Locating an acacia that seemed a fair distance in front of the statue, he hauled himself up into it as high as he could amid the flat branches and turned around.

He never wore a hat, even in the hottest and sunniest of locations, but he found himself wishing he'd not left his rucksack at the base of the tree. Nestled somewhere at the bottom of it, in a worn old leather case that held some of his more delicate tools, was his only measure against bright sunlight: a soft kohl pencil that he'd sometimes line his eyes with. Together with the long linen scarf that had protected his face against more than one dust storm, it was yet another thing that he had brought out of the desert with him, one more relic of his own history.

In the absence of that kohl, he raised one hand above his eyes to shield them from the light that glinted off the gold on the statue's mechanical wing; the one that he had dubbed the sextant wing. Parts of the gold had worn away in places; a thick band across the middle of the wing eroded and weathered more than the rest, leaving mostly stone behind, flecked with gold in the softer, pitted areas. Flanking one central portion of the wing were two large sections of a much darker reddish stone - again pitted with gold - of a kind he'd never seen before.

The angel held a sword in her left hand. Although there was nothing in the construction of the statue to give any notion of gender, there was a maternal feel to its whole; from the lowered sword indicating protection when needed, to the right hand held out and away from the hip, palm-forward as if in benediction of the earth and all that lived on it. This was a motherly presence; perhaps not quite a goddess, but most certainly an angel of…

He glanced between the sword and the benediction. And then he smiled. Yes. An angel of life and death, both blessing and memento mori for the people of this civilisation.

Onorait Paix sulphur smell red thing nose tingle

Tearing his gaze away from the statue, Pix looked down at the base, locating Malin's glow amid a small pile of stones that had long since fallen from a decorative archway centred in the front wall.

"Sulphurous and red?" he muttered, quickly making his way back down the tree again and grabbing his rucksack along the way. "No! Out here?!"

sulphur smell red thing nose tingle

Malin's body was rigid as Pix reached them, their tail up and bristling, its tip flicking from side to side. Crouching beside them, he rested a hand on their shoulders, stroking gently down their spine until the bristling subsided a little and Malin sat down, licking a nonchalant paw as if to say they hadn't been worried at all what on earth are you on about Onorait Paix?! Only the slightly flattened ear tips gave the lie to that nonchalance.

"It's all right," Pix soothed in a low voice. "I think I know what this is. It's just—"

Brushing back the tall grass, he saw the glowing red blotch on the floor, little scarlet motes drifting up from it as the grass moved, and he smiled again.

"It's just redstone. My goodness, it's been a while since I last saw you, my sparky little friend. Now, what are you powering, hm?"

Carefully tweaking aside more grass, he followed the trail, still crouching somewhat awkwardly as he moved. A series of small redstone torches were stuck

into the ground at intervals, some secreted amid a small pile of stones - where only the glowing red tip of the torch gave its position away - and others buried mostly under piles of sandy dirt, their presence only indicated by the ruddy motes that drifted up from the ground and a bright glimmer from beneath the grains of soil.

Onorait Paix big jump croak fly eater

Barely pausing as he made his way through the grass, Pix replied, "I look like a frog? I suppose I probably do. Not fond of eating flies, though. Too crunchy. Ah! Here we are!"

A small stone button, almost fully concealed against the base of the front wall, right at the end before it turned the corner. But for the trail of redstone dust, he might have missed it completely. Indeed, the grasses around the dust were unnaturally dense, given the sparseness of the scrub around the rest of the savannah. Most likely there was a water source concealed beneath the ground; irrigation for the grass that obscured the dust to the naked eye unless one got down really close as Pix had been doing.

He pushed the button and waited.

Nothing.

"Hmm."

Standing with a soft groan as one knee popped, he followed the dust trail back to the first splotch that Malin had located. It had been a terminus; the end point of the line. There had to be a missing part somewhere, between the terminus and where the line picked up again.

"Care to give me a hand?" He arched an eyebrow at Malin, who sat watching him, loafed on the ground with their paws tucked elegantly in. Inscrutable teal eyes blinked slowly at him, and Malin's tongue flicked out to lick their nose before they settled a little more comfortably.

"Right." Pix smirked. "I'll take that as a no, then."

A little more froglike crouched exploration, and the trail picked up again, heading toward the outer edge of the decorative arch on the statue's base, before it

disappeared under the stone. There was only a little of the dust missing. Perhaps he could scrape up some from the thicker parts of the trail, and use that to fill in the gap?

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The bottom of Pix's rucksack was an archaeological dig in its own right, and his fingers regularly delved through the different strata in search of treasures. This time, he unearthed his tool kit: the worn leather case containing his best brushes, two small artist's palette knives, the kohl pencil, a neatly tied skein of ivory string, and a plastic spoon.

Taking the spoon and one of the palette knives, he made his way back to where the dust was in a thicker band. Going to his knees and bending low over the dust, he began painstakingly scraping a little away from the edge of the band, into the bowl of the spoon.

Weird, he thought as he worked his way along the line, how they'd left this so exposed. Almost as if they wanted it to be found. Whenever he'd used redstone in the past, it had mostly been hidden away. Its components tended to be bulky and unsightly, so most of the engineers of his youth - himself included - had only left it visible when they had created a circuit that warranted admiration; something so complex that there was beauty to be found in its ugliness.

This, though; there was nothing to show for this trail of redstone power. There appeared to have been attempts at hiding it, by means of the piles of stones and dirt around the torches, as well as the tall grasses. Redstone dust needed to be laid on a solid surface with air above it, so perhaps there was something shallow buried beneath the soil that meant there wasn't room enough for the dust line be hidden down there?

The bowl of the plastic spoon was now full, so he got to his feet again and made his way back to the gap in the line. Oh-so-carefully, he tipped the spoon, moving it from the terminus toward the other break closer to the wall. There was just enough to fill the gap, and the final redstone torch - tucked away behind a beautifully carved stone brick at the base of the decorative arch - sparked the last leg of the dust into glimmering scarlet light.

The circuit was live.

Pix made his way back to the stone button, crouching beside it. This time, as he pressed it, he heard a click, followed by the unmistakeable ka-chunk-ka-chunk-ka-chunk of old pistons heaving into life deep inside the statue's base. A second later, Malin yowled and shot toward him like a teal neon blur, streaking away from their comfortable position and climbing him like a tree, wrapping around his shoulders, their claws digging into his neck.

Pix didn't even feel the pain, though he raised a hand to rest it on Malin's flank and steady them.

He was too busy staring at the no-longer-decorative arch, which was now the surround of an ink-dark hole into the base of the statue.

CHAPTER 3

It turned out that stealth was tricky to achieve when one had a glowing feline wrapped rigidly around one's shoulders, like a spectral neon feather boa. On the one hand, Malin tended to glow more brightly when they were on high alert, which made them handy for lighting up dark locations. On the other hand, that same brightened glow turned them into a beacon for unwanted eyes.

Dust was still drifting around the entrance, redstone quietly ticking as it cooled from the superheated flash charge that had activated the pistons, its oily, chthonic scent filling his nostrils. Somewhere just beneath the top layer of soil, Pix could hear the breathy sigh of the pistons' hydraulics as they settled into their retracted position.

Hot, dry air ghosted out of the gaping maw between the ornate stones of the archway, as Pix edged forward half a step to peek into the blackness beyond, braced for anything... unpleasant that might lurch toward him. He hadn't needed to wield a sword in years, having found that one good chop with an axe on the downward part of a short jump dealt enough critical damage to anything that dared to target him. But, right now, his palm itched to wrap itself around a sword hilt.

Instead, he reached up and behind him, unclipping the protective Kevlar flap that covered the always-sharpened bit of his short wood axe, which he carefully pulled upwards to free its well-worn handle from the two straps on the side of his rucksack. He only got so far, though, before he was forced to raise his other hand to peel Malin's tail gently away from where it had wound tightly around his wrist.

"You're not helping by doing that," he grumbled, affectionately, "but I do appreciate the additional lighting. What do you sense, my friend?"

He felt Malin's whiskers twitch and tickle against the side of his neck.

old. dead things. death-decay-dust. treasures. secret deep clank thing danger. seep! ooze! death big grow!

Pix frowned. That was the most Malin had ever touched his mind with in one go, and he didn't miss the rising tone of alarm in the final words. So, this place was mostly safe, if filled with a lot of old and dead things - well, he'd already surmised

it was probably a catacomb, purely from the warm, dry, musty scent still dissipating from the entrance - but Malin seemed spooked about the 'secret deep clank thing'.

"Okay," Pix murmured. "Thank you. Anything else I should know about before we go in?"

Again, those whiskers danced over the skin of his neck, tickling and making him smile. Then, to his surprise, Malin began to *purr*.

old friend. Onorait Paix know. happy

"You've got me insanely curious about this place," Pix muttered, hefting the axe and stepping into the entrance.

He didn't even see the tripwire until it was too late, and the light tension against his ankle, combined with that scarily familiar click spasmed every muscle of his body into the tension of flight as the memory of his first ever encounter with a jungle temple flooded back. He'd been damned lucky that day to have been wearing a tightly woven silk shirt. It hadn't stopped the arrows, but it had made them easier to remove from the wounds in his flesh.

It was a bloody good job, then, that the only thing this tripwire did was spark some redstone lamps into life within the room. Pix sagged with relief against the cool stone of the side wall, as the muscles on either side of the base of his spine relaxed and complained at him for being so rudely and viciously tensed.

Malin's tongue rasped against the side of his neck a few times, and he lifted his free hand to stroke a thumb over his companion's head in gratitude.

"Must be losing my touch," was all he muttered, glancing down at the tripwire. "Decades ago, I'd have spotted that before I even took another step."

Onorait Paix still like cat. bad sleep-excitement make trouble

Pix sighed, then smiled. "Yeah, you're right. I didn't sleep too well, and I'm itching to look around in here."

So, look around he did, although from the safety of his current position first of all. Where there was one tripwire, there were often more, but the warm ochre glow of the redstone lamps provided enough illumination that he could see, well...

The words of Howard Carter as he peered into the just-opened tomb of Tutankhamun came to mind; words that had renewed the spark of exploration and history in Pix when he'd encountered them in a dusty old textbook. Asked by Lord Carnarvon, "Can you see anything?" Carter had replied...

"Yes, wonderful things."

The words whispered into the gloom as Pix repeated them, then he chuckled. The textbooks had all taken liberties with that, as he'd realised when he'd read Carter's journal at Oxford:

> *There was naturally short suspense for those present who could not see, when Lord Carnarvon said to me 'Can you see anything'. I replied to him 'Yes, it is wonderful'.*

While Pix's discovery was certainly less glittering and regal than Carter's, in his eyes it was just as wonderful. To his right was the dark outline of a massive tomb, to his left a niche containing an old wooden chest nestled between two chunks of stone, the rear one of which bore something dark and metallic. Behind that he could see what looked like a stepped altar with two short glinting posts in front of it, and at the back of the room was another tomb on a raised dais.

The far wall contained what - in the dim light of the redstone lamps - looked like matching niches, a few broken bits of metal railing dotted the floor and the niches, and dusty half-melted stubs of ivory candles peeked out here and there from the gloom.

But it was the staircase that held Pix's rapt attention. Leading down into the lower areas, he could see a broken verdigris mosaic at the bottom, lit by a strange glow. What that glow was, he didn't feel ready to examine just yet. There was quite enough up here on the main floor to hold his attention for some time.

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The dark metallic thing by the chest turned out - after he'd wiped away some of the grime from its glass panels - to be a lantern. Gently picking at the tiny latch

with a fingernail, Pix managed to open it. He was unsurprised at the lack of rust; not a drop of moisture had been inside this massive vault for probably centuries.

By Malin's soft light, he could see something brown and sticky packed down into the base of the lamp. Was that...?

death dirt

"Soul soil," Pix corrected, and then he shrugged, making his companion cling more tightly for a moment. "I guess it's the same thing, if you think about it."

A bit of blind fumbling around in his rucksack - he was quite accustomed to digging a hand into that specific pocket, even while still wearing the thing - and he drew out his trusty old flint and steel. Holding the steel as close as he could to the open door of the lantern, he brought the flint down sharply against the edge of it several times, until a spark flew from the steel and landed on the soul soil within the lantern.

An eerie blue flame licked up from it, reminiscent of Malin's aura. Still wrapped around Pix's neck, Malin sniffed the air.

not-ghost. bone archer.

Pix arched an eyebrow, turning to look at Malin. "You can tell where it came from?"

Malin just blinked, staring at the flame.

"Huh," Pix said, as he glanced around. So that bit of soul soil had come from one of *them*. He'd encountered a few in the past, deep in the caverns of the earth. Skeletal archers; easily defeated with a good shield and a sharp sword. But soul soil was a rarity here above ground. It belonged below ground. *Way* below ground, in the deep, smouldering places where few dared venture.

His gaze landed on what he was hoping to find: an unlit torch sitting in a socket on one of the two crumbling pillars that flanked the inner entrance. Carefully, he lifted it out from the socket, blew gently on the oily cloth wadding to dislodge the worst of the dust, then held it against the lantern flame.

The torch flared, casting a brighter, warmer glow than the lantern was capable of. Now, he could see more clearly, inspecting the floor of this upper vault first of all,

wary of further tripwires. Once he realised there were none, he began touching the torch to the candle stubs, bringing more and more ancient light to this place.

Lighting candles in a place that honours death. How the world comes full circle...

CHAPTER 4

They first took form under desert skies. A tiny mote they were, brought into the world as an old woman left it. When their presence emerged, they were 'she', not 'they', and they were born from one infinitesimal part of her, because with her final breaths she spoke the words that called them forth as her wrinkled hand touched the tanned and bearded face watching over her passing.

"My name has been Nehle-aalh. I am the water in the desert, and you are the halo around the moon. My life's service was the joy of guiding you from suckling babe to the man you are now, leader of your people. And you have come to me; the guiding hand on this part of my journey. You did not forget me, and my eternal gratitude will walk with you always. My candle will shine brightly, for you are the best of what I have given in my time."

She breathed her last, and only the man watching over her could see the teal blue mist drift up, swirling in a brief and joyous dance before it dissipated, joining the gentle breeze that tickled the desert sands in the ghosting hour of the night. Only one mote of it remained.

Her palm was still warm against his cheek, covered by his own hand in that final moment, so it did not fall. Turning his face, he kissed her wrinkled fingers, murmuring a blessing. Then, he laid her hand on her still breast, turning it palm-upwards and placing into it a small copper totem with bright verdigris eyes.

"Now forever undying."

He curled her fingers around it, turning her hand back until her loosely clasped fist rested over her heart.

The tiny mote drifted lazily in front of him. He smiled at it and left the small, quiet house of the nurse who had been his constant companion and confidante since childhood, holding the door open while the mote followed him out.

There was a candle to be lit.

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The mote was 'she' for but a few hours.

The young water carrier - in any other place a lowly position, but in this place a vital and respected role - answered the gentle knocking at the door in the hour before dawn. In the quiet street before him - bare-headed, alone, and unguarded - stood the tall figure of his king, carrying a small copper totem in his hand.

The young water carrier nodded, leading the king into the small room where his mother sat by the bed of his father. She gave a stifled sob as she saw who had arrived, pressing one last, fierce kiss to her husband's cheek before she relinquished her simple wooden stool so the king could sit.

The old water carrier's eyes were rheumy, but they shone in the low light of the small oil lamp as the king leaned over him and took his hand.

"You always used my wooden cups," the old man rasped, "instead of the fancy copper one you should have drunk from. You drove your chaperones mad when you'd insist on it, even when you were only about as tall as my knee."

"Your cups had pretty carvings on them," the king said softly. "Carvings that told stories."

The old water carrier's diseased and failing lungs turned his chuckle into a hoarse cough, but the king did not flinch away from it.

When the cough subsided, the old man closed his eyes for a moment. "May the stars grant me enough breath to say the words," he whispered.

"My name has been Hashaan al-maah. I carried a burden that bent my back but kept my people alive. All who needed me could find me, from the smallest and poorest to the highest and richest… who insisted on drinking from my old wooden cups…"

The king smiled, and the old man continued.

"My gratitude to you, Onorait, for treating those old wooden cups no differently than the finest copper vessel in your palace, and for doing the same as my son carries on with my burden. My candle will shine brightly, for I brought life to my people."

A few moments later, a second mote joined the first, as the king placed the copper totem in the old water carrier's hand and murmured the blessing. Slowly, he stood, turning to face the young water carrier and his mother.

The first fingers of dawn light touched the copper lamp in the window.

"Will you stay, Onorait, to break fast with us?" the woman asked, her voice low and tremulous, her eyes wet.

He shook his head with a tender smile. Clasping both of her hands between his, he bowed his head.

"There is a candle to be lit," was all he said.

And the mote became 'they'.

***

He could not always be there, and the words could not always be said. Not every passing was one that allowed time for traditions. Some were sudden and unexpected; others were far away. But where there was time, he was there, no matter who was passing. Some went with gratitude, others with regret, a few with curses. Some knew their candle would shine bright, and some feared their candle would flicker and wane. He heard them all and treated none different from any other. He heard sorrows and confessions, and murmured blessings even over those who had railed against death to the last.

Sometimes, the teal blue mist drifted calmly and easily, and sometimes it swirled angrily before the desert breeze caught it. And every now and then - when the words had expressed gratitude toward him in some way - another mote would remain and add to the constellation that only he could see around him.

***

They first had enough substance to become a tiny moth, flitting alongside him, occasionally landing on his robes or his crown, but always close by him. Visible only to him, they caused many a tickly nose as they flew across his face in the middle of important royal audiences, causing him to bestow upon them the affectionate nickname of Mischief.

Despite his solemn duties, Onorait Paix al-Lareiff appreciated a good bit of mischief.

Over the next few years, enough motes joined the moth that they trailed like dust from their wings. And so it was that, as the king grew older, they had gained enough substance to become their second form: a small desert bird, whose song was his only companion in the Afteryears, as he wandered the desert alone.

Mischief became Melody.

Motes still exist in the open desert, but they are harder to come by. A precious sip from a dwindling waterskin for a mangy dog scavenging around a tiny village; a handful of grass for a camel tied to a post behind a caravan tent. The gratitude of animals did not wait for death; it was instant. Sometimes he could be present at a human passing, and tales sprang up in his wake of the wandering male death doula whose calming presence affected all of those around him, and who always asked for only a single candle as his payment.

And, one morning - many, many years later - he woke up to something purring in his ear.

Melody had become Malin.

CHAPTER 5

The chest bore an oily smear of redstone around its hasp. Pix eyeballed it doubtfully, before backing away. Until he knew exactly what that might trigger, he was leaving well alone. Given its proximity to the altar-like structure, it was probably an offering chest. Granted, that meant there may be treasures within, but the tripwire at the entrance to this place had spooked him into an excess of caution. He'd learned redstone from the guildmasters themselves; he knew what it was capable of.

***

Onorait Paix al-Lareiff was but seven years of age when he was introduced to the guildmaster who would begin tutoring him in the mysteries of redstone. He had been told this master was highly regarded within the Guild of Redstone Adepts, and particularly skilled in making redstone… *fun?*

Paix had been unsure how this would be possible, as the tutelage of a young prince who would one day inherit his father's empire tended toward dry, soul-sucking boredom. Rituals and customs, histories (he enjoyed those, at least) and languages, combat and strategy, politics and negotiation. He knew that redstone was essential to the deep workings of parts of the empire, but whenever he'd glimpsed it in-situ, it looked like a confusion of clunks and clicks, things lighting up, and things shunting other things around. How could that be *fun?*

The door to his receiving room - on the edge of his private quarters - swung open, and Chaperone Mhenheli entered. Of all his chaperones, Paix liked Mhenheli the least. There was something oily and observant about the man. But tolerance was one thing he knew his father meant him to learn, and most likely Mhenheli's presence in his life was solely to educate him in that most difficult of the subtle arts.

"Onorait." Mhenheli bowed low. "I introduce Guildmaster Teng-ahtk, of the Redstone Adepts."

Behind him - for Mhenheli had a way of inserting himself into a room through the barest of cracks in a doorway - the door opened fully, to admit a tall man wearing red robes bordered with alternating black and white (well, white smeared with red in places) silk ribbon. He was skinny, and yet somehow imposing in a vaguely unsettling manner, as he strode across the tiled floor. Bright blond hair clung to his

scalp, as if it had been wrestled into a semblance of neatness just for this occasion. Paix stifled a grin as he pictured how the guildmaster might look in the midst of a tricky redstone project: hair awry and sticking up in all directions.

It turned out, he wasn't far from the truth.

"Onorait." Guildmaster Teng-ahtk had stopped in front of him and was bowing.

Paix held out his right hand, the Ring of the Prince glinting on his second finger. Fashioned of bright copper with polished shards of glowstone glimmering around a large cut emerald, it was a pretty little adornment, although he would have preferred the emerald to be in its natural state. He knew it had been dug out from a deepslate stone deposit, and it pained him to remember that.

Guildmaster Teng-ahtk gently clasped the prince's fingers in his peculiarly soft hand and kissed the emerald. Paix was soon to discover that the hands of all redstone masters were this soft, due to the oily properties of the dust itself.

"Onorait, it is my pleasure to begin your tutoring in my noble craft," he said, letting go of Paix's hand and straightening.

Paix looked up at him, only now realising what had given him that unsettled feeling. The guildmaster wore a strange contraption on his head: two small lenses of deep red glass in front of his eyes, joined by a thin braid of copper wire across the bridge of his nose. On the outer edges of the lenses, two long bands of copper ran along each side of his head, hooking over his ears.

"I look forward to it," Paix said, realising to his embarrassment that he hadn't yet replied. "I am told that you are adept at making the study of your craft enjoyable."

"I am!" The guildmaster suddenly grinned. "We shall create and use games to learn the ways of the beautiful dust, and you will see just what can be done with it!"

He leaned closer and whispered in a conspiratorial tone, "They help me see the dust in a way that the naked eye cannot." Then, behind those strange lenses, he winked, and Paix grinned.

Now Paix al-Lareiff understood how redstone could be fun.

***

"If you'd set up this chest, Guildmaster," Pix said, smiling at the memory, "I could at least expect a muffled explosion, or something else to make me jump out of my skin. I never understood those glasses, but boy did you get excited about the boom-booms."

He chuckled to himself as he moved past the chest and soul lantern, to where the altar-like structure sat. In front of it were two tall objects that - like the lantern glass had been - were thick with dust. But, beneath them both, he could see an unmistakeable glint. Licking a finger, he swiped it down the side of the nearest object. Sure enough - that was copper beneath the muck.

"Malin," he called.

"Mrowrr?"

"What do these feel like to you, my friend?"

Malin padded over to him, sniffing tentatively at the object, their lips curling back as they did so in that peculiar way cats have of tasting air when smelling something.

big spark catcher

"Hm, yeah. They do look a little bit like lightning rods."

big spark catcher. not sky spark catcher

Pix frowned. "liiinteresting," he mused, glancing over at the short iron rods stuck into the ground only a couple of feet away, and then beyond to the massive stone tomb on the opposite side of the room. He hadn't missed the huge gouge marks on the stone floor that quite clearly showed the tomb had once covered the staircase down into the catacombs. Something had moved that tomb, but it would have taken one hell of a combined effort by many men to do so...

...or perhaps some manner of stored redstone charge powered its removal?

***

Onorait Paix al-Lareiff was but thirteen years of age when he was introduced to the guildmaster who would be tutoring him in the uses of redstone for concealment. Guildmaster Maah-em Behro was considered the eminent practitioner of vault creation, entrances, and complex redstone ciphers.

Maah-em Behro was a pale-skinned, dark-eyed oddity of a man. Never still, always moving, and self-deprecating to a fault. At their first meeting, he had been presented - as Guildmaster Teng-ahtk had - in the receiving room of Paix's private quarters. Wearing black robes with a thin red sash, he had clearly struggled with royal protocol, constantly fidgeting with his hair and tweaking his sleek black moustache nervously.

"Guildmaster, it is a pleasure to meet you," Paix said, wishing to put him at ease, as he held out his hand. "I am told that you are the most skilled vaultmaster in our lands, and I look forward to learning the arts of cipher and concealment under your tutelage."

Maah-em Behro looked up from kissing the emerald ring, and suddenly his dark eyes shone.

"Onorait," he said, "I hope you will discover the joys that I find within perfecting my craft. And it will not *all* be work."

He let go of the royal hand and clearly couldn't help himself, shifting restlessly from one foot to the other - in spite of Mhenheli's frown and very obvious headshaking.

"There is learning to be had in the ridiculous as well as in the art," Maah-em Behro continued. "Building something silly, just for the joy of seeing if it will work, stretching your mind and the dust's abilities to their limits."

Now Paix al-Lareiff understood how redstone could be a delightful toy in the hands of a playful mind. And that it was really... quite simple.

***

The lid of the tomb was damaged, so Pix took great care in lifting himself up to peer cautiously down into its depths through the broken corner. This time, he did not rely on a flaming torch, preferring instead the bright white beam of a small Maglite.

The tomb was empty. Well, that made it almost certain, then, that it was decorative. Intended to conceal the stairway down, yes, but its creators had tried to give it as little weight as possible, to allow it to be moved. Its sides were surprisingly thin - two to three inches at best - which, for something of this size, meant they were brittle. Pix suspected it was only intended to be moved once, and most likely the damage was caused when that happened.

Onorait Paix...

"Hm?"

Malin was padding down the staircase, their ears perked high. Pix watched them walk into the catacombs, and he hastily slid down from the tomb to keep an eye on them.

Malin had stopped moving just past the bottom of the stairs and was looking up at something. Pix could just make out the corner of a wooden object - another chest? - from the top of the stairwell.

put thing in chest

Pix hesitated, glancing over at the redstone-smeared chest. With a sigh, he walked over to it, picking up a small hunk of stone from the floor along the way. Bracing himself to run like hell, he flicked up the hasp, eased the chest lid open a fraction, tossed in the stone, then let go of the lid.

It snapped shut, and every nerve in his body twanged as he waited for the hiss. Instead, he heard something that took his mind back to his youth yet again: the noise of that stone rattling through one heavy iron container after another.

***

Onorait Paix al-Lareiff was but seventeen years of age when he was introduced to the guildmaster who would be tutoring him in the practical application of redstone for the transport, sorting, and storage systems critical to the empire's silos, granaries, and construction supply warehouses. His were the hands behind the underlying infrastructure of many empires, his systems being considered the absolute foundation of an education in the redstone arts.

Guildmaster Impeh al-Sheveh, third master of the Guild of Redstone Adepts, had a more serious aspect about him than his fellow guildmasters upon his first introduction to the young prince. He had clearly studied royal protocol, and conducted himself impeccably, as evidenced by Mhenheli's approving nod. His robes, however, were ostentatious: black and edged in shimmering gold ribbon. He was not quirky or restless like his compatriots, but Paix took to him immediately, being now of an age when he could appreciate calm and methodical tuition. And every now and then, when the young prince's experiments went awry, Impeh al-Sheveh would giggle uncontrollably, which delightful sound made those silly mistakes worth their weight in gold.

Now Paix al-Lareiff understood how crucial redstone was to the survival of his people.

***

"So, the offerings are sorted down here," Pix murmured, finally standing at the bottom of the stairs. He was looking into the chest that Malin had spotted, and - sure enough - there was the stone. But that was the only thing in the chest, so where did the offerings go after that?

Malin sat by his right ankle, licking a paw and rubbing it repeatedly over one ear. Beneath them both, the broken verdigris mosaic crunched as Pix moved off it. The soft glow that lit the area came from a pale lichen that had found a foothold in the hair-thin cracks between the stones, revealing branching corridors to the left and right, and - as he peered into the first pair - further corridors spidering off those.

Pix had explored several catacombs in his lifetime; every one of them a bloody maze that it would be easy to get completely lost in. He shrugged off his rucksack and dove inside it for his toolkit, extricating a lump of white chalk. Hefting the rucksack back onto one shoulder, he took a left turn, chalking onto the wall an arrow that pointed upwards, indicating that this was the final corridor before the entrance.

Niches lined every corridor, some of them bordered by iron bars, a few of which were broken. Down here, in the quiet depths, he didn't feel like entertaining the notion of exactly *what* might have broken them. Had whoever moved the massive stone tomb covering the stairs ransacked this place?

Inside every niche was a simple wooden box, the length of a human body. Some were intact, and others were crumbling. Nothing glimmered or glinted; there was no hint to be glimpsed inside the crumbled boxes of the treasures that Malin had detected, but those might be secreted elsewhere within this maze.

The chalk marks continued - always on the left wall - moving deeper and deeper into the corridors. And then, one corridor opened out into a room that was a dead end. Wooden boxes lined the three walls, their ends facing inwards. To his left stood an old wooden lectern, atop which rested a heavy tome, its corners capped with protective iron decorations.

His gloves were at the very bottom of his rucksack, and it was getting late. He should be making his way back above ground, to set up camp. There would be time enough tomorrow to fish out the gloves and take a peek at what lay within that book.

He turned to leave, and then he heard it. A faint, regular rhythm, deep below him. Unmistakeably piston-like, but its regularity was like a clock.

***

Onorait Paix al-Lareiff was twenty-seven years of age when he was introduced to the Grand Master of the Guild of Redstone Adepts. His other tutors had spoken of the Grand Master in tones of awe and affection, and the prince felt that - through their words - he knew the man already. The Grand Master was the keeper of arcane redstone knowledge, much of which he had invented. It was rumoured that he had been the first to discover the dust's properties, having come across a strange, sparking red substance while exploring a cave. Having extracted it, he took it back to his workshop to examine it, and dedicated his life to studying its capabilities, turning its power to so many different uses that some had forgotten who invented them, from the fantastical to the mundane. Every empire throughout the lands kept its time to the clock invented by the Grand Master.

"Onorait." Even Mhenheli seemed awed as he bowed. "I introduce Grand Master Ehto al-Selahb, of the Redstone Adepts."

Paix had not known what to expect when the one affectionately referred to as 'the father of our craft' by his tutors walked in. He had expected an old man, and the first glimpse of white hair as Ehto al-Selahb entered the room appeared to prove him right, until the man bowed with the ease of one much younger.

"Onorait," was all he said.

Paix had been informed that the Grand Master was a man of few words. He had also been informed that the man did not often leave the guild quarters, and that a sighting of him was as rare as a rainstorm. His robes were a plain dark blue, atop of which he wore a short green cloak. His face was veiled with a blue linen cloth wrap, but what Paix could see of it was pale and unlined. His white hair was not of age, that was clear.

Paix bowed his head briefly: recognition and respect for the man and all he had done. "Grand Master," he said. "It is an honour to meet you. My tutors have spoken of you often."

Ehto al-Selahb crossed the floor to make his respects, kissing the emerald ring on the prince's finger.

"They have spoken to me of you, too," he said, letting go of Paix's hand and straightening to look at him. And now Paix was held in the intense gaze of that red eye.

In one of his more serious moments, Guildmaster Teng-ahtk had spoken of an accident many years ago, that had taken the Grand Master's left eye, leaving behind a scar and an empty socket. Undeterred, Ehto al-Selahb had simply fashioned a replacement eye from polished quartz and redstone.

"It's rumoured that he can see the future through that eye," Guildmaster Teng-ahtk had said, with a wry grin*. "That's a load of camel shit, if you ask me. The only thing I remember him seeing was every blasted mistake that I made when he was tutoring me!"*

Paix tilted his head, curiously. "They have?"
The skin around those strange eyes crinkled. Behind his veil, the Grand Master was smiling.

"Oh yes."

A man of few words indeed. Paix was dying to know what Ehto al-Selahb had been told about him by his tutors! But nothing more was forthcoming, and he resigned

himself to wondering whether it would be impudent to poke them about it at some point.

The Grand Master took one step away from Paix - his smile now faded - looking at the prince intently for a moment.

"Yes, and I can see why," he said quietly. "You will create something that will be the envy of many empires, some of them distant and far-flung. It… will not be the most efficient at its task, but it *will* be a marvel. And that, Onorait, is a thing that a man can be proud to be remembered for."

Now Paix al-Lareiff understood that even a master needed the validation of a legacy.

***

secret deep clank thing. Onorait Paix sleep now. dark sky.

"Hm?" Torn from his reverie, Pix looked down to find Malin stretching up against his shins, claws kneading against the thick fabric of his pants. Dark sky? It was night already? Bloody hell, how long had he been daydreaming down here?!

"Yeah, I need to set up a more permanent camp. I could also do with something to eat and a good night's sleep. Tent?"

Malin purred, rubbing their cheek against his calf.

"Tent it is, then," Pix said with a smile. "C'mon."

CHAPTER 6

Morning brought with it a brilliant sunrise, an aching back, and a rumbling belly. Crawling out of his one-man (well, one man and one cat) tent, Pix stood up and stretched in the cool morning air, working out the knots in his back muscles as best he could. He'd tried to find a soft patch of grass to pitch the tent on, but even the densest grass felt like a bed of rocks out here in the dry savannah.

Malin wandered out ahead of him a few feet, stretching forward and then back in a manner that Pix wished he had the flexibility to copy. Cat stretches always looked so *satisfying*, and while he'd practiced yoga in the past, it had long ceased to be a morning habit for him. Perhaps he ought to take it up again, especially since he might be spending a number of months in this place, and his spine wouldn't thank him for many more nights spent sleeping on the ground.

water is close

Shading his eyes with his hand, Pix scanned the ruins that lay before him. Yesterday, the statue had held all of his attention, but now - in the bright morning light - he could see the unmistakeable outline of a tall and remarkably intact aqueduct in the far distance. Getting to it would probably entail several hours of walking and climbing up the rocky cliff that appeared to lead up to where it faded into the early morning mist that still shrouded the higher plateaus and hills, merging with yet more shadowy structures that could very well be... a castle?

Never mind months; Pix suspected he'd be spending several years in this place. He could live with that, provided he could fashion some kind of sleeping area that was just a *tad* more comfortable.

"I see it," he murmured. "But it's a bit of a trek, and I'm pretty bloody hungry right now."

not there. follow

Pix looked down at Malin, who was twining around his ankles. Now, this was unusual. In all the time they'd been together, his companion had never instructed him to simply follow them before.

"All right," he said, heaving a reluctant sigh and shouldering his rucksack as he sent up a silent plea to any deity who cared to listen that there might be some berry bushes in the direction they were heading. Berries would at least silence his belly for a few hours. "Lead on."

***

"Now *that* is one heck of a wall. No, wait; it's… an elevated road?" Pix murmured, as - fifteen minutes and one clamber through a craggy dip between two hills later - they emerged into a stand of acacias. In front of them, a thick stone wall loomed tens of feet in the air, surmounted by heavy stone guides, several of which had collapsed and fallen to the ground below.

A road like that had to lead somewhere important. The street that took a direct line away from the catacombs - paved through it was - was nowhere near as impressive.

Malin didn't exactly *say* anything, but a touch of feline frustration tickled at Pix's mind, and he shook his head, coming back to the present. Distractions, distractions; *so damn much* to distract him here. Malin had gone ahead, and was looking back at him, tail swishing impatiently. Behind them, Pix could see a broad archway in the wall; a cut-through beneath the road. Turning away from him, Malin carried on picking their way through the scrubby grass, and Pix shook his head, chuckling.

"I'm not sure this place is ever going to not make me stop and stare every few minutes. Might as well get used to that, my friend," he murmured, as he picked up pace again and followed Malin through the archway.

food there

It was clearly an orchard. Or had *once been* an orchard, at least. The trees had been planted in rows, but time and dropped seeds had raised their many children into stunted growth beneath their canopies. Now, while their parents' regimentation could still be seen, the smaller trees did what children the world over and throughout history have always done: they got underfoot. Or at least… under branch.

Stepping closer to the nearest tall tree, Pix reached up to cradle one of the large, pale fruits that it bore. It was about the size of a small cantaloupe melon, and a

beautiful pearlescent pink, its waxy skin firm to the touch but with a little give to it when gently squeezed. Whatever it was, it had attained perfect ripeness. What was more, it *glowed*. Not just reflecting the sun; no, this fruit had a sun *within* it.

"What on earth are they?" Pix whispered, entranced. "I've never seen anything like this before."

croak burp fruit

Pix blinked.

"Uh... what?"

croak burp fruit

Pix stared at the fruit, then sighed. "Y'know, I'm not even going to pursue that line of questioning. Are they safe to eat?"

sweet food and drink. all safe. tasty

That settled it. Malin might have a silly name for the fruit, but they had never led Pix wrong about the edibility of wild flora. If Malin said it was safe to eat, then Pix was going to eat it.

Cupping the fruit more firmly, he twisted it, and it came away from the branch easily. As he sat down, his back to the tree's trunk, he tried digging a thumbnail into the fruit. It made a dent, but the skin was waxy and thick, demanding that he pay it delicate attention with his penknife.

A few minutes later, he'd peeled away some of the skin, revealing the glowing pink fruit behind it. It smelled vaguely sweet, reminding him of lychees. When he bit into it, that taste was confirmed: exactly like lychees. It was also deliciously - if lamentably - juicy, so by the time he'd finished it he was wearing some of it, too.

With both hunger and thirst sated, he got to his feet, looking ruefully down at himself. Well, most of the wayward juice had gone onto his skin and avoided his shirt, so that was something at least. It would soon dry in the sun.
follow

Dutifully, he picked up his rucksack and played follow-my-leader with a shimmering ghostly cat that only he could see. His life had been a long and eventful one at times, but this day in particular - as if eating a croak burp fruit wasn't enough - was about to slap him around the face with something that would bring him to his knees.

***

Malin could hop and scrabble their way up a pile of fallen rubble with the graceful agility of, well, a cat. But Pix was regrettably more human and took a lot longer to make it to the top of the elevated road. Once there, he bent over, hands braced on his thighs as he caught his breath for a minute. Then, he straightened upright and looked around.

The view was spectacular. The angel soared into the morning sky, sunlight winking off the smatterings of gold in her sextant wing. Following her line of sight, Pix could see the familiar verdigris of a copper dome in the distance. Yet *another* large building - and if it had an intact roof dome - then the underlying structure was probably sound as well.

In the other direction - the one taken by the elevated road - he could see two massive square towers rising into the cloudless sky. Gatehouses. They had to be gatehouses. Of course, it made perfect sense. This elevated road was the main thoroughfare into the city.

Malin was already heading down that road at a loping run, toward the towers, tail high and ears perked.

Pix knew that run. Malin had sensed something *good*.

***

As Pix rounded the final curve of the road, his heart began thumping and he slowed down, honouring the instinct to savour this moment. Flanking the road were several tall buildings in startlingly good condition, but he gave them only a passing glance. They could wait. *Everything* could wait. Because up ahead, a truly spectacular gatehouse led out to a vista that for centuries had only been seen by wild birds and beasts. Now, a pair of swiftly welling human eyes were witnessing it, and they struggled to take it all in.

The wooden gate was at least two feet thick and banded with heavy iron braces. It was hanging open as if - unlike him as he walked slowly through it, enraptured by what lay beyond - the people of the city had left in a hurry; something that he might find clues to elsewhere in the... in the...

His brain grappled for words and found none.

Onorait Paix al-Lareiff, the man who had seen more history than any other human being, sank to his knees, tears rolling down his face.

"What have I found?" he whimpered. "Who were you? Why... why did you leave? How could you build something like this and then abandon it? What... *happened?*"

Tearing his gaze away from the massive expanse of unending stone bridge that stretched in front of him, he looked down. His hands trembled as he laid them with a very deliberate motion flat against the warm stone. Several tears fell between them, splattering little darker spots that faded quickly.

"I can't share you with the world." His breath hitched. "I *can't*. I don't want them clambering all over you, cataloguing you, dusting off your bones, looting your treasures, bidding for parts of you, breaking you up and taking you away from the land that holds you."

He looked up. Up at the great bridge, at its towers, at the massive statues surmounting those towers, at the exquisite stonework, at the sheer breath-stealing *beauty* of it all.

"I'll look after you," he whispered. "If you'll bear my company, then I will keep you safe."

CHAPTER 7

~ The First Pillar ~

A bird wheeled overhead, a tiny speck in the cloudless sky. The clear, fresh scent of water rose from far below. Acacia leaves whispered in the breeze. Smooth stone warmed in the morning sun.

Pix sat back on his heels. Swiped his sleeve across his eyes. Sniffled. Exhaled. Tilted his head back. Closed his eyes. *Breathed*.

It was a beautiful morning to be kneeling on a wonder.

books here

He opened his eyes. Malin had wandered over to the first pillar on the left. Its surround was jagged, but he couldn't see any piles of stone anywhere that indicated it might have toppled. Several of the other pillars had a similarly ruined look, so it must have been a deliberate choice.

Finally getting to his feet, he swayed momentarily, still feeling a bit giddy. Slowly and still wary of his balance, he made his way over to where Malin was now exploring the hollow interior of the pillar. Its tallest stones - made of basalt - were at least twice Pix's height, and two ornate carved blocks bisected the shorter stone pillars flanking the entrance.

The stairs that led into the pillar were made of chiselled copper, worn to verdigris by age and to concave by the tread of many feet over the years. It was not a metal that Pix had ever seen used for such a high traffic area before, nor one that he would have contemplated for the same, as it was far too soft. But the copper continued up and away from the stairs, in a band around the pillar, so it clearly had some significance to whatever had been situated in this pillar.

'Situated', because... well, there wasn't much left of whatever had occupied this space. Several of the other pillars provided a base for magnificent statues, but what lay within the hollow of this particular one was a rather sorry sight. A few barrels and chests, and some large blocks of metal that might have been iron?

He dug a hand into his pants pocket and pulled out his penknife, holding the magnetic centre of it against the nearest block. It flew out of his hand and clacked against the metal block. Yep, iron.

Shoving the penknife back into his pocket, he looked up. What appeared to be most of a tree trunk had been wedged firmly into the stone floor. A tenacious

yellow lichen had taken hold in the cracks left by the force of that action, and was slowly, patiently making its way up the wood. The side facing out toward the bridge had been hewn into something resembling a flat plane, and at the bottom - sheltered from the wind and sun - a short section of wooden ladder still remained fastened to the trunk. Several more sections of ladder were scattered on the floor, but there didn't appear to be enough to reach the top of the trunk. Perhaps the rest had blown over the edge when they fell and landed in the river.

If a ladder went up there, then something had to have been up there worth climbing to. There was nothing to indicate a lookout post, or a place where a sentry might sit; besides which, the guard towers either side of the gate would have served that purpose. What on earth could have been up there?

His first clue was a small, tattered piece of woven wicker, nestled between one of the barrels and the side wall of the pillar. Sheltered from the elements, it was in surprisingly good condition. The weave was thick and heavy, indicating that it had come from a large basket. One long, thin strip of wood was also wedged upright behind the barrel, its exposed end cracked and dried as it shivered in the breeze.

A large basket. A long, thin, flexible piece of wood that might have been a support strut. Something that needed a ladder to get to it. Could this have been some kind of hot air balloon? No, that couldn't be possible. This place was far, far older than the late 1700s, when the earliest hot air balloon flight took place. No, it was far more likely to be some kind of depiction of ascension to the gods in a basket carried by a large wooden bird, or something like that.

He bit his lip. It really did look like a hot air balloon...

books here

Turning, he saw Malin perched on one of the barrels, watching him patiently. Realising that this was the second time his companion had said the same thing to him, he responded with a rueful grin and a, "Yeah, sorry."

Malin jumped down from the barrel, finding a warm and sunny spot on a nearby chest where they loafed, paws turned neatly in, purring. As he scratched a finger beneath their chin, they butted their head against his hand, making the most of the fuss.

The lid of the barrel was firmly wedged in, and it took some considerable force to loosen it, but finally Pix managed to lift it up and set it down against the wall.

Books were, indeed, here. A barrel might have seemed an odd place to store them, but - he bent forward and sniffed - it was also waterproof, as evidenced by the barely detectable redolence of wine emanating from within. Just as wine

hadn't been able to escape out, so the elements hadn't been able to get in once the barrels were repurposed for book storage.

He took off his fingerless leather gloves, stuffing them into his rucksack and digging beneath them until his fingers touched the softness of a different pair of gloves. Tugging them out - oh dear, they were crumpled to high heaven and back - he pulled them on, and carefully picked up the first book, bringing it into the light.

He inhaled sharply. The soft brown leather cover glimmered a strange violet colour, as if overlain with an iridescent sheen. He turned it in his hands, watching it flash and shine in the sunlight.

He hadn't seen one of these in *centuries!*

The golden clasp holding the red closure ribbon together was as bright as the day it was clipped on. Carefully, he hooked his thumb into the place where he knew he'd find the small, thin part to press and unlock it. It opened easily, the ribbon sliding free from the clasp.

Almost not wanting to spoil the moment, he hesitated. If this was what he thought it was - and there was no reason why it *wouldn't* be - it meant that something he had been familiar with long, long ago had made its way across countless lands and oceans to be here. Another civilisation had known about this.

He opened the book, and familiar words read themselves to him.

A four-verse plea - a prayer of the highest order - for protection. Words spoken by weapon smiths and armourers over anvils, by clerics over their faithful, and by mothers over their children. Ancient, powerful words; words that he had once known but had long since forgotten.

He had spoken these words in the past. He could speak them again.

CHAPTER 8

~ The Second and Third Pillars ~

The barrel of books would take some time to sift through and catalogue, and Pix was eager to explore the remaining pillars on this wondrous great bridge, which - if he thought about it - was a perfect name for it. The Greatbridge.

Taking off the soft gloves that he always used when handling books, he stuffed them back into his rucksack, jamming them into it by means of the small gap near the top. Honestly, it was no wonder the damn things were so crumpled. With the rucksack hefted onto one shoulder again, he picked up the barrel lid and wedged it as firmly as he could back in place. Not that it rained here, but he didn't want anything else - insects or dust - getting inside.

With the lid finally secured to his satisfaction, he turned around to look up... *and up* at the statue occupying the opposite pillar.

It was clearly a bird, reminding him of a parrot or a cockatiel. Time and weather had worn away most of the details on the statue, leaving only smooth polished stone behind, but in places - deep in the shadows of the bird's lower breast - he could still see bright green and yellow paint carved into intricate feathers, as well as some brilliant blue beneath its tail. It must have been a beautiful sight in its heyday, probably painted all over to resemble the colourful bird that it clearly represented.

A worryingly large crack ran down from the statue's neck to its left wing. It was deep and - at its central point - wider than Pix liked to see. Already, part of the beak had fallen; sheared off and laying in three or four broken pieces at the foot of the pillar. A crack that size could have been caused by an earth tremor, but Pix had come across no other indication of tectonic movement in the surrounding areas. He didn't want to risk any further damage to the statue by climbing it to get a better look, so a few sketches and photos would have to suffice to record it.

The pillar beside what he'd mentally dubbed the 'hot air balloon' (because his stubborn brain refused to let that notion go, regardless of how anachronistic it was) was empty. He scoured it closely, looking for any scraps that might indicate that whatever had been placed there may simply have rotted away, or been made of substances that simply couldn't stand the test of time. But there was no hint of anything; no stains, no marks, no scraps of anything man-made, so he made his way over to the opposite side of the bridge, and onto the next pillar.

Standing tall beside the bird was a familiar beast: a stylised depiction of a llama. A smile brightened his face as he looked up at it. As with the bird, the shaded underside of its neck showed hints of colour and detailed carving. It had probably been brightly painted when new, and he heaved a sigh as he realised what this place might have been like once, when hundreds of feet crossed it every day. The bustle of chatter, the creak of cartwheels, the scents of incense and spices, the intensity of haggling and bartering, quiet offerings and prayers to statues and gods.

Malin butted their head against his ankle.

secrets here. not safe. need light.

"Up here?" Pix looked up at the sun, rising higher above the savannah plateaux. The sky was a breathtaking blue, without a wisp of cloud to be seen.

below

"Hmm."

There were no cracks in this statue that he could see, so it was probably safe to approach it for a closer inspection. A couple of stumps of dried and cracked wood nosed up from the stone floor, suggesting a fence had once blocked off the more open entrance to this pillar. Underfoot, the stone gave way to soil, and the familiar scrubby grass of the savannah made a welcome carpet, dotted with an overgrown profusion of tiny wildflowers. Those were definitely not native to this area, as the rest of the savannah was home only to acacias and grasses. Pix hadn't seen any flowers in a long time. This little oasis of beauty was rather lovely, and it warmed his heart to see such a riot of colour.

Something white caught his eye amid the tall plants, and he crouched down carefully. Animal bones, scattered by something - most likely scavenging beasts - but the skull was similar to ones he'd seen many years ago. His people had regarded camels as family; indeed, many children grew up with the same beasts in their family until their middling years, so long-lived were those patient and sturdy creatures. When a camel died of old age, it became part of the family in a more permanent way. Its meat was used to prepare meals for the family, for their neighbours, and for the poorest homes who could not afford such luxuries. Its hide was stripped and tanned, to be fashioned into packs and clothing that would be used or worn for generations to come. Its bones were carved into models to honour it, into needles, intricate little puzzle boxes, dice, and other useful objects. And, finally, its skull was buried beneath the threshold of the home, that its endurance and strength - symbols of preparedness and longevity - would transfer to all who stepped within.

This was not a camel skull, but it was something similar: a llama skull. A llama skull beneath a llama statue. And, next to it, a bird statue. Both were quite different, with the llama being created in a more stylised manner compared to the bird's softer appearance. Were these created by different peoples? Or in different times? He had seen at least one more massive statue toward the far end of the bridge, which - at the initial glance he had given it - seemed more primitive in nature. Could these have been offerings from other locales to the people of this city? The result of treaties? Even... embassies?

need light

Malin was sniffing around the deepest corners at the back of the pillar. Rising to his feet again, Pix carefully skirted around the bones and made his way over there.

Hidden behind one of the rear legs of the llama statue, a deep black hole led down. Pix couldn't see the river beneath it, so it must have led into the innards of the bridge. He dug out his Maglite, shining it down into the darkness, but he couldn't make out anything, and he sure as hell wasn't going to risk going down there without some means of lighting the place up. It could just be a small storage room down there, but it may turn out to be something much bigger; even dangerous.

"I think we'll leave that until we're better equipped for adventuring," he said, stepping away from the hole. "I want to check out all of these pillars quickly, before we go back. This is going to take *weeks* to investigate properly."

Stepping out into the sun again, he shaded his eyes with one hand as he looked down the bridge.

"Let's move on. I'm dying to see what that massive sword is all about."

CHAPTER 9

~ The Fourth Pillar ~

At first glance, Pix had assumed the massive sword statue speared into the fourth pillar was some kind of protective totem for the city's army, or a show of military might to ward off any people who wish to cross the Greatbridge with ill intent.

But, as he approached it, he slowed his steps and looked up. Unlike every other statue on this bridge, the sword was in immaculate condition, as if it had been created only last week. Its aged copper quillons shone in the sun, as if inviting the hand of a giant to pull it out from the stone, and the polished chunk of emerald in the pommel sparkled as if freshly embedded. *Something* was here; something not quite of this world. A power surrounded the sword, and as he stepped into it, he realised what it was.

It was the same power that resided within him; the soft well of time that crackled and ticked just beyond the edge of hearing. He knew it well, for it had sustained him many times when the world would have ended him. Ages of the stars were within him, and within this place, kept safe from the outside.

He felt an aching familiarity.

"I know this," he whispered, reaching out to press his fingertips against the stone blade of the sword. In a far distant moment, the echo of a small dog yipped back at him. Just once, just… *there*. And he smiled.

"So, you found your way here eventually," he said, softly. "Changed, yes, but I think that was a good thing."

The same ghostly blue lanterns that he'd found in the catacombs entrance hung from chains at the sword's shoulder, and toward the bottom of the blade a banner moved softly in the breeze. He did not recognise its symbols of greens, pinks, yellows, and teals, but it felt warm and welcoming, as did the elegant, flourished letters in the carved sign below it.

"Sanctuary," he murmured, tracing the word with the tip of one finger. "Yes, I feel it here, but you are surely long gone. What power holds this place in time? What guards it and keeps it safe?"

His people had known of magic, of course. What race living in such a harsh environment wouldn't? Who couldn't look up at the night sky, or at the vast shifting expanse of sand, and not feel *something* beyond comprehension? Mystics read the shapes of the dunes, astrologers consulted the processions of the stars, and

the masters of the Great Library recorded all in their books. And central to it all, his own position: the Keeper of Lifetimes and Endings, the Guardian of the Vigil, the Listener of the Words. So many words. Gratitude, thankfulness, pain, and regret; he had carried them all with him as he wandered the world. And always, *always*, he seemed to find himself at the same point, just in a different place. The Keeper of Lifetimes and Endings.

He looked down. Malin had curled up at the base of the sword, dozing contentedly. Even they felt the peace of this place.

Boxes and chests, crates and barrels were stacked up everywhere. Pix reached for the nearest chest, pulling up the hasp and opening the lid.

Inside, a leather saddle, still supple and with stirrups folded neatly under it. A small box that, when eased open, proved to be holding some small wooden tags with metal discs on them. He remembered seeing those hanging from the bridles of horses many years ago, bearing the name of the beast on one side and its rider on the other; a precaution should the rider be lost in battle. A small stack of signs pushed neatly against the side wall of the chest. A soft leather bundle, filled with a handful of cut emeralds, prized trading tokens from times past. A bundle of sticks.

He chuckled. "You always were a little bit chaotic."

The barrel next to the chest held moss-covered stones, mingled in with bricks of a strange polished black stone that Pix had not seen before. Just that, and nothing more. Other barrels held random assortments of planks, stones, logs, and wool.

The largest chest was at the back of the sword, sitting on the floor. Kneeling in front of it, he lifted the lid.

On the very top was a wooden shield. It was simple in design, with a strong band of iron around the outside of it. Pix thought of the dark hole beneath the llama statue. He might feel up to exploring that with this shield to protect him from anything unexpected that might be down there. If only he had a sword, too.

He lifted up the shield and inhaled sharply. Beneath it was another shield; one far more magnificent, bordered with gold surmounting a thick, shining silver edge. The field was azure and overlain with a heater of black adorned with gold floral filigrees. At its very centre stood a radiant silver carved figure of a goddess, long hair flowing down, plants growing up from her feet, divinity radiating from her halo.

Something tugged at him inside, and he looked up in the direction of the catacombs and the statue. He could see neither from here, kneeling behind the massive sword statue, but…

Reverently, he set the shield aside on the ground beside him and leaned over the chest again. Well, he had wished for a sword, and his hand now closed around the hilt of one. It was a simple iron sword, nowhere near as ornate as the shield, but as he slowly unsheathed it from its leather scabbard, it shimmered in the dappled shadows here behind the statue. This weapon had words whispered into it, and it had seen use.

Touching careful fingers to the fuller of the blade, he closed his eyes. It had been a long time since he'd done this, touched this long-buried part of himself, but he reached for it now, with a whisper of, "Tell me of your abilities, honoured edge."

In his mind's eye, he saw skeletal archers flying back from each slash of the blade, falling to the second each time. This was a good sword to take into the deeper, darker places of the earth, where death rattled in hidden corners.

"Thank you," he murmured. "My name is Onorait Paix al-Lareiff, and I will carry you with me without fear."

Sheathing the sword, he placed it on top of the simple wooden shield. What else was in this chest? A heavy brown cape, neatly folded, seemed to be the last item. A thick woollen thing, used for travelling; it was a style he knew well of old.

Something fell out of its folds as he lifted it, and he caught it clumsily with the side of his hand. Laying the cape back down again, he found himself holding a simple brown leather pouch that was light but clearly held lots of small somethings. Carefully, he pulled apart the drawstrings, opening the pouch up, and tipped its contents into his open palm.

Sunflower seeds, dried and carefully preserved, hoarded in a simple bag and wrapped in an old woollen garment. He looked down at them for long minutes before gently tipping them back into the pouch and pulling the drawstrings closed again. He didn't know their significance; only that they clearly held great meaning.

Tucking the pouch back into the folds of the cape, he lifted it up, not expecting to see anything else, as the cape was flat and had been at the bottom of the chest.

He was wrong.

The cape dropped onto his knees as he stared at the floor of the chest. For the second time that day, tears welled in his eyes, spilling over and down his face, until they were lost in his beard. There was one final thing at the bottom of the chest. To anyone else, it would have been a small and insignificant little thing; a trinket that had possibly come loose from a piece of jewellery.

Onorait Paix al-Lareiff reached into the chest one last time, shaking fingers closing around a small copper totem with verdigris eyes, as he broke down and sobbed.

CHAPTER 10

~ The Final Pillars ~

By the time Pix had finished checking all the barrels and chests in the sword pillar, the angle of the sun (not to mention the rumbling of his belly) indicated that it was getting late in the afternoon. If he was to finish his initial examination of the remaining pillars before night fell, he'd need to get a move on.

Leaving the sword resting on top of the simple shield, next to a soft bolt of wool that he'd retrieved from one of the bigger chests in hopes that he might be able to fashion a kind of mattress out of it, he picked up the small copper totem and stepped out of the moment that held this pillar in stasis.

Back on the bridge again with the warm breeze kissing his cheek, he tucked the precious totem into the slim leather bag that he kept strapped to his left thigh. All of his most precious things were in that bag. He could be parted from his rucksack in a desperate moment, and though he would mourn the loss of his journals he would be fine. He could not, however, bear to be parted from the small treasures in that bag.

He crossed the bridge to the pillar on the opposite side, and oh what a sorry sight met his gaze. Huge chunks of shattered quartz gleamed in the sun, piled up over gilded rocks, and topped with a strange crumbled greenish material that he had never seen before. It resembled a very expensive, very shiny, and very broken dessert.

As he drew closer, he realised that the larger chunks of quartz were striated from the bottom up. Shattered at their base - the quartz dust long since dispersed by the wind - those cracks told a story that just didn't make sense. For the damage to be this extensive these chunks must have fallen from a decent height, but there was nothing to indicate any kind of pedestal; no remnants of stone visible between the chunks, and no sign of post holes, although those might have rotted away, as the ground beneath the chunks was soil and not stone. It was as if the quartz had been held up by some invisible power that had eventually failed, causing it to smash to the ground.

Well, he'd already seen evidence of some kind of magic here, so he supposed that was a *possible* answer, but it wouldn't be one that any archaeological journal would accept.

He caught himself in that thought. He had already decided that no archaeological journal would ever see his notes on this place anyway, so what did it matter? He

smiled, realising that - for once in his career - he could allow for things that *he* knew existed, but that others would try to rationalise away with some eminently practical but highly improbable reason.

The pillar beside the shattered quartz one held something that glittered in the afternoon sunlight: a huge amethyst crystal cluster that filled the space given to it. There was nothing more; just the crystal, but it was absolutely breathtaking, and he stared at it for several minutes.

"A show of wealth, perhaps?" he muttered, flicking a fingernail over one of the crystal clusters and delighting in the pure musical note that rang out. Another cluster gave a different note, a third yet another.

"Or perhaps a musical instrument," he added, tilting his head. "Or a devotional? A tap for protection, or for luck, or even some kind of yes/no answer to a question?" He chuckled at himself. "Or a history lover letting his imagination run just a little too wild over an inside-out geode. You tell me."

He tapped the crystal one more time. It rang out with a beautiful tone, and just for a second, he could swear that it sounded like *No*.

Palming a hand to the back of his neck, he frowned, shook his head briefly, and turned to the next pillar.

Planted firmly in this one was an ancient tree, its long-dead branches arching into the sky. No foliage remained on it, but as Pix climbed over the step and into the pillar, he could see life, nonetheless. Fungi had taken hold in the splits and cracks, and a bone-white lichen processed up one side of the trunk. An old, broken iron lantern - probably once hung from a smaller branch - was half-hidden under one of the tree roots that had pushed up and out from beneath the stone.

"Life always finds a way," he said softly, tugging his Maglite out again and switching it on. He aimed its powerful white beam into the dark hollow at the front of the tree and was surprised to see small bones in there. They had been disturbed, but from the long metatarsals and phalanges he surmised that it had probably been either a frog or a toad. Since the hollow of a tree was not the kind of place one might expect such a creature, it was probably an offering of some kind.

There was something else beneath the roots: broken pieces of terracotta. Perhaps an offering jug or vase? He crouched down for a better look and spotted something else: a strip of bright green. Gently *glowing* bright green. As he reached out to it, his fingertips tingled, and he hesitated. Flicking on the Maglite again, he focused its beam into the shadowy area. Whatever that strip of green was, it had a *handle*, and it was warning him off; the tingle told him that much.

He turned off the torch. "All right," he said. "I'll leave you be. Perhaps later, you might trust me enough to let me take a better look at you."

He stood with a soft groan. By the stars, his back *really* wasn't happy with sleeping on the ground. Hopefully that bolt of wool would be enough when folded to provide a little more comfort.

The sun was edging closer to the water as he arrived at the final occupied pillar. The statue that it contained comprised many types of stone and was fashioned in a primitive - if slightly chaotic and wonky - stylised manner. At the centre - presumably where the statue's heart might be - a lump of gold had been shoved haphazardly into a hacked-out hole in the stone.

Its… horns? ears?… were absolutely enormous, and - like the rest of it - wonky, as if it had been created by a sculptor with an easily distracted, scribble-scrabble mind. The tip of one horn (or ear) had fallen to the ground, landing beside a crumbled wooden crate that…

Damn. Pix hadn't seen that many copper ingots in *centuries*. They tumbled out of several broken wooden crates, all around the statue. Granted, they had all oxidised into a familiar verdigris, but his heart gave a warm little tug at the sight of something so familiar; something that reminded him of home.

sunset. long walk back

He turned, seeing Malin standing in front of the sword statue, where they had clearly just woken up. They were right. It was time to get moving.

He jogged back to the statue, stepped inside, and bent to pick up the sword. It would be awkward to carry all of this in his arms, especially with the bolt of wool being so heavy. He could always *wear* the sword for the walk back. Its leather belt was still supple, and it buckled around his waist in a comfortable fit. It felt odd to have a sword at his side again after all these years, but it was a comfort, nonetheless. Not that he'd been bothered by anything in many days or nights of travel, but having a weapon to hand settled something inside him that always felt just a little bit unnerved.

Hefting the bolt of wool over one shoulder, he pushed his other arm through the shield's strap. Oh, this felt good, especially as night was falling. A shield was something he missed as he wandered through the world, but they were usually too bulky to be carried around on longer journeys. He preferred to travel light.

Now, though, it felt good. It felt *right*. It was just one more little thing that made this place feel like *home*.

"C'mon," he said to Malin. "Let's see if we can make that tent a bit more comfy for tonight."

CHAPTER 11

Hunkered down in the tent, Pix rolled out the bolt of wool cloth slowly and carefully onto the groundsheet, doubling it back onto itself over and over, back and forth, to form a thick layer over the hard and unforgiving surface beneath. The fabric was soft and warm, and he had to keep gently pulling Malin away from kneading at it.

"You can do that once it's finished," he said, scritching affectionate fingers beneath Malin's chin, smiling as they lifted their head and purred their approval and impatience.

Once he'd completed his own mattress, he began on a separate smaller one for Malin, although he knew they'd probably end up sleeping on him anyway. Not so much for the warmth - although that was probably one reason - but over the centuries they'd been together he had come to understand that Malin was not only a companion; they were also a protector.

He often wondered if Malin saw him as a strange two-legged kitten who needed looking after, and occasional chiding and nudging to do the right thing; an absent-minded, easily distracted creature whose caprices were quite inexplicable to the superior feline mind.

Something like that, anyway. He smirked as Malin butted against him repeatedly as if to hurry him up with their bed. Once it was done, he sat back on his haunches and watched as they sniffed around it, kneaded the soft wool a few times, turned and turned and turned, then settled into a perfect doughnut. Paws tucked in, tail encircling, one ear twitching momentarily. One heaved sigh, then peace.

He'd always loved watching cats sleep.

Quietly, he unstrapped his old fleece blanket from the base straps of his rucksack, shook it out, and draped it over himself. Shuffling the rucksack up to the top of the wool cloth mattress, he rested his head onto it and settled down. By the stars, this was far more comfortable than last night's attempt at sleep. Still not quite as good as a proper mattress, but much better than a thin plastic groundsheet over hard and stony soil. He'd take what he could get.

His eyelids drooped as he watched the comfort of Malin's gentle glow dimming as they dozed. For all he knew, they might see him as glowing, too. And right now, his glow would also be growing dim, as the quiet sounds of night bled in through the thin walls of the tent. The gentle soughing of the breeze, the rustle of dry grass, the tiny scratchings of nocturnal insects, and the slow, silent tick of time as he drifted into the liminal space between wakefulness and sleep.

***

The Scorpion processed across an indigo sky, chasing the Silver Ant in a dance that had begun before the earliest ages of the world.

Onorait Paix al-Lareiff had been awoken by Chaperone Mhenheli one night in his twenty-fourth year and urged to visit the natural observatory at the bidding of Astrologer G'tehm ah-Shker. Something wondrous was happening, and G'tehm ah-Shker was a man who loved to share wonder with his students.

Wrapping himself hastily in a cloak and toeing into his sandals, Paix made the short journey up to the stone outcrop where the astrologers liked to sit. Of course, they had a building to work from, but on many a night they would make the trek up to this place high above the conduit light of the city, the better to see the objects of their studies. He could see several of them already standing up there, robes flapping around their legs in the desert breeze.

The outcrop made for a steep climb, but it plateaued out at its summit. Centuries of sandalled feet had worn smooth paths in the rock, and Paix followed the one that ended in his teacher of astrology: G'tehm ah-Shker.

Hearing quiet footsteps behind him, the man turned from his fantastical array of lenses and smiled at Paix.

"Well, hello there," he said. "Welcome to the wonderful world of starlight and ancient travellers. Look up and witness a transient visitor who normally passes by but once every few mortal lifetimes."

Paix smiled back, bowing with the respect that his tutor was due; even from the man who would one day rule the city. He adored G'tehm ah-Shker's lessons, so filled with the delight and wonder that - even in his advanced years - his tutor clearly felt when in his element.

Paix looked up at the night sky. There it was: the Silver Ant, its long, dusty tail of cloudy light streaming out behind it as it passed in front of the Scorpion. Countless distant stars pinpricked a backdrop for its slow procession.

"How often does it visit?" he murmured.

G'tehm ah-Shker returned to his lenses - beautiful circles of glass layered over each other, supported by ornate adjustable copper frames.

"Oh," he said casually, as he bent to look up through the lowest of the lenses, "there's no consensus, really. Our written histories tell of a visit some two hundred or so years ago, but there are no records before that. It would be a reasonable

guess of every two hundred years, I suppose. This one will be well documented, for future scientific examination. Would you like to take a look, Onorait?"

Oh, he absolutely would.

Bending low, he put his right eye close to the smallest lens, squinting the other eye shut. Up through the multiple layers of glass - each one magnifying the other a little more - the Silver Ant looked larger. It was of an irregular shape, but he could see how it had earned its name, for it was argent in the reflected light from the sun currently hidden below the world. Its tail was clearer now; dust streaming out in a long reach that almost touched the Scorpion.

"It's beautiful," he whispered.

"That it is, and we are lucky to witness it," came the reply as he stepped back from the lenses to allow G'tehm ah-Shker to resume his position. He had settled a book on his knee, and - his student now forgotten - he began to make sketches and take notes.

Having made his way back to the palace, Paix looked up once more from the window of his chambers. The Silver Ant continued its slow progress across the firmament, promising to see him again one day.

***

In the quiet of a savannah night, a bright comet journeyed across the night sky. Far, far below, it saw a small tent, faintly lit with a blue glow. Many times had it observed and been observed by the occupant of that tent, but this night it went unseen, for the man it had visited every two hundred years was dreaming of their first meeting.

CHAPTER 12

Morning came with two paws shoved into his cheek. Cracking open one eye, he smiled as he saw that Malin had indeed wriggled over to snuggle up to him in the night. They were now waking up, which - of course - meant that he had to be awake, too. Hard not to be, really, when your feline companion is pushing your head to one side in a glorious morning stretch.

He tried a stretch himself. It was not quite as satisfying as Malin's looked, but it eased out the aches and stiffness of sleeping on the ground, and he sighed contentedly as he felt his neck crack. Oh, that felt *goooood*.

The wool cloth mattress had afforded him a relatively comfortable night's sleep. It still wasn't as soft as a bed - by the stars, how he would welcome the luxury of a bed - but at least this morning he didn't feel as if every stone and solid lump of dirt under the groundsheet had left an imprint in his back.

His belly gnawed at him as Malin blinked awake and rolled over, getting to their feet. They nosed at the tent flap with a soft rumbling *miaow*, and Pix reached over to unzip it a little, letting them out and the cool morning air in. Laying on his belly with his chin resting on the backs of his hands, he looked out at the morning as Malin sniffed around in front of the tent.

He could hear a distant bird heralding the dawn; its bright song lilting through the clear air. Industrious ants were already hard at work, marching in a line from one side of the old path to the other, a few feet away from the tent.

Malin suddenly perked, tail and ears up, dead still as they focused on something. Slowly, they moved down low, prowling forward, making Pix grin.

"What have you spotted?" he murmured, watching his companion's butt wiggle a few times, before Malin streaked off out of sight. He heard a small, startled squeak, and raised an eyebrow. He knew that Malin had no need of food, so why on earth were they hunting? Just for play?

A few moments later, Malin backed into his view again, dragging something small and furry and clearly dead. Whatever it was, its body was almost half Malin's size, and Pix unzipped the tent flap the whole way so he could step outside.

Stopping at his feet, Malin let go of the little corpse - which Pix could now see was a rabbit - stepping over it and butting at Pix's ankle with their head.

Onorait Paix hungry. here food

Pix crouched down to offer a chin-scritch of thanks.

"That'll make a tasty meal, thank you," he said, chuckling as Malin rolled onto their back to invite belly rubs as payment instead. It would probably end in a clawed arm, but it was always worth it.

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Having skinned the rabbit and washed it in the river, alongside the stick he intended to spear it on, Pix scouted around for any kind of wild vegetable or root that he might be able to cook with it. Near to the water, he found a few thickets of wild sorghum and snapped off a couple of the feathery heads. Meat *and* grain? This meal was looking better and better. On his way back to the city, he passed under the elevated road, and up to the gentle slopes where he'd noticed the remnants of dry-stone walls a few days before. This looked like a farming area if he wasn't mistaken; small fields separated by those walls. Something might have survived here over the years, especially if the soil had been cultivated extensively back in the city's heyday.

It was overgrown and wild, but he could see several patches of unmistakeable leaves. Yams! A few nudges with the toe of his boot, followed by a hefty tug, and he had the plant in his hand, its tubers dangling beneath it and scattering dry soil onto Malin, who jumped out of the way and then pounced where it had fallen.

Making his way back through the orchard, Pix decided to try the greenish looking croak burp fruit this time, twisting one off the nearest tree and hoping that the green was its natural colour and not an indicator that it was unripe.

Within the hour, Pix was full and happy as he leaned back against a ruined wall in the early morning sun, snacking on the croak burp fruit. The green ones, it turned out, tasted a bit like cucumber; watery and refreshing. Now no longer starving hungry, with the sun warm on his face and not a cloud in the azure sky, he closed his eyes and heaved a blissful sigh. This was the most at home he'd felt in decades.

The campfire crackled quietly, now dulled to embers. Most of the rabbit meat was in Pix's belly now, alongside the boiled sorghum and yam. The only thing that would have made it even better would have been a generous knob of butter on the grain and vegetable mix, but he was more than sated with what he'd had, and he let out a contented burp that made Malin open one startled eye momentarily, then settle back down for a snooze again.

***

Pix devoted the early afternoon to exploring the area in front of the catacombs. Leading away from its entrance, half-buried under the soil, was a cobbled road. Partway down the road, on the right, were the remains of a structure. Its front was remarkably intact, with a tall pediment above the front pillars, but its back was completely ruined. Moss and vines grew over the stones, and the peculiar pale green glowing lichen clung to most of its surfaces, but the steps leading up into the interior were in good condition, if worn down in their centres.

On the upper floor, a stone pedestal greeted the visitor, ornate geometric carvings still visible on the sheltered side, but worn away on the ruined faces. To the left, this upper floor continued into the wide walkable top of an archway. For now, until he'd tested its stability, Pix wouldn't risk standing on it. The opposite end of the arch had crumbled, and he couldn't be sure that it would support his weight.

Making his way back down, he backed up to look at the building as a whole. A gnarled old tree had made its home to the building's right, growing over and into the smaller ruined room off to that side, its roots pushing up the soil and disturbing the foundations.

To the left, more cobbled road; patchy and overgrown with soil and grass, but its raised edges were still visible in places. On the edge of his hearing, Pix could almost hear the wheels of a cart, the clip-clop of hooves, the shouts of a carter, the rumble of barrels being rolled along the cobbles.

Brewery? Storage? Granary? No, too small for a granary, especially in a city this size. He frowned, and turned away from the building, pacing across the broken pathway, lost in thought. A brewery would make sense; most cities this size would have had one, and the fact that he'd found sorghum growing near the river meant there was a possibility of sorghum beer being brewed—

Was that something wooden sticking out from the dirt hillside in front of him?

"Malin?"

Mrowr?

"Is that worth investigating?"

Onorait Paix dig. find things

Worth investigating, then.

The soil was loose; unusual in and of itself in this baked-dry location. Most of the dirt around here was packed hard, but this soil was warm and soft, and it

crumbled beneath his hands. More and more of it came away as he dug his fingers into it, piling at his feet as he revealed… a door.

A solid wooden door. Not ruined, not split, not old. This was *new*.

He glanced back at Malin, who simply sat and watched him, inscrutable as ever. That meant it was safe to enter, because Malin would have warned him if it wasn't, right?

Right?

Slowly, he drew his sword, holding it ready as he pushed open the door.

CHAPTER 13

"Oh..."

Pix's sword arm dropped as he stood in the doorway. Ahead of him, a small room had been carved out of the stone beneath the hill. It was perhaps eight feet square, and the ceiling was about a foot above his head. The walls were oddly smooth, but not made of stone bricks. Whoever had dug out this place had done so with immense precision. But it was the contents of the room, more than its walls, that held his attention.

Specifically, the bed.

It was a simple single bed with a thick mattress, its rustic wooden frame crafted from the rust-toned acacia wood native to the savannah. The wood had been sanded smooth - not a sharp edge or splinter in sight - and it gleamed as if it had been oiled. Clean white cotton sheets covered the mattress, and a pristine white pillow sat at the head end. Tucked around the whole was a beautiful deep blue wool blanket. On one side of the bed stood a low acacia wood table with a lantern on it.

A *lit* lantern.

"Someone's been here before me," Pix whispered, his stomach dropping. "Or... they're here now. Why the hell is that still lit? Have they been here the whole time? Watching me? Hiding from me?"

He looked around. There were no other signs of life, only that lantern, its golden light warm and welcoming.

Malin twined around his ankles, purring. Confused, Pix looked down.

"No," he began. "This isn't good. Someone's *here*, Malin."

Malin jumped up onto the bottom of the bed, sniffing the blanket. They started kneading it, still purring.

"Malin," he said, almost desperately, "can you sense them? Where are they?"

nobody here

Well, that much was bloody obvious. Pix sighed, sheathing his sword and looking around as Malin hopped down from the bed. To Pix's left, just inside the door, a large solid wood chest was pushed up against the wall. It, too, looked new; of the same polished acacia, it's metal braces and hasp shining in the lamplight.

Malin's purring grew louder, and Pix looked back at them. Only then did he notice what they'd curled up in. It was a shallow basket on the other side of the bed, with a soft cushion nestled in it, made of the same blue wool as the blanket. Malin had made themself very comfortable, blinking up at him before their jaw gaped in a yawn, followed by a tongue-lick over their nose.

Cautiously, Pix closed the door behind him and approached the bed. He pulled back the covers a little. The sheets were immaculate and uncreased and the pillow was soft and undented. This bed had clearly never been slept in. And oh, the blanket was soft - *so* soft - and, coincidentally, in his favourite shade of blue.

chest not empty

"Has anyone actually lived here?" Pix murmured, half to himself and half to Malin as he crouched in front of the chest. "Or did they just build this and then leave? There's no way someone would do that, surely?"

He lifted the lid of the chest. It was absolutely crammed to the brim with all sorts of items, and he hastily lowered the lid again. He shouldn't be looking in there. That was someone else's stuff.

Onorait Paix not clever

Pix turned to stare at Malin.

"What?"

In response, Malin twisted onto their back and stretched out, and Pix frowned.

"Why are you being so *weird* this afternoon?" he asked. "This isn't like you."

chest not empty

"I can *see* that!" Pix sighed, shoving a distracted hand through his hair. "It's full of someone else's—"

Onorait Paix not clever

There was that little needle of feline frustration again. He'd felt it a few times before from Malin, especially when he wasn't quite *getting* something obvious. It was Malin's way of telling him he was, quite frankly, being dense. And Malin was always right, so what was Pix not getting *here*, then?

He looked from the bed to the chest.

This stuff looked new. The bed had clearly never been slept in. Who would go to the trouble of hand-crafting a bed, making it with sheets and a blanket, and then not using it? And why on earth would they have also made what looked like a cat

bed? How many other people were wandering this part of the world with a cat as companion?

Malin blinked at him, wriggling back into their familiar doughnut position. Pix knew they were waiting patiently for him to twig whatever the hell it was he was supposed to bloody twig, but that he was still struggling to wrap his brains around.

Maybe the chest would hold some clues?

The first thing he pulled out of it was a metal bucket filled with several items. At the top were several cotton pouches. Each one contained a generous handful of different types of seed. One was clearly a grain, reminding him of ancient wheat seeds. Another was knobbly and indented; maybe... beetroot? The others, he had no clue about. A bigger cotton bag beneath them held several potatoes that had gone to seed, already sprouting shoots and ready to plant.

Beneath the pouches and bag, the last item in the bucket was a device he recognised from his past: a clay pot with a cork stopper and a handle on one side that ran from the middle to the base. On the opposite side to the handle, toward the stoppered neck, small holes had been made in the clay. He couldn't hold back a smile as he remembered how Nehle-aalh, his old nurse, had shown him how to use one of these. Take out the cork, dip the pot into the well to fill it, and stand it back down on its base. Put the cork back in, carry the pot upright to the flower beds, then hold the handle, upending the pot and sending droplets of water through the holes and onto the plants.

A bucket, some seeds, and an ancient watering can. And there, right beneath the bucket, was a short-handled hoe; again, so like the ones he remembered. He might have thought this had been carefully preserved, but for the fact that - like everything else in this room - it looked as if it had just been made. This was uncanny. How did whoever had put this stuff here know about the history of these things?

Onorait Paix think

"I'm *trying*," he whispered. "I'm not stupid; I *know* I'm not, but I just don't *understand*."

Beneath the hoe, some empty sacks were neatly folded, presumably for carrying the harvest, or anything else that needed carrying in quantities. A sturdy coil of rope. Some candles. A flint and steel. A heavy wooden box that - when opened - revealed compartments filled with redstone dust and torches. A leather cuirass with matching bracers and greaves. A cooking pot with a handle, to be hung above a fire.

And lastly, beneath all of that, five beautiful thick leather-bound books. Of all these useful items, it was the books that made something twist in his chest as he took them out. Two of them were A5 in size, and an inch thick; perfect for tucking into a rucksack to jot down field notes in. The other three were much larger.

Spreading his fingers wide, he spanned the distance between the tip of his thumb and the tip of his pinkie finger across and down the cover, counting in his head. At a rough guesstimate, this was Pott size; an old Imperial paper measure that was a little smaller than foolscap and dated back several centuries. These were books for record-keeping, not for scribbled notes. Inside each of the books, both large and small, the paper was creamy smooth and unlined; the kind of paper that it was a delight to feel one's hand move over as one wrote.

Tucked beside the books in the chest were the final two items: a small polished wooden box, and a long thin cloth bag. The former contained two heavy rounded copper pots with lids. As he carefully raised the lid of one, the unmistakeable scent of ink drifted out. The latter held three beautiful feather quills with etched copper nibs. Both the inkwells and quills were exactly the same as those he had used many, many years ago.

Pix sat quietly, looking at them, mentally fighting the truth. He'd walked past this hill several times since he'd arrived here, and not once had he spotted the corner of that door… *because it hadn't existed until today*.

It had been put there for him to find.

Malin started purring, and Pix looked over at them.

Seeds and farming equipment for a man who had gone hungry. A soft bed with a blanket in his favourite colour for a man who slept on the ground. Armour for a man who had none. Useful tools for a man who carried only the bare essentials. Books and writing equipment for a man with only a thin journal and a stub of pencil. The history of that man riven throughout it all.

He knew now, and he got to his feet, still carrying the books and quills. Opening the door, he stepped out of the room and looked up at the statue in the distance.

"Thank you," he whispered, holding them up to show her. "Thank you for trusting me. I promise I'll use these well, and record your story with them."

Behind him, the last rays of the setting sun suddenly caught the gold on her sextant wing, brilliant glints momentarily sparking out in the twilit sky, and then it was gone. A serendipitous moment where the light was just perfect? For sure, but also something more, in the language that has no words.

Onorait Paix al-Lareiff turned back into the room, closed the door, looked at his new bed, and smiled.

CHAPTER 14

The bed was so, *so* comfortable, the pillow was so, *so* soft, and the blanket was so, *so* warm. With a rare, truly contented sigh, Pix allowed himself to sink into a blissful sleep, lulled by the soft sounds of Malin purring from their cosy little basket.

He had always been blessed with unusually vivid dreams, and the one that stole on soft feet into his unguarded mind tonight was no exception.

Small flames popped into existence all around the floor of his room, followed - more slowly - by the copper oil lamps from whose delicate spouts they were burning. Lamplight shimmered over the walls and ceiling, growing brighter and brighter until it became daylight, and the lamps faded out of existence once more.

Slowly, the sounds of morning crept into the room. A cock crowed, hushed early morning footsteps whispered past his door, a distant bird renewed its musical search for a mate. The soft murmur of discourse began to rise with the sun, and Pix opened his eyes, staring at the ceiling.

Within, the room was exactly as it had been last night. Without, however…

Turning his head, he looked down at Malin, still fast asleep in their bed. He frowned. They were smaller; almost kittenish, their paws twitching as they chased mice in their sleep.

A horse whickered, cartwheels rumbled over the cobbled road outside, and Pix blinked, pushing back the soft blue blanket and sheet. His hand hesitated, almost letting the fabric drop. He'd stripped off most of his clothes last night to sleep in his underwear, just draping his pants and shirt over the bottom of the bed and leaving his boots standing beside his rucksack in the corner… so where had this loose clothing come from?

Slowly, he sat up and swung his feet out of bed, still looking down at himself. Loose deep brown linen pants and a lighter brown tunic - simple but for the delicate embroidery in copper-twined thread around the deep v-neckline - they were a little worn, but comfortable. And familiar, he thought, as he slid his feet instinctively into the pair of sandals that were always at the side of his bed and stood.

Sandals. Huh. It had been a while, even though they had always been there… hadn't they?

His pants and shirt were nowhere to be seen, replaced instead by a loosely folded garment in a lighter - near ivory - tone. As he picked it up and shook out the folds,

he realised it was a long coat. A heavier weight of linen, edged with a thick copper-toned ribbon, its shoulders bore the most beautiful epaulettes made of multiple layers of silk in the same coppery tones, shot through with teal embroidery that mimicked verdigris.

He swung it around himself and shouldered into it. It fitted as if made for him. Of course it did. It *was*.

Still pondering this, as the bustle outside grew - more voices, calling wares and haggling prices, punctuated by an occasional peal of laughter - he reached up to scratch his fingers through his beard.

That was different, too, he realised, trying to feel for the unfamiliar shape of it. No, it wasn't unfamiliar; it was just… long forgotten.

He wasn't one to carry around a mirror with him, but the copper of those ink wells last night had been polished enough that he *might* be able to glimpse his reflection in them. Crossing the room, he lifted the lid of the chest.

The bucket was nowhere to be seen. Nor - at first glance - was anything else that had been in there before he went to sleep. Instead, on the top of its contents was a blue hooded robe, bordered with shining gold and red ribbons. Coiled within its folds, a simple brown leather leash; the kind that would be used to lead a pack animal. Beneath the robe, bundle after bundle of candles in many colours, a worn flint and steel, an old leather drawstring pouch that was heavier than it first seemed, the leather-bound books he'd adored last night, alongside the bag of copper-nibbed quills and the box of copper ink wells, a slim leather case, and - lastly - a highly polished copper hand mirror.

Setting aside his curiosity about the heavy bag, Pix lifted the mirror and stared into it.

His hair was a little shorter, and a lot tidier. Roaming the world, he usually just let it grow, either tucking it behind his ears or scraping it back into a sloppy knot at the back of his skull when he needed to bend over a particularly interesting and time-consuming excavation. He did carry a sharp pair of scissors, and once his hair got too annoyingly long, he'd just chop a few inches off and leave it behind for the local birds to weave into their nests. He rather liked the idea of part of him providing a home for a growing family.

His beard, too, was neater than it had been, trimmed more elegantly than he usually bothered to with those same scissors when - like his hair - it got too annoyingly long. Bright copper rings pierced both of his earlobes, and hanging from the left one was a highly polished small deepslate stone teardrop, dotted with glints of emerald.

Something was missing, though, and he knew what it was. Reaching for the slim leather case, he prised it open. Inside was a stubby black stick of kohl, a shallow glass dish, a small, stoppered bottle of water, and a delicate copper-handled brush. It was but the work of a few minutes to grind some of the kohl onto the dish, mix it with a little water, and - with a practised hand - sweep the blackened brush around his eyes.

"*There* you are," he murmured to his reflection, almost dropping the mirror and kohl brush as a shout, followed by a crash, then roars of laughter bled in through the door.

The heavy pouch was last, and he tugged open the drawstrings.

"Here, too?" he whispered, looking from the hundreds of small verdigris-eyed copper totems within to the bundles of candles in the chest. "But I don't remember seeing the ruins of a Vigil..."

Frowning, he closed the pouch. Beside him, Malin stretched and blinked awake with a huge yawn.

new day

Onorait Paix al-Lareiff smiled. "I do believe it is, yes."

***

He opened the door, not knowing quite what to expect. The ghosts of voices? Hallucinations? Tricks of the light? The fevered wanderings of his own dreaming mind?

No. The city was *alive*; far more life than a dream or hallucination could offer. The buildings were whole and intact and perfect, bright banners and flags cracking cheerfully in the brisk dawn breeze. People in all manners of dress bustled past: women with baskets of produce on their heads, women with children balanced on their hips, men carrying water and wares, carters good-naturedly ribbing one of their own - the source of that crash - now drenched in beer and laughing alongside them.

He stepped out from the doorway, Malin right behind him. He could feel their fur brushing against his bare ankle as he closed the door behind them.

A woman rushing past him, clearly on some important errand, managed an impressive double-take at him, then smiled as she nodded and dipped her knee momentarily before continuing on her way, stride barely broken. The carters looked up and over at him, and - as one man - they all touched a respectful

finger to their foreheads. He nodded briefly in return, slipping deeper and deeper into what felt familiar and home.

Down the street, past the brewery - he had been right; it *was* a brewery! - he hesitated as a distant horn sounded up ahead. The activity of the main street hushed as everyone paused and turned to face in one direction. Paix stopped in his tracks and followed their gaze.

They were all looking at the statue, waiting. She was still fashioned of grey stone, but she was polished and painted in bright colours and hung about with garlands of flowers. Curls of incense burning at her feet could just be seen in the light that was slowly making its way up her skirt to her waist as the morning sun crested the hills. Her dark wing glimmered, but it was her sextant wing that caught his eye. No longer pitted; it was completely covered in gold. And at that moment, the sunlight reached that wing; a coruscating brilliance that made him glad he'd shielded his eyes with the kohl. Around him, all had lowered their gaze; he was the only one who could look upon that reflected sunlight.

He heard occasional soft murmurings in several tongues, managing to pick out a few words.

"Madre... grant... a bountiful harvest."

The first word was spoken most fervently in a lyrical accent by a dark-haired woman to his left who had paused her sweeping of her front step. It had been a long, long time since he'd heard that accent, but he recognised it instantly as ancient Mythish. One of the carters - a gruff redhead - had also caught his ear. If he was not mistaken, that guttural accent was Grym, and few remained who could understand that tongue anymore.

The brilliant light died as the sun rose higher, and the horn sounded again. The city came back to life, and Paix stood in the middle of it all like a rock in the middle of a stream, relishing the comforting crash of familiarity that rolled around him.

The day was too short, as he wandered the streets, examining every building, drinking in structures, shapes, and purposes. Many of the city's inhabitants proffered gestures of respect to him, and twice someone in similar raiment to his own murmured "Onorait" as they did so, cupping both palms together and touching fingertips to their forehead; a gesture that he returned with a smile and nod.

Malin padded beside him as he walked the city, and the sun drew lower in the sky. Eventually, words that Paix did not want to hear gently grazed his mind.

home soon

"I want to see the night," Paix whispered.

see the night from home. come

Reluctantly, Paix followed Malin's oddly kittenish form back to the door in the hillside. The city was quieter now, lamps glimmering in windows, distant music emanating from a tavern, the bustle of the day blended into the peace of night. Standing outside the door, he looked up at the statue as the horn sounded again. This time, though, there was no blaze of light. Instead, the last glow of the sunset dipped below the horizon and the darkness of night fell.

Banners fluttered and faded, translucent against the walls. Bright paints evaporated and lamp flames dimmed. Walls tumbled silently, devoured by leaves and vines. Cobblestones sank into the earth. The statue's sextant wing dulled, the flower offerings crumbling to dust. For one liminal moment, all that remained was a single banner, diaphanous in the twilight, and a single voice singing. Then, the banner dissipated into nothing and the voice - the last sound of the city - died.

Pix shivered, a man standing outside his little base camp in underwear and bare feet, looking out at the ruins he called home. He turned and went inside.

CHAPTER 15

The morning was quiet. *Too* quiet, with only the faint sound of the early breeze rustling through the acacia leaves making its way through the door. No bustle of past life, no chatter, no footsteps; only the sound of a dead city's ruins quietly existing.

Somewhere, a small bird trilled its dainty little song, and Pix opened his eyes. Well, *something* was different, but it wasn't what he'd expected, or even hoped for.

A carved border had appeared around the edge of the ceiling. It was simple and stylised, the shapes within resembling a primitive skyline of square-roofed buildings in varying heights. What was more startling, though, was that this border was not made of the grey stone that was everywhere else.

It was made of *sandstone*.

He lay there for a while, pondering it, his gaze tracing the lines of the rooftop patterns. That one *could* be the apiary, and that taller one next to it *might* be the city's storage building. Set so close together, their relative sizes looked familiar, and a fainter, more jagged shape rising behind them sealed it.

Now *that* was familiar. The Anthill: the first home of his people when they had settled in the desert. A strange, hollowed rock formation, not quite massive enough to be called a mountain, but nonetheless big enough to offer shelter from the unrelenting desert sun for many people. They fashioned homes on the Anthill's floor; they carved staircases around its inner walls, digging into the sandstone to create storage rooms, shops, and yet more homes higher and higher up the inside of the rock.

Looking up while standing on the ground in the Anthill gave the impression of a night sky. Hundreds of lights glimmered up the walls, winking and shimmering in windows and niches like stars. And, at the very top, nine copper chains had been fixed to the walls and brought inwards, holding up a circular mechanism in the middle of the Anthill's centre: the Great Orrery.

Five large rings of copper moved around each other in never-ending orbits that captured the eye and held it rapt; at which point a crick in the neck usually ensued but was tolerated for the awe of watching the orrery in motion. Embedded into each ring was a coloured glass globe depicting one of the known planets, which - in turn - rotated on its correct axis as determined by the city's astrologers. And, at its centre, the Great Conduit; source of power not only for the orrery but also for the Anthill itself.

The Great Conduit had been dug out of the desert sands by Paix's great grandfather. One of the earliest settlers in the area - when the city still comprised only a handful of nomadic families who had found shelter in the Anthill and decided to stay there awhile - he had been labouring to dig a well when he had detected a thrumming sound beneath a thick layer of sandstone, three feet below the surface. Calling other men to help him, he had excavated the strange object just before sundown.

As they brought it to the surface, they realised that it emitted a beautiful golden light, and that every man who had handled it could feel the hum and tingle of power it emitted as they touched it. It was carried to the Anthill, where they chiselled a hollow into a spire of rock and rested the Great Conduit there.

Its golden light illuminated the entire inside of the Anthill, brightly at the centre and softly around the edges. It was a thing of wonder, and Paix's great-grandfather dedicated his life to the study of it.

Pix sighed quietly, turning his head to follow the carved border around the room, recognising more and more buildings in the stylised artwork, now that he knew what it represented. And there, finally - right above the bed - he found it.

The Vigil.

Unmistakable, arching into the sky; the tall spire of sandstone with its floating arms slowly orbiting around its own Conduit was the first thing to… *appear* outside the Anthill. And that was the right word for it. His people had spotted something outside the rough-hewn entrance to the Anthill in the early morning light, and emerged to find the Vigil had simply appeared overnight. Some said they had heard a distant sound in the night, as if tons of sand had shifted and slid; others had felt their beds tremble momentarily, waking them from sleep. The shape of the sand around its broad base indicated that it had indeed risen up from below the ground.

They recognised the Conduit at its apex as a lesser version of the one that lit the interior of the Anthill, but they were fearful of the orbiting chunks of sandstone that slowly moved around it, suspended in nothing but air. The astrologers declared it to be *probably* as safe as the Great Conduit but advised that the people should not go near to it, in case whatever power was holding those rocks up ceased and they fell to the ground.

Over the decades, this worry proved to be unfounded, and the Vigil became just a point of interest in the city. The only person who seemed fascinated by it was Paix's great-grandfather, who could often be glimpsed simply watching it, and who - having discovered the power source within the Conduits and left behind an

astonishing number of books detailing his research - eventually passed into his next life.

His family gathered to conduct a small ceremony honouring him. First, at the Great Conduit, incense was lit, and offerings were left, including a small copper totem with verdigris eyes, intended to represent his soul as it journeyed beyond death. Then, at the Vigil; its first ever ceremony.

Paix's grandfather stood with his wife, and also Paix's father and his wife, with their newborn son cradled in his mother's arms. Paix's grandfather spoke a prayer to the gods, lit a simple ivory candle, and placed it on one of the ledges that surrounded the Vigil.

The first candle was lit.

"I knew that day," Paix's mother told him later in life, "that you would become what you are. You were but a tiny babe in my arms, but you stared at the Vigil and did not look away. It was as if you *could not* look away."

As an esteemed and respected scholar who had discovered not only the secrets of the Great Conduit, but also devised ways of using them to benefit all, Paix's great-grandfather had been elected leader of the city. With the blessing of the city's elders, this title now passed to Paix's grandfather, and then to his father, and finally to Paix himself.

"And thus, the city was given its name," Pix murmured, smiling as he looked over at Malin, who was still fast asleep in their basket. "Who would have thought that my family's old naming tradition for where we found our inner peace would become the name of a powerful empire?"

He was Paix al-Lareiff - born and chosen - for he found peace in learning. His father had chosen Paix al-Anhraar, for his peace was found in study of the stars and planets. His grandfather's chosen name when of age had been Paix al-Zhaanti, his beautiful baritone voice ringing around the palace and city indicating his inner peace, found in singing. And his great-grandfather - Paix al-Talamah - he who found peace in science.

And so was born Paixandria, city of learning, astrology, science, and the arts.

CHAPTER 16

Rising from bed, Pix instinctively looked down at himself. The robes and sandals hadn't returned, much to his disappointment, as they'd been familiar and comfortable and would have been nice for relaxing in through the evening after his work among the ruins was done. His shirt and pants were back, draped over the end of the bed, and his boots stood by the rucksack in the corner, next to the chest.

Aside from the new border around the room's ceiling, everything seemed back to how it was.

not quite

He looked down at Malin, who sat up, Bastlike, in their little basket, watching him.

"How so?" Pix asked, as he stepped into his pants and pulled them up. Huh. They were clean and fresh, not a crease in sight. The same went for his shirt, and he grinned as he realised that the city had effectively done his laundry for him. *How* it had done that was beyond him but given the events of recent days he was beginning to realise he had to relax his analytical grip on things. Well, *try* to relax it, anyway.

clothes and hair

He hesitated, shirt half-buttoned. Lifting his hands, he dug his fingers into his hair. Yes, it was pillow-tousled, but it was the same length as it had been yesterday when he'd wandered through the past. His beard was also still trimmed and neat.

"Is the city trying to tell me I was *scruffy?*" he muttered, not sure whether to be amused or affronted. Sure, his hair had been long and tousled, and he'd let his beard grow out a bit. But more important things than haircuts had kept his mind fully occupied.

Onorait Paix had no mirror

With a resigned sigh, he sat on the bed, levelling his gaze at Malin.

"And now you're also telling me I was scruffy."

Malin jumped up onto his lap, butting their head against his chest. Absentmindedly, he stroked a hand down their spine, over and over, as he thought.

He supposed it *was* a little disrespectful to wander these ancient ruins in his usual rumpled, distractedly unkempt manner. And it felt good to feel the clean cotton of

his shirt against his skin again. He'd planned to wash it in the river later today, but the city had saved him the bother.

That… was a whole lot to unpack. The clean clothes. The chest with its changing contents. The haircut and beard trim. The… oh, were the earrings still there, too? A quick check told him that yes, they were: two small and slender copper hoops, with the polished deepslate emerald teardrop hanging from one.

"But why?" he murmured. He wasn't even going to try and untangle *how*. Not right now. There were more than enough whys to deal with, and far too many hows.

Malin had settled on his lap, effectively trapping him in place. Pix gently scritched behind their ear, then moved his fingers down to their cheek, earning himself some blissful nuzzling and purring in the process.

Parts of his past were settling into his present. He was *becoming* again, but he couldn't fathom *why*. He wasn't unhappy with it; in fact, he'd rather missed his earrings. The teardrop, in particular, had always tended to draw his fingers when he was deep in thought; an action that he'd moved to his beard in recent centuries, scratching his fingertips slowly through it whenever he got lost in his mind.

He closed his eyes and leaned against the wall behind him, recalling those first strange moments of yesterday. The woman who double-took at him and briefly bent a knee before hurrying on. The carters' gestures of respect. The many people - all strangers to him - who had done the same. The few, dressed in desert raiment, who had afforded him the gesture given by his people to a leader of men; a gesture he had not received since he left his home.

And yet… he had never visited this place before.

How did they know him? How had they recognised what - *who* - he was? His clothing had been mostly simple, but he supposed the rich silk and embroidery on the coat may have suggested authority. But he'd just been a man who stepped out of a door in the side of a hill, literally emerging from a pile of dirt, if one wished to be prosaic about it.

Was it the earrings? More specifically, the deepslate emerald teardrop? That *had* been a favoured piece for him in the distant past, so a portrait of him wearing it might have existed in this city's past. Several of them had been painted, usually with him standing tall and noble in his regalia cloak, copper crown upon his brow, gleaming trident in one hand, and often a book or representation of a Conduit - denoting power - in his other hand. But this city was a long, long way from the desert. It was doubtful that a portrait had made it out this far.

But then… some of his people had clearly settled here.

Onorait Paix busy head

“Can you blame me?” Pix murmured, not opening his eyes. “How did they know me?”

time magic

Pix chuckled. “You’re telling me that some sort of magical time travel–"

Oh.

His eyes flew open.

Oh!

A little glimmer of amusement brushed against his mind. It was the closest thing that Malin ever got to laughter.

“I was both there and not there…” Pix said slowly, “until I was *observed*.”

Malin stretched out on his lap, then settled again. The amusement had turned to a vague sensation of smug correctness.

“Why am I not surprised that it took a cat to remind me of *that* principle,” Pix huffed. “But that still doesn’t explain why I actually *was* there yesterday, and why people knew me. I mean… look, I know that deep magic exists; I’ve seen it and felt it at work. But I *know* I never visited this place in my past. I would have remembered it.”

wanderer

He sighed. “Not even in my wanderings, my friend. You were with me through all of those. I never came here, not even in… those times. You know this.”

Malin yawned, then jumped down off Pix’s lap, padding over to the door and looking expectantly back at him. With another sigh, Pix hauled himself from his cosy sitting position on the bed and made his way to the door, opening it to let Malin out.

His nostrils caught a familiar scent, as a faint curl of smoke drifted from the left of the door.

Incense.

He stepped outside. The door was no longer set simply into the soft-packed dirt of the hillside, even as it had been when he entered the room at the end of yesterday’s strange and beautiful wonders. Like the ceiling, it was now altered. A thick and elaborately carved polished grey stone architrave bordered the door,

exquisitely detailed with the tiny desert flowers he'd loved so much and cultivated wherever he could around his home. Reeds and stylised cacti, sun rays, and - above the lintel - the unmistakable shape of a Conduit had all been fashioned out of the plain stone.

And there, to the left of the door and set into the wall, was a simple little niche, its back wall carved with a rendition of the Vigil. Resting on it was a copper dish, half-filled with sand and topped with gently glowing powdery chunks of incense resins; the source of the rich aromatic smoke that drifted across the doorway. Beside the dish sat two other items: a simple pottery cup, hand-fashioned and containing what looked like wine; and - he inhaled sharply - a near fist-sized chunk of deepslate stone, gritty and shimmering with emerald glints.

He had seen countless niches like this before. He knew what this was. But where had it come from? Somehow, the city was managing to transform both him and his surroundings. It was giving him useful gifts in the chest. It was showing him its past, letting him walk through its history.

But he was pretty sure it wasn't making offerings to him. So, who was?

CHAPTER 17

The cup was almost brimming with liquid, and so Pix lifted it carefully, keeping his hand as steady as he could. Raising it to his nose, he inhaled its scent, and memory flooded his lungs with lightly spiced sweetness.

Paixandrian honey wine, fermented with imported vanilla and nutmeg; a delicate drink that had enough alcohol content to induce pleasant warmth, but not so much that it compounded the possibility of dehydration in such a hot and dry environment. He had indulged but rarely - usually when visited by dignitaries who were always offered the best that Paixandria had to give - and preferred a cup of simple cool water to slake his thirst.

But here and now, oh, he needed to indulge. He closed his eyes and - without caution - drank deeply.

A thousand years tore away from him, and then a thousand more slipped from his knowledge. Warmth poured into him, swirled in a dry breeze around him, ruffled through his hair, pulled at his clothes, touched his cheek, caressed his suddenly-damp forehead.

“Another?” a soft voice asked behind him.

Without opening his eyes, he held out the cup in the direction of the voice. The quiet sound of feet moved across the floor, and the cup grew a little heavier.

“May I join you?” the voice asked, still soft, as he brought the cup to his lips once more.

He smiled.

“Of course,” he murmured, taking another sip.

“Stars bless and guide you,” the voice said, tinged with relief as he heard another cup being filled. “It’s been *such* a day!”

His smile broadened, but he allowed only a hint of it to touch his voice. “Tell me of it, Mu'enaah.”

“Yes, yes, you find my fluster amusing. I know it! You always did!”

He could hear the faux-reproachful finger-wagging in that voice, but he didn’t want to open his eyes. Not yet. Not until he could be certain that the return of sight would not dispel this moment.

The sound of soft cushions being flopped onto. One of those ‘end of a long day’ sighs. A somewhat inelegant slurping.

He bit back a laugh. No, this moment would not be dispelled. He knew that now, and he opened his eyes.

“Those young houseboys trampled my beautiful plants. Again! And then I had to remind Guildmaster Teng-ahtk - not once, but twice! - that you were busy with this morning’s trade delegation and could not attend your lesson. I'm sure all that redstone has cooked his prodigious brains. And *then*…”

The sun was only a rim gilding the distant dunes and a rosy glow that faded into deep purples and indigos. Framed by the sandstone window arch before him, he longed to paint it; this perfect moment, accompanied by the weary chatter of Nehle-aalh.

Slowly, Paix sipped the honey wine, letting the desert heat fill his belly and his bones, dampen his skin, and settle a small, soft ache in his heart.

“Your head is filled with poetry and dreams again,” he heard Nehle-aalh murmur. “Against those, the woes of an old woman fade like the stars at dawn.”

She paused.

“She calls to you, doesn’t she?”

He turned, cup still held to his lips, to look at his mu’enaah; the nurse who had guided his early years, tended to scraped knees and redstone burns, been privy to his whispered secrets in the lonely hours as he grew older. The dearest, most beloved creature in his life, now that his mother and father walked with the stars.

“She always has,” he said softly.

Nehle-aalh nodded, reaching to refill her cup. “I foresee many years before you. Years of wandering, years of learning, years of devotion, and years of loneliness.” She raised the cup to him. “But you will find her, one day. And she will bring you back.”

Taking his cup with him, Paix stepped down from the window niche and crossed the smooth coolness of the polished sandstone floor until he reached the couch where Nehle-aalh had flopped down.

“Yes, I think you are right,” he said, crouching in front of her and watching with affectionate eyes as she drained her own cup in one go.

“Ah, ‘tis late. I suppose I must be out of your hair,” she grumbled, setting down the cup and ruffling a hand through his hair, much as she had done when he was but a boy. “Such pretty hair it is, too,” she added with a chuckle, as her hand moved down to pat his bearded cheek. “Yet you don’t have even a mote of vanity within

you, despite being the finest catch in these lands. Ah! Hehehee! There's that blush! My work tonight is done!"

Rising to his feet, he offered his hand, and she took it, letting him help her old bones up from the couch. She looked up at him, her eyes bright and seeking, as if she knew something was just a little different this night, but she couldn't quite see what it was.

"Goodnight, my halo around the moon," she said, palming her wrinkled hand to his cheek once again.

He mirrored the action, resting his palm against her weathered face.

"Goodnight, Mu'enaah, my water in the desert," he responded softly.

Not five hours later, in the time when the desert breeze was at its coolest, Paix left a small and humble home. In his hands, a simple ivory candle; in his heart, the ache of a goodbye.

***

The sun rose slowly over the savannah, glinting briefly off the sextant wing of the statue, sending shards of light out to speckle the ruins.

Pix turned to face the statue, an empty cup in his hand and silent tears streaming down his face.

"Grant her next life a bountiful harvest," he whispered.

CHAPTER 18

With one of the new smaller books on his knee and his trusty pencil stub in his hand, Pix leaned back against one of the support pillars of the ruined brewery, facing the statue.

"Now let's see if I have the skill to capture your likeness," he murmured. "It has been quite some time since I last painted, but a field sketch now and then is not beyond me."

Beginning with a few hesitant strokes - in between squinting up at the statue to get an overall view of the structural lines - his hand slowly settled into the task, growing in confidence. The feathered wing flared out boldly, the sextant wing angled as its opposite, the skirt flowed, the sword's blade ran true. The opening hand of blessing was a comfort, the hair almost ruffled in the breeze, the eyes were closed, the head lifted slightly as if to rejoice in the morning sunlight…

His hand hesitated. The closed eyes and raised face were not evident in the statue, either now or in its past. Where had that come from? Moreover, there were now words beneath the sketch. Where had *those* come from?! He recognised his own handwriting, but it was in a language that he knew from long ago: Helianthian. Its poetry and stories were mostly oral, and all written records had been lost in the Great Burning.

But here, in the ruins of an ancient capital, a voice now spoke them aloud again. Pix's Helianthian accent was a little rusty, not having been used for centuries, but he did his best.

> *A fine day, the air is cool, the oxen are drawing, the heaven is doing according to our hearts!*
> *Hasten, leader, forward with the oxen! behold, the queen is standing and looking on.*
> *Friend, hasten the work, let us finish in good time.*
> *If you bring me one hundred sheaves, I am the man to strip them all.*
> *This is a good day, come out onto the land, let us work and bind firm our heart.*
> *The year is good, free of ills; healthy in all herbs; and the calves are strong for future ploughs.*

He sat in silence, looking at the words. He had passed through the lands of Helianthia but once, many years ago on the way to a trade meeting with Mythish ambassadors in the time before the red curse took over that place. Looking at Helianthia from afar as his retinue approached, it was evident why it had been

called The Gilded Lands. Its hills shimmered with golden wheat that danced in the brisk breeze, the bountiful waters glittered with reflected sunlight, fields of sunflowers lifted cheerful heads to the skies, and many roofs were bright with yellow thatch. It was a place to lift the spirits partway through a long journey, and his heart ached at the knowledge of what had befallen that beautiful place.

He rested his head back against the pillar, looking up at the statue. The day was just past noon, and the sun had moved around behind her, haloing the stony outline of her long hair.

The Helianthian Queen, it was said, had withered away at the end of days. The news had reached him in a distant village where he had begged shelter for the night. Footsore and weary, he had welcomed the blanket and the bowl of thin and watery soup the household had offered him from their meagre store. With his gnawing belly sated, curled unobtrusively on the floor under the blanket in a corner of the only room in the poor farmhouse, he had listened to the whispered words of the goodwife and her husband by the fire.

“I was at market today,” the goodwife said lowly. “But three stalls there instead of the usual twenty, and none from the Gilded Lands.”

“Aye,” her husband muttered. “We shall all suffer for the loss of those good lands. The queen was generous with her exports, and I remember Gilded grain keeping this village alive during the dearth.”

The goodwife murmured her agreement. Then, lower, “I spoke with Mereneth. She told me of the queen’s end, which she heard of from her sister, who heard from her cousin in the Overgrown Lands.”

“What said they?” asked her husband.

Paix had held his breath, listening intently for each whispered word.

“That… a great agony took her,” the goodwife keened. “A rotting from within, a blackening of the heart and lungs and head. They called it a withering, like a plant struck with disease. None could stop it, and it happened so quickly. Within a few hours, she was lost.”

Paix had bowed his head, shoving a wad of the blanket into his mouth and biting down on it to prevent a sob from escaping. Silent tears poured down his cheeks and - in the shadows away from the fire, unnoticed by the two closer to it - his shoulders shook violently.

It had all been his fault.

***

“I’m sorry,” Pix whispered to the statue. The words sounded so small for an apology of such great import. “I wish I had a way to tell you, to show you how sorry I am, how I wish I had not been so stupid and foolish.”

He sighed, but it ended in an anguished groan.

“I let so many people down. You, and everyone else who tried to stop me, and - at the end - even my own people. I was so ashamed of what I did, of what I unleashed. I just… left. Left them without guidance, without a leader, to face the end alone.” He whimpered. “I wish… wish… *wish* I could change what happened, but there is no going back. There is only memory and regret.”

The halo shifted as the sun dipped lower, and a beautiful ray of light suddenly arced down the back of the statue’s right arm, highlighting her blessing hand.

He must have been delirious with sorrow and grief, because for a few brief moments, he could swear that he felt the warm pressure of a palm on his forehead, like that of a mother comforting her sick child. He closed his eyes, and once again time peeled away from him.

***

“I’m so glad you could make it, Professor al-Lareiff.”

Pix smiled, shaking the proffered hand of Dr Kay Ralis, who - in his position as curator of the university’s research library - had contacted him three days ago.

“Please, call me Paix, or Pix; whichever is easiest for you.”

“Pix it is, then. Again, thank you for coming. This find has been exercising us for quite some time, so when my assistant mentioned coming across the paper that you wrote on ancient languages, I looked it up and noticed that you had gone into detail about one specific language that seemed incredibly similar to, well… this.”

The walls of the room appeared to comprise hundreds of polished wooden drawers, filled with meticulously catalogued finds and treasures - the kind of place that Pix loved to lose himself in whenever he had the opportunity - but the old wooden table that Dr Ralis was gesturing to held what Pix was here to take a look at.

Dr Ralis was holding out a pair of white gloves. With a nod of thanks, Pix took them and slipped them on, approaching the table. On it, a clear stand held an ancient book.

“Calf leather binding,” Dr Ralis murmured, as he hovered close to Pix. “The paper’s origin we are not sure of, but its edges are very smoothly cut, so the book appears to have been from a society that had advanced book binding to a precise degree. As you can see, there are faint traces of gilt in the cover. There appears to be some form of lettering, too, but time has sadly worn it down so it’s unrecognisable. We aim to scan it later this week, to see if we can enhance it that way.”

Pix’s hand hesitated over the book’s cover. “May I?”

“Of course,” Dr Ralis beamed. “That’s why I asked you here. I had hoped the language contained in this book might be familiar to you, or at least that it may have similarities to one you have studied.”

Carefully, Pix opened the book, his jaw setting with brief tension as the leather crackled in protest. He knew how to handle ancient books, and many of them sounded this way when opened; it still didn’t make that tension go away. And this one was particularly fragile.

He stared at the first page before him.

There was a long silence.

“Well?” Dr Ralis eventually murmured, clearly unable to contain himself any longer. “Is it familiar to you?”

Pix looked down… at his own handwriting.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Oh, my goodness! Tell me! Are you able to read it? What is it?!”

“It…” Pix cleared his throat. “It appears to be a book of poetry. The language bears remarkable resemblance to that of a long-forgotten desert kingdom. A few… fragments of it remain, but this is the first time I have seen an entire book of it. This…”

He exhaled softly, turning another page.

“This is a treasure,” he said.

Dr Ralis was practically vibrating with excitement beside him. It was clearly all he could do to keep from clapping his hands together.

“Are you able to translate?” he asked, pointing to the page Pix had the book open to. “How about this one?”

Pix swallowed, suddenly wishing he had a glass of water. He nodded.

“It is mostly legible to me. One moment while I decipher the handwriting…”

Handwriting that he knew, words that he knew; he just needed that moment to compose himself.

“Of course. Of course,” Dr Ralis murmured, bouncing on the balls of his feet, impatience in the set of his whole body.

“Right.” Pix steeled himself. “It… it appears to be a love poem. Let me see now…”

I hadn’t told them about you
But they saw you bathing in my eyes
I hadn’t told them about you
But they saw you in my written words
Because my love for you
Is higher than words
I have decided to fall silent

“Goodness me.” Dr Ralis’s voice broke into the silence that followed. “I could almost *feel* the pain of that. Who would fall silent instead of declaring their love, if their love was that great?”

A man in a shining copper cage.

“I… don’t know,” Pix murmured. “Perhaps they had taken a vow of some kind, like a priest, and could not love. Or perhaps their role in life was one that meant they could not love without bearing commitment that came with it.” He took a shaky breath. “Or perhaps they knew that more than platonic love would be expected, and that was all they could give, so they rejected it all for the security of their own heart.”

He became acutely aware that Dr Ralis was observing him curiously. Although the room was quite cool, sweat beaded down Pix's back beneath his shirt.

“Uh, just a few wild guesses anyway,” he said, straightening. “There could be any number of reasons. Desert societies such as this had many complex rules and expectations. Marriage and children, securing the city’s future population; the usual thing. They also had no shortage of priests and prophets; those who had taken vows and were bound to observe them, often at cost to themselves.”

“Hm.” Dr Ralis looked down at the book. “Well, I suppose that would make sense with the whole bit about ‘not telling them about you’. Do you know much about this society?”

“Yes, a fair amount. I’ve come across it multiple times in my research.” Pix was now, quite honestly, bullshitting for his life. “Records are scattered and incomplete, but I’m, uh, I’ve been gathering them together for several years.”

Dr Ralis beamed. “Potential research paper?”

“Perhaps.” Pix returned the smile, weakly.

“Let’s go and get a coffee,” Dr Ralis said. “I’d love to pick your brains a bit more, if I may. I’ve heard you’re one of the few historians these days with any knowledge of the Grym language…”

CHAPTER 19

The statue sketch was completed by late afternoon, showing her as she was at that point in time, but haloed by scribbled notes detailing how she used to be.

Painted flowers here (arrow) - yellow, I think?/ skirt was green / flower garlands - all colours - draped here (arrow) and here (arrow) and here (arrow) - imported? Must be, bc no flowers grow here / incense at feet - wasn't up high enough to see what else at feet / flowers around head (crown?) / coloured silks woven around & hanging from hand here (arrow) / sextant wing (arrow) fully gilded / sun had reached abt here (arrow) when 1st horn blown / sun had reached here (arrow) when 2nd horn blown

He paused, looking at his notes, then drew one final sweeping arrow down the line of the lowered arm, culminating at the blessing hand. Along the top of the arrow line, he wrote *God ray* and along the bottom he wrote *comfort*.

He sighed, looking at that second word. Comfort was something he had learned to live without, through long years of wandering the world. He had bedded down for the night in hay lofts, in hedges, in shallow caves, in the arms of trees and at the feet of cliffs. He had struggled to kindle small campfires in the heavy dampness of fog and fought to keep them alive through storms. He had weathered heat and dust, flesh-scouring sandstorms and soul-soaking downpours.

This modern world had ruined his tolerance for suffering, had made him soft; the complaining of his back at sleeping on the hard-packed ground of the savannah told him that much, as did the pleasure he felt in having something as simple as a bed to sleep in. His had always been an itinerant life, even when he had appeared settled to all around him. Through all his years of teaching, he had lived out of an old camper van parked outside the homes of various acquaintances, with their blessing, and showering at the university's gym facilities, cooking on a small paraffin stove, and marking papers at night by the stored light of a solar lantern.

He told himself that this was perfectly normal for a man born to those of a nomadic race. His people had travelled the desert before resting awhile at the Anthill. They hadn't intended to remain there for more than a few months, but then the Great Conduit was unearthed, and the Vigil had revealed itself. His people sank their roots into the hot sands, found a footing, and a home.

What *was* it about the thought of having a place to call home that suddenly pulled so strongly at him? He had walked away from the only home that he'd known, undeserving of its comfort and unworthy of its shelter, the weight of the wrongs he had done bowing his shoulders and bending his neck. Unable to bear

the gaze of his people, he had shamefully slipped away in the night, fully expecting the world to have ended him after a few days under the punishing sun, with no water or food.

But the world had other ideas. It let him continue. It let him endure. It let him live an eternity with the knowledge of what he had done.

He looked down at the floor beneath him. Dark basalt, worn soft and smooth by centuries of feet. He rested his palm against the warm stone, focusing on the sensation of grains of dry dirt atop it, the scratch of a small leaf stuck in the cracks and quivering in the breeze, the march of an ant climbing over his finger with an inexorable determination that he knew so well.

The sun was warm on his face. The breeze rustled softly through the acacias. An arrowhead of birds wheeled overhead, on their way to find a roost for the evening. Malin snoozed while nuzzled up beside him, sprawled on their back in the knowledge of absolute safety, their belly gently rising and falling with every peaceful breath.

For the first time in centuries, Pix let his shoulders relax, just a little.

He was sinking his roots into these stones, finding a footing here amid the ruins. It was fitting that a man who had left his only other home like a shadow in the night should find himself a new home amid ghosts and echoes. This place gave him a comfort that he had until now not permitted himself. He was old and weary, and even the dishonoured need to rest their bones somewhere for a while.

***

The clothes were waiting for him when he closed the door to his little room. Draped neatly across the bottom of the blanket, the pants and tunic in their familiar earthen tones brought a smile to his lips. Without thought to what else had appeared in the room, he unbuttoned his shirt, tugging it off and slipping the tunic on, fingertips grazing over the copper embroidery. Boots off next, then the leg bag, and finally his pants. On went the loose linen pants and sandals, and he closed his eyes, sending a silent thank you to the city… the statue… the universe. He didn't know who or what was behind this, but he had wished for these again, to wear in the evenings, and clearly fairy godmothers existed outside of fairy tales.

Fairy godmothers had also decided he couldn't record the story of this place with those large books balanced on his lap. His room was a little bigger than it had been when he left it this morning; big enough to fit a small desk and chair along the wall opposite the bed. The copper inkwells had been set out along the back of it, the bag of quills in front of them, and one of the large books sat waiting for him.

At the left rear corner of the desk, the chunk of deepslate emerald ore that had been left in the niche outside his door; at the right, the copper incense cup, filled with sand and fresh grains of glowing resin that blessed the room with a scent that softened his shoulders a little further.

He took the seat, glancing down as Malin tugged their basket closer to the desk. He reached down, helping them to move it near to his ankle. A velvet little nose nuzzled the side of his hand in thanks, and Malin hopped onto the cushion, kneading and turning before settling down.

Picking up the long bag, Pix drew out one of the quills, turning it in his hands. It had been an age of the world since he had written with anything other than a pencil or a fountain pen. The weight of the long feather felt strange, where once it had been all he knew.

He opened the book and stared down at the virgin page. Flipped open the lid of one inkwell. Dipped the copper nib a few times. Tapped it gently against the rim.

His handwriting had grown small and rough and scribble-scrabble over the years, but the moment he put nib to paper, the open and flowing elegant script of his past came back to him as if his hand had never forgotten it.

These Stones Remember
~
A City Through Time
by
Onorait Paix al-Lareiff

His heart quieted, he watched the glisten of wet ink fade to the matte of dried, then he turned the page and dipped the quill again. Every story needs a foreword, and there was none better suited for this story than that written about another great city.

Composed Upon Westminster Bridge
September 3, 1802

Earth has not any thing to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

— William Wordsworth

That night, he slept the soundest he had in two thousand years.

CHAPTER 20

It had been some days since Pix first explored the catacombs. There was just so much outside to draw his attention, and amid the embarrassment of riches that he had to choose from, the catacombs had fallen a little behind.

Today that would change. Today, he had set aside the whole day for a thorough exploration. One of the first things he wanted to go back to was that mysterious book in the 'dead end room'.

There was also the not-so-small matter of the broken and crumbled boxes, some of which might afford him a glimpse of what was within, so he extricated his Maglite from his rucksack and stuffed it into his pocket. The crumpled white gloves went into the other pocket, alongside his trusty lump of chalk for marking the way. As an afterthought, he also buckled the sword belt around his waist and picked up the shield. It might be a bit of overkill, considering he'd already checked most of the catacombs, but if previous explorations of other necropoli had taught him anything, it was that they often contained unexpected secrets.

Malin padded after him, a constant presence even when the going was enough to raise feline hackles. Pix knew that he could count on his companion to make their escape if they got too spooked. Said escape usually involved climbing Pix like a tree and wrapping around his neck, which could cause problems during combat, but at close quarters even a clawed swipe could help him out. Not that he expected anything this close to the surface, but he had no idea how deep the catacombs truly went.

Ignoring the first room, he descended the stairs, taking care not to crush underfoot the broken mosaic at the bottom. One side-step to the left, and he was facing the first set of boxes. These had no iron spikes in front of them and were mostly intact. The metal corner brace on one had come away, hanging down against the stone surround, but the box was still in good condition.

As he made his way slowly down the corridor, shining his Maglite around each box, a creeping sense of oddness began to steal over him. Something wasn't quite right. It wasn't until the third corridor, down the second set of steps, that he realised what it was.

None of the boxes had names or inscriptions anywhere around them. They were all completely anonymous. They could contain a noble or a peasant, and there was no clue left to tell him which it was.

"The great leveller," he murmured, crouching to examine another of the boxes. "The glories of our blood and state / Are shadows, not substantial things; / There is

no armour against fate; / Death lays his icy hand on kings: / Sceptre and Crown / Must tumble down, / And in the dust be equal made / With the poor crooked scythe and spade."

sulphur smell red thing nose tingle

He looked up. Malin was in the room that ended this particular corridor, and Pix realised that it was the dead-end room. He could just see the wooden podium of the lectern to the left of the carved stone archway.

"Redstone?" he asked; to which Malin looked back at him and blinked.

Standing with a soft groan - really, the sword and shield *had* been a bit of overkill; he was so accustomed to both travelling and working light - he followed his companion into the room.

The light in here was dim, but he could see a torch in its socket on the opposite wall. It was the matter of a minute or two to find his flint and steel, strike it a few times until a spark caught onto the wadding of the torch and the flame cast flickering shadows over the box-lined walls.

Tugging the gloves out of his pocket, he put on just the left one. If he had to reach for his sword for any reason, he needed a decent grip, and these soft cotton gloves would not afford him that.

He opened the book.

measure of the Silver Ant's return
one fiftieth part reduced

A smile quirked the corner of his mouth. A riddle that only a Paixandrian could solve. Not only for the fact that the language was his own, but the Silver Ant was a name given by his people to a specific comet whose orbit brought it to visit but every two hundred years. And one fiftieth part reduced? That was something to trip up the unwary; those who may have understanding of the language, and even discovered the identity and orbital frequency of the Silver Ant.
This riddle was penned by a Redstone Adept. And if there was one thing about Redstone Adepts that Pix knew - for he was one himself - it was that their riddles ran *contrariwise*. 'One fiftieth part reduced' did not mean 'take away one fiftieth part of that time and the remainder is the answer'; it meant 'the fiftieth part of that time *is* the answer'.

With his gloved thumb, he turned the pages.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

He waited four seconds. Then he turned them back again.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Deep beneath his feet, something began ticking. Malin's fur stood on end, and they backed slowly behind Pix's ankles. The sulphurous odour of hot redstone seeped up from the floor.

Reaching down, he scooped his gloved hand under Malin's belly, lifting them up and cradling them to his chest. His bare hand unsheathed his sword, and he took two steps back into the corridor, bracing himself.

Pistons fired, one after the other, getting closer and closer to the floor beneath his feet. And then, with one massive rumble, the stone floor opened up to reveal a narrow staircase down into the depths of the earth.

"Malin?" Pix whispered. "Are we good to go?"

There was a moment's pause, then Malin's response came in the form of a vague tickle against his mind. It was a little uncertain, but not wholly alarmed. That was enough for Pix. If it was unsafe to go down those stairs, Malin would have let him know.

"I'll feel safer with my shield up," Pix murmured. "Round my neck with you."

He lifted Malin up and waited until they took their familiar place curled around his shoulders, claws digging in as they held on. Then, with his shield braced before him and his sword held ready, he advanced slowly down the steps, his progress lit only by Malin's glow.

Whatever was down there was in utter darkness; the stairs vanishing into the umbra. He moved slowly, checking first with each foot that there was something solid to rest it on before he moved off the previous step. He had been caught out before by stairs that simply ended, sending him tumbling down. He had no plans to do that again.

After a nerve-wracking couple of minutes' descent, he froze. The tension of a tripwire had just pressed against his forward ankle. With a sword, a shield, and Malin hanging on for dear life around his neck, turning and running back up the stairs would be no quick matter.

And then his eyes widened.

Tens of feet ahead of him, a redstone lamp flickered on. Two more followed it; one on each side of it. In a wave that slowly made its way outwards from that first light, like a ripple in a still pond, light after light came on, illuminating a cavernous room that was filled on both sides with a monumental piece of redstone circuitry.

Awed, he stepped down into the room. A wide expanse of bare stone ran down the middle of the circuits, and he slowly made his way down it, looking left and right, trying to determine what the hell he was looking at.

Malin was purring loudly in his left ear.

friend

"Is this…?" Pix whispered incredulously, as he finally looked beyond the incredible expanse of circuitry and - focusing on just one - saw something very old and very familiar: a row of aged copper, jutting out from the end of the circuit.

He reached up to touch it.

"It *is!* But… how?"

***

"Nervous?"

Paix turned to look back at the three men following him. It was Guildmaster Teng-ahtk who had spoken, and he was grinning at his student.

Paix smiled. "No, not really. I have worked hard, I have tested thoroughly, and I have done my best. Nerves are for those who are uncertain that they have done all they could do."

"Exactly the answer I expected from you," Guildmaster Impeh al-Sheveh said, all but brimming with pride. "You have endeavoured to keep this circuit a close secret, but everything I have seen of your work thus far indicates that our report to the Grand Master on this final project will see you earn the title of Adept."

"I must say," Guildmaster Maah-em Behro interjected, "I do like this door. Nicely done!"

They entered the large room beneath the storage area that Paix had been using for his redstone supplies. The floor in front of them was thickly striped with deepslate and smooth sandstone for several feet, but stretching out ahead a great distance was a covering of glass, beneath which ticked and hissed the project that was to be assessed.

Guildmaster Teng-ahtk stepped forward first, moving swiftly over to the glass and bending to inspect the circuitry through his red lenses.

“Oh, this is *good*,” he purred. “Has it been named?”

Of course it had.

***

“Dar’veh Ehr-maah Nu’hazin,” Pix murmured. “My device for ageing copper. But this is different, more advanced. How in all the stars did it get here?”

time magic

Pix chuckled, pulled out of his enchanted reverie by Malin licking at the side of his neck.

“That again?” he said, reaching up to scritch Malin’s cheek. “You’ll be calling me H.G. Wells next. I wonder if it still works…?”

CHAPTER 21

The moon was already past its zenith when his eyes blinked open. All was still, without even the occasional night insects' chirping to disturb the silence.

He lay there for a moment, gathering his bearings amid the sudden awakening. No loud noises, no bad dreams; nothing had happened to cause this, except an innate *feeling* that he should awaken.

Malin was still a dimmed glowing teal doughnut in their basket, their side rising and falling in a sound and peaceful sleep. The room was dimly lit, but the light was not that of the usual lantern. He knew that light; it was an old and familiar soft flame that danced over walls and ceilings.

Paix looked up. The room had shifted again. The sandstone border now glinted with copper inlays around its lower edge; inlays that seemed to drip and pool into slender pillars that ran down the stone walls. Upon the simple table beside his bed, a copper oil lantern sat, its spout exhaling the flame that cast shimmering light on the walls.

He needed to get up, needed to leave. There wasn't much time.

Pushing back the covers, he stood, instinctively toeing into the sandals that waited for him. His ivory coat was again draped over the end of the bed, and he swung it around his shoulders, waiting as it settled over the simple earth-toned linen pants and tunic he was already wearing, despite having stripped to his underwear before going to bed.

Malin continued sleeping, heaving only a small sigh, their ear twitching a couple of times.

Quietly, Paix lifted the lid of the chest, reaching beneath the blue robe, beneath the bundles of candles, and into the heavy bag. Long, tanned fingers withdrew a small copper totem with verdigris eyes, closing around it as he shut the chest once more.

The ancient capital was moonlight-quiet, its banners faded and hanging still in the breathless air. Here and there, a copper lantern provided warm illumination along the streets, and small bowls of pitch at her feet illuminated the statue. Even the silks and flowers that garlanded her were unmoving.

His steps were unerring, whisper-silent over the cobblestones. A small tabby cat snoozing on a raised doorstep lifted its head to watch him pass by, its eyes silver-bright in the darkness. He turned a corner out of sight, and the cat settled back

down once more. There were dream mice to be chased, and those were far more interesting than the nocturnal wanderings of a regal wraith.

Only one window in the city held a copper oil lantern whose flame guided his path. He reached the door and knocked gently. A few moments later, a small boy opened the door in his night clothes, looking solemnly up at him. His gaze moved down to the copper totem, then back up to the calm face above him. He nodded and opened the door fully, letting the visitor in.

A simple wooden chair sat beside the larger of two beds in the room. The boy sat on the smaller bed, pulling up his knees and hugging them, watching in awed silence as the king of his people sat on the chair.

The woman in the bed could not have lived more than thirty summers, but Paix could see she was riven with pain that she had long endured, and she opened her eyes to look up at the man sitting beside her.

“So soon?” she whispered.

Paix nodded, holding out his empty hand. She slipped her palm into it, and his fingers closed gently around it as he watched her gaze move past his shoulder to rest on the boy behind him.

“My sister will care for him,” she said softly. “Can he be here with me? When it happens?”

He smiled. “Of course he can,” he said. “Whatever comforts you both is what is right.”

“Come here, maah'maru.”[1]

At his mother’s gentle words, the boy clambered onto her bed, cuddling up to her, his dark eyes looking up at his king.

“Will you tell him what will happen?” she whispered. “I…”

And then Paix knew. The old desert traditions were not widely taught now. Most in the city did not wake him; only his own people silently called to him, and many of them knew nothing beyond the one fact they had all been taught: if the king turns up on your doorstep with a copper totem in his hand, he is to be permitted inside without a word and allowed to do as he must.

His explanation would be as much for her understanding as for that of her son.

“Your ah’lamah[2] prepares to walk with the stars,” Paix said softly, his focus wholly on the boy. “I have come to guide her on her journey. She will speak to me the words, telling me what her name has been, and how her candle will shine, and why it will shine.”

“What makes it shine?” the boy asked.

Paix smiled. “A good deed will make it shine. Many good deeds will make it shine bright. A life well lived in service of others, a life spent helping or guiding, a life that will be spoken of with fond words and memories; all these things will make it shine bright.”

The boy nodded, and Paix continued.

“After the words are spoken, your ah’lamah begins her journey. I speak the blessing of the desert sands and skies over her and give her this totem. I then take her candle to be lit.”

“And then ah’lamah is gone?” the boy whispered.

“Yes, maah’maru,” the woman said softly, kissing the boy’s forehead. “I will be with the stars. You will live with Ema-ah'lamah[3] Nehra, and she will take good care of you.”

Again, the boy nodded, turning his solemn gaze back onto the tall, seated figure of the king.

“My candle is in the drawer beside the bed,” the woman murmured, resting back against the pillows. “It was given to me by my own ah’lamah.”

As tradition dictated. It was good to know that this, at least, still endured. Paix waited in silent patience. This was never a thing to be rushed.

It was almost a full five minutes before she spoke again.

“My name has been Ehzhani al-Q’ireh…” she murmured, her eyes on the man looking down at her, clearly seeking his approval that she was doing this properly. His answer came in the form of a gentle smile and encouraging nod.

“My candle will burn brightly,” she continued, “because I raised my son alone, and worked hard to give him everything I could. I am only a washerwoman, but I scraped my knuckles raw to buy books for him, that he may learn his letters and be apprenticed.”

She looked at the boy, then kissed his forehead again. “Yes,” she whispered. “My little desert fox; my love for you will make my candle shine so brightly.”

A moment later, Paix leaned over her, murmured the ancient blessing, and placed the copper totem in her hand.

***

As Paix left the house, candle cupped in both hands, something tugged at his coat. He looked down.

“Ah’lamah is gone,” the boy said quietly. “Will you take me to my Ema-ah'lamah?”

“I will, but first, your ah’lamah’s candle must be lit.” Paix crouched down to show the boy the simple ivory candle. “It tells the Vigil that a soul has left the bound realm and journeys toward the stars, and it puts that soul’s light into the care and protection of the Vigil.”

“What’s the Vigil?”

Rising to his feet again, Paix held out his hand, and the boy slipped his own little hand into it. They began to walk through the hushed streets, toward a peaceful area that had long been designated the city’s place for quiet contemplation.

“It’s a sacred place to our people, far, far away in our desert home,” Paix said. “It’s very, very old, and our legends tell of it rising from beneath the sands one night.”

“Is it still there?” the boy asked.

“Yes, but we cannot go there anymore,” Paix murmured, as they passed beneath a stone arch and entered the peace of the city’s garden. In the centre of it, four cobblestone paths met in a circle, sheltered by acacia trees. A warm golden light shone down from somewhere in the trees’ canopies, directly above the stone circle.

The boy pointed at the light. “That’s not usually there.”

“No, it isn’t.” Paix led the boy over to the circle, and they both looked up. Above them, a ghostly Conduit floated gently, rustling through the acacia leaves.

“This is part of the Vigil,” Paix said softly. “It has come here tonight for this ceremony. I must sit here for a while. You may sit with me, or elsewhere in the park, but do not stray too far. And do not sit or move within the circle. I will be quiet for some time and must not be disturbed. I will let you know when it’s time to go to your Ema-ah'lamah, all right?”

The boy nodded, sitting cross-legged just outside the edge of the circle. Paix followed suit, but in the middle of it, directly beneath the Conduit.

He closed his eyes, the candle cupped gently in his hands. It had been such a long time…

***

Ah'lamah was gone, but she was still here. Q'aliseh could feel her presence under this strange floating light as he watched the seated figure in front of him.

He'd never been allowed out this late before. The moon was hiding behind the trees, but it had gone past its highest point and was on its way to bed. The night was warm, and the floating light was bright enough that he wasn't scared. Ah'lamah was still here, somehow.

The king sat before him, perfectly still, with his eyes closed. Ah'lamah had told Q'aliseh that their king must always be addressed as 'Onorait', which meant 'Honoured' in their ancient tongue. Q'aliseh bit his lip as he realised that he had forgotten to do that, but then his attention was seized by the candle in the king's cupped palms.

It rose slowly, floating before him. The light from above grew brighter and more golden, as the king moved his hands up on either side of the candle, palms upwards, fingers and thumbs close together, as if cupping them to capture something. Glittering shards of light began to drip softly down, within the radius of the stone circle. Some of them landed in the king's hands, like splashes of liquid radiance.

The glow in each of the king's hands grew, rising up to meet the brilliance from above until it seemed that a thin luminescent pillar joined each of those hands to the floating light. Q'aliseh watched, rapt, as the light continued to splash down until it seemed that it would begin to spill from the king's hands.

Slowly, the king brought his hands together, one above the candle and one below. The hand above tilted, pouring out the lustre that it held. The hand below touched the base of the candle.

A flame leapt up, shining brilliantly from the candle's wick.

Q'aliseh smiled.

***

Ehzhani saw the Vigilkeeper arrive in a blaze of light, landing gently before her, his ivory coat still flowing behind him as if disturbed by a soft desert breeze.

"Is this the next part of my journey?" she asked, glancing across the darkness surrounding them. Ghosts of islands floated here and there - one of which they now stood upon. It was small and made of a yellow-gold type of stone that she had never seen before. It glimmered and sparkled as if the stone contained a million tiny candle flames. In the distance she could see a much larger island, surmounted with huge dark pillars.

The Vigilkeeper smiled. “The easiest, yes. You have only to cross the void, and I am here to carry you.”

“Have you carried many?”

He picked her up in his arms. Huge wings of age-yellowed bone and shattered ancient gauzy membranes unfurled behind him, stitched together with old copper threads and faded silk ribbons.

“Thousands,” he said softly, as they rose up from the island and flew across the deep blackness of the void, toward a crumbling sandstone well that shimmered with stars.

***

Ehzhani had slipped into the stars with a smile and a whisper of, “Watch over him, Onorait.”

With the burden of carrying her now gone, Paix stood on the sandstone rim alone. He turned and looked down into the void.

Across two thousand years, the echo of the Guardian’s death throes closed in on him, as it had every time he’d carried the burden since that moment.

The air here was too thin to cool the tears on his cheeks as he rose up from the sandstone rim and flew silently to the largest island. The void took all air, consuming it greedily, sucking the breath out of anyone who fell into it until they were lost to this realm and returned to their own.

For decades, Paix had been the only one to come here, had been the only one to fall into it. Over and over and over. He’d had no choice. It was the only way back.

He landed softly at the edge of the island and made his way across to the centre. No longer needed, the huge wings faded as he walked to the ancient stone pillar. Pooled at its base was the ink-black sky filled with stars that led back home.

He stepped in.

***

In the garden, Q'aliseh watched as the king opened his eyes with a shuddering exhalation. Tears were on his face, and Q'aliseh wondered what had happened. The candle still hovered in the air, burning brightly, but the presence of his ah’lamah had faded a few minutes before.

The king smiled at him. He looked tired, and Q'aliseh yawned. He was tired, too. Maybe the king needed a good night's sleep, like he did.

"Come," said the king, standing carefully, so as not to disturb the candle, and holding out his hand. "Let us go to your Ema-ah'lamah."

[1] Maah'maru = an affectionate nickname for a young child (something like 'my little baba')
[2] Ah'lamah = mother
[3] Ema-ah'lamah = sister-mother (aunt)

CHAPTER 22

Morning did not bring back his usual clothes, nor did it bring back the years. Paix awoke to the sound of the city coming to life outside his door once again. The room was unchanged, and he stared at the ceiling as a quiet fear crept over him.

What if he was stuck here, in the past? Granted, it would afford him an incredible opportunity to study this place as it once was, but…

But what? he told himself. *What do you have in your modern existence that calls you back? Malin is here with you, and they have been the only constant in your life. You have no love, no home, no friends, and even your acquaintances you had to leave behind, for fear of them noticing that you never age.*

But… this was a new uncertainty. And while he had lived through many uncertainties, he wasn't so sure about this one. What would become of the future him, wandering the ruins? Would there even *be* a future him? Or would his future lie in one of those anonymous boxes, deep in the catacombs?

He screwed his eyes shut. *No, no, don't be stupid. That cannot be your fate. You will be with this world until it dies.*

He rarely allowed himself to contemplate that thought. The enormity of it was too overwhelming, and was usually followed up by 'and after that… what? Endless void?'

He groaned, scrubbing a hand over his face and sitting up in bed. Well, if the city was alive for him today, he would lose himself and his worries in it.

Malin was awake - smaller and more kittenish, as they had been before when the city had lived - and was busy with their morning wash, licking a paw and rubbing it repeatedly over their face and ear.

Paix swung his feet out of bed and into his sandals. He neatened the covers and made his way over to the chest. If nothing else, he would need the kohl today, since he'd not yet heard the horn sound.

He didn't need the polished copper mirror, applying the kohl with an easy and practised hand, but after he'd finished, he took a look, nonetheless.

His own face stared back at him across two thousand years. Composed and regal, and showing no sign of inner turmoil, yet the weight of his duties lay heavy in his eyes. He had learned, long before the copper crown even touched his brow, to show only outward calm, his every movement measured and controlled to appear effortless and serene.

Until I fled in the night…

The kohl-rimmed blue eyes in the mirror cast down for a moment, and his breath caught in his throat. They looked back up at him, haunted and pained… and then he was looking at himself again. There was scant difference to be noticed, but he knew what he'd just seen.

Carefully, he tucked the mirror back into the chest, placing the kohl case to one side of it. On the other side, something new had appeared, and as he took it out Malin nuzzled at his side.

Onorait Paix worried. trust

The rope of beads sang a familiar little melody as they came out of the chest; soft chimes and clicks as he pooled them into his open hand. Copper both new and aged, glassy golden amber, pure quartz; each of five lengths separated by larger polished deepslate beads speckled with emerald glints. On either side of each deepslate bead, a thin beaten copper cartouche bearing a raised pictograph of two hands lifted up to the stylised representation of a Conduit, sand pouring down from between the fingers. The ancient Paixandrian symbol of 'trust'.

Slowly, he looped the beads once around his finger, letting them rest loosely against the old copper ring. Winding them back around his hand, he wrapped them three times around his wrist, securing them with the copper clasp at that point. The loop that remained hanging down he caught up with his thumb and forefinger, the instinct of centuries past slowly counting them over and over without words.

Fresh incense drifted from the niche outside his door. No emerald ore stones today. This morning's offering was a small, lidded clay pot. Lifting the lid, he discovered five plump, fresh dates. With a smile, he took one out and bit into it, savouring the sweetness and the lack of a pit, for whoever had offered these had already removed them. He took another, replaced the lid, and stepped out into the street.

It was still before dawn, the sky lightening behind him. The streets were already being washed and swept, industrious hands scouring stiff bundles of reeds over the wetted cobbles. Up ahead, the pitch bowls at the feet of the statue were being replenished and re-lit by agile young men who then climbed even higher upon ladders held steady by others to replace the previous day's faded flower garlands.

From a side street a small procession emerged. At its head, a woman in desert robes and with her head covered with a gauzy veil walked slowly. In each hand

she held a small copper cymbal hanging from a silk ribbon, and at every other step she gently touched one cymbal to the other.

Vigil bells. It had been so long since he had last heard them.

Four men, all clad in simple desert raiment, carried upon their shoulders a slender bier draped with a linen cloth. Behind them followed a woman dressed similarly to the procession leader, and a man holding the hand of a small boy.

The procession paused as they realised their king stood before them. Paix touched the fingertips of one hand to his chest, then briefly to his forehead and out to one side as he bowed, for the desert kings showed respect for those who mourned.

As he straightened, he locked eyes with the boy, who - even as the procession moved on toward the statue and the catacombs beneath - turned back, smiled and waved at him.

***

By mid-morning, Paix had made his way along the elevated road. The flavour of bitter coffee still rolled around his tongue, after a cup had been pressed on him by one of his countrymen who walked the road with a padded copper urn strapped to his back. With a murmur of gratitude, Paix had downed the shallow cup's contents, and the coffee seller only wished to clasp the king's hand for a moment as payment.

The great wooden gates lay up ahead, and beyond them he could see a bustle already arising. Carts rumbled past him, laden with wares, and donkeys and llamas similarly packed with goods passed by more noisily. And, as he walked through the gates, the whole of the Greatbridge lay before him.

Flanking the whole length of it, as far as he could see, stalls and stands were already set up and in the process of being stocked. Banners and pennants danced in the river breeze that also brought the scents of spices and incense smokes to him.

Baskets and crates and sacks, fruits and grains and vegetables, the hot floury smell of flatbread baking in ovens, the mouth-watering sizzle of sides of pork turning over hot coals that nosed down from the far end of the bridge, the chatter and laughter of haggling already underway.

To his left, a large balloon that floated in the air, tied down with rope. Occasional bursts of flame upwards into the stiffened cloth sphere made it rise to the limits of the rope, as well as the heavy net slung across the top of the sphere. Below it

there hung a large square basket, from which burly men wearing brown leather breeches and white shirts handed down large crates to their colleagues on the ladder below, who cracked them open and set out their contents on tables and boxes. Stacks of books, both plain and with magical sheen, piled between shining ingots of pure iron.

To his right, a great chirping, flapping, and squawking as a man and woman took birdcages from a small cart pulled by a third, hanging them beneath a joyously bright statue of a parrot. Two small children stood close by, hand-in-hand, watching and giggling.

Beneath bright awnings, cooking oils by the jug and dried fruits by the waxen bag, seeds by the pouch for planting, buttons by the cone, and ribbons by the measure of thumb to elbow. Beneath the llama statue, women crowded to haggle for the best and brightest from water-filled buckets of colourful flowers.

Moving through the bustling crowd, delights at every turn, Paix gloried in the beauty and heart of humanity that thronged this place. Hawkers cried their wares, flattered and wheedled and flirted with their customers for another sale, jugglers and tumbling acrobats somehow managed to keep both a space about them and an entertained audience distracted before them. Devotees sang and sold wine and sugar beneath a floating quartz cupola that defied both gravity and sensibility. A redstone trickster held a small gaggle of onlookers rapt while his light-fingered accomplice relieved their pockets of coin. Mummers performed a comedic play, drawing roars of laughter from those crowded around their antics.

Paix was offered samples of wine by the singing devotees, juicy hunks of roasted pork by odd little squat folk whose cloak hoods flared widely on either side of their heads and who tried to press him for an additional purchase of copper ingots, giggling when he demurred since he had nothing with which to pay them. More wine, followed by a hand thrusting a crescent-shaped meat pie toward him with a broad grin and a bellowed word that was lost amid the general clamour on the Greatbridge.

Slowly, he made his way back along the bridge toward the gates as the sun began to set. The crowds remained, even as the stalls began to be put away; last-minute haggling for knock-down prices at the end of the day continued as he reached the gates.

One final stall caught his eye. Tucked away just outside the gates, it was simpler than the others and draped with a large linen cloth. Stacked behind it were several large copper jugs, and three smaller ones stood on the table before them, beside a pile of ornate sampling cups. The familiar banner of Paixandria pinned to the front of the cloth drew him toward it.

The stall's owners - an elderly man and woman - both cupped their hands together, touching their fingertips to their foreheads; a gesture that he returned with a smile.

“Onorait,” the man said, as his wife poured from a copper jug a generous cupful of honey wine. “Please; we are honoured to offer you this.”

“My gratitude to you,” Paix murmured, taking the cup. “You are here each day?” he added, before taking a sip.

The man nodded. “Each day for the past fifty years, since you led our people here.”

Paix raised the cup again and took another sip, his other hand gently passing the beads one after the other through thumb and forefinger. *Calm. Composure. Effortless serenity.* He smiled.

“This is excellent wine,” he said softly. “I have not tasted better in a long time.”

The man smiled broadly, evidently overjoyed at this praise. His wife would not let Paix leave without pressing a small jug of the wine upon him as a parting gift, and so he made his way back through the gates, his belly full, his heart warmed, and his head delightfully mazed.

At his door, he turned to watch the city as night fell. This time, it did not fade into the past, but simply fell quiet and dark. He watched for a long time, committing the peace of it into his memory, before he turned and picked up the small pot of dates, taking both it and the jug of wine into his room.

As he slipped into a comfortable slumber, Malin having abandoned their basket in favour of snuggling down at the foot of the bed, the voice of the old man followed him into his dreams.

Each day for the past fifty years, since you led our people here.

CHAPTER 23

He could tell from the silence when he next awoke that he was back amid the ruins once more. The early morning of the modern day had a different sound to the night of the past; both silent, but each distinct. The silence of the past was the city's breath; that of the present was the land's.

The next thing that came to his mind was curiosity. Would the room have changed again? He half wanted to open his eyes immediately and find out, but half wanted to stay in this semi-dreaming state where he was still a little closer to that breath of the past.

He realised that he missed it.

Yesterday morning he had worried about being stuck there, worried about his future - no, his *current* - self. But right now, in the comfort of his bed, he could feel the gentle twist of a yearning in his chest; a mourning for what he'd had but now lost.

Future-current-past-dreaming selves; by the stars, it was enough to—

He jumped as something landed on his chest. Eyes wide and heart pounding, he found himself nose-to-nose with Malin, who had evidently decided to put a stop to any prospective existential headaches by scaring the living daylights out of him.

He flopped back against the pillow as Malin started kneading the covers atop him. Breathing hard for a few moments, he found himself nonetheless laughing.

"You little…" he began, affectionately rubbing a hand over Malin's head and earning himself a scratch to the side of that hand as they swiped playfully at him.

The ceiling was now pure, smooth sandstone. Well, that answered *that* question, anyway. It gleamed in the low light from the lantern. Adjoined to the border at the top of the wall, with the copper pillars that still trailed down stone, it might have made him think he was in his old bedroom in Paixandria, but for the stone, the small size of the room, the small bed, the… all right, it was nothing like his old bedroom.

He was yearning again.

With a sigh, he sat up, as Malin hopped down onto the floor and wandered over to the desk, whereat they began to scent mark the acacia wood leg nearest their basket.

As they had been before, his clothes were clean and neatly folded at the end of the bed. His leather boots had also been buffed and polished. Lifting one up, he sniffed the toecap. Ah, beeswax. That made sense.

Having got dressed, he found himself tweaking at the shirt collar, pulling at the pants belt, wriggling his toes in the confines of the boots. It… didn't feel right, even though he'd been wearing this style of clothing for years now.

He sighed, turning his attention toward the desk. The large book was open, the quill still stuck into one of the open inkwells, and both the deepslate emerald ore block and the incense bowl in place, the last with fresh incense burning in it once more. And there, flanking the inkwells, were the copper jug and the clay pot.

Curiously, he lifted the lid of the pot. Three fresh dates still sat in there. But… those were from…

How?!

The wine, too, smelled as fresh as it had last night, when he'd walked *in the past*.

He looked down at the book. There were his final notes from two days ago, but one new line had been added, in elegant, flowing Paixandrian script.

He draws closer. He is coming.

As he looked at it, it faded away, leaving only blank smooth paper behind.

***

The dates were still plump and sweet, and a sip of the honey wine warmed his belly. Wary of consuming too much, especially given what he'd seen in that book, he tucked his field notes book into his rucksack and headed out of the door.

It was instinct by now, to turn and see what had been left on the little offering ledge. As with indoors on his desk, the incense had been replenished, and beside it was a square acacia wood box that was about the size of his fist.

Picking up the box, he turned his gaze to the front of the hillside. Yesterday's smooth stone door surround now glittered with polished copper veins. Against the dark stone, the metal shimmered in the bright morning sunlight, the carvings outlined with the same thin gleaming rivulets. Above the door, something he had not seen in over two thousand years: a Conduit holder. It was identical to the one above his ancient home, fashioned as an exquisitely carved cradle of oxidised copper.

He looked down at the box. It was the right size…

He opened it.

Slowly, the small Conduit rose up from its ivory silk bed within the box. Time danced and coruscated around it, now revealing sandstone, now a thousand candle flames, now the shadow of the void, now an indistinct face.

It settled into the cradle, floating just above it and humming softly with power, it's golden glow lighting the doorway and area in front of it.

How?!

Again, that question settled in his mind. In all of his years of wandering, he had never encountered another Conduit. His last sighting of one had been when he'd taken one final look back at Paixandria in the night as he'd fled the city; an image that had remained seared in his mind and his nightmares ever since.

***

He had planned to examine Dar'veh Ehr-maah Nu'hazin today, or at least the city's variant of it. From the brief look-over he'd managed upon discovering it, the circuits were far more advanced than the ones he had created for his final project; the one that had earned him the title of Redstone Adept.

His original model had seen active use in Paixandria for many years and the blueprints for it were stored in the Guildmasters' archives. Presumably, Paixandrian migrants had brought the technology with them and subsequently improved upon it. He was insanely curious to see what they had done to better it.

The lamps were off, but the ankle-height tripwire at the base of the steps set them alight, and this time he was expecting it. One by one, in a satisfying wave around the room, they flared into humming, glowing life. Something caught his eye in the far corner, where it was still dark; something moving quickly in the shadows. As the light finally reached that corner, he looked more closely but saw nothing. Probably just a bat, or his own eyes playing tricks on him.

He stepped down into the room, letting his rucksack fall from his shoulder. Resting it on the floor, he crouched to pull out his field notes book and a pencil, then hefted the rucksack back on. Malin trotted close behind his heels as he approached the first circuit, ducking beneath the dock.

This one had returned already, laden with oxidised copper. As he glanced around the room, he realised they had all returned. Someone must have manually triggered that, so why did they leave all the copper sitting there?

A quick examination around the base of the dock told him why. There was no lever to trigger a manual return. Instead, as he scouted around, he realised that each circuit had a mechanism to detect changes in the oxidisation, dropping a wooden pellet at each stage. Once four pellets had been released, he could now see that the circuit would push the fully oxidised copper out into the centre of the system. And once all of the sub-circuits had released their cargo, the system would return it all automatically for collection.

He smiled. “I didn’t even think of this,” he murmured. “They took my idea and made it so much better. Paixandrian technology and ingenuity at its finest.”

It had been quite some time since he’d drawn up a redstone schematic, but the old symbols were seared into his memory, and a few hours of wandering around one of the double circuits, scribbling and scratching notes in his book, saw him with a reasonable enough diagram that he could reproduce more neatly in one of the larger books.

Heading back up the stairs, he made his way back into the gloaming. Fresh air hit his lungs, and he breathed in deeply, his gaze drawn to the golden light near the end of the cobblestone road, above his door.

Another offering had been left, and it steamed gently in the evening air as he reached the door. A thick wrap of linen that, when opened, revealed two hot, freshly-baked flatbreads, each with a pocket cut into them along their longest side, the inside of which was smeared with salted butter.

He looked up at the statue.

“You really know the way to my heart,” he said with a grin as he picked up the delicious package. “Thank you.”

***

He had quite forgotten the vanishing words in the book, but once he’d polished off his evening meal and sat down to transcribe the redstone schematic from his field notes, he was reminded of them.

He draws closer. He is coming.

He shuddered and picked up the quill, opening his notes and setting his mind to his task, losing himself in two hours of meticulous recording until his shoulders reminded him that he’d been hunched over a desk for longer than they were comfortable with.

Malin was already curled up in their basket, fast asleep. Pix wiped the end of the quill, set it down, and closed the inkwell. Leaving the book open so that the ink could dry overnight, he made his way to his bed, sitting down to unstrap his boots and haul them off. Shirt and pants followed, and he crawled under the covers - belly sated and head full of redstone symbols - to fall into a fitful sleep.

***

The door to Paix's private quarters opened just a crack, and Chaperone Mhenheli insinuated himself in through it. Looking up from his desk, Paix nodded briefly to him.

"One moment," he said, picking up a small copper vial beside him and pouring sand delicately onto the book he had been writing in. Carefully and slowly, he traced the final words - *decided to fall silent* - that were still wet. The sand would take care of the drying.

He looked up again. Mhenheli had remained close to the door. Paix raised a questioning eyebrow at him.

Mhenheli cleared his throat.

"Onorait," he said, holding out a scroll. "A messenger has arrived from Mythland. He has brought an invitation."

Rising from his chair, Paix crossed the polished sandstone floor, taking the scroll. It did indeed bear the seal of the Mythish King. He broke the seal with a fingernail, letting the scroll unfurl. Upon it, in a bold black scrawl, he read:

Honour'd King Paix of the Desert Kingdom,

This messenger bringeth tidings of a great discovery! Within the barren mountains far beyond my lands, my explorers hath found a secret deep beneath the ground: a stronghold filled with knowledge, much of which will surely hold an interest for a scholar such as thyself.

Hidden deep within this stronghold they also found a portal, and returned shaken and voidstruck, but with tidings that can scarce be believed, and which I could not help but share with all the old and great empires.

Honour'd friend, wilt thou accept this invitation for the greatest hunt of your life? If nay, then return my messengers forthwith with that word. If yea, arm thyself well, and I will send word when the hunt is ready.

Yrs,
Ser'Zhege of Mythland

Paix looked up from the scroll.

"Ready my armour," he said.

CHAPTER 24

The breeze began to pick up outside. The leaves of the acacias whispered, and their trunks groaned. The sparse scrub twitched, then bent. Dust kicked up, dry little dervishes skittering through the moonlit streets. Clouds gathered, scudding to hide the light and cast the ancient city below into a deep, hollow darkness.

Malin raised their head, looking up at the bed from their basket. The sleep-tousled head on the pillow was restless, moving fitfully, brow dampened, soft sounds rising from a taut throat, up and out through dry, parted lips.

Malin stretched and yawned, standing up and hopping out of the basket. In one graceful leap they landed softly on the bed, stepped over the rumpled blanket, and sat down to begin their watch. Centuries coming, the veils of history were at their thinnest, and the Eternal would need guarding this night.

***

Cracked and damp hissing stone spewed myriad crawling, biting insectile creatures when stepped on. Blades swung, sending the creatures flying to crack and shatter against walls, shards of stone splintering and clattering to the floor. Heavy iron doors that opened only when three shoulders braced against them and hefted in unison. Unearthly silence so deep and loud that it rang in the ears like hammered bells. Endless corridors and stairwells, dank and dripping with brackish water. A hastily scribbled and misremembered map, cast aside when it led to lie after lie.

“It must be here somewhere,” the map’s previous owner growled, patience tried and vowing painful retribution for those lies. “The void was upon them when they returned, that much was true. A path was found once; we hath but to find it again.”

“I like not this place,” another said. “The walls whisper of malice and envy. I feel it.”

A third sighed. “The hunt of our lives, indeed,” he said, a wry smirk colouring his words. “If our hunt for the portal has taken this long, then the gods help us if we finally manage to—“

“This way.”

All heads turned.

“Paix? You found it?” Ser’Zhege paced over to him, his boot heel grinding the useless map into the stone as he did so.

A nod. “Of course. Can you not sense the portal?”

Without waiting for a reply, he headed for a nearby stairwell and stepped down into it. Four pairs of eyes glanced from one to the other, nonplussed, then Ser’Zhege started down the stairs after him.

“If he was not always the calm and level-headed one anyway, I would say that felt deeply out of character,” muttered N’dachVeip, using the tip of his sword to winkle out a stray chip of stone from the heel of his boot.

Caelamondorion grimaced. “Calm and level-headed, yet he leads us deeper into this accursed dungeon.”

“Scared?” N’dachVeip had finished ministering to his boot, and grinned up at Caelamondorion, who fixed him with a scathing look.

“A tinkerer who plays with lava and metals for a hobby might be at home in the bowels of the earth, but high elves are born to the sky. This place reeks of malevolence.”

“Well, if you wish to turn back and return to Raendella—“ N’dachVeip began, but he was silenced by the slender form who stepped between them and - hands on her hips - looked up at him, then much further up at Caelamondorion.

“Quartz and Chrysocolla!” Xsia-Minai’Te groused. “Will you both stop arguing and get down those stairs? We came here for a hunt, not to watch you two bicker like an old married couple!”

***

The portal hummed at their feet, an endless deep, dancing with stars.

“You said your explorers were voidstruck when they returned?” Caelamondorion murmured.

Ser’Zhege knelt, reaching out one hand toward the shimmering dark. “Tainted with it, yes,” he said softly, fingertips grazing against it. It seemed to yearn up to him, and he snatched his hand back. “They spoke of escaping the beast by leaping into the void.”

“A thing no sane man would do,” N’dachVeip said. “It is said that the void consumes life, sucking air from lungs and blood from veins. Those who are voidstruck return as shadows, doomed to struggle for every breath and with the urge to drain the blood from their fellow men.”

Silence filled the room. The portal hummed and yearned.

“Ser’Zhege, you told us this was just a hunt,” Xsia-Minai’Te whispered. “I came along only to heal any wounds sustained. Where in Agate’s name does this portal lead?!”

“The realm beyond death,” said a calm voice, and they all turned to see Paix step into the portal.

With a roar, it leapt up and consumed him, black stars pouring over his form as it sank down and he vanished.

Ser’Zhege squared his shoulders. “Well, the hunt is up,” he said. “Follow and help or tarry and flee, but I will not shy from this.”

The portal flared again, sinking back down as it took another into its inky depths.

N’dachVeip, Caelamondorion, and Xsia-Minai’Te exchanged looks. None moved for a moment. Then, finally, Xsia-Minai’Te heaved a huge sigh, scrunched her eyes shut, and jumped off the ledge as if leaping feet-first into a crystalline stream.

***

Beneath their feet, a small island of dry yellowed stone, glittering as though shot through with shards of glass. Around them, endless tenebra; a profound darkness that reached beyond mere black and dipped into the realm of endless nothing, so devoid of substance that it almost hurt to look at for too long. In the distance, another island. Stretching toward it, a long and narrow bridge of the same yellowed stone, scarcely the width of two feet together, and with no visible means of support or handrails.

Paix and Ser’Zhege stood in front of the bridge, staring across it to the large island. Xsia-Minai’Te joined them, as two more pairs of feet landed softly on the stone where she had been standing a moment before.

She looked back to see N’dachVeip and Caelamondorion, the former with his sword already unsheathed, the latter readying his bow.

“Put those away,” she said softly, adding as she turned back to the large island and the perilous bridge, “We have a way to go yet.”

“I see ten pillars.” Ser’Zhege shielded his eyes with his hand, as if there were a sun bright enough to dazzle, though in truth the void came close to that. “But what is that on top of each one? Crystals?”

Xsia-Minai’Te squinted across the distance. Crystals, she knew, but…

“Those are like no crystals I’ve ever seen before,” she muttered. “I sense dark runes spinning about them and arcing out from them toward something. Whatever they are, it’s not good.”

“I see the runes clearly,” said Caelamondorion. “They are eldritch spells, and they feed something, give it life. But I cannot see what is being fed. Darkness surrounds it.”

“Darkness surrounds *every* damn thing here,” N’dachVeip muttered. “Why would the thing we’re supposed to be hunting be any different? Ser’Zhege, what exactly *are* we hunting?”

Ser’Zhege opened his mouth to speak but closed it again as Paix stepped forward onto the bridge.

Xsia-Minai’Te didn’t miss the way that the skirt of Paix’s ivory coat began to stir as if blown by a gentle breeze; a breeze that did not exist in this place of utter stillness. Her eyes narrowed as she noted his shoulders move almost imperceptibly, seeming to broaden and brace slightly, as if to make way for some kind of burden to be carried upon his back.

“The Guardian,” Paix said softly, and began to walk away from them, along the bridge.

Xsia-Minai’Te raised one hand, calling to it a pyrite cluster and directing five glimmering citrines to orbit the cluster. They were all going to need all the protection they could get, but she had a feeling that she shouldn’t stray too far away from Paix.

***

“This is probably not a good time to mention that I hate heights,” N’dachVeip gritted as he inched nervously along the narrow bridge, “but I *hate* heights.”

“You would fare ill in Raendellarae, then,” came the amused rejoinder from Caelamondorion, stepping lightly behind him with elven surefootedness. “The stairs to our homes climb to the highest tree canopies, and afford a beautiful view of the forest floor, many, many feet below…”

“*Shut. up.*”

Ahead, he could just see the long flowing skirts of Xsia-Minai’Te as she stepped carefully on the aged stone, but most of his focus was on his own feet and *exactly* where he was placing them.

Caelamondorion clearly - finally - took pity on him, saying softly, “There are but twenty or so more human paces remaining on the bridge. Then we will be on the large island.”

N’dachVeip had never felt such relief as he did two minutes later, as the void on either side of him gave way to the solid reassurance of wide, wide flat ground.

And then he made the mistake of looking up.

***

The crystals in Xsia-Minai’Te’s hand chimed and vibrated, warning after warning shuddering up her arm.

The towers were *obsidian*. Quartz and Chrysocolla, what *was* this creature, if this much obsidian was needed to keep it held here?! Above her, a swirling maelstrom of darkness, into which streamed pale arcs of eldritch runes that emanated from whatever those crystals were atop each pillar. The arcs moved, following something that she could not see. Whatever was up there, it was circling.

Ser’Zhege fitted an arrow to his bow, holding the weapon ready. Beside him, Caelamondorion followed suit, the great elven bow of Raendellarae almost as tall as the Mythish king himself.

“I cannot fire at a mark that does not show itself.” Ser’Zhege groused, loosing the arrow into the blackness above them, then nocking another.

Out of the corner of her eye, Xsia-Minai’Te saw Paix ready his trident. She had heard whispers about the desert king’s ability to summon lightning at will but had dismissed it as the fantastical tales of wandering bards. But now, she could see sparks crackling around the copper tines, as Paix lifted his arm.

“Aim for the crystals,” he said, then hurled the trident toward the top of the nearest tower. It flew high and true, reaching its apogee directly above the crystal. A blinding shard of light hit the crystal, shattering it, even as the trident was returning to the king’s hand.

The bow of Raendellarae sang out, and a second crystal burst into shards. Ser’Zhege’s second arrow found a third crystal.

The pyrite cluster in Xsia-Minai’Te’s hand dissolved into dust.

“RUN!” Ser’Zhege roared, turning and shoving Xsia-Minai’Te out of the way of a hail of black shards that tore out of the maelstrom above. They slammed harmlessly into the ground, hissing and singing. A moment later, they were nothing more

than molten rivulets that seeped into the yellowed stone. A second hail landed where Caelamondorion had stood a few seconds before.

Shaken, Xsia-Minai'Te got to her feet, hiding behind the nearby pillar as she watched the men attack the crystals. More and more fell to their weapons, more and more black shards melted to coat the ground in a slick metallic sheen. Only three crystals remained. Then two.

She watched as N'dachVeip fired arrow after arrow at the tallest tower, trying in vain to reach the crystal atop it, dancing away from the black shards every time they hailed down near him.

She could see the rune streams moving more and more erratically, writhing in wide sweeping arcs that were getting lower and lower. Whatever was up there was on its way down, and it appeared to be aiming for the ancient stone pillar in the centre of the obsidian circle.

Another crystal fell to the bow of Raendellarae. One left; the tallest.

A terrible calm enveloped the island. An encompassing bloom of silence rolled out of the darkness like a shockwave.

The maelstrom parted, and Xsia-Minai'Te's heart pounded with terror as she saw the Guardian descend from it.

A dark elemental!

"Oh, Quartz and Chrysocolla," she whispered. "We have no hope. We cannot win against death given life…"

Ser'Zhege and N'dachVeip turned their bows onto the elemental. The first arrow to strike its blackened flesh opened up a crack that bled fire and lava. The silence was shattered by an unearthly shriek as the elemental sent more black shards hurtling toward them.

Caelamondorion aimed over and over at the final crystal, but even the great elven bow could not reach it. Paix's trident also fell short, but they did not give up. One rune stream still arced from the crystal, pouring into the elemental and healing the wounds it was sustaining from the arrows.

Quietly, Xsia-Minai'Te got to her feet and - shielded from the deadly shards by the pillar - she watched the elemental. Every arrow that landed tore its skin into rivulets of lava, drawing a fresh shriek and more shards, before the crystal healed the wound. Over and over, she watched every arrow hit.

We're tormenting it. This is not a hunt, it's not sport. It's a cruel torture. It may be death, but it is death given life. It lives, as we do; just not as we do. It… does not deserve this.

She dashed out from behind the pillar, running toward Paix and Caelamondorion.

"Stop!" she gasped. "We cannot win this! We are torturing it. This isn't right! Stop! *Please* stop!"

Paix turned slowly to face her. His usual calm serenity was gone, replaced by something she had never seen in him before: grim determination. His face was set, his jaw tense, his eyes blazing with purpose and… desperation.

"No," he said, so quietly that it belied everything about him in that moment. "I'm tired of dying in the void."

He turned away from her once more, opened his shoulders out, and a huge pair of wings suddenly unfurled from between his shoulders. Long bone metacarpals and phalanges spread out behind him. Stretched between them, a thin pale membrane, ghostly and tattered at the edges. They flexed once, twice, then he leapt into the air, soaring up above the pillar.

Xsia-Minai'Te's gaze met Caelamondorion's wide eyes. They both looked up together. Down came the trident, shattering the final crystal.

The elemental shrieked as its final life support was broken.

Xsia-Minai'Te turned to look at Ser'Zhege and N'dachVeip. They, too, were staring at Paix, mouths agape.

The trident flew again, connecting with the elemental's huge black wing, singing back into Paix's hand as he readied to throw once more.

An eldritch wail broke the air, and the elemental turned the full force of its attention onto what was hurting it. Black shards flew across the void, but Paix soared away from them.

He wasn't so lucky the second time. Shards tore through his wings, shredding the gauzy membrane and shattering the bones. He faltered, losing height, then aimed the trident at the ground, using reverse momentum to propel himself higher again.

Xsia-Minai'Te's hand flew to her mouth as she watched in horror. She was here to heal, but she could not heal this!

The elemental lashed out with its own wings. One of them clipped Paix across the face; the force of it knocking him back in the air. Long, prehensile talons clawed out toward him.

The bow of Raendellarae sang out again, joined moments later by more arrows from Ser'Zhege and N'dachVeip, as the elemental caught Paix in its grasp and tried to fly up out of range.

Now unable to let loose with the trident, and gripped by the beast, his wings torn and broken, Paix instead struggled to grasp the weapon closer to the tines, stabbing it into the claws that held him.

Shrieking and howling with rage and pain, the elemental soared and plummeted, clearly trying to avoid the hail of arrows. Ser'Zhege's quiver had run dry, and he threw the bow aside, drawing his sword as he ran toward the ancient stone pillar. The elemental dropped close enough that he could leap up and slash against one of its tails, which thrashed and knocked him off his feet.

Caelamondorion landed an arrow in one of the beast's multiple eyes, driving it into a frenzy of rage and pain. Now on her knees, hands covering her mouth, Xsia-Minai'Te could only watch, eyes wide.

The elemental thrashed lower and lower, pinned over and over with arrows. Ser'Zhege charged once more, his blade finding the claw that held Paix, but it wasn't enough.

What was that? There, floating above Paix's head as he fought for a grip on the trident with bloodied hands. A strange circular object that spun slowly, it began to emanate a warm golden light. Brighter and brighter it grew, until the island glowed like the desert sands under the hot sun.

And then, the trident found the elemental's throat, with every last ounce of Paix's fading strength behind it.

The most terrible sound ever heard across any land in any age thundered out into the void. The four hunters were knocked off their feet by it, as the elemental cracked and shattered, blasted out from the obsidian circle in thousands of black shards.

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Xsia-Minai'Te lifted her head, pushing herself up from the yellowed ground, still slick with metallic rivulets that were fast seeping into the rock, to disappear forever.

To her right Caelamondorion was already on his feet, shouldering his bow across his body, and running over to the ancient stone pillar, where Paix lay motionless on the ground, broken trident at his side.

CHAPTER 25

"He lives," Caelamondorion said softly, as Xsia-Minai'Te reached him. "But he is sorely wounded."

He was kneeling beside Paix, one hand held over him yet not touching him. Xsia-Minai'Te followed suit, both hands hovering over the motionless form crumpled on the glittering ground, trying to gauge the extent of his injuries without touching him. Slowly, her hands traced above the shattered wings, and she winced as she sensed just how damaged they were.

N'dachVeip crouched down and reached out a hand to Paix's face, where a livid bruise was slowly rising on his cheekbone, around several long cuts so thin that blood could not even escape from them. The elemental's scales had been razor-sharp.

"Do not touch him!"

N'dachVeip snatched his hand back, staring at Caelamondorion.

"What; you're gonna heal him by just waving your hands over him? His kingdom's rules about not touching him be-damned; the man's *hurt!*" he growled.

Ser'Zhege - the only one still on his feet - stood over them, wiping down his blade with a black cloth.

"The rules of a kingdom," he said, grimly, "apply in times of peace and in times of war. They apply both to its subjects and to the rulers of other kingdoms."

He tucked the cloth back under his belt and sheathed the sword.

"But when the rules mean that a good man might perish, they do not apply." He crouched down, both arms held out, looking up and down the prone figure, clearly trying to size him up. "Now," he added in a mutter, nodding at the broken wings, "the only thing to be reckoned is how in the blessed names of all the saints do we pick him up without further damaging *those?*"

Xsia-Minai'Te sat back on her heels, lowering her hands with a sigh. He was right, of course. They could not leave Paix here, or even heal him properly here. For one thing, there was not nearly enough light to see by, and her crystals could only do so much in a place of such darkness. Even the light of several candles would be more helpful than the eerie glow emitted by the yellowed rock beneath them.

"We could probably manage between us," N'dachVeip said, positioning himself at Paix's head. "I'll take under his shoulders, you take his waist, and Caelamondorion can take his legs."

“And what about those?” Caelamondorion gestured to the wings.

“I’ll try to hold them as steady as I can,” Xsia-Minai’Te said softly, though she dreaded causing further hurt to them. She wasn’t sure if Paix could feel pain through them or not. In the midst of battle, when the shards had struck them, she hadn’t seen or heard him cry out in pain, but it had all been so chaotic that she might have missed it.

Ser’Zhege carefully pushed his arms beneath Paix’s waist, watching and waiting as N’dachVeip did the same with his shoulders and Caelamondorion with his lower legs.

Xsia-Minai’Te was at a loss with the wings, uncertain which parts to hold. The central joint was probably best, so she reached out to the wing that was half folded across Paix’s body, intending to move it as gently as she could against its pair.

The moment that her fingertips brushed against it, whispers began floating through her mind. Shifting sands, a glowing orb, names and names and names, and the sensation of her life’s history being observed gently and without judgement. Emotions of all kinds pummelled her, making her chest tight and her eyes damp.

Startled, she looked up and around her. Ser’Zhege and N’dachVeip were still settling their position, readying themselves to lift. Their hands were on Paix, as hers were, but they were clearly not feeling this… *thing*. But Caelamondorion returned her gaze with one of equal surprise, followed by a short nod. Whatever this was, he was feeling it too.

“We need to move,” N’dachVeip’s tense voice cut into the moment. “We don’t know how long this portal will stay open for. Those wings are busted up enough as it is. I don’t think you can hurt them any more than they already are.”

Xsia-Minai’Te looked at him, still bewildered by what she was feeling. It hadn’t stopped. She could now feel the gentle ghost of a hand on her cheek, could sense something watching her… no, watching *over* her.

A tear rolled down her face.

N’dachVeip smiled at her, his expression softening. “Just do your best,” he murmured, before turning back to the task at hand.

“Are we ready? On three. One… two…”

***

In the end, the hardest part had been ensuring they all stepped into the portal at exactly the same moment. As it roared up around them, Xsia-Minai'Te just heard Ser'Zhege call out, "Be ready to catch him, if it takes him later than us!"

As they arrived at wherever their destination was, that comforting sensation of being watched and guarded dissipated. They were all safely through together, Paix still held firmly in their arms.

Xsia-Minai'Te gasped. She was holding… nothing. The wings had gone.

"I feared that might happen," she heard Caelamondorion mutter, as she stared at her empty hands. "They exist only in that realm."

She looked up. They were in a large room with polished sandstone walls and floor. Shining sandstone pillars inlaid with copper held up a ceiling that was painted a deep indigo and decorated with intricate constellations traced in pure silver. Tall arched windows opened onto a moonlit night, several of them shuttered from the outside, none of them containing glass. Against the window wall, a large and comfortable bed with a deep blue blanket - toward which her travelling companions were carrying Paix - rested on a raised section of floor. Against another wall several low couches were arranged around a table, and against a third wall a desk and chair were surrounded by bookshelves and scrolls. Along each wall, soft-burning oil lamps hung from copper sconces.

The air was desert-dry and hot. The portal had taken them all to Paixandria; directly into what was clearly the king's private quarters. Was this where it always led? Was *that* why Paix had been so insistent that the Guardian must die?

She recalled his words - *I'm tired of dying in the void* - as she watched her companions lay him gently down on the bed. He had known what he was doing, where he was going, how to bring down the elemental. He… was at home in that place. He had been there before - many times before, if his words were to be believed - and each time must have returned by falling into the void.

She shuddered. Quartz and Chrysocolla, what a puzzle this was!

With Paix safely settled on the bed, N'dachVeip had wandered over to one of the window arches, looking out across the city.

"So *that* is the famed Vigil," he murmured, as Ser'Zhege joined him. "The heart of the desert kingdom."

Xsia-Minai'Te looked out of the window as she reached the bed, catching a glimpse of the fabled monument that sat in the very centre of Paixandria. It glowed with an unearthly golden light - one that she realised she had seen before

- and atop the low sandstone wall that surrounded it, the flames of hundreds of candles in all shapes and colours flickered and danced.

It felt like sacrilege to turn her back to it, but there was healing to be done.

Caelamondorion was perched on one hip on the opposite side of the bed, leaning over the unconscious form of the desert king, his gaze travelling over Paix's face, concern in the set of his body.

"He wanders," he said lowly, for Xsia-Minai'Te's ears only. "His body is here, but his mind travels far beyond any place I can reach."

Xsia-Minai'Te sat on the bed, all business now, her quick gaze darting over every wound, every cut, scratch, and bruise. A rust-edged, jagged slash at the waist of Paix's loose linen tunic drew her most urgent attention. That rust was not decoration.

She pushed the tunic up a little, and bit her lip. The wound in his side was deep and had bled considerably. It matched where the elemental had held him in its razored talons.

"Hold the edges together," she muttered, as she called to her hand two small, slender clear quartz points; powerful and needle-like. Her stitching kit.

Without a word, Caelamondorion did her bidding, carefully pushing together the edges of the wound, his long pale fingers stark against Paix's deeply tanned skin. Xsia-Minai'Te directed the clear quartz points over one end of the wound. They chimed softly, quivering against each other in a cross formation, trailing healing power beneath them in a gentle mist.

"Jasper and amethyst," she whispered, feeling the rings slide onto her fingers, their large flat stones facing inwards. Slowly, she rested them on either side of the wound, feeling that sense of being watched over once again flooding into her as soon as she touched Paix. Pulling her focus together, she directed the quartz points to begin their work, as she pushed the healing and nurturing energy from the rings deep into Paix's body. The quartz points began to flicker past each other, criss-crossing their trails along the wound, stitching its edges together.

"This has long been a skill desired by the elves," Caelamondorion murmured as he watched. "Our healers have mastered some levels of it, but you are crystal-born. We must mine our crystals, yet you call them from the aether."

Xsia-Minai'Te did not answer that. She knew full well how the elves coveted her abilities. Instead, she simply said, "Tell me what you feel."

There was a pause.

“The same as you feel, I suspect,” Caelamondorion admitted, keeping his voice low. “Watchfulness. A gentle and quiet examination of my life; neutral and non-threatening. And it only happens when I lay a hand on him.”

“Is it him, do you think?” Xsia-Minai’Te whispered. “Or something else?”

“It is more than him. He is not with us right now, except in body. Something guards him and examines every soul that lays a hand upon him. I suspect that is what lies behind this kingdom’s strange rule of not touching him.”

“The others didn’t seem to notice anything.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Caelamondorion look up across the room, to where Ser’Zhege and N’dachVeip were looking out of the windows at the Vigil, talking in voices as low as hers and Caelamondorion’s were.

“They are human,” he said. “We are not.”

She looked up at him, sharply, catching his eye. He chuckled.

“My dear Xsia-Minai’Te, we are of the earth; you from its rocks and I from its trees. We were both born of a mother in mortal form, but we both know our true mother.”

The clear quartz points had finished their task, coming to rest in a cross formation at the end of the now-stitched wound. Xsia-Minai’Te moved her hands directly over the stitching, closing her eyes and letting the power channel through her, reaching deep within to bind and heal damaged flesh.

“How’s it going?”

N’dachVeip had wandered over to the bed to watch, while Ser’Zhege busied himself with examining the titles on the bookshelves. Xsia-Minai’Te had moved on to healing Paix’s hands, the palms of which were sliced and bloody from his struggles to free himself from the elemental’s talons.

“The worst one of his injuries is now healed,” Xsia-Minai’Te murmured, as she focused on searching for anything that should not be present. She could feel… *something* not quite right here. “Just his hands and face to be done.”

“What happened to the wings?” N’dachVeip asked. “I mean, can we *talk* about the fact that the man *grew wings and flew* back there?! And that the wings vanished when we came here?”

“Visible wounds first,” Xsia-Minai’Te said, finally honing on what was wrong. One delicate flick of her fingers, and something small and black appeared between them. A single glittering shard from the elemental, blunted and broken and now removed from deep within Paix’s palm.

She felt someone take it from her.

“So, this is all that remains of it,” N’dachVeip murmured. “Shiny. It’d make a pretty trinket.”

“It should be destroyed,” Caelamondorion said sharply.

“Oh, of course. I’ll take care of it. My foundry will soon make light work of that. Melt it into nothing.”

“Be sure that you do,” Caelamondorion said. “Such a thing is not to be trifled with, nor to be turned into a necklace.”

Booted feet approached them. “Nothing but histories, maps, sciences, astronomical charts, and redstone schematics,” Ser’Zhege reported his findings from the bookshelves. “Nothing of any interest at all.”

“To you, perhaps.” Caelamondorion sounded amused. “Our friend here is a scholar. His very name declares where his passion lies.”

Xsia-Minai’Te moved on to Paix’s face. Just above the top edge of his beard, a deep bruise marred his cheekbone, laced with multiple thin cuts. This must have been where the elemental clipped him with its wing. Bloodstone would do the trick here, clearing out the bruise, and her rings changed themselves at her bidding. The clear quartz points moved swiftly again, darting over each razored cut to stitch it invisibly. She took great care here, knowing that any scar left on the face would be questioned.

“Well, if there’s nothing more that I can do,” Ser’Zhege said, “I should be making my way back home. Or I would if I had any means of transport. Perhaps I could hire a horse?”

Caelamondorion chuckled. “You will find no horses in Paixandria. The desert does not hold enough water to sustain their needs. How comfortable are you with camels?”

***

With both Ser’Zhege and N’dachVeip having left - via one of the windows, no less, since they did not wish to arouse the interest of any guards in Paix’s home - Xsia-Minai’Te was left alone to finish tending to Paix’s visible wounds, while Caelamondorion perused the bookshelves with interest.

The bruise was almost gone, the deep tan of Paix’s skin covering what remained. The cuts mended beautifully, having been so thin in the first place. Now, she had only to attempt the trickiest mend of all.

“How do I heal what I cannot see?” she whispered, looking down at his face, which seemed a little more relaxed and peaceful now. “I think you’re going to need those in future, and you can’t fly with them when they’re so broken.”

She sighed. “I should have started working on them back then, when they were still visible.”

“Problems?”

She looked up. Caelamondorion had walked over to her, a book balanced open on his hand.

“Just the wings,” she replied, then laughed softly, repeating, “*Just* the wings. Quartz and Chrysocolla, listen to me, talking as if I’ve seen someone sprout wings and fly before. There is no ‘just’ about that.”

“Can your crystal sight not find them?”

She bit her lip. So, the elves knew about that ability too, did they?

“No,” she said softly. “It cannot reach into the realm beyond death.”

“So, we need something else.”

“I’m not sure there *is* anything else.” She sighed. “We can’t go back there, so they become visible again. What else *is* there?”

Caelamondorion put down the book and sat on the bed, bracing one elbow near to Paix’s shoulder as he looked down intently at his face.

“Well,” he said softly, “there is always the Vigil. He has returned to us from his wanderings, I think. Take his hand.”

Xsia-Minai’Te slipped her hand into Paix’s right palm, clasping it firmly, even as Caelamondorion took his left, cradling it between both of his hands.

Caelamondorion began to speak softly, in a language that she had only heard Paix himself speak before, and only as an aside to one of his aides.

"Mabra'Qiza. Ah-thraam al-risha. Ayamah'ajhin, hakhad'shifah."

A soft golden glow shimmered overhead. Xsia-Minai’Te looked up, to see that same orb slowly rotating above the bed, casting its warm rays down upon Paix. And there, spread out beneath him, the ghostly shimmer of the great wings appeared once more.

“What did you say?” she whispered.

“*’Blessed Vigil. Respect to your Keeper. Allow his wings to show, that they may be healed.’* You must heal him without letting go of his hand. Can you do that?”

She smiled. “Yes, I can do that. At least, I can try my best.” Her smile faded, as she added in a whisper, “They’re so damaged. I don’t think my crystals can mend them fully. They need more support.”

“Like a bandage, you mean?”

She shook her head. “Can’t bandage wings without hobbling them. That much I know from rescuing the occasional wounded bird here and there. He might need them again sometime soon, so they need something equally supportive but less intrusive. Strong thread or something.”

She watched as Caelamondorion touched the fingers of his free hand to the front of Paix’s tunic, its deep neck embroidered with delicate copper-twined thread. Slowly, the thread unstitched itself from the fabric, spooling into his palm. He held it out with an amused quirk of one eyebrow.

“I think that, between this and maybe some of the ribbons on your skirts, you could do a good job,” he said softly.

Xsia-Minai’Te looked at the thread, then shook her head with a rueful laugh.

“You think he’ll mind me making his wings all pretty with ribbons and copper thread?”

“If I had wings, I would certainly appreciate it.” Caelamondorion shrugged. “Besides, the thread is copper, so what could be more fitting?”

“What indeed. Right then. Let’s make a start on this…”

CHAPTER 26

Everything hurt.

Hot, angry pain seared his body, focusing on the side of his torso, his hands, and his face. It screamed in soundless, shattered words between his shoulders. It needled into his mind and behind his eyes, presenting him with broken visions; fractured glimpses of the Vigil, of engulfing fire, of ground rent asunder, of stone towers crumbling, of cracked and dry ocean beds, of death, of death, of death.

Everything hurt, and everything was wrong.

Far, far away, he saw a great walled city rising up from a hilltop. Towers that were once white stone, now soot-smudged and encrusted with coal dust. Black rooftops worn like tall hats that jutted through the steamy, smoky cloud surrounding one large, blackened building. At its zenith, a roiling container of molten trouble; at its nadir, a man holding a small and shiny black shard between finger and thumb, examining it with interest.

"So, this is all that remains of it. Shiny. It'd make a pretty trinket."

"It should be destroyed."

"Oh, of course. I'll take care of it. My foundry will soon make light work of that. Melt it into nothing."

"Be sure that you do. Such a thing is not to be trifled with, nor to be turned into a necklace."

So shiny. So pretty. So rare. So tempting.

"It should be destroyed."

"Oh, of course. I'll take care of it."

It would look so lovely, hanging from a delicate neck chain.

"It should be destroyed."

But nobody would know, not if he wore it beneath his shirt!

The man sighed, reached out his other hand - clad in a thick fireproof gauntlet - and pulled down a heavy insulated hatch. Behind it, destruction roared and clamoured. He paused, then shook his head in resignation, before tossing the shard into the foundry and letting the hatch door slam shut behind it.

He took off the gauntlet, dropped it onto a nearby stool, and turned his back on the foundry.

The ground began to shake.

He froze.

The shaking increased. Bottles danced off shelves, hammers and tongs clattered to the floor, cries of alarm bled in from the city, warning bells clanged.

A sound loud enough to break his hearing finally forced him to move, turning to watch in horror as the foundry cracked and heaved. He watched for just long enough to realise that if he didn't move fast the rest of him would also be broken.

He fled, blending into the screaming crowd; a desperate tsunami of humanity flowing toward the city's gates.

Up... up... up... up...

The great chimney cap atop the foundry shot up like a cork, but it was not enough to release the pressure. The stone building cracked and glowed as tides of people rolled down the hill; some running, some tumbling, many trampled and crushed in the surge.

The world turned white, a moment of blistering, beautiful purity. Silence bloomed outwards as the earth held its breath. And then, a great shattering boom presaged the arrival of a maelstrom; a roiling wall of heat and flame and obliteration, dashed with razored rock and stone, roaring and greedy. Racing ahead of it, the land ruptured, riven with deep cracks that gulped down into their depths houses and carts, trees and streams. As the cracks clawed far and wide through the lands, they teased fresh earthquakes from far below them, gleefully tickled ancient lava pits into bubbling life, and coaxed long-dormant volcanoes into fiery thunder.

Forest, farm, and field blazed, stock and stone blackened, towers cracked and fell, oil and ordnance supplies refuelled the endless, unstoppable maelstrom as it tore across the lands, its wall of destruction felling one mighty empire after another.

The Guardian of the land beyond death had one final visitation left to make, far across the hot sands.

***

The agony in his side had abated. The pain in his hand blazed, then ceased. The shadow that had lain over his mind suddenly cleared like thunderclouds over the desert dunes.

"So, this is all that remains of it," he heard someone say a moment later. "Shiny. It'd make a pretty trinket."

It is all my fault. I could have - should have - lived with that. Should have let it burrow deeper; so deep that she couldn't find it. I could have… could have lived with it.

A small voice nuzzled at him; a gentle little nudge that tickled and purred into his mind with a teal-coloured whisper.

no. Onorait Paix would have become Guardian instead. not strong enough to resist.

Everything hurt, and everything was wrong.

***

He opened his eyes. Above him, an indigo-painted sky laced with silver constellations. Around him, the silence of night. Echoes of pain still faded from his body as he shivered beneath the blanket, wracked with memory and grief.

How long would it take N'dachVeip to reach his lands? Could he send a messenger after him, to try and warn him? How long had he lain here in his bed? Xsia-Minai'Te and Caelamondorion had clearly left him, but it surely must be the same night? If naught else, Chaperone Mhenheli would have woken him if it were a new day…

Slowly, he sat up, gritting his teeth against the lingering aches of his body, then stood up. His sandal brushed against something, and he looked down to see his broken trident on the floor at his feet.

The sky outside his windows was midnight dark. The *city* was midnight dark.

His breath caught in his throat. Then, he started to run.

Out of his private quarters, past silent and empty corridors, past quiet gardens, through solitary gates, overnight-cooled pavements, to the centre of the city.

He skidded to a halt, gasping for air, staring upwards.

The Vigil was dark and silent.

***

He opened his eyes. Above him, an indigo-painted sky laced with silver constellations. Around him, the silence of night. Echoes of pain still faded from his body as he shivered beneath the blanket, wracked with memory and grief.

Something nuzzled his neck. Something licked his cheek. Something purred in his ear.

Onorait Paix rest. bad thought remember gone.

Malin's gently glowing head butted against him a couple of times.

bad thought remember gone. Onorait Paix awake. now, not then.

The room had changed again. A little bigger, a painted sky ceiling, the walls now fully polished sandstone.

Malin huffed - a startled, squeezed-out little cough of surprise - as they were suddenly grabbed and wrapped up in a desperately tight hug.

"It was a dream," Pix whispered, the words tumbling over themselves, lost amid the tears that dampened Malin's fur. "Just a dream. It didn't go dark. I know it didn't. It didn't stop speaking to me. A dream. It was just a dream. *Just a dream*."

And it had hurt more than any wound he had ever borne before.

CHAPTER 27

He could have sworn he'd had at least three or four cups of the honey wine over the previous few days, but there the copper jug sat, still full. Beside it, the inkwell and quill waited, but he didn't have it in him to concern himself with elegant penmanship and the meticulous recording of histories. Not this morning. Not after last night.

He laid the large record book gently on the bed, its place on the desk filled instead with the smaller A5 leather-bound book that he'd taken to using for his scribbled field notes, loose sketches, and scratched down general thoughts. In truth, this book had replaced his old thin journal in its purpose, serving as a day-to-day record.

But he had not been truthful in it. Not fully. Not completely. Today, that needed to change.

He sat down, poured himself a generous cup of the wine, dipped the quill, and stared at the page.

His head was a mess, his memories tangled like a badly threaded cat's cradle. So far, he'd just taken it in stride - or so he'd thought - that he was dipping in and out of the past. But now it was beginning to fuck with his head a little too much. He couldn't carry out his work effectively when he was in this state, but he didn't know where the hell to start. Where was the end of that tangled piece of string, so he could start unravelling it all?

> *The city is both dead and alive. I've walked in both. When it's alive ~~it feels so believable but~~ it's completely REAL. ~~I've eaten and drunk stuff~~*
>
> *Food and drink crosses times, from past into present, and stays fresh.*
>
> *When it's the past, people recognise me. <u>But I've never been here before.</u>*
>
> *I can feel the statue. Can kind of… sense it? A bit like Malin when they're not actually speaking to me, I can still sense them and their mood. I can kind of sense <u>her</u>. Pretty sure I've felt her hand on my forehead once before now. Or the sensation of a hand that was supposed to be hers. I don't even bloody know.*

He refilled the cup and re-read his words. The handwriting was scruffy, scratched out and blotted in places. He already had ink on his fingers, which had smudged on the page. But he needed to get this out of his head and onto paper, so it would stop bothering him.

I led my people here? And I was still here 50 yrs later?

Offerings? Emerald ore. Incense (fresh every day). Dates. Wine. Conduit. Bread (HOT bread! Even in the present) Who's leaving them? The city? The people from its past? Who's cleaning my clothes?

Room changes: first, it appeared. Next, sandstone border. Desk and chair. Pillars. Walls. Ceiling. Outer door surround, niche. Surround again, Conduit holder. Gets bigger, too.

Chest: contents change, depending whether past or present. Changes within times, too (worry beads).

He scrubbed a hand over his eyes. By the stars, this wasn't helping. All he had was a series of questions and a list of things that had happened. He really should be more methodical about this; treat it like any other investigation he might carry out. But his head wasn't in the right space for that.

He refilled the cup again. The jug was still full. He studiously ignored that inconvenient little fact. The wine was warming, loosening, and maybe helping… just a little bit.

"He is coming." WHO IS?! Who wrote that? And why did it disappear, as if I wasn't supposed to see it? Honestly unnerved by this, more than I realised. Is someone going to show up? Take this away from me?

She knows I can't share her. I promised to take care of her, to document everything about her history. And she's been taking care of me; pretty sure of that. It's her… right? Somehow, she knew. She knows. She's an angel of life and death. She's

He looked up from the page, staring at the wall.

"She's a Guardian," he whispered, eyes wide, a panicked rivulet of uncontrollable shivering starting to pour inside his chest. "Nonononono. No, she's not like that thing. She's… she's maternal, funerary, protective… she's the Isis of these people. Mother to the deceased."

And she knew. She knew what had walked into her domain, and she had welcomed it, provided succour to it, given it comfort.

Guilt and anguish on two legs. Weakness and fear, wrapped up in brushes and palette knives. The Keeper of Lifetimes and Endings, whose selfishness caused more endings than he could endure. The faithless deserter whose meticulous self-control she's been slowly unpicking all this time.

It didn't go dark. It didn't go dark. Didn't. Go. Dark. It wasn't silent.

It blazed.

It screamed.

It knew. Knew what I'd done. Knew I'd used its gifts for my own selfish purposes. But it wasn't angry. It hurt. It was hurting. It felt their pain. All of them. Thousands upon thousands of them. My hands. My own selfish

***

He couldn't bear it. The light in his mind was blinding, the lament deafening. Clinging to the window ledge, Paix stared down at the Vigil. It looked no different - Conduit gently rotating, candles softly flickering - as it watched over the city.

But it was tormented. He could feel it, see it, hear it. Never before had it reacted like this. The Vigil concerned itself with Paixandria and its people only. But something had happened; something terrible and calamitous, caused by his own hand. And now, the Vigil mourned the deaths of thousands.

The vision had woken him, sent him shivering from his bed to wrap himself in his coat. A city blown apart, wildfires and earthquakes spreading and toppling other cities. He had run to the window, and the anguish of the Vigil had slammed into him.

My fault. My fault. My fault. I didn't <u>know</u>. I was so tired of the pain of the void. If I'd known, oh stars, if I'd known… I would have borne it for eternity.

The Vigil's scream twisted and writhed in his mind, the agony of burning, of crushing, of trampling, of breaking, of panic.

I can't. I can't. I can't. I need… need air. Need space. Just… for a few hours. I can't… please.

Numb fingers scrabbled for a hold as he climbed over the window ledge and let himself drop silently down onto the low porch roof. One more drop and he was on the ground, surrounded by the sweet scent of desert blooms.

Even out here, it followed him. And a deeper dread settled into him.

They would know. His people would know. How could he hold their hands, listen to their words, and guide them through their final journey, knowing what he had done? But… there was nobody else to do it. He was born to it, chosen by the Vigil, protected by it. Its Keeper.

And it was screaming, lamenting every life that *he had ended*.

He did not deserve its protection. It deserved better than him.

He began to run.

***

I didn't even know where I was heading; only that I needed to get away. I ran for what my lungs told me was hours, but was probably only ten minutes, because I made it to the outcrop where the astrologers liked to sit.

I could still hear the Vigil, but I had some breathing space at least. I figured I'd climb the rock and stay there until the moon was at its height. It was cloudy, so nobody was up there. I wanted to keep going, but I also… wanted one last look back at home… in the moonlight.

I climbed to the very top and sat at its very edge, hugging my knees. My beautiful city glowed far below; a golden pearl in the desert night, with the anthill rising like a shadowed backdrop. I could see the occasional oil lamp glimmering in a window, the pylons shimmering, the bright green of the gardens with their vivid flowers - oh, my people had worked so hard to fashion such a beautiful and lush home in this unforgiving place. The banners drifted in the night breeze, the Vigil - though anguished in my mind - a steady and glowing comfort to my people, and it was all so perfect, so peaceful.

High up on the outcrop, I could feel the ground faintly trembling. It wasn't strong enough to have been felt in the city, but with my senses so heightened, I could feel it.

And then the sands started to stir. The wind was getting up. I could see something in the far distance; a dark shadow rising from the southeast. At first, I thought it was a sandstorm, that the warning bells would sound for my people to wake and run for the safety of the Anthill.

I gave not a thought to my own safety. What did that matter now?

Surely the watch towers would see the shadow of the sandstorm soon? It was moving faster than any storm I had ever seen before. But the bells did not ring. Were the guards asleep?!

Clouds of sand billowed ahead of the storm, and finally the bells sang out. I was too far away to see much, but columns of light appeared as doors were opened, from within them the shadowed forms of my people moving out into the streets.

A few moments later, I realised this was no sandstorm. It was a wall of destruction, boiling with fire and shot through with deadly rocks, advancing with terrifying speed. Paixandria shuddered as it approached, sand blasted through the streets by the shockwave ahead of it, blinding my people as they ran desperately for safety.

They had three minutes. That was all. And it wasn't enough.

I watched, helpless, as my home, my city, my people…

***

The final line of blurred ink, barely legible, ended with the quill being thrown onto the desk. Scrubbing a hand over wet eyes, Pix grabbed the still-full wine jug and cup, taking it over to the bed. He shoved the large record book onto the floor, not even caring that it might be damaged, then sank onto the bed and huddled into the corner, knees pulled up to his chest, tugging the blanket up around himself.

Malin hopped up onto the bed with him, ducking under the blanket and snuggling as close as they could, as Pix made tearful headway into the one guaranteed way of forgetting, if only for a few hours.

And quietly, on the desk, fresh words appeared on the page.

He draws closer. He is coming.

CHAPTER 28

Dusk arrived with wakefulness and a head full of hammers. With a soft groan, Pix raised one hand to his forehead and tentatively opened his eyes. Thank all the stars for low golden lamplight, though even that made him squint and survey the room through half-closed lids.

For once, it was unchanged. Perhaps the city had taken pity on him and decided not to shift his surroundings this evening. The jug of honey wine - still nauseatingly full - and empty cup sat on the small bedside table. Beside them was the only new thing in the room: a tall and delicate pottery beaker, washed with a beautiful golden glaze.

Fragrant steam curled lazily up from its mouth, and Pix oh-so-carefully leaned forward toward it, very much aware of his forehead and temples violently protesting as he did so. As the scent reached him, the corners of his mouth quirked in brief amusement.

***

“A little overindulgence last night, Mu'enaah?”

“Impertinence! Mark my words, one day after you have fallen a bit too deep in your cups, you will beg me for this recipe. ‘Tis of my own devising, and a pure wonder.”

“I smell ginger…”

“Hmpf! Very well. That is one of the ingredients. The rest I shall keep, that I may one day give you the same knowing smile you now give me when you beg for your aching head and tumbling belly to be eased.”

“And… hm… chamomile?”

“Ach! That handsome nose of yours is too stars-blessed sensitive! Can’t an old woman have any secrets?!”

“And, if I know you well enough, Mu'enaah, the final ingredient is a generous spoon of honey.”

***

Cradling the beaker carefully in both hands, he nestled back on the bed against the corner of the wall. He hadn’t missed that he was once again clad in desert

raiment, but instead of tripping his mind up and backwards into the anguish of memory, it now felt like a familiar comfort.

Slow, mindful sips. The chamomile gentled his aching head, the ginger warmed his throat on its way down to settle his stomach, and the honey sweetened his lingering sorrow. Nehle-aalh's old remedy for overindulgence truly *was* a pure wonder.

At his hip, Malin snoozed, their body vibrating with soft little snores. Ensuring that he had a good grip on the beaker with one hand, Pix let the other hand rest on their gently rising and falling flank, his fingers stroking through their fur.

Did it *really* matter who was doing this? The offerings, the clean clothes, the constant changes to the room, the contents of the chest; hell, even the haircut and beard trim. Why was he trying to make sense of the nonsensical when so many other things here deserved his attention instead?

***

"Do you ever wonder at your own mind?"

"Sometimes, Onorait. I catch myself amazed at how much I can stuff into it and have it recall at a later date. Usually the most ridiculous things, grant you. Did you know that the folk of Raendellarae have a name for the Silver Ant that is close to ours, though those names were given before we each knew of the other's existence? They call it 'taelënnier', which means 'silvered honeybee'."

"Well, it <u>is</u> silver to the eye, and it <u>is</u> small like an ant or a bee…"

"Shh. You speak of wondering at your mind, yet you listen only to the part of it that holds reason and logic. Give an ear to the part of it that holds wonder, mystery, and magic. Such things exist, if you allow yourself to seek them out."

"…like the Vigil?"

"Exactly like the Vigil! Ah, I've looked out of the observatory window and seen you stand before the Vigil many a time, gazing up at it as it speaks to you. Your face is lit with more than the Vigil's glow in those moments. It reminds me a little of the wonder I'd see in your eyes when you were first a young student of mine, looking up at the stars through my lenses and asking me a thousand questions about where they came from and where they were going."

***

He closed his eyes, letting his head rest back against the coolness of the polished sandstone wall. He'd been inside that head a little too much of late, paying too much attention to that part of reason and logic; the part that demanded things should make sense.

Instead, he could just… allow.

His breathing slowed, soft and shallow, and he observed it, felt the coolness of each inhalation and the warmth of each exhalation.

His shoulders dropped a little.

The silence of night filled the room, letting him know the city was in the present. Every now and then, Malin would huff a little sigh or twitch a paw. On the edge of hearing, Pix could make out the faintest crackle of incense grains as they glowed in their sand-filled cup on his desk.

His brow smoothed. His jaw loosened.

The air was softly redolent of incense, chamomile, and ginger. It reminded him of the heartfelt hugs of his mu'enaah; one of only two people who had been permitted to touch him after the Vigil had chosen him when he was but ten years old.

He observed his own mind, with detached curiosity. A small part of it still held onto 'He is coming', poking at it and questioning it. Another part of it wandered far and wide, always looking up, seeking the Vigil's light. Yet another dwelt amid piles of old books, eating dates and immersed in histories. This part over here sat quietly, cradling a lit candle, and that part over there swept quill and ink over paper in tender words. Here, the careful construction of a redstone schematic; there, the meticulous unearthing of artefacts.

***

"She calls to you, doesn't she?"

"She always has."

"I foresee many years before you. Years of wandering, years of learning, years of devotion, and years of loneliness. But you will find her, one day. And she will bring you back."

***

He was *becoming* again.

CHAPTER 29

The night air was a little chilly as he stepped out of the room. One glance back showed him that Malin was *very* comfortably ensconced on the bed in their usual doughnut shape, their glow dimmed enough to pronounce that they were sound asleep thank you very much and would not be accompanying him on his nocturnal wanderings.

This fact was actually quite comforting, since it meant no danger would befall him wherever he chose to go this evening. He'd never quite worked out how they sensed it, but if there were even the *remotest* chance of something going awry, Malin would always accompany him. That contented doze, though, loosened his shoulders, and he closed the door behind him with a smile.

With his head now cleared - stars bless Nehle-aalh! - he had felt restless enough to go for a walk. Having spent over a day cooped up in the room, most of it curled up on the bed, he needed to stretch his legs, and the Greatbridge was calling him. A stroll up and down its entire length would be exercise enough before he turned in for the remainder of the night, since he had no desire to begin keeping overly late hours.

The evening breeze was cool between his sandaled toes and around his loosely linen-clad ankles; a novel enough experience, since he'd worn pants tucked into boots for much of his time outside at night. Grateful for the warmth afforded by his long ivory coat, he pushed his hands into its deep pockets and stepped down onto the cobbled path.

The city was in its now, yet he was dressed in its then as he slowly made his way through streets that breathed quietly under the moonlight. Dried grasses whispered at the juncture of ruined buildings and hard-packed earth, and here and there a night insect whirred or chirruped in the distance.

Silvered in the moonlight, the statue watched over her ancient city and its solitary inhabitant. Pulling his hands from his pockets, Pix cupped them together and raised them, touching the tips of his fingers to his forehead as he dipped in a bow of respect toward her.

As he straightened, he saw a slender ribbon of light streak across the sky behind her, and he smiled.

"I would make a wish," he said softly, "but I have all that I need already."

A second star followed its sister. Pix laughed.

“Well, if you insist. May all those souls who desire rest or peace find what they need. *Mabra'Qiza liaah-qun.*”[1]

***

The Greatbridge stretched out before him, its pale stone gleaming in the soft, cold light of the moon. The assortment of statues arranged along it stood quiet sentinel, the llama casting a long shadow, the banner on the sword’s blade swinging in the night breeze, the distant amethyst crystals sparkling and glittering.

To his right, something he had barely noticed before: an off-ramp leading down from the bridge. Making his way over to the edge of the bridge, he leaned on the ledge and looked down. Far below, the base of the off-ramp led down to an area of land behind the shore; mingled grass and scuffed old stone. It looked well-trodden, and he could see a small pool at the base of the bridge’s pile. It drew his curiosity enough that he decided to investigate.

The off-ramp slope was gentle, backing around on itself a couple of times until it reached the ground. Down here, profuse overgrowth obscured the water. Pushing aside the tallest grasses he’d seen since emerging into the savannah, Pix carefully made his way over broken stone bricks until he reached the pool.

It was clearly man-made, lined with carved old bricks of dark stone. Tall, half-dead vines twisted up the walls, and at the centre of the back wall sat a peculiar statue that looked for all the world like a craggy old face. Crumbling with age, its left eye held what had once been a redstone lamp but was now a jagged frame of iron with only a few glowing shards of glass dug into it. The glimmer of ancient, oxidised copper represented its other eye, and another weathered copper chunk had clearly fallen into the water from the hole where its mouth was.

To the left of it, the bricks had cracked and fallen, leaving an ingress behind it. The pale lichen that seemed to thrive in this location had taken hold within, as the hollow was lit with an eerie greenish glow.

Pix stepped carefully over the damp stones surrounding the pool, craning his neck to peer warily into the ingress. It was of a generous size and well-lit by the lichen. Worth investigating, then. Two more steps - one of them over a large fallen brick stair - and he was inside.

He caught the oily whiff of redstone but could see none of the red dust in the ghostly light. Instead, what he found was a large square stone shape with a small lever on its side. He hadn’t seen one of these in a while, and he wondered what was inside it. One hefty tug on the lever - stiff with age - saw the back of the dropper slide down to reveal its contents.

A small treasure trove greeted his curious gaze. A helmet and two pickaxes, all glinting with words whispered into them. An oddly shaped box of a velvety purple material he had never encountered before. And - he gasped - a stack of shimmering black ingots whose rarity made their combined worth beyond even guessing in this modern age.

“Netherite!” he whispered, reaching out to graze reverent fingertips over the ingots. “Six of them! By the stars, that is more than all the known netherite in the world right now!”

Moving his fingers to touch the closest pickaxe, he closed his eyes and asked softly, “Tell me of your abilities, worthy miner.”

In his mind’s eye, he saw ores dropping in great quantities from a rock face, the pickaxe moving effortlessly through stone and ores alike.

He moved his fingers to the helmet, asking of it the same question. It showed him a vision of moving swiftly and working unhindered underwater.

“Thank you,” he murmured to them both. "My name is Onorait Paix al-Lareiff, and should I have need of you both, it would be my honour to bear and wear you.”

The curious box was next to fall under his gaze. Around its middle, an oddly shaped seam traced its entire circumference. There appeared to be no method of opening it that he could find, so he tried laying his palm along its top, intending to ask it of its purpose. But that, apparently, *was* the way to open it, and he snatched his hand back as the box cracked along the seam, its lid spinning up with a soft clunk.

Nestled within it were a few of the strange fruits from the orchard, which Malin had dubbed ‘croak burp fruits’. And sitting atop the stack were two apples that glinted with a strange golden sheen.

Every item looked as fresh as if it had just been plucked from its tree, and when he reached inside to pick up one of the apples, the coldness that touched his fingers made him hesitate.

“Okay, there’s no way this is some kind of fridge,” he muttered. “There’s no power source that I can see - other than some ancient redstone - but…”

There was no doubting it. This box had been behind here for a very long time, it was ice-cold inside, and the fruit that it contained was perfectly preserved. Carefully, he laid a hand on the top of the lid again, watching as it spun back down into a closed position. Hopefully, he hadn’t broken whatever was causing that chill.

There was nothing else inside the dropper, so he stepped back to survey its priceless contents. The netherite alone was an incredible find, but to also come across an ancient source of refrigeration—

His gaze swivelled left. Something tall and slender was leaning against the side of the dropper; something a little taller than he was, fashioned of copper, and branching out into three ornate and elegantly carved tines.

A trident.

His breath caught in his throat. It was in immaculate condition - unweathered and pristine - and the patterning not only of its carvings but also of its artfully unwaxed decorative streaks of verdigris were very, very familiar.

Before he even realised, the weight of it was in his hand; a sensation of intimacy almost thrumming from it as he held it. There, beneath its head, the signs of careful repair showed that this weapon had once been broken.

He ran tender fingers down the tines, watching as tiny sparks crackled along them, one of them yearning out toward the old copper ring he wore.

"*Yah'dir-siqa*,"[2] he whispered, his eyes lit with wonder and incredulity. "How in the name of all the stars did you find your way here?! You gave your all against the Guardian, and the last I saw you…"

He closed his eyes. No. That memory was not a place he would return to this night. Not with this precious protector and friend back where it belonged in his hand, making him a little more whole again.

The priceless artefacts in the dropper were forgotten as he stepped out from the ingress, back into the night air, falling into an easy and familiar rhythm with the trident's base touching the floor at every other step as he made his way back home.

[1] *Mabra'Qiza liaah-qun* = Vigil's Grace grant it so

[2] *Yah'dir-siqa* = bringer of lightning

CHAPTER 30

It turned out that working amid ruins whilst wearing desert raiment was not as difficult or awkward as he'd initially thought it would be. The loose clothing was cool and comfortable in the heavy heat of the savannah, and it was something of a delight to feel air around his sandaled feet as he worked, rather than having them cooped up in knee-high strapped leather boots, which - while sturdy and offering good support for his ankles - didn't exactly afford him much in the way of comfort. He even delighted in the dry dusty soil that got between his toes and under his soles, since it reminded him of the sands of his beloved Paixandria.

The only thing he missed was the sensation of his trusty old leather leg bag, which now rested on the lower shelf of his bedside table. But, on reflection, he realised how infrequently he'd actually reached into that bag since he'd arrived here - almost never, in fact - and he hadn't missed the use of what it contained. Rather, he'd just missed the familiarity of those straps around his left thigh. It took a couple of weeks for that feeling to fade, but fade it eventually did.

Four quiet and uneventful days were spent in the delights of documenting the large building that he'd spotted not long after arriving. It had possibly once been a luxurious home, fronted by a classically styled portico and topped with an exquisite copper roof and dome that were in beautiful condition. The interior was a single spacious room, which had sparked within him the notion that it would make a perfect place to store and perhaps display some of the city's treasures.

Granted, if he turned the building into a museum, it would be for his own use only, but on seeing the space and realising its potential a yearning for a return to his days pottering around amid curated exhibits touched his soul again. Polished wood cabinets of meticulously sorted and recorded curiosities, pots and sherds in glass cases, neatly written museum labels, and the comforting hush of history that permeated a room such as that; oh, he would love to taste that quiet peace of the ages again.

The city had remained in its present, affording him time to spend his days jotting down field notes in his everyday tight, scribble-scrabble hand; scratched sketches, scrupulous measurements, and diligent chronicles punctuated with the marginalia of afterthought as he sought to cram every page with as much detail as he could.

His evenings were spent with the tall ledgers. Inked quill in a hand whose penmanship opened up like a night flower into elegant and flowing script, he transcribed notes and sketches alike, painstakingly documenting the story of the city. And if the occasional line of poetry also spilled from that hand, what of it? It

had been an age of the world twice over since his heart had yearned toward paper, and now that it had been reawakened to that joy, he was in no mind to stop it.

Occasional afternoons were spent in solitary industry, tending to the small garden that he'd set up with the seeds and sprouted potatoes that had been left in the chest. He had wandered back to the ancient farming area, seeking out other vegetables for replanting in that garden. Weeding and watering whiled away productive hours, rewarding him with the joy of tender green shoots, even as his own roots sank deep into the dry soil and took firm hold.

So it was that he found himself closing the ledger late one night and sitting back in his chair. Malin was fast asleep in their little basket, dimmed and snoring gently, and he watched them with a faint smile on his lips.

He had missed the city's past, but he knew that it would return when he least expected it. He would awaken one morning to the sound of footsteps and voices and have the opportunity to live in history for a day or two. And then, back in the present, the ghosts of buildings would shimmer in his mind's eye, allowing him to see them again; both there and not. This, if nothing else, had allowed him to make his peace with the strangeness that surrounded him; the messy cat's-cradle unscrambling in his head the longer he existed in this intangible space between times.

He closed his eyes and sighed, his shoulders fully relaxed and loose.

***

A faint, but insistent knocking at his door made him pause and glance up. Without waiting for a response from him, the door cracked open and Chaperone Mhenheli edged his way in.

Paix looked back down at his book, copper nib once again touching paper as he continued writing.

"One moment," he murmured, sweeping a final flourish to the word *'silent'.* He then laid the quill down on its elegant stand, picked up the copper vial at his left hand, and delicately trickled soft, pale sand from it onto the wet ink.

Patient as a stone, Mhenheli waited - hands folded primly behind his back - until Paix looked up at him and raised a questioning eyebrow. Only at that point did he clear his throat and hold out a scroll.

"Onorait," he said. "A messenger has arrived from Mythland. He has brought an invitation."

Setting the vial back down on the desk, Paix stood, crossing the floor toward Mhenheli and taking the scroll from him. The seal was indeed that of the Mythish king; a rich red wax into which the imprint of a sheep's head had been made, and as Paix walked a few paces away from the Chaperone - to afford himself a little privacy to read - he broke the seal with one fingernail, allowing the scroll to fall open.

Honour'd King Paix of the Desert Kingdom, he read. *This messenger bringeth tidings of a great discovery! Within the barren mountains far beyond my lands, my explorers hath found a secret deep beneath the ground: a stronghold filled with knowledge, much of which will surely hold an interest for a scholar such as thyself.*

In utter silence, he read the remainder of the missive. Read it twice, in fact; slowly and carefully. Yes. Yes indeed, these were the same words. He knew these words; knew what they would lead to. That same cruel torment he had lived a thousand times over and more.

But… from whence did he derive that knowledge? A dream?

A warm breeze ruffled his coat. The scirocco had arrived earlier that morning, dusting Paixandria in a fine layer of sand from the distant dunes, bringing the city's residents out with short brooms to sweep the streets. By nightfall it had softened to a dry breath that stirred the city's banners and snaked its way in through open windows.

Mhenheli still waited.

And Paix realised that he still waited.

This was… new. This was… different. This was…

He should have responded by now, told Mhenheli to ready his armour… should he not?

He had not yet spoken.

Slow curiosity began to burn a tiny flame within him. Very deliberately, he turned and walked with a measured pace over to the open arched window that led out into the night.

Yes. Yes, this was different. He should not have done that. He *had not* done that.

He stared down at the Vigil as the tiny flame flickered inside, a candle's hope and promise.

This is not a memory. This is not a dream. This is not a playback. This is the moment. The past is now, again. I have… I have agency.

Galvanised into movement again, he walked over to his desk and sat. An empty scroll rested at his right hand, always ready should it be needed, and always replaced anew when it had been used. He reached for it now, unrolling it and weighting top and bottom down with two elegant heavy copper bars. He dipped the quill once more and began to write.

To his honoured Majesty, Ser'Zhege of Mythland,

To your offer of a hunt in territory that you have discovered upon the lands beyond your kingdom, I offer my gratitude and appreciation of your consideration in extending this invitation to me.

Regretfully, and with the greatest respect, I must decline this offer. And with this refusal I feel duty bound to offer also a warning to you and any others who may join you in this endeavour. With the best of intent, I strongly advise against undertaking this hunt.

Your explorers returned voidstruck. This tells me that what you will find at your destination is a thousand measures and more beyond any prey that you have ever stalked before. I say this not to offer you further challenge, but to warn that a successful conclusion to this journey would cause ill for all nations.

Mark my words, friend, for I do not offer them lightly.

May the light of the Vigil ever be on your path,
Onorait Paix al-Lareiff

Pushing aside the weights, he closed the scroll and picked up a bar of copper-coloured wax. Holding its end over the flame of the desk's oil lamp, he waited a few moments, then allowed the wax to drip across the scroll join, forming a soft liquid puddle that sealed the most important letter he had ever written. The seal of Paixandria - sand-filled hands holding a Conduit aloft - pressed into the wax before it hardened, and Paix stood again.

"Tell the messenger to make haste," he said, holding out the scroll for Mhenheli to take. "It is of the utmost importance that this reaches the king as soon as possible."

Mhenheli murmured his assurance that it would, and exited the room, as Paix flopped back into his chair, his breath half-held, time shimmering around the flame within him.

He had just altered history.

And yet… and yet… how did he know that? Where was this future memory of this present past coming from? And… why did he feel deeply uneasy that there was not a moment to lose?

His gaze alighted on the quill, which had fallen from its delicately balanced rest at the echoed vibration caused by him sitting back down in his chair.

Hmm…

CHAPTER 31

Slowly, over the days and nights, ink-filled page after ink-filled page turned. The occasional glimmer of poetry bled deeper and deeper into the text; a line here becoming a stanza there, elegies and sonnets draping themselves over measurements and field sketches. With infinitesimal patience, the ledger's true purpose revealed itself.

The city's past visited often, affording him the chance to glory in the humanity of the Greatbridge, to take a meal here and there in the tavern, and to converse with history itself in a way that reached into his soul to tug hard and strong and true.

Sometimes the city remained in her past, but became a more liminal space; deserted of her people but still intact and whole. Those days were quieter, peaceful, reflective. He spent much of them brushing fingertips over smooth stonework or finding a patch of sunlight to sit in and rest, allowing his unwearying gaze to travel over every inch of this beautiful place he called home so deeply that his very bones ached with the comfort it gave him.

On those quieter days, little pieces of the future drifted gently over the past, like sheets over furniture left to gather dust in an attic; ghostly visions of what was to come. Pillars stood strong and true in colour, but in that spectral overlay they shimmered in ethereal ruin, drawing his fascinated gaze until he came to know every part of their storied history, both ancient and yet to come.

The field notes book was left behind, tucked in the rucksack that no longer left the room; resting comfortably against the side of the chest as if they were old friends meeting again after years apart and catching up in the commonplace quietude of old familiarity.

His eyes and memory were all he needed now.

Days bled into weeks bled into months, passing in moments that lasted lifetimes. High on the distant cliffs, the only indicator of time slowly took shape, rising stone by stone, its progress documented in his ledger. Now and then, he would undertake the climb to survey the work, discuss plans with the masons - skilled artisans from the Mythish Guild of Stone Whisperers - and watch in awe as the White Sanctum rose higher and higher over the city.

Evenings and nights saw him with quill in hand, Malin curled up asleep in their basket by his feet. Many, many pages back in the ledger, English had been abandoned for the familiarity of Paixandrian; Latinate poetry just wasn't the same, after all.

Here and there, brief sketches of redstone schematics punctuated the elegant script. His engineers had come to him, much taxed with figuring out how to automate their latest project - a re-imagining of Dar'veh Ehr-maah Nu'hazin - and wishing to lean upon its creator's wisdom. This, too, he oversaw, descending deep beneath the statue, delighting in the oily feel of a sulphurous old friend beneath his hand once more, and working late into several nights to devise the solution: a simple series of wooden pellets that dropped upon detection of a change in oxidisation.

***

The ledger was half-completed when, on one of the city's liminal evenings, he sat back and rested the quill back onto its stand. Stretching his arms above his head and then behind himself, he yawned, rotating his shoulders to ease out the stiffness that invariably came with hours of writing.

At his feet, Malin wriggled onto their back, splayed out inelegantly, half in and half out of their basket, snoring gently. They slept a great deal lately, but he had been so occupied that he hadn't wanted to disturb them. They looked so unutterably peaceful that it brought a smile to his lips as he watched them.

After a few minutes, he turned back to the ledger. The ink would be dry by now, and he could close it before retiring for the night. But there, below today's entry, in flowing Paixandrian script, he saw something that he had not written.

He is here.

The air held its breath as he stilled, re-reading the words.

***

Quietly, carefully, he opened the door and peeked outside. The moon was high, the buildings quiet and overlain with the wraiths of things to come. He looked up at the statue, silvered and peaceful. As they always did when night fell - even on these liminal evenings - the great doors beneath the statue had closed, affording those in eternal slumber within a restful peace until the city decided between living or lingering for the following day.

He crept from the room, closing the door silently behind him. On cat-quiet feet, he hugged walls and crept over familiar roads until he reached the base of the statue. Crouched low, he swiped a hand over a broad section of the redstone dust, scattering it to the night breeze and breaking the circuit. That, at least, would keep the doors secure from prying eyes.

From *his* prying eyes, whoever he was.

The night passed in a sleepless watch, spent in the arms of an acacia that overlooked the city's main road and the statue.

***

Morning brought with it tired eyes that eventually gave in to the siren call of a nap. Firmly wedged into the tree branches, out of sight from the ground and shielded from the sun, he dozed for a few hours, finally awakening at the sound of footsteps.

The city was still at rest, quiet and whole and present, yet with that ethereal overlay of ruin. And something else ethereal was here, standing not far away from the tree he was hidden in.

Something almost intangible, something almost fragile; a pale shadow that was achingly familiar. It stood, half there and half not, staring up at the statue. A tall human figure, it seemed to be held rapt by what it saw. Its features were indistinct, wraithlike in the early afternoon sunlight, but he was sure that he could make out the shape of a scruffy beard on its chin.

He was here then. This… was him.

The figure turned and reached out to the building nearest to him, resting a hand on it. No, *in* it. His hand sank into the wall, resting onto the ghostly ruin overlay. He turned back to the statue and looked up at it once more.

His entire form radiated unbridled joy.

CHAPTER 32

It is quite the experience to come face to face with time itself.

He watched from the secrecy of the acacia's canopy as the ghostly stranger walked slowly down the cobbled road toward him, head raised, rapt gaze fixed on the statue. Having reached the base of it, the wraith stopped, one hand reaching out to rest against the heft of immaculate stonework, his thumbnail picking into the sliver-thin joints, seeking and not finding the width of even a piece of paper.

The man took a step back, the joy that he radiated now blending into wonder and curiosity. A quick glance around, and he turned, striding with purpose toward one particular tree.

Oh dear. Oh no. Not *this* tree, please!

It was too late. The pack that he bore was unslung from his shoulders and dropped at the base of the trunk, one hand reached up and gripped the lowest branch, one boot landed itself firmly against the bark, and the apparition was climbing with ease into the very tree where he was hiding!

Desperately trying not to shake the branches and give away his position, he shrank back amid the leaves. They were sparse - too sparse - and surely would not hide him, but they were all he had, as the spectre's form hauled itself up beside him, translucent as the future that lay over the city like a cloud of fog.

In that moment, he found himself staring into eyes that held no colour, as they looked - briefly, but terrifyingly - right through him. Then, the wraith turned, clasping one hand around the nearest branch, and leaned out of the canopy to look up at the statue, shielding his eyes with his hand.

Those eyes had not seen him, thank the stars. Something had hidden him from the spectral man's gaze as it swept through the canopy, seeking handholds to help him observe the statue. Yes, those eyes had not seen him, but that face… *that face*…

He had seen that face before.

Shaken, he watched, letting his gaze run over the wraith. He had the same build, though his hair was longer - tied loosely into a careless knot at the nape of his neck - and his beard scruffier.

He had the same energy, too; a familiarity that would have been comforting if it were not so jarring. What he could see of the man's clothing through the ghostly haze surrounding him showed that his garments were practical and sturdy; well-suited to climbing trees, if nothing else.

You need a name, uninvited yet familiar stranger. I know not what you are called by those who hold you dear, but I must think of a thing to call you, for the sake of my own sanity. I dare not countenance my suspicions, so a name you must have.

His gaze landed on the faint glow of a band around the spectre's finger, and he closed his eyes, unwilling to discover anything more.

Your name must be Emiah. You are not who you show yourself to be. You cannot be who that ring gives you claim to be.

His eyes startled open as the tree shook. The spectre was moving, swiftly climbing back down and jumping the final couple of feet, snatching up the pack and jogging over to the base of the statue. Crouching down, he began to pass his hands through the grass, moving it to one side.

He had found the break in the redstone line.

Breath held, shoulders tensed, he watched as Emiah carefully gathered redstone from elsewhere in the line, bringing it back to fill and close the circuit. Moments later, the great doors shuddered down, and Emiah set foot inside the darkness within.

He could look no more, exhaling in a shuddering breath before he carefully slid down the tree, almost fumbling his footing. Keeping to the side streets, he cat-footed his way back to the room - which Emiah, thankfully, had not seemed to notice - and slipped inside.

Malin dozed on the bed, curled in their usual perfect circle, dimmed enough to show that they slept deeply and soundly. They slept so much these days…

He sat at the desk, opening the almost forgotten ledger. Dipping the quill, he added a single word to the end of the current page.

Emiah.

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The campfire was still in its same old spot, close to the base of the statue and near where he had first pitched his tent. Its flames licked up hungrily over the speared fish, and at its outer edge they caressed the base of a metal cooking pot, sending its contents - the earliest crop of new potatoes, fresh from the small garden - rolling and dancing in the water that covered them.

Pix leaned back against a half-crumbled wall and watched the flames, his gaze fixed on the miniature glowing hellscape to be found deep amid the embers. It was hard to believe that he had been here long enough for the garden to begin

providing for him, but there was just *so much* to do, and time seemed to have forgotten he existed, passing by as if he were no more than a ghost or an afterthought in the fabric of the city.

The fish and potatoes were cooked to perfection; the former flaking into near-melting deliciousness on his tongue, and the latter soft and floury. He had grown accustomed to eating without seasoning, and no longer missed the heat of pepper or the tang of salt, no longer yearned for a knob of salted butter on those potatoes. He had discovered - or rediscovered - how food *really* tasted and was pleasantly surprised by it.

Nearby, Malin padded around the campsite, sniffing the night air. Their ears perked and they stilled, tail up and bent forward a little at its end. Curiously, Pix watched them, that posture a familiar one to him, for it was how Malin always greeted him. That hooked tail was a sign of happiness, but he could see no reason for it now.

Well, he reasoned as he watched, it was said that cats can sense ghosts. Perhaps Malin was just picking up on something amid the layers of time and history that blanketed this place; a shadow of someone who once lived here in the past.

He smiled, clasping his hands together behind his head and relaxing back against the wall, picturing a small child in the distant past, coming across an odd little glowing cat, and crouching to pet it.

Malin was pacing in a figure eight now, winding as they sometimes did around his ankles whenever they wanted his attention. It was fascinating to observe their behaviour, and to wonder just what - or who - they were sensing.

The heat haze from the campfire shimmered, but behind and to one side of it - above Malin - the air also moved, forming the outline of a figure bending over them to stroke their head. The figure straightened, barely a movement of the night air, revealing themselves to be not a child at all, but a tall man… and then it faded.

Malin sat down, watching intently, their gaze clearly following whoever it was, as he made his way down the path, toward the cliff that rose in the far distance.

That reminded Pix. He really needed to make the trek up there sometime soon. He'd been putting off examining the massive ruin that was clearly up there, knowing that it would consume his every waking hour, and probably his dreams for good measure.

Malin padded over to him, butting their head against his side.

"Should I be jealous that you found a new friend?" Pix teased them, lowering one hand to scritch behind their ear.

not new friend. old friend. dear friend.

Huh.

"Well, now I think I *am* jealous," he murmured, his scritchings moving down to their cheek as they scent marked him, purring.

There was that faint touch of amusement from Malin again. Well, whatever they found funny would have to wait. He had notes to transcribe, so with a groan he hauled himself to his feet, kicked out the campfire, grabbed his rucksack, and headed toward his room, Malin trotting at his heels.

Inside, he closed the door, dropping the bag on the chest and stretching with a yawn. Maybe the notes could wait until morn—

Wait a second.

The ledger was open. He hadn't left it like that this morning. Half fearful that there would be another update in the 'He is coming' saga, he approached it cautiously.

One new word was inscribed at the end of the previous entry: a Paixandrian word standing alone in a larger and bolder hand than usual, as if to make a point firm enough to convince its writer.

"Emiah," he murmured.

Brother.

CHAPTER 33

The day was scarce begun, the air still night-cool, the abundant desert blooms outside the royal palace slowly opening as the sky began to lighten, and yet already the path outside the elegant home was thronged with those who had answered their king's call.

Artisans and architects, engineers and jewellers had begun to gather before dawn, some carrying rolled papers, others with their arms laden with books. All those who worked with their hands, those skilled in fashioning intricate objects - no matter their craft - had been commanded to attend at the king's residence with the utmost urgency.

Mhamhil kept himself quietly to one side of the gathering, keen eyes darting across important faces. At the front of the throng stood the court jeweller, discoursing with the city's chief architect, their heads bent together as they muttered to each other with frequent glances toward the elegant front door.

Behind them, two representatives from the Redstone Guildmasters. Mhamhil's eyebrows raised as he realised one of them was none other than the Grand Master himself. The other was a tall and skinny man with bright blond hair, his eyes covered by strange red glass discs. The Grand Master waited with patience, but his colleague's gaze moved restlessly across the gathering.

Others amid the crowd shifted and milled, glanced at the lightening sky, and - like Mhamhil - most likely wondered what in all the stars this was about.

Mhamhil had no arms full of papers, no important books, no great knowledge. He was just a toymaker, a fashioner of trinkets and amusements for Paixandrian children. He had brought with him a bag, tied around his body, filled with some of his finest little amusements, just in case. He had answered his king's call, because even though he was no eminent luminary like many of those before him, he was skilled in his own craft, and thus belonged here just as much as they did.

The doors were opened, revealing a tall, dark-haired man wearing simple black robes.

"Ah," he said, looking out over the small crowd. "I think we have just enough room for you all. Follow me."

The court jeweller - of course - swept in first, followed immediately by the chief architect. There was not so much a pushing and shoving as there was an insistent nudging, so that Mhamhil had no choice but to engage a firm elbow here and there, to ensure that he took his fair place in the moving line of artisans, albeit very close to the back.

He looked all around him as the line wound its way through the palace. He had always wondered what it looked like inside, as its size from outside had never failed to surprise him. A palace should be huge and ostentatious, like those he had heard of from the wandering traders in the souk; colourful like that of the terracotta kingdom to the east or shimmering and glittering like the wall-clinging towers of the mages who dwelt in the high mountain ranges.

But their king's palace was simple and modest by comparison to those fabled wonders. The walls and floors were plain sandstone, polished to a high sheen, the ceilings arched and undecorated. Only the pillars - polished like the walls and trimmed with copper inlays - had any ornament.

The black-robed man stopped in front of a closed set of doors, turning to face them.

"I am sure I do not need to remind you," he said primly, "but the king is not to be touched. Nor is he to be interrupted when speaking. Normal protocol would see each of you showing deference to the emerald ring, but..." - his gaze swept over the throng - "we have not the time for that. Therefore, a simple bow will suffice. Am I understood?"

A low murmur of agreement filled the corridor. Mhamhil - after making his own sound of assent - stifled a grin. This, then, must be the famed and feared Chaperone known as Mhenheli. Oh, he had heard tales about this Chaperone from the palace guards when they fell into their cups at the caravanserai. To say that he was loved would be to say the desert was wet. And yet, the king trusted him, so he must be good for something.

The doors were opened from within, and Mhamhil craned his neck to get a glimpse of the room beyond, since he would be almost the last to enter it. It appeared to be similar to the rest of the palace, with one exception: the ceiling. Mhamhil stared up at it, marvelling at the deep indigo colour of it, at the golden constellations painted upon it, at its sheer beauty. The king was indeed a lucky man, to behold such a sight every day.

In the centre of the room was a simple table, draped with a deep blue linen cloth. As the gathering fanned out in the room, Mhamhil finally caught sight of the king, standing by the window, watching them. His glimpse was brief for now, as the court jeweller bowed low, and the entire gathering followed suit.

They rose - again, almost as one - and Mhamhil finally got to look upon his king. He had seen him before, of course, at the Vigil. But there he looked nothing like this. At the Vigil, the king carried out his duties bare-headed and clad in simple linen robes, his only ornament the emerald ring and the piercings in his ears.

At the Vigil, this man was its humble servant and keeper; the prophet who lit the candles, who listened to and held the words of thousands of souls. But here in his palace he was truly a king. Beneath his cloak he wore deep brown linen pants and a lighter brown tunic, both edged with bright, ornate copper embroidery. But it was the cloak that drew Mhamhil's awed gaze.

Heavy ivory silk draped from the king's shoulders like a waterfall, cut so perfectly that it grazed the polished floor but did not pool underfoot. At its open edges it was banded with copper ribbons that appeared to fade into verdigris. Leading out from the ribbons, running down to the ends of the cloak, hundreds of desert flowers were embroidered in threads of every age of copper.

Atop his head rested the copper crown, burnished bright and gleaming in the light of the oil lamps that dotted the walls. Mhamhil had never seen it before, but he recognised the shape of its front as that of the Conduit cradle above the palace doors. And then he realised the light around the king was not coming from the oil lamps at all.

A tiny Conduit floated above the crown, nestled amid the cradle as its larger brother did atop the palace doors. Mirrored below it, a gleaming emerald cut to a perfect sphere rested against the king's forehead in the lower cradle.

The deep blue kohl-lined eyes of his king suddenly locked on Mhamhil, who realised that he was staring. He lowered his gaze, sweating and hoping that the Chaperone would not kick him out for his insolence.

The king walked toward them, the cloak swinging gently behind him. In his hands he held a slender object which - once he had reached the table - he laid upon the blue cloth.

"Tell me what you see," was all he said.

As one man, the gathered artisans, engineers, and craftsmen leaned over the table and stared at the object. It was a fairly simple construction: a flat base the width of two fingers and the length of one palm. Rising up from it, two slender twisted copper wires held an elegant little cradle.

The court jeweller tilted his head, then looked askance at the king.

"A quill holder, Onorait?" he ventured. "I believe I made this for you upon the occasion of your coronation."

"Correct," the king said, holding out his right hand, still looking over the assembled gathering. Chaperone Mhenheli carefully placed a quill into that hand, which the king then rested into the holder.

Mhamhil scratched his head, peeking around the blond-haired Redstone Guildmaster who had pushed a little in front of him. What under all the stars was this all about? They'd been summoned here at the crack of dawn to stare at a quill holder?

"I have an urgent task for you all," the king continued, resting both hands on the table either side of the quill holder. "It is imperative that a solution is found as soon as possible, which is why I have gathered you all here. Between all of you - the finest craftsmen and artisans of this city - my hope is that this solution may be arrived at by the end of this day."

"We shall, of course, endeavour to serve in any way that we can," the chief architect murmured.

Mhamhil rolled his eyes. Court formalities be buggered; get on with it! He'd missed three good hours of sleep to be here!

"A vision of great danger to Paixandria has come to me," the king said. "A shaking and shattering of the land that presages a wall of destruction greater than any sandstorm the city has weathered before."

The gathering was suddenly still. Even Mhamhil's internal complaining ceased.

"Before the great shaking came smaller tremors," the king continued. "Softer and barely discernible, but present, nonetheless. Scarcely ten minutes passed between the smaller tremors and the great destruction, but if those smaller tremors could be detected we would have time enough to evacuate our people to the safety of the Anthill."

He was still leaning on the table, and he suddenly gave it the gentlest of shakes. The quill fell from its rest onto the blue cloth.

"What I need from you is a device to detect those small tremors." He gestured to the fallen quill. "Sensitive enough to provide warning at the first sign, yet not so much that a footstep close by would trigger it."

The silence lasted for but a few moments more, then down came the unrolling of papers and opening of books onto the table, up went the voices, and a great babbling of discussion filled the room. The chief architect began to sketch a tower with a great pendulum suspended within it, the court jeweller leafed through his books to find any design that might be adapted, and the Redstone Guildmasters discussed which circuits might offer the required delicacy.

Mhamhil stared at the quill holder. It was just a matter of balance, surely? In fact, he had something that… maybe…?

Tugging off his bag, he shoved an elbow into the blond-haired Guildmaster's back so he could rest the bag on the edge of the table. So deep into conversation was the Guildmaster that he didn't even notice.

Digging around in the bag, Mhamhil finally emerged with several small items clasped in his fist. He looked up at the king, who had stepped back from the table and was watching them all, his expression impassive.

The chief architect presented his sketch, holding it out with a hopeful look. The tower was impressive indeed, but…

"The solution must be ready by the end of this day," the king said. "We have not the capacity for such a construction in so short a time."

One by one, engineers, jewellers, artisans, and craftsmen proposed their solutions, all of which would either take too long to construct or had little to no proof of concept. Mhamhil found himself pushed away from the front, still clutching his own solution, as the assembled gathering discussed and sketched, trying for idea after idea, voices raising louder and louder to the point of argument, until Mhamhil saw the king briefly close his eyes and touch the fingertips of one hand to his temple; a clear sign of fading hope.

And then the king opened his eyes again, looking directly at Mhamhil, half-hidden behind the gathering.

"Step forward," he said in a commanding voice that cut through the hubbub, silencing them all.

Heads turned, and Mhamhil felt about as small as his young grandson as bodies moved aside, leaving him standing there with no cover. He swiped his tongue nervously over his upper lip, approaching the table.

"You have not yet spoken," the king said, addressing him directly, "yet I see that you wish to. What is your name?"

"Mhamhil, Onorait," Mhamhil said quietly. "I am a crafter of toys."

The court jeweller snorted; a sound cut short as the king shot him a look.

"You have something in your hand, Mhamhil," the king said, returning his attention to the toymaker. "I would see it." He gestured toward an empty spot on the table.

Carefully, Mhamhil placed down the items he was holding. First, a shallow little copper dish, atop which he rested a sandstone jar with several carved ibis heads around the upper lip and small holes punched into it. Through the holes he threaded half a dozen short reeds, then between each of the birds' lightly sprung beaks he wedged a small sandstone sphere.

He stood back, looking up at the king, who was regarding the object with a strange light in his eyes.

“May I ask what we are looking at?” the court jeweller said.

Before Mhamhil could respond, he saw the king’s eyes soften.

“A balance game,” the king murmured, looking up at Mhamhil. “Am I not correct?”

Mhamhil grinned. “Yes, Onorait. A simple child’s toy. The sandstone beads will stay put until it’s the turn of an unsteady hand to pull one of the reeds. Then…”

He pulled out one reed, taking little care with it as he grasped it. The beak of the carved ibis above it was disturbed enough to open, and the sandstone bead clattered loudly into the copper dish.

“It will not trigger when walked past,” he continued. “Only when it is shaken by something. I reckon it could work for tremors of the earth, as it detects tremors of the hands.”

The king fixed him with a keen gaze. “How quickly could you adapt it, given any and all materials you might require?”

“A few hours, Onorait, if I am shown where it is to be installed. It works best when on a table.”

The king nodded, then turned to address the gathering.

“Thank you, all. Vigil’s Grace go with you.”

Mhamhil watched as they all silently filed out of the room, the Chaperone closing the doors behind them and standing quietly, unobtrusively in the corner.

Mhamhil felt a hand alight on his shoulder. He swallowed. The king *never* laid a hand on anyone until they were ready to speak the words, or so he'd heard.

“I entrust my people's safety to you, honoured toy maker,” the king said softly.

CHAPTER 34

The quiet of noon descended over Paixandria; the time when most sought some form of shade, either indoors or beneath awnings that cracked in the breeze that blew hot and dusty across the sands. Some headed for the souk, taking shelter beneath its multitudinous bright canopies and seeking out the water carrier if he happened to be there, or the sha'haaki[1] who delighted their customers with spectacles of pouring spiced teas from great height into ornate little copper cups.

Mhenheli watched as the toymaker paused before the palace entrance - not yet leaving through the doors that had already been opened for him - then turned toward him.

"The terrible vision the king had," the toymaker began hesitantly, his fingers twisting around the tie of his raggedy old bag. "Will it come to pass?"

Mhenheli gestured to the sun-baked outdoors, which the open doors were letting *into* the cooler palace corridors. But the man did not move, clearly and stubbornly waiting for a reply.

With an internal eyeroll - one that he would *never* be so unprofessional as to show outwardly - Mhenheli gave a slight, tight smile.

"The king's visions - while rare - are always treated with the utmost seriousness," was all he said, before he gestured again to the open door.

Thankfully, the toymaker appeared to accept this explanation, nodding and shuffling out into the sun, pulling his scarf up over his head as he did so. The guards closed the doors behind him, and Mhenheli finally permitted himself a faint sigh as he looked down at all the dirt on the floor.

It was bad enough dealing with the caprices and dusts hauled in by various rulers and their retinues on the rare occasions a meeting of empires took place here, let alone the grime traipsed in by half the city's artisanal populace. Still, the housekeeping of the palace ran smoothly and efficiently, and he knew he could count on various houseboys and housegirls to have swept away every trace of the grime within the hour. It merely soured him to have to tolerate the mess in the meantime.

The doors to the king's receiving room were closed, but as the senior Chaperone Mhenheli had permission to enter whenever necessary. A gentle knock - the rhythm of it randomly selected from a list of ten agreed upon with the king, so that he knew upon hearing any of the ten that it was Mhenheli requesting entrance - and he opened the door after a moment's pause.

The king never commanded him to enter. In the entirety of the royal court, Mhenheli alone could knock and simply enter, and he prided himself on that trust the king had put in him.

Unsurprisingly, the king was not in the receiving rooms. The table stood alone in the centre; all chairs having been moved to the outer walls to make room for this morning's gathering. The blue cloth was empty, the king clearly having taken the quill holder through to his private quarters. So that was where Mhenheli headed.

Another knock - uncoded this time, since very few were permitted the privilege of entry into this area of the palace, and the security of randomness was not required - and Mhenheli let himself into the quiet of the rooms beyond.

His gaze went immediately to the new ornament on the king's bedside table, and his eyebrows almost met his hairline. The king allowed that toymaker into *here*, to install that tremor-detecting device *right beside his bed?*

"Where else did you expect it to be?" came a voice from his left.

Mhenheli turned to see the king looking up at him from the paper he had been writing on. His crown sat on the desk beside him, the conduit and emerald fully settled into their cradles as they always were when it was not upon his head, and the cloak was tossed carelessly across the bed. Mhenheli cringed internally to see the symbols of the king's rule treated so cavalierly, but his master was clearly awaiting a reply.

"Onorait," Mhenheli said slowly, bowing. "I merely thought that perhaps you might appoint someone to oversee the… device. Not to watch it yourself. You are, after all, often not here in this room."

The king regarded him for a moment, then returned his attention to the paper.

"The vision occurred late at night," he said. "I am always here in this room at that hour."

With those blue eyes safely focused on the paper, Mhenheli allowed himself a frown of concern. This vision seemed to have gripped the king with undue fervour. That he'd demanded the device be ready by tonight, that he seemed lost amid the drafting of a redstone schematic, that his brow was furrowed with concentration, that his hand moved the quill with urgent purpose and none of his usual calligraphic elegance; all of these were things that worried Mhenheli.

He soothed himself with familiar duties, walking over to the bed to lift the cloak reverently from its messy repose on the blanket and carrying it over to the tall stand, where he draped it carefully and tried not to tsk over the faint creases he could see.

The crown, however, it was not his place to touch. He had never laid a finger upon it, and it would not have tolerated his hands anyway. There were plenty enough tales about its powers and properties - of would-be thieves who had ended up with strange lightning-shaped burns on their fingers, hands, and arms after they tried to take it, and of its Conduit and emerald only activating when worn by the king himself - that he knew to leave well alone.

He moved silently, unobtrusively around the room, tweaking the blanket on the bed, straightening and fluffing up the pillows on the couches.

“Chaperone,” the king suddenly said, his voice quiet in the midday stillness of the room. “I would have you make one promise to me.”

“Of course, Onorait.” Mhenheli walked over to him immediately, bowing again.

“Once you have given me this promise, you are to fetch me the Grand Master.” The king tapped a finger on the paper before him. “I require his assistance to build this circuit, so he must bring supplies with him. The circuit must be constructed before midnight.”

“I shall send for him urgently, of course.”

“The alarms will sound at night,” the king continued, putting down the quill and sitting back in his chair, looking up at Mhenheli, who stood on the other side of the desk before him. He looked tired, so tired, as if he had not slept well, but his gaze was clear and bright and determined as he fixed it on Mhenheli.

“Give me your word, Chaperone, that when they sound you will not look for me. Instead, you will spend no more than eight minutes helping my people to the safety of the Anthill, and you will then hasten there yourself.”

“Onorait, I…”

Mhenheli’s voice trailed off as the king's unwavering stare told him that he would not countenance any response other than ‘I give you my word’.

“Only if you do the same, Onorait,” he finally said.

There was a beat of silence, a short and powerful standoff between king and servant. Then, finally, the king broke eye contact, looking down at his redstone schematic.

“Of course I will,” he murmured. “I shall also be helping my people to safety, as will my guards. Every one of us will be needed for that task, since we shall have only ten minutes before the Anthill’s doors must be closed against what is to come, and not one of my people is to be left behind.”

Another pause.

“But I will need you safe, Chaperone, to assist in the aftermath,” he added, looking up again. “So, do I have your word?”

Mhenheli nodded. “You have my word, Onorait.”

“Good. Now, fetch the Grand Master.”

[1] Sha’haaki = tea hawkers

CHAPTER 35

The great city of Paixandria tried to go about its daily business with some semblance of normality, but this was difficult to achieve when it was holding its breath.

The first edict issued by the palace was a curfew. After sundown, all citizens were to make their way to their homes and remain there. By the time the moon crested the Anthill, the streets were to be deserted, with nobody wandering unaccounted for.

The second edict was unequivocal. All citizens, when they heard the alarm bells sound, must stop whatever they are doing - no matter how important they thought it - and make haste to the Anthill, helping others, if necessary, but only if it would not slow themselves down. Camels should also be brought to the Anthill, but only if they were ridden at a good pace, for they walked too slowly to make it to the Anthill within the required time of eight minutes. Other animals could be brought, but again only if they would not slow their owner's pace. The Anthill's doors were to be closed ten minutes after the first alarm bell and not opened again until all danger was heard to have passed.

The third edict was for all citizens of advanced age, of poor hearing, those unable to move swiftly, and those who were infirm to make themselves and their addresses known immediately to the palace, that arrangements could be made to ensure they reached safety.

The fourth edict was an order issued directly to the city's guards. Each was assigned a small area of the city to check and lists of the homes therein where they may need to awaken someone who could not hear the alarms, or to carry someone who could not walk swiftly.

The final edict was one the king delivered himself, to his royal guards in the receiving room at the palace. With a map of the city's central area spread out over the table, he gave each guard several houses or shops to check thoroughly for all living creatures. Three of the guards were assigned to check all rooms at the palace.

A silence fell over the assembled cohort, eventually broken by their captain.

"Onorait, you have assigned a duty to every one of your guards."

"Correct," the king said, his gaze darting over the map, his fingers scratching slowly through his beard. "I believe I have not missed anyone out?"

“I’m afraid that you have. You have left nobody free to guard you and ensure that you are safe.”

Those fingers stilled and the king looked up.

“I shall be doing as all of you will be doing. I, too, have an assigned area to check.”

“Onorait—“

The king raised a silencing hand.

“I am of my people,” he said. “If one of them is left behind, then I have failed in my duty to protect them. That includes all of you. Your duty to me ends the moment those bells ring. Your duty to my people ends when nine minutes have passed since the first bell. Your duty to yourself *as one of my people* then takes over, and you *run* to the Anthill. Is that clear?”

The guards murmured their assent. Unhappy assent, but assent, nonetheless. Clearly sensing this, the king added a reassurance:

“The Vigil will tell me when all are accounted for. At that point I, too, shall run for safety.”

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“All this fuss for a dream.”

Q’alamet sank into one of the chairs in the guard room with a heavy sigh, glancing over at two of his colleagues playing a lively game of Yah'taqudh in the corner of the room, their hands fisted with card fans and the table between them covered with tiny copper coins that they flicked back and forth as each won or lost a point.

“Does he do this often?” Q’alamet groused to himself, looking up as the door opened to admit Menet, the older guard who had been assigned to him as a guide two months ago when he had secured this position.

“Does he do what often?” Menet asked, making straight for the jug of watered-down honey wine on the table and pouring himself a generous cup. He sat down in the chair opposite Q’alamet and raised the cup to him with a grin, before drinking deeply. “Ach, stars, ‘tis a dusty one out there today,” he muttered.

“Make such a fuss over a nightmare.”

Menet raised an eyebrow. “You think this is all because of some bad dream, lad?”

Q’alamet sighed. “Well, what else could it be? I mean, yes, he’s our king, and yes, we need to obey him, but…”

Menet stood, refilled his cup, then fetched another, which he handed to Q'alamet. He sat back down again.

"You ever remember going hungry as a child?" he asked.

Q'alamet frowned, looking down into his cup. "No. My family was poor, but we always had enough to eat."

"You or your family ever get sick with the Red Death?"

"The what?"

"The Red Death. Starts with a dry cough, moves on to red blotches on the skin that eventually suppurate and rot, eating you up from the inside."

Q'alamet shuddered. "No, thankfully, nobody I know had that. Well, I remember my ah'lamah having the cough and the red blotches, but she got better."

Menet grunted. "You never went hungry, even though this city was hit with a dearth in your lifetime when the river failed to rise and flood the croplands one year, leading to the harvests failing the next. The king had a vision of that, and so he set up trade routes months ahead of time with the Gilded Lands for grains and vegetables, and he had silos built to stockpile those goods. He tasked the Redstone Guildmasters to create circuit-powered farms that would see the city through any future dearth should it happen again."

Q'alamet subsided in his chair a little, as Menet continued:

"And the reason why your ah'lamah got better was because the king had a vision of the Red Death, too. He himself travelled to the mages that dwell in the mountains, to beg them for enchantments that our apothecaries could use, and when he returned with them, he personally oversaw large-scale production of the potions that cured anyone suffering from that terrible disease, your ah'lamah included."

"I didn't know," was all Q'alamet could mumble. And he truly didn't.

"Ach," Menet said, his tone softening. "Well, the king's visions are not something that's taught to young ones, and yer still a bit wet behind the ears, lad. Just know that when a rare vision strikes the king, you'd best believe he will act upon it, and his actions will save many a life."

The game of Yah'taqudh in the corner had grown quieter, its two players focusing more on Menet's words than on their cards. Occasionally a small copper coin flicked back or forth, or a card was thrown onto the table, but mostly they were distracted.

"I have twenty-two summers behind me." Q'alamet glowered at Menet.

“An’ I have fifty-four, going on fifty-five,” Menet countered with a grin. “You’ll understand one day, when we’re past whatever this latest vision is all about.”

“You’re confident that we’ll survive?” came a voice from the corner. “This one seems much worse than any other he’s had before.”

Menet nodded. “It *is* much worse, and he’s acting accordingly. He had the Grand Master here yesterday afternoon, and they worked together late into the night, setting up some kind of circuit that connects from the palace to the alarm bells and to the Anthill.” He sighed. “I’ll admit, I’ve never seen him this… worked up about one of those visions. This one’s serious.”

“Is it tied to the Vigil? The king’s visions, I mean,” Q’alamet asked.

Menet roared with laughter. “Lad, *everything’s* tied to the Vigil, the king included. He’s literally its keeper. Surely you’ve seen him there on many a day, bare-headed and lighting candles.”

Q’alamet nodded. "Of course I have." Not a soul in Paixandria had *not* seen that sight at some point in their lives.

Menet held out his empty cup with a raised eyebrow. Hastily, Q’alamet got to his feet, fetching the jug and bringing it back to the chairs, refilling Menet’s cup for him. He sat back down, setting the jug at his feet in case further refills were needed. Menet seemed to be about to embark on some fascinating tale or other, and for that his cup needed to be kept topped-up.

“The king,” Menet began, “is of his people. He’s of this land. He’s born of it and tied to it, if you will, and though he’s never married, I’d bet that on some deep spiritual level he’s wedded to the Vigil itself. It speaks to him and through him. It chose his family to reveal itself to, and he is the third generation to carry that burden.”

“Is it a burden, though?” Q’alamet asked. “I mean, if it’s allowed him to save our people, surely it can’t be a burden?”

“How many people have you watched die, lad?” Menet asked softly. “He’s watched hundreds, not all of them peaceful and calm. You know that he’s the king, and you probably know his title of Vigilkeeper, but he has other titles as well, and that’s another thing they don’t teach young ones these days. One of his other titles is Keeper of Lifetimes and Endings. Yet another is Listener of the Words. And there’s at least one thing I do know about schooling, which is that everyone in this city has to come up with their words, for when their time comes.”

Q’alamet nodded. It had felt odd, trying to think of his own words. He hadn’t done much in his life, so he wasn’t sure what would make his candle burn, or even how

well it would burn. In the end, he'd opted for his service to the king - new though it was - as a reason for his candle to shine at least relatively brightly.

"And when the time for your words comes, the king will be sitting there, holding your hand and listening to them," Menet said. "That's a lot of words, a lot of lives, and a lot of deaths. I tell you, lad, the king is no ordinary man like you or I, or even like those two eavesdropping rogues over there in the corner."

"Hey!"

"Ach, shut that face hole of yours, Am'hadi." Menet grinned. "You love a good tale just as much as the rest of us. Did you lot know it's said that the king was born amid the worst storm the desert has ever witnessed, and that because of this he can summon lightning with that trident of his? I tell you, when I first joined to serve him, I remember being told that another of his titles - and this one's only rumoured, mind you - is Death's Prophet..."

Q'alamet kept that cup filled to the brim until the end of his break, at which point he returned to his post outside the palace doors. Over the course of his shift, his eyes strayed more than once to the Vigil, standing constant in the middle of the city.

Was it just a trick of the sun, or did the Vigil seem a little brighter than usual?

CHAPTER 36

Why do I feel such unease when I see you?

He had taken to following Emiah around, watching from shadows and half-hidden places as the ethereal figure explored the city, trying in vain to read the emotions crossing the often-blurred translucence of his face.

It is not even an unease, if I examine it. It is merely… I cannot even find the word. Unsettled? Maybe. Discomfort? No, not that. Transience? Hm, perhaps…

It was far simpler to read Emiah's emotions through his body. The gentle way in which he touched everything around him, the reverence with which he moved through the streets and buildings, the care and respect that he showed toward the city's history.

You see it as bones, don't you? The white wraiths of ruin that I see over these buildings are your truth. You see not these solid walls, these whole and complete roads; you see decay and collapse. These banners do not fly for you, the scent of incense does not reach you; for you the sound is only that of wind and insects, and the scent is but warm grass and dust.

The realisation that he was undetected brought the courage to move closer, to walk only a few paces behind in his footsteps, until he was stopped by solid walls that Emiah simply walked through.

Yet, you love her as I love her. This place, these bones; you touch her as I sometimes touch her. My hand on sun-warmed walls, your hand on sun-warmed ruination; this place I built, so beloved to us both. Why does this place move you so?

The words scratched in a tight and foreign hand into Emiah's flimsy book made no sense to him, but the sketches matched the diaphanous shapes of destruction that sometimes drifted over the city. Emiah was documenting what he saw; not seeking out riches or treasures, but simply delighting in the simplest of things. The fit of one stone brick against another, the perfection of the Golden Road, the shade of the orchards… the Greatbridge.

The Greatbridge was the first time he laid hands on time passed.

Emiah sank to his knees, overwhelm bleeding from him. His ethereal glow blazed for a brief moment, then faded, leaving him less of a wraith and more of a muted colour echo as he stared out across the great expanse of stone.

Blue shirt, creased and dusty. Brown pants, crumpled and worn. Brown boots, scuffed and sturdy. Tanned face, weather-worn and tired. Blue eyes, brimming with tears. Brown hair, tousled and tied. Copper ring, battered and lacking.

He, too, sank to his knees, in front of Emiah. Blue eyes stared through him, tears spilling over. He reached up, cradling a hand either side of that achingly familiar face as he watched Emiah's lips move.

The face between his palms shifted, blurred, resolved, blurred again, resolved. The wind brought words across the ages, a low moan of anguish.

"What have I found?"

He moved a thumb, trying to wipe away a tear. It rolled through him, losing itself in Emiah's beard.

Home. You have found home.

"Who were you? Why… *why* did you leave? How could you build something like this and then abandon it? What… *happened?*"

I never left. We never left. We are still here. These bones that you see are but shadows. They are not the life of this place. Would that I could show you, brother. Would that these eyes could see what I see.

Emiah moved, and he pulled his hands back, still kneeling. He watched as Emiah laid trembling hands flat against the warm stone of the bridge, watched as tears dropped, listened to the soft hitch of breath.

His gaze rested on the battered old copper ring that lacked all ornament save an odd lightning streak of brightness around it and a faint raised nub - worn smooth by time - where something precious had once lain.

He understood now.

I cannot remember my future, but… do you remember your past? Do you remember me?

Quietly, he rested his hand over Emiah's hand, covering the old copper ring with fingers that bore its history. And as the sun glinted off the emerald mounted in it, both he and his future whispered a vow.

I'll look after you. If you'll bear my company, then I will keep you safe.

CHAPTER 37

"It must be here somewhere. The void was upon them when they returned, that much was true. A path was found once; we hath but to find it again."

"I like not this place. The walls whisper of malice and envy. I feel it."

"The hunt of our lives, indeed. If our hunt for the portal has taken this long, then the gods help us if we finally manage to find it!"

***

The Dreamer slept.

Ancient stone bricks shifted, and walls slithered, unlocking and transposing, to afford him a view into the dungeon depths. Blades sliced the air, sending chittering stone nuisances flying, to crack and shatter against the walls.

"Ugh! I *hate* these little beasts! Give me the brutal honesty of a tiger any day. At least you know where you stand with those. *Get away from me, you little monsters!*"

"Yelling at them won't stop them," a wry voice said.

"I know, I know. It just makes me feel better."

A sigh cut through the air, followed by a greatsword.

"You just have to ensure to kill them in one blow, Qazepha. Like that. With just a single blow, they do not summon others from the nests."

"We should move on," another voice murmured. "Clearly the portal is not here. Does anyone have any ideas?"

The Dreamer observed them through the ever-shifting walls of time: four figures, indistinct and yet each distinguishable from the other. One of them - Ser'Zhege of Mythland - tall and broad and glinting with armour; another - Xsia-Minai'Te of the crystal mountains - slender and robed in purple; a third - Caelamondorion the elven lord of Raendellarae - the tallest of the party and clad in icy blue; a fourth - N'dachVeip, Grav'n er-Rachzem - clad in a long black coat and red scarf; the last - an unknown whose form whispered of deep, hot jungles and golden temples - all tanned flesh and bright colours. The Dreamer knew this dream, knew all its actors. All, that is, save the last, named Qazepha by his companions.

“I wish Paix had said yes to this hunt,” Ser’Zhege muttered, raising his greatsword as he advanced on one dark tunnel.

Qazepha scoffed. “The desert wanderer? Why him? What use would he be here underground?”

“Well, listen to the name you yourself just gave him. To survive amid the vast emptiness of a desert, navigating it with trade caravans and always returning safely home, no matter how deep amid the sands he wanders? The man has an innate sense of direction.”

“He does that by means of the *stars*, Ser’Zhege,” Qazepha groused. “You may not have noticed, but those are somewhat lacking down here.”

“Quartz and Chrysocolla!” Xsia-Minai’Te placed herself between them, hands on her hips. “Will you both stop arguing and get down those stairs? We came here for a hunt, not to watch you two bicker like an old married couple!”

The Dreamer followed them, unnoticed, through transient walls and iron doors that faded in and out of existence. A glimmer of torchlight headed the party as they moved deeper and closer to their destination, finally locating it thanks to the glow from a deep pool of lava that encircled it.

The party stood around the portal, staring into its shimmering black depths. None moved. None spoke. Then, finally:

“Ser’Zhege, you told us this was just a hunt,” Xsia-Minai’Te whispered. “I came along only to heal any wounds sustained. Where in Agate’s name does this portal lead?”

Ser’Zhege looked up. “No idea,” he said with a grin. “But the hunt is up! Follow and help or tarry and flee, but I will not shy from this.”

And into the portal he leapt.

***

The Dreamer knew this dream, knew this fight, knew the one thing that would stop them from emerging victorious; the one thing that he alone had done to lay waste to the elemental’s sole means of healing itself. They could not win this without him.

“The final crystal is out of reach!” Caelamondorion cried. “Even my bow cannot touch it!”

Ser’Zhege and N’dachVeip - sore-pressed and battle-weary - ran for the safety of a thick black pillar as the elemental sent a storm of black shards down to stab the

golden ground. They exchanged worried looks with Xsia-Minai'Te, whose hands were a blur of crystals that shuddered and swung around each other, tiny chips flying off into the thin air.

"We cannot win this. We are torturing it!" she whispered. "Already I have lost five crystals. It's too powerful! If you cannot extinguish its remaining healing source, we are better to leap into the void and lose everything. We cannot win!"

"We've come this far," Qazepha muttered, reaching for something at his belt. "We can finish this. Just need to get a *liiiitle* higher up this pillar…"

He threw something green at the solid wall of glassy obsidian. It hit, and clung, somehow finding a hold. Tendrils span out, seeking down to root itself in the ground, seeking up for the light at the pillar's apex. Moving with a haste none of the party had seen before, the creeping vine wound its way up the more sheltered side of the pillar, and Qazepha began to climb it.

"Oh, Quartz and Chrysocolla," Xsia-Minai'Te whispered, watching him ascend the pillar. Higher and higher, as the elemental swept the ground with its shards, circling ever closer. Calling up three peridots, she directed them to circle around Qazepha's citrine, in hopes that they could provide him with the protection he would need should the elemental's weapons hit that tower.

One foot firmly anchored in the vines, one hand above him and doing the same, Qazepha leaned away from the pillar, taking one final thing from his belt. A short rope, to the end of which three even shorter ropes were knotted, each culminating in a golden ball. He swung it around his head twice, then let go at the apex of its swing, pulling himself close to the tower and ducking his head.

The crystal atop the tower exploded in a shatter of piercing shards, almost shaking him free of the vines, which shrank back from the violence, bringing him safely - if worryingly quickly - down to the unearthly golden rocks.

"Still wish you'd brought that desert wanderer with you?" He winked at Ser'Zhege, grinning and coiling the vines until he could once again hook them onto his belt.

"We still have to kill the beast," N'dachVeip observed. "How many arrows do we have left between us?"

"We have enough," Caelamondorion murmured, raising the great elven bow of Raendellarae. "Let us finish this."

***

The Dreamer knew this dream, but not this ending. With almost every arrow spent, the elemental was finally slain by a blow from Ser'Zhege's greatsword. As the fell creature rose into the blackness, shrieking as it disintegrated, the Dreamer saw N'dachVeip duck from the final hail of shards. One of them ricocheted from the nearby obsidian pillar, soaring up elegantly before softly falling back down to bury itself in the thick folds of his red scarf.

With curious fingers, he delved for it, bringing it out into the strange light and turning it to examine it, as silence drifted across the realm beyond death.

Caelamondorion hastened over to him.

"So, this is all that remains of it," N'dachVeip murmured. "Shiny. It'd make a pretty trinket."

"It should be destroyed," Caelamondorion said sharply.

"Oh, of course. I'll take care of it. My foundry will soon make light work of that. Melt it into nothing."

"Be sure that you do," Caelamondorion said. "Such a thing is not to be trifled with, nor to be turned into a necklace."

"The portal is open," Xsia-Minai'Te called, from the pillar at the centre of the island. "Can we *please* go home? I'm exhausted, and I've lost so many crystals. I need to replenish."

They left in quick succession, Xsia-Minai'Te first, followed by a smug and grinning Qazepha, and then a weary Ser'Zhege. Caelamondorion and N'dachVeip stood on opposite sides of the portal surround, the former fixing the latter with a gimlet stare.

"Heed my words, friend," he warned. "At the first chance you have, cast it into the forge."

N'dachVeip nodded, watching the elf jump into the portal. With one last look at the shard, he sighed, closed his fingers around it, screwed his eyes shut, and stepped into the swirling blackness.

***

The Dreamer awoke.

His breath a quiet tension. Soft, soundless, half-held.

His eyes a glimmer in the darkness. Wide, watching, near unblinking.

His hope a small copper vessel. Shining, balanced, ready.

He waited.

CHAPTER 38

Stars winked and watched overhead, glittering observers slowly processing across the firmament, their light a constant; guides and maps both to any experienced eye. No clouds nor moon hindered their observance on this night, yet their observance was not returned as it would be on any other night as clear. The layered lenses sat not upon the stone outcrop but were instead safely packed in light travelling cases.

The air was still and cool, casting an unfamiliar silence over the golden light of the pale jewel that glimmered amid the night-chilled sands of the deep desert. Not a leaf rustled in the lush gardens so carefully watered and cultivated, not a ripple formed in the small pools that had been replenished before the curfew was called. Not a banner stirred, not a lantern flame danced.

The city slept.

The desert held its breath.

Deep within the palace, in a room whose ceiling mirrored the stars that observed from above, the long, slender beak of a carved ibis trembled, and a small sandstone ball fell with a clatter into a copper dish. Less than a blink later, another dropped.

A hand slammed upwards from beneath a blue blanket that was already being kicked back. Making contact with a lever on the wall directly above the pillows, the hand rammed it up into its active position, and the redstone flashed - an urgent heat that raced out of the palace, beneath the sands, toward the tall guard towers.

The floor was steady, the ground still, but the sandstone balls continued to fall. Hasty feet shoved themselves into sandals, arms shouldered into an ivory coat, and the redstone charge found its target.

The bells of Paixandria sang out, calling all to wake, to rise, to *run*.

Doors were flung open, pouring puddles of light onto the streets. Urgent arms reached for babies and young children. Dogs barked, panicked by the sudden clamour. The city surged out into the streets, some empty-handed, others bearing their family, both young and old. Some tarried a moment to grab precious belongings but were themselves grabbed by guards - both of the city and of the palace - and bodily shoved out into the streets with the exhortation to *run*.

A river like none the desert had ever seen before flowed toward the mighty Anthill; a flood of humanity, sleepy and bewildered, propelled by the urgency of the bells,

by the shouts and shoves of the guards, and by the sight of their king running from house to house down the main road that flanked the Vigil, pulling open doors and checking each room within before emerging again to check another.

The water carrier - to his startlement - was grabbed by the arm and turned to see his king with a loudly protesting elderly woman slung over his shoulder.

“Take her,” the king ordered, hefting her forward as the water carrier helplessly held out his arms and caught her. The moment she was safely transferred, the king turned away and ran back into the house, leaving the water carrier to bear the fists that beat against his shoulders as he ran as best he could with his burden, following the throng that streamed toward the Anthill.

The city slowly emptied, and the Anthill slowly filled. Camels and dogs and people milled within, as without the stragglers made their way up the steps toward the great doors.

The cadence of the bells changed, becoming more urgent. The city’s guards checked their last few homes, resorting to bodily carrying those who thought they had time to *take* their time. One by one they fled up the steps, carrying their infuriatingly tardy but precious cargoes into the safety of the Anthill.

The cadence changed yet again, this time a clamour. The palace guards took to their heels, all their assigned houses now emptied.

The ground began to shudder. Distant cries of alarm drifted out from the Anthill, joined by the barking of spooked hounds and the bellowing of startled camels. And over it all, as the shaking increased, the sound of a great horn urged every able hand to the thick stone doors and every strong and sturdy back to brace and push.

Rolling, tumbling clouds of sand spat through the streets; their hissing a familiar sound, as of the storms that crossed the desert sometimes and left much sweeping in their wake. But a sandstorm never shook the earth like this, never cracked its very foundations.

***

Gasping for breath, Q’alamet pelted down the street toward the Anthill, his headscarf half blown off and flapping across his face. Out of the corner of his eye he saw someone emerge from the candle-maker’s shop by the Vigil, and he almost stumbled as he realised it was the king.

“Run!” the king yelled at him; one arm flung out toward the Anthill as Q’alamet passed him. Shaken, Q’alamet faltered again, but that commanding voice followed him and made him keep going:

“I am right behind you!”

Right behind him. Stars, he hoped so, as he ran for all he was worth. The doors were two thirds closed, and he couldn’t hear a thing past the hissing of the sand and the cracking of the earth.

At the foot of the Anthill’s steps, a tiny bundle of fur cowered. Hardly breaking step, Q’alamet swept down an arm, scooped up the terrified kitten against his chest, and turned his head briefly, squinting through the sand.

What he saw in that brief moment was a sight that was to haunt his dreams: a wall of hell on earth coming right for him. A roiling, unstoppable wall - high as the Anthill - of billowing, roaring smoke and fire and rocks and sandstone bricks torn from the buildings it had already destroyed on the city’s outskirts. A blaze of heat hit him, and with a panicked yell he dove through the fast-closing gap in the door.

It slammed shut behind him, leaving him panting and winded on the floor, still tightly clutching the kitten, which mewled piteously into his chest as the Anthill was pounded by that wall of hell.

He had scarcely a second to catch his breath before his shoulders were grabbed in a firm grip and he was shaken to his senses. His vision swimming, he blinked away the sand and grit and found himself staring up at the king’s chief Chaperone, crouched over him.

“The king,” the Chaperone urged, his eyes wide. “Where is the king? Did you see him?”

“He… he was coming out of the candle-maker’s shop,” Q’alamet stammered, becoming aware of blazing raw pain of the side of his face and his arm, where his leather armour had been burned away. “I called out to him, and he shouted back.”

The Chaperone stilled, then took a shuddering breath.

“What did he say?” he whispered.

“He said ‘Run. I am right behind you’. I saw this kitten cowering behind a plant pot, so I grabbed it as I ran.”

The Chaperone let him go, his head turning to look toward the doors, his gaze frantically darting over the crowds of people huddled together and looking fearfully upwards, whispering their prayers to the Vigil as the Anthill echoed with the roar of destruction outside.

The Chaperone closed his eyes, sinking slowly down to his knees. He took another long, shuddering breath, then opened his eyes again.

“Go and find the apothecary,” he murmured hoarsely. “Get those burns seen to.”

***

The king, of course, had rooms within the Anthill. Slowly, Mhenheli climbed upwards toward them. They were closer to the top of the cavernous roof, with crystalline windows that allowed him to look out upon the Great Orrery.

His head told him they would be empty, but a tiny flame in his heart still flared with the hope that he would find his master within them, sat behind his desk, turning to look at him with a smile of relief because all were safe. Because *all* were safe.

Here, higher up in the Anthill, the pounding roar was quieter. Whatever had struck the city had still not passed, but it was clearly more destructive at ground level. The Anthill had weathered many a storm, and it appeared to be standing blessedly solid and firm amid the devastation happening outside.

He screwed his eyes shut for a moment, urging himself not to think about it, not to envision what must be passing through the once beautiful city of Paixandria. That young guard had been burned on the face and arm, and… no… NO. No, he would not think of that. Could not countenance it.

He laid a hand on the door, but did not push. One deep breath, then he rested his forehead briefly against the wood.

“Please,” he whispered. “Somehow. Somehow, you made it in, and I just didn’t see you.”

He pushed, and the door opened.

The room beyond was quiet, devoid of life, and the little flame of hope crumpled, flickering out with nary a breath.

He closed the door behind him, staring at the desk. The hot sulphur smell of an expended redstone charge drifted through the still air, and he realised the top of the desk had been pulled apart by a small piston circuit, revealing a secret compartment.

He reached down into it, his hand closing first around something papery, and then something heavy and waxen. Choking down a mournful sob, he drew both out from the compartment.

A scroll, and a simple ivory candle. The king’s candle.

Penned in elegant script on the outside of the scroll, by the king's seal, were the words *'for Mhenheli'*.

Tears pricked at his eyes more than any sandstorm had ever done, as he slumped into the king's chair and broke the seal, letting the scroll unfurl.

Chaperone,

If I made it to safety then you will never read this, for I will remove it from my desk before you have a chance to see it. However, if your eyes rest upon these words now, know that I met my fate with acceptance and honour.

I pass the title of Regent to you. My people are now in your hands. The copper crown will never be worn again, for I left no bloodline, and it will tolerate no other bearer, but I pray you keep it safe. If the palace still stands, you will find the crown secured within a copper-lined oak box in the large wooden chest in my Robing Room. It is safe to pick up when in this box.

I required that promise of you because - of all those who surrounded me in my time as king - you were my shadow and my constant. You alone I trust to know what to do. If the city stands, you can rebuild. If it has fallen or is dangerous, you can lead my people to a new home.

This is a great ask to lay upon your shoulders, but I have faith that you can bear it. The Grace of the Vigil will guide you. Though you may not hear it as I do, its guidance will be felt strongly within you. Follow your heart, for the Vigil is Love and the heart is where it rests most comfortably.

If my body is found, I wish for no great ceremonies or an elaborate tomb. In death I am not a king; I am only a man. Simply bury me at the foot of the Vigil, that I may keep it always. If my body is not found, then I am one with the sands from whence I came. Either way I shall be at peace.

Light my candle, Mhenheli, and place it at the Vigil. None will hear my words, for I will have whispered them to the wind, but I write them here that at least one other knows them:

My name has been Paix al-Lareiff. My life's service has been to my people and to the Vigil. My candle will shine brightly, for I was given a second chance, and I grasped it, righting a terrible wrong and saving my people.

Paix al-Lareiff

Mhenheli closed his eyes, letting the tears come, letting them fall, letting the grief overwhelm him like a soft, smothering blanket.

“May it have been swift,” he whispered. “May you have known no pain. May the stars embrace you; you blessed… beloved… stubborn… *stupid* man.”

He sank forward onto the desk, his head resting on his arms as he sobbed, the weight of his duty falling heavy on his shoulders, the weight of his heart breaking wide open.

CHAPTER 39

As the pitiless maelstrom pounded the solid and patient Anthill, so unrelenting grief pounded the man who sat alone and weeping in a chair that should have borne another. Another whose confident hand would have already been drafting orders, another who would have then gone to be among his people, another who would have directed the aftermath with a steady patience, another whose calm visage - even when only a mask for his own worries - would have inspired faith and confidence in the multitude who cowered far below.

Another, and not a man who sat and sobbed and wished for anything but this moment.

Another, and not a man who had run an entire royal household with efficiency and exactitude, now small and helpless and hollow and broken.

The Grace of the Vigil will guide you. Though you may not hear it as I do, its guidance will be felt strongly within you. Follow your heart, for the Vigil is Love and the heart is where it rests most comfortably.

"How can I?" Mhenheli choked, "when my heart is cracked open?"

He had shut it up so tightly, shrouded it in stoic obsequience, lashed ropes of duty and punctiliousness around it, guarded it against every smile, every blue-eyed glint of amusement or joy or mischief, every soft laugh, every weary sigh, every stroke of the paintbrush, every flourish of the quill, every quiet evening silhouetted by the window.

Barely out of childhood himself when honoured with the role of junior Chaperone, and terrified of erring, he had tasked himself to study protocol until it ran through his veins. Assigned to formal duties at the age of only seventeen, he had found himself struggling to guide a bright-eyed, restless, spirited young boy blessed with more than a streak of mischief and a will of his own that refused to bend to princely protocols.

Frustrations and exasperations; his bed occasionally filled with sand, his sha' sometimes nauseatingly dosed with far too much honey, his young charge often nowhere to be found when learning was to be done. Nonetheless, over the years as childish giggles gave way to softer, deeper laughter and the pranks grew more subtle - if never less gleefully inconvenient - he had wrestled with his own face, biting down mutual merriment and smoothing away quirked lips until his amusement showed only in a slight creasing around his eyes.

Duty. Duty was his everything, and he silenced his laughter.

In the depths of that long and aching night, when the joyful lightness of a prince had slipped away into the weight and responsibilities of a king, his had been the hand to rest upon trembling shoulders, his had been the ears to hear quiet sobs, and his had been the lips to murmur soft sounds of comfort.

His were the hands to drape the regalia cloak across broad shoulders, the fingers to tweak its ribbons and silks meticulously into place, the critical eyes to check that it fell perfectly so that no part of it did more than ghost over the floor.

After long nights at the Vigil, his were the hands to ease sandals from weary feet, to gently wipe away with a soft cloth the sand that clung to them, to lift the blue blanket and lower it again over a tired body that scarce had energy enough for a murmur of gratitude before slipping into exhausted sleep. His were the hands to quietly sweep up that sand, to tuck the blanket, to set a cup of cooled water beside the bed, to whisper a goodnight and gently close the door.

In the early morning, his were the eyes to see him rise from bed, loose and warm of limb, tousle-haired and tired-eyed. His were the hands to give the cool, damp cloth to rouse that sleepy face, to hold ready the fresh robes, to comb that tousled hair, to trim that neat beard, to hold the copper mirror as a tanned and practised hand swept dark kohl around those blue eyes.

Duty. Duty was his everything, and he concealed his heart.

None but he and the old nurse were permitted to lay a hand on the man who carried a nation upon his shoulders. Unspoken, they both quietly gave their all to ease his lonely, touch-starved burden. And, when the old nurse joined the stars - another long, dark night when those cerulean eyes clouded and wept - he had shouldered that task alone.

He had prepared himself to lose this quiet masculine intimacy to the prospect of a wife, bringing giggling maidservants to dispel the peaceful sanctum of his devoted worship. But she had never come. He had stood to one side - always there, always unobtrusive - as emissaries offered portraits of their queens and princesses, in hopes of a marital alliance with the wealthy desert kingdom. He had often wondered how a woman raised in the luxuries of a palace in any other land would bear the harshness of the desert, the unrelenting heat and sand, the rival for her husband's attention that stood in the centre of his city. A marriage arranged without love would surely not outlast such conditions. Yet, who could be in that presence for long and *not* fall in love with it?

With gratitude and grace, all had been turned away. The prettiest, the winsomest, the most accomplished, the gentlest of heart; all were refused with a diplomatic smile and a shake of the head, their emissaries sent home with a personally

handwritten offer of some kind of trade, to soften the refusal. And, after each visit of this manner, poetry flowed into a beautiful leather-bound book.

His were the hands to slip the book from its drawer when the rooms were quiet and empty, and his were the eyes to dart over the words, letting them settle in his chest until the silence of the room made him nervous of discovery. Those words were his realisation why the emissaries left empty-handed, his understanding of why he cared - why he *felt* - so deeply.

The copper crown will never be worn again, for I left no bloodline, and it will tolerate no other bearer, but I pray you keep it safe.

His whole life, he, too, had only ever wished for love and nothing more. For hands to hold, lips to cherish, the warmth of another beside him at night, a heart to cradle in his hands like a candle flame. That, and nothing more. That would have been his all.

He sank his fingers into his greying hair, a low mournful sob erupting from his chest, where only an ache and a *missing* now sat heavy. Ten minutes had shattered his world and lain waste to every rope he'd lashed around his heart.

But for duty, he would have offered that. But for duty, he would have given that. But for duty, he could have been that.

Always there, discreet and attentive. His every action, care concealed as protocol. His every touch, love cloaked as duty.

Duty. Duty was his everything, and he despised it.

***

A gentle knock roused him from his sorrow. Passing a hand quickly over his eyes, he turned and beheld Menet, one of the older palace guards, who had entered without being commanded.

Menet took one look at Mhenheli's anguished face and bowed his head.

"The people are afraid," he said quietly, his voice rough with emotion. "They beg for the king."

Mhenheli opened his mouth, but no words would come. He closed it again, looking helplessly back at the desk, upon which sat the open scroll and the simple ivory candle.

Menet's gaze, too, alighted on the candle.

"He is lost," he murmured. "Isn't he?"

Slowly, his eyes closing and fresh tears falling silently from them, Mhenheli nodded.

He heard Menet's footsteps cross the floor, coming to a halt beside the desk.

"May the stars wrap him in their embrace, that he may guide us from above." A firm hand clasped Mhenheli's shoulder, its thumb rubbing gently, over and over.

"He has named me Regent," Mhenheli whispered, gesturing with trembling fingers toward the scroll. "Put his people in my hands."

He held that hand up, watching it shake violently.

"*Look* at my hands," he urged. "They can barely hold the weight of my grief. They cannot hold the weight of this nation."

Menet took his hand from Mhenheli's shoulder, then silently moved away. Mhenheli stared at his own hands, seeing only the man disappear into a side room out of the corner of his eye. A few moments later, he re-emerged, walking back to the desk.

With one wet hand he took Mhenheli's palm firmly in his own, grasping it and stilling its trembling. Mhenheli looked up at him.

"I'm sure he thought the same thing on the night his father journeyed to the stars," Menet said gently, opening up Mhenheli's hand and placing a wet, wrung-out cloth in it. "Dry your eyes and soothe your face, Regent. Your people must be told of their loss."

Numb, Mhenheli stared at the cloth. He nodded, mechanically wiping his face, folding the wet fabric and holding its coolness against his sore, reddened eyes for a few minutes.

"This is the king's candle?" he heard Menet ask.

Mhenheli lowered the cloth, folding and re-folding it,

"He asked me to light it and place it at the Vigil," he said. "But I don't even know if the Vigil is still there."

"It's still there. It has to be."

"Even if its last keeper is gone?"

Menet smiled, and it looked incongruous on his dirt-streaked face.

"The Vigil's not a structure, though that's how it shows itself in the city," he said. "The Vigil's in every heart. When we lose someone we love, we light a candle for them and place it at the Vigil itself, but we also carry a flame for them that burns

always inside us, until it's our turn to have our candle lit. And so, it goes on. It's said that the ancient words carved on the Vigil say, *'I am Love'*. I think that's about right."

Follow your heart, for the Vigil is Love and the heart is where it rests most comfortably.

"I don't know how to tell them," Mhenheli whispered.

Menet gestured to the simple ivory candle.

"You won't need words," was all he said.

Mhenheli nodded, reaching for the candle and cradling it in both hands.

Duty. Duty was his everything, and he clung to it.

***

Below, the maelstrom still pounded the ancient rock, but the Anthill held firm; solid and safe as it had always been throughout the ages. None knew how much time had passed, but families and friends had found each other, lovers had fallen weeping with relief into each other's arms, and the city's apothecaries wove between each group, seeking out those with injuries sustained in the rush to safety, offering precious potions and calming scented herbs.

Far in the top of the Anthill, two men began a slow and sorrowful procession down the steps toward the lower cavern. In front, thin and drawn, his black robes dusty and creased in a way that none had ever seen before, the chief Chaperone. Behind him, a palace guard, keeping close as if he were the only thing holding the Chaperone upright.

As they drew closer to the lower cavern, one woman looked up. Her gaze fell upon the simple ivory candle cradled in the Chaperone's hands, then upon the anguish writ upon his face. For a moment, she stared, unmoving, then she tore off her veil and a low keening sound rose from within her.

Other heads looked up, other voices joined her mourning cry as every woman threw off her veil, copper bracelets and earrings a melody to counterpoint the chaos outside. One delved into a small pouch of precious items at her belt, drawing out two tiny copper cymbals on ribbons, and the tender sound of Vigil bells rang through the cavern as the Chaperone and the guard reached the floor and walked slowly to its centre, beneath the Great Conduit.

***

Mhenheli looked around him, as the women of Paixandria gave a voice to his grief, their mourning spiralling up through the acoustics of the cavern and echoing back down again. At his back, unseen by those around them, Menet's firm hand rested against the base of his spine; a reassurance and strength that he desperately needed.

He was at the point of wondering what happened next, when next actually happened.

The noise outside abruptly ceased, dying with one final roar of wind that gasped away into nothing. The keening of the women continued for a few moments more, and then it, too, faded. The final echo of the Vigil bells hung in the air, dissolving into silence.

It was over.

CHAPTER 40

The silence bloomed; a deep and sonorous tintinnabulation in the wake of the cacophony that had battered the mighty Anthill for several hours.

Menet had advised waiting for at least another hour, to ensure that the destruction did not return. And much though Mhenheli was torn between going outside and finding - or not finding - the king's remains, he knew that he was still thinking with his heart and not his head, and so he deferred to the guard's wisdom.

"The last thing we need," Menet said quietly, "is to open those doors and have another round of that chaos catch us unawares. The king gave his life to ensure all were safe. His sacrifice would be in vain if we lost a single soul because we were too hasty to go outside."

"How long have we been in here?" Mhenheli said, looking down at the candle he still cradled, the weight of Menet's words a reminder of what he had lost, of what the people - his people - had lost.

His people.

He closed his eyes tightly for a moment, then opened them. Menet had pulled something out of a pocket sewn inside his guard's tunic: a golden disc, half of which was covered by an inset of lapis lazuli to represent the vault of the heavens. Atop the disc, a slender arrow of gold had just begun to rise into the blue, indicating that morning had arrived.

"By my reckoning," Menet examined the disc, "about three hours. Four, if we wait another, just to be safe."

They had both moved to one side of the Anthill's massive stone doorway, and now sat huddled together on a pile of barrels and chests that had been hastily dragged inside before the doors were closed. Mhenheli had no idea what was in them, but they provided a place to rest his aching, mourning body while he watched the populace try to gather together some semblance of normality and routine around themselves.

Shopkeepers and warehousemen - perpetual denizens of the Anthill - had opened the doors of their establishments, had found bedding and clothing, had rummaged through stocks of food and water, and were now distributing them out. The city's guards had set up makeshift beds for children worn weary by terror, and fashioned tables and stools from whatever they could find in the warehouses.

The palace guards stood close by the doors, and Mhenheli realised they were now guarding *him*. He wondered what had happened to the young guard with the kitten; the last man to make it into the Anthill before the doors had slammed shut.

The last man to see the king alive.

***

The hour passed slowly, but eventually Menet pulled the golden disc from his tunic once more, looked at it, and nodded at the captain of the city's guards. A cohort of them marched over to the doors, as Menet gestured for Mhenheli to stand aside and allow them room.

Waiting, as the men laid hands to the massive doors and braced their backs, Mhenheli looked around. Even in only that hour, the Anthill had grown quieter. Parents tended to their children, all thoughts of anything else flown from their heads. Hundreds of people sat, either on makeshift benches, stools, or the ground, breaking their nightlong fast with whatever the warehousemen and shopkeepers had managed to find from their stores.

The low scrape of stone against stone indicated that the doors had begun to move. Heads looked up from wooden bowls, dishes, and cupped hands, but not a soul stirred otherwise from their meal.

A chink of sunlight speared the sandstone floor of the Anthill, broadening as the doors rasped along their deep channels. Once the gap was wide enough to allow two men to pass through side by side, the guard captain ordered a halt and his men stood down, rubbing aching shoulders.

The sky was a brilliant pale blue, as it had been on so many beautiful early mornings in the glorious city of Paixandria. On such mornings, the air was always clear and still cool from the night's chill, the gardeners had already watered the lush gardens, the banners and awnings had flapped and cracked around the souk as traders set out their wares, and the sounds of a city rising from its slumber had slowly filtered into the world like a blessing.

Mhenheli stepped through the open doorway and into the blazing bright sunlight.

He faltered, Menet's hands steadying him from behind. His eyes blurred with tears. His lips trembled. His hands shook, wrapping tightly around the candle, his lifeline.

Paixandria was a scorched, broken, smoking ruin.

The gardens, hollow shells; everything green and good, every flower, every quiet pool razed into nothing. The trees, burned stumps; blackened nubs barely visible

above the scoured sandstone ground. The shade of rooftop awnings and terraces gone; every scrap of wood and cloth incinerated.

Every building, shattered or cracked; blasted with holes, crumbling and fragile. Once-pale walls, blackened; smouldering still with the hot, sour stench of burned sandstone.

Not a grain of sand to be seen anywhere. The streets had been scoured clean of sand and pathways, the sandstone beneath smooth and riven with cracks; some thin, some wide, and some…

The palace still stood, heavily damaged, one wing completely destroyed. Its huge chimneys had toppled, its wooden roof was gone, and the beautiful copper ornamentation around its doorway had completely melted. But the ground before that empty doorway - though splintered with cracks - was beautiful, for the molten copper had run down the walls to fill those cracks, solidifying in a glimmering tracery that branched across the scoured, scorched ground; mending it in a web of shining hope in the middle of the desolation that lay before him.

"The Vigil," he heard Menet whisper behind him. "Stars… look at the Vigil…"

It was in that moment that Mhenheli realised the sunlight in Paixandria had never, not even on the hottest of days, shone this brightly.

The Vigil was *ablaze*.

Not with fire, but with light; a radiating pillar of light so dazzling that he could barely rest his gaze near it. Within the light he could just - through squinting eyes - make out the Conduit and the slowly rotating sandstone pieces that embraced it, and the spire of the Vigil itself.

Step forward, Mhenheli, devoted servant of my servant

Her voice was soft and warm, a comfort to his aching and wounded heart. With the candle still clutched in his trembling hands, he walked slowly down the Anthill's outer steps, past the scorched and barren gardens, along the cracked and empty pathway toward the Vigil, his head half turned away from her blazing light.

He faltered as his gaze fell on the ruined building that had once been the candle-maker's shop. The place where…

Come closer, O shattered heart; you who bring a candle to me that your hands would beg never to light

A few more slow steps, away from that place and toward the gentle comfort that called to him.

Do you know who I am, candle-bearer?

Mhenheli blinked away tears. Scoured a tongue over dry lips. Swallowed through a hoarse throat.

"You are Love," he whispered.

I am Love. I am in every heart. I know every heart. I transcend Time and Death, for their grasp cannot touch Love. I am Love, and I am Grief, for Grief is only Love that can no longer be given

Mhenheli bowed his head. A wretched sob broke free from his lips and he sank to his knees. His hands shook violently as he placed down the candle in the light that flooded the Vigil's steps.

In the hours when my beloved people trembled in fear, my servant whispered to me the names and words of all he had guided to my light and beyond to the stars. He had held them dear, every one. Every word remembered, and whispered to me until his voice was gone and only breath remained. His love for them, his remembrance of them, has made him worthy of the gift of eternal peace and forgiveness that I now give to him

The light directly in front of Mhenheli slowly began to dim. While the rest of the Vigil still blazed, his tears no longer reflected a dazzling brilliance. He fumbled the flint and steel, almost dropping it.

Do not light his candle. Stand, and behold

So commanded, he obeyed.

The flint and steel fell from his hands, dropping with a soft clatter to the sandstone.

There, within the inner circle of the Vigil's low surrounding wall - forehead pressed to the base of the spire, hands splayed flat to the ground - lay the prostrated body of his master.

Whole.

Alive.

Every word has now been spoken, save the final ones. He speaks his own words to me now. Do not let him finish those words, devoted servant of my servant. Take him from my embrace and into yours. Do not let him finish his words

Mhenheli leapt over the wall, into the sanctum of the Vigil; a place no man - not even the king, until this day - had ever set foot in. Collapsing to his knees, he bent low, wrapping both arms tightly around his master and cradling him close.

"My name has been Paix al-Lareiff," came the faintest whisper from exhausted lips.

"No," Mhenheli begged. "Don't. Don't you dare. Don't say it."

"My life's service has been to my people and to the Vigil."

Clinging, rocking, sobbing, Mhenheli begged again, his master clutched tightly to him.

"Please! Please don't!"

"My candle will shine brightly, for I was given—"

With a low moan of anguish, Mhenheli did the only thing he could think of; the one thing he had never dared to do, the one thing he could think of to silence those words.

He kissed the man he loved. A fierce, desperate, panicked kiss, fingers splayed in his hair, tears falling on his face, every prayer he had ever known burning behind his lips.

The words fell silent.

The world fell still.

Shaking, Mhenheli raised his head, half expecting those lips to begin moving again, to utter those final words. But instead, the king's eyes slowly opened - an impossible, pleading blue in the light that shone from above.

"They are all safe," Mhenheli whispered. "You saved them. Every one of them. And now you must save yourself."

Those beloved eyes slowly closed, and that exhausted body went limp in his arms, completely spent.

"Hold on," Mhenheli begged, rising to his feet, cradling his master in his arms as tenderly as a mother would her child. "Just, please, hold on."

As if in response to that plea, long fingers weakly fisted into the front of his robes, as he stepped out from the Vigil's light into the broken city.

With Menet running toward him, followed by a brace of the palace guards, Mhenheli walked away from the Vigil, leaving a solitary ivory candle on the ground, unlit and unneeded.

CHAPTER 41

Menet skidded to a halt several feet in front of Mhenheli. His gaze darted over the sight before him. The Chaperone, cradling the king in his arms. The king… was he alive? He seemed unharmed, thank the stars, but that was no indication of… ah… no, that hand clutched into the front of the Chaperone's robes was not the action of a dead man. But still…

"He lives?" he asked hoarsely, as Mhenheli drew closer.

The Chaperone raised his head, and his face was lit up as if the heavens had blessed him with every wish he had ever asked for. He simply nodded.

Menet's heart leapt, and he returned that smile. Turning, he yelled back to the cohort of guards, who had stopped running when he had and were watching, uncertainty in every man's stance.

"Fetch the apothecaries! Have them ready at the doors!"

Two of the guards took off at a run, back toward the Anthill.

***

At those shouted words, Mhenheli felt the king's fingers tense up, clutching even more tightly into his robes. Concerned, he looked down as he kept walking, Menet now at his side.

The king's face was drawn, his eyes tightly shut, his jaw tense, his body suddenly shifting to huddle in on itself in his arms. Sharp, staccato exhalations left his flared nostrils, and Mhenheli realised that had a voice remained in that throat, his master would be whimpering.

His pace slowed momentarily as a terrible realisation swept over him. While he and the entire population of Paixandria had been together, with the mighty strength of the Anthill to shelter and protect them, the king had been *outside* in the centre of the maelstrom. Sheltered and protected by the Vigil, yes, but it had raged around him as he lay out here, *alone*, for three hours while the city was torn apart.

"Where should he be taken?" Menet was asking. "We could perhaps set up a room on the ground floor. It would be closest, so you wouldn't have to carry him too far."

Mhenheli thought of the usual lively bustle that took place in the lower cavern of the Anthill, even on the days when the entire city was not living in it. If one raised voice could cause this much distress…

“He will be taken to his rooms, in the upper cavern,” he said. “It is quieter there, and everything is ready for him.”

Menet nodded. “I’ll arrange for some of my men to be ready, to carry him up there.”

“I will carry him.”

“Ser, with respect, it’s a long way, up many steps—“

Mhenheli’s jaw set, and he flicked a look at the guard.

“I would carry him to the very top of the Anthill if I had to,” he said. “Just make sure that there are guards ahead of me to open doors, and behind me to brace me if my legs weaken.”

“Ser—“

“I am not negotiating this with you.” Mhenheli kept his voice low and even. “You know that no man but I may lay hands on the king.”

Menet palmed a hand to the back of his neck and chewed briefly on his lower lip. “Well… yes, I’ll give you that. But there *is* a caveat to the rule: if the king’s life be in danger, then palace guards also may touch him, to save him.”

They were approaching the razed and barren garden in front of the Anthill steps. Mhenheli looked up at the doors. Just beyond, in the shadows, he could see curious faces peeking out, surrounded by the bright scarves that were the mark of the city’s apothecaries.

“The danger to the king’s life is passed,” he murmured. “His body is whole. More than anything else, I suspect that he mostly needs rest, and plenty of it, to regain his strength.”

He looked back down at that clutching hand, which had loosened a little now the words being spoken around him were softer. His brows knit with worry. The king’s body was indeed whole. But what of his mind?

***

Having made his way carefully up the Anthill’s outer steps and through the great stone doors, turning a little to the side so he didn’t catch any part of his precious burden against them, Mhenheli waited for a few moments in the shadows while his eyes adjusted to the dimmer light of the lower cavern.

“Stars, I thought all hope was lost,” one of the apothecaries muttered, rummaging in his satchel. “I have two bottles remaining. Is he able to drink anything?”

“No,” Mhenheli said lowly. “Not yet. We need to get him to the upper cavern and into bed first.”

“Any broken bones?” another apothecary asked. “I have one healing left. Used up all my others on that poor young guard with the burns on his face and arm.”

His vision adjusted enough that he could walk without concern of a misstep, Mhenheli moved out of the shadows by the door with a murmur of, “I have no idea. Any broken bones can be discovered once we have him safe.”

Beneath the golden light of the Great Conduit, the fast had been broken. Small groups of people clustered together around various city guards, who were each holding small maps. One guard pointed to his map, then toward an ancient door in the lower cavern wall.

Ah, of course. The Anthill had once been the city’s home, long before the populace moved out and built Paixandria itself. The rooms lived in back then still existed. Granted, they would need to hold a great many more people now, but they would provide more comfort than the cavern floor itself.

Mhenheli tried to keep as close as he could to the shadows of the wall as he made his way to the foot of the steps leading to the upper cavern, the apothecaries hurrying after him and clutching their satchels close to them, to protect the precious few potions they had left. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Menet gesture rapidly to the palace guards, urging them to cluster around him, to protect the king from being seen… but it was too late.

A sharp, ululating cry lifted to the roof of the cavern as a woman rushed toward them. Barely a breath later, and several more cries raised, as more people ran over at sight of their king, still alive. In everyday Paixandrian life, such cries were sounds of joy and celebration, but to the trembling man in Mhenheli’s arms they were a torment.

“Shut them up,” Mhenheli gritted to Menet. *“Shut them up.”*

***

The climb to the upper cavern was steady and slow, but nonetheless Mhenheli’s legs felt heavy and weak by the time he finally reached the doors to the king’s quarters. Menet was already ahead of him, watching him anxiously lest his legs finally give way, and he drop his precious cargo.

Steady to the end, though his knees wanted to collapse, Mhenheli set his jaw and carried his master the final few steps to his bedroom in the quiet of the upper

cavern. Menet pulled back the blue blanket on the bed, and Mhenheli carefully laid the king down on the soft mattress.

One of the apothecaries set down a wooden stand on the table beside the bed. Into it, he placed a small, rounded bottle, filled with a deep red liquid. A second bottle was nestled into another cavity within the stand, this one a brighter red. A third and final bottle was added - only half full - of a soft pink pearlescent liquid that shimmered in the low light.

“Strength, healing, and regeneration,” the apothecary murmured, pointing to each in turn. “The last should only be used if there is serious physical damage. It's the only one we have left, until we can attempt to get access to our tools and stores in the city. We just made sure our satchels were packed with what we could fit in, and what we thought might be needed.”

“Thank you,” Mhenheli said, as Menet carried a chair over to the side of the bed and gestured for him to sit down on it.

“Best you collapse into that, rather than onto the king and break half his bones,” Menet said, with a wry grin. “Never seen a man carry another up so many stairs without falling to his knees at the end of it. That’s guard captain material, if ever I saw it.”

Sinking gratefully into the chair, Mhenheli could only manage a weary smile, as Menet ushered everyone out of the room and quietly closed the door behind him, leaving the Chaperone alone with his master.

***

His were the hands to gently ease sandals from dusty feet, one of the fine leather straps abraded, another torn and split. His were the hands to move gently over those feet, feeling for any unnatural forming of the delicate bones beneath. His were the hands to sweep softly over linen, checking shins, knees, thighs, hips, and ribs so very carefully.

His were the hands to sweep over arms, shoulders, and collar, finally content that his master’s bones were whole and undamaged. His were the hands to then remove the ivory coat, slowly moving his master’s limbs and torso until first one arm then the other could be painstakingly freed.

His were the hands to take a comb from the drawer beside the bed, softly drawing it through his master’s hair until the pillow was flecked with sand. His were the hands to dampen a soft cloth with water and tenderly wash dust from his

master's face, hands, and feet. His were the hands to pull that deep blue blanket up and settle it comfortably.

His was the exhausted body that slumped back into the chair. His were the eyes that welled with tears now that he knew *all* were safe, including the one most precious to him. His were the lids that drooped with tiredness afforded by the luxury of sheer relief.

And his was the weary, sleeping face that his master saw when he opened his eyes.

***

Mhenheli startled awake, his gaze immediately going to the bed. In the low light from the Great Orrery that warmed the crystalline windows of the king's rooms, he saw familiar blue eyes staring at him. Blue eyes that had once held patience, humour, mischief, gentleness, authority. Blue eyes that now held something wholly unfamiliar.

Fear.

Immediately, he sat forward in the chair, reaching for the hand that lay outside the covers. Slipping his palm into it, he held it as he shifted from the chair to the side of the bed. He did not miss how those eyes followed his face.

"All are safe," he murmured. "Every one of your people, all are safe in the caverns of the Anthill, below us."

That deep blue gaze had moved to his mouth. Lines of stress flickered around his master's eyes as he clearly tried to focus.

"Onorait?" Mhenheli said softly. "All are safe. Do you… do you understand?"

The king was still watching his mouth closely, and suddenly Mhenheli realised why. His master was trying to read the words formed by his lips.

"Can you hear me?" he asked, still wary of raising his voice too much, given the reaction to loud noises that he'd already seen earlier.

After a moment, those blue eyes flicked up to meet his gaze. Slowly, the king shook his head.

Mhenheli's heart sank, but he kept his face calm and impassive. His master's hearing was damaged, that was obvious. The noise he had endured amid the maelstrom must have been terrible, but he had been able to hear Menet's shout and the cries of the women - even though they had caused him distress - so there was hope yet.

Slowly, keeping hold of his master's hand, he shifted himself up toward the head of the bed. Only then did he let go, gently pushing his arm beneath the king's shoulders to lift him up a little. A soft gasp of pain hitched out into the quiet, still air.

"I know nothing's broken, but I know it hurts," he muttered, tension in the set of his every limb as he manoeuvred himself behind the king. "I just need to get you in a place where I can give you some of this potion without you choking on it."

Eventually, with only one more hitched inbreath, he had his master leaning back against him and could reach to his side to take the deep red potion from its wooden rest. The cork came out easily from the delicate bottle, and he brought the potion carefully to the king's lips.

Just a few drops trickled into a mouth that could barely open for them. Even though he knew he could not be heard, Mhenheli could not help but make soothing sounds of encouragement. He was sure his master could feel the vibration of his voice, if nothing else.

"That's it," he praised. "Just a few drops more. You have so little strength left, and this will help you regain it."

The next he tried was the lighter red bottle. Again, his master only managed to take a few droplets of it, but every mote of healing would bring him closer to a point where he could manage more.

Mhenheli looked over his shoulder at the soft pink potion. The apothecary had told him only to use it in the case of serious physical damage. Could it possibly regenerate his master's hearing?

Again, only a trickle of the potion made it between those lips. As Mhenheli pushed the cork back into the bottle, he heard a soft exhalation that sounded more than just a breath. Hastily, he rested the bottle back in its stand, once again slipping his palm into his master's hand and holding it. Those potion-dampened lips were trying to speak, but nothing was coming out.

Gently, Mhenheli rested a finger on those lips. They stilled, then the head that rested back against his chest nodded slightly, before turning to rest its cheek there instead.

Mhenheli's heart wrenched as he watched his master's eyes close, the lines around them slowly softening, the tension of his jaw fading, his lips parting, his weight growing heavier as he slipped into a deep, healing sleep.

Gently, Mhenheli rested his other hand in his master's hair, slowly stroking through it over and over, soothing and calming, as he rested his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

He would be whatever he was needed to be, do whatever he was needed to do. Duty would no longer fetter his touch, his smile, his heart. He wasn't afraid anymore.

CHAPTER 42

A gentle knock woke Mhenheli some time later. From the powerful twinge in his neck as he lifted his head away from the wall, he'd been asleep for quite some time, and he bit down a sharp hiss of breath as he carefully settled back against the wall again.

The king still rested against him, his breathing deep and slow. He had turned somewhat, the hand that Mhenheli was not still holding now flat against his chest, and his cheek almost nuzzled beside it; so close that Mhenheli could feel the warmth of his breath through his robes. To anyone entering the room the scene before them would look like far more than it actually was. If he were to admit it, it *felt* like far more than it actually was.

"Who is it?" Mhenheli asked, only raising his voice as far as he thought might carry through the door, mindful of his sleeping charge.

"Menet, ser," came the response, muffled through the wooden door.

He looked down at the king, then over to the door. He had trusted Menet thus far. The guard had been a pillar of strength and levelheadedness for him. Surely, he could trust him with this?

"Enter," he said, "but be as quiet as you can, and come alone."

The door opened without a sound, and Menet backed his way in, clearly carrying a wooden tray of something. He turned, pushing backwards to close the door with his rump, and lifting his head with a smile.

"I've brought food and wine…" he began, then he stopped, taking in the scene before him.

"I had to sit him up a little to give him the potions, and then he fell asleep on me," Mhenheli said, watching anxiously as Menet set down the tray on the bedside table, shifting the potions to one side, but still within reach.

"No need to explain," Menet replied, straightening. "Had to do the same with my wife when she caught a sickness and grew so weak she couldn't sit up without my help. I think I fell asleep in the same position as you, if I remember right. How's your neck?" He gave Mhenheli a choice grin.

"Sore," Mhenheli admitted ruefully, his shoulders nonetheless relaxing as the realisation that he was right to trust this man sank into them.

Menet chuckled. "Aye, thought so. How fares he?"

Mhenheli looked down at his master, sleeping soundly against him.

“He took a little of each potion,” he murmured. “Not enough for what he needed, but it was a start. When he awakens, I’ll try to get him to take a little more. He… his hearing has been affected. He cannot hear low voices, could not hear me speaking normally to him. Whether that is temporary or not, only time will tell. My hope is that the apothecaries can procure more potions to help with that.”

Menet sank into the chair beside the bed, looking intently at the king’s sleeping face.

“It was loud enough in here,” he said. “I cannot imagine what it must have been like outside in the middle of it all. I remember being on duty by the bells one morning when a sandstorm came in. The bell was clanging right by my ear for several minutes. Took me days to feel like I could hear properly again.”

Mhenheli nodded, looking over at the tray. On it there rested a few small dishes, some covered and some open. A bowl of pitted dates, some delicate sweet breads, a plate of little glazed pastry cases filled with hot spiced rice and vegetables, palm-sized flatbreads that still steamed from the ovens and oozed butter and honey; everything small and simple to eat, nourishing and tempting for a possibly reluctant appetite.

“Finger foods,” Menet explained, as he held out the plate of spiced pastries. “The cooks wanted to make it nice and easy to eat.”

Gratefully, Mhenheli took one with his free hand; the other - closest to the table - still being held by his master’s hand. He hadn’t realised just how hungry he was, and he was silent for a few minutes while he devoured the pastry.

“The people have set up a small place in the centre of the lower cavern,” Menet said lowly, as he poured a cup of honey wine and handed it to Mhenheli. “A little vigil of their own, but with not the same significance as the one outside. ‘tis for the king; a place where they bring candles and lanterns, incense and amber, and where they pray for his health and recovery.”

He looked up. “I have ensured that all who live and work in these upper levels have been told to keep noise to a minimum, that the king needs quiet and rest to aid in his recovery.”

The words behind those were unspoken, but Mhenheli understood them, nonetheless. Menet had seen how the king cringed away from the loud and joyful celebrations down on the cavern floor, and had already been attempting to quiet them down, even as Mhenheli had ordered him to do so.

“May that recovery be swift,” Menet added, sitting back up. “Did you want help to get up, so you can stretch out and relieve that pain in your neck?”

Mhenheli raised the cup to his lips, murmuring, “Not moving,” before he took a sip.

Menet shrugged, reaching into his guard’s tunic and pulling out the golden disc. “Fair enough,” he said, examining it. “If you have no more need of me tonight, I will return in the morning.”

“The morning?” The cup stilled on Mhenheli’s lips. “Where in the day are we?”

In response, Menet showed him the golden disc. The slender gold arrow had departed the lapis lazuli half, indicating that night had fallen.

“You’ve been squashed up against that wall for over twelve hours,” he said, tucking the golden disc back into its pocket. “Spend the rest of the night like it, and I guarantee it’ll be *you* needing some of those potions come morning. But, if you’re not moving, you’re not moving.”

“He might awaken soon,” Mhenheli said, handing the now empty cup back to Menet. “It hurt him to be moved into this position. I will not risk hurting him again purely for the sake of my own comfort. I will stay here, ready to administer more potions, and hopefully some food, if he can manage that.”

“As you wish.” Menet gently slapped his hands against his thighs, then stood up. “At least let me make you a bit more comfortable,” he added, grabbing the cushion from the chair and holding it out with a raised eyebrow.

“Thank you.” Mhenheli lowered his head, gritting his teeth as another twinge speared down the cords of his neck. He felt Menet push the soft pillow behind his head, and once it was in place, he settled back again with a sigh of relief.

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The next time Mhenheli was roused to wakefulness, it was by the soft, low chime of the Great Orrery’s midnight bell. A deep and muffled note, it was not usually enough to awaken even those who slept in the higher areas of the Anthill, but Mhenheli’s sleep had been wholly disrupted over the past day, and so it was enough to bring him to his senses.

The heaviness that rested against him also stirred, heaving a soft sigh. He looked down, seeing dark lashes slowly open in the dim golden light. They blinked a few times, then that beloved head moved, tilting back a little to look up at him, cheek still pillowed against his chest.

He smiled. “Yes, maah’qab, I am still here,” he said, making sure to keep the words slow and well-formed upon his lips, as he saw that gaze swoop immediately to his mouth.

“Potions,” he added, nodding toward the table beside the bed. His master nodded faintly in response, letting go of his hand. So freed, Mhenheli could reach for the strength potion, uncorking it and holding it to his master’s lips.

Overjoyed, he watched, tilting the bottle very carefully, as his master managed to actually drink more than a few drops this time. Only two small gulps - barely half a good spoonful, if measured - but a vast improvement over this morning, when he barely had the strength to part his lips.

“Good,” Mhenheli praised. “Good! Now, some healing.”

This one his master took three small mouthfuls of. And, as Mhenheli re-corked the bottle, he knew that the more he drank, the faster he would recover. Perhaps, by the morning, the whole bottle would be gone.

The regeneration potion… he would not touch. It was far too valuable, and had not improved the king’s hearing, judging from the way he had once again attempted to read Mhenheli’s lips

He gestured toward the tray of food, watching as that gaze moved back to his mouth.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

A nod.

“Sweet, or not sweet?”

His master’s lips moved, but barely a breath escaped them. They formed the shape of ‘sweet’, though, so Mhenheli reached for the plate of sweet breads. They were small and delicate - barely the size of his thumb - and glazed with a wash of honey water. The cooks had known how to tempt a capricious appetite, as these breads had long been a favourite of the king’s, ever since he was a young boy.

Carefully, Mhenheli rested the plate on his chest, holding it close to the hand that still lay there. He watched as those fingers lifted, managing to close awkwardly around the end of one of the soft little breads. They were trembling with just that small effort, though, and he held back a sigh as he hoped to all the stars that the potions would do their work overnight, bringing renewed vigour to this body that so desperately needed it.

A soft, huffed wheeze of frustration followed, as the bread slipped from those shaking fingers, landing on Mhenheli’s chest, thankfully not sticky side down. He felt his master’s weight slump against him, clear misery and resignation in that movement, and his heart twisted to see this man he loved so helpless and despairing.

He needed to eat and was clearly hungry. The potions would do their work regardless, but with a little food in his belly, they would be far more effective.

There was one thing he could try. He wasn't sure if the king would even allow it, but he had to *try*.

He picked up the bread, breaking it between his fingers into three smaller pieces. Inside, it was soft and fluffy, and its delicious, sweet scent filled the air. He paused, waiting until those eyes looked up at him again, then he held one of the pieces close to his master's lips.

"Tomorrow, maah'qab," he said softly and slowly, "tomorrow you will be stronger, and every day after that stronger yet. But this night, let me help you. Let me do this for you."

There was a moment's pause - a breath in the world between them - as his master read those words on his mouth. That deep blue gaze moved back up to his eyes, clear and searching. Then his master nodded, dark lashes sweeping back down again as he focused on the small piece of bread between Mhenheli's fingers and parted his lips to receive it.

Three of the small, sweet breads later, Mhenheli knew this could not last. His master *had* to get well. His own heart couldn't take this deep, tender intimacy for much longer, and he was terrified that he would blurt out his love in a thoughtless moment. Having those lips slowly and carefully taking the small, soft pieces of bread from his fingertips, over and over, had almost killed him.

He had managed to disguise how deeply it had affected him by persuading his master to drink a little more of the two potions before he rested again. Two more mouthfuls of each had he managed, and now - as that head grew heavy, cheek once more against his chest - Mhenheli closed his eyes and allowed tears to flow.

CHAPTER 43

It was a slow, lazy drift from the deep ocean of slumber, through the shallows of drowsiness, and onto the shore of wakefulness. Like a storm-tossed sailor, half-drowned by terror, he had washed up on unfamiliar sands somewhere quiet and calm, his body aching and weak, his mind lashed by ropes and wreckage.

He was warm. He was comfortable. He was safe.

The world was a muffled and hazy thing. A soothing warmth hummed in his mind's eye, the ever-present solace of the Vigil. So cocooned, he became aware of the steady beat of a regular pulse against his cheek; a solid, dependable feeling that grounded him. Not his heart, but one so close that it felt gifted to him; a reassurance that everything was going to be all right.

He was supported. He was held. He was loved.

He knew this feeling. It was the approving smile of his father, the soft embrace of his mother, the protectiveness of his mu'enaah. Though all were gone from his life for many a year, the aching familiarity of their presence was echoed in the arms that held him now.

He could just drift here for a while. Let the waves lap against his ankles, let his body rest on the sand, let the warmth sink into his bones.

But the world was coming closer, intruding on this blessed space. Unbidden, a soft breath left his lips. *No, don't come in yet, let this ocean cradle me until I am ready to stand again.*

Gentle fingers moved through his hair, over and over, stroking and soothing. The low vibration of a voice, muffled and indistinct, blended with the pulse beneath his cheek.

The world peeked in.

He opened his eyes.

Again, that voice. Its words were lost behind a hazy veil, but its tenderness sank into him, finding that sore place where he had once carried guilt - an old and heavy anguish that abraded his soul - and bringing it out into a golden light so familiar to him: the light of the Vigil.

It no longer hurt to sit in that light. No more did it seep into the cracks within him, illuminating them and reminding him that a part of him was broken by his own hand. Those cracks were still there, but the light radiated *out* from them, instead of sinking into them.

You have done well, my beloved servant. Rest now and allow others to be strong for you. Take that soft, fragile place within you and sit with it. Hold it. Know it. Trust it. A time will come for you to take strength back into your hands, for many will need your guidance in days far ahead. For now, be still, and find your strength and comfort in those closest to you.

A hand gently brushed his cheek. His eyes refocused, and he tilted his head back, not wanting to lose contact with the warmth beneath him.

Mhenheli. Familiar, but… utterly changed. A smile on his lips; one that reached his eyes. When was the last time he had seen that? When was the last time those hands had touched him with anything other than swift and neat necessity?

That voice - still muffled behind what felt like a cloud drifting across his hearing - spoke now; addressed him, slowly and carefully. He watched the movement of those lips, picking out a word here and there…

Maah'qab?

When was the last time that voice had called him anything other than his title of 'Onorait'? Never once did Mhenheli use any other name for him, though they had been close for many years.

He must have been mistaken, but the confusion dissolved as Mhenheli picked up one of the small glass bottles that rested in a stand beside the bed. Uncorking it, he held it out with another muffled word.

He didn't need the word to recognise what was in the bottle, so he simply nodded and parted his lips, waiting.

The cool caress of glass gently touched his lower lip, tilting slowly. The warmth of strength trickled into his mouth and down his throat, and he simply let it flow. Its biting, strong alcohol base blazed through him, chased by a bouquet of herbs whose oils lingered like an afterthought just on the edge of recognition.

Again, that muffled murmur brushed against the clouds over his hearing. With his focus on the last few drops in the bottle as they ran down his tongue, he could not watch Mhenheli's lips to guess his words, but their tone was as clear as his eyes and his understanding were becoming.

Praise.

When was the last time he had been praised for anything he had done? Visitors to his court knew better than to fawn and flatter the Copper King with false praises, but had he missed something more genuine? Or was it simply that this praise was so heartfelt that it cut through, right to his heart?

A second bottle touched his lips, the astringent scent of healing herbs drifting up from its neck. Again, he simply trusted Mhenheli, letting the potion flow over his tongue and slip down his throat until it was done.

Mhenheli looked so happy, his eyes shining, a broad and genuine smile touching them. He spoke again, less carefully, the words harder to discern: good… strong… soon… maah'qab.

The Keeper of Lifetimes and Endings did not only light candles for those who journeyed to the stars. Those were the Endings, but there were Lifetimes to honour, too. And oft had he heard the vows of those whom he stood witness for as they devoted their lives to each other.

Maah'qab tazu alaa'qab, id'haye nahid. My heart cherishes your heart, for it knows we are one.

He sought answers in Mhenheli's eyes. What had brought down the walls of duty that had always surrounded him? Over the years, he had grown close to his Chaperone but had wondered often what was behind that perfect neatness, that rigid protocol, that innate sense of duty.

Mhenheli's eyes were weary and ringed with the dark smudges of tiredness and the heaviness of a past grief. His greying hair was loose and messy, his robes creased and dusty, his face drawn and careworn. Wholly unlike himself. Wholly altered.

Who had found him at the Vigil? Whose arms had carried him here? Who had wept for him? Who had not left his side for even a moment?

This man. This blessed, beloved man.

Take that soft, fragile place within you and sit with it. Hold it. Know it. Trust it.

He closed his eyes as that hand returned to his hair, slow and soothing.

He was supported. He was held. He was loved.

CHAPTER 44

Mhenheli next awoke shortly before dawn, if the peaceful silence within the Anthill was anything to go by. The oil lamps had all burned out, and only the Conduit within the Great Orrery lit the king's rooms with its hazy golden light.

The first thing he became aware of was that he was stiff and aching all over, from not having moved much for at least a day and a night. Stars, what he would give for a deep, hot bath to soak in right now…

The second thing he became aware of was what had awoken him. The king was awake and moving, testing out his strength. He had raised the hand on Mhenheli's chest, then lowered it again. He was now trying the same movement with his head, although the soft gasp of pain as he rested it back down told Mhenheli that his master was probably as stiff and sore as he was.

"Much though I do not wish to move," Mhenheli said, his voice a near groan of pain as he did just that, "if I do not do so, I may root to the spot and never move again."

Carefully, he extricated himself from beneath his master until he managed to stand upright. Cradling his lower spine in his palms, he first leaned back, then forward, then side to side, all the time grimacing. With a final roll of his shoulders, he turned and smiled as he saw that the king had managed to roll onto his back on the firm mattress. Granted, he looked as if that simple movement had taken everything out of him, but though he was panting softly with exertion, his lips were curved in a faint but triumphant smile.

Mhenheli bent down, ignoring the twinge of his back, and did his best to plump up the pillows beneath the king's head. As he did so, a hand suddenly rested on his wrist, and he stilled, looking down at his master.

The king's eyes glimmered in the low light, and they were fixed intently on him, clear and wide awake.

"Thank you."

It was the softest whisper of a breath from an exhausted throat, but it was the first thing he'd heard from his master in several days, and just the sound of it lit his own face with a bright smile. He wasn't sure if those thanks were just for the pillows, or for… everything. The enormity of the latter threatened to solidify a lump in his chest and throat, so he opted for the safety of the former, and simply nodded, still smiling.

“How is your hearing?” he asked, keeping his voice at an even tempo, and expecting the king’s gaze to move to his lips. But it did not, remaining steadily on his eyes.

“Dulled, but returning. I wish that—”

Again, that voice was barely audible, and Mhenheli gently laid a finger on his master's lips.

“Hush,” he said. “I will call for more potions, and then hopefully we will soon have you sitting up and able to speak without straining your voice too much.”

The king sighed - a clear expression of frustration - but nonetheless, he nodded. His gaze flicked over to the tray of cold food on the small table beside the bed, then to the rack of mostly empty potion bottles.

“Menet will arrive soon with some fresh, hot food,” Mhenheli said, walking over to stand by the crystalline window and looking down to the cavern below. “I shall ask him to fetch more strength and healing potions. And then—“ He turned to face the bed with a rueful smile “—I think we both need a change of clothing.”

“And a bath,” came the whispered reply.

Mhenheli smirked. “I thought I told you to hush.”

When his master returned that quip with a wry smile and a glimmer of that old familiar mischief in his eyes, Mhenheli knew that everything was going to be all right. It might take a while, since that glimmer was still edged with something that spoke of what the king had endured during those three hours alone, but Mhenheli would do whatever was needed to bring this beloved man back to his old self again.

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Menet did indeed arrive within the hour, bearing a tray of fresh food, much the same as the one he had brought the day before. He shoved the old tray at one of the guards outside, telling him to take it to the barracks for anyone to pick over if they needed something to eat between shifts. Another guard was ordered to fetch an apothecary, to bring one more potion each of strength and healing.

“Anything else needed, Ser?” he asked quietly of Mhenheli, his gaze flicking briefly toward the bed, where the king appeared to be asleep.

“Yes.” Mhenheli took him over to the door, keeping his voice low. “Has anyone managed to get into the palace yet? There are things there that are needed.”

“I had planned to send some of my men in this morning,” Menet said, “to see how safe it is. As far as I can tell, the guest wing and banqueting hall are both destroyed, but the king’s rooms, servants’ quarters, and the guard house appear undamaged, save some fallen beams from the roof.”

Mhenheli nodded. “Salvage what you can from the king’s rooms. There will be a wooden chest in the Robing Room, which must be saved. Do not open it, but bring it here. The trident as well, if it is to be found. And, if you find the regalia cloak on a stand in the Robing Room, bring that also. And any changes of everyday clothing, personal artefacts and the like; anything to bring some sense of normality back and assist in his healing.”

“It will be done, Ser. And anything for you, personally?”

Mhenheli looked down at his dusty, creased robes, then back up at Menet with a rueful chuckle.

“I, too, would greatly appreciate a change of clothing.”

Menet grinned. “Right you are. One set of black robes to replace the old set of black robes shall be yours, once we find—“

He was stopped by a knock at the door. Outside stood an apothecary, holding two potions and trying in vain to peek into the room beyond.

“Thank you,” Mhenheli said smoothly, taking the potions from him. “The king rests but is recovering well. These potions will aid in his further healing.”

“Excuse me… Ser?” another voice said, from behind the apothecary. “I have come with a gift from the sha’haaki.”

The man pushed forward, nudging the apothecary to one side and holding out a polished wooden box.

“’Tis all things needed for brewing sha’, and we have filled it with the king’s favourite spices. May it bring him comfort while he heals.”

Menet smiled, taking the box. “I’m sure he’ll—“

“Ser…”

Mhenheli looked up. Behind the apothecary and the sha’haaki, a line of people queued along the upper walks, even descending partway down the stairs. Each held something in their hands; gifts for their king which they were eager to press upon the Chaperone and the Captain of the Palace Guard. A soft woollen throw, a new pair of sandals fashioned of the finest leather, a set of dice made from polished camel bone, an ivory linen tunic embroidered with desert flowers, a jug of fine honey wine, a small silken pillow filled with the softest wool and fringed with

tiny crystalline beads, a pot of flower-infused sugar, a glass vial of herbal balm for soothing aches of the head… so many gifts that the guards at the king's doors had to help carry them.

Mhenheli's heart was full and his throat sore from murmuring words of gratitude on behalf of his master, but stars above he would have it no other way. These people loved their king and wanted to show that love in whatever way they could.

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Later that afternoon, when the palace guards had warily combed the king's rooms in the palace for all they could salvage, Mhenheli sat on a low chair, looking through the crates and sacks they had hauled up into the Anthill.

The crown, trident, and regalia cloak were all safe, much to his relief. Those, he tucked into the small side room, alongside the sacks of clothing that had been recovered. He would find some way to hang those up, to prevent too much creasing, but first there were a few more crates to unpack.

The first held six fine linen banners, emblazoned with the flag of Paixandria. Beneath those, two carefully folded travelling cloaks; one brown and one blue, the latter bearing gold and red ribbons around its edge.

The next two were heavy, and upon opening them he found the king's collection of books and maps, neatly packed and undamaged. Tucked down the side of the second crate, the book that had sat within the desk drawer, filled with poetry and the king's most private thoughts.

Mhenheli bit his lip, hoping that none of the guards had thought to open and read that book.

Another crate held a fine leather pouch, filled with the copper totems that the king would choose carefully from whenever he left the palace to tend to the dying. Packed beside that, wrapped carefully in the soft blue blanket from the king's bed, his collection of quills, and the elegant stand that he rested them on. Beneath those, the sturdy box that contained his polished copper inkwells.

The final item in that chest was tucked in a corner, swaddled in one of the sheets from the king's bed. A small sandstone jar with carved ibis heads around its rim, a copper dish to stand it in, and a handful of small sandstone balls.

Mhenheli stood slowly, this precious object in his hands. The king would wish to see this, more than anything, and so he took it over to the bed.

His master had been watching him unpack the various crates and sacks, an occasional smile brightening his face when he saw such things as his beloved books and his old blue travelling cloak. But when he saw the object Mhenheli now held before him, his eyes filled, and he reached out trembling fingers.

Quickly, Mhenheli took it over to him, holding it out so his master could touch it; this precious thing, this little child's toy that had saved his people.

Tears spilled over, trickling down the king's face. He looked up at Mhenheli.

"Find him," he whispered. "I must see him."

"A few more days," Mhenheli begged. "Please, give yourself a few more days. You must be strong enough to sit unaided, and able to speak in more than a whisper before any of your people see you."

The king gave a frustrated sigh, closing his eyes for a moment. Mhenheli waited, expecting his master to insist the toymaker be brought to him, but instead those eyes opened, clear and accepting.

"At least—" the king began in that faint whisper, shaking his head as Mhenheli frowned. "No, I will speak this much, for it is important. At least ensure he is safe and comfortable."

Mhenheli relaxed. "Of course I will. And he will be brought to you as soon as you are able to receive visitors." He smiled. "Because, maah'qab, as you said this morning, we are both in dire need of a bath and a change of clothes."

The king's gaze rested on him for a moment that edged toward a little too long, then he returned that smile.

"Yes," he whispered. "We are."

CHAPTER 45

The workshop was well appointed, halfway up the Anthill's inner walls and with a large window that opened out onto the cavern. The golden light from the Great Conduit shone through that window, illuminating the room's interior enough that a lamp would not have been necessary but for the fact that one was needed for precision work.

Mhamhil sat back in his chair, loosening the old leather strap that held the magnifying crystal lens to his right eye and setting the odd contraption down on his workbench. His creation sat before him, small and intricate and finally complete, and he looked it over critically.

This was the first time he had attempted to make something with such detailed carvings, and he had relied on oral histories to get them right. No toy, this; but a small sculpture of the Vigil itself, carefully hewn from a chunk of sandstone that had fallen from the rough inner wall of the lower cavern. Its floating parts were joined to the spire by the thinnest bands of sandstone, and the glinting copper sphere that represented its Conduit rested at the very top.

For hours he had bent over his workbench, first chipping away to find the rough shape within the rock, then switching to smaller tools to scratch away layer after layer, working from memory in the long hours after the king had been brought safely home.

Standing before the Vigil, a small figure - carved with more care and attention than he gave to even his most intricate little dolls - faced the spire with its arms raised, a candle cradled in its hands. Atop the figure's head, a delicate circle of copper had been carefully melted to resemble a crown. The candle's flame, too, was a tiny wafer of bright copper that caught the lamplight.

Satisfied, he smiled, leaving the carving on his workbench as he hauled himself from his chair, stretched, and carried the lamp over to his bed, tucked away in a corner of the small room.

As he settled into bed, he once again picked up the elegant scroll that had been brought to him that morning by one of the palace guards. He had carefully scraped off the wax seal of the king, so that he could preserve it, and he now unrolled the scroll again to read the short missive therein.

Mhamhil,

The king desires your attendance at his rooms on the morning of the third day since the city entered the Anthill, once the fast has been broken. Give your name to the guards at the door, and you will be granted entry.

Chaperone Mhenheli

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Mhenheli stood by the bed, watching anxiously as his master sat on its edge, panting. It had taken considerable effort for him to sit upright and swing his legs around until his feet rested on the floor, but he had insisted on doing so unaided. The fortifying strength potion that he had taken but one hour before had clearly helped, but he still had to pause and catch his breath.

"I could carry you…" Mhenheli offered, somewhat desperately, looking from his master to where the throne had been set down. To a healthy man it would take but ten or so paces to reach it, but the king was still recovering.

"I will do this myself," the king responded, his voice husky yet once more holding something of its old authority and command.

Still recovering… and still stubborn.

Mhenheli sighed and nodded, crouching to gently slip the newly gifted pair of sandals onto the king's feet. They were beautiful, and a perfect fit, but still Mhenheli looked up.

"Comfortable?" he asked, his anxiety easing a little as the king nodded and gave a slight smile.

"Very," he said, glancing over to the small side room. "Fetch my trident."

A few moments later it was in his hand, its base firmly on the floor by his feet. His eyes brightened with a strange light as he looked up at the tines, something of his old self flickering behind the tiredness that had lain over those eyes since his rescue.

That deep blue gaze moved onto Mhenheli, and the king silently held out his other arm. With a nod, Mhenheli bent forward, gently bringing that arm around his shoulders. He felt the steadying inbreath that his master took, then - together - they brought him onto his feet.

"I am reminded," that husky voice murmured, with not a little humour, "of watching a newborn camel calf as it attempts to stand for the first time."

Mhenheli chuckled. “You are certainly as persistent and stubborn as a camel.”

“I shall accept that as a great compliment. Thank you. Now, the regalia cloak, if you please.”

Carefully, Mhenheli removed the arm that was still leaning quite heavily around his shoulders. Immediately, the king put that weight onto the trident, holding it tightly as he waited.

Mhenheli settled the exquisite cloak across his master’s shoulders, his fingers slipping into the familiar routine of tweaking the silks and ribbons until they sat absolutely perfectly, the hem of the cloak barely ghosting over the sandstone floor.

“Why,” that beloved voice had returned to a whisper, “do I tremble inside?”

Without thinking, Mhenheli gently stroked the backs of his fingers down the nape of his master’s neck.

“It has been a while since you did this,” he murmured. “And the last time you wore this, the world was a different place.”

He walked around in front of the king, who still leaned heavily on the trident, determination in the set of his jaw, but with that edge of something not quite himself still limning the blue of his eyes.

Gently and briefly, Mhenheli cradled a hand against his master’s cheek, letting his fingers caress down skin and beard as he pulled that hand away.

“It gives me such joy to see you becoming your old self again,” he said softly. “But I think we need to get you sitting down, hm?”

There was a moment’s pause, then the king smiled. “Agreed. Give me your shoulder again. Much though I wish to attempt it myself, my dignity would not suffer to watch me falling flat upon the floor.”

Slowly, each step a small and shuffled one, they made their way to the throne, where Mhenheli held the regalia cloak to one side as the king - leaning heavily on one arm of the seat - lowered himself down with a soft grunt of effort, then relaxed.

Finally allowing himself to breathe again, Mhenheli busied himself with settling the folds and drapes of the cloak. Once satisfied, and still crouched at the king’s feet, he looked up.

“The crown?” he asked, tentatively, unsure if it would be too heavy a weight to bear.

“Of course,” came the response. “If any audience merited the copper crown, it is this one.”

The oak box was heavier than Mhenheli had realised, as he carried it from the chest in the side room. He had never in all his years borne the weight of the copper crown, as no man but the king could touch it, and he worried anew at the thought of his master wearing it if it was truly this heavy.

He knelt before the king, holding the box up and resting it as lightly as he could on his master’s knees. He heard the clasp flick open and felt the weight of the box shift as the lid was raised.

The king rested the trident against the front of the throne, then reached into the box with both hands, drawing out the gleaming crown from within. At the moment he held it up, Mhenheli realised that much of the weight was in the box and not in the crown, so he closed the lid and put the box on the floor, still kneeling as he watched.

Carefully, his hands trembling faintly, the king lifted the crown to his head, feeling for its two cradles with his fingers as he settled it down over his brow.

Mhenheli watched, breath held as it always was at this moment. The small Conduit in the crown’s upper cradle activated, rising up to hover in the empty space at the centre of the cradle, rotating slowly and casting its beautiful golden light over the king. The cut emerald in the lower cradle slowly moved down to float in the empty space there, glittering and sparkling against the tanned skin of the king’s forehead and reflecting the golden light from above.

The king reached once more for the trident, holding it upright at his side. His back was straight, his head steady, his gaze calm and serene. There was sheer willpower behind every movement, but only Mhenheli - who had seen this beloved man in his weakest moments - had the eyes to spot it.

Slowly, still kneeling, Mhenheli reached for the hand that rested on the arm of the throne, taking it in his fingers and kissing the emerald ring.

“Onorait.” He let the hand go as he looked up, a smile on his lips.

Instead of resting back on the chair arm, that hand briefly touched his cheek, fingertips brushing across it.

“Ahat maah’qati,” the king murmured.

You are my strength.

***

Quietly, his head bent respectfully, Mhamhil walked into the king's quarters. The doors were closed behind him, and he waited.

"Come forward, honoured Mhamhil."

He ventured to look up. The king sat before him, looking every inch as regal as he had the last time Mhamhil had laid eyes on him in the palace. Trident in hand, crown upon his head, beautiful cloak draped around his shoulders, his face serene yet welcoming.

His voice was low and husky, as if he had worn it out in speaking. As he shuffled forward, Mhamhil recalled the whispers he had heard in the lower cavern as he'd made his prayers at the small makeshift vigil down there. Whispers that the king was gravely ill, that he could not hear, could not speak, that he was so weak he could not even sit unaided.

"Onorait," he mumbled, ducking his head again. "I rejoice to see you so well."

He had reached the throne, and something felt wrong about him standing while the king sat, so he slowly went to one knee at the king's feet, craning his neck so that he could kiss the emerald ring.

Drawing his head back, he looked up. Behind the throne, at the king's shoulder, stood the Chaperone who had carried him to safety. It had been said that the king was found within the Vigil itself, that it had protected him from the terrible maelstrom that had destroyed the city. That was one reason why he had taken so much time to carve the little gift he had brought with him.

"Give me your hands, honoured Mhamhil," the king said quietly, moving the trident to one side. The Chaperone took it, holding it in place as the king held out both his hands, waiting.

Confused, Mhamhil hesitantly held out his hands, then - as the king did not move - he rested them, palms upward, in the king's waiting hands. A moment later, his mouth opened in disbelief as the king bent forward, lowering his head until he could touch his forehead to Mhamhil's fingertips in a gesture of the greatest respect.

"I honour these hands," the king murmured. "These humble hands gave me what I needed to save my people, and I will forever be indebted to them."

Dazzled by the golden light of the Conduit in the copper crown and stunned by the king's gesture and words, Mhamhil just stared, bewildered. Slowly, the king

raised his head and let go of Mhamhil's hands, taking the trident once more from the Chaperone.

"If you have need of anything," the king said, "at any time, you have but to call upon me and I shall ensure that it is done. And, whether we rebuild our home here or move elsewhere, your name shall be ever honoured among my people and be set down in our histories as one who saved them."

Not even knowing where to look, nor what to say - for he had just *touched the king!* - Mhamhil just continued staring for a few moments, then - finally giving himself a little shake - he reached for his old cloth bag, digging inside it for the little wooden box he had carefully inserted his gift into.

Tugging the box out, he lifted the lid and peeked inside to check that everything looked as it should, then he turned the box to present it to the king.

"I heard that many people were bringing gifts to you, Onorait," he mumbled. "So, I made one myself for you."

The king took the box, gazing down at the tiny carved sculpture of the Vigil, and at the representation of himself holding a copper-flamed candle up to it.

"I thought you might be missing the Vigil…" Mhamhil continued, "and that it would be a warmth to your heart to have a remembrance of it here in your rooms."

The king's eyes softened as he took in every little detail.

"This is beautiful," he murmured. "The inscription of old is even there, which has not been seen for many a year."

"Aye. Not seen but spoken of. I learned it at my mother's knee, for she took me and my brother there often and taught us what the old inscription once said."

"'I am Love'," the king whispered, a smile curving his lips. "Thank you for this gift, Mhamhil. It shall sit beside my bed, and I shall treasure its presence there."

Mhamhil returned that smile, but his was a broad and joyful one compared to the gentle smile of his king.

"Onorait, to see you again after all that has happened is the best gift that any of us could have. Stars bless and guide you always."

CHAPTER 46

Over the following days, as the king's strength slowly returned, Mhenheli would often find him at his desk. His books and maps had been unpacked and were - for the lack of a better storage space - piled on the floor around him. Many hours were spent with maps spread out across the desk, measuring and marking with delicate copper instruments, making notes in one particular book, and consulting histories of the known world.

Mhenheli knew better than to disturb his master when he fell into a period of intense study, so instead he busied himself in keeping the king fed and watered and well rested, insisting that he *must* sleep, to continue growing stronger.

It was when the maps of the world were changed out for maps of the stars that Mhenheli began to grow concerned. Maps of the stars meant a journey, and the king was still not strong enough to undertake anything of the sort, much less a journey long enough that those star maps spent two days on the desk.

"Onorait," he murmured one evening, as he warmed a small copper pan filled with camel milk over the brazier. "May I ask something?"

"Mmm?" came the distracted response from the desk.

Mhenheli picked through a small wooden box, taking out a paper bag of dried black sha' leaves and tipping a small amount into the simmering milk.

"What *was* it that came to the city?"

The sound of quill on paper paused. Quietly, Mhenheli sifted through the small bags of spices in the box, adding a pinch each of cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, and black pepper to the milk as he waited for a response. He dipped a copper spoon into the small pan and stirred slowly.

The camel milk turned a soft golden colour. The spoon stirred. The silence bloomed.

The writing resumed.

"It is not something that I can explain adequately."

Holding back a sigh, Mhenheli lifted the pan, touched a strainer to its lip, and poured the spiced sha' into an elegant copper cup. After adding a drizzle of honey, he took the cup over to the desk and held it out to his master.

"Even an inadequate explanation would be enough," he said, as the king looked up.

After a moment's pause, his master put the quill back into its stand and reached out to take the cup with a nod of thanks, sitting back in his chair. He raised the cup to his lips, blew gently over its surface, and took a sip, his eyes focused on something elsewhere, something that was not in this room, or maybe even in this world.

"A dark and powerful creature was destroyed," he eventually murmured. "But a part of it was brought to where it should not have been. And when that part was also destroyed, the residual darkness within it erupted and caused the maelstrom that tore through Paixandria."

For several minutes, Mhenheli was at a loss for words, staring at the king, who continued to slowly sip from the cup of sha', his gaze now on the book he had been writing in.

"But," Mhenheli eventually managed, "why Paixandria? Why did it target us?"

"It did not," came the whispered response.

With a frustrated groan, Mhenheli crouched down beside his master's chair, resting a hand on his arm.

"Riddles do not help me to understand," he urged. "Please, speak plain to me. It did not target us? Then how…?"

The king covered Mhenheli's hand with his own, his palm still heated from holding the now empty cup that he'd set down on the desk.

"We were the last that it reached," he murmured, looking down at Mhenheli. "It destroyed all other lands before it reached ours. I saw them all, in my vision. The Gilded Lands burning, the domes and spires of Mezalea cracked and shattered, the oceans and swamps drained, the crystal towers of the mages crumbling away from their cliffs, the forges and ironworks of the great tinkerer's city blasted into the skies."

He looked away, his gaze once more hollow and distant. "I know not how many survived in those lands. I fear the worst, for the terrible destruction that I witnessed in that vision is why I was so desperate to save my people. Thank the stars we had the Anthill and the Vigil to protect us, but so many souls had nothing. We have survived, and so it is our duty, our responsibility to find them, to help them."

He heaved a sigh, letting his head fall back against the chair and closing his eyes. "I fear that we, too, may have lost our home. Once I am strong enough to descend the steps into the cavern, I must see for myself what has befallen my city, and whether it is safe for us to remain here. And I must ask the Vigil for guidance."

Mhenheli bowed his head, resting his cheek against the king's hand and wetting it with a few tears.

"This is why you have spent so many hours with the maps," he whispered.

"Yes. I have been plotting a course to take us through as many lands as we are able to reach, to search for survivors. And onward from there, I have been searching for a place we might all settle if we are unable to remain here." The king sighed, and added very softly, "We may once again have to become a wandering people."

CHAPTER 47

The bustle of life in the lower cavern was a low, comforting hum. The city's guards had scouted each building - every home and every shop - declaring them safe or not for their owners to return and salvage what they could.

Merchants and traders rebuilt the outdoor souk on the cavern floor, its banners and awnings no longer necessary as shields from the sun, but instead serving as a reassuring familiarity.

Families brought back precious belongings. The toys of a child, keepsakes and mementoes of their histories, their own candles, small items of furniture, and their few stocks of food that had both survived the maelstrom and not rotted away.

The apothecaries, much relieved that their guild was safe to enter, retrieved their stocks of herbs and potions, carrying brewing stands and alembics back into the Anthill in hand-drawn carts.

The librarians rescued what books and scrolls they could, mourning the severe damage to the Great Library and the loss of so many records and histories. Fire had swept through one wing of the building, destroying countless precious tomes, and not a librarian returned from their task without their arms filled with books and their eyes filled with tears.

An open kitchen was set up, for those whose shared rooms had no space to cook. A small play area nestled in one corner of the lower cavern and a group of women shared the care of the city's young children, allowing their mothers to tend to work, for all in Paixandria turned their hands to keeping their compatriots fed, clothed, and cared for.

So it was, amid this busy hum of activity and industry, as the redstone farms deep below the Anthill's floor slowly rebuilt the city's stocks of food and the people gathered normality around them once more, that a whisper was uttered by a single mouth early one morning. Slowly, it moved through the gathered people on the cavern floor, travelling faster as it reached the outer edges.

As one, all faces raised toward the top of the cavern, past the golden light of the Great Orrery. All hands stilled. All work ceased. All sounds, save the quiet giggling chatter of young children in the farthest reaches of the cavern, silenced.

A tall figure had exited the one door high up in the cavern that all eyes had glanced toward at least once per day. Clad in a long ivory coat, one hand holding a trident, he moved slowly toward the top of the stairs. Two palace guards descended before him, and a black-clad figure followed him.

His progress down the stairs was slow and measured, but not once did he falter or stumble. Not a soul watching raised their voice, for they were now aware of what this man - their beloved king - had endured alone out there while they had sheltered safe within the Anthill.

***

"I think I am ready."

Mhenheli looked up from plumping up the pillows on the king's bed.

"Onorait?"

Slowly, his master walked over to the bed. Mhenheli straightened, watching him. The king's step was now steady and firm, if still not quite returned to its former motion of purpose.

"I want to see the sky again," the king said softly. "I want to see my city, no matter how damaged it is. I want to feel the sunlight that shines upon it. I want to breathe its air again."

Mhenheli swallowed. He had dreaded this moment, knowing what the once glorious city of Paixandria now looked like, and fearful of what that sight would do to his master.

"Fetch me my coat and my trident," the king murmured.

***

The final few steps, and then the king set foot upon the floor of the lower cavern. The palace guards gathered around him, but he raised a hand to gesture that they should stay back a little and allow his people to see him.

And see him they did, with gladsome eyes and smiling faces. Tasks were laid down and footsteps hastened across the sandstone floor until he was all but surrounded, with a respectful space around him. Hands touched foreheads, heads bowed, prayers of thanks were whispered, and those with keen eyes who dared to look overlong saw that the king's eyes were full, and his lips trembled with emotion.

He bowed in return, to acknowledge their gratitude, then turned toward the shafts of bright sunlight that streamed across the cavern floor from the now fully opened doors of the Anthill.

As his people moved away to allow him to walk toward the doors, some swore to each other around the evening campfires that night that they had heard the joyful melody of a desert bird trilling briefly around the cavern.

***

The sky was a beautiful blue and decorated with the faintest of ribbons; whisper-thin clouds that streaked across the brilliant firmament. The air that seeped into the lower cavern was warm with the promise of a new day, but it held a hint of something unfamiliar, something smoky and stale, scoured and dead.

Paix walked toward the open doors, Mhenheli close behind him. A few paces back, the palace guards followed, and behind them his people gathered, watching as their king returned to his city.

His feet stopped in the doorway, momentarily unwilling to move further. His hand tightened on the trident, his other hand moving beneath it to steady himself. A warm hand - a comforting presence - rested against the base of his spine as Mhenheli stood beside him.

His city, his home, his empire, his world… destroyed. The shining and beautiful jewel of the sands that he had helped build and raise into a vibrant, lush, and welcoming oasis amid the unrelenting heat of the desert, shattered and burned and broken. Even the desert breeze sounded different, no longer accompanied by the susurration of sand being blown through the scoured streets.

A soft sound of desperate sorrow broke free from his lips, and he closed his eyes, silent tears coursing down his cheeks.

“Do you wish me to come with you?” Mhenheli whispered close to his ear.

Paix opened his eyes, taking in the devastation and letting the anguish of it flow into him, allowing it to settle around his heart. Later, he would sit quietly with the pain of it, watching it and learning how to go on with it buried deep within him. But that would be later.

“No,” he said softly. “I will do this alone.”

He stepped forward, into the ruins of his city.

***

Mhenheli watched, helplessly. The palace guards gathered behind him, and the people of the city behind them. All eyes were on the tall figure of their king as he walked slowly down the steps and through the quiet streets of the destroyed city.

Occasionally, his head would turn as he passed a building, but all knew where his feet were taking him.

He stopped before the Vigil, his head raised to look up at its spire. The light from its Conduit began to glow more brightly, bathing him in a warm golden glow.

Slowly, he sank to his knees, placing the trident before him on the ground. His proud head lowered, and his straight back bent in defeat.

Mhenheli watched and wept, as once again his beloved master endured a maelstrom. And this one would not blow over within a few hours.

***

Beloved servant.

"I have not the words," Paix whispered.

I see your heart. I know its pain. You need not words. You come to me for guidance.

Paix hitched in a breath. He had never wept here before, until this day.

"I come first to offer gratitude. For saving me, and for protecting my people."

It was your love that saved them, not I. I saved you because of your love, and because of your truths. Perhaps one day I will tell you your truths, but not this day.

Over the years, Paix had come to know and understand that the Vigil revealed what was needed only when it was needed. Those truths - whatever they were - would come when the moment was right for him to know them.

"I know not what to do," he murmured. "I have made plans as best I can, should we be unable to stay, but I cannot see beyond the devastation. Is our home safe? Can we rebuild here?"

Below these scorched streets lie cracks, riven deep into the earth. They may lie quiet for weeks, or months, or even years. But one day they will stir without warning, and all of Paixandria will fall in a moment.

He had feared it so.

"Then… we must leave," he whispered.

You must once again become a wandering people. Return to the nomadic tents and caravans of your history. The sands will return, and they will reclaim Paixandria, and I shall watch over her as she sinks beneath them. You, my

beloved servant, must lead your people from here, following the course you have already charted. Find the survivors from other lands and gather them around you. Together, you must found a new home, a new capital city, a new nation.

"That is the work of many lifetimes—"

And many lifetimes you now have. Beloved servant, time no longer holds you in his grasp. Death cannot now lay her fingers upon you. You will ever be her prophet, but you will never look into her eyes and whisper your words to her.

Paix exhaled heavily. So, this was how it would be.

"I must watch those I love grow old and die, for eternity," he said, his voice hoarse.

Nothing is ever truly lost. You will come to understand this truth one day. I will be with you always. My light shall come when you need it, and I gift you a part of me to take with you on your long journey. No other may touch it save you, but I give it to you that you have something physical of me to lay your hand upon when light and hope seem far away.

Slowly, the smallest part of the gently rotating sandstone pieces drifted to the ground, until it rested before him. He bent forward over it, laying one hand upon it and pressing a reverent kiss to it.

One final gift I give to you, beloved servant. Take up your trident, and together we shall cleanse the darkness from this place.

***

From the shelter of the Anthill's great doorway, the people of the city watched as their king bowed low, then straightened. His hand clasped his trident and - still kneeling - he raised it above his head.

The blue skies above darkened, grey clouds swiftly gathering above the city. A cool, stiff breeze blew through the streets as the clouds cast deep shadows over Paixandria. In the centre of it all, the Vigil shone bright, illuminating the kneeling figure before it.

A low rumble shook the skies, and all watching saw sparks glitter around the tines of the trident. The king slammed its base down onto the ground beside him, and a bright white light arced up from it toward the sky, which split asunder with a mighty crack that shimmered over the city, bringing its citizens' hands up to shield their eyes from its brilliance.

One spattered drop, followed by another hissed onto the scoured and heated ground. And then, as their hands dropped and the people stared out from the shelter of the Anthill's doors, a heavy deluge of sweet, blessed, bountiful rain began to pour down onto the scorched and broken city.

It coursed in rivulets through empty gardens, filling the pools anew.

It cascaded down the walls of shattered buildings, washing away soot and scorch marks.

It spilled over the melted copper that filled the cracks in front of the palace, and they gleamed in the reflected light of the Vigil.

And it washed away the tears of a man who knelt in the middle of it all, his face raised to the skies and bathed in golden light.

CHAPTER 48

There was a path here once. A narrow path, walkable by a laden pack animal or by two men standing shoulder to shoulder, but no wider. A path that would corral any ill-wishing battalion into a thin line, easy to pick off from the battlements above. Its steps were shallow and long, to force an uneven gait; relatively easy - if a little uncomfortable - when taken at a slow pace, but potentially literal murder if attempted at a charging run.

It wound up around the base of the tall stone cliffs, leading from the front of the large mansion house toward the aqueduct. Up past tall overgrown trees and curving to the right; a steady but steep climb that culminated in a small area before the massive barbican with its heavy portcullis and thick, layered crenellations. Any army funnelled into this cramped location would be vulnerable to attack from above, and as Pix stood there with his hands on his thighs, briefly catching his breath, he couldn't help but admire the planning behind these defences.

The portcullis was slightly raised from its floor sockets, allowing him ingress to the castle's courtyard, but as he squeezed under it, he paused to stare at the huge metal rung he'd laid his hand against. At first glance, it appeared rust-red, but there was no rain here in the savannah. Instead, the dark metal was covered in some substance that rendered it that colour. It did not flake off onto his hand when he rubbed it, seeming almost part of the metal itself.

Curious.

He touched briefly that part of his psyche that spoke with the past, querying this strange patina. What came back to him was a chaos of fire and hellish heat, and he withdrew from his question with haste. Evidently this metal was tempered, somehow, within the deepest places of the earth. He had ventured there a few times, but never lingered overlong, as it was far too dangerous.

Now safely within the small open area of the barbican itself, he stepped carefully. The ground was scuffed and worn, a few stone bricks crumbled into careless heaps at the base of the walls and the two broad steps that led up to the main gatehouse, which stood directly behind the barbican. To either side of him, heavy wooden doors were set into the base of the gatehouse towers, and up ahead lay the open courtyard.

That courtyard was heavily armed, offering an unwelcoming sight to the visitor. The armaments were in varying states of ruin, but had clearly been permanently in-situ, for their bases dug deep into the ground. Intimidation tactics, it seemed;

possibly a warning to all that this city could - and would - show no mercy to those who attempted an attack.

Further exploration around the outer edges of the courtyard led him into various storage rooms. More solid doors led into small armouries and other towers filled with crates and chests. To his left, the ground sloped steeply down, but it was the large open doorway just ahead and to his right that drew him inexplicably toward it.

Stacked in front of the low staircase that led up to the door, a few chests and barrels looked for all the world as if they were still waiting to be taken inside and unpacked. He took the stairs slowly and leaned around the door.

The years stripped away from him. The broken lanterns that hung from the massive ceiling beams suddenly reassembled themselves and shimmered into brilliant life. The remaining threads of carpet beneath his feet bloomed into a deep russet softness. The paintings glowed in the lantern light, and the statues that flanked the length of this hallway appeared to move as they found their original whole and intact forms.

He scarce dared to breathe as he watched the Great Hall come singing to life around him. Figures bustled to and fro. A scribe sat at a desk to his left, annotating the contents of a chest that had been brought to him by a merchant. And to his right, a small group of guards marched out of an open door into what looked to be a training yard.

Tentatively, he walked forward, watching closely to see if anyone looked up. Was he seen? Or did he walk outside of this time? He had still not quite grown accustomed to all the signs, and while it was usually clear when he was actually *there* in the past and when he was simply an observer, sometimes he still felt like he should hide away for fear of disturbing the scene.

Nobody appeared to notice him, though, and so he stepped forward with a little more confidence. This Great Hall was as busy as he would have expected, and he breathed in the sights, sounds, and scents of it. Something delicious and meaty was being cooked somewhere nearby, and judging from the eagerly wagging tails poking out from an open doorway to his left a little farther down the hall, he'd at least found the location of the kitchen.

Toward the end of the hall, with most of the busyness behind him, he took some steps down into a wide-open area, set about with huge tables. Around these tables, a few people were seated: some eating, some debating, some leaning over ledgers, and some lounging back with a cup of wine in hand.

And at the far end of the room, hurrying down the final set of steps that led toward a smaller doorway in the end wall, a figure in black robes moved quickly and purposefully.

Pix froze, staring. The man was there for but a moment, and then had vanished through the door, but in that time, Pix had seen a ghost. Or a vision. Or… *something* that had made his heart feel like it had leapt up and got stuck in his throat.

Stumbling forward, he ran down the rest of the stairs and wove past the tables, dodging around a young serving woman who was laying down platters on the table in front of two men deep in discussion. He shoved at the door, and it opened more easily than he thought it would, sending him falling through it.

He caught himself with a hand on the wall. The corridor was narrow, clearly a private area that was intended to be discreet enough as to draw no great attention. It turned sharply to the right, continuing for about fifteen paces. Up ahead, a flash of black cloth disappeared down another sharp turn, this time to the left.

Pix broke into a sprint, arriving at that turn a moment later.

He clung to the side of the wall. Watching. Aching.

It was him.

Tall, purposeful, dutiful, his greying hair neat, his mannerisms poised and clipped. He stepped up into what was clearly a large and long corridor with a vaulted wood ceiling, and Pix crept behind him, breath held, still staring.

Pix stopped at the entrance to that corridor, clinging to the wall and watching with a wretched desperation. The black-robed figure opened a side door to the right, stepping into the room beyond and leaving the door open.

Pix crept forward a little more, hugging the wall to his left, until he could peek into the room. He could see green - so much green - and brilliant sunlight pouring in from a glass roof. Pots and planters were everywhere, standing on the floor and on trestle tables, and glowing vines hung down from the beams in the ceiling. A wave of warmth gusted out from the open doorway. This was not just a greenhouse; it was a hothouse.

A moment later, and the figure exited the room, a delicate pink desert flower in a bright terracotta pot balanced on his hand. Carefully, he closed the door behind him and continued walking down the corridor, with Pix shadowing him closely.

The corridor opened out into a wider room. Its back wall bore a beautiful stone carving of a broad-leaved tree, in front of which sat an elegant throne

upholstered with deep russet fabric. Gold surmounted its back, and the figure bent to place the flower upon a small table beside the throne.

Then, he turned, and his gaze fell onto the shadowed corner where Pix watched with hollow, anguished eyes. He did not move further, simply gazing intently… right at Pix.

Slowly, hesitantly, Pix edged out from the gloom and into the light that flooded in from one of the beautiful stained-glass windows.

“Mhenheli…” he whispered, reaching out one hand, tears threatening to fall.

The man smiled at him, and the present day returned with a cruel destruction; a crumbling of bricks, a mouldering of fabric, a dusting and a spiderwebbing of surfaces and corners.

The vision faded - still smiling - into nothing. Only an empty flowerpot, cracked and devoid of life, remained at the side of the now dilapidated throne.

Pix crumpled to the floor, drawing his knees up to his face and hugging them, rocking slowly back and forth as he sobbed in the quiet of the ruined throne room.

CHAPTER 49

He had fled the castle, almost tumbling back down the path, running for all he was worth. By the time he reached his room, his lungs were burning and he was gasping, and he flung the door open, thoroughly startling poor Malin, who jumped out of their basket, fur bristling and ears flattened until they realised who had rudely awoken them.

Onorait Paix hurt pain heart

Pix shut the door behind him and staggered over to the bed, falling onto it and nodding miserably.

“I saw him,” he whispered.

Malin butted against his ankle, and Pix reached down to pick them up. They nestled down on his lap without protest, allowing him to stroke his hands repeatedly over their soft, glowing fur; an action that never failed to calm him.

black cloth friend

Pix’s fingers stilled momentarily. “You remember him?” he murmured. “You were only a moth back then. I left… we left Paixandria before you even became a bird, much less your current form.”

remember black cloth friend. neat friend. duty friend.

“Yes,” Pix said hoarsely. “Yes, he was. He was lost, like everyone else, when that terrible maelstrom hit Paixandria. I don’t know why he was here, though. He was walking through the castle like he knew it well, like he lived there. But that’s impossible.”

He sighed, shifting on the bed to lean back against the headboard.

“I just wish…” he began, then clamped his mouth shut. No. No wishing.

Wishing does naught but make you feel bad, Nehle-aalh had once told him, when he was still young enough to believe that wishes came true. *When you wish for more, you have lost sight of the blessings you already have. If a wish could become a camel, do not be the one who would have a whole caravan.*

The memory of his beloved mu'enaah brought a smile to his lips as he sat quietly, stroking a hand down Malin’s spine repeatedly while they vibrated contentedly in his lap, filling the air with their loud, rumbling purr.

“I made my peace with the loss of my mu'enaah,” Pix eventually murmured. “She was gone from my life long before… everything happened.”

He sighed. “But I cannot make my peace with the loss of my Chaperone. Mu'enaah was the warmth, the care, and the embrace. Mhenheli was the steadying hand, the ear I could trust, the constant. Above all, he was the constant. I cannot begin to comprehend how many times in my life I have wished I could speak with him again or share with him a moment of triumph or happiness.”

Malin’s velvet nose pushed against the side of his hand, and he looked down at them. Their tongue rasped over his fingers.

Onorait Paix take bird tool. make marks. speak black cloth friend.

Bird tool? Pix frowned, looking around the room to see what on earth Malin could be referring to. And then his gaze landed upon the feathered quill in its stand on the desk.

Oh! Bird tool. Make marks.

“Write him a letter…?” he whispered. “But what good would that do? A letter that can never be sent, that will never be read by the person it’s addressed to?”

take hurt out of heart. put hurt on paper. heart feel better.

Hmm.

“I guess it’s worth a try.”

***

> *Why were you here? I did not expect to see you anywhere ever again but in my dreams, and even then, you have passed through those so briefly that I felt every loss of you anew like a raw, open wound upon waking.*
>
> *Why do you haunt me? Why were you here?*

Pix stared down at the journal. His handwriting was shaky at best, and in truth it was downright atrocious; a visible show of how rattled and distraught he remained by the vision of Mhenheli, no matter how much Malin had managed to calm him since he’d burst into the room, gasping and wracked with anguish.

This was all wrong. This was not how he should begin this most important of letters. No, he should write as if Mhenheli would receive and read it, so he turned over the page, took a steadying breath, and put quill to paper once more.

This time, his hand was steady as he began to take the hurt from his heart and put it onto the paper.

***

Tazah q'adisi,[1]

I must begin this letter with the earliest times, in which I was but a small boy whose wish for fun and play was far too consumed for his liking with learning and things of importance only to grown-ups. I may have been a prince, but beneath my royal robes and titles I was still a normal, naughty little child when first you came into my service.

It pains me to write these words now, but I did not like you back then. You were strict, and you always seemed to be there, watching. I know now that you were only young yourself, and you must have felt so uncertain in your new and responsible role. And in addition, you had me to deal with, and the attendant worries that such an unruly charge brought you. I was not, after all, the most obedient child at the best of times…

You had admirable composure, which I remember trying to break at every opportunity that I could. Stars, the pranks I pulled on you! And yet, not a smile touched your lips. I heard not one sigh of complaint, saw not one frown of irritation, heard not one syllable of raised voice. You appeared completely unaffected by everything that I did.

I thought you made of stone. Riven through with duty and rules and protocols, and stolidly unbending when all I wanted was to see you break into laughter when I had managed to pull off a particularly clever and mischievous prank on you.

Yet, that night when my eht'amah[2] *joined the stars and I sat in my rooms now a king, my heart was in no firm enough place to understand and feel the tenderness with which you comforted me. My tears, my pain, my mourning blinded me from seeing a different side to you.*

It was a side of you that I never saw again, for when I was finally settled in my duties and had time to think back and recall that night, you were your old self again. Discreet, dutiful almost to a fault, and governed by protocol. My household feared and disliked you, but my childhood aversion to you became a deep and lasting trust as I grew older. Never once did I hesitate to speak with you about things I would have permitted no other to know for fear that they would be widely dispersed within hours. With you, all my secrets were safe.

I learned that - despite your punctiliousness and adherence to the way things must be - in you I had loyalty and faithfulness that I doubted any other king or queen could boast of. And every now and then I saw the faintest of glimpses of emotion from you. A glimmer of pride in something I had done, or the smallest

crease around your eyes that hinted at mirth held in check. I treasured those moments, rare as they were.

I wondered often why you hid yourself from me, and yet devoted your life to me. You were my constant; the hand that both served and guided when I needed advice. You saw me at my best and my worst, my highest and my lowest. You knew every part of me, save one.

I have had many painful years in which to wish that I had told you how much you meant to me. Years in which I wished I had pursued further the knowledge that you read my poetry and the deepest thoughts and secrets that I poured into the book kept in my desk drawer. Always, when I found upon the floor the fine hair that I had balanced inside the drawer, I knew that once again your gaze had fallen upon my words.

Yet you never spoke of them. You never acted upon them. Did you think them aimed at another? At some foreign princess or distant noble lord? In truth, they were simply a plea for love; the supplication of a man who wanted only hands to hold, lips to kiss, warmth to embrace. Just love, and nothing more. I desired no carnal intimacy, needed no complications that romance would bring in its wake, wanted no children. All I wished for was love.

Had you given any indication that you would accept such a thing and not press for more, then I might have risked the loss of you by asking. I would have trusted no other in my court to hold discretion as you did. But fear is a terrible and powerful restraint. I tried - stars, how I tried - to coax thoughts and emotions from you, but I met only with a placid wall of duty. I had no sign, no clue, no suggestion that I would not be rebuffed, that you would not feel so uncomfortable that you felt your only recourse would be to leave my service. And that was something I could not bear, could not countenance.

So now, when you cannot see or hear my words and when it is far too late, for my own sanity and hopeful closure of the wound I have borne in my heart for millennia, I would tell you that in truth I was as devoted to you as you were to me, and my life's regret is that I never told you that you were my strength, my compass and guiding star, my confidante and my most beloved.

I miss you more than I have words to express, and I pray that the Grace of the Vigil holds you as tenderly as my heart does.

Paix.

***

Late that night, when all was still outside, Malin blinked open one eye then lifted their head as the air in the room stirred. An ethereal hand reached down to scratch briefly under their chin, and wraithlike robes pooled around sandaled feet beside their basket.

Malin happily butted their head against that hand, then nosed it in the direction of the desk. The robes and feet moved, and the hand touched upon the book that still lay open.

The visitor did not stir for the longest time, reading the words over and over. But eventually, those feet moved again, and that hand reached out once more; this time to the head that lay so unsuspecting and peaceful upon the pillow. The hand stroked back a lock of hair from its wayward fall across sleeping blue eyes.

The feet stepped outside, robes ghosting across the floor and through the door. The hands reached for a final time, now into the niche by the door. Fresh incense resin glowed into sweet smoky life, and beside it a pink desert flower blossomed in a bright terracotta pot.

[1] Tazah q'adisi = treasured companion
[2] Eht'amah = father

CHAPTER 50

It began with the smallest of things.

Up from the cracks in the ground, fine tendrils of green reached tentatively for the clear morning air the day after the storm. Scouting around the wider area, the city's gardeners brought back news of similar growth, all the way up the natural observatory and beyond.

One day after that, the desert blossomed into a wonder: streaks of soft and bright pink flowers spreading atop low tufted mounds of green. The gardeners clipped tiny stems and carried back delicate blooms in their hands and their hair.

A good omen, they advised, for the journey ahead. These plants could be cultivated and taken along as mementoes of home; reminders of the tenacity and patience of life that lay hidden beneath the stark beauty of the sands.

One graceful little plant was presented to the king, and it sat at his right hand, growing ever stronger and ever more beautiful and bright as he spent hour after hour with his charts and maps, discussed planned routes with the q'ayadasi[1] who would be guiding the caravan, and oversaw the repair and refurbishment of the old tents and the construction of the new.

Once, five tents had been enough to hold the handful of families that had arrived at the Anthill in the days of Paix's ancestors. Great, low, sweeping stretches of layered cloth, propped by wooden posts and secured with sturdy rope, their floors laid down with beautiful woven carpets. Now, an entire city's population had to be accommodated, and the weavers and stitchers busied themselves with every scrap of cloth, wool, and hide that could be found in the stores.

The redstone farms steadily chattered day and night in the enormous rooms beneath the Anthill's main cavern, building the city's stocks of food in preparation for the journey. Carpenters fashioned a coffer that would hold the precious relic gifted by the Vigil, carving exquisite copper-inlaid depictions into the wood, of the Anthill, of the city's skyline before its destruction, and - atop its lid - of the Vigil itself. The apothecaries banked up their stocks of herbs and potion ingredients, packing thick tied bundles into drying boxes, nestling bottles into crated beds of straw, and packing around them knotted strings of cork stoppers.

The q'ayadasi took charge of every camel in the city, measuring each for the saddles and equipment that they would bear, feeding the smallest and weakest to strengthen them, and ensuring every beast was in the best of health.

The king's own camel, Ahet al-Haad Tarida'nal - *She Who Chases the Stars* - a sturdy, intelligent, and patient beast whose name had been bestowed upon her

by Paix's father, was reunited early one morning with her master after many days apart. With one of the q'ayadasi close by and looking on, Paix approached his faithful old companion, one hand outstretched and palm upwards.

"T'alia mhasa, sa'madiq,"[2] Paix murmured, smiling as the camel's ears perked forward. The beast's eyelashes lowered, and a low rumbling coo of happiness left her throat as Paix laid that open hand against her cheek, stroking gently.

The camel curved her neck partially around his shoulders, her lips nibbling at the hair on the back of his head, making him chuckle.

"Ah q'ahat iftaq'i, eh?"[3] he said, keeping his voice low and soothing as he patted her shaggy neck. "Soon you will chase the stars across the night again, my friend, and you will bear me away from my home one final time."

***

On the final night, a candle burned in every window as the king walked to the Vigil, followed by all who could find a space in the broad plaza around the great spire. Children hugged their mother's waists, hands held hands and arms embraced shoulders in the cooling night air as a light breeze blew through the city's streets.

Bare-headed, as he always was when approaching the Vigil, the king stood before the spire. Raising both hands, he cupped them together before him and lifted his face to the sky. None heard the words he murmured, but a moment after his lips ceased to move the Conduit atop the Vigil slowly began to glow brighter and brighter, until it was a blazing ball of light.

The light cascaded down like rain; shimmering droplets of pure luminance falling around the Vigil and around the king, splashing and pooling in his cupped hands and around his feet. Its golden glow spread to encompass the masses who stood around it, staring in awe at this thing they had never seen before.

And then the king spoke, his voice raised for all to hear, but it was a voice they had never before heard from his lips. His own, but warmed and feminine and soft and loving, its words wrapping gently around every heart; the voice of another, speaking through him.

"My beloved people. This night is your last in this place beneath these stars. Your roots have sunk deep, and long have I tended them, but now they must seek new soils and waters. Long shall the stars wheel and change over your heads before you settle once more, and your numbers will grow as you find those who are lost and weary, their homes and families torn from them."

A soft whisper began at the edges of the city; a susurration so familiar that none noticed it at first. It skittered through the streets, a soft hushed hissing that soon reached the crowd gathered in the plaza, swirling up in little eddies that tickled at feet and ankles.

"The sands return. Slowly they will reclaim these walls and gardens and streets, and I will watch over all as Paixandria sinks into history until only the mountain remains. This great city will be but a memory; a jewel of the sands that will one day be forgotten by all save one."

The light that poured from the Vigil grew brighter until it seemed that the king was almost bathed in it. It poured from his fingers and lit his face. The wider glow of the Vigil's light broadened, casting over the entire city a radiance like that of a sunset.

"Your king, my prophet and keeper, will lead you from this place where I am embodied in stone, but I will be with you always. For as I am Love, so he is Love. Undying, your king is now your Vigil, and my light will shine through him. Go now with my Grace and my Love, to rest your heads one last time beneath these stars."

***

In the deserted quiet of the plaza, as the city slept, the King stood before the spire; two Vigils, both bathed in light and Love, each with a long and lonely task ahead.

[1] Q'ayadasi = caravan leaders

[2] T'alia mhasa, Sa'madiq = Good morning, old friend

[3] Ah q'ahat iftaq'a, eh? = Did you miss me, eh?

CHAPTER 51

The caravan left Paixandria in the early afternoon, once the sun had lowered enough to be less punishing to those for whom travel was more of a travail. At its head rode the king, together with the captain of the palace guards and the two q'ayadasi entrusted with the lead of the caravan, and at its rear - not leaving the city until the sun dipped toward the distant dunes, so lengthy was the train of people - the Redstone Adepts, accompanied by two more q'ayadasi. Those of import, the apothecaries and the cooks - whose skills could or would be needed at either end of the long caravan - travelled at its centre. Flanking the whole, interspersed at intervals, rode the city's guards, their eyes constantly on their surroundings.

A short way behind the lead riders, one camel carried among its burden their greatest treasure: the piece of the Vigil, in its exquisite copper-inlaid coffer. Two palace guards flanked this beast and its precious cargo.

The two lead q'ayadasi had travelled before with the king and they trusted his knowledge of the stars as much as they trusted their own mastery of the desert and how to traverse it quickly and safely. The king needed no maps out here in the open sands, especially once the russet and gold skies darkened to a silver-speckled indigo and he could lift his gaze to track the movement of the stars. Not for naught was it a blessing among their people to wish upon another that the stars would offer guidance, for they knew that an understanding of the celestial vault could mean the difference between a journey that was safe and one that was perilous.

The astrologers, travelling close behind the king, would occasionally ride forward to speak with him; a welcome distraction as they discussed the movements of the known planets and the procession of occasional celestial visitors such as the Silver Ant. G'tehm ah-Shker, the king's favourite teacher of astrology, was foremost in urging his mount toward his pupil, and their quiet voices would be heard throughout the long night as the caravan made its steady exodus.

Many turned to look back that first night, occasionally resting their gaze on the glowing desert jewel that grew ever more distant as the hour moved toward dawn. The sight was both a comfort and an ache, for they knew that never again would they see the place where they had grown from children to raise their own. Many a heart imprinted the sight as deeply as they could, many a tear fell, and many a prayer was whispered.

The first tents were pitched toward the late afternoon of the third day out from the city. By the time the end of the caravan had reached them, the sun was already

below the dunes and painting the sky with brilliant hues of pink and reddish gold. Weary from snatching only fitful sleep while still in the saddle, most people slept heavily after breaking their long fast around the campfires that had been lit and glowed brightly in the night air.

But the king stood atop a small rock outcrop, accompanied by his Chaperone and the lead q'ayadasi. Book in hand, he drew the next day's course with one fingertip over a carefully copied map.

"Our eventual aim is to reach this wooded area," he murmured, indicating a deep forest that lay at the heart of the great continent. "From there, we will set up a more permanent base from which we can send out fast riders equipped with supplies to each of the lands, to search for survivors."

"The quickest route will take us through the Mythish lands," said the q'ayadasi, gesturing to a thick line on the map to the north of that country. "But what is this?"

"The border to the swamps of the north," the king replied. "However, we may find it difficult to traverse that border. The line represents a broad and deep crack in the land that cannot be safely bridged."

"Caused by the maelstrom?" Mhenheli looked from the map to the king, who nodded.

"Yes. At least, that is what my visions showed me. We shall, of course, check the location regardless."

The q'ayadasi nodded. "And what of the ocean realm beyond, Onorait?"

The king sighed. "That, I fear, is beyond our abilities. If we find survivors on the shores then we can aid them, but unless we are able to find a ship in port, we will be unable to put to sea. We have not the time nor the knowledge to build ships of our own. Our faith must be in the wide ocean to cradle and keep its own. The waters receded from both swamp and ocean in the wake of the maelstrom, but they cannot be held back forever. We can but pray that they have returned to those who need them."

"How many days' travel until we reach the Mythish borders?" Mhenheli asked quietly.

"Too many," the king replied. "We can travel no faster until we reach ground that horses can traverse with ease, and then we need to *find* and tame horses." He sighed again. "I estimate that we shall reach the Mythish borders in approximately eight days."

The q'ayadasi nodded his agreement. "With fewer people we could make it in perhaps three or four, based on previous journeys when we travelled much more

lightly. But we carry a city with us and must travel at a rate that reaches our location as quickly as we can while allowing the slowest to keep up with us. We are many miles yet from our destination."

"And at what time do we break camp?"

The king glanced at Mhenheli and smiled wearily.

"First light, so yes I will cede to your unspoken worry that I must get some sleep."

"After you have eaten," Mhenheli insisted. "The weight of your people sits upon your shoulders, but you will bear them better once fed and well-rested."

***

The king's tent had been pitched amidst those of his people. The only sign that it was a little different were the two palace guards standing beneath its outer awnings and holding aside the thick cloth that covered the entrance as the king approached.

Mhenheli ducked inside the tent after his master. The feeling of carpet beneath his feet was a welcome rest to his calves, which were unaccustomed to toiling overmuch through sand. The only light came from a glass-walled lantern that hung from the canopy overhead, and the interior of the tent was no more luxurious than any other in the caravan. In fact, it was far smaller, having sleeping accommodation only for the king and his Chaperone, as well as a small seating area with a low round table and three firm cushions.

While travelling with his people, the king was one of his people and demanded no special treatment. He ate the same simple meals as they did from the same simple bowls, and he sat at the same campfire and listened to the same tales told around it by those unwearied enough not to need a full night of sleep, which were few.

The camp was struck at first light, many hands taking down the tents and re-equipping the camels. The king's tent was distributed between the camels ridden by Mhenheli and Menet, his own camel being equipped only lightly should he have need to ride fast for any reason.

Behind them, in the early morning light, Paixandria was now but a glowing speck in the far distance. Now mounted, Mhenheli rode over to his master as the caravan began to form, and both men looked across the sands toward the city.

The king was silent, but the emotion in his eyes - half-hidden by the scarf he wore - spoke more than any words he could utter. Mhenheli reached over to him, laying a hand on the back of his wrist.

The king's eyes closed, his head lowered, and his wrist turned so that he could clasp that hand briefly in acknowledgement. Then, with his farewells to his home wordlessly made, he turned his mount and rode away toward the head of the waiting caravan.

***

Another three days of travel, another pitching of the tents. Far ahead, the first signs of other lands had begun to limn the horizon, and at that night's discussion of the maps - this time around the table in the king's tent - it was agreed that their guesses had been correct, and they would reach the Mythish borders within another two days.

The q'ayadasi having left for his own tent, Mhenheli sat with his master, sipping the spiced sha' he had prepared. He watched as the king rolled his shoulders a couple of times.

"The weight of a kingdom is a mighty one," Mhenheli said softly, getting to his feet and standing behind his master. He placed his hands on the king's shoulders, thumbs digging deep into the muscles and moving firmly, earning himself first a soft hiss of inbreath and then the satisfaction of feeling those shoulders begin to soften and relax beneath his touch.

"Thank you," the king murmured, his voice low and tired. "These shoulders bear not only the weight of my own kingdom, but the worry for every other kingdom that we approach. I know only what I saw in my visions, but those were brief and terrible. I pray that we find survivors, yet I know not what truly awaits us."

"It is said that Mythish stone is strong and heavy, and their builders are skilled in whispering to it," Mhenheli said. "Perhaps it stood firm against the onslaught."

The king nodded. "The stone is strong, and their builders are skilled, but the land beneath it is vulnerable to fracture, as happened along the borders with the swamp. All the strength and skill in the world cannot force buildings to remain standing when the earth below gives way."

Mhenheli took his hands away from the king's shoulders and moved around to crouch in front of him. Gently, he took his master's hands and looked up at him.

"We must have hope," he said softly. "You said yourself that we know not what truly awaits us. Perhaps it is not as bad as the worst you imagine?"

The king gave him a sad smile. “It was the last effort of the maelstrom that reached us in the desert, its final breaths of rage and destruction. It was far stronger as it traversed the other lands before it came to us. I wish I could share your hope that enough of the city survived that it could be rebuilt, but I fear we shall find only a few survivors.”

“Then we shall help as many as we can,” Mhenheli said. “Come, you need to rest.”

***

Another day and a half of travel brought the new land closer and closer; a blackened smear on the horizon that caused a murmuring to arise near the front of the caravan.

Riding alongside the king, Mhenheli glanced at him often. His master’s eyes looked straight ahead, unwavering and determined behind his scarf. The q'ayadasi had spoken of the king having near-preternatural sight during their previous journeys, with him having spotted landmarks and buildings that they could not see for a considerable while longer.

So it was, during the middle of the afternoon of the seventh day since leaving Paixandria, that Mhenheli saw the king’s hand suddenly reach for the pack that he carried before him. Out of the pack he drew a copper spyglass inlaid with amethyst crystals, and even as he withdrew it, he was urging his camel forward in a run, toward a dune that rose ahead and to the right of the caravan.

One glance at each other, and Mhenheli, the q'ayadasi, and Menet all spurred their mounts to run after him. By the time they had reached him, he was atop the dune, looking through the spyglass. Below them, the caravan continued, urged on by the second q'ayadasi.

“What do you see?” Mhenheli asked, peering into the distance. All he could make out were the burned and blackened stumps of a once great and dense forest, stretching far ahead.

“The city has fallen,” the king murmured. “The watchtower is gone, the great castle… shattered. The wall is broken.”

“Onorait, we cannot set up camp in what remains of the forest,” the q'ayadasi said lowly. “There is not the space, and the air already smells foul and burned, even this far distant from it. Where should we head?”

“Between the desert and the forest… what *was* the forest, there lies a stretch of ancient rock.” The king pointed toward the blackened smudge in the distance.

Before it, Mhenheli could make out - as the king had said - a reddish swathe of barren land.

“It is high ground,” the king continued, “and so should be above the smell of burning.” He lowered the spyglass, adding, “It will also provide a spot where we can light large fires to serve as beacons to any survivors. We shall set camp there for a few days and send scouts to both the Mythish country and the Gilded Lands that border them on the opposite side. We must pray that we also come across wild horses that may have survived, for they will be needed.”

***

In the quiet of that night in the camp atop the red hills, Mhenheli brought a bowl of spiced vegetables and rice to his master, who had taken the unusual decision to remain in his tent instead of eating at one of the campfires. Mhenheli served him with a cup of honey wine, then sat on one of the cushions to eat his own meal.

The king was strangely subdued, simply nodding his thanks as he took the bowl. For several minutes he just held it, not bothering to eat. Mhenheli was halfway down his own bowl before he finally spoke up.

“Onorait, please eat something.”

As if brought back from a dream, the king started and came to himself again. He looked down at the bowl, as if only now realising what he held, then he began to eat.

Worried, Mhenheli finished his meal and set the bowl on the table. Something was wrong, and it was more than just the weight of many empires on his master’s shoulders.

The king finished his meal, drank the wine, then stood. Without a word, he walked outside, leaving Mhenheli to scramble to his feet and hurry after him.

Outside in the dusty warm air that smelled only faintly of smoke mingled with old, hardened earth, Mhenheli looked around frantically, finally spotting the familiar ivory coat of his master moving toward the summit of the hill.

On the two smaller hills that flanked the broad one where their camp had been set, tall bonfires had been lit, fired by blackened wood gathered from the foothills. Burned on the outside, once split the wood inside was still sound and good for kindling. The fires burned high, bright glowing beacons in the night sky, in the hope of alerting survivors that help was nearby.

“Onorait?” Mhenheli said softly, unable to keep the worry from his voice as he watched his master standing on the very precipice of the tallest peak, far away from the camp. “What is wrong?”

Slowly, the king turned to look back at him. In the darkness, his eyes gleamed with an odd golden light; an unearthly, unnatural light that reminded Mhenheli of the Vigil’s presence.

“I am surrounded by death,” he whispered, turning back to the lands before him. Far below, to his left, the Gilded Lands lay razed to nothing, and to his right the Mythish country lay shattered and burned.

He held out his hands, cupping both together and touching his fingertips to his forehead. Then, he folded to sit cross-legged a little way back from the precipice, reached into the pocket of his coat, and withdrew two candles: one orange and one black.

Placing them side by side - the orange to his left and the black to his right - he held out his left hand, cupped to the stars. Above him, the familiar glow of a Conduit appeared, rotating slowly. As they had before the Vigil on that final night, droplets of light began to fall, pooling in the king’s cupped hand as Mhenheli watched, awed.

This was new to him. The king had always lit candles at the Vigil with a flint and steel before. This was something wholly different; the Vigil working through him and pouring its light into his hand.

Once his hand was filled with the pooling light, he tipped it gently, allowing the light to stream down onto the orange candle, which leapt into brilliant, beautiful life. The remainder of the light pooled around its base, as the king then cupped his right hand.

Mhenheli had to sit down as he watched the process repeat, but not because it was repeating. No, his legs had weakened at the sight of what was happening to the orange candle.

A mist was rising up from the Gilded Lands. Difficult to make out in the darkness below, as the moon was hidden and only the stars illuminated this night, but it was there, and it rose in soft blue wisps. They chased each other up into the air, streaming higher and higher, until they poured into the flame of the orange candle. Most were of the same size, but occasionally a much smaller one streamed into the flame after one or two larger wisps.

The light poured onto the black candle now, and it, too, leapt into brilliant life. The same mist began to rise from the Mythish lands far below, rippling up in the same soft blue wisps that streamed into the flame of the black candle.

The king sat silently, his head bowed as the mists streamed endlessly and the candle flames leapt and flickered. Only once the streams softened and slowed and eventually ceased did he raise his head, lifting his face to the skies, his cheeks wet with tears.

He remained there, Mhenheli bearing him quiet company, until the candles burned out as the sun rose over the blackened lands far below.

CHAPTER 52

They came slowly at first, bedraggled and wounded. The lost, the frightened, those who had thought a slow end would be theirs. The rising flames up on the hill had terrified them at first, until they'd seen the tents.

The first to arrive were Zhenchra and Ghembro, two burly men from the Mythish lands. Weary, hungry, and filthy, they toiled up the hill, being helped in the final stages by Paixandrian city guards. They were led into a small tent with a floor of exquisite woven carpets and sat upon cushions around a low table. A bowl of hot rice mixed with spiced vegetables was set in front of each, as a tall man dressed in simple desert clothing sat upon the third cushion. Half-starved, the rescued men murmured their grateful thanks and ate greedily as they recounted to their host how the raging wall of destruction had caught the lands unawares.

"Did you see any other survivors?" the man asked them in the Mythish language, his accent passable, if not as lyrical as that of a native speaker. A copper cup of honey wine was given to each of them by another man; this one wearing black robes.

"We managed to save a few," said Zhenchra. "Three women, a child, and an old man. We bundled them down into a cellar that was untouched by the storm. We found a few supplies down there, but those dwindled fast. We came out of the cellar to scavenge, but…" He waved his hand expressively, his face a picture of misery. "There was nothing left," he finished softly. "Then we saw the fires up on the hill and thought the destruction had returned. It was only by chance that Ghembro here spotted your tents."

The seated man looked across the tent to where two guards stood just inside the open entrance, and he spoke to them in the strange tongue of the desert people. From his commanding tone, it was clear that he was giving the guards an order. Then, as one of them nodded and left the tent, he returned to the men and addressed them once more in their native language.

"Is there any other signal that your people would recognise as one of safety or aid?" he asked. "We lit the bonfires to act as beacons, but perhaps open flames after what has happened here was not the wisest of choices."

"The blowing of a goat horn," Ghembro said. "We use them for many things. Rallying calls, calls to prayer at the church, and at dawn and sunset."

The seated man turned to the black-robed one. "Mhenheli, ad'ha q'anra mazish?"[1]

"Anha teziqem hin'ifkha, Onorait,"[2] the black-robed man replied smoothly.

“Onorait?” Zhenchra said, staring at their seated host. His gaze took in the emerald ring and copper earrings, and his eyes widened. Then, he bowed his head briefly.

“Had I known you were the desert king, Ser’al-Lareiff, I would have shown respect from the moment we met,” he mumbled, as Ghembro also bowed as best he could while seated.

The king waved aside their protests with a faint smile.

“You have been through much,” he said. “Protocol is not important when there is a hungry belly to be fed. Tell me: do you have any news of your king? We saw that the castle was shattered.”

Both men shook their heads.

“The storm struck just before noonday,” Zhenchra said. “At that hour, he would usually attend at the Offering Circle. It is traditional among our people to give an offering to the gods before we eat the noonday meal, and Ser’Zhege would do this at the Circle on behalf of the entire city.”

The king nodded. “I have ordered my guards to search the city for survivors. They will check every house and cellar that they can safely reach and will also bring back whatever provisions and medicines they discover. We carried our entire stocks with us when we left Paixandria, but…”

He sighed, briefly pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingertips.

“I am torn between fear of not having enough supplies to treat the wounded and the needy and having too many supplies because… there are none to save,” he finished softly.

Zhenchra set down his empty bowl and picked up the cup of wine.

“Mythish stone is strong, and we work it well,” he murmured. “The storm was beyond anything we could have prepared for, but mayhap some homes still remain standing.”

“We called out,” Ghembro added, finishing the last mouthful of his meal. “Several times. We heard no response, and the lands were so cracked that we dared not venture too far to search for others. Some may be trapped in cellars, with the walls of their homes collapsed over the entrance.”

A hollow silence filled the tent at those words, broken by the king’s quiet promise.

“We shall make every effort to find all who can be found, whether living or dead. Those who have been lost, we shall honour.”

The embroidered cloth covering the entrance to the tent was pulled aside and the guard who had left earlier walked back in.

“Onorait.” He bowed his head. “Two women and a child from the Gilded Lands have been found. The women speak of others who sheltered in a cave and survived. I can spare but four men to search there, as the rest are already scouring the Mythish lands, and I have sent a few onward past there to search the swamp and ocean shores.”

Zhenchra clapped his hands to his thighs. “Well,” he said gruffly as he stood. “Now that I am fed, I can offer my eyes to search and my arms to carry those who may need it. Ghembro?”

“Aye,” Ghembro said, knocking back the rest of his honey wine and getting to his feet. “You have two more men to aid in the search now.”

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In the soft evening light, Mhenheli stood beside the king on the precipice that looked over both of the shattered lands below. The occasional flare of a lit torch moved between broken stone walls, and all too infrequently a distant shout would go up, drawing other torches to hurry toward it as another discovery was made.

Too few, far too few, had arrived in the camp, but still they came in ones, twos, and threes. Many of them were bruised or burned; men whose haunted eyes spoke of bodies they had buried as best they could, exhausted women cradling babies and with bundles tied around their backs of what they had salvaged from the ruins of their homes, and children… silent children who clung to their mother’s skirts or held tightly onto precious little objects - a small carved wooden toy or a scrap of bright cloth - and would not let go of them, even when eating.

“If this is what we find so far from the centre of it all,” Mhenheli whispered, as he watched the latest small group arrive in the camp with cries of gratitude as hands reached out to help them, “Then what will we find closer to it?”

“The longer we tarry here, the less chance they have,” the king replied. “We must break up the camp and move some onward while others remain here to finish the search. We cannot delay helping those closer to the blast. Every day that we remain here is a day - and possibly many more lives - lost.”

He turned to Mhenheli, who saw the weight of weariness upon his shoulders and in his eyes.

“Tomorrow, at first light,” the king said, “I shall take the palace guards and strike out for the plains. We will travel light, taking only enough supplies and medicines to treat the severely wounded, and tents enough to house them.”

Mhenheli opened his mouth to speak, but his master stepped closer to him and raised a finger to his own lips.

“You must remain here, to guide the ongoing rescue,” he said. “I know you would come with me, but I trust no other with this task. Once all are saved that can be saved, strike the camp and follow my path. The q'ayadasi will know the way.”

Mhenheli bowed. “It shall be done, Onorait. But please…” He looked up. “*Please*,” he whispered again, “take care of yourself.”

The king smiled, placing one hand on Mhenheli’s shoulder. The side of his thumb stroked slowly, briefly down Mhenheli’s neck.

“Worry not. I shall do what needs to be done, including taking care of myself.”

“Be sure that you do,” Mhenheli replied, his voice hoarse with emotion that he attempted to disguise with humour and a touch of his old sternness. “It has been many a year since I sent you to bed early for being naughty, but though you are now grown and no longer a wayward little boy I am not above doing that again when next we meet.”

That raised a soft laugh from his master, brightening the sorrow on his face even if only for a moment. Mhenheli felt himself being pulled into an embrace; an arm around his waist, that hand drawing his cheek against the king’s bearded one.

“Tazah q’adisi, ahat maah’qati. Dhahdak aq'at em-safali,”[3] his master said softly, fondly against his ear, adding, “And I would quake in my boots at that threat, were I wearing any.”

He drew away, smiled again, and turned to walk back across the plateau to his tent, leaving Mhenheli standing there alone, one hand against his cheek, his eyes closed.

[1] *Mhenheli, ad’ha q’anra mazish?* = Mhenheli, did we bring a goat horn?
[2] *Anha teziqem hin’ifkha* = I am sure that one could be found.
[3] *Tazah q’adisi, ahat maah’qati. Dhahdak aq'at em-safali* = Treasured companion, you are my strength. I promise you that I will.

CHAPTER 53

Before the sun was even a dim glow on the horizon, Mhenheli quietly pulled on his robes and sandals and crept out of the tent into the cool twilit air. Wrapping his arms around himself, for it was chilly up on the high plateau at this hour, he walked briskly until he reached the supplies tent.

He was not the first in the camp to awaken, for the large open-fronted kitchen tent already glowed welcomingly from within with the early morning fires that had been set beneath ovens and braziers, the cooks already preparing the morning meal.

The guard outside the supplies tent nodded to him as he approached.

“Chaperone,” he murmured. “You’re up early.”

Mhenheli tweaked back the cloth that covered the entrance. “The king is going on a journey this morning,” was all he offered by way of response, as he ducked inside the tent.

Lowly lit by a single lantern that hung from its central post, the large tent was filled with crates and sacks, boxes and bags. Some they had brought with them from Paixandria, others had been salvaged from the ruins of the two lands below. Most of the supplies here were for use in the kitchen tent, but Mhenheli rummaged around until he found a box of sha’ spices, neatly packaged into many tiny, folded slips of paper. He took one slip of each of his master’s favourites, then ducked out of the tent again, heading for the kitchen.

Not fifteen minutes later, as the pale edges of the far distant desert began to glimmer with dawn’s first light, he carried a cup of hot spiced sha’, together with a plate of small, sweet, honeyed breads and fresh dates into the curtained-off area of the small tent where his master slept.

“T'alia mhasa,”[1] the king murmured, turning onto his back and rubbing a hand over his eyes as he yawned.

With a grin, Mhenheli knelt at the side of the soft bedroll and held out the cup of sha’.

“Mhasa l’amsha,”[2] he replied, earning himself a sleepy smile as the king sat up and took the cup from his hand.

Setting down the plate by the bedroll, Mhenheli shifted around behind his master, reaching for the soft leather pouch that sat on a low table by the tent wall. From it, he withdrew a polished camel bone comb, which he slowly and carefully began to

draw through his master's hair, easing out the tousles that sleep had put into it, as the king sipped his sha' and broke his fast with the bread and dates.

"The skies look clear," Mhenheli said softly, as he worked. "Not a cloud to break the view. A good day for searching and for riding. As I returned from the kitchens, I saw the q'ayadasi readying your camel. She looked eager to stretch her legs."

The king chuckled. "As she always is. Well, she will have a good run today and she will enjoy the weather, as will I."

"The air is cooler here," Mhenheli remarked. "I may need to secure some boots if my toes are not to freeze off."

His master set the empty plate down on the floor beside him, drew up his knees, and rested both elbows on them as he held the cup of sha' in both hands.

"We might hope that some of the famed leathersmiths of the Gilded Lands are among the survivors that we find," he said softly. "Such work of theirs have I seen. The softest of leather boots, the most beautifully detailed belts, and the sturdiest of travelling packs."

"Is your camel's saddle not Gilded work, also?"

"The leather pad of it, yes." The king finished his sha' and placed the cup atop the plate. "A gift from their queen, may the sunlight ever bless her face."

The silence that fell between them was a comfortable one as Mhenheli attended to his task, comb followed by fingers carefully neatening his master's hair. At the first breath of a breeze, it would inevitably tousle again, but for this moment Mhenheli was satisfied with his work.

"We will set up a small camp in the central plains," the king said. "Enough to serve as shelter for those we find closer to where the maelstrom began. As soon as we have found a safe location, I will take a few guards with me and make for Eastvale."

The comb stilled briefly.

"The lands of Rachzem?"

The head beneath his hands nodded. "The maelstrom began at that place. I must go there. They will have suffered the most."

Slowly, the comb resumed its work, and if it trembled a little then Mhenheli hoped his master couldn't feel it. The movement - this small daily service - usually soothed and calmed him, but today it did not.

He set the comb down and let his fingers replace it, smoothing his master's hair and tucking it a little behind his ears. Briefly, he sat back on his heels, ignoring the small hollow feeling that gathered in the pit of his belly.

"I will fetch your clothes," he whispered, getting to his feet. Duty. Duty was his constant, and he leaned on it in these moments when he felt lost.

Barely thirty minutes later, he stood and watched numbly as the king, together with six palace guards, an apothecary, and one of the q'ayadasi rode away from the camp. As they left the steeper slopes of the hills and found flatter ground the camels settled into their familiar, comfortable loping run, and before long they were out of sight.

Mhenheli stared after them long past the point where they could no longer be seen, but eventually a hand touched his elbow. He turned and beheld a guard, who gave him a nod and said gruffly, "Five more found. A whole family this time."

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Through the blackened lands they rode, the stench of soot and smoke still foul in the air. The devastation was unending; every tree either shattered or razed to a stump. The ground was filled with cracks both large and narrow, at times slowing the group to a much-reduced pace that tugged at the urgency within Paix's chest. They needed to move, and this was far too slow.

The swathe of destroyed forest slowly gave way to more open land. Here, finally, far to their left as they rode, green was still visible; a great oak forest that had somehow escaped the ruinous caress of the maelstrom. Menet called across to Paix, gesturing toward the green, and Paix nodded in return.

"We might find horses there," Menet said, urging his camel closer to Paix's. "And, if nothing else, there might be decent hunting beneath the canopy."

"Meat would go far to healing wounds if we find any survivors," Paix called back to him, his gaze scanning the ground up ahead, looking for any sign of green in the direction they were headed. "If we could only find a place to set up camp, your men could search that forest."

"I see nothing that is not burned or broken," the q'ayadasi muttered, just behind them. "Better that we set up camp under the forest canopy itself. We could clear some of the smaller trees in a day or so."

Paix reined in his camel, and the retinue came to a halt around him. He looked over at the forest as he reached for the spyglass in his pack.

“Take a couple of men and look for a clearing,” he said, shaking the spyglass out to its fullest length and putting it to his right eye as he looked up ahead. “If you find one,” he added, “set up the tents.”

There. Far in the distance, there was no mistaking the two great hills rising out of a rolling green plains. Atop them had once straddled a great city: the prosperous homes of Eastvale surrounded by their protective wall, and the towering forge of the Tinkerer beside the tall edifice of his manor house.

There was no mistaking… what *was left of* the two great hills.

Slowly, he lowered the spyglass, a chill cold as iron, sharp as a blade driving down his back and settling deep in his gut. He became aware of the curious and worried looks of those around him; Menet urging his camel closer, saying something, looking across to the far distant land that he could not yet see, the land that had seared its terrible vision behind Paix’s eyes.

A red candle nestled in his mind, urging his hand toward it, the drops of light ever present and circling closer to it.

No! Not yet. Not yet.

The warmth of the Vigil hummed through him, taking his eyes and his hands. Vaguely, he heard Menet’s startled voice - more urgent now - but the words did not register. Paix shoved the spyglass back into the pack and took the reins once more. The Vigil moved quietly through him; a shimmering murmur that coursed from his hands, down the fine leather straps. The loyal Ahet al-Haad Tarida'nal shifted beneath him, tossing her head. Her ears perked forward, her forelegs raised, and she was off, chasing the stars like she never had before.

Somewhere behind him, he heard shouts, followed by the irregular thump of many camel feet racing after him. Ahet al-Haad Tarida'nal would not be caught, for her name was well-earned, and so Paix’s retinue lagged behind him as the ground flew beneath him.

It is not too late. Not yet. But it soon will be. Hold on… just hold on…

The hills were closer now, the once great city little more than jagged teeth on the edge of shattered rock. Even at this distance, Ahet al-Haad Tarida'nal was running past roof tiles and broken chunks of brick, the plains littered with debris from the explosion. Great black globs of something were congealed solid on the ground, and as he raced past them, he realised they had once been the lava that powered the great forge.

Closer, closer. Up ahead, the forge rose atop the second hill, split apart like a burst pomegranate. Its massive stone walls lay in heaped chunks all around it, some

having been blasted down onto the plains below. The metal parts of it twisted agonised arms toward the skies in a jagged embrace. More of the black congealed lava had poured down the side of the hill, and the mansion was just… gone. Beneath where it had once stood proudly, the rail lines lay buckled and broken, their wooden supports collapsed and blackened where lava had touched them and briefly set them ablaze.

How could anyone possibly have survived this?

And yet… they did. I can feel them, can feel him.

Up ahead, the dark maw of a small cave sank deep in the rock face that had once held up the mansion. If there were any place that shelter might have been found, it would be—

Ahet al-Haad Tarida'nal gave a startled bellow as something flew in front of her legs. Something so fast that it barely registered in Paix's vision. She almost stumbled, coming to an abrupt halt as another something flew out from a smaller cave that he had not even seen, well-hidden and directly to his left.

Arrows!

With a tug of the reins, he turned her head, moving her urgently back out of the line of sight. From the corner of his vision, he saw his retinue finally catching up to him, and as they reached him, the bowman came into view, still aiming.

N'dachVeip. Haggard and gaunt, his clothes torn, his red hair lank and scruffy and half burned off on one side, his beard long and scraggly, his eyes haunted. He held the bow with hands that shook violently, as if it were taking every last ounce of his strength to draw it.

Around him, Paix heard swords unsheathe as his guards started forward.

"Niq'a!"[3] he snapped, holding one arm out in an unmistakeable gesture to stand down, not taking his eyes off N'dachVeip as he saw out of the corner of his eye those blades lower, but they were not sheathed.

N'dachVeip stared at him, still unmoving, arrow still nocked to his bow, still somehow standing by sheer force of will alone.

Hold on. Just hold on.

"Yasq'a mehak, sa'madiq,"[4] Paix murmured, giving a gentle tug on the reins.

Slowly, Ahet al-Haad Tarida'nal lay down, allowing him to dismount. His sandals touched the beautiful green grass that, miraculously, still survived this close to the blast. He felt its soft blades tickle his toes and the sides of his feet as a gentle breeze blew in from the east.

He held out one hand, palm upwards, pushing all worry away from his eyes and leaving behind only his accustomed calm and warm serenity that he prayed N'dachVeip could remember.

"My friend," he said quietly in the Grym tongue, advancing one step toward the man who still stared at him like a rabbit awaiting the teeth of a wolf.

The arrow remained trained unsteadily on his heart. Behind him, he could hear his guards shifting with barely suppressed worry.

Hold on. Just hold on. I am almost there…

Another step.

"My friend," he said again, bringing a soft smile to his lips and holding out his other hand.

The red candle in his mind shimmered, flickering in and out of sight.

A soft, wounded sound crossed the short distance between them, and the tension lifted from the bow. The arrow clattered harmlessly to the ground at N'dachVeip's feet, and then the bow followed it. He swayed… and a moment later Paix had reached him.

Wrapping both arms around that thin - by all the stars, that *bone thin* - body, he followed his exhausted friend down to the ground, holding him gently as he finally allowed weakness to take the place of what little strength he had left. As they settled, Paix shifted to his knees, the better to hold N'dachVeip in a tight and comforting embrace.

"You are safe," he murmured, still using the language he knew this shadow of a man would instinctively understand. "You are no longer alone, my friend. I have you."

Shaking arms wrapped around him in return, bony fingers almost clawing into the back of his ivory coat as N'dachVeip clung to him as if he were the last man on earth.

Paix glanced behind him, catching Menet's eye. With a nod, the guard dismounted and edged closer, within earshot but keeping far enough back that he didn't cause alarm.

"Fetch a cup of water," Paix said lowly. "And some simple food. From the feel of him, he has not eaten in days."

He returned his attention to N'dachVeip, still trembling in his arms, still barely holding himself together. Soft, desperately choked-back sounds left his throat,

and Paix slid one hand up, fingers feathering into red hair as he held the man's cheek against his.

"You are safe," he murmured again. "Let go, my friend. It was not your fault. Let go."

Those fingers clawed even more, as if N'dachVeip were trying to climb into Paix, trying to disappear in the warmth of his embrace. His breath was hitching now, yet still he shook, still he held himself together.

Quietly, a cup of water was set down at Paix's side, followed by a wooden bowl containing a little plain cooked rice. He felt N'dachVeip shift, starting to pull away.

He tightened his hold.

No. Not until you know that it was not your fault.

Gently, he stroked his hand through that lank and shaggy red hair. A whimper reached him; a sound that cut straight to his heart.

"Not your fault," he repeated softly, cradling N'dachVeip so close that he could feel his heartbeat. "It was not your fault. Let go, my friend. Let go."

One final whimper, a sound that was little more than a choked wail, and N'dachVeip broke apart in his arms, finally releasing his last fingernail hold on control, and sobbing.

You are safe. You are no longer alone, my friend. I have you.

[1] *T'alia mhasa* = Good morning
[2] *Mhasa l'amsha* = Morning, sleepyhead
[3] *Niq'a!* = Hold!
[4] *Yasq'a mehak, sa'madiq* = Down you go, my old friend

CHAPTER 54

The tears flowed bitterly for long and agonised minutes, every breath a hitched sob, some a choked cough. Through it all, Paix's arms remained warm and firm and comforting around N'dachVeip, one hand tenderly stroking his hair and the nape of his neck until finally the sobs died and his friend sat quiet, exhausted, and small in his arms.

Slowly, carefully, keeping his embrace as close as he could, Paix moved the palm of that hand around to N'dachVeip's cheek, letting his fingers gently scratch through the straggly beard there, trying to get his attention.

N'dachVeip raised his head. His eyes were wet; red-rimmed and dark-ringed. They gazed up at Paix, flickering nervously across his face, searching for… what?

Paix smiled gently. "Water?" he asked.

Immediately, he saw that gaze snap down to his mouth, and his heart sank. He knew what that meant, had done it himself in the first days after the maelstrom when he could not hear what Mhenheli was saying to him.

"Water?" he asked again.

N'dachVeip's gaze moved back up to his eyes and he nodded.

"Please," he whispered. "So thirsty."

Shifting just a little, to get more comfortable, Paix picked up the cup of water, still holding one arm around his friend. As N'dachVeip reached both hands out for the cup, they shook violently, and he let them drop again with another little sob.

"Let me," Paix murmured, raising the cup to his friend's lips, so reminiscent of how Mhenheli had once cared for him.

As I received, so I return.

The water was gone in a few mouthfuls, though Paix tilted the cup only gently. N'dachVeip would have drunk it ten times over, but Paix knew the dangers of drinking too much water too quickly when deeply thirsting.

"Slowly," he urged, despite knowing his friend could not hear him. Just as he could once feel the soothing timbre and vibration of Mhenheli's voice, so he hoped N'dachVeip could feel the same from him. "It is not good to water a starving belly quickly."

He set down the empty cup and picked up the small wooden bowl of plain rice. It was Paixandrian custom to eat rice with the fingers, but Menet had pushed a smooth wooden spoon into this bowl.

Paix remembered the frustration of not being able to feed himself, and while Mhenheli had done so with incredible tenderness, he knew that N'dachVeip was accustomed to relying only on himself. He had no servants - save those who had kept his house clean and cooked his meals - and certainly had nothing that compared to the close and intimate role of a Chaperone.

With that in his mind, Paix carefully half-filled the wooden spoon with a mouthful of rice and held its handle out. Flicking him a grateful look, N'dachVeip reached for it. His hand still shook, but with Paix's hand cradling the back of it and guiding it, N'dachVeip managed to eat the rice himself.

They made slow progress through the bowl, with Paix filling the spoon and helping his fiercely independent friend to feed himself. By the time they had finished, Paix saw that Menet had approached and was waiting nearby.

"Onorait," he said, "we have set up a tent. The sun is high, and it would probably be best to get him into the shade. The apothecary has his potions ready."

Nodding his thanks, Paix waited while Menet removed the empty cup and bowl, then looked back down at his friend. N'dachVeip had clearly already seen the tent, as tears were gathering in his eyes again.

"Thank you so much," he whispered. "Thought I was going to die here alone…"

You almost did, my dear friend. Your candle was so close to the light.

Paix touched the side of N'dachVeip's face to get his attention. Once those eyes were on him, he gently tapped his own lips, waiting for a moment until N'dachVeip looked at them.

"Walk?" he asked, carefully enunciating the word in the Grym tongue. "Or carry?"

N'dachVeip's eyes lowered, his expression defeated. "I have no strength," he said quietly. "But I probably weigh less than a bird right now, so I won't strain your back."

With a wry smile at that little glimpse of his old friend's sense of humour, Paix shifted again, braced his position, and lifted N'dachVeip into his arms, cradling him close as he walked over to the tent. He did, indeed, weigh frighteningly little. How long had he been without food and water? How long had he been alone?

Menet was holding aside the cloth that covered the entrance to the tent. As he passed him, Paix murmured, "Leave one guard here. Take the others and search

as best you can. And work quickly. If there are any other survivors, they may be close to death."

Menet simply nodded, and Paix ducked into the tent. It had been set up quickly, with a lantern hanging from its canopy, two rugs laid across the ground, and a soft bedroll spread out along one wall. It was to that bedroll that Paix carried N'dachVeip, gently laying him down on it as the q'ayadasi held its cover back.

"Is your camel all right?" N'dachVeip murmured, as Paix settled him as comfortably as he could. "I'm sorry if I scared it or hurt it. I saw animal legs walking past, and my only thought was that it could be my first meal in days."

Again, Paix touched his friend's face. N'dachVeip clearly did not realise that he needed to *look* for a reply, but then why would he? Before the explosion, his hearing had been perfect. Paix fervently hoped that - like his own hearing loss after the maelstrom - this was only temporary, but he feared that it would not be.

"She is fine," he replied with a smile, once his friend was looking at him. The q'ayadasi was propping N'dachVeip up with soft cushions atop a lightly rolled small rug, and as soon he was settled Paix held out a hand toward the apothecary.

"Strength first of all," he said, lowly.

"Agreed," the apothecary replied, his tone equally soft as he placed a bottle into that waiting hand. "I will check for injuries once he has drunk that, though I will recommend administering the potion in small doses with a cup of water in between, else the alcohol might prove too much for him."

As if in anticipation of this advice, Menet was already placing down a cup of water, and beside it a stoppered flask containing more. Almost immediately, N'dachVeip reached for the water, fingers still trembling. He grasped the cup firmly, and lifted it, his jaw set with determination. The water within sloshed around a little, but thanks to it only being half-filled it did not overflow, and he managed to drink it down.

Paix had the flask un-stoppered and ready to refill, again only partway, as N'dachVeip held out the cup. Another greedy gulping down of the water, but this time no refill. Instead, Paix held out the potion, bringing it close to his friend's mouth.

N'dachVeip hesitated, then nodded, allowing Paix to rest the neck of the bottle against his lips and tilt it slowly. Good, for this was far too precious to risk being dropped or fumbled. Soon enough, he hoped, his friend's hands would steady, but

for now he must play the role of nurse just as tenderly as Nehle-aalh had once done.

After N'dachVeip had taken a few healthy gulps of potion Paix refilled the water cup, then turned to the apothecary, keeping an eye on his friend as he sipped more slowly now from the cup, his desperate thirst clearly slaked.

"Bring more of that rice," he murmured. "Even if it—"

He looked up, catching the apothecary's startled gaze.

Hoofbeats?

Fast, urgent, and coming closer; that was unmistakeably the sound of horses. *Many* horses!

Corking the potion and setting it down on the floor, he rose quickly to his feet as the guard outside yelled something; a muffled cry that was cut off and ended with a thud. A second later, the cloth cover of the entrance was wrenched aside and several men bundled into the tent, their swords drawn, their faces ashen with shock. They were unmistakeably Rachzem folk; their hair the same flaming red as N'dachVeip's, their stature middling, their raiment black and edged with red.

They stared at Paix and the apothecary for a moment, then began to advance on them.

"Hold!" Paix ordered in the Grym tongue, drawing himself to his full height.

They stopped, but one - clearly the leader of the group - took a further step toward him.

"Who orders me and my kin to hold in our own lands?" he growled, looking Paix up and down. "A desert vagabond? A wanderer of the sands?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Paix saw the apothecary bristle with indignation.

"Show some respect, insolent dolt! You address the king of Paixandria!"

Instantly, five sword points were aimed at the man, who promptly shut his mouth, yet still glared defiantly at the men.

"King, eh?" their leader sneered. "I see no crown. I see no finery. I see no regalia. I see only a man in peasant's clothing. A *desert vagabond*," he repeated, enunciating the words in a clear insult.

Heat stirred within Paix; a golden warmth that burned and blazed. He was unarmed, but at least he had this…

“What king has but one man to guard him, eh?” another said, turning the point of his sword to face Paix. “We arrive home from our travels, only to find our home blown to pieces, and you here in the middle of it, alive. *What did you do to our home, stranger?*”

Paix took one step forward. The air around him began to change as the golden heat rose within him. One of the men clapped a hand to his head as his hair - longer than that of his fellow companions - slowly began to rise in a ruddy halo around his head. Tiny sparks glittered momentarily around the swords as Paix took another step forward.

The men took a step back, watching him warily.

“I am guarded by only one man,” Paix said, with all the quiet calm that presages a threatening storm, “because the rest of my men are searching for survivors among your people.” Another step forward, and he was now towering over the leader, whose sword had lowered as he stared up at the man above him.

Outside, overhead, the sky lowered and rumbled. The first spatters of heavy rain began to hit the tent roof.

“Perhaps, instead of threatening me while I am healing your leader, whom I rescued barely an hour ago from the brink of death, you might want to join my men in looking for survivors yourself, hm?”

The leader recovered his composure. His sword may have been lowered, but his heart was stout, if foolish. He squared his shoulders, drew his brows together, and glared at Paix.

“I ask again,” he growled. “Why are you here and alive, when our city is no more? Where did you come from, and *what did you do?*”

An ear-shattering crack rent the air, as a bolt of lightning hit the ground nearby. As one, the men dropped their sparking swords with yelps of alarm, staring down at them as they rang with strange humming sounds on the exquisite rug that served as a floor for the tent.

A tanned hand suddenly clasped the lead man’s shoulder, close to the side of his neck. Paix bent down until their faces were level.

“Go,” he said quietly. “Rescue those of your people whom you can find and leave the *desert vagabond* to heal your leader.”

The man bridled, but the hand on his shoulder tightened. He stiffened momentarily as a shock raced through his body and strange reddened and jagged burn marks skittered across the skin of his neck.

“Go,” Paix said again, quieter this time.

An arm hooked heavily around his waist, and a body leaned equally heavily against his left side. The man’s gaze swivelled across to N’dachVeip, who was holding on to Paix for dear life.

“Grav’n—“ the man blustered.

“How about you join the rescue efforts instead of threatening Onorait Paix al-Lareiff, King of Paixandria, huh?” N’dachVeip muttered. “He’s just saved my damned life, and his men are out there looking for my people. Get yourselves out there and join them and be thankful that he didn’t just fry your ungrateful backsides from here to Mezalea for drawing swords against him.”

Paix straightened and let go of the lead man, hooking his arm instead around N’dachVeip’s shoulder, very much aware that he was mostly the only thing keeping his friend upright.

The men bent to pick up their swords, each either nodding or touching their foreheads while looking at N’dachVeip and backing toward the entrance to the tent.

“Bring my guard inside from the rain,” Paix called after them. “And pray that he recovers from whatever injury you inflicted upon him to silence him.”

“T’was but one good punch to the jaw,” the leader muttered, but did as he was bade, dragging the unconscious guard into the tent and dumping him unceremoniously on the rug before taking his men outside into the storm.

The apothecary and q’ayadasi ran over to the guard, and Paix turned to look down at N’dachVeip, who was grinning weakly up at him, something of his old humour shimmering brightly in his eyes.

“My friend,” N’dachVeip said. “When you get angry, sparks really do fly, huh?”

CHAPTER 55

The plaintive cry of a bird far overhead roused Pix from peaceful slumber. Through the polished acacia door, he could hear the early sounds of the city awakening, and he slid the fingers of one hand through his hair, pushing it back.

He'd slept soundly, more soundly than he had in a long time, and this morning he simply felt… tranquil. Yes, that was the word. Tranquil and comforted, which was a whole world removed from his emotional state the night before, when he'd burst into the room and scared the living daylights out of poor Malin.

Onorait Paix purr?

He smiled. Speaking of…

"Not sure that I'm purring exactly - unless you can sense something that I'm not aware I'm doing - but I do feel contented, yes," he said, as Malin hopped up onto the bed. He rested a hand on their head, stroking over it as they rubbed their cheek against his fingers.

"Best night's sleep I've had in ages," he murmured.

bird tool marks help

He turned his head on the pillow, looking over at the open journal on the desk.

"Yeah," he said softly. "Still wish I could have told him in person, rather than writing a letter two thousand years later. But—" He scritched Malin's cheek, "—you were right. It helped."

walk big walls hilltop today?

The sound of low voices bled in through the door, footsteps whispering on the cobbles outside. The city was in its past. Did he really want to go back there to that big castle, and risk having his heart wrenched yet again?

Against all his better judgement… yes, he did. Something there was calling him, pulling him toward it. It felt incredibly familiar, but he couldn't quite put his finger on *why*. The city itself had grown familiar over time, but the castle ruins atop the cliff had felt that way from the moment he'd first set foot in them. Even the twisting corridors that led out from the main hall toward the throne room had felt like an echo in his mind.

There was bound to be some incredible archaeology to be found up there, but he clearly wouldn't be finding it today, not with the city residing in its past. He stretched, yawning, as Malin jumped down from the bed and paced over to their basket, where they curled into their usual comfortable little doughnut.

“Sleepyhead,” Pix remarked with a smile as he pushed back the covers. Outside, the sunrise horn sounded as he stepped into the loose linen pants and pulled the soft tunic over his head. Sandals slipped onto his feet, ivory coat shouldered into, door opened, and the cool morning air slipped into the room.

As always, fresh incense accompanied that clear air, and he instinctively turned his head to see what was in the niche this morning.

Oh…

Carefully, he cupped both hands around the bright terracotta plant pot and lifted it up from the polished niche. The delicate little pink desert blooms wavered on tender stems as he bent his neck to breathe in their scent. Closing his eyes, he remembered a time long, long ago, when a rare storm had passed over Paixandria; so long ago that he’d been but a young boy, and his father had taken him by the hand, out into the dunes to see the miracle wrought by rain in the desert.

His people had poured into the streets and danced out in the rain, hands and smiles raised to the skies. He had walked out onto his balcony, staring up at the lowering clouds and feeling the strangeness of water spattering on his face from above. Within minutes he was soaked through, as Nehle-aalh stood just inside the doorway and clucked anxiously at him to come back indoors before he caught a chill.

He smiled, eyes still closed, lingering in that memory. It was one of the few times that he had completely ignored her, so rapt was he at the sensation of heavy rain falling on him. She had even called upon Mhenheli, to try and talk some sense into him. Luckily for him - and to Nehle-aalh’s exasperation - Mhenheli had simply joined him out on the balcony, his eyes closed, and his face raised to the skies in quiet enjoyment.

But it was over the next few days that the desert blossomed into a life that he had not even imagined it could hold. As if the gods had taken the most colourful dyes and thrown them down to the earth, the sands were streaked with pinks and purples, delicate whites and a smattering of yellows; all atop little scrubby mounds of green.

His father had taken him up to the natural observatory in the afternoon, and together they had sat quietly for a long time, just looking out over the beauty of it all. Eventually, he had grown as sleepy as the sun, and his father had picked him up in his arms, carrying him home.

He opened his eyes, smiling as he looked at the tiny little pink petals. Of all the gifts left to him by the city, this was the most precious of all, more precious even

than the emerald ore. This gift was a memory that he had long forgotten, returned once more, and he set the pot gently down again in the niche. This evening, he would bring it inside, but for now he wanted to make his way up to the castle once more.

It was a slow walk, stopped so frequently as he was. The water carrier offered him a cupful to slake his thirst. A woman carrying a basket of sweet breads over her arm begged him to take one to break his fast with. The brewer called out from his open window, beckoning him over to sample the latest from his vats. And then, finally, he paused to bow his respects as a Mythish funeral procession slowly passed down the streets, both women and men heavily veiled as they accompanied the bier into the catacombs beneath the statue.

Finally, though, he was out of the city and moving across the fields, climbing the steps up to the castle and entering via the side gate of the barbican. Through the courtyard, busy with guards and deliveries from the orchards and fields, and at last he stepped up into the Great Hall.

"Ah, Onorait!" said the scribe who sat just to the left of the entrance. "You are expected."

Startled, Pix looked at him. "I am?"

The man smiled. "Yes, down in the refectory. I was told to inform you - as soon as I saw you, no less - that it was of the utmost urgency that you make your way there as quickly as possible. Although, I think you may already have been spotted by—"

"PAIX!" a voice yelled from the lower end of the Great Hall, turning every head toward it. "GET OVER HERE!"

The scribe chuckled. "He has been waiting since well before daybreak to speak with you. Came here with an armful of papers, sat himself down, ordered a plate of food and a jug of beer, and has been poring over those papers ever since."

Pix was frozen to the spot, having finally seen who was yelling at him. The occupants of the Great Hall had returned to their business, but there was no mistaking the man down at the large tables in the refectory, standing up and waving one arm at him. Black coat, red scarf, fiery red hair and beard, big grin…

"N'dachVeip," Pix whispered in disbelief. "By all the stars…"

With one glance at the scribe, who was still smiling as he returned to his books, Pix set off down the Great Hall. As he descended the steps into the refectory, his old friend wrapped him in a big hug, which - still stunned - he managed to return.

"Where've you *been?*" N'dachVeip was saying as he pulled away, holding Pix by the elbows as he grinned up at him. "You're usually up before the sun. I've been waiting for *ages!*"

Oh, that had felt good. *So good*. The first hug he'd had in… years. Possibly decades. Warmed through by it, Pix smiled down at his friend.

"Oh," he said, "I felt like having a lazy morning, you know."

N'dachVeip blinked. "Lazy morning? Who are you, and what have you done with Paix al-Lareiff?! Ha! Come over here. Got something I want to show you."

He let go, turning without waiting for a reply, and heading over to the large table, which was strewn with papers that were weighted down by an empty plate, a book, and a jug of beer. Stars, everything about him was so perfectly, wonderfully familiar, except for the strange contraption that he wore on his head.

He had always sported a pair of goggles that he'd crafted himself; red-lensed and with leather protectors at the sides. Essential for a Tinkerer, he'd once said when queried about them. With bits of metal and lava and whatnot flying all over the place, he needed to protect his eyes. But this contraption was completely new and unfamiliar, and as Pix followed him over to the table, he examined it discreetly.

A band of malleable copper around the back of N'dachVeip's head, half-hidden by his hair, it thinned to a twisted stem that looped over the top of each ear and ended in two moulded copper pads that sat snugly against his skull, directly in front of and behind each ear. They reminded Pix of headphones that he'd seen once, using bone conduction to transmit sound instead of the mechanisms of the inner ear.

"I've been working on these plans for months, and they're finally ready," N'dachVeip was saying as he sat down at the table, sweeping his hand in a broad '*tada!*' gesture across the largest sheet of paper. "I'm going to need a *lot* of copper for the roof, so that new copper ageing circuit of yours is going to be busy for a while."

Pix reached him and looked down at the plans. He rested one hand on N'dachVeip's shoulder as he stood over him, bending over the table. His friend's plans and sketches had always been admirably detailed, but this was…

… it was the large mansion house. The one with the domed copper roof that he'd first seen as he'd approached the city.

"My new home! What d'you think?" N'dachVeip asked, turning to look up at him with a grin. "Fit for the once Grav'n er-Rachzem, eh?"

Pix wanted to ask, '*How did you even get here?*' He wanted to ask, '*How did you even survive the blast?*' He wanted, most of all, to ask for another hug, but he settled instead for the simple and comforting touch of his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Fit for him indeed," he said. "You have but to speak with my coppersmiths and they will supply you with all that you need. I cannot wait to see construction begin, and if I know you then you will probably be laying the foundations this very day, hm?"

N'dachVeip smirked. "Got to dig them out first. Fancy giving me a hand?"

Pix had opened his mouth to say '*yes*', when his friend laughed.

"I jest! Can't have the king getting his hands dirty by digging holes. You've got far more important things to be doing! I just wanted to show you this, and let you know that I'm going to be using every scrap of copper in the entire city. Just to give fair warning, of course."

"Of course," Pix said smoothly, his lips curving in a broad smile. It had always been impossible not to smile when in N'dachVeip's presence, especially when he was in this kind of mischievous mood.

Stars, how I have missed you, sa'madiq.

"Well, I'm going to head out and make a start on things." N'dachVeip rolled up the papers, wrangling an old loop of knotted string around them to hold them together, and then getting to his feet. "You'll stop by and take a look at progress, right?"

"As often as I can," Pix said, praying that the city would allow him to return to this, so he could make good on his word. But, just in case it wouldn't, he held out both arms, inviting another hug.

It was given whole-heartedly, and he held onto it tightly, probably just a little too long, revelling in the warmth and humanity of it. Eventually, though, he pulled away, patted his hand quickly on N'dachVeip's shoulder, and turned without a word to head down toward the door that led to the throne room.

Behind him, N'dachVeip tilted his head and watched him go, puzzlement writ large upon his face.

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Pix walked with a steady pace down the first section of corridor, following its sharp right turn into the second section. But, as he approached the left turn into the final section before the long gallery, he slowed his steps.

Seeing N'dachVeip had caught him completely off-guard and had been blessing enough. It had left him emotional, though, and he did not want to turn that final corner with damp eyes and a too-tender heart.

He stopped walking, closed his eyes, rested a hand against the wall, and breathed deeply for a moment. He reached back through the years, grasping for something he had not needed to hold onto for millennia. Without the beads to help him, he was at the mercy of his memory for this.

Calm serenity. Poised. Regal. There… yes, there it is. There I am.

He opened his eyes, inhaled deeply, and stepped into the final corridor.

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The throne room was deserted, as he might have expected this early in the morning. Already, the floor was painted with light that streamed in through the stained-glass windows, and he walked slowly across the beautiful mosaics.

The throne stood before him, a beautiful construction of polished acacia wood and rich russet fabric. Behind it, the stylised carving of the tree was painted in rich colours, and looking at it now, he realised it had twelve branches. Some were sturdy and broad, others smaller and more delicate. Each branch was painted differently, but together they made a whole that was pleasing to the eye and the heart.

He stood in the coloured sunlight for several long minutes, looking up at it, his gaze tracing each branch and noting what made it special from its fellows. One gilded, one frosted, one speckled with fungi, one limned with copper, one bright as a parrot's wing, one dark as the night and edged with iron, one red and sparking, one blooming with a multitude of tiny flowers, one glittering with amethyst, one ocean-iridescent, one of wood overlain with faint shimmering scales, and one a myriad of bright layers of hardened clay.

The rainbow of light slowly crossed the floor and moved up the throne, until it alighted on something set into the back of it. Something made of sandstone. Something with old carvings on it. Something that he had not seen in over two thousand years. Something that his eyes had once beheld every day.

Pix stared at it. A deep warm light flickered within him; a warmth that had not touched him in a long, long time.

The light of the Vigil. That… is part of the Vigil.

"T'alia mhasa, Onorait. Did you enjoy your walk?"

He turned at the sound of that achingly familiar voice. He had braced himself for this moment as he walked through the corridors, but still it slammed into him and almost overwhelmed him.

"I did," he heard himself say. "It's a beautiful morning."

He wanted to weep. He was *here*. He was in the moment. He was *seen*.

Mhenheli smiled at him. *Smiled*. Had he ever seen his Chaperone smile like that, other than the agonising ghostly vision of him from the day before? This was no vision, and it was too real to be a dream. He could feel the warmth of the colour-speckled sunlight on his back, could feel the warmth of that smile, could smell the familiar warmth of his favourite spices.

"I know," Mhenheli said. "I have been standing on the balcony and watching the sun rise over the city. I saw you climbing up the steps, and so I came in to prepare some sha' for you."

Pix returned that smile, full-hearted. "I thought I could smell it," he said softly, moving toward Mhenheli as his entire world shifted into feeling *right* again.

Half-dazed, he followed Mhenheli through a discreet door to one side of the throne, along an open terrace, and through a second door, which Mhenheli closed behind them.

The sight of the room beyond almost sent Pix to his knees.

It was an exact copy of his rooms in Paixandria, the only difference being the stone was that local to the savannah, a deep grey instead of the lightness of sandstone. Highly polished, as those walls of old had been, they reflected the golden morning light that shone in from the open windows. Bright copper shone in every remembered detail, and the ceiling was the same silver-constellationed indigo that he looked up at every night in his small room down in the city.

His bed, soft blue blanket draped over it, there by the windows. Copper oil lamps upon the walls, unlit for now. A desk and bookshelves to his left, soft low couches and tables to his right.

Mhenheli sat upon one of those couches, a small brazier on the table before him. He was tipping a long-handled sha' pot, pouring its contents through a strainer and into a copper cup.

Pix walked over to the couches, feeling as if time were collapsing in on itself, melting past and present together in a strange, blissful fusion. He sat, as Mhenheli held the cup out to him with another smile.

Their fingers touched briefly as he took the cup from Mhenheli's hand, and he almost fell apart, clinging on to that calm serenity like a drowning man.

"May I join you?"

Raising the cup to his lips, he nodded.

"Of course," he whispered, then closed his eyes and sipped the spiced sha'. When he opened them again, Mhenheli was sitting with a cup of sha' balanced on his fingertips, gaze lowered as he drank from it, and as Pix drank in the sight of him.

He was older than the last time Pix had ever seen him; now apparently of an age that he had never had the chance to reach. Even back then, his hair had been lightly streaked with grey and his face a little weathered, but now age had settled onto him fully. He was completely grey, his features lined and worn, but the lines were not those of worry. They did not crease his forehead; instead, they had formed around his eyes and mouth. Lines of laughter and smiles.

Pix's heart warmed. They suited him.

I don't even know why you're here, but I thank the stars that whatever has blessed me with this day has also blessed me with you by my side for it. And regardless of what this is, whether it's a dream or a hallucination or an actual moment in the past that I've slipped into, I need to… I need to do this.

"There's something I have been meaning to tell you," he murmured.

Over the top of his cup, Mhenheli arched an inquisitive eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I… I should have said this much sooner, but now seems as good a time as any." Pix looked down at his half-empty cup, as if it would give him the words he needed, or the courage to say them. He knew the words, anyway, had written them in that letter last night. But now he had the chance to say them; a chance he'd never had before.

He took a slow breath,

"You mean the world to me. You… are my compass. My guiding star. My confidante. My strength."

He looked up at Mhenheli, who had lowered his cup and was watching him with the most… *beautiful* expression Pix had ever seen cross his face.

"My most beloved," he finished in a whisper.

And then, Mhenheli smiled at him.

“I know,” he said softly. “I know.”

CHAPTER 56

"You *know?*" Pix murmured, completely taken aback and hoping that it didn't show on his face. If nothing else, then he could feel heat rising on his cheeks. Thank the stars he was just as tanned in the present day as he had been when Mhenheli was by his side, for at least that blush wouldn't betray too much how bewildered he felt.

"I… had never said it before," he continued, his gaze suddenly fascinated by the contents of the copper sha' cup he was holding. "I felt that it was time I told you."

Mhenheli chuckled, and oh, wasn't that a delightful sound? A sound that he had never heard before, it was rich and warm, and it held a hint of self-deprecation.

"Well, now it is my turn to blush," Mhenheli admitted. "When you do not return from the city at night, I know you have been so caught up in something that you choose to sleep in your tent, rather than make the journey up here. But on those occasions, I make the journey down to you, to ensure that you are safe and comfortable. And… last night you left your book open on the desk."

Wait a minute. Back up there. Back the hell up. WHAT?

It was as if all cognitive thought had decided to tie itself in a knot, set itself on fire, and then defenestrate itself for good measure. Pix did not know what to think or do after hearing that admission.

You… but… but that book is in the future and you're in the past, but you managed to read it somehow and what the…?!

"I should not have read it." Mhenheli's quiet voice came from somewhere around the region of Pix's right knee, and Pix mentally shook himself to his senses, finally realising that his Chaperone was kneeling at his feet and bending his head to kiss his hand.

"Onorait, I am truly sorry," he was murmuring. "I should not have read your words. Your private thoughts should have remained private, and my eyes should not have been tempted by them."

Oh stars, and now he feels guilty. How would I have handled this back then? This is a time and place I don't remember living through! He's so different, so does that mean I was different? He's… warmer, softer. Maybe I should be the same…?

He would unpack at some other time - or, at least, *try* to unpack - exactly why both he and Mhenheli seemed to be here in the past. The words of the wine merchant that day on the Greatbridge - that he had led his people here fifty years

before that day - still niggled in the back of his mind and came uncomfortably to the fore in moments like this.

Right now, though, he had an increasingly distraught Chaperone to comfort, and his own silence was *not* helping on that front.

He turned the hand that Mhenheli was bent over, and cradled it gently against his Chaperone's cheek, hoping that this kind of touch - one he had never allowed himself to indulge millennia ago - was not too dissimilar to how he might have treated Mhenheli in this time.

"Your apology is accepted," he said softly, watching as Mhenheli's shoulders visibly relaxed, but still he remained kneeling where he was, clearly unwilling to leave that tender touch. It was as if he was waiting for something else, for Pix to say something. Or… to say something himself.

And then Pix remembered what he'd written toward the end of that letter, and a cold chill of fear rippled up his spine.

> *'Had you given any indication that you would accept such a thing and not press for more, then I might have risked the loss of you by asking. I would have trusted no other in my court to hold discretion as you did. But fear is a terrible and powerful restraint. I tried - stars, how I tried - to coax thoughts and emotions from you, but I met only with a placid wall of duty. I had no sign, no clue, no suggestion that I would not be rebuffed, that you would not feel so uncomfortable that you felt your only recourse would be to leave my service. And that was something I could not bear, could not countenance.'*

He closed his eyes, willing Mhenheli not to recall those words. But his Chaperone lingered, unmoving, and appeared to be quietly wrestling with whether to speak or not, and Pix knew - he *knew* - that it was only a matter of time before either he, or the version of him that existed in this time, was going to have to deal with the consequences of that letter.

I don't live in this time, whatever and however it took place. I don't know what happened in this time! If he says something about the end of that letter, about what I said I was afraid to ask him… what the hell do I do? If I truly was here with him in this time, am I taking my own place in this moment, or is the… me from this time somewhere else and completely unaware of what's happening? Whatever I do now could risk hurting Mhenheli and cause no end of trouble for… the me from back then. What do I do?!

"I… would never leave your service," Mhenheli whispered, his voice sounding tight and barely controlled.

Oh no. Oh nononononono…

Pix swallowed. He *had* to respond; couldn't leave that hanging in the air between them.

"Tazah q'adisi,"[1] he murmured, allowing his fingers to caress Mhenheli's cheek gently, and praying that it was the right thing to do. "You cannot comprehend what a comfort those words are to me."

He felt fingers touch the back of the hand that he still held to Mhenheli's cheek. They slid over his skin, covering it, cradling it, holding it there. Mhenheli turned his head slightly, pressed a kiss to the palm of his hand, then turned back again to look up at him.

Pix wanted to weep, wanted to scream. It was so fucking *unfair*. In those dark eyes, he saw a heart lifted up to him, offered for him to take. The beautiful, uncomplicated simplicity of deep platonic love that he had always craved was kneeling right there at his feet, waiting for him to accept it.

And he did not dare touch it.

I swear, if the past me who lives in this time doesn't take him up on this then he's a fucking fool. But then… that self might not have been in this situation in the first place but for my selfish actions. It was me who wrote that letter, me who blurted out my feelings. This is all my fault, and I don't know how to fix it.

He was in an absolute bind. If he changed the subject, he knew those dark eyes and that wide open heart would both be shuttered by duty, and probably be hurt so much that they would never have the courage to take such a risk again. But if he did anything that could be construed as acceptance of that painfully evident and beautiful offer, his self from this time would have no knowledge of it and could be placed in an incredibly awkward situation.

But he had to act right now, had to do *something*. He couldn't just leave this moment hanging here between them.

Pain and heartache for his beloved Mhenheli, versus an awkward situation for some past or other version of himself.

There was no contest.

Fuck it. That other me can deal with it.

He bent forward, and as he did so Mhenheli raised his face further, eyes widening in desperate hope. The first kiss, feather-soft, he pressed upon Mhenheli's forehead. The second, barely a ghost of a caress, upon his lips.

He pulled back a little, looking down into those dark eyes, and he smiled.

“Let us have some more sha’, hm?” he murmured.

Mhenheli nodded, returning that smile, and oh… there was that beautiful expression on his face again. It warmed Pix to the core to see such simple joy and contentment expressed so openly, even while his own heart was in absolute turmoil.

Why can’t I take my own place in this life? Let me live that life out with him. Let me take what he holds out to me with his whole heart in his eyes, that simple loving companionship that I have yearned for, for so long. I’m worn thin by feeling so unutterably lonely. I would give my everything just to have this, for however many years he has remaining in this life. Please, I’m begging you, whoever you are. Let me have this, and then I will return to the modern world when his time is done.

He forced his expression to remain attentive and placid as his Chaperone got up off his knees, sat back down, and began to prepare a fresh batch of sha’. Focusing his gaze on Mhenheli’s long fingers as they stirred the spoon through the spices and camel milk in the warming pan, he tried to recall when the last time was that he’d actually kissed someone.

To his dismay, he… couldn’t actually remember. It was misery enough that his last hug - before that enveloping and warm embrace from N’dachVeip - had been decades, possibly even centuries ago. But that he could not remember even the most platonic of kisses was absolutely depressing. Most likely the last one of those had been a perfunctory double-cheek air-kiss greeting for some academic colleague or peer somewhere in Europe, and that counted no more than a handshake would.

Have I truly been starved of affection, of the warmth of human touch for so long?

Mhenheli was holding out the cup to him once more, fragrant spiced steam curling up from it. Gently, Pix took it with a smile and a murmur of thanks, cradling it as he watched Mhenheli pour another cup for himself.

“What will you do today?” Mhenheli asked, sitting back and blowing gently across his own cup. “Does the city call you to duty, or do your books call you to leisure?”

His books. Oh, how he had missed all of those books. To spend a day reacquainting himself with those beloved old friends would be a heaven on earth.

“Leisure, most definitely,” Pix replied, with a glance behind him to the elegant wooden shelves that held his books and maps. “I can think of nothing I want to do more today than lounge on a couch and lose myself in words for hours.”

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As he stacked a few of his most sorely missed books into the crook of one arm, Pix glanced back to where Mhenheli was arranging cushions on the couch with the best view of the open windows, making a comfortable nest for him to settle down into. Once his Chaperone appeared to be satisfied with said nest, Pix made his way across to the couch, setting the book pile down carefully on the table and sitting down.

Before he'd had a chance to do anything else, Mhenheli was crouching before him, gentle hands slipping the sandals from his feet. An all too brief massage of each foot followed, as they were lifted carefully up onto the couch, and Pix settled back comfortably against the cushions, reaching for the first book on top of the small pile.

Two pages in, and a beautifully glazed ceramic bowl was set down on the table, filled with peeled slices of glowing croak burp fruit. Pix smiled at the sight of them, as a second vessel was placed beside them; this one a shallow finger bowl of water. A soft cloth was the final accompaniment.

"Fresh from the orchard," Mhenheli said quietly, as he folded the cloth so that it would be easy for Pix to dab his fingers dry on it.

"Thank you," Pix murmured, reaching for a slice of the pale pink fruit and popping it into his mouth. It was warm and delicious, sweet and soft, and he savoured it as he dipped his fingertips into the water and wiped them dry on the cloth before returning to his book.

Behind him, Mhenheli had pulled up a stool and sat down, and a moment later Pix's eyes drifted shut as he felt gentle fingers begin to comb through his hair, followed by an actual comb. Slowly and methodically, Mhenheli worked, and it was all Pix could do not to fall asleep as faint tingles shivered over his scalp and down each side of his spine. Stars, this was heavenly…

His eyes next opened several hours later. The book had been taken from his hand and placed back on the table, and a light blue blanket had been draped carefully over him. Outside, he could see the warm early afternoon sunlight dappling the acacia treetops outside the windows, the breeze that cooled the high plateau rustling the delicate fronded leaves into a subtle dance.

On the couch opposite, Mhenheli sat with a ledger balanced upon his knee and a low table drawn up to his side, upon which sat an inkwell and a small jug of honey wine with two cups. He was busy writing, pausing every now and then for some

brief mental arithmetic before returning to his writing. This was something Pix remembered from long, long ago when Mhenheli had run his entire household, and it was a sight that made him smile as he watched that grey head bent so intently over his work.

He watched for several long, blissful minutes, as he allowed the sensation of a deep peace to settle within him. This may only be a temporary joy granted to him, but he was going to make the most of every moment he had within it.

Eventually, the gentle scratch of copper nib on paper paused, and Mhenheli looked up, presumably to check on him. The moment their eyes met, the quill went down on the table, the book was closed, and Mhenheli sat forward.

"I am sorry," he said softly. "Were you awake for long?"

Pix shook his head; a lie accompanied by a smile. "I had no idea I was so tired," he mumbled, stretching. "What time is it?"

"Almost time for the afternoon meal. I have already requested it, and it should arrive soon." Mhenheli picked up the jug of honey wine, raising an eyebrow toward his master, who nodded his assent.

A moment later, Pix was cradling a generous cup of honey wine, sipping from it as Mhenheli moved back to the stool behind him, hands resting on his shoulders. As thumbs dug gently into stiff muscles, Pix felt his shoulders relax, and he wallowed in the luxury of a massage that he had long missed.

"A message arrived while you were asleep," Mhenheli said. "From the Grav'n er-Rachzem."

"N'dachVeip? What did he want?"

"He wanted to ask you for permission to use black powder to excavate the foundations of his new home. Said he was tired of digging and thought he would ask, because he thought that - for old time's sake - you might agree."

Pix chuckled. "I trust you sent him away with a firm 'no' ringing in his ears."

"I advised that I would ask you when you awoke," Mhenheli said primly. "I also advised that I suspected you would not permit him to cause deliberate explosions in the city."

"I will speak with him tomorrow," Pix murmured.

If I'm allowed tomorrow, that is. Only once has the city given me two consecutive days in its past. Please, please, by the Vigil's Grace, let me stay here…

***

The evening meal was eaten together in companionable silence, and after it was cleared away Mhenheli returned to his ledger and Pix to his books. As the night drew on, Mhenheli put away the ledger and closed the window shutters. His quiet presence moved around the room, lighting the oil lamps and readying the room for his master's slumber.

His book still open on his lap, Pix watched him, a feeling of lonely dread settling low and heavy in the pit of his stomach.

I feel like a small boy, fighting against his bedtime. This day has been a blessing, and I'm loath to lose it, but I fear that is exactly what'll happen. I want to savour every minute, make the most of every second.

The bed was turned down, the blanket folded back enough for him to climb beneath it. A cup of cooled water was set on the low table near his pillow. Fresh incense grains were lit on a table at the foot of the bed, glowing gently in the low golden light from the oil lamps and filling the air with their warm, rich scent.

"Are you not tired this evening?" Mhenheli asked as he returned to the couch, sitting down opposite Pix with a fond smile. "I suppose you did have a long nap this morning."

At that, Pix returned the smile. "The last time I heard such words, I was probably about seven years of age, and my stern Chaperone was trying to persuade me to go to bed so that I would not be a small and grumpy bundle of annoyance in the morning."

Mhenheli laughed, an actual honest to goodness *laugh* - something that Pix had never seen him do before, something he had once longed to see him do - and it absolutely entranced him. He couldn't help but grin broadly in response as Mhenheli shook his head, still chuckling.

"I would not presume," Mhenheli teased, "but I will mention that I am reluctant to experience a *tall* and grumpy bundle of annoyance in the morning."

"Ah, I see." Pix nodded sagely, mirth creasing around his eyes. "Then I shall bow to the wisdom and wishes of my Chaperone and retire for the night." Then, more seriously, he added, "And I am sure you are also tired, which is my real reason."

Closing his book and putting it back on the table, he stood and stretched, then made his way, still barefooted, over to the bed. Gentle hands helped him out of his simple linen tunic and pants, holding back the blanket so he could slip beneath it, then pulling it tenderly up over him.

One by one, the oil lamps were dimmed and extinguished, until only two remained burning lowly on the opposite side of the room, affording just enough light for Mhenheli to see by as Pix watched him quietly take the clothes into a side room and return a moment later with fresh ones, laying them out in readiness for the morning.

Where do you sleep in this massive place? Do you have a room close by, as you did in Paixandria? You were never far away from me, and I would sometimes wake up to find you moving around my room, quietly replenishing the incense or adding oil to the lamps. I used to wonder how much sleep you got, because you were always there when I needed you, day or night.

Eventually, Mhenheli approached the bed once more, tweaking the blanket and settling it. Quick eyes glanced over the table, ensuring everything that might be needed during the night was there, then he turned to look down at Pix with a soft smile.

"T'alia mhala,"[2] he murmured.

I don't want this day to end in a goodnight where you walk away from me. If it must end, then don't leave me.

"Thank you for today," Pix whispered. "It's been a quiet joy to rest with you nearby."

Mhenheli tilted his head, a strange and soft expression on his face.

"Every day is a quiet joy when it's spent in your service," he replied.

Stay. Please… stay.

A beat of silence hung in the air between them, then Pix gently pulled back the blanket on the other side of the bed.

"For this night," he murmured, "I… need that quiet joy to continue, resting with you beside me."

Mhenheli's eyes closed briefly, and his breath hitched softly, then he exhaled, opened his eyes, and nodded. Once again, his face was lit with that beautiful expression, as he walked around to the other side of the bed, divested himself of his black robes, draping them over the back of the nearby chair, and slipped beneath the blanket.

He lay there hesitantly, dark eyes glimmering in the low light, until Pix reached for him. Then, with a low almost whimper of happiness, he rested his cheek on Pix's shoulder, wrapped one arm around Pix's waist, and closed his eyes.

The night breeze soughed through the leaves outside as Pix lay there, listening to it, feeling the soft accompaniment of warm breath against his shoulder; breath

that grew slower and more measured as the head that rested against him grew heavier.

This moment. This blessed, beautiful, perfect moment. He had yearned for this. Just this. This simplest and yet deepest of affection, of resting quietly in another's heart, in another's arms, in the most exquisite peace.

Let me stay here. Give me this. Please.

The lullaby of the breeze took his eyelids, gently closing them. The night took his mind, softly drowsing it into the deep comfort of sleep.

Devoted servant… nothing is ever truly lost…

When he awoke, the soft breath of the city's present sighed outside the polished acacia door of his small room in the hillside, as silent tears trickled down his cheek to dampen the pillow of his solitary, single, empty bed.

[1] *Tazah q'adisi* = treasured companion
[2] *T'alia mhala* = goodnight

CHAPTER 57

Life finds a way. In the most desolate of locations, there is always hope. Even down here, on the scorched and razed ground, small tendrils of green began to nose cautiously toward the sun, speckling the darkened earth with a hazy sheen of promise.

Five days ago, a heavy rainstorm had rolled in from the east. Distant thunder had rumbled around the mountains but came no closer, instead sending lowering clouds to blanket the plains where the Great Caravan had been re-settled at the central point between all the lands. Rain had poured down for hours, running off the waxed cloth that covered the tents, cleansing the ground, and washing away the stink of smoke and burning.

In the days since - just as it had in the desert around Paixandria - life had reminded the living that it was still around. Dry, long-buried seeds cracked their now-swollen shells and sent out pale green shoots in hopes of finding sunlight. Silenced birds that had flown to the safety of the untouched forest gladdened the skies with distant trills, moving ever closer after the rain had cleared the air.

And every now and then, sometimes hobbling or limping, sometimes pulling small hand-drawn carts laden with precious salvaged possessions, small and straggling groups of people approached the encampment of large tents from all directions and were welcomed with open arms, a hot meal, and the comfort of safety and shelter.

On the fifth day after the storm, Mhenheli had risen at his usual early hour, brewed himself a cup of sha', and now stood in the open entrance of the king's tent, slowly sipping the warm spiced drink as he watched the sun rise over the wide and slowly greening plains.

Six days since the king had left. Six days of quiet, of aimless busy-ness. Six days of trying to find something to do. He had, of course, been consulted for decisions that normally would have been made by the king himself, but outside of those rare times he found himself with precious little to do; so much of his day, of his life, revolved around his master.

He had offered his services where he could, or at least where he had some skill. He assisted the apothecaries in administering potions and asked to be taught their production. He even helped to dole out food in the kitchens, as the camp grew larger and the mouths needing to be fed grew more numerous.

Late the night before, one of the guards who had left with the king rode back to the camp, with a request that a cart be made ready to return with him, and

several men as accompaniment. He brought news that the Grav'n er-Rachzem had been found close to death, but saved, and that several Rachzem traders had also been found. They had scoured the ruins of Eastvale, finding five or six other survivors who happened to be in deep basements or other heavily sheltered areas at the time of the explosion, but no more. The city had been utterly destroyed and the Rachzem folk almost completely wiped out.

The guard had turned back toward Eastvale with the cart, accompanied by several men on camels, all of them heading into the night with the promise of returning on the morrow.

As Mhenheli watched, cradling the warm copper cup on the tips of his fingers, he could see on the distant hill the silhouettes of riders against the brightening sky. At his best guess they would reach the camp within two hours, and so at last - thankfully - he had something to occupy his attention this morning.

Finishing his sha', he took the cup back to the kitchens and made his way to the apothecary's tent. Inside, he found a Paixandrian woman tending to a man wearing the garb of a mountain trader; one of the wanderers who plied his wares from hilltop to hilltop. His satchel lay on the floor beside the bedroll where he rested, his battered old wide-brimmed leather hat sitting atop it. His face was dirty and thin, and he sat staring down into the bowl of steaming vegetables that he held, his gaze haunted.

The woman walked over to Mhenheli, raising her fingertips to her forehead in a gesture of respect.

"Chaperone," she said lowly, glancing over at the trader. "He asked me to remove all the meat from his meal. Kept begging Zhana to forgive him."

She sighed, wrapping her arms around herself. "I asked him gently what had happened, as I tended his wounds. Zhana was his pack animal; a llama who had accompanied him on his travels for many a year. The beast was killed in the disaster, as she could not fit into the low cave he managed to dive into as he saw the maelstrom approaching. He—" Her breath hitched a little. "He had no food with him, being someone who survived off the land as he travelled. So… he had no choice but to…"

Mhenheli briefly closed his eyes and nodded. He had heard many such a heart-breaking story in recent days. When he opened his eyes, he looked at the woman.

"You are here every day," he murmured. "I trust that you are resting and taking care of yourself as well as you are those who come here for help."

She looked down at the floor. “Yes. At least, I try to. There is just so much suffering. I find it hard to turn away from it.” Her gaze turned back up to his face, earnest and yet wearied. “The apothecaries do a wonderful job, but they are kept so busy mixing as well as administering their potions. And they are all men. For many who come here, well… they are missing a woman they loved. Their wife, their sister, their mother, their daughter. A soft voice and gentle hands can help them to finally let go and grieve those they have lost.”

“The Vigil’s Grace shines through you,” Mhenheli said softly. “What is your name?”

“Hadita al-Tarida, Chaperone.”

“Gift from the Stars.” Mhenheli repeated, with a smile. “Well were you named. I came here to inform the apothecaries that more survivors are on their way. The king returns from Eastvale, and he is bringing the Grav’n er-Rachzem and a few others with him. I will endeavour to find a few people to help you, as you cannot stretch yourself so thin as to give succour to all of them. We must care for our carers, too.”

Hadita gave him a tired smile. “Thank you.”

***

It was all Mhenheli could do not to run out to greet the king’s caravan as it arrived in the camp. Several Rachzem men on horseback accompanied the camel riders, and the cart taken by the guard the previous night bore those who were too weak or wounded to walk, wrapped in warm bedrolls and nestled amid soft carpets laid out on the cart’s wooden floor.

The king’s camel knelt, and he dismounted, walking around to her head to speak softly to her. One of the q’ayadasi who had accompanied him gave him a handful of grass, which he fed to the beast while stroking a gentle hand over her muzzle. Her ears were perked forward as she ate, and eventually the king straightened up, exchanged brief words with the q’ayadasi, and left the camel in his care as he walked over to the cart.

The guards were already lifting the cart’s passengers up into their arms, and to Mhenheli’s surprise, the king also reached for someone. Once they were safely cradled in his arms, he joined the slow and careful procession toward the apothecary’s tent, where Mhenheli stood by the entrance.

On seeing black robes before him, the king looked up, meeting Mhenheli’s gaze. He smiled briefly as he ducked inside the tent, and Mhenheli realised that his master was carrying N’dachVeip, the Grav’n er-Rachzem. The man was gaunt

and pale, his eyes closed as if sleeping, his cheek pillowed against the king's chest as he was cradled gently.

Following his master into the tent, Mhenheli kept to one side, watching and waiting until he was needed. He had found two more women willing to help Hadita, and they moved between the bedrolls, settling each patient comfortably and speaking tenderly to them.

Two apothecaries clustered around N'dachVeip as the king laid him down on a bedroll. Low murmured voices drifted across the quiet tent toward Mhenheli, as he watched the other survivors being cared for around this tent that had seen so much pain and sorrow.

"His hearing is gone," Mhenheli heard the king murmur to the apothecaries. "It has been weeks since the explosion, and it still has not returned. Speak clearly with him and ensure that he is looking at you as you do so, for he will attempt to read your lips."

"Onorait?"

The king looked up. Hadita stood nearby, touching her fingertips briefly to her forehead.

"Perhaps I could help?" she said. "My father was born without hearing. Perhaps I could teach him some of the signs and gestures that our family uses to communicate?"

The king smiled at her. "Then I shall leave him in your capable hands. Thank you. Take good care of him."

Hadita glanced down at the sleeping N'dachVeip. "Of course, Onorait. Perhaps… if you wish it - and only if you have time, of course - I could teach you some of those signs as well, that you might communicate with him?"

"I would appreciate that," the king replied, following her gaze. "He has been through much. More than any other who has come to us. A weight lies upon his shoulders and his heart that we cannot begin to comprehend."

He looked back at Hadita. "If he becomes anxious and distressed, or you see his hands begin to shake, send a guard for me. Immediately."

She nodded, whispering, "I will, Onorait. And… do his lands have rules about not touching him, as we have with you?"

The king smiled. "No," he said softly. "Rachzem folk, once they warm to you and come to know you, give the best hugs, and they love to receive them also. If you are comfortable with offering that, I know he will appreciate it."

“My family are the same.” Hadita returned that smile. “Hugs I can do, and I do them well.”

***

“It is good to have you back home,” Mhenheli said quietly, some ten minutes later, as he helped his master divest himself of his old creased and dusty clothing and change into a fresh tunic and pants.

The king smiled, glancing around himself at the walls of his tent. “We have returned to our history, have we not?” he murmured. “This is home now and will be for a long time.”

Mhenheli gestured to one of the low cushions, and his master sat down, still gazing around him. Kneeling, Mhenheli gently slipped the king’s sandals from his feet and pulled a shallow copper bowl filled with warmed water toward him. First one foot, then the other, tenderly washed and patted dry with a linen cloth. Dust carefully wiped from the sandals’ leather before they were slipped back on and fastened.

“Thank you,” the king said. “I truly feel that I am home, now I am back here with you.”

Mhenheli smiled as his master’s warm hand palmed briefly against his cheek.

“As do I,” he murmured. “Rest here awhile. I will fetch us some food, and then brew some sha’.”

“I should—“

Mhenheli laid a hand on his master’s knee, and turned on him a look that he hadn’t given since the king was but a prince, and a very young one at that.

“Rest,” he said firmly. “Then food. Then sha’. *Then* all of those things that merit a ‘should’. Just as I said to Hadita, the woman in the apothecary’s tent, we must care for our carers. You have been carrying the weight of these people - these survivors of so many lands as well as your own - on your shoulders. Everybody knows what they are to do; they all have their tasks and their duties.”

He raised both hands in front of him, fingers relaxed and pointing upwards, as if allowing sand to pour through them.

Trust.

The king smiled, rare humour touching his eyes that had been missing for a long time.

"Yes, Chaperone."

CHAPTER 58

"You poor man. What *happened* to you?"

Hadita sat beside the Grav'n er-Rachzem as he slept, her fingers tucking her skirts beneath her as she folded easily onto a cushion upon the soft, carpet-covered floor. She reached out toward the side of his head, where his hair and a small section of his beard were partially burned away, the skin beneath raw but thankfully healing well. The damage extended toward the back of his head, indicating that he had somehow managed to turn away at the last moment from whatever had hurt him, just enough to save his face from being marred.

The apothecaries had left two potions for her to administer to him once he awoke, together with instruction that he should not exert himself overmuch and must rest - and preferably sleep - as often as possible, to allow the potions to do their work.

Hadita had carefully removed his torn and dirty red scarf, folding it and laying it beside his head, that he might see it when he awoke and not be worried that it had been taken away from him. She knew that many who had come into her care possessed only the clothes they wore, which had become precious memories of their lost homes and families.

His coat she had left be for now, though it was quite warm in the tent, and he must be uncomfortable wearing it. It would cause too much disturbance to him to try and remove it, but she had done what she could to make him as comfortable as she could before she began her watch through the deepening day.

His eyes finally opened just before sunset, as the evening meals were carried into the tent by Paixandrian city guards. Hadita smiled to herself. The smell of food usually woke her patients as soon as it arrived, and clearly the Grav'n was no exception.

He was looking around at the tent walls, frowning, then his gaze finally landed on her. She smiled, touching her fingertips briefly to her forehead, then - as she drew them back down - she waved one hand slightly as she said a clear, but low, "Hello."

The Grav'n nodded in reply, his eyes guarded. They took to looking around again, spotting first his scarf beside his head, and then the guard who was bringing a platter of food over to where he lay.

The meal was placed on the low table beside the bedroll, and the Grav'n nodded once again - this time in acknowledgement and thanks - then he grunted with the effort of hauling himself up on his elbows to look at the platter.

On it was the same simple fayre offered to all the occupants of this tent: a bowl of rice and vegetables with small pieces of roasted meat in it, a soft hunk of freshly baked bread that was still warm from the ovens, and a mouth-wateringly tender sliver of *esaki*; a tart made of pastry soaked in thickened cream, thinly layered with a light custard, and with honey drizzled over its crust. Beside the platter, the guard placed a small jug of honey wine and a cup, then he left to fetch more food for the other occupants of the tent.

Carefully, and with some effort, the Grav'n managed to manoeuvre himself into a sitting position. Hadita watched as he reached for the bowl of rice. His fingers trembled finely, but they did not shake as the king had warned they might, and so she was not worried.

As he ate, she sat quietly beside him, her hands busy with some embroidery that she had brought with her to work upon during the long watch of the day, her gaze occasionally moving to him to check that he was all right.

He ate slowly and methodically, working his way through the savoury bowl of rice, together with the bread. But when he got to the *esaki* he made a soft whine of exquisite happiness as the sweetness melted on his tongue, and Hadita giggled.

His gaze met hers as he went for his second mouthful, and once again he couldn't help that little whimper as his eyes closed and he savoured the dessert. Not for naught was *esaki* a rare Paixandrian delicacy - something that was regarded as a real treat - but clearly it was a new taste to the Rachzem folk!

The morsel was gone by the third mouthful, and the Grav'n looked down mournfully at the empty plate.

"Would it be bad form for me to lick the plate?" he asked as he flicked a glance toward Hadita, who grinned and shook her head as she put down her embroidery and sat forward to pour him a cup of honey wine. She filled it just a little over halfway only, so that it would not spill once it was in those trembling fingers.

To his credit, the Grav'n managed to refrain from plate-licking, instead putting it down and taking the cup from her hand.

"Thank you," he murmured, this time remembering his manners.

Hadita responded by touching her fingertips to her heart and then moving them forward, in a gesture that - among her family - meant *you are welcome*.

The Grav'n hesitated, his gaze going to that hand, then back up to her face. Slowly, he sipped from the cup, his brows knit in thought as Hadita turned her attention to the potions, uncorking the one she had been instructed to administer first. It was a

deep red colour, and the heady scent of its strong alcohol base drifted up from the glass neck of the bottle.

“You speak with your hands,” the Grav’n said quietly, putting down the cup and holding out his hand for the potion.

Hadita look up at him and nodded as she gave him the bottle, watching as he drank it all down with only one brief shudder. Well. He was clearly a man who knew how to handle strong alcohol. Most people could not manage to down an entire potion of strength that quickly, and all in one go, no less!

“Heurgh!” he muttered, shaking his head as he held out the empty bottle to her. “Your apothecaries like to make those strong, don’t they? If there are any more, I’d best get them over with now.”

The healing potion went down as quickly as the other had, with another shake of the head and incoherent shuddering exclamation. The Grav’n stared at her with slightly watery eyes, waiting for any more, but Hadita simply corked both empty bottles and gestured back to the cup of honey wine.

“Thank the gods,” the Grav’n said hoarsely and fervently, picking up the delicate copper cup. “This is like nectar, compared to that stuff.”

He took a long, slow sip, then cradled the cup in one hand, turning his attention back to Hadita.

“You are a healer?” he asked, clearly attempting to be sociable. “Might I know your name?”

Hadita smiled, using her hands to sign her name even as she spoke it, flicking her fingers upwards to denote sparkling stars, then cupping her hands together and holding them out to denote a gift.

The Grav’n watched, his head tilted a little to one side.

“Wait,” he said softly, clearly intrigued. “Speak first, that I may watch you form the words, then show me with your hands?”

Hadita did as she was asked, clearly and carefully enunciating the syllables of her name, followed by the hand signs.

“Hedita?” the Grav’n ventured.

Hadita grinned, raising one finger and squinting one eye half shut. *Almost.* She tapped her ear - *sounds like* - and then raised her hand, pointing to it.

“Sounds…” The Grav’n frowned. “Oh! Hand? Sounds like hand? *Had*ita?”

She smiled, clapping her hands together twice and pointing to him. He was a quick study and would probably pick up quite easily the simple hand language that her family used to communicate with her father.

“Pretty name,” he said, his lips curving into the first smile she’d seen cross his gaunt and haggard face. Oh, that was such a welcome and promising sight!

“Now show me with the hands again? I think I got it, but I want to make sure. Paix once told me the names of your people all have a special meaning. Yours… is about stars?”

Once again, Hadita signed her name, as the Grav’n watched her hands intently.

“Again?” he asked, putting down the cup.

This time, as she signed her name, he attempted to follow her lead, flicking his fingers upwards, then cupping them together and holding them out.

“Stars gift?” He looked up to her face. “Or… gift of the stars?”

She covered her face with her hands, then lowered them again, smiling broadly and nodding. “Yes!” she said softly, watching him match her smile with one of equal delight.

“Do you speak often with your hands?” he asked. “Would you teach me more?”

“Yes,” Hadita said again. She held up one finger with a small duck of the head and half-smile, then placed her hands together, pillowing her cheek briefly against them, before pointing to the bedroll.

“Yes, but I need to rest,” the Grav’n murmured. “Apothecary’s orders, I suppose?” He heaved a sigh, his shoulders sagging as he nodded. “All right,” he mumbled, then hesitated as Hadita touched the sleeve of his coat, giving a gentle pull on the fabric just above a jagged tear in it, with a questioning lift of her eyebrows.

He nodded, awkwardly shrugging out of the coat. Beneath it, his white shirt was clean upon the sleeves but grey with soot and dirt at the front. One sleeve was torn in the same place as his coat, the skin beneath it reddened and bruised.

He handed the coat to her, settling down in the bedroll as she carefully folded the garment and placed it beside the red scarf. She, too, settled back on her small cushion, picking up her embroidery once more.

“Hadita…”

She looked down at him, still slowly pushing her needle through the fabric, one eyebrow raised.

“Would you like to know how your name is said in my language?” the Grav’n asked softly, his tone hesitant, as if uncertain whether to offer.

She nodded, giving him an encouraging smile.

“It’s… not as pretty as it is in Paixandrian. But we would say it *dav'ra zherne*. Star’s Gift.”

She left her needle in the fabric, raising her hand to her heart before clasping her fingers into a loose fist, bringing them to her lips, and kissing them.

“You like it?” he whispered, his expression hopeful.

Hadita knew this man had lost almost his entire people, his history, his home. His language could not be allowed to die as well. She nodded.

“I love it,” she murmured. “And your name?” She gestured to him with one hand and another raise of her eyebrow.

“My name? It doesn’t mean anything, as yours does. Even if it did, it wouldn’t be as beautiful.” He chuckled. “I’m called N’dachVeip. N’dach is my family name, and Veip is my given name.” His tone softened as his eyes drowsed. The healing potion was doing its work, pulling him down into sleep.

“Rachzem names’re sorta backwards like that,” he slurred. “Language’s interestin’, n’it?”

Hadita watched quietly as he fell into a peaceful slumber, the tension around his eyes smoothing, his jaw relaxing, his breath becoming soft and even. Carefully, she tucked the bedroll around him, then turned her attention to the folded coat.

She picked it up, unfolding it and examining the sleeve to find the place where it had been torn. She had some black thread somewhere in the leather pouch that held her embroidery spools and needles. She could make quick work of this, and though the coat was dusty, soot-stained, and in dire need of cleaning, she could at least mend it so that it as was strong and whole as it was when new. His shirt, too, if on the morrow he would let her have it for but a short while. And - she glanced at it with a slight smile - the scarf. She had been saving some bright red embroidery thread for a moment when she felt inspired to create something more colourful, but now she had a much better use for it.

“*Dav'ra zherne*,” she murmured, as she threaded her needle with black, took up the old, battered coat, and began to mend the tear in the sleeve with tiny, close stitches. “*Dav'ra zherne*,” she said again. “Just as I will teach you the language of hands, so will I learn your language, and will encourage others to learn it. Your people will live on in the tales we will tell our children about them.”

She looked over at his peaceful face.

“I promise, we will not forget,” she whispered, as she returned to her task.

CHAPTER 59

Over the next few weeks, the arrivals dwindled. Fewer and fewer survivors turned up at the camp, and fewer and fewer were found alive amidst the ruins of their lands. More and more frequently, those who had journeyed out with hope of finding the living returned with shovels to bury the dead.

The camp had grown, with new tents being fashioned from what fabrics could be salvaged from each land. Great patchworked shelters arose; a city of colourful mismatched homes that blended every culture together under many stitched and woven roofs. Their inhabitants brought new recipes to the cooks, carefully hoarded seeds of new plants to the gardeners and apothecaries, and - most importantly of all - they brought new histories, tales, and legends to tell around the evening fires.

Every person who arrived at the camp, no matter how young or old, how elevated or mean their position in life, was brought to see the King of Paixandria once they were well enough. They would be sat at the low table in his tent, offered food and drink, and asked if they wished to tell their story, or the stories of their lost loved ones. The names of those that did were noted in a tall ledger that lay open before the king.

If there was time at that moment, no matter how late in the day, the king would open a different ledger and gently encourage his visitor to speak. During those times, his quill would scratch swiftly over paper, documenting the stories he was told.

Slowly, as the arrivals diminished from few to none, a great history of the shattered empires began to come together, the first of many tall ledgers filled with the lives of the fallen and the saved, their amanuensis a king who gathered the lost and the destitute around him.

***

It had been four days since the last arrivals. Unspoken, the enormity of this was noted by every soul in the camp. A final punctuation, a stop at the end of so many histories, a *missing* where once there had been at least *something*.

Mhenheli woke to find the king already up and standing just outside the tent, a cloak wrapped around him to ward off the pre-dawn chill. Hastening into his own cloak, Mhenheli walked out to join him.

“Is something wrong?” he murmured, aware of the presence of two guards close by.

The king shook his head, his gaze fixed on the distant mountains.

“No,” he said softly. “Nothing wrong, but something is about to happen.”

Mhenheli followed his gaze. He could see nothing in the gloaming around the camp. The distant mountains lifted their white-capped heads against the clear sky, only visible against the shimmer of countless stars.

“Good?” he whispered. “Or bad?”

The king smiled. “Oh, definitely good. Can you not see it? Look there, toward the bottom of the mountain.”

Mhenheli squinted against the darkness. Now that his eyes were a little more accustomed to the low light level, he could indeed just make out something moving near the bottom of the mountain. A line of faint purple lights - glimmering and shifting in the darkness like the iridescent scales of a snake - was moving at a walking pace toward the camp.

“I see it,” he said. “What is it?”

The king turned to him, placing a hand upon his shoulder, his smile a rare bright one that reached his eyes.

“The crystal mages have left their Mountainhome and found their way to us. And there are many of them,” he said. “We must alert the q’ayadasi to raise more tents.”

He glanced back toward the mountains. The first glimmers of dawn were limning the east side of their outline.

“Stars,” he murmured, “I hope she is among them.”

***

“Paix!”

A slender body all but threw itself at him, arms wrapping tightly around him, face burying in his chest, shaking entirely with relief.

Around them both, the slow procession of mages entered the camp, laden down with satchels and bags, books and staffs. Welcoming hands relieved them of their burdens, brought stools and cushions for them to sit and rest wearied feet, and fetched them wholesome food and drink.

“Oh, Quartz and Chrysocolla! You’re safe!” The arms around Paix tightened even more, as a whisper came from the vicinity of his chest. “I know I’m not supposed to touch you, but protocol can go hang. Of all people I am *so* glad to see you.”

Paix enfolded Xsia-Minai'Te in his arms, holding her close until she finally raised her head to look up at him.

"And I you," he murmured, smiling down at her. "And so many of your kin with you. This is a joy, for it has been many days since the last survivors reached us. We have scoured the lands and brought all to us whom we could find. We had almost given up hope."

"I fear we are the last," Xsia-Minai'Te said. "We searched Raendellarae but found no sign of the Elvenkind. We cast enchantments to try to locate them, but it was as though they had vanished into another realm. We found no bodies, no ruins, nothing."

"And none have found their way to us," Paix said, finally relinquishing his embrace as Xsia-Minai'Te pulled away, tugging her cloak about her. "We can but hope that they did indeed escape to another realm. The Elvenkind have sight and skill that we do not and may have had forewarning enough to escape what came for us all."

"M'lady?"

Xsia-Minai'Te turned toward the Mythish man who was standing close by. In one hand he held a wooden bowl of hot vegetable stew, and in the other a beaker with fragrant steam rising from it. He held both out to her with a questioning look, and with a sigh of relief she sank onto one of the stools that had been brought out and took them from him.

"Thank you," she said, giving the man a weary smile. He nodded and returned to the kitchens to fetch more victuals as might be needed.

Paix crouched beside her. The desperate relief of that hug had spoken volumes of how tired and alone she felt, even with many of her kind surrounding her. It was a feeling he knew all too well; the weight of a people upon his shoulders that even his beloved Chaperone could not fully help him bear. Some company would be right welcome for her, he was sure.

"Have you found many survivors?" she asked, eating slowly, and clearly savouring each mouthful.

"From most lands, yes," he replied. "None from Raendellarae, as you also found. But survivors have reached us and been saved from all other places. Many have been lost. Of the Rachzem folk we found but a scant dozen."

Xsia-Minai'Te stopped eating, fixing him with a keen gaze.

“That was where it started,” she murmured.

He nodded. “In the forge, yes.”

“And… N’dachVeip?”

“Saved,” he said, his lips curving in a smile as she sagged with relief. “Sorely wounded, very weak, and with his hearing completely broken, but he is recovering well. Back up on his feet at last, and making a delightful nuisance of himself, as is his wont.”

Xsia-Minai’Te did not return to her meal. Instead, her gaze remained on Paix for an uncomfortably long time.

“You know about the forge,” she said softly, glancing around. “Paix… we need to talk. Away from here.”

“Yes,” he murmured. “But not until you have eaten and rested. There will be time aplenty for discussion. We will remain camped here until all are healed enough to begin journeying away from these lands in search of a new home.”

Xsia-Minai’Te hesitated, then turned her attention back to the bowl of stew, eating it slowly and thoughtfully, her gaze darting about the camp.

“I see many of your people around me,” she said. “How many were saved?”

“Every single one,” Paix replied. “We took shelter in the Anthill.”

Once again, her gaze rested on him; a pale green that seemed to pierce through to places deep within him, seeking something.

“One did not,” she said, lowly.

He took a breath. Met that gaze steadily.

“That, too, must wait until you have eaten and rested. We have set up tents for you and your kin. Two large ones for them to share, and a smaller one for you, that you may have privacy to study and work and rest as needed.”

“Paix…”

He gestured to the still unfinished bowl of stew, but Xsia-Minai’Te persisted.

“Have you done all this alone?” she asked softly.

“Stars, no,” he chuckled. “I have had the help of many, many people. The guards, my Chaperone, the apothecaries, the—“

“But you are at the head of it all.”

“Well…”

A small hand rested on his shoulder, and she smiled at him.

“Desert King. Copper King. Vigilkeeper,” she murmured. “You have many titles, but I give you one more. Father of the Nation, I call you.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but she tapped her fingers on his shoulder and gave him a stern look that, quite unequivocally, told him she would brook no resistance.

“Accept it, and then I shall be good and eat and rest and suchlike,” she said, her lips quirking in an impish grin.

The ground gave him no answer as he glanced down at it, so he looked back up at Xsia-Minai’Te, meeting that look with a rueful smile.

“Very well. I accept it, but with reluctance,” he said.

“Good.” She nodded, returning once more to her meal. “Maybe one day you will understand the truth of it, because I see it even if you do not.”

CHAPTER 60

"Twenty-seven new arrivals," Mhenheli said, as Paix ducked into the quiet of his tent later that evening. "Our camp grows large, which is both a comfort and a concern."

"Indeed." Paix settled onto one of the cushions around the low table and pulled a small ledger toward him. "I have instructed the Adepts to recreate two of the farming circuits that we used under the Anthill, that we may replenish our food stocks, and I have also tasked them with designing portable versions that may be set up and taken down quickly."

He took up his quill and opened the ledger, turning it until he reached the most recent page, and inscribing into it the number of the latest arrivals to the camp and the land from whence they came.

Mhenheli lit the small brazier in the centre of the tent. Down here in the plains, the weather grew cooler in the fading months of the year, and the brazier's warmth soon took the edge off the faint chill in the air.

He set down a small copper pan above the glowing coals, pouring into it a generous helping of camel milk.

"Is this the last of them, do you think?" he asked.

Paix looked up from the ledger, but before he could respond there came a scratching at the cloth that covered the entrance to the tent, and a moment later Menet entered.

"Onorait," he said, with a short bow. "The leader of the Crystal Mages wishes to speak with you."

Mhenheli returned to his task, pre-emptively adding more milk to the pan, as Paix set down the quill and closed the ledger, giving Menet a small nod. The guard captain ducked back outside, but before he could even relay his master's permission the cloth was tugged back once more and Xsia-Minai'Te swept through it in a flurry of warm purple velvet and white fur.

"I am fed, and I have rested until I was bored out of my mind," she declared, as Paix got to his feet to welcome her. "You know that I don't sleep much, and we have so much to discuss."

"Please." Paix gave her a warm smile as he gestured to the cushions. "Be seated. Mhenheli is brewing sha', and so we shall have a warm cup to drink while we talk."

Xsia-Minai'Te sank onto one of the cushions that faced into the tent, the thick ornate woven fabric of its wall behind her. Paix sat opposite her and watched as she unpinned her cloak and shrugged out of it. Beneath it, she wore her familiar gown with its many-ribboned skirt, but - he gazed at it for a moment - it seemed a little more… tattered than he last recalled seeing it. But then, everyone here was a little tattered, given what they had been through.

The scent of warm spices began to drift through the tent, and before long Mhenheli was placing down two cups of spiced sha' on the table.

"Thank you," Paix murmured, as Xsia-Minai'Te also looked up at the Chaperone and smiled.

"This smells good," she said, picking it up and taking a careful sip. "Mmm, tastes good, too. Warming."

"Made with my favourite spices," Paix chuckled. "Now, as promised, discussion."

He saw her gaze flick over his shoulder, toward where he could hear Mhenheli clearing up the sha' spices, pan, and spoon.

"These are things that are best spoken of alone," she murmured.

"Mhenheli is perfectly discreet," Paix replied lowly. "I trust him with my life. Whatever is spoken of in here will go no further."

Those pale green eyes fixed him with an intent look. Xsia-Minai'Te rested one hand on her tattered skirt, and now Paix could see that several of the ribbons had been roughly severed, as if hastily torn from the garment.

"My ribbons," Xsia-Minai'Te whispered, "are still at your back."

A heavy silence hung between them.

He trusted Mhenheli with his life, yes. But this went far, far deeper than that. This was something that no living person could possibly know of, and yet somehow Xsia-Minai'Te did.

"Mhenheli…" he murmured, half turning toward his Chaperone.

"Onorait?" Mhenheli hastened over to them.

"Faithful Chaperone," Xsia-Minai'Te said, before Paix could utter another word. "What we must speak of here is of such secrecy that not even your trustworthy ears can be permitted to hear of it." She smiled gently up at him, adding, "For the sake of your master, and for my sake, could we please be left alone awhile?"

Mhenheli's dark gaze flicked over toward Paix, who simply nodded.

“Of course,” Mhenheli said, bowing to her and turning to leave, wrapping his cloak around him as he pulled aside the cloth over the tent’s entrance and exited into the night.

Silence settled once more. Paix reached for his sha’ with fingers that - he stared at them - fingers that *trembled*.

“Tell me of what you know,” he murmured. “And, more importantly, *how* you know of it.”

Xsia-Minai’Te raised her free hand, and into it there shimmered a crystal, arriving in her palm with a soft sound as that of chimes. Paix had never seen such a crystal before. It was not of a natural shape that he had ever encountered nor read of. This crystal appeared in the form of a sphere, but contained many facets that glittered in the lamplight as Xsia-Minai’Te held it.

“The ‘how’ should be first,” she said. “This is a sight stone. There were few of our kind who could use one, and I am now the only one remaining. You see your visions here—“ She set down her sha’ cup and reached across the low table to touch a fingertip to Paix’s forehead. “—and I see mine here.” She nodded to the crystal.

“And what visions have you seen?” Paix asked, calming the anxious fluttering within his chest with a sip of sha’.

“Not visions. *Histories*. A place of infinite darkness. Golden glittering islands. Black obsidian pillars.” Xsia-Minai’Te looked directly at him. “A dark elemental guarding the only safe way back.”

Paix said nothing, merely continued to slowly drink his sha’, his gaze fixed on the glittering crystal.

“The sight stone allows me to touch my gift; the crystal sight,” Xsia-Minai’Te continued softly. “I use it rarely, since it leaves me tired and feeling hollow. But in the days after our towers shattered and crumbled, and in the hours while we sheltered deep within the mountains, I called it to me and questioned it, trying to find out what had happened.”

“You saw the forge?” Paix murmured.

“I saw the forge,” she said. “I knew what had happened to bring that shard to N’dachVeip’s hand, for I was among the party, having been called upon for my healing skills during the battle with the elemental. But… as I questioned the stone, its facets seemed to split, and it showed me a second history for the same battle.”

She looked up at him. “A history where you were present. One where you were determined to see the battle through to the end, no matter how much I begged

you not to. One where you struck the killing blow but were sorely wounded as a result."

The letter!

"I…" Paix began, setting his cup down on the table, his fingers still cradling it. "I recall receiving Ser'Zhege's letter. I thought it so… strange at the time. I knew its contents even as I read it. I knew… what would happen. I knew of the destruction that would come. I thought it a vision, but at the same time it felt like no other vision I had had before. In that moment, as I lingered before speaking, I was aware that… I should have said something, that I had already said something, but *I had remained silent*."

"Because you *had* said something," Xsia-Minai'Te whispered. "In another history. In that moment, you touched that history and remembered it, though you did not know it at the time."

He stared at her.

"My life was split in twain," he murmured. "I knew what I had done, and what I had not done. And I knew that if I was to save my people, I should not go. And so, I refused the invitation and advised Ser'Zhege to reconsider."

"Which," Xsia-Minai'Te sighed, "of course, he did not. Stubborn man. May the earth cradle him soft and deep. But you, dear man, did you know what happened in that other history?"

An ancient pain rose within him, and he lowered his head, trying not to choke on the bile of anguish.

"My dreams were haunted by guilt," he said hoarsely. "In them, it was my hand that broke the final crystal, and my hand that dealt the final blow, my hand that caused the destruction."

"Paix… did you know how sorely wounded you were in that history? What injuries you suffered?"

He shook his head. He had not known, had thought it but a night terror. Only one thing had given him pause, and that was only as he attended to his duties for the Vigil.

"I mended the wounds on your body," Xsia-Minai'Te whispered. "But your wings were shattered."

He closed his eyes. A faint choked sob broke from his lips, and he felt a small, warm hand cover the back of his own hand.

“I fixed them as best I could,” Xsia-Minai’Te continued gently. “With ribbons from my skirts and the copper thread from your tunic. I knew not why you needed them, nor why they only appeared in that realm, but the moment I saw you in the camp this morning, I knew.”

Paix raised his head to look at her, silent tears cooling on his cheeks.

She smiled at him, soft fingertips tenderly stroking the back of his hand. “I see them still, even in this realm. And, though you were not present at the battle this time, I see my ribbons on them. Part of that history is merged with this history. Something has happened to you that brings those wings into this world, but only for those who have Sight, as I do. A light blazes from you, and I recognise it. It is the light of your Vigil. And it will never die, will it?”

He shook his head, numb with disbelief. She could see them? Here?

“You were right,” he heard himself say. “Not all of us sheltered in the Anthill. I… did not make it there in time. Instead, the Vigil protected me.”

The quiet after those words was comforting, as Xsia-Minai’Te gently stroked his hand and watched him. He felt, slowly, almost imperceptibly, weight drifting away from him. Outside, the evening campfires crackled on the edge of hearing, their warmth reaching to hands held out to them, their golden flames listening to the murmured tales and histories spoken around them and sending their words up to the stars that glittered and wheeled overhead.

The vast infinite world spread out before him. He was no longer alone with this one final secret that he had kept for so long.

“She is with me,” he whispered. “With me and within me.”

He remembered a warm evening in Paixandria. An old, beloved companion. A shared jug of honey wine. A dear, wrinkled face smiling up at him.

“She calls to you, doesn’t she?”

“She always has.”

“I foresee many years before you. Years of wandering, years of learning, years of devotion, and years of loneliness. But you will find her, one day. And she will bring you back.”

Xsia-Minai’Te’s hand reached up, her thumb gently wiping the tears from his cheeks as she smiled at him.

“Somewhere out there,” she murmured, “you have another history. There is another you, in another time, wandering the world with the burden of all that guilt. Maybe one day you will find him as you walk in your dreams, and you will be able

to hold him, and he will know forgiveness and love. Your histories speak of the Vigil as Love, and she is not only with you and within you, dear Paix. You and she are one. You *are* the Vigil. *You are Love*."

Overwhelmed, brought down low to the raw pain of loneliness at his very core and then lifted up and away from it by the enormity of the words Xsia-Minai'Te had gifted him with, Paix could only sit before her, shivering within, unable to stop his tears from welling and spilling over.

She smiled at him.

"You know, I did a really good job with those wings," she said, sitting back on her cushion and looking smug as she picked up her half-finished cup of sha'. "They make you look rather pretty."

He blinked, swept out of the maelstrom of his emotions and back into the present moment by her cheeky grin. He choked out a half-sob, half laugh, and reached for his own forgotten sha' cup, lifting it to his lips with fingers that now trembled not with fear but with relief.

"You'd best call for your Chaperone to return," Xsia-Minai'Te said, as the sight stone popped out of existence and she cradled her cup with both hands, looking at him across its copper edge with amused eyes. "Poor man, that we pushed him out into the night's chill so we could talk. He needs to come in and get warmed up. I saw him in the sight stone, too, you know."

"You did?" Paix turned a curious gaze onto her.

"Mmhm."

"... and?"

"Oh, now that you must find out for yourself." Xsia-Minai'Te winked at him. "Drink up."

CHAPTER 61

Paixandrian tents were warmer and more spacious than they first looked. Xsia-Minai'Te had first stepped into the tent assigned to her, as one of the Paixandrian guards held aside the thick fabric cover from the entrance, and she looked up in surprise.

She could stand comfortably upright, with plenty of room overhead. The walls of the tent were lined with fabrics woven in dusky threads of all shades, from sand to rose, and behind those was the strong and weathered fabric of the tent itself. Another hanging wall separated the tent into two rooms: one smaller than the other. Underfoot, warm rugs were layered, and a lantern hung from one of the strong but supple supports that were threaded through bands sewn into the fabric of the roof and came together at the apex of the central post.

Within the smaller room, a soft bedroll was laid out, with a low wooden stool beside it that served as a bedside table. Within the larger room, three small but firm cushions were set around another low table, this one with room enough to spread out books and work, or to eat with guests.

Gratefully, she had let her satchel slide off her shoulder, resting its weight on the floor beside the larger table. Her precious staff followed it - the belt that kept it strapped to her back unclasped and loosened - and finally her cloak, unpinned and draped over both. She sank onto one of the cushions and looked around, her feet still aching from the long trek down Mountainhome.

She was safe. Her people were safe.

She closed her eyes, and her shoulders rose and fell softly.

Well, many of her people were safe. Some had been lost; those working in the towers as they had crumbled and fallen, sliding and crashing down the side of Mountainhome. There were few mages residing in the cliffs - theirs being a society of scholars rather than of bustling families and industry - but perhaps a quarter of their number had never returned from their studies.

So much arcane knowledge, so much learning, so many histories; now all one again with the rocks. It had been too onerous a task to dig through the huge piles of rubble, and every seeking enchantment they had cast came back with empty hands and sorrowful sounds. Not a soul survived beneath the stone.

Eat and rest, Paix had told her, his tone stern but gentle as it always was. Well, she had eaten her fill, and delicious that was, but rest would be a while coming; at least while her thoughts still lay partially at the foot of Mountainhome.

The rest of her thoughts were fervently occupied by what she had *seen* as she'd entered the camp. From afar, the large gathering of tents had been obvious as those of desert dwellers. She knew of their nomadic history, and having assumed that the destruction had crossed multiple lands, she guessed that the surviving citizens of Paixandria had returned to their itinerant roots.

As the mages had wound their way down Mountainhome toward the encampment, she had found herself hoping against hope that Paix was among their number. She wouldn't have put it past that man to have lingered in an attempt to save some poor stray dog or other, even as death approached on hellish winds, and been lost. She had resolutely ignored the far distant shattered sight of Eastvale bordering on the east of Mountainhome, and Raendellarae was as deserted as if it had never been occupied by the Elvenkind at all.

On flatter ground, wending through the miraculously untouched forest, the mages had drawn closer to the camp. The trees grew sparse, the tents rising up before them in a welcoming sight. And amid it all, a curious golden light moved slowly toward what was clearly the central open area of the encampment.

As it moved into view, Xsia-Minai'Te had faltered, her steps momentarily coming to a halt as she stared. A tall man stood at the centre of the light, his skin deeply tanned, his hair brown, his clothes the simple linen raiment of the Paixandrian people but covered with a familiar long ivory coat. Behind him… a huge pair of wings rose, of age-yellowed bone and shattered gauzy membranes, mended with pale ribbons and copper threads.

Her people had stopped behind her, mumbling and muttering as they waited, and she simply gaped at the sight; a history that happened elsewhere but now come to life in this moment.

"Paix," she had whispered. And, as if he had heard her, even across the distance between them, he had turned toward her… and smiled.

"Paix!" she had then screamed, gathering up her satchel and her skirts, as she ran pell-mell out of the forest, across the sparsely renewed green grass of the plains, and into his waiting arms, wrapping herself around him and sobbing with relief.

Ghostly ribbons had trailed over her hands as she held onto him and he onto her, murmuring how good it was to see her safe, and how thankful he was for that. She had responded in kind, some vague memory of protocol - *"You must never touch the Copper King!"* - tugging at her before she told it to kindly go hang.

They had exchanged talk, brief words about the Elvenkind, before a man had offered her food and drink, and she had finally allowed herself to sit and eat. Paix had crouched beside her, resting in the easy squat of the desert folk; something

her knees had never permitted her to be comfortable with. As she ate, she had glanced around the camp, but her eyes had been continually drawn back to him as he told her of those that had been saved.

The great wings arched behind him, their ribbons trailing on the ground, and yet nobody else appeared to see them. The light that glowed from within him - a radiance that warmed and comforted her heart - also seemed to be unnoticed by anyone else around them.

“Of the Rachzem folk we found but a scant dozen,” he was saying.

She stopped eating and fixed him with a keen gaze.

“That was where it started,” she murmured.

He nodded. “In the forge, yes.”

She almost didn’t want to ask, but she had to…

“And… N’dachVeip?”

He smiled. “Saved.”

Oh, thank all the gods!

“Sorely wounded,” Paix continued, “very weak, and with his hearing completely broken, but he is recovering well. Back up on his feet at last, and making a delightful nuisance of himself, as is his wont.”

With the knowledge that N’dachVeip was safe, her thoughts travelled back through the conversation a few steps. Paix knew about the forge… How had he known? One of his visions? He had not been present for the battle, and thus could not have known how the shard came into N’dachVeip’s possession.

He was not present at this battle, at least…

“Paix,” she murmured, unable to pull her gaze away from those wings, and from that light. “We need to talk. Away from here.”

He had urged her to eat first, to rest first. There would be time aplenty for discussion. She had asked him how many of his people had been saved. He had told her they had all sheltered within the Anthill; the great mountain that rose up behind the city of Paixandria. All had been saved, not one left behind.

It was not often that the Sight took her without the need of the stone, but sometimes… just sometimes, it did.

She watched him. Watched the wings. Watched the light. It expanded around him, and the bustle and chatter of the camp lulled into silence. Movement slowed and

then stopped, and she found herself racing the raging wall of destruction. Silently it moved in this memory, and she kept her gaze straight ahead, ignoring the flames and the rocks and stones that flew all around her in the night.

She drew ahead, vision speeding over the dark forests that surrounded the Mythish lands. The air grew warm, then hot, and the ground became sand. Great dunes rose around her, and up ahead there glittered in the darkness the pale jewel of Paixandria. She could see people running toward the great bulk of the Anthill as she approached on the zephyr of history.

She reached the city, watching as the last few guards ran up the steps in front of the Anthill. The heat of destruction was close behind her, bearing down on the city's precious heart. One final guard ran through the deserted plaza around the tall spire of the Vigil, as another man ducked out of a small building close by.

Paix.

The guard stared at him. Paix yelled something, gesturing toward the Anthill. The guard took to his heels, stooping to grab a small kitten along the way as he sped up the steps.

Paix had turned to begin running in the same direction, but the heat was so close now, sand blasting through the streets, peppered with rocks and pieces of brick and sandstone, and he faltered, arms raised to shield his eyes from the sand as he faced what bore down on him.

The Vigil blazed with light, and - in the space of a moment's thought - he turned and leapt forward, over the low wall that surrounded the spire, his body prostrated on the smooth sandstone floor, his cheek pressed against the base of the Vigil.

Xsia-Minai'Te saw his lips begin to move, and then all was chaos.

Sound and movement and light eased back into the world again. She sat on a low stool, a wooden bowl of hot vegetable stew on her lap. Crouched beside her, the Copper King; winged and bathed in the light she had seen a few moments before.

The light of the Vigil.

"We took shelter in the Anthill," he was saying.

She fixed him with a steady look. Said softly, "One did not." Watched him take a slow breath. Yes, that had caught him unawares. He had not expected that.

"That, too, must wait until you have eaten and rested."

***

She stared grimly down at her cloak, covering all she owned; the satchel filled with her most precious grimoires, and her staff.

"Rest," she murmured, looking around at the quiet and comforting walls of the tent. "How in Agate's name am I supposed to rest? I have *so many questions.*"

The Vigil had saved him. Before he'd taken that leap into its embrace, he had looked as he always had to her eyes. No wings, no golden light. Just a man, standing alone and staring death in the face.

She had seen the wings once before, in the history that had startled her so greatly as she sought guidance from the sight stone. It had refracted unexpectedly, showing her that *this had happened before*, but with a different outcome. Paix had been there, had insisted the dark elemental had to be killed, and had revealed his wings before the astonished party, using them to fly up and destroy the final life-giving crystal that had been out of reach.

The dark elemental had targeted him, had taken hold of him, had shattered his wings and wounded him deeply, but a golden orb had appeared above Paix's head, showering him with golden light, and moments later his bloodied trident had struck the killing blow.

That golden light again, but still it had not come from him. Instead, it had come *to* him, as if to imbue him with enough strength to save himself.

"But that was another history," she whispered, resting her elbows on the table and letting her face fall into her hands, palming her eyes and rubbing them wearily. "You were not there this time. The final crystal was destroyed by Qazepha. How? *How* could your wings still be shattered, and mended with my ribbons… when you were not there?"

Lifting her head, she sighed. "Well, maybe this will make me tired enough to get some rest."

She called the sight stone to her palm, bringing it before her steady gaze.

"I would see where this strange light comes from," she whispered to it.

She saw the entire city of Paixandria crowded around the Vigil plaza, spilling out into the surrounding streets in the quiet deep night. Candles and lamps flickered in every window, and Paix stood before the Vigil, his hands and face raised to the skies.

Atop the tall spire, the strange moving pieces of sandstone - carved with such ancient words that they had almost faded from view - moved slowly around a

golden orb that began to glow with a warm, golden light that expanded outwards.

Xsia-Minai'Te had seen that orb before. So… it was the Vigil that had come to him in that other history?

The light seemed to fall like rain, great shimmering golden droplets cascading down around the Vigil, and around Paix. As it grew in intensity, he seemed almost bathed in it, though it did not soak into his clothing and hair.

It pooled in his cupped hands, held aloft before him, pouring through his fingers to spatter on the ground at his feet. Xsia-Minai'Te was entranced. Never before had she seen pure light behave like water.

And then, Paix spoke. The voice was his own, but warmer - if that were possible; his tone had always been gentle and calm - and more feminine.

"Your king, my prophet and keeper, will lead you from this place where I am embodied in stone, but I will be with you always. For as I am Love, so he is Love. Undying, your king is now your Vigil, and my light will shine through him. Go now with my Grace and my Love, to rest your heads one last time beneath these stars."

Slowly, the people dispersed, leaving Paix standing alone, his hands now lowered to his sides. The light drew in, until it surrounded only him and the Vigil. Still, it cascaded in those beautiful shimmering droplets as he stood, silent and unmoving, his eyes closed.

Xsia-Minai'Te watched as the light then moved away from the Vigil, focusing only on Paix. Now, it was not pouring over him, but through him. No longer did it splash in gentle drops on the ground, but every drop splashed onto him and into him.

And there, in that moment, was the glow from within. This was its source, its founding.

The great wings unfurled behind him, like those of an insect fresh from its cocoon; shivering at first, their faded ribbons trembling as the shattered bones assumed their full height.

Somehow… that other history had merged with this reality in this moment. This was beyond her knowledge or understanding and was a magic far greater than any she or her kind had accomplished.

The image in the sight stone faded, leaving the crystal dull and clouded and spent in her palm. It would need plenty of cool water and sunlight to recharge before she could next use it again, so she thanked it and let it go where it needed

to be in order to rest, smiling wearily at the little popping sound it made as it winked out of this existence.

She yawned hugely. Well, *now* she was tired. Seeing always took it out of her, and she got to her feet, shambling across the carpeted floor and sinking down on the bedroll.

As she pulled its soft cover over her, the words Paix had spoken lingered in her mind.

Undying, your king is now your Vigil, and my light will shine through him.

Sleep pulled her under, and she dreamed of ribbons and black shards, golden rainlight, and ancient sandstone-carved words that moved beyond worlds and time.

CHAPTER 62

The quiet of the room was deep, almost sonorous, with not even the sigh of a breeze through grass and leaves outside to mend it. A dead silence, like that of early morning snow before even the birds have awoken. A peaceful silence that spoke of a blanketing pre-dawn mist and heralded a beautiful day.

Pix lay on his bed, tears cooling and drying on his cheeks, staring at the cheerfully coloured little plant pot that sat across the room on his desk. Peeking up from it, delicate pink desert flowers reminded him of home, of heart, of what he had lost.

And yet… he smiled at the sight of them. Somewhere, in some other time, he had loved and been loved so sweetly, so tenderly that the endurance of that loss had almost torn him apart. And was it not a gift - an honour - to have loved so much that he now had to shoulder the grief of that loss?

He would shoulder it again if he could. Over and over, if it would gift him with precious moments like the ones it had shown him yesterday. He could still almost smell the warm scent of sha' spices and the smoky drift of incense, and he sat up slowly, stretching out his back and finally getting to his feet.

The book was still open on the desk, but the quill had moved from where he had left it, and the page had been turned to a fresh one. Familiar words, sprawled comfortably and neatly across the page:

He is coming.

"Not again," he murmured.

Onorait Paix wait. patience brings him

He turned, looking down at Malin, who sat in their basket, observing him placidly.

"Wait for what? Brings who?"

soon

Pix sighed. He might have known the answer would be a non-answer. With the way things were going, 'he' could be anybody. N'dachVeip. Mhenheli (oh stars, let it be Mhenheli). His other self from that other time (probably to ask him what *on earth* he'd done yesterday). Who the hell knew?

"I am so confused," he muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose before looking down at himself, still clad in familiar desert raiment. Despite the fact that he'd clearly slept in this clothing, it bore not a single crease, as linen so often did when rumpled.

patience brings him. trust

He crouched down to scritch behind Malin's ear. "You do love to speak in riddles," he murmured affectionately. "I suppose there's a reason for that, and I'm just to learn to be patient until it all reveals itself… right?"

Malin simply purred, butting their head against his hand.

He smiled. Nailed it.

"I'm going back up there today," he said. "Taking my toolkit and field notes with me. You want to tag along, or are you going to snooze here for a bit then go off and do cat things elsewhere, hm?"

Malin raised their rump and lowered their head, forepaws sliding to the edge of their basket and tail arching over their back as they stretched, then straightened and shook their head so hard that their ears made a flapping sound.

Pix grinned.

"I wish my back would let me stretch like that," he said, getting to his feet again and picking up his rucksack. He dumped it onto the bed and opened it, digging around inside to check his toolkit was still there. It was, and so he added his field notes book and a couple of sharpened pencils, before hooking the bag over one shoulder and leaving the room.

Outside, a thick mist had enveloped the ruins, leaving them raising spectral heads through the shroud. The air was cool and delightfully damp, and Pix turned to see what had been left in the niche this morning.

Incense, as always, its smoke dulled by the moisture in the air, but still imparting its smoky scent from where it had been pushed toward the back of the niche in an attempt to protect it from the weather. And a soft waxed linen wrap that steamed gently, adding its own moisture to the air. Within, a fresh, hot flatbread; sliced thinly and smeared with salted butter.

Leaning against the surround of the door, Pix slowly ate the flatbread, savouring every mouthful as he gazed out into the fog. A distant glimmer in the east hinted at the sun's valiant efforts to rise and disperse the damp and chilly air, but he rather hoped that it remained like this for a while. Although the heat of the savannah reminded him so much of the desert, it was a novelty to feel this cool, fresh air in such a place, and it made him miss his early morning autumn walks from the camper van to his local newsagent to pick up his morning papers and a coffee before heading off to the university.

With the flatbread finished, and after a respectful bow toward the statue - rising up through the mist, her sextant wing glistening with moisture - he turned and

began to make his way out of the city, toward the castle. Treading carefully, for the fog was thick on the ground and chilling his feet somewhat in the sandals, he walked slowly and purposefully.

Malin, surprisingly, was trotting along beside him, stopping every now and then to sniff at a leaf or a rock. This fact had settled a small note of concern deep inside Pix. Malin usually did not accompany him around the city these days; at least not when there was no possibility of danger, or of something untoward happening. Perhaps they were simply bored of snoozing in their basket or wandering the city alone? Or perhaps… they sensed something was going to happen.

Either way, Pix shoved that concern to the back of his mind as he laboured up the odd stride of the steps leading to the castle. Through the partially open portcullis and the massive barbican, through the silent open yard, into the ruined Great Hall - so strangely quiet now that he had experienced it several times in its heyday - down past the refectory where N'dachVeip had enveloped him in that tight bear hug of his, through the narrow doorway, down the corridors - their ceilings now half open to the skies - and into the broad hallway where the doors opened onto the hothouse.

Up ahead, the ruined throne room with its carved tree. Now faded and half broken, each branch was still seared in his memory as its true form but seeing them here in such a sorry state made him sigh.

He stopped in the middle of the throne room, looking to his left. The broken stained-glass windows had begun to throw pale rainbow patterns on the crumbling mosaics of the floor. The sun was beginning to win its battle against the fog, although the low clouds still drifted across the city far below.

There, in the back of the throne, what he had come for, what had drawn him back here today. A slender piece of sandstone, perhaps the length of his forearm, pitted with age but bearing the faint remembrance of ancient carvings. Its familiarity pulled at a warmth within him, and he approached it slowly.

"Mabra'Qiza,"[1] he murmured, reaching out toward it. His fingertips began to tingle; a soft and recognisable prickling that he had not felt in millennia. "Ahat'imadh, tazah sa'madiq?"[2]

A light began to glimmer around him, but he paid it no mind, his fingers drawn to the sandstone. They touched it lightly, grazing briefly over it before resting more confidently upon it, his palm settling, his fingers splaying.

Warmth burst out from him, light filled him, and he closed his eyes, lips parting in a shocked, shuddering exhale as time splintered around him, its shards reflecting and refracting a hundred flickering images as they spun around him.

Paixandria glowing in the deep night. A hot redstone flash. The clamour of bells. Doors of light on sandstone ground. Feet running. The Anthill's shelter. The Vigil's protection. The chaos. The silence. The utter, utter silence. The warmth of arms. The fierce kiss of lips. Dark eyes above him. Arms lifting him. Carrying him. The tenderness. The care. The love. His Chaperone. His people. His light. A journey. A long, sorrowful journey. Destruction and hope. Salvation. Old friends. New people. A dry savannah. A wide river. The planting of tents and of roots. The founding of stone. The founding of a nation. A copper crown upon the throne.

He opened his eyes, inhaling sharply, almost staggering with the overwhelm of what he had just witnessed. Light spun about him, dizzying, coalescing, shimmering around him, around the sandstone, around his hand, through his body. Far, far distant, he heard his own voice, though his lips did not move.

"My life was split in twain. I knew what I had done, and what I had not done. And I knew that if I was to save my people, I should not go. And so, I refused the invitation and advised Ser'Zhege to reconsider."

And then, equally distant but faintly familiar; a voice he had not heard for over two thousand years. A sweet voice that had once been a friend to him.

"Somewhere out there you have another history. There is another you, in another time, wandering the world with the burden of all that guilt. Maybe one day you will find him as you walk in your dreams, and you will be able to hold him, and he will know forgiveness and love."

Time shivered, spinning wildly, flickering and refracting as he gasped for breath in its midst.

My life was split in twain. My life was split in twain. My life—

And then, all was still. The light slowly faded, leaving him standing with his hand against cool sandstone, panting as if he had run all the way from the city to this room. At his feet, he could feel Malin's fur brushing against his ankles as they twined around his legs, rubbing their cheek against him as if to comfort him.

Slowly, staring at it, he took his hand away from the sandstone. His tarnished old copper ring, once dented and worn thin, now shone as brightly as if newly forged. It was still missing its emerald, but the dents had all gone, as had the delicate lightning streak that had been etched into it by the static from Malin's fur.

He turned to his right and began to walk, inexplicably drawn to the one place he desperately needed to see, no matter how it might appear in its current state. Up stone steps worn smooth by time and countless feet, through the open-air gallery - its pillars still intact - and up to the ornate wooden double doors.

He pushed gently on them, and they opened without a sound. He stepped inside.

Smooth polished stone greeted him. Dead leaves gathered in corners, clustering around the base of a heavy wooden desk to his left. Tall bookshelves stood sentinel behind the desk, their contents crumbling and broken; ash-dry paper unbound from curling leather casings.

Oh, my beloved books…

The frames of couches, their once lush cushions now faded and mouldering, sat to his right. Between them, a low table, atop which sat an old brazier, its iron feet sunk into the rotting wood and leaving behind rusting marks.

The bed frame - still intact - its mattress fallen through the broken supports to the floor, lay before him. His heart ached at his last memory of that bed, of the warmth and love and comfort it had held.

To its left a door hung partly open, offering a glimpse of a distant mountain range. Inexorably, he was pulled toward it, carefully opening the door enough that he could step out into the area beyond.

He stood at the entrance to an open balcony. Underfoot, not stone, but grass; a patch of garden in this massive stone edifice. Yes, stone bordered the balcony, but its broad centre was soft with green blades that tickled his feet as he stepped out onto it, entranced by the view.

He set his rucksack down by the wall and approached the edge, peeking over the stone balustrade. A steep wall fell away into the lush greenery of a darker forest, thick with oak trees that blended with old spruce toward the distant foothills of the mountains. It was as if the castle marked the end of the savannah's heat and had been built on the edges of this richer, darker land for a reason.

Or for a memory. He knew the direction this balcony faced. No matter where he was in the world, Paixandria was like a lodestone to his heart. This balcony faced the Jewel of the Desert.

He looked down.

The grass underfoot was not alone. It was sprinkled with hundreds of familiar flowers. Tiny pink desert flowers.

This is not a garden. This is a remembrance.

And then he saw it, nestled in a still bright copper stand at one end of the garden and glimmering in the morning sunlight.

A candle, brown as oft-remembered dark eyes, its flame burning soft and strong and true. Not a breath of wind touched it, for it barely moved, as if a photograph

rather than a real thing sat quietly and unobtrusively here amid the grass and pink petals.

Slowly, he walked toward it, but his step hesitated as he realised the grass was not even. He took one step back, his gaze darting over the shape of it. It was unmistakeable; a shape he had encountered hundreds - perhaps thousands - of times over the course of his archaeology career.

He sank to his knees.

The grass. The flowers. The candle. Still burning. An eternal flame.

This is not a garden.

This is a grave.

He reached out, fingertips brushing through the soft flowers and grass, that now familiar ache settling deep and heavy in his chest. Slowly, quietly, he lay himself down over the soft rise, his arms embracing it, the tears in his eyes reflecting the ever-burning flame of the candle.

“Maah’qab tazu alaa'qab,” he whispered. “Id'haye nahid.”[3]

[1] *Mabra’Qiza* = Blessed Vigil

[2] *Ahat’imadh, tazah sa'madiq?* = why are you here, treasured old friend?

[3] *Maah’qab tazu alaa'qab, id'haye nahid* = my heart cherishes your heart, for it knows we are one

CHAPTER 63

~ PREPARATIONS FOR A JOURNEY ~
{EARLY SPRING}

Early afternoon sunlight warmed the air as spring green bloomed all around the camp. A great bustle and noise had been in the air for several days; a hammering of nails into wood, a creaking of fresh-wrighted wheels, the trot of wild hooves and the encouraging calls of riders taming them, the reassuring low thud of redstone circuitry powering grain and root farms, the crack of a tree being felled here and there.

Sacks were filled with dried foodstuffs and stacked into carts fashioned from those fallen trees, and new tents and carpets were woven and rolled and tied. Leathersmiths fashioned from their stock warm boots for chilled feet, belts and straps to secure supplies, and repaired well-worn bags and satchels. Shepherds spun wool from the few sheep recovered from deep within the safety of the forest, and that wool in turn became coats and cloaks in the skilled hands of Paixandrian weavers.

Strolling through the busyness, lost in thought, Paix found himself stopped by a hand on his arm. Distracted, he looked up to see N'dachVeip grinning at him.

"I managed to tweak it so it's more economical with the bonemeal," he said, gesturing to the redstone farm he'd been elbow-deep in. "It only uses about a third of what it once did. Reckon your Guildmasters will be impressed?"

Paix looked the farm over, taking note of the tweaks his friend had made. "Indeed," he said, with a firm nod that N'dachVeip would be able to see. He turned to his friend with a smile. "We shall make an Adept of you yet."

N'dachVeip tilted his head, frowned, then shrugged, clearly not able to read those words on his lips. In response, Paix reached out for the small book that hung from his friend's belt, unhooking it and holding his hand out expectantly.

N'dachVeip chuckled, digging into his toolbelt for a stub of charcoal wrapped in grimy paper. "Hadita's idea," he said, handing the charcoal over and watching as Paix wrote into the book what he had just said. "She's been teaching me the hand language she uses with her father. Did you know he can't hear either?"

Glancing up, Paix smiled and nodded, returning to his writing.

"Right." N'dachVeip scratched the back of his neck, then caught up the edge of his red scarf from where it was flapping loosely in the spring breeze. When Paix held the book and charcoal out to him, N'dachVeip was staring at the redstone circuit,

quietly running his fingers over the tiny stitches that had mended the frayed and torn edges of the scarf, and clearly daydreaming.

Jolted out of his reverie by Paix tapping his arm, he gave a sheepish grin and accepted the book. Shoving the charcoal back into his toolbelt, he read the words Paix had written, and the tips of his ears matched his hair colour.

"You think so?" he asked, squinting up at Paix, doubtfully. "I mean… a Tinkerer's nothing compared to a Grand Master. I just… mess with stuff and sometimes it works. More often than not it doesn't."

Paix just folded his arms and gave him a look that made his ears go even redder.

"Well…" N'dachVeip mumbled. "I try my best, so if you think they'd…" He coughed, then cleared his throat. "Oh, I've been working on something else, too. Can you spare some copper? I had an idea for something that might help get my hearing back, even if only a bit."

"Of course," Paix said, enunciating his words clearly. "Take what you need."

N'dachVeip grinned. "Thank you. I realised yesterday, when I started working on this farm, that if I rest my elbow on it… hang on, let me show you."

Tugging off his ever-present black coat and tossing it over the glass cover of the circuit, he leaned against the farm, resting his elbow on the top of the piston guard. Then, he tilted his head until his palm cupped his ear, with the heel of his hand pressed on his cheekbone.

"I can not only feel it," he said, "but I can also *hear* it. It's like the sound transfers through the bones and into my ear, so I thought I'd—"

"—give yourself a headache by doing that to show everyone you meet about it," a voice finished, as Hadita firmly took N'dachVeip's hand away from his head.

"Here," she said, holding out a cup. "I made you some sha'. You've been out here for hours without eating or drinking, tinkering around with that farm."

Paix watched as N'dachVeip took the cup carefully with a murmur of thanks and a smile that was unlike any other smile he had ever seen him give. It was not his usual grin, nor even his triumphant beam when a project exceeded his expectations. No, this was a smile that appeared to be reserved only for Hadita, and as Paix looked, he saw that she was returning it.

Well now. If that is not the best kind of healing you could have, my old friend.

He made quiet note of the intricate embroidery around the cuffs of N'dachVeip's shirt; tiny, delicate stitches that marked it as Paixandrian threadwork, subtly white against the fabric of the shirt. His old red scarf - still firmly wrapped around his

neck - that had been tattered and torn when Paix had rescued him, now mended by the same careful stitches in a shade of red that matched the tiny flowers embroidered into the elegant long scarf Hadita wore draped over her head and around her shoulders.

Paix smiled.

If I needed a sign of hope for this journey, it is right before my eyes.

***

~ SUNLIGHT SEEN THROUGH TOWERING TREES ~
{EARLY SPRING}

It was just past dawn. Camels and horses had been watered, fed, and saddled. Carts had been hitched. The fast had been broken and the camp had been struck, swiftly and efficiently; tents brought down and folded, rugs rolled and tied, supports bundled and lashed against the sides of the carts. The q'ayadasi rode up and down the length of the caravan, ensuring that all riders were mounted and all those riding in carts were secure and comfortable.

At the head of the caravan, Paix, Mhenheli, Menet, and the lead q'ayadasi waited patiently. Behind them, Xsia-Minai'Te rode a sweet little pony found in the forest; a grey with a gentle temperament upon whom she had bestowed the name of Violet, on account of the hint of that colour in her coat. Further back in the caravan, N'dachVeip and Hadita sat together on the front seat of a long wagon pulled by two great Mythish draught horses. The roof of this wagon was fashioned of the same waxed fabric as the Paixandrian tents, and arched overhead to provide shelter from the elements for those inside; the old and infirm, and those nursing young infants.

The q'ayadasi returned to the front of the caravan, nodding to their leader, who nudged his camel toward the king.

"Onorait," he murmured. "All is ready."

Paix closed his eyes and breathed softly, calling upon the golden warmth that resided within him.

Go forward with joy and hope. My Grace and Love are with you always.

Opening his eyes, he nodded to Menet, and as the sound of a goat horn rang around the plains, the caravan set out. Early sunlight shimmered through the trees around them, glistening on the dew-damp grass underfoot and limning the distant hills.

***

~ EVERY COLOUR YOU ARE ~
{MID SPRING}

Travelling day and night, some sleeping in the saddle, some riding in shifts, some bedding down in carts, the caravan moved slowly and steadily through plains, skirting great forests, and traversing rolling hills. They stopped every week to encamp for a few days, that good sleep and greater refreshment than light travelling meals might be had, that scouts could explore the lands and bring back new plants and seeds, that the apothecaries could source fresh herbs, and that the q'ayadasi might replenish the caravan's stocks of water.

At almost every stop, they grew in number. In ones and twos, curious faces would peek from among trees, venturing out from ramshackle forest hovels, drawn by blazing campfires and the evening sounds of drums and singing and taletelling. One by one, the destitute found their way to each encampment. Wanderers and beggars entranced by the possibility of a fresh new start, and outcasts emboldened by hope; all were welcomed and fed, and a place was found for them around the fires.

Step by mile, field by river, hill by stone, the caravan became a moving city; a great host of humanity all heading in one direction, all seeking a place to call home. They settled briefly now and then, learning each other's fables and tales, teaching each other their languages, sharing their skills and recipes and songs.

Women sat together and talked and sang as they stitched; delicate Paixandrian embroidery, intricate Overgrown lacework, and comforting Gilded wool craft brought together over cups of hot sha' and cooled honey wine.

Hadita spent many an hour sewing amid these chatty groups, her industrious hands slowly fashioning two sets of clothing of plain linen and dyed, stitched in many bright colours with flowers, animals, and birds. Skirts and sashes, breeches and tunic, and lastly a short black cape and a hat; both in the Grym style - taught to her by Dav'rEchni, a sprightly old woman who had survived the Eastvale blast while rummaging in her cellar for something to eat in the dead of night - and stitched with intricate red detailing and love.

***

~ THE HEALING PLACE ~
{MID SPRING}

"Here now," Menet grumbled as he rescued his still half full cup from a curious paw. "You not feeding this little thing enough?"

Q'alamet chuckled. "Of course I am. She's just inquisitive, and she's got a good nose for food. Or, in this case, for honey."

Menet watched Q'alamet curve his hand beneath the young cat's belly and lift her up, safely away from the low table in the tent. She protested with a mew, her back legs stretching awkwardly out to find purchase on something, which they eventually did as Q'alamet rested her in his lap.

Immediately, she tried to hop back toward the table, but he continued to pull her back with infinite patience until eventually she gave up, resting her forepaws against his chest and stretching out.

"How's the face and arm?" Menet asked, his tone softer than it ever had been when Q'alamet was a young guard under his guidance. He had kept a close watch over this lad, whom he still considered his responsibility, and every bit of progress had been encouraging.

At first, Q'alamet had veiled his face, partly to protect it from the sun but partly from shame at his disfigurement. But slowly, as the wounds healed, and his confidence grew - aided in part by the mischievous kitten he had rescued from the maelstrom at the last moment - he had discarded the veil and decided to show his face for what it was.

His attention still almost wholly focused on the cat, Q'alamet murmured, "I have feeling again in parts of my face, but not in others. My arm is still mostly numb, but the burns have healed well."

Menet nodded. "Bristles are coming back," he said approvingly, with a gesture toward where a light, if patchy, beard dusted the damaged skin of Q'alamet's cheek and jaw. "Itchy?"

Q'alamet grinned, and it stretched his face a little oddly on the burned side. "Thankfully, no. I only have some feeling returned there, so it's not been plaguing me with itching. I'll just be grateful if it grows in fully. Just… to cover some of it up."

"Yer chin was as bald as a baby's backside even before that," Menet teased. "A beard suits ye. May it keep growing well, lad."

“You think the Vigil would listen to a prayer for bristles?” Q’alamet snorted, as the cat balanced on his leg, eyeing Menet thoughtfully. She crouched down, and her backside began to wiggle.

Menet chuckled. “I’m sure she’s listened to prayers for much— *Hey!*”

Q’alamet burst out laughing as the cat clung to Menet’s arm, claws digging in for dear life as she stared down at the cup.

“What did you call her again?” Menet groused, shielding the cup with his other hand, trying to protect the rest of his honey wine before it splattered all over the rugs on the ground.

“Lucky.”

“Hmf. She’ll be lucky if she gets any of this wine!”

“C’mere,” Q’alamet said affectionately, as he prised Lucky’s claws one by one from the wool of Menet’s coat and cradled her against him. He kissed the top of her head and sat back down, holding her against him as Menet hastily gulped down the rest of his honey wine then reached into his pockets to pull out a battered old pack of cards.

“Fancy a game of Yah'taqudh?” he asked, with a grin.

***

~ LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING ~
{LATE SPRING}

The meadow glittered in the gathering dusk. Lanterns had been lit and set all around, hung from tall copper posts that had been pushed into the ground. Soft green grass dotted with bright flowers gave out a sweet, gentle scent underfoot as the caravan gathered together under the evening sky.

A short way distant, the city of tents glowed with bright warmth, a new jewel here in new lands. The campfires had not yet been lit, but soon would crackle their cheerful sparks up toward the stars.

A group of Paixandrian women gathered in a semicircle, the lanterns behind them glimmering off the copper embroidery on their robes; the best they owned worn for this occasion. Each had been taught by Dav’rEchni how to sing in the Grym style, and their clear voices rose in an achingly beautiful and solemn polyphony as Paix stepped into the semicircle, copper crown atop his head and regalia cloak draped from his shoulders.

From his right, N'dachVeip slowly walked toward him, flanked by Zhenchra and Ghembro. N'dachVeip's face was a picture of emotion. He clearly felt a bit awkward in his formal clothes; the breeches, tunic, and short cloak shimmering with exquisite embroidery and delicate copper beads in the lamplight, and the hat atop his head set slightly askew, for it had to accommodate a copper band around the back of his head that hooked over his ears and ended in two moulded copper pads both in front of and behind his ears.

There were tears in his eyes as he stopped in front of Paix, for - because of that strange copper contraption - N'dachVeip could *hear* the beauty of the voices that rang across the meadow.

Paix turned to his left, as a small group of women entered the lamplight: two in front of and two behind a fifth, who was heavily veiled. Slowly, they walked toward Paix and N'dachVeip, the two in front touching their fingertips to their foreheads as they approached their king; a gesture that he returned.

The escort turned inward, each reaching for a corner of the thick veil that covered their companion. They raised it with great care, so as not to disturb her garments, and as they gently folded it Paix glanced at N'dachVeip, whose eyes were now not only welling with tears but also lit with wonder and love.

Quietly, with steps so tiny that it appeared she glided instead of walked, Hadita moved toward them. Her skirts glittered with bright copper beads worked into colourful embroidery, her sashes swung gently in the evening air, her silken veil was bordered with a fringe of delicate lacework, her arms were festooned with thin copper bracelets, and her copper earrings chimed gently as she moved. She touched her fingertips to her forehead, the bracelets shimmering down her arms as she did so; their music audible over the singing.

Paix returned the gesture with a smile and held out one hand toward her. She placed her hand in his palm, and he drew her gently toward N'dachVeip, whom she turned to face.

Paix held out his other hand, and - after a moment of simply staring rapt at Hadita - N'dachVeip placed his hand in it. Paix drew both their hands together until they rested, palms together, fingers interlaced, then he let go.

As the beautiful song rang around the meadow's deepening night and the entire caravan watched on, lit by the lanterns, N'dachVeip spoke low in his mother tongue; the tender vow voiced by the Rachzem folk at their weddings. Moments later, in her soft voice, Hadita responded with her own vow in the same tongue, having been taught the words by Dav'rEchni.

The voices faded and a moment of silence hung in the air, though it seemed as though they still rang out for a little while. Gently, Paix guided both N'dachVeip and Hadita to hold each other's hands in the simpler way that Paixandrians did before their own vows.

The voices rose again, softer this time; a traditional Paixandrian melody, the slow and almost mournful sound of the desert touching this place of green and flowers and cool evening air.

This time, Hadita spoke first, her face raised to look directly at N'dachVeip, her eyes sparkling in the lamplight.

"Maah'qab tazu alaa'qab, id'haye nahid."

N'dachVeip licked a nervous tongue over his upper lip. Paix had spent patient hours with him, guiding him through the pronunciation until it was perfect, urging him to take the words slowly if he thought he might stumble.

But instead, N'dachVeip took a breath and spoke with a confidence that lit Paix's heart with happiness for his friend.

"Maah'qab tazu alaa'qab, id'haye nahid."

Paix smiled, murmuring, "Mabra'Qiza yahme, a-da'nal taraq."[1]

N'dachVeip looked at him, questioningly, as Hadita stifled a giggle.

Paix chuckled. "Yes," he murmured, low enough that only the two in front of him could hear. "That's as complicated as a Paixandrian vow ceremony gets. Go on."

Carefully, N'dachVeip lifted Hadita's veil, and Paix stepped back, watching with a smile as Hadita raised her face to receive her husband's kiss with a full heart.

***

As the night drew on and the caravan gathered around the campfires, food and drink was served in plenty, for such a celebration was the first they had had, and a sign of good fortune was cause for high spirits.

Paix had changed out of his ceremonial raiment, relishing the chance to wear something a little less regal but nonetheless more formal. It had been a long time since he had attended a wedding in the capacity of a guest - though he had also been the celebrant for this one - but he wore his favourite long scarf draped about his shoulders; a beautiful example of Paixandrian threadwork and beadwork that had been gifted to him upon his accession. Beneath it, his favourite silken long tunic in a soft shade of dark gold. Beside him, even Mhenheli had draped a scarf atop his black robes, his a simpler one but no less beautifully

made. Paix had never seen it before, much less seen his Chaperone wearing anything but the familiar black robes, and it warmed his heart to see Mhenheli looking so joyful, so different.

Around the campfire, the honey wine flowed freely as N'dachVeip and Hadita sat together, both enjoying the chatter and laughter around them. And then, Ghembro and Zhenchra approached the fire, the former holding a short flute and the latter carrying a stringed instrument and a bow.

"As is the Mythish tradition!" Zhenchra bellowed, as all heads turned toward him. "After a wedding, there is food and drink, and right well have we had that!" He placed one foot atop an empty stool and rested the instrument against his shoulder. He tapped the bow across the strings a couple of times, then pressed his fingertips to the instrument's neck.

"But after that, we dance!"

He glanced at Ghembro, they both nodded, and the bow hit the strings in a frenetic and joyful dance, as the flute piped out an infectious jig. Within seconds, those around the campfire were clapping along to the fast rhythm, laughing and stamping their feet on the ground in time.

"Up with ye two!" Zhenchra beamed at the newlyweds, and N'dachVeip grinned at Hadita, holding out a hand to her.

"I think I love these people," Mhenheli leaned in to murmur close to Paix's ear, as a space cleared around the newlyweds. Hadita spread her skirts and curtseyed to her husband, and N'dachVeip bowed to his wife. A moment later, as the music whirled around into another turn, Hadita stepped into the elegant dance typical of Paixandrian women, giggling uncontrollably as N'dachVeip kicked up his heels and danced a merry capering jig around her.

"They are named Grym, but their joy is never far below the surface," Paix chuckled, as both he and Mhenheli clapped along with everyone else, feet stamping on the floor in time with the rhythm, laughing as they lost themselves in the delight of this evening full of hope and happiness.

[1] *Mabra'Qiza yahme, a-da'nal taraq* = The Vigil's Grace holds you, and the stars shine upon you

CHAPTER 64

HOW LITTLE WE NEED TO BE HAPPY
{EARLY AUTUMN}

The Great Caravan moved slowly, inexorably, ever onward. Through dense forests and across broad plains, camels and horses plodded and wheels turned. Wherever a large vista of flatter land presented itself ahead of them, they set up camp and rested awhile. Never more than a few days, as the year was already past its midpoint and heading into cooler months, and both Paix and the q'ayadasi were anxious to find warmer lands before winter set in, but the encampments provided a pause in the endless motion and were gratefully embraced by those who - unlike Paixandrians - were not possessed of nomadic ancestry.

A distant sparse jungle proved a welcome sight through Paix's spyglass as he rode a short way out from the camp late one afternoon. It hinted at the warmth he had hoped to find, and as he waited for the sun to dip low enough for the stars to become visible, he scanned the horizon.

Less than a week ago, they had narrowly avoided a large swamp, its watery ground tangled with thick roots that were clogged with mud and shaded by a dense canopy of weeping, drooping dark leaves that dripped in the dank air within. The detour it had forced them to take led them across a river, and they were much exercised to find a shallow enough spot across which they could safely ford. Upon the river's far bank, though, were the rolling plains they were now encamped upon.

Dotted with small stands of oak and apple trees and thickets of rangy bushes and dusted with a glory of wildflowers whose heads nodded lazily toward the low afternoon sun, it was home to roaming herds of shaggy ponies who ventured curiously and fearlessly close to the caravan.

As leaves crisped and curled and yellowed, drifting down from sparse branches to carpet the grass with gold, laughter rang around the camp as the placid little ponies trotted good-naturedly around with a child or two on their backs, watched over by the q'ayadasi, each of whom had one eye for a sturdy beast that might join the caravan and the other eye on the safety of their young charges.

Friendly donkeys accepted windfall apples picked up from beneath the trees, nosing into hands and pockets in search of treats, and distant flocks of sheep settled like sleepy clouds on the hillsides as the gentle lowing of cows travelled through the deepening gloom of dusk.

Far, far to his left, Paix could make out through the lens of the spyglass tall towers and peaks of red stone, curiously flattened at the top as if sliced off by a sharp knife. They looked dry and hot and gave him even more hope that he was heading in the right direction.

He lowered the spyglass, closing it and tucking it into the small pack before him on the saddle. Tilting his head back, he gazed up at the sky, quick eyes darting to find familiar groups of stars. They were lower in the firmament than he was accustomed to, but even here - far from home - they were enough to guide him. With the red land to his left, he would strike a course across the plains and toward the jungle.

He closed his eyes, letting the starlight bathe his face, and breathed in the warm ochre scent of the autumn air, damp and smoky, redolent with spores and fungi and dried leaves dappled with mould that heralded the coming death of the old year.

“We need to find so many new names,” a familiar voice said quietly, as he heard the chink of small copper-framed lenses being moved around and in front of each other, a little way to his left.

He smiled, not opening his eyes.

“Indeed, we do,” he murmured. “I wonder if the peoples of these lands, whoever they are, have their own names for what moves above us.”

“And how might those names differ from those we would give them,” G'tehm ah-Shker replied, as Paix opened his eyes and lowered his head, turning to look across at him.

The astrologer was peering through his lenses, which he was resting upon a peculiar contraption that sat before his camel’s saddle; a sort of counterbalanced brace that kept the lenses steady even if the camel moved. Paix wouldn’t be surprised if that wasn’t the work of N’dachVeip, for it was the kind of thing he liked to set his hand to. If a problem needed solving, or there was a better way to do something, one could count on a Tinkerer to mull it over until their hands grew tired of their mind doing all the work.

“I ponder often,” G'tehm ah-Shker mused, focusing on his lenses, “what shapes other peoples see in the stars, how they might group them into meaning something only to them. Where we see the Ibis, do they see the Swan? Or do they see not a bird but a plough, or a horse. Or do they see the gods themselves? It’s enough to keep me up at night.”

He looked askance at Paix with a little grin tweaking at one side of his mouth.

“Which,” he added, “is no bad thing, when this is my profession, eh?”

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SILVER MOON OVER SLEEPING STEEPLES
{LATE AUTUMN}

The jungle had proved large enough, dense enough, and hilly enough that upon reaching it Paix realised he would be forced to navigate around it. Moving eastward, the caravan had traversed the dwindling plains, following the course of a wide river that bordered a dry strip of grassland to their right.

Through a broad, flower-speckled meadow - where they spent a few days encamped - and then onward, heading west once more. To their left, a valley sloped down to a clear and deep freshwater lake that narrowed into a river that the caravan hugged like a welcoming friend.

Though the low angle of the sun and the position of the stars told Paix that winter was looming ever closer, the air was still reasonably mild, even as a majestic stand of snow-capped peaks slowly passed by to their right; a thing that many Paixandrians marvelled at the sight of, for few had ever seen a peak taller than the Anthill, and scarce a single one had ever seen snow in their lifetimes.

Their final encampment was once again in a wide plains, though by now the trees were stripped of their colourful autumn glory and reached bare branches toward the sky in search of spring’s return.

Paix stood at the water’s edge one afternoon, looking across the river that stretched out to his left and broadened into a deep lake once more to his right. He had come to realise now that the land on the opposite bank was the same that he had seen several weeks ago from the encampment in the meadow, and that the river was but a tributary of this broad lake, surrounding a tall central island.

“Perfect place for a bridge, that.”

Paix turned as N’dachVeip walked up beside him and nodded toward the lake.

“I mean,” his friend continued, “great big island, surrounded by water. Easy to defend, plenty of food in the lake.” He looked across at Paix. “What d’you say? How about that for a place to settle?”

Paix turned to look across the lake at the island. He pursed his lips thoughtfully.

“The air is still a little too cool here,” he murmured. “Winter would not be easy for us if we were not well enough established.”

N'dachVeip sighed. "Paix, we need to put down some roots soon. Winter is on its way. Even if it's only a temporary camp while we wait out the colder weather, there's enough trees around here that we could build a palisade to keep out the worst of it, and also fuel the fires all season long."

"There is also the somewhat urgent problem of bridging that river in the first place," Paix said, offering his friend an apologetic smile as he tugged his coat collar up to ward off the approach of cool evening air. "I see no way of safely fording the water at any point, and we have not the time to build a bridge, nor the knowledge of how deep those waters lie. I will not risk it."

N'dachVeip walked over to him, prodding at the collar and grinning up at him. "Ah now, see, if you were Rachzem you'd have a nice red scarf to keep your neck warm while you pondered through the evening. C'mon; I see the campfires being lit over there. Let's warm up and get something to eat."

***

Morning brought a change in the weather. A thick mist had settled over the encampment, drifting lazily across the ground and between the tents, and creating a damp, shimmering glow around each lantern and crackling campfire.

Mhenheli hurried into the king's tent with his hands full; a ceramic pot of steaming sha' in his right, and a linen wrap of warm flatbread and stewed sweetened apples in his left. These he placed on the low table as Paix looked up from the map he had been perusing.

Seeing his Chaperone wrapped in a thick cloak and rubbing his hands together as he sat down to serve the sha' into copper cups, Paix frowned.

"Is it *that* cold outside?" he asked.

Mhenheli nodded, as he held out a filled cup to his master.

"A thick fog as far as the eye can see." He looked up and smiled. "Which, admittedly, is not very far; perhaps about ten paces, but little more. Only the fires are visible, and the sky is as grey and gloomy as the mist."

Paix took the cup with a nod of thanks and returned his attention to the map, his gaze flicking over the areas he had recorded. If they had truly come almost full circle around the island, then that must mean the jungle would be on the opposite bank at some point soon, for they had reached the point where the river flared out into a lake, as it had just past the meadow.

“If I am correct about this,” he murmured, tapping the map with one fingernail as he took a sip of sha’, “then we shall soon be upon warmer lands once again.”

“We cannot remain here as the year is turning, or so the q’ayadasi were saying as I passed them last night around the campfire,” Mhenheli said as he carefully unwrapped the linen to reveal two steaming flatbreads and a little covered pot. He lifted the lid of the pot and stirred its contents. The delicious sweetness of hot stewed and spiced apple drifted into the air.

Paix nodded in agreement. “The land is too open here,” he said. “We need either warm lands or sheltered ones. There is a dense patch of forest up ahead and to our right, so that may be an option if we clear some of the trees, but I think—“ He traced with his fingertip a line forward into an empty part of the map just ahead from the small campfire he had drawn to denote their current position, “—I shall scout ahead a little today. I am certain that those warmer lands lie ahead of us, here.”

Mhenheli held out one of the flatbreads, which he had split and spooned some of the spiced apple into.

“It may be wise to strike the camp and simply head in that direction,” he murmured, as Paix took the bread. “We are running out of time and should not tarry overlong in any place. I fear that the fog outside is a warning from the land.”

Paix sat back, taking a bite from the flatbread as he watched Mhenheli spoon some of the apple into his own serving. He did not miss the fact that his Chaperone had not removed his cloak, and indeed his own coat collar was up, though the brazier glowed warmly in the centre of the tent. This was not good weather for such dwellings.

“I think that both you and the q’ayadasi are right,” he murmured. “Once the fog clears, we shall strike the camp and move on.”

***

The fog refused to clear, and so the camp was struck amid its damp and miserable moisture. The Great Caravan set out once more, camels and horses plodding steadily along, the guiding calls of the q’ayadasi deadened by the encompassing mist. Overhead, the sun was a hazy smear of dull yellow; not strong enough - though trying valiantly - to burn away the mist.

During the early afternoon, however, Paix noticed that the mists were dissipating. Glancing back, he saw that - though the caravan trailing far behind him still toiled through the dampness - up ahead the view was clearer.

“The air feels warmer,” Menet remarked, and almost immediately both Mhenheli and the q’ayadasi murmured their agreement, as Paix reached for the spyglass in his camel’s pack. Still riding slowly onward, he brought the glass to his eye and looked ahead.

He smiled.

“What do you see?” Mhenheli asked.

“Dry grass,” he replied. “Soft hills covered in dry grass and stands of what look like acacia trees. A warm grassland.”

“Oh, thank the stars,” Mhenheli breathed. “I can barely feel my fingers. How far off is it?”

“If we keep this pace… we shall reach it by sunset.”

***

As the promised dry grasslands and angular trees came closer into view, the air grew warmer. The chill of the fog that had clung to the caravan was long gone, and Mhenheli could feel his fingers prickling and tingling as warmth returned to them. Even the camels seemed happier, their ears perked forward as they walked steadily onward.

“Quartz and Chrysocolla!” came a relieved voice just behind him, accompanied by the lively thud of hooves as Xsia-Minai’Te drew her pony alongside. “I can feel my toes again!”

“And I my fingers,” Mhenheli said with a chuckle as she grinned up at him.

“I will admit,” she murmured, glancing at Paix, who rode a little way ahead of them, Menet by his side. “I was beginning to get a little bit worried. Then I told myself that it’s Paix leading us, and if that man does not have an innate sense of direction, then nobody does.”

Mhenheli simply smiled, keeping his remembrance of his master’s furrowed brow to himself. He knew the king well enough to read signs of concern upon his face, no matter how swiftly they were masked.

“I should imagine you desert folk have been feeling chilled these past few weeks,” Xsia-Minai’Te was saying. “Woollen coats and cloaks are all very well, but you can’t beat a fur-lined cloak for warmth. My one regret is that I brought only leather boots with me!”

Mhenheli gave her a rueful look. “My body is not suited to cold weather,” he admitted. “Being born and raised in a desert leaves one feeling chilled to the bone in weather that your people might consider pleasant and mild.”

“Oh, shared body heat is a wonderful way to keep warm, though,” Xsia-Minai’Te said. “Take it from someone who lived atop a mountain all her life. You and his majesty over there should have snuggled up together. That would have kept you both nice and cosy!”

And with that, she shot him a sly little grin, laughed, and spurred her pony forward to join Paix and Menet, leaving Mhenheli behind and suddenly feeling *uncomfortably* warm.

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As the sun dipped low in the sky, casting late afternoon warmth across the dry grassland, Paix brought his camel to a halt beneath a stand of acacia trees, his gaze fixed on a tall cliff in the distance. A low rise of earth led up to it on one side, but the cliff fell away steeply on all other sides. In the far distance, beyond the grassland, a thick forest lay beneath the shelter of tall mountains. At their foothills, the trees were bare-limbed oaks but rising up the lower slopes they became tall pines that held onto their green; rich and dark against the snow-dusted rock.

Mhenheli walked his camel up to the king’s side, where two q’ayadasi and Menet also waited, looking around them, clearly grateful for the familiar warmth afforded by these dry lands. He watched his master closely, watched those blue eyes as they remained fixed upon the distant cliff, watched as they seemed to look far, far distant; beyond anything that was visible to anyone else.

“This would be a good place to—“ Menet began, but he snapped his mouth shut as Mhenheli held up a hand. Then he, too, looked at the king, and recognised what was happening.

The remainder of the caravan had begun to catch up, slowing to a halt behind them. A soft murmuring arose, a questioning of encampment, a gladness for warmth. And still the king looked far into the distance, beyond the world in which he stood, seeing what would come and what would be.

Eventually, his eyes cleared, and he turned to Xsia-Minai’Te. Lowly, so that only she and Mhenheli could hear him, he murmured, “What does your sight tell you?”

Mhenheli watched as Xsia-Minai’Te called a small, faceted crystal globe to her hand. It shimmered and glittered in the final rays of the sunset as she gazed upon it.

“I see magic,” she whispered. “I see time.”

She looked up at Paix. “And I see home.”

Paix nodded, turning to Mhenheli with a smile.

“We are here.”

CHAPTER 65

With his belly warmed by honey wine, Pix leaned back against the trunk of the stunted old tree growing just outside the hill where his room lay hidden. Overhead, the sun had just passed its zenith, its light speckling down through the sparse leaf canopy, and Pix's gaze was fixed and lost amid the flames of the campfire that he'd kindled and kept fuelled for the past forty or so minutes.

Atop the flames - suspended from a frame that he'd fashioned from sturdy wood - hung a metal cooking pot. It had served him well over the past few months, as had the seeds and seed potatoes that had accompanied it in the chest within his room. He had planted and tended them diligently, and they now bore results in the form of the hearty stew that bubbled in the pot. Malin had provided the rabbit meat - freshly hunted earlier that morning - and Pix's stomach growled in anticipation as he stared into the fire and daydreamed.

Much though the castle called to him, there were other buildings he wanted to investigate. Chief among them was the large manor house down the road to his left. With its ornate weathered copper roof and elegant portico and pillars, he now knew it had been N'dachVeip's home in the time when he, too, had been here.

He heaved a faint sigh. Physics had never been a strong point for him, so if this was a result of splitting time and dimensions then it would be out of his wheelhouse. But he suspected there was far more to it than something that could be explained away by equations. Something magical. Something… *other*.

He had made his peace with letting things happen as they would, but that was before he had spent a day in his own past and realised that he'd had a life here that he had no recollection of; a life that had happened in another time. It was as if he'd doubled back on his life and re-lived part of it, and that - in that re-living - he had changed everything.

He had both fled Paixandria, wracked with guilt and shame, only to watch as the maelstrom destroyed his city, his people, his everything… and he had remained there to *save* his people, before leading them to found this ancient city he now worked and lived in.

A'lumiya

He blinked, brought back to reality.

"A'lumiya?" he murmured, reaching for his field notes and a stub of pencil. He scratched down the word and looked at it.

"Hm."

He added the apostrophe where it felt right; for *a'lum* was the Paixandrian for 'people'. But *~iya* as a suffix made no sense to him. He stared at it for several minutes.

People… something.

With another short sigh, he set down the book and pencil and sat forward. Wrapping his hand in a cloth to protect it from the heat of the metal handle, he carefully lifted the cooking pot down from the fire and removed its lid. The meal within was cooked to perfection, the rabbit meat on the verge of falling apart and the vegetables beautifully soft.

He spooned a generous helping into a wooden bowl and set the lid back on the pot before leaning back against the tree. The spoonful of stew steamed, even in the hot savannah air, and he blew gently over it a couple of times before venturing a mouthful.

Oh, stars… it reminded him of the hearty stews that he'd been served in Eastvale when he'd visited there on trade and courtesy visits. Rachzem folk were fond of simple fayre; thick stews brimming with root vegetables and freshly caught meat, cooked until it practically melted in the mouth. They called this kind of meal *ves'miya* - 'everything together' - for indeed it was everything a body needed, in one bowl.

It wasn't until his third mouthful that Pix looked back down at the book.

Ves'miya, everything together. Ves', everything. Miya, together. A'lum, people… wait a minute!

"*A'lum* and *miya? A'lumiya?* A portmanteau?" he muttered. "I mean, it would make sense. If both Paixandrian and Rachzem folk lived here together, and for many years, they might coin new words and phrases based on their languages blended together. A'lumiya might be such a word."

He turned his head toward the statue, gazing thoughtfully at it.

"A'lumiya," he murmured. "People together?" And then he almost dropped the bowl.

"Was that the *name* of this place? Was this city called A'lumiya?"

The only response to that was a warmth deep within him, and he couldn't tell if that was just the honey wine or something else; something that touched him but rarely. But the word had come to his mind in the soft resonance of the Vigil, so it had to be right. And people, together, had built this place.

He had a name, finally, for his home.

***

The manor house faced the hill that led up to the castle, its tall and imposing entrance bounded by several pillars. Once white, they were dusted with the pale green lichen so prevalent in this area. Shrubs and leaves clambered up the stone walls, reaching for the weathered copper roof.

Three long, shallow steps led up to the porch, and on either side of it a low veranda spread, bearing ramshackle wooden planters nestled up against the walls. The one to the left held only dirt and a few dead bushes, but a bright little shrub had found a foothold in the one to the right, raising cheerful green leaves that would catch the sun every morning.

An effort had been made to create a little garden between the broken cobbled pathway and the building. Dry shrubs bordered the inside turn of the road, and a small tree bearing ochre-yellow croak burp fruit grew in the limited space allowed to it.

To the right, a strange stone brick shape arose, and Pix made his way toward that first of all, standing on tiptoes to peer down into it. Something smooth and hard and black met his gaze, and it took him a moment to recognise it as solidified lava.

He smiled. Trust N'dachVeip to have a small foundry outside his house.

The front doors were nowhere to be seen, and so he stepped inside this place that had once been home to his dear friend.

The lower floor comprised mostly one large open space, with a walled off area to the right, into which an old wooden door was set. Dust covered the floor and gathered in the corners and against the inner walls, mingling with the dry crispness of long-dead leaves.

Across by the far wall, a large fireplace showed signs of frequent use; its flue blackened, and its hearth still containing stones and burned nubs of firewood. An iron bar stretched across it, from which there hung a large cooking pot, and hanging from an old iron nail to one side he could see a flat pan akin to a skillet.

A few old pieces of furniture lay broken and mouldering, in a worse condition the closer they were to the open entrance. Against the left side wall, a heavy wooden cabinet stood solid and tall; its sheer weight and bulk clearly giving it an advantage against time and the elements. As Pix approached it, he smiled at the beautiful smooth copper knobs on the cabinet's doors, now aged to verdigris, but once they would have shone in golden lamplight.

The doors opened easily, and he moved them into a safe resting position before turning to examine what lay within.

Relics of lives lived sat before him on the shelves, and he held his breath, his throat stopped up with emotion as he reached carefully for them.

The first thing he touched was a smooth box, fashioned of oak wood and polished to a soft shine. Its clasp - like all other copper metals here - was weathered and green, but it still moved with ease when encouraged to open. Within - oh, stars, what treasures! - a myriad of things any seamstress would recognise. Buttons of wood and bone and copper, hand-turned spools still bearing thread that had retained perfect colours in the darkness of the box; bright blues and teals and reds, deep black, and even delicate twined copper thread. A slender case of needles - fine ones fashioned of copper, and thicker ones of smooth bone - and even an exquisite little pair of copper shears for cutting thread, all lay atop the buttons and threads.

There were books here, too, but he dared not touch them just yet, recalling how fragile his old books had been in the castle. And atop one stack of old books, there lay two things that made him smile while bringing a tear to his eye at the same time. A worn old pair of leather goggles with red lenses, and a strange copper contraption identical to the one he had seen N'dachVeip wearing when he walked in the past.

On the shelf below, a stack of folded wool blankets, and tucked to one side of those a handful of small wooden objects. Crouching down, Pix reached for one to take it out.

The by now familiar shift of time moved around him, and he pulled his hand away before he could pick up the object, as the doors silently re-appeared in their closed position. Turning, he saw the front doors of the house - now in place - fling themselves wide open as N'dachVeip strode in, his black coat flapping behind him, and with a huge grin on his face. Under one arm, he carried a small red-haired boy, who was giggling and trying to squirm out of his grasp. Two more boys, both a little older than the one he was carrying, pelted in after him, running rings around him as he laughed.

Across the room, a brown-haired Paixandrian woman turned from the hearth - where she'd been bent over the cooking pot, which emitted steam and the smell of something delicious that reached even down the ages to Pix's nose - and smiled at the new arrivals. Her belly was swollen, clearly bearing a brother or sister for the three little rowdies who were causing a miniature riot in her house, and she was wiping her hands on a cloth.

“Now then,” she said warmly, “the adventurers return! Where have you been today, my boys?”

N’dachVeip finally let down his captive, who made a run for the cabinet where Pix was crouched. Moving through Pix as if he were but a ghost, the lad threw open the cabinet doors and grabbed hold of one of the wooden objects - which turned out to be a little toy minecart - followed by a fistful of tiny rails.

“Ota[1] took us to the mines!” he beamed. “We rode the carts, like this: *nyeooooooom!*” He swooshed the little wooden minecart toy around in the air like it was on a rollercoaster, and Pix couldn’t help but grin as he watched.

“You took them to the mines?” The woman raised both eyebrows at N’dachVeip, who had walked over to her and slid an arm around her waist.

He smiled at her. “Only just to the entrance. The safe part. You should have seen them, so excited to ride the minecarts around. They reminded me so much of me when my ota took me to the mines in Eastvale.”

He bent his head to press a kiss to her lips, and his hand rested gently against her belly.

“How has your day been, zhavi?[2] Want me to finish the meal while you rest?”

She nodded with a grateful smile, letting him lead her toward a low and comfortable couch, upon which she sank while N’dachVeip shuffled cushions into place and made her as comfortable as he could.

“Tiring,” she murmured, gently patting her belly. “Dav’rEchni agrees that this little one must be almost ready to bless us with their presence, so our home is about to get even louder.”

N’dachVeip grinned at her. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. You rest there and I’ll finish getting the meal ready.” He glanced over at the two slightly older boys, who were engaged in a spirited wrestling match just inside the door. “Help your ah’lamah out, boys, and get the table ready.”

The vision faded, leaving Pix crouched before the open cabinet with a fond smile on his face. He reached out to pick up the little wooden minecart, setting it on the palm of his hand and gazing down at it.

Even here, even now, down through the centuries, he could feel the love that had echoed through this place. A big, riotous family that grew year upon year; Rachzem and Paixandrian in this beautiful city of people, together.

“A’lumiya,” he murmured. “I’m so blessed that you let me find you and discover that I helped to create you.”

[1] *ota* = papa
[2] *zhavi* = cherished

CHAPTER 66

Journal of Onorait Paix al-Lareiff
vol.1

A'LUMIYA - CONSTELLATION OF THE SHEAF - YEAR 1

We are settled now through the passing of eight phases of the moon. Our immediate priority has been housing. Whilst tents suffice for the majority, sturdier settlement is needed for those with infants, and for the infirm. The masons have quarried near to the lake; good stone found there, they tell me, and they have worked it fast and well. The first small dwellings are now complete, with all hands ready and eager to assist in the building thereof.

Construction has also begun atop the cliff, though at a slower pace until of late. The plans are ambitious, but I am content to remain as I am until such time as it is ready. The trees have provided lumber enough for good beds to be fashioned, and so now all in our settlement have restful sleep at night, be that in house or tent.

The redstone circuit farms have served us well while we have set new crops into the ground. Fertile soil is upon the hillsides, and so our root crops fare well. Sorghum already begins to sprout by the water's edge, and the fishing is plentiful there, which gives a new and unusual white meat for my people to enjoy. Strange and sweet fruits grow on wild trees nearby, waxen and thick of skin, but delicious. We have harvested their seeds and shall attempt to cultivate an orchard.

A'LUMIYA - CONSTELLATION OF THE SCORPION - YEAR 2

Fatherhood sits well on N'dachVeip. Both of his boys - who, for the life of me, I cannot tell apart, born within minutes of each other as they were - take after his hair and his temperament, being lusty with their noise. He and Hadita have their hands full, but more joy I have not found than that which rings through their humble little house.

The pace of the castle's construction astonishes me. The throne room is complete, and the hothouse already bears its green and flowered beauty under glass. My quarters are being worked upon, and the Great Hall is also being raised. Standing in the lee behind my tent, I look up and see the walls grow higher every day, swarmed with men and planks and ropes.

First tastings of the sorghum beer from the brewery have come and were pronounced good. The Mythish folk raised an inn in no time, it being their first

priority after the small homes were built. It warms my heart to hear the song and chatter when I pass by at night and warms my belly when I have a mind to drop in and sample the wares.

A'LUMIYA - CONSTELLATION OF THE IBIS - YEAR 4

I write this entry, at last, from my own quarters within the castle. My heart is full, for this place resembles exactly my rooms in Paixandria, down to the very last detail, in all but the type of stone. Construction continues apace all around me and below, in the city. As I look down from the Crystal Tower, the first stones of a great monument are rising from above the entrance to the burial chambers. By the Vigil's Grace we have lost but a small number of the most aged of our people, but I have given orders that catacombs be dug, that those who pass from this life may have a good resting place.

The monument rises from steady feet, the point of a sword already before her skirts, as she grows stone by stone. The Helianthian folk petitioned for their blessed queen to be guardian of our dead; a petition that I was glad to allow. She will watch over us all and be a sign to our people that the sun will gild our land each and every day.

Larger homes now rise amid the city. It was the wise notion of Xsia-Minai'Te that the smaller homes could be kept for those beginning their lives together, until their family home is completed. Thus, all have a roof and privacy and comfort to raise their young, moving out as the stonemasons complete their larger dwelling, and leaving the small home for the next young couple needing it. Already, our society draws up its new customs, and I watch with fascination as each new proposal is brought before me.

Hadita is with child again. Bless that home, for it is a riot of joy and noise, but also of love. I wish them well, with all my heart.

A'LUMIYA - CONSTELLATION OF THE BEE - YEAR 5

The statue is complete, and a wonder she is to behold. Her wings bear the burdens of light and darkness, her hand blesses, and her sword protects. Her green dress beautifully painted, her arms and skirts hung about daily with garlands and ribbons, she guards the gateway to our dead and watches over us all. Sunflowers grow around her feet, though none were planted by our people. They flourish of their own accord and raise their faces to greet each morning. It has become the custom of many - begun by those from the Gilded lands, for she is now a deity to them - to whisper a prayer to her at sunrise for blessings and a bountiful harvest.

Beside her, the gardens are a calm delight. The masons found a smooth new type of white stone in the mountains and have fashioned it into paths that wind through the trees and flowers that flourish and blossom there. Water trickles through clever hidden devices, running into small ponds and falls that remind me so dearly of those in Paixandria, and comfortable benches are placed in quiet areas. I walk there often, to find peace and solitude, and the central circle is a small and blessed place where I take candles to be lit.

The fruit orchard is still but stands of youthful trees tied to sturdy supports, but they grow strong and true, their branches reaching to the sun, and full of leaf. We have found three types of trees and grow them all in neat rows. Within another turning of the sun, we should see the first small fruits bear forth.

Today, I have a mind to check upon the progress of the Golden Road, which curves from close to the base of the cliff and is planned to rise above the landscape toward the city's gates. My architects have spoken of their plans for a great bridge spanning the lake; a monumental work that will take many years to complete but will be a marvel to all who see it. Their plans for this bridge await my approval, and so it will be a long day in the city, and I suspect I may be too wearied to make the trip back to the castle. My tent shall be my bedroom tonight.

***

The moon cast its pale light down over the city as Paix made his weary way down the path that led away from the architects' office. He had pored over diagrams, schematics, and sketches for hours, querying this and approving that. And, while he had been seated for most of the time, his mind was tired, and he was ready to lay down his head on a pillow for the night.

Behind him, the windows of the inn glowed warmly, and the distant sound of a ballad being sung from within the building filtered softly out through the shuttered windows. He smiled as he turned a corner onto the main cobbled road that ran through the city. With a glance to his left, he bowed his head toward the statue. She rose high into the star-speckled sky, curls of incense smoke drifting up from the bowls at her feet. Her golden wing shimmered in the moonlight, and as he watched her, a faint streak of pale light moved across the firmament behind her.

Where do you go to in such a hurry? he thought with a smile, as a second streak followed it, and - farther back - a third. Ah, so tonight was the display of lights that the astrologers had been so enthused about. He would have stood to watch awhile longer, but they had told him the display would last for several nights, and

he truly needed to sleep. Already, the moon was past her zenith and starting her turn toward the western horizon, and he needed to start his turn toward his bed.

Turning back on his path, he walked toward his tent, his eyelids drooping with tiredness. Around him, the buildings seemed to shift and fade, and his step hesitated. A ghost of his beloved city drifted down, ruinous and broken, over the buildings. Up ahead, he saw himself - as ghostly as the vision - walking toward his tent from the opposite direction. He saw his ivory coat and his sandals; his likeness almost exact in but one thing.

The vision of himself seemed wearied and tired. Not the tiredness that he felt from a long day, but a tiredness of everything and a weariness of a long-carried burden. His eyes spoke of an ache that he had held within for too long, and the words of Xsia-Minai'Te drifted into Paix's mind.

"Somewhere out there you have another history. There is another you, in another time, wandering the world with the burden of all that guilt. Maybe one day you will find him as you walk in your dreams, and you will be able to hold him, and he will know forgiveness and love."

The vision of himself reached out a hand as he approached the tent, turning a handle that Paix could not see, and then he vanished through the fabric as if it did not exist. A moment later, the ghost of the city dissolved into the night, leaving Paix standing back in the present moment and staring uncertainly at his tent.

The guard who always stood outside had not reacted to the vision, but instead bowed his head and pulled back the thick cloth that covered the entrance as Paix approached. Nodding his thanks, Paix ducked inside, looking around cautiously.

Within, the tent was quiet and deserted.

The cloth dropped down again behind him, and he heaved a weary sigh, reaching up to light the lantern that hung from the central pillar. Normally a job reserved for Mhenheli's hands, tonight he would have to do it himself. It felt odd to ready himself for bed without those hands to assist him, but he was so tired that he could not worry overmuch about it, all but pulling off his clothes and dropping them onto the floor before he sank into the bed.

The covers were scarce pulled up and his head barely comfortable on the pillow, before his eyes drifted shut and his mind dipped into the restful ease of sleep.

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The morning sounds beautiful.

A soft breeze rustled the acacia leaves, distant birdsong trilled in the orchards, and the quiet bustle of the castle began far below. The fact that he had gone to sleep in his tent and not in the castle quite escaped him in the warm, hazy glow of awakening.

The morning smells wonderful.

Clear, dew-freshened air nosed in through the thin vents of the window shutters, mingling with the soft smoky redolence of lingering incense that had been glowing at the foot of the bed throughout the night.

The morning feels…

Paix opened his eyes, staring up at the ceiling. It was the same silver-painted indigo, as it always was. The blanket was the same soft blue, as it always was. The mattress was the same restful comfort, as it always was. But something was different. Something was wholly unfamiliar. Something was as it had never been before.

He had gone to sleep in his tent, but he was no longer there. He was in his bed, in his quarters in the castle.

And he was not alone.

A body slept warm and trusting against him. A head lay heavy on his shoulder, cheek pillowed against his collarbone, breath slowly and softly coursing warm across his chest. An arm rested snug about his waist, fingertips tucked up beneath the back of his ribcage, as if ensuring that it would not let go in the relaxation of sleep. His own arm had done this very thing, having clearly been holding against him whoever this was, but loosening and falling away to rest on the mattress once sleep had claimed him.

Slowly, oh so slowly, he turned his head.

Mhenheli?!

Mhenheli was in his bed, equally as undressed as he was, and curled up to him in a quiet and peaceful slumbering embrace.

What on *earth* had happened?! How in the names of all the thousand stars had Mhenheli ended up in his bed?! And *why?!*

I cannot remember anything about this! It was late when I went to bed, after a long night poring over the architects' plans, and I passed the inn without going inside. I do not recall being carried here, for surely I would have awoken. My head is not mazed or aching this morning, so I was not drinking. I feel perfectly well,

and so I was not sick and in need of comfort… besides which, this is not the sort of comfort I could ever imagine him offering!

This was so completely and utterly out of character for his loyal Chaperone that it did not even enter his head that Mhenheli might have done this without asking. He had known the man for almost his entire life, and he trusted him implicitly. This was not anything he could have imagined Mhenheli doing sneakily, or under-handedly.

I must have agreed to this. But… he would not have asked for it. No matter the gentle touches and caresses that we have both adopted since leaving Paixandria; not once could I have imagined him asking for this! It is entirely not within him to do so.

He stared at that silver-grey head, so peaceful against his shoulder, breathing slow and measured and warm across his skin. There could be only one reason for this, only one way that Mhenheli would have done this.

I… asked him to do it?

Yes, he must have done. A request - because such a thing would not be an order! - would be the only reason. Mhenheli would never presume otherwise, and possibly even then might have offered up a small protest at such a change in the already intimate relationship between king and Chaperone.

If I asked him to do it, then I cannot ask him to cease. And…

He closed his eyes, focusing on the moment, on the warmth, the closeness, and the quiet feeling of utter peace and happiness that suffused him.

I do not want it to cease. Is this the feeling of what I have long craved? Did I finally relinquish my fear of losing him if I asked? Stars, how I wish I could remember! The last thing I recall was falling asleep in my tent. How on earth did I get all the way up here?

The comfort. The quiet. The warmth. The intimacy. The trust. The way he was held, as though Mhenheli needed to touch him, for fear that he might vanish and take this moment away.

Once more, the words of Xsia-Minai'Te came to him.

"Somewhere out there you have another history. There is another you, in another time, wandering the world with the burden of all that guilt."

The vision of himself that he had seen last night. Was that… his other self? Had their histories reached across time to touch in that moment?

He opened his eyes, staring up at the ceiling.

Did our histories cross, so that he slept in my time and I in his? Was it he who asked Mhenheli to do this? But… what happened to Mhenheli in…? Oh, stars… the letter of refusal that I sent to Ser'Zhege. I did not attend that battle, but in his history, my other self did!

In his history… none but he survived the maelstrom. He fled, and never saw Mhenheli again. No wonder… No wonder, if he came here and saw Mhenheli once more… I would have done the same, with that chance before me; that chance to do and say something that my own actions had denied me.

Slowly, carefully, he lifted his hand from the mattress, clasping it loosely around Mhenheli's shoulder so that his arm embraced him as it clearly had done during the night. Mhenheli uttered a faint sigh, shifting almost imperceptibly against him.

He agreed to this. This embrace is not that of a reluctant man, only obeying a request from his master. It is that of a man who does not wish me to move away from him. He wanted this. He… wanted this all along? How many years have I wasted? For how long could we have had this, if I had only had the courage to speak? For how—

Mhenheli shifted again, but this time he moved with the awareness of somebody waking from sleep. Paix held his breath, waiting to see what would happen.

A soft sound, a sigh, a hand moving from beneath him and resting on his chest, a head lifting from his shoulder, dark eyes gazing down at him.

Mhenheli smiled. "T'alia mhasa," he murmured. "Did you sleep well?"

"Soundly and peacefully," Paix replied, unable to help himself from smiling as he raised a hand to tuck a stray lock of hair behind Mhenheli's ear. "I have never seen you looking quite so… tousled before," he added, as his fingers worked to neaten that silver-grey hair as best he could.

Mhenheli's eyes slid shut, and he exhaled softly. "This should be my job, for you," he whispered.

"But can I not do it for you also?" Paix countered, his heart warmed with tenderness and his eyes lit with humour. "I know how good this feels, so let me give you that, hm?"

Mhenheli smiled again. "Well then," he murmured, "I shall permit it, because it does indeed feel good. However, much though it pains me to leave the comfort of you and this bed, I do have duties to attend to."

"You cannot attend to them while you are so tousled," Paix chuckled. "Hush awhile. Let me enjoy this rare opportunity to care for you."

In reply, Mhenheli only gave a soft sigh; a faint hum of contentment as he lay there, propped up a little on one elbow, his other hand resting gently on Paix's chest, while his hair was combed and neatened by long tanned fingers. And, in turn, Paix revelled in doing something he had never been able to do before.

I cannot recall a time where our positions were reversed, and I had the chance to care for you. Even when you have been sick, you simply veiled your face to protect me and carried on. Let me do this, for now I understand how it feels to be able to care for another whom you love.

Eventually, after probably a good five minutes had passed, Mhenheli opened his eyes. Deep amusement glimmered in them and hid also about the corners of his lips.

"If I am not untousled now, then I never will be," he said. "And your arm must be aching."

Paix's fingers stilled in his hair. He looked up at that beloved face, weathered and worn and smiling tenderly down at him.

"*Must* you leave?" he asked, quietly.

"My duty calls me," Mhenheli said. "You gave me the most precious gift I have ever been blessed with last night, and I had accepted that it might be only for that night. With that in my mind, still I know I must attend to everything that needs doing this morning. But…"

At that hesitation, Paix smiled. "But?"

"But… if it were not only for one night," Mhenheli continued, his own smile now faded, his eyes reflecting an earnest hope. "If you were willing to allow me this privilege again…"

"How can I not?" Paix murmured, allowing his fingers to caress through Mhenheli's hair, thereby undoing most of his previous work to neaten it from the tousles that sleep had gentled into it.

"Not just last night, tazah q'adisi," he said, watching that beautiful expression of blissful peace settling over Mhenheli's face once more. "Every night. For I have had no better sleep in my life than that which I had last night, with you resting beside me."

Before this day there was always a piece of me missing. I was always restless, searching for it, not knowing what it was. Now… I have found it. Now I feel whole again.

“You are an inexpressible comfort to me,” he murmured. “I only regret that my fear of losing you led me to not—“

A gentle finger rested upon his lips, silencing him.

“Regrets do naught but foster pain,” Mhenheli whispered, lifting his finger away and replacing it with his lips, in the softest of brief kisses. He raised his head again, gazing down at Paix.

I… oh…

For several moments they both lay in silence, Mhenheli’s eyes speaking of contentment, and Paix’s of blissful surprise.

“Duty,” Mhenheli eventually murmured with a smile, as he sat up and stretched. “Rest awhile longer, and I will ready this room and the day for you, as I always do.”

Paix watched him rise from the bed, pick up the robes he had discarded last night, and walk into the small side room.

He closed his eyes.

Wherever you are, my self of that other history… thank you. One day I shall find you, and - if the Vigil’s Grace permit it - I will hold you until you can forgive yourself for the fear that settled that burden in your heart and that pain in your eyes. Maah'Qiza liaah-qun.

CHAPTER 67

"Onorait." Hadita touched her fingertips to her forehead. "Had I known you would visit us today, I would have baked your favourite honey breads."

Paix returned the gesture with a smile, then took her hands in his, raising them both to kiss them gently.

"I knew you would," he said, his eyes soft as they glanced down at her clearly very pregnant belly. "And that is why I decided to arrive unannounced. You work enough as it is, and so close to your term, even. I would not have you standing for a moment longer than you need to."

She smiled as he let her hands go. "Thank you," she said softly, looking up as someone else stepped into the doorway behind Paix.

"Chaperone! What a delight to see you here, too. Ah, now my sha' making abilities will be put to the greatest test! Please, do come in. N'dachVeip is just—"

"C'mere, you little scamp!"

A young red-haired boy came pelting out of the side room, giggling and dodging behind the couch, even as Hadita closed the front door behind Paix and Mhenheli.

"—putting the boys to bed. Or trying to, anyway" she finished, watching fondly as N'dachVeip stalked out of the side room. He nodded to their guests, winked at them both, then started to prowl toward the little lad, who squealed and ducked down behind the couch as if he could not be seen.

"Oh no!" N'dachVeip called out, dismayed. "Where did he go? Hadita, do you see him anywhere?"

She grinned, glancing over at the couch. "No, maah'qab. I see no sign of him. I will make our guests comfortable and then help you try to find him."

"Hmm…" N'dachVeip pondered, tapping his chin as the top of a red head peeked out above the comfortable cushions. "I wonder if I can find him… *behind the couch!*"

He leapt toward the couch with a roar, and the lad shrieked, jumping out from behind it and running - giggling breathlessly - over to where Paix and Mhenheli stood just inside the doorway, deeply amused at this little pantomime.

"Oh now, hiding behind our esteemed guests, are you?" N'dachVeip teased. "C'mon, it's past your bedtime."

“Want to see the king!” the little boy protested, glancing between his father and Paix.

“You’ve seen him now, bab'cho.[1] He’s right there in front of you.” N’dachVeip gestured to Paix, who obligingly nodded formally to the boy.

“Where’s your crown?” the boy asked, staring up at Paix.

Immediately, Paix clapped a hand to his head and gave him a look of dramatic startlement.

“It’s gone!” he gasped. “It must have fallen off as I walked here!”

The boy’s eyes widened, his mouth falling open in a little ‘o’ shape. So surprised was he that he didn’t spot the glimmer of amusement in the king’s eyes, and nor did he notice his father prowling closer and closer until the very last second, as N’dachVeip gave another playful roar and made a grab for him. Once again, though, his son was too slippery for him, dodging around Mhenheli and hiding behind the black robes…

…until, to his dismay, an arm reached down and scooped him up, dangling him half upside down by his waist as he wriggled in the crook of the Chaperone’s elbow.

“Bedtime, you say?” Mhenheli asked, quirking one eyebrow at N’dachVeip.

“I’ll wager that it’s been a long time since you had to do that,” N’dachVeip said, with a sidelong smirk toward Paix. “You’ve not lost your touch, though. Have to do it a lot, did you?”

Mhenheli smiled. “You might say I am somewhat… *practised* at it.”

“Stars,” Paix muttered, making his way over to the couch as N’dachVeip snorted with laughter.

“This way.”

***

“While we have a moment alone,” Paix murmured, as he sat on the couch and Hadita bustled around him. “I have something of great importance that I must tell you.”

She hesitated, nodding and taking the seat beside him, clearly sensing this was a personal matter. “Of course,” she said quietly. “What is it?”

Paix glanced toward the door where N’dachVeip and Mhenheli had carried the young lad through into the bedroom.

“Speak with your husband,” he said lowly. “Ask him to consider what his words will be.”

Hadita’s lips parted in a soft sound of surprise.

“His words? Onorait, the Vigil will give him its Grace?”

He nodded. “I have begged it for him, and my request has been granted. The Vigil's Grace will reunite you both beyond the Well of Stars, and I will come to him at the end of his days.”

Tears welled in Hadita’s eyes. She clasped her hands together before her, bowing her head.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “To know that we shall walk together amid the stars one day is the greatest gift I have ever received. I could not bear to be parted from him, but I had accepted that one day an eternal parting would come to us.”

Paix took those hands in his, clasping them gently.

“Words, and a candle,” he said. “The candle should be red, as that is his colour. As red as his scarf.”

She nodded, smiling brightly and quickly wiping her eyes as the door across the room opened and N’dachVeip entered, with Mhenheli close behind him. She rose from the couch, gesturing for Mhenheli to take her seat. He opened his mouth to speak, clearly unwilling to take her place, but she smiled and shook her head.

“I will make sha’, but you must not judge my skills with it too harshly,” she said. “I know how my father likes it to be served, but I have not the skill of a Chaperone in preparing it. Please, be seated.”

N’dachVeip pressed a kiss to her cheek as he walked past her, then flopped down on one of the two low chairs either side of the couch, as Mhenheli took his seat beside Paix.

“I’m lodging a formal protest,” N’dachVeip said. “Your Chaperone is far too discreet, Paix. Couldn’t get a single juicy bit of gossip about you out of him!”

“Not through lack of trying, either,” Mhenheli murmured drily, flicking a glance of amusement at Paix, who returned it.

“I not only trust him with my life,” Paix said, “but also with my secrets. Good luck winkling out of him anything more than an embarrassing hint at how reluctant for bedtime I was as a child.”

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“My words?”

With their guests gone, the children in bed, and some quiet time alone together finally upon them, N’dachVeip lounged on the couch with his feet up on a stool and Hadita nestled up to him.

“I don’t understand,” he murmured. “What words?”

Hadita wrapped her arm around his waist and settled her cheek against his chest.

“The Vigil has granted you a gift,” she said softly. “The king requested it, and the Vigil was pleased to allow it. You know that I keep my candle in the drawer beside our bed, yes?”

“Of course.” N’dachVeip stroked his fingers over her hair, letting his head fall back against the cushions of the couch and breathing a happy sigh. “It’s a lovely pale yellow one. Reminds me of the scarf you wore when we first met.”

“Well, that *is* the reason why it’s yellow, maah’qab. The colour of a person’s candle has to mean something to them. Mine is yellow, because it is the colour of something that I loved and was wearing when you came into my life.”

N’dachVeip raised his head, bending his neck to press a fierce kiss against the crown of his wife’s head.

“I wonder what colour mine would have been?” he mused, still gently sifting his fingers through Hadita’s hair.

“Yours will be red,” she murmured. “Like your scarf.”

His fingers stilled for a moment, then resumed their stroking.

“Will be?” he asked.

Hadita raised her face to look up at him. She was smiling, and her smile touched her eyes in that way that made his heart soft.

“Will be,” she said. “For my people, our candle is lit after we have passed from this world. The king comes to us in our final hour and sits with us.”

“Wait…” N’dachVeip sat up a little, looking down at her, intrigued. “He comes to every one of you at that time?”

“Yes. He just… *knows* when it’s our time. And what else is known among my people is that when the king turns up on your doorstep, bare-headed and with a small copper totem in his hand, he is to be allowed in without question, for he has come to guide a member of the household on their final journey.”

“I had no idea…”

“Part of that journey is the words,” Hadita continued. “Every Paixandrian knows their words. We think of them often, and sometimes we change them as our life changes, but we always know them. They are the last words that we ever speak in this life, and the king listens to them and keeps them safe. That is why one of his titles is Listener of the Words.”

“Ah! I always thought that was a bit of an odd one for him to have. I mean, we all listen to words, but I gather that these words are special ones? And you have your words? What are they?”

“That I cannot tell you,” Hadita said. “The words must not be spoken until the final moments of life. For a Paixandrian, the words are our summing up, our reckoning of our life. We speak our name, telling the Vigil - through the king - what our name was in this life. We then tell of how brightly our candle will burn, and why it will burn that way. And then… our life is done. The speaking of the words makes it so. The king places the totem in our hand, speaks the blessing of the Vigil over us, and takes our candle to be lit.”

N’dachVeip smiled. “That’s beautiful. My people have no traditions surrounding death. We have a simple burial, with a few words of gratitude for the life lived spoken over the grave, and then we part and go on with our lives. Your tradition makes me wish we had something more, something like that, with the candles and the words, and someone to guide us through those final moments.”

Hadita was watching him and smiling, and he couldn’t help but dip his head again to peck a kiss on the curve of those lips.

“What happy thoughts are in this beautiful head, zhavi?” he murmured. “I love to see you smile like this.”

“When you and the Chaperone were putting Yaschda’nal to bed,” Hadita said, “the king told me that you must consider what your words will be.”

“Yes, you mentioned— Oh! Me? But I’m not Paixandrian.”

Hadita laughed softly. “Well, that is your gift, my love. The king begged the Vigil for you to be blessed in your final moments as Paixandrians are, and the Vigil has given you that gift. It is a very special thing, for it means that we will not be parted after our lives are done. You will walk amid the stars with me, and I will not be alone there without you.”

N’dachVeip gazed at her, seeing the shining of her eyes and the way that this news seemed to light her face with happiness.

“Then, though I do not understand it one whit, and you will need to teach me all about it,” he murmured, “I accept that gift with all my heart.”

[1] *bab'cho* = an affectionate Rachzem nickname for a small child

CHAPTER 68

NINE YEARS LATER

A cool pre-dawn mist swirled around Paix's feet as he made his way down into the city. Autumn in A'lumiya was always welcomed, as the morning air smelled and felt fresher. The collar of his coat was up, but that was the only concession he had given to the brief chill, for he was already warmed through by the generous cup of spiced sha' Mhenheli had awoken him with.

Past N'dachVeip's home, its windows already glowing softly with lamplight, and down the path alongside it, he lifted his gaze to look up at the statue. Rising out of the mist like the deity some worshipped her as, she was both familiar guardian and comfort, and he bowed his head briefly to her as he continued walking.

Outside the brewery an empty cart was just pulling up beneath the arch, ready to be laden with barrels bound for the inn. The flame-haired young man leading the horses turned to tie the lead around a post, but as Paix approached, he looked up and caught the king's eye.

"Onorait," he said, with a grin. "You're up early!"

"Indeed," Paix replied as Yaschda'nal finished securing the lead. "I was so busy in the city yesterday that I completely forgot to retrieve a ledger from my tent, and I need it this morning. How is the new job faring? N'dachVeip told me how you loved horses, so this seems the perfect role for you."

"Well," Yaschda'nal mused, scratching the back of his neck with a big hand. "It's heavy labour, outside of the horses, but I enjoy it. I get to work alongside my brother, and also the free samples are nice."

Paix chuckled. "I'm sure those free samples more than make up for that heavy labour. Occasionally I'm offered one as I pass by, too, and it's always a welcome treat."

He looked up as a hatch opened and two long planks - old and bowed with regular use - slid down from it to form a makeshift ramp. The red head of Yaschda'nal's twin poked itself out of the hatch, and a hand waved at them both.

"T'alia mhasa, Onorait!" he called down in a cheery voice. "Early start for you?"

"T'alia mhasa, Venyi'fkha," Paix called up to him. "Is there a swirling rumour that I am something of a lay-a-bed?" he added with a grin. "Both of you have expressed surprise at me being here. I am always up at this hour, but I usually remain in my quarters until a little later in the morning."

“Oh yes, rumours galore!” Venyi’fkha winked at him.

Yaschda’nal rolled his eyes. “Ignore him, Onorait. He’s as annoying as he’s always been. There are no such rumours.” He turned to look up at his brother, as a couple of other men - both Rachzem compatriots - wandered up to help handle the casks. “Hadn’t you better be strapping those planks into place, bab’cho? “

“Bab’cho? Pfah!”

“Tie ‘em down tight!” Yaschda’nal said with a grin, as Paix carried on walking to his tent, smiling at their banter. They reminded him so much of their father.

Inside the tent, sheltered by the thick cloth, it was warm enough that he pulled down his coat collar once again. As the carters began to call to each other, wrangling the casks carefully into place for rolling down the planks, other sounds of the city began to filter into the tent. The familiar blend of haggling, laughter, and an occasional snippet of whistled song; all drifted through the morning air as Paix dug through the heavy chest just inside the entrance, finally locating the book he was after. It was not a ledger, but his latest journal, and the knowledge that he sometimes left it here was something he did not tell a soul.

“*There* you are,” he murmured, pulling it out and closing the chest. With the book cradled against him, he approached the door cloth again, only to be startled by a loud crash, which was followed a moment later by roars of laughter from several throats.

Pushing aside the tent cloth, he was met with a strong smell of beer and a hilarious scene. Yaschda’nal was sat on the ground, drenched in beer, the ruins of both a cask and one of the improperly secured planks beside him. Venyi’fkha was laughing so hard that he’d almost fallen out of the hatch and was hanging onto it for dear life, and Yaschda’nal’s colleagues were ribbing him mercilessly, even as they helped him - laughing - to his feet.

A woman hurried past Paix, her arms around a large, covered basket. Glancing at him, she bobbed a little curtsey and carried on walking. Across the road, the carters - to a man, even the twins - all touched fingers to foreheads, still grinning; a gesture that he returned with a nod and a smile as he turned to begin making his way back up to the castle.

Before he had moved more than a few paces, though, the sunrise horn sounded, and he stopped in his tracks, as did all around him. All faces turned to look up at the statue, as the sun crested the surrounding hills and rose slowly up her brightly painted and garlanded form, until it shone off her golden wing.

Madre de Girasoles, came the murmur from many voices around him, in many tongues; a beautiful blend of language and accent that never failed to touch him to his very heart. *Grant their next lives a bountiful harvest.*

"Maah'Qiza liaah-qun," he murmured, bowing his head as the sunrise horn sounded once more and the city resumed its usual early morning bustle.

***

Mhenheli was sitting in his favourite spot on the couch when Paix walked back into his quarters after the invigorating climb up to the castle. His silvered head was bent over the ledger that he had balanced on his knee, but he looked up from his accounts as Paix entered, and he smiled.

"You look all aglow," he murmured. "It must have been a brisk walk."

"It was," Paix replied, setting the journal down on his desk and walking over to his Chaperone. Bending at the waist, he pressed a soft kiss to Mhenheli's tanned, weathered cheek and tucked a lock of silver hair behind his ear. "The morning mist was nice and cooling, but I was warmed by the sha' you prepared."

"Would you like more?"

Paix smiled, glancing down at the close-written ledger on Mhenheli's knee, its columns perfectly neat, though the handwriting was changed from what it once was. Still small and careful, it was now a little more shaky.

"Not just yet," he said. "Finish your accounts first, maah'qab. I will join you in writing, for my journal is sorely in need of updating. I might first enquire about some food, though, for—"

"Already done," Mhenheli said, picking up his quill once more. "It will arrive shortly."

"Balcony?" Paix asked, straightening and walking over to his desk.

"Of course," Mhenheli replied smoothly. "My favourite spot for watching the city, and it just so happens to give me a perfect view of the main road." He glanced up. "There is no mistaking your coat," he added with a smile, before returning to his accounts.

***

A'LUMIYA - CONSTELLATION OF THE BEE - YEAR 15

The Greatbridge is finally complete, the last stones being laid but three days ago. My architects called me to witness the moment, and to lay my hand to the final

stone as it was placed. It is a feat of engineering that is a marvel to behold, stretching the entire width of the lake from the city gates to the lands beyond.

The first to walk across it was a pedlar, bringing his llamas with him. He had been encamped upon the far shore and told us that he wished to be the first to set foot upon its splendour. I am sure that word of our achievement in completing it will be spread across the lands that he travels to, and my hope is that we shall soon discover new trading routes as a result.

He brought with him word of a mysterious city deep within a mountain to the north, peopled by strange folk shorter than any man he had ever seen, with odd-coloured skin and large ears. They were right friendly to him, trading pork with him and offering to lade him down with different types of rock, which he politely refused as his llamas would not be able to bear such a burden.

He also spoke of a small town of brightly built homes nestled amid flower fields, a little to the east of these mountain folk. He showed us small samples of their dyes, which are truly exquisite; such vibrant colours as I have never before seen.

I shall send scouts to these lands, and endeavour to strike up an accord with their peoples, that we may investigate what trade routes are available to us. And indeed, a thought occurred to me as we spoke with the pedlar upon the Greatbridge: that such a wide expanse of stone might make an excellent location for trading posts, and possibly even an open market. What a sight that would be to behold!

***

SEVEN YEARS LATER

The afternoon was quiet, late in its passing, and golden in its light. Tiny motes of dusty pollen drifted around the windows, whose shutters were still open and allowing in the outside air, faintly scented with pine from the trees that nuzzled the base of the distant mountains.

At his desk, Paix was deep in thought, studying a redstone schematic from a city to the east of A'lumiya; a place where circuits whirred day and night and great cogs turned, powering engines that spat and hissed steam high into the air. A profitable trade route had been the result of scouts arriving from that land, having heard of the Greatbridge and the city behind it. A'lumiyan copper was in great demand, and this industrious city had iron aplenty to offer in return, something that the Mythish blacksmiths were eager to obtain.

On the other side of the room, Mhenheli had been working on his accounts, but his ledger now lay open and untouched in his lap, and his quill rested in its stand on the table. His head was bent as it always was over his books, but he was not working. Indeed, his breathing was slow and measured, and his eyes were closed.

A quiet knock sounded at the door, breaking the comfortable and companionable peace of the room.

“Enter,” Paix said, glancing up from the schematic.

Across the room, Mhenheli’s head lifted, and he looked around, clearly a little dazed from his nap. Then, he turned slowly, reaching once more for the quill. His fingers closed around it carefully, and he dipped it into the inkwell as Paix watched.

The door opened, and the captain of the castle guard stepped into the rooms. Behind him, just outside, the head cook waited patiently, a somewhat concerned expression knitting his brows.

“Onorait,” the captain began, standing to attention. His handsome face was marred upon one side by the scars of an old burn, much of which was hidden by a neatly trimmed beard.

Paix smiled at him. A good appointment, this one. Upon his retirement, Menet had petitioned him to bestow the position of captain upon a guard he vouched for as loyal and true, and upon learning that this was the same guard he had seen stoop to save a small kitten in the moments before the maelstrom’s devastation hit Paixandria, Paix was pleased to grant the appointment. And Menet had been true in his assessment, for Q’alamet was as loyal, discreet, and faithful as his predecessor.

“The head cook reports an issue with the latest grain delivery for the kitchens,” Q’alamet said. “Apparently, twice the amount was ordered, and we have not the space to store it.”

On the other side of the room, the slow scratching of quill upon paper stopped, but Mhenheli did not raise his head.

Paix caught that subtle change in sound, and without so much as a glance to draw attention to his Chaperone, he said, “The spare grain can be distributed to the city’s silos. It is good to have surplus, for tomorrow’s plans for us are never known.”

Q’alamet bowed. “Of course, Onorait.”

As he closed the door behind him, Paix caught the anxious voice of the head cook growing fainter as Q'alamet escorted him away. "But… the order has never been doubled before!"

Silence fell over the room, softly broken a moment later by the sound of book pages turning as Mhenheli quietly looked back through his accounts. His fingers stilled upon one page as he read.

"I thought…" he whispered, "that I had not placed the order. It would seem that… I… forgot, and so I ordered it a second time."

He looked up, across the room to where Paix sat behind his desk.

"It will not happen again," he murmured, an unfamiliar distress in his eyes that twisted something in Paix's chest.

Paix smiled tenderly, allowing himself a brief nod to acknowledge that promise.

"Would you make us some sha', maah'qab?" he asked softly.

"Of course."

***

TWO YEARS LATER

"I like not this stiffness and shaking of my fingers," Mhenheli said quietly, as he slowly worked the comb through Paix's hair. "It worries me that I will hurt you as I do this."

"You have never yet hurt me," Paix murmured, his eyes closed as he savoured the gentle and tender attention that had accompanied his every morning since he was a small child. "And I know that you never will, no matter how stiff and trembling your fingers may become. That you continue to do this for me, difficult as it now is for you, is a blessing that I do not take for granted."

"I will serve you until my last breath leaves my body," Mhenheli whispered, bending his head to ghost a kiss behind Paix's ear.

That now ever-present twist inside Paix's chest turned once more, and he lifted a hand to lay his palm against Mhenheli's cheek, gently urging his head forward until that weathered cheek rested against his own bearded one.

"I know," he murmured. "Tazah q'adisi. My most beloved."

He felt the smile against his cheek.

"I would like to watch the sunrise this morning," Mhenheli said. "Will you join me?"

Paix turned his head. Pressed a kiss to the wrinkled corner of that mouth. Smiled.

“Always.”

***

Slow, measured steps, each punctuated by the tap of a copper-tipped cane on the stone underfoot. A hand on his arm as they reached the short flight of three stairs. The door opened by the guard always stationed there, acknowledged with a nod from both king and Chaperone.

“New face,” Mhenheli remarked as they stepped out onto the long, covered balcony and the door was closed behind them.

“Indeed,” Paix agreed, though the guard was the same one who had been there for many mornings like this.

That hand, still on his arm, the other holding the cane. Those steps, so slow and careful, moving over the stone.

“We have once again beaten the sun to rising,” Mhenheli said, nodding to the distant hills as the dawn began to limn them with a thin halo of pure golden light.

Paix slipped his arm around Mhenheli’s waist, standing close to him as they watched the sun rise. Far below in the city, the sunrise horn sounded, and the light moved - slow and liquid lazy - across the rooftops, finally touching on the golden wing of the statue, coruscating out from it in brilliant sparkles.

Beside him, Mhenheli sighed happily.

“I love this moment,” he whispered.

“I, too,” Paix murmured in response, his gaze not on the statue but on that beloved old face. “But I love more that I can stand here with you as it happens and watch how happy it makes you.”

Mhenheli turned his head, his lips quirked in a dry smile.

“Sentimental,” he chided softly.

“Nothing wrong with that.” Paix returned that smile with one of his own. “You should indulge my sentimentality, you know.”

Mhenheli snorted indelicately. “Since when have I ever done that?”

“Well… now that you mention it…”

“Precisely.”

Together, they stood in companionable silence, watching the city come into bustling life below them, until Mhenheli finally turned away.

“I fear I must sit for a while,” he said. “My legs remind me that they are not fond of standing overlong anymore.”

“Of course.” Paix shifted, keeping his arm around Mhenheli’s waist as he began carefully to guide his slow steps back toward the door to his quarters. “Would you like some sha’? I could—“

“You most certainly will not. My legs may be weak, but my hands can still prepare sha’ for us both.”

Paix smiled, suitably chastened. “Yes, Chaperone,” he murmured, earning himself a small grin from this beloved man.

“In this *you* must indulge *me*,” Mhenheli whispered, snatching one brief kiss to Paix’s cheek before Paix rapped lightly on the door. “The making of sha’ is the role of a Chaperone, not of his king.”

The door was opened by the guard, and they slowly moved back indoors, making their way across the open terrace, down the steps, and into Paix’s quarters.

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TWO YEARS LATER

“Our roles have reversed,” Mhenheli said quietly one morning, as - having already helped him into his black robes - Paix now knelt at the side of the bed to slip sandals onto his Chaperone’s feet. “I am uncertain how to feel about that. You should not be doing this. A king, kneeling at the feet of his servant?”

Paix looked up at him. “A man,” he replied, “kneeling to care for his treasured companion. I have discovered what gave you such joy through all those years, and I cherish the opportunity to return your service in whatever small ways I can.”

He returned to his task, ensuring first one sandal was fastened securely and comfortably, and then moving his attention to the other.

“’Tis still not right,” Mhenheli said. “But the days when I could reach my own feet are long past, and so I am grateful for your care, Onorait.”

Paix’s hands stilled for a moment on the delicate straps of the sandal, then resumed their task until it was done.

“After all these years,” he murmured, “I beg to hear from your lips my name, and no more my honorific.”

He looked up, still kneeling at his Chaperone's feet.

"Please," he whispered. "You have long been more to me than a servant. I ask this of you now."

Mhenheli did not speak, simply watching him for the longest time. Then, just as Paix was beginning to wonder if he'd actually offended him, Mhenheli smiled.

"Get up off your knees, Paix," he said, fondly. "A Chaperone does not kneel for any longer than he has to, and a king should not kneel at all, though this king gives good reason to."

Relieved, Paix got to his feet, pausing to bend and ghost a kiss over Mhenheli's cheek.

"We are up before the sun again," he said. "Would you like to go onto the balcony?"

A surprising hesitation filled the air after those words had died. Paix watched as Mhenheli's gaze settled on the doorway. His eyes were filled with longing but tinged with resignation.

"I wish to," he murmured, "but alas my legs do not. I fear they will not suffer to walk more than a few paces today; enough maybe to reach the couch."

He turned to look up at Paix. "You go," he said. "And then come back to tell me how it was, who was out and about this morning."

"Alone?" Both of Paix's eyebrows went up. "Without you? Not a chance."

And, with that, he turned to walk toward his desk. From behind it, he lifted up his chair, carrying it over to the door. Setting it down for a moment, he ignored the soft sounds of protest coming from the bed, and opened the door, shuffling the chair through the gap until he had it out in the open terrace, where he lifted it up again, bearing it easily up the three steps.

The guard at the door greeted him, opening it wide enough to allow him to carry the chair out onto the balcony, where he set it down in the exact spot where Mhenheli had always liked to stand.

Back in the room once more, Mhenheli watched him return and ease open the lid of a large chest that stood against one wall.

"What are you doing?"

Paix took a soft blue blanket from the chest, flipping it up and back to drape it over one shoulder. Then, he lifted Mhenheli up in his arms, cradling him as tenderly as he had once been cradled.

“You are *not* missing the sunrise,” he said firmly, carrying Mhenheli toward the door, which he opened with the toe of his sandal. “If I have to do this every morning, then I will, and gladly.”

Once again, the guard opened the door, a faint smile on his lips as - for the umpteenth time - he heard the old Chaperone murmur that he must be a new face as he was carried out onto the balcony by the king.

Carefully, Paix settled Mhenheli on the chair, then opened the folded blanket, draping it tenderly around the thin form of his treasured companion. Only once he was satisfied that Mhenheli would not catch a chill from the cooler morning air did he finally stand beside him, one hand on a blanket-covered shoulder, as the sun began to rise over the distant hills.

Together, they watched as the sunrise horn blew and the city stilled for their morning prayer to the statue, and then the horn blew again. They watched as the statue was draped in fresh flower garlands, and the incense bowls at her feet were replenished. They watched as the streets bustled into life; the glorious sight and sound of humanity moving through this great city.

They watched together for the longest time.

“You have built a home here,” Mhenheli finally said, his gaze not leaving the rooftops and roads, as he took in everything with a faint and happy smile on his lips.

“*We* have built a home,” Paix replied. “All of us, you included. It is why we called it A’lumiya, for we all built it; all people, together.”

“Yes, but you are the father of this nation, Paix. It is your hand that has guided it, throughout.”

Paix looked at him.

“You know,” he said, “someone else once called me that.”

Mhenheli chuckled. “I know. She told me that she almost had to guilt you into accepting the title.” He glanced at Paix. “Must I do the same?”

Paix smiled.

“No,” he murmured. “I will accept it from you without protest.”

He crouched down to tweak at the blanket a little, ensuring that it was tucked snugly around Mhenheli. Memories of every moment when his Chaperone had done similar for him came flooding back - perfecting every drape of his cloak, ensuring the most comfortable fit of his bed’s blanket, settling the cushions on his couch *just so* - and he smiled.

“Just tell me when you’re ready to go back inside,” he said.

A hand covered his own, wrinkled and trembling, its fingers stiff and no longer straight as they once had been. But those fingers were still as long and elegant as always; just in a new way, a way that spoke of decades of service and love.

“Let us stay here a little while longer,” Mhenheli said, his gaze returning to the city.

“As you wish,” Paix said softly, placing his other hand over that wrinkled one and nestling his cheek against Mhenheli’s arm as they sat together and watched the city below.

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ONE YEAR LATER

A’LUMIYA - CONSTELLATION OF THE IBIS - YEAR 27

I sit here each day, and I watch him grow old.

I watch him forget, and I watch his distress as words slip from his grasp.

I watch his shoulders stoop, his back bend, and his fingers stiffen.

I watch his steps grow slower, more faltering, fewer in number. I watch him lean more heavily on the cane that N’dachVeip fashioned for him.

I watch his eyes cloud and grow dim, and I watch their gaze rest upon my face more often than it ever has.

I watch his hands tremble, moving with great slowness and care as they make my sha’.

I watch, and I wait, and I dread.

CHAPTER 69

"Where the hell did I leave that bloody field notes book?"

Pix scratched his fingertips through his beard as he stood inside the room, looking all around himself as though said book would miraculously appear upon being summoned by those magical words of frustration.

"Could've sworn I left it on the desk," he muttered. "Don't tell me it's somewhere up in the castle. It'll take a month of Sundays to unearth it if it's there."

He sighed, scrubbing his hand over his face. God, he was tired. For some reason, he'd not been sleeping well this past week. Oh, he'd gone to bed at a reasonable hour, but sleep had eluded him, leaving him tossing and turning for hours, and on a couple of occasions he'd simply given up and grabbed the field notes book to spend an hour or two writing until Somnus finally claimed him.

The last time that had happened was two nights ago, and he'd awoken to find the book on the floor, upended and open, with its pages criminally bent. The stub of pencil he normally used was nowhere to be found, until he went diving beneath the bed with his Maglite, finally locating it in the dark corner whence it had rolled off the top of the blanket.

Having retrieved his book, tsking at himself for being so careless, he'd opened it at the bent pages. There was his handwriting; the confident looping that slowly became a sleepy scrawl and eventually trailed off in a wobbly line as the book had slipped from his grasp.

Beneath that, though, those words had once again appeared.

He is coming.

There had been something… odd about the words. Something he'd not spotted in the moment, but it had niggled in the back of his mind ever since, and he wanted to look at them again, but of course now the book proved to be as elusive as a full night of good quality sleep.

He glanced over at Malin, who was sprawled comfortably on their back in their basket, paws splayed out and belly exposed as they stretched and yawned hugely.

"Well, at least one of us is getting plenty of sleep," Pix muttered as he sank onto his bed, watching as Malin flipped themself onto their side and yawned again.

He grinned at them. "Care to share your snoozing secrets? Or would they just comprise 'be a cat'?"

time magic make bad sleep

"Ah."

He watched as Malin stepped delicately out of their basket and padded over to the heavy chest just by the door. They sniffed gingerly at it for a few moments, then began scent-marking one corner of it.

He'd often wondered why they bothered to do that here. After all, it wasn't as if some other cat - ethereal or solid - would be coming along to attempt a hostile takeover of Malin's territory. But they'd done it for as long as he could remember, even way back when he lived in the camper van, into which he let not another soul enter.

The scent-marking of *him*, now that he could understand. It was more likely - at least before he arrived here - that he might possibly encounter another cat, who needed to be warned that Pix was Malin's human. But his mind would then turn over another question: what might another cat *smell* on him? Malin was not exactly a flesh and blood feline, after all. Hell, there was a time when they hadn't even *been* a cat. Their existence began as a tiny mote, then a moth, then a little bird, and then - finally - they took their current four-legged form.

"Such are the thoughts that keep me up at night," Pix muttered, with a wry smile. "Malin, why do you scent-mark things in this place where we're all alone?"

attention

Centuries of experience with Malin's odd phrasing immediately sent Pix's mind into translation mode, sifting through all the possible meanings. *They* want *attention. They* give *attention. They* draw *attention— ah!*

He eyeballed the chest, thoughtfully. Well, its contents had changed several times before now…

"Okay," he sighed, hauling himself to his feet and walking over to the chest. "I think I get it."

Malin stopped their enthusiastic cheek-rubbing of the wood, and instead began to purr, their tongue rasping over the back of his hand a couple of times. He scritched behind their ear with that hand, even as he pushed open the lid of the chest with the other hand.

The contents had indeed changed once more. Not greatly, but something new lay within, nestled on the old blue cloak. A book… no, *two* books, tied together with a thick black ribbon.

Carefully, he lifted them out of the chest and let the lid back down. Taking the books back to his bed, he settled down on it, making himself comfortable, even as Malin hopped up beside him and curled up against his hip.

The topmost book was roughly the same size as his field notes book. Exquisitely bound in leather, it had clearly belonged to someone wealthy or important, and a quick look at the fore edges showed him that a considerable portion of the book had been written in, as more than two-thirds of the leaves were ever so slightly ruffled in a manner that indicated the application of wet ink at some point.

Tucked inside the book there appeared to be a few loose pages, made of a different paper - slightly larger and with rougher deckled edges that had curled over somewhat.

The other book was a little smaller and a little thinner, reminding him of his current slim journals, though - unlike his card-bound journals - this one was bound in leather. It was also well-worn, as if it had been very frequently used.

Both books reminded him of something, but he couldn't quite put his finger on *what*.

The black ribbon was broad and—

Wait a minute. That wasn't a ribbon…

He went perfectly still, his fingertips motionless on the black fabric. Tiny, perfect stitches hemmed the long edges, which was what had initially made him think it was a ribbon, but no. This fabric was black-dyed cloth, soft and worn, cut and fashioned into a long, hemmed strip and tied in a careful bow around both books.

He'd seen fabric like this before. Many, many years ago… and more recently.

Slowly, reverently, he untied the cloth, letting it run through his fingers as his throat tightened with emotion. He folded it carefully, setting it down on the bed, and reached first for the smaller book. He didn't have his white gloves with him, but these books were as perfectly preserved as if they had still been in use only yesterday. They were certainly not delicate enough to fall apart at the slightest touch, besides which his emotions overrode the archivist inside him as he gently opened the book.

Pages and pages of orderly accounts lay in front of him. Perfect columns listing supplies, orders, and salaries, all in a close and neat hand. Immaculate and precise, each page headed with a date, followed by something he didn't recognise: anywhere between one and seven symbols that were like none he had ever encountered before. Pictograms? Code? They could be either, as he could see that some were repeated elsewhere in the book.

He realised that it hadn't even initially registered with him that the language the accounts were written in was Paixandrian. It was so familiar to him that his brain glossed right over the fact that it wasn't in English.

He glanced down at the folded strip of black cloth.

His throat tightened a little more.

He continued slowly leafing through the book. Page after page of accounts detailing the life of a wealthy household, but then they suddenly stopped. A single page was almost wholly blank, except for nine of the small symbols. The accounts resumed on the following page, but the regularity of dates had altered, as had the content of the columns. They began to list supplies, both stocked and needed, then they listed days of travel and things found. For a while they listed numbers of 'saved', and then they resumed recording days of travel and found things.

And then, suddenly, they were back to how they had previously been: the accounts of a household. And so, they continued, for page after page, though toward the end the writing grew a little less neat, a little more scratchy, and the columns a little more wobbly. They went on like this for many pages, the handwriting becoming more spidery and crabbed, as if written by an ageing hand.

And then, they stopped. Beneath the final scrawled account, someone had drawn a single little candle, its flame tall and shining out brightly.

He closed the book, setting it down beside the black cloth. He looked at both for a long time. Beside him, Malin was a warm and comforting presence as he eventually opened the larger book.

A'LUMIYA - CONSTELLATION OF THE SHEAF - YEAR 1

We are settled now through the passing of eight phases of the moon. Our immediate priority has been housing. Whilst tents suffice for the majority, sturdier settlement is needed for those with infants, and for the infirm. The masons have quarried near to the lake; good stone found there, they tell me, and they have worked it fast and well. The first small dwellings are now complete, with all hands ready and eager to assist in the building thereof.

***

He read for hours, all thoughts of emotion lost as he fell into the history of his new home, recorded in a hand identical to his own. The story of every building, of the bridge, of the castle, the farms, the orchards, the observatory, the great raised

road, the statue; all was recorded here. Meetings with architects and engineers, redstone schematics neatly laid out and documented, details of nearby settlements and the goods they were willing to trade.

Entranced, he read anecdotes about the family of his old friend N'dachVeip, who had apparently ended up with a riotous household filled with children; far more than the three he had witnessed during that brief vision of the past. He read of Xsia-Minai'Te, the crystal mage he recalled from so long ago, who had apparently become advisor to the king. He read of the Sunflower Inn, the Rainlight Gardens, the Golden Road, the Approach, the Madre de Girasoles… stars, he had *names* for all these places now! And oh, the joy when he read that they, too, called that stupendous work of engineering 'The Greatbridge'.

Forgetting all time and hunger, he devoured page after page while Malin dozed contentedly at his hip. The city was laid bare before him, from its infancy to its greatness, every stone and every person brought to life upon the pages.

And there, right there, in the middle of one entry, a name that drew his eye the moment that he turned the page.

Mhenheli.

He hesitated, looking up from the page as he realised that, until this point, he'd been refusing to acknowledge what this journal had been hammering into his head oh so very gently and insistently all this time. But now there was no getting away from it.

This was the journal of his other self, in that other time. And his other self had lived in that castle, sat upon that throne, ruled these lands. He had been king of these people.

He swallowed, realising his throat was dry. He really should stop to eat and drink something, but he needed to read just a little more. Just… a little more.

A'LUMIYA - CONSTELLATION OF THE BEE - YEAR 6

> *I awoke this morning, and in my arms - unexpectedly, yet quietly and perfectly beside me - was that for which I had yearned my entire life. I know not how, nor dare I question what chance or twist of fate and history brought such happiness to me, yet I recall the words of Xsia-Minai'Te.*

Pix stared at the writing, his mind absolutely reeling. That… that had been his doing! By all the myriad stars, he was reading about the outcome of his day in the past with Mhenheli!

How? How the hell was this even possible? Was time so completely messed up here that he could actually make an impact… on the past?

Up until this moment, he had managed to accept that he could walk in the past. But even after that day spent with Mhenheli, and despite how it had ended, he had wondered if - even assumed that - those days were just visions of the past; echoes that he could walk in. He'd even considered the likelihood that they were simply dreams.

But now he had in front of him concrete proof that he had had a direct impact on this version of him that had been king here, this 'other self' who lived in that other time. And, as he looked back down at the journal entry, he saw that it had slipped into a coded text that he was fully familiar with but had not seen for centuries. His own cipher, used for the most sensitive of records that he had wanted nobody else to read and understand.

> *My life split in twain, another history where it was my hand that slew the elemental guarding the Land Beyond Death. Another history, where another 'me' walks, burdened by the guilt of what he did. Xsia-Minai'Te told me that she had mended the wounds of my body but had struggled to mend my wings. She told me that she could still see them, even outside the Land Beyond Death. And she told me that the Light of the Vigil shone from me.*

The book went down on the bed and Pix's head went down into his hands. This couldn't be happening.

It took several moments before he managed to calm his breathing. He really needed to take a break, maybe get something to eat and drink.

***

He returned to the book an hour later, thirst and hunger slaked, questions churning around his mind; questions that he tried to stomp down until he'd at least finished reading. Beside him, Malin lay stretched out, their belly pressed against his hip, their paws flexing and twitching as they slept.

He lost himself in history once more.

Slowly, the entries began to change. Less about the city, and more about the people. Clearly, the majority of the infrastructure had now been built. There were more anecdotes about N'dachVeip and his family, and about daily life in the city. Details of new traditions and ceremonies that the people of A'lumiya formed, and of old ones that they retained. The sunrise and sunset prayer to the statue, which he had witnessed with his own eyes that first day he had walked in the past. The

king's use of the Rainlight Gardens for candle ceremonies after the passing of any Paixandrian. The lively markets on the Greatbridge - oh, how that brought a smile to his face as he recalled that joyful morning wandering among the press of people, the scents and the sounds.

One person in particular began to feature heavily in the journal. Mhenheli's name became the one word in every single entry. Year upon year, little moments - clearly treasured, for they were diligently recorded to be remembered - were peppered throughout the flowing writing. The entries grew less frequent, but no less detailed, until Pix noticed a distinct change in tone.

Concern crept into the words. Worry slowly filtered in here and there. It was hard to detect, but from the livelier and more joyful entries he began to notice a definite slide - albeit slow - into a more sorrowful tone.

And then, in the final entry, the sorrow spilled over, in smudged and tear-spattered shaky words.

A'LUMIYA - CONSTELLATION OF THE SHEAF - YEAR 28

Time, that one thing above all that I have in such abundance, now is the most precious thing that I hold. Yet, it slips through my fingers like sand. Is it of no coincidence that the symbol used by my people to denote 'trust' is that of sand spilling through the fingers of two hands held aloft?

I, who have sat at countless bedsides, held countless hands, listened to countless words, borne witness to countless deaths. I, who must now place all my trust in the Vigil to guide and hold me, for I now live each day in dread of the day that will soon come.

He rises no more from bed. Instead, he lies still and patient, permitting me to care for him, to wash him and comb his hair, to feed him the little that he can manage to eat. As he once cradled me and guided me back to life, so now I cradle him as I guide him gently and tenderly toward the stars.

I hold him every minute that I can. I whisper to him what he has meant to me, all the words that I wish him to carry with him as he walks with the stars. He will carry my heart with him also, for it will be torn from me in the moment when we are parted. Already, the pain is almost unbearable, and it tells me what I have long suspected; that we are stars-bound.

May I have the strength to not shatter when it is his hand that I hold, his words that I listen to, and his candle that I light.

Silent tears running down his cheeks, Pix gently pulled out the loose pages from the book. There were only two of them, both written in a different hand; sharper and more looping, the ink so faded that it was hard to read. The first was a formal notice of death, and the second was a proclamation that all Paixandrians were to enter a period of mourning for one month.

Both were signed *N'dachVeip, Regent of A'lumiya*.

CHAPTER 70

ON THE NATURE OF DAYLIGHT

The cool air of a spring morning, fresh before dawn touched the sky with the paintbrush of its beauty, drifted through the open windows. Their shutters had not been closed, as the scents of the night were so beautiful at this time of year; dusky pollens mingling with the clean freshness of pine from the nearby mountains.

A lone desert bird was perched upon the windowsill, shimmering ghostly teal as they looked out at the gloaming, their tiny eyes watching over a country seemingly too vast for their little body to hold dominion over. The day was coming behind the distant hills, and as they watched they began softly to chirp.

Paix shifted in his sleep as the gentle sound filtered into his mind, drawing him to a slow wakefulness. He had heard this little bird's melody often, but never had it sounded so quiet, so peaceful.

He opened his eyes.

In the dim lamplight, dark eyes gazed back at him. Clouded and tired, nonetheless they watched his face, and probably had done so even while he slept.

He smiled.

"T'alia mhasa," he murmured, lifting a hand to cradle it against Mhenheli's weathered cheek as he raised his head to ghost a tender kiss over his beloved mouth.

Beneath him, he felt movement, and he held still where he was, a breath away from those lips. A long moment later a thin hand rose, trembling, from beneath the covers. Its fingers, stiff and crabbed over with the aches of age, slowly touched his hair, and he closed his eyes, aching inside.

Gently, those fingers sifted through his hair as they had done so many times in the past. As best they could, they combed and neatened, until the ache of holding that hand up proved too much and it rested back down on the covers.

He opened his eyes again, his gaze meeting Mhenheli's.

"Thank you, maah'qab," he whispered. "You always take such good care of me."

Mhenheli's lips curved in a faint smile. "It has been my life's purpose and joy," he murmured. "Is the sun up, or have we beaten her to awakening once more?"

Paix chuckled. “She has not yet risen from her bed but will doubtless soon do so.”

Mhenheli’s eyes closed, and he breathed a quiet sigh.

“I wish I could see it again. One last time.”

Paix kissed his cheek. “I could carry you outside to watch it,” he murmured. “Wrap you in a blanket so you stay nice and warm, and we could watch the sun rise together.”

Those dark eyes opened again.

“I would like that.”

Gently, so as not to disturb Mhenheli too much, Paix rose from bed and threw on the tunic and pants that he had discarded the night before. To the soft tsk of disapproval from his Chaperone, he merely smiled and shook his head.

“I have more important things to do than worry about a few wrinkles in my clothing,” he said, slipping his feet into his sandals, shouldering into his ivory coat, and walking around to the other side of the bed. “Now, I trust in you to tell me if anything that I do hurts you.”

“There is nothing you could do,” Mhenheli said, a shade of his old humour glimmering through. “Except, perhaps, wear yesterday’s wrinkled clothes.”

“Then I shall worry about that when we come back inside, for though the sun lays abed still she will not wait for me to change into fresh clothes before she rises.”

Carefully, Paix sat Mhenheli up, supporting him gently as he wrapped the soft blue blanket around him. Then, as if he weighed no more than a child - which, in truth, he barely did now - he lifted his beloved Chaperone into his arms and carried him toward the door that led out to the long balcony. Calling to the guard outside, he waited as the door was opened, then with a nod of thanks he carried Mhenheli out to his usual favourite spot.

“New face,” Mhenheli whispered, to which Paix smiled.

“Yes, indeed. Are you warm enough?”

Mhenheli nodded, his cheek pillowed against Paix’s chest. And together they watched in silence as the horizon glowed first a soft pink, then a blushing peach as a golden halo edged the distant hills, then a beautiful orange gold as the first rays shone over those ancient stone sentinels, old and patient as time itself.

Far below, the sunrise horn sounded, and the city - quietly busy at this early hour - came to a standstill, all eyes turning toward the statue.

“Grant their next lives a bountiful harvest,” Mhenheli whispered; something Paix had never heard him say before at this moment.

He bent his neck, so he could bury his face in that silver hair nestled so close to him, and he whispered the prayer in return.

“She watches over us all, and will watch over you when I am gone,” Mhenheli said quietly. “But she cannot care for you as I do. I worry for how you will cope without me.”

His throat tight, Paix murmured, “I will not have another Chaperone. Nobody could or will ever take your place.”

The sun burst forth from the gilded wing of the statue, shining out over the city, reflected brightly over its rooftops. The second sounding of the sunrise horn drifted up, and the city resumed its early bustle. The distant echo of cartwheels and hooves reached even this far up on the still morning air, and Mhenheli breathed in deeply, as if taking every scent and sound and sight into him, there to hold them and cherish them.

“Let us return inside,” he murmured.

AU BORD | AT THE EDGE

Carefully, Hadita carried a filled cup of sha’ over to her husband, who sat on the couch. Upon his lap he had some new small contraption balanced, and he was tinkering with it, quietly muttering to himself as he did so, talking himself through some delicate procedure as he gingerly poked a thin strip of copper through a hole somewhere in the contraption.

He looked up as she approached, smiled, and set the contraption down on the low table before him. Reaching up both hands, he took the proffered cup with a murmur of thanks, and shifted along the couch cushions so that Hadita could sit beside him.

“This is one of my favourite times of the day,” he murmured, as she nestled up to him. He shifted the cup into one hand, so he could slip his other arm around her waist, and he sipped the sha’ slowly, enjoying the heat from both the milk and the spices.

“You think the boys will come to visit today after their work is done?” he asked, turning to press a kiss to the top of his wife’s head. “I could run to the market for you, if we need anything extra for the evening meal.”

She tilted her head back to look up at him.

“We have enough food for now,” she said softly. “But… maah’qab, there is something much more important than a run to the market that you must do today.”

“Hmm? What’s that?”

“The Chaperone is ailing,” Hadita murmured. “It is said that his final day is near, and that the king has abandoned all duties to care for him and refuses to leave his bedside.”

N’dachVeip rested the cup on his knee with a quiet sigh. “I heard this, too,” he said. “I wish there was something that I could do, because I know that Paix will be devastated. I… I don’t know what to do, though.”

Hadita’s hand rested on his chest.

“Go to the castle,” she urged softly. “Offer your services, as the most senior noble of the city. The city cannot go ungoverned, and the king’s thoughts are with only one person right now. That is what you can do for him, my love. Take up the reins of government until such time as he is ready to hold them once more.”

N’dachVeip hung his head. “Zhavi, I never felt able to rule even over my own people. This place is so much bigger…”

Hadita kissed his cheek. “My people have a saying: *Every hand reaches out to those who mourn.* It is our way, to do whatever we can for those in grief. Reach out your hand, my strong and beautiful man. He carried you once, when you desperately needed it. You must do the same for him. Give the gift of your hand to your oldest and dearest friend.”

And so it was that N’dachVeip found himself walking down familiar long corridors in the castle, until he reached the one with the captain of the castle guard standing watch in front of it.

“Grav’n,” Q’alamet said, nodding formally in greeting.

N’dachVeip returned that nod. “I have come to visit the king,” he said.

“I cannot let you in, Ser. The king is refusing all visitors.”

N’dachVeip’s heart sank. “Even me?” he asked quietly.

“Even you,” Q’alamet said. “I am sorry, Grav’n. The Chaperone is dying, and the king will neither see nor speak with anyone.”

N’dachVeip lowered his gaze, feeling lost. He needed to speak with Paix, but his chance was past. He would have to give his message via the captain instead, much though he would prefer to give it in person.

“Well… if he needs me,” he murmured, “please tell him that I am willing to do anything for him. If he needs someone to take the reins for a while, so he can grieve without worry, then I will do that.”

“If he is ready to hear your offer, I will put it to him, but I fear that may not be for a while yet.”

N’dachVeip nodded, his heart heavy.

“I have made it,” he said, “and that is the best I can do for now. If he will hear nothing else, then tell him that he is loved, and that our hearts are holding both him and Mhenheli.”

JUST ME AND YOU

Mhenheli was settled back into bed, as comfortably as Paix could make him. The pillow was soft, plumped up by a king’s hands, and the blanket was tucked gently by the same regal fingers.

“You have learned well, how to make a body comfortable,” Mhenheli whispered.

Paix smiled, sitting on the edge of the bed. “Well, look at the example I have had before me for my entire life. How could I not have learned when I had you as my tutor?”

“May it serve you well through your life.” The words were spoken on a soft sigh as Mhenheli closed his eyes.

“I shall hold that tender duty as dear to me as you have always held it, maah’qab.” Paix watched that tired face upon the pillow, so dear, so old, so weary. He swallowed through a tight throat, and asked softly, “Will you have a little something to break your fast this morning?”

The silver head upon the pillow moved slightly from side to side.

“The only thing I need now,” Mhenheli whispered, “is you beside me.”

Without hesitation, Paix got to his feet, walked around to the other side of the bed, kicked off his sandals, tossed his coat over the back of a nearby chair, and slipped beneath the blanket. Gently, he wrapped both arms around his beloved Chaperone, cradling him tenderly.

“Do you remember,” Mhenheli said softly, a smile dancing around the corners of his lips, “when you filled my bed with sand?”

Closing his eyes, Paix nuzzled his cheek against Mhenheli’s and huffed a faint laugh.

“Well,” he murmured, “you *had* carried me unceremoniously under your arm through the whole palace the night before, when I had escaped my bedtime once more.”

Mhenheli chuckled. “Richly deserved. Stars, you were more wily than a desert fox. You gave me such a challenge each night, trying to find your latest hiding place.”

“But you always found me.”

“Of course. Mostly because you could not help yourself from giggling at the thought of me looking everywhere for you.”

Paix smiled. “It was fun, thinking I had given my stern Chaperone the slip, and sometimes peeking through cracks in doorways or keyholes as you searched for me. I was the naughtiest child, and I must have been a terror to raise.”

“A terror, yes. But also, a joy. That laughter was so difficult to ignore when I had to be the stern Chaperone. I would complain to Nehle-aalh of my struggles to keep a straight face.”

Paix turned his head, kissing Mhenheli’s weathered cheek. “No doubt,” he murmured against the wrinkled skin, “she told you to stop being so serious, to let go, and to have a bit of fun. And she probably tried to ply you with honey wine as she did so.”

“Mmhm. ‘Loosen up a little’ was the thing she said most often to me.”

“I can well believe it. Stars, I miss her,” Paix whispered.

Again, Mhenheli breathed a soft sigh. “As do I,” he murmured. “But perhaps I shall see her again soon. And I shall tell her of the man you became, and she will burst with pride to know it. You were the halo around the moon to her.”

“And she was the water in the desert to me,” Paix said softly.

There was a long and comfortable silence.

“Paix…”

“Hmm?” Again, he nuzzled that cheek, kissing it.

“What have I been to you?”

He tightened his embrace.

“My confidante. My guiding star. My compass. My strength. My most beloved. You have given me the peace and love and joy I have sought my whole life. You have been the beat of my heart.”

Mhenheli smiled.

“And you have been the light of my world,” he murmured. “Let us sleep for a while together.”

I AM WEARY, DON’T LET ME REST

The little bird waited quietly, their eyes watching over the room from their perch on the windowsill. Occasionally they preened a feather here and there, but as the day wore on and the peace of the room continued, they stilled.

Far below, the faint echo of the sunset horn drifted up through the windows, as the first stars began to speckle the painted sky, and the sun slowly lay down in her bed of night.

Paix’s eyes opened. Deep inside him, something called to him; the silent call that he had heard countless times before.

The silent call that he had dreaded to hear this time.

He closed his eyes, wishing he could will it away, but it pulled at him, tugging, yearning, calling. He could no more ignore it than he could stop the sun from setting.

Quietly, he turned his head and kissed Mhenheli’s cheek, then with infinite care he withdrew from the embrace he had held his beloved Chaperone in for the past few hours. He pushed back the covers and slipped from the bed. Unerringly, his feet found his sandals, and he walked across the lowly-lit room to crouch before the chest that stood by the door to the long balcony.

He opened the chest, his hand reached inside, his fingertips found the soft leather pouch, and they pushed into its depths. They closed around something small and metallic, drawing it out of the bag, out of the chest, and into his palm.

He stared down at it. Then he did something he had never done before. He brought the small copper totem to his lips and kissed it.

“Cradle him tenderly,” he whispered to it.

He needed no chair this time. Instead, he approached the bed where his heart lay and sank to his knees beside it.

Dark eyes opened; their gaze fixed upon his face. Slowly, Mhenheli nodded.

“Yes,” he whispered. “I feel it, too. It is time.”

Tears welling in his eyes, Paix reached for Mhenheli’s hand, clasping it in his own warm palm. He had never before wept at any bedside, but this time he could not hold back the silent tears that spilled over and coursed down his face.

“I have listened to so many words,” he said hoarsely. “But yours will be the hardest for me to hear.”

Mhenheli’s gaze did not leave his face.

“These tears show me that my life has been well lived,” he murmured. “I have so little to leave to others after I am gone from this earth. But what has been mine I give to you.”

Mutely, Paix nodded, too emotional to speak. He brought that beloved old hand to his lips and kissed the back of it.

Mhenheli sighed softly once more, but his gaze remained fixed upon Paix’s face.

“Maah’qab, if the Vigil’s Grace allows it, I will be with you throughout eternity, watching over you. As I walk with the stars, I will walk by your side, and though you may not see me, I will be there, always, in some way.”

Another quiet sigh. And then he spoke for the final time.

“My name has been Mhenheli al-Q'isaraf. My candle will shine brightly… for you were my world, and I have loved you… stars, how I have loved you. And, in return, you gave me the gift of your love when I held out my heart to you. Your eyes and your arms are my home, your smile is the sun on my face, and your touch is the wind in my hair.”

He smiled. “Thank you, maah’qab. With all my heart, thank you.”

Blinded by tears, his hands trembling, Paix gently placed the copper totem into that beloved palm, closing the fingers around it and kissing them over and over as he choked out the words.

“Now forever undying.”

He knelt, lost in anguish and pain for several moments, his eyes closed as tears streamed down his face. One shuddering inbreath later, he fell back on duty, as his beloved Chaperone had always done, and he whispered the blessing through lips that he thought would never smile again.

"The sands cradle you, the winds carry you, and the stars embrace you. The Vigil's light shines upon you and through you, for the Vigil is Love and you are Loved. Your life has blessed this earth, and to the earth you return. Maah'Qiza liaah-qun."

Unseen by his tear-blurred eyes, a soft blue wisp rose into the air. It swirled around him in a tender loving caress, and then it drifted slowly toward the window, finding there what it sought.

A moment later, the two tiny, clawed feet that had been waiting so patiently on the windowsill since before sunrise hopped lightly into the air. Ghostly teal wings flapped once, twice, and then the little desert bird soared up silently for a glorious moment before they swooped down toward the floor.

They landed on four little paws, which padded quietly across the room. Their fur glowed as they purred softly and nuzzled their head against the man who knelt beside the bed, sobbing.

COME TENDERNESS

N'dachVeip looked up from the contraption he was tinkering with as he heard the bedroom door open. His hand stilled and the soft scratching of the tool he'd been using ceased as he saw Hadita walking into the room.

Over her head she had draped a long veil he had never seen before, but he knew of its significance. It was plain, and of a soft dusky pink. The colour of desert flowers. The Paixandrian colour of mourning.

"We must go to the gardens," she murmured, holding out her hand to him. "We must stand vigil with the king."

He had never questioned the closeness of his wife's people to death. She had told him before that all Paixandrians called silently to their king in the final moments of their lives, and he knew that there was something innate in the desert folk; a kinship with death that he could not understand, but that he respected, nonetheless.

Nobody had come to their home that day to bring any news to them. And yet here Hadita stood before him, somehow knowing that Mhenheli had passed from this life, somehow sensing Paix's grief.

He set the contraption down and rose to his feet, taking her hand. Together they left their house, stepping out into the night. Above them, stars glittered in the clear skies, and as they turned the corner onto the main street, he saw shafts of light opening onto the cobbles. From many doorways throughout the city other people were leaving their homes, too. Paixandrians all, with veils and scarves of mourning over their heads or around their shoulders, they slowly walked down the path alongside N'dachVeip and Hadita.

He heard a soft bell-like chime and saw that a young woman just ahead of them held a small copper cymbal in each hand, suspended from short, slender ribbons. Every second slow step, she tapped the cymbals together, and their gentle sound rang through the quiet streets.

Doors that had not opened for Paixandrians to leave them now opened at this sound, and people from the other lands gathered on the front steps of their homes, silently watching the procession file past.

N'dachVeip bit his lip as - up ahead, in front of the statue - he saw a tall figure robed all in the same dusky pink, walking slowly, alone, toward the gardens. Draped over his head, a long veil of the same colour, and cradled in his hands, an unlit brown candle.

Oh, Paix. Oh, my friend. If I could only hold you right now as you once held me when my world had fallen apart.

The gardens were lit by a strange golden light that seemed to fall from the acacia trees whose canopies provided shade over the central white circle during the daytime. As they approached, he saw that Paix's robed and veiled figure was already kneeling in the middle of that circle. On the edges of the gardens, Paixandrians now gathered quietly, offering their silent comfort to their king. And he stood with them, his arm around Hadita's waist.

The soft chime of the cymbals had stopped, and as N'dachVeip watched, the candle rose up of its own accord from Paix's cupped hands. From above the kneeling figure, a beautiful rain of light began to fall, and he stared at it, entranced. He had always thought the name of this place - the Rainlight Gardens - was lovely, but he'd had no idea that this was why it was so called.

The light indeed fell like rain, spattering around the kneeling figure to pool in glittering little puddles on the white path. Paix raised his cupped hands, and the light slowly filled them, splashing and gathering into each of them. Then, as the liquid light seemed almost ready to spill over them, he touched one hand to the base of the candle and held the other above the wick.

Slowly, he tilted that hand, and the light poured down from it. As it touched the wick, a flame leapt up, clear and tall and brilliant and pure.

Paix lowered his hands, allowing the rest of the light to pour gently from them onto the ground before him. The glistening drops of light slowly ceased, leaving only the golden glow that shone down from the treetops above him, mirrored by the flame of the candle that slowly lowered itself to the ground, resting gently on the white path before him, burning soft and true.

Paix rested his palms on his knees, bowing his head. Around him, N'dachVeip saw all who were gathered there also bow their heads, and so he followed suit, his heart aching for his dearest friend.

The warm and golden embrace of the Vigil faded, but only from his vision. Mhenheli could still feel its love holding him, filling him, cradling him, as if the arms of his ah'lamah were around him once more.

He smiled at the memory of her soft black hair and her gentle brown eyes. He had taken after her, so many had told him, and he had been glad of that, for his ah'lamah had been beautiful both in face and heart.

As the golden light dissipated, he looked around, wondering where he found himself. For a moment he thought he was in the stars, as above him and around him there was a deep blackness. But he realised it was not filled with the stars that he had expected, and he was standing on a small island of ground that was a golden yellow in colour; ground that shimmered and glinted as if lit by a million tiny candle flames or crushed pieces of mirror.

Where was he?

A slow realisation moved through him as he looked down at the ground beneath his feet. He raised his hands to gaze at them. They were no longer aged, his fingers no longer stiff and wrinkled and aching, but long and tanned and young once more.

He lifted those fingers to touch his face. Smooth skin beneath them; yes, creased with one or two faint lines, but no longer weathered and tired and old. He felt just as he had felt when he was at his most alive and happy, when he had finally held out his heart to Paix, whose hands had cradled it tenderly even as they offered his own heart in return.

On the edge of his vision, something bright caught his attention. It was above him and coming closer; a golden light that shone as bright and warm as that of the Vigil had. Emanating from it, reaching out to him, all he could feel was love, and he smiled at it as he lowered his hands.

As it drew closer, he stared at it, his eyes widening. There was a figure in the centre of the light; a figure wearing something wholly familiar to him, something he had seen many times, something he had held out while someone beloved shouldered into it. A long ivory coat, the skirt of which moved as if blown by an unseen breeze.

Mhenheli's eyes filled with tears as the figure landed softly on the small island where he stood, and the golden light faded away, leaving Paix standing before him.

“You cannot be here,” Mhenheli whispered. “Maah’qab, tell me that you did not follow me into death. Please, tell me—“

Paix reached out to him, taking his hands with a gentle smile. In his eyes was an endless sorrow, but also an endless love.

“I did not follow you into death,” he murmured. “I am here because of duty. Something that you also know well.”

“But… how?”

Paix lifted Mhenheli’s fingers to his lips and kissed them.

“This is the part of me,” he said, “that nobody knows of, that nobody sees until it is their time to journey here.”

Mhenheli gazed at him. There was something strange about Paix that he had never noticed before when he was alive. He couldn’t quite define it, but it felt ethereal, and the closest he could come to identifying it was that it felt a little like the golden encompassing love and comfort that the Vigil had cradled him in after he had closed his eyes for the last time.

“Where are we?” he whispered. “And why are you here? What duty brings you to this place?”

Paix’s gaze didn’t leave his face as he spoke.

“This is the Land Beyond Death. After a soul passes from its life, it is cradled in the embrace of the Vigil while I light its candle. And then, when the candle is lit and I am sitting vigil over it in the earthly realm, I come here to perform my final duty to that soul. I am the Keeper of Lifetimes and Endings. I am Death’s Prophet. And I am he who bears the weight of souls across the void. Once, I was servant of the Vigil. Now, I am *become* the Vigil.”

He let go of Mhenheli’s hands, then lifted him into his arms, cradling him with ease.

“You know of duty, maah’qab,” he murmured. “This is my duty to every soul who passes.”

As Mhenheli watched, his lips parting in amazement, two huge wings unfurled behind Paix, shivering as they did so, until they arched over him. But they were not feathered, as those of the statue had been. They were made of bone and a gauze-thin membrane that shimmered pale blue and almost iridescent in the strange light of this land. But, as he stared, he realised they were damaged and had been mended. Bright copper threads twined around the shattered bones, and long strips of ivory and white silk ribbons were tied about and trailed from them.

“Have I loved and served a god?” Mhenheli breathed, awestruck.

At that, Paix chuckled. “Not quite, no. I am still just a man, maah’qab, but a man who can do something no other is able to. Once, you carried me. Now, I return that embrace.”

The great wings spread, beat together once, then spread again as Paix leapt effortlessly into the air, still carrying Mhenheli. And then they were soaring above the void, as the tiny little glittering island faded into the darkness below them.

The only sign that they were travelling across the void was the slow, almost languid movement of those huge wings. No air rushed past them, and no sound touched them. All was still, but so incredibly peaceful that Mhenheli felt no fear at all. He was held, and he was loved. And, for a brief while, he had Paix with him once more.

Something appeared in the distance. Made of sandstone, it reminded him of the low surrounding wall of the Vigil, far away in Paixandria. As they came closer to it, he realised that was *exactly* what it was. Its shape was intimately familiar to him, but when he had last seen it the great spire of the Vigil had towered above it. There was nothing above this circular wall, but there *was* something within it.

“This is the Well of Stars,” Paix murmured, as he set foot gently on the rim of sandstone. “Beyond here is eternity. Beyond here, you walk with the stars.”

As Mhenheli looked down into it, he saw the most beautiful sight. Within the circle, a deep indigo darkness glittered with the tiny pinpricks of thousands of stars. It reminded him of the ceiling of Paix’s bedroom, and he wondered if that was why the ceiling had been painted so.

Paix had set him down on the sandstone rim and stood with one arm around his waist.

“The fall into the Well of Stars is slow and gentle and warm,” he said softly. “There is no fear, only love. I will watch over you.”

“I just… step off this ledge?”

Paix smiled at him. “Yes.”

The great wings slowly came together behind him. Even once they had stilled, their ribbons moved gently in a breeze that did not exist, as did the skirts of his long ivory coat.

“And you will watch over me?” Mhenheli whispered.

“Until the last moment, yes. Until you walk with the stars.”

With that assurance, Mhenheli turned so that his back was to the shimmering, star-speckled depths of the Well of Stars. He wanted to see that beloved face until that last moment.

He stepped backwards, and his feet left the sandstone.

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The fall was slow and gradual, as it always was. Paix watched, his heart full, as his beloved Chaperone gently sank into the Well of Stars. And then, one final urge gripped him.

He sank to one knee upon the sandstone rim. Reached out one hand. Cupped Mhenheli's chin with it. Stopped the fall for a moment.

He bent his head, leaned over the well, and kissed Mhenheli one final time. As he drew away, he murmured, "Thank you, maah'qab, for your devotion, and for your love."

Mhenheli smiled, and in his dark eyes Paix could see nothing but peace.

His voice so low as to be almost a breath, Paix uttered the last words he would ever say to this beloved man.

"Maah'qab tazu alaa'qab, id'haye nahid."

That beautiful smile brightened, and he let go, watching as Mhenheli sank beneath the stars, gaze fixed on him until the final moment.

He lowered his head, and one tear fell into the deep swirl of stars below him.

"May the Vigil's Grace bring you back to me again one day," he whispered.

Then he rose, the great wings spread once more, and he flew away toward home.

HE REMEMBERS

His consciousness returned to the earthly realm. Before him in the quiet of the peaceful gardens, the brown candle burned softly. His gaze remained fixed upon the flame as it shimmered in the night air, but not a drop of wax around it melted. The flame burned and burned, but the candle remained untouched.

Around him, at a respectful distance, he could sense the love and comfort of his people, of his friends. He could feel their presence among the night-scented flowers and between the trees.

He knew that they, too, were watching the candle, seeing its ever-burning flame and its unchanging shape. Of the hundreds - possibly thousands - of candles that he had lit in his lifetime, none had ever done this. They had all slowly melted, quietly softening into no more than a lingering pool of wax, and he had sat vigil over every one.

But not this one.

Carefully, he picked it up, cradling it in one hand and holding it steady with the other as he rose to his feet. The flame barely flickered, even though it should have done so at that movement.

He turned, beginning the slow walk out of the gardens and back up to the castle. As he did so, something red - the familiar sight of an old scarf - caught his gaze, and he found himself looking at N'dachVeip, who quietly pressed his closed fist to his chest, then opened it and held it palm upwards toward Paix as if giving him something.

It was a sign that Paix knew well, as Hadita had taught it to him also. In the silent language of hands, it meant *'my heart is with you'*.

In response, Paix managed a faint nod, then his gaze returned to the candle and the long walk ahead of him.

I ASKED FOR LOVE

"Onorait," Q'alamet murmured, bowing low as Paix approached him. "What do you need of me? Should I fetch someone to..."

Paix shook his head.

"I will do this alone," he said. "It is a final service I can give to him, after his years of service given to me. All I need of you is to stand guard and not let a soul enter until at least tomorrow."

Q'alamet bowed again and opened the door. Paix stepped through it, then hesitated, still cradling the candle.

"I..." he whispered. "I will need a shovel. Leave it just inside the door for me."

He saw his captain of the guard look at him with eyes that held such sympathy and sorrow that it almost broke him. But Q'alamet simply nodded, and murmured, "I shall fetch one for you, Onorait."

The door closed behind him, and he was alone in the silence of his quarters. It was a silence that now held only his own breath and the faint crackle of the candle flame. Not another soul was here now; only his own.

He carried the candle through into his bedroom, and the light of its flame flickered across the smooth stone walls. He set it gently down on the table beside the bed, where lay the body of the man who had loved and served him for so long.

From the side room, he fetched a copper bowl, filling it with water from the jug that stood always ready by the sink. Taking the softest cloth he could find, he carried it and the bowl back into the bedroom, placing them on the table next to the candle.

He drew the sheets back, sat on the edge of the bed, dipped the cloth into the water, wrung it out, and tenderly began to wash Mhenheli's face and body, preparing him for his shroud. He worked gently, quietly, taking the utmost care.

In the room beyond, he heard the door open and the quiet sound of something being leaned against the wall, before the door was closed once more.

He continued his task.

A fresh set of black robes lay neatly folded in the heavy wooden drawers against the far wall. He carefully removed them and dressed his Chaperone in them, taking his time as he moved each still and empty limb into the soft black cloth.

He took up the old camel bone comb that had run through his own hair so many times, and - once again seated on the edge of the bed - he leaned forward to run it through silver hair, gently combing it into the style that Mhenheli had always worn.

Beside the bed, on the other table, the little brightly coloured pot of desert flowers was already in bloom. With his fingernails, he gently nipped off one long sprig of the flowers. Placing Mhenheli's hands together upon his chest, he tucked the flowers into the one that was not holding the small copper totem.

There he left Mhenheli, walking into the antechamber and picking up the shovel that had been left for him. Now began the backbreaking work, but he would have no other do this. It was his task alone.

He opened the door to the outer balcony, where he liked to sit in the evenings and watch the mountains. He had had soil and grass brought up here, so that he could have a small garden blooming just outside his door and window, and as Mhenheli's life had slowly faded away, Paix had long made up his mind that his Chaperone would not rest in the catacombs.

He would rest here.

The shovel found the grass and then the soil beneath it, over and over. Soft earth piled up to one side as he toiled. When he was done, he rested the shovel against the wall and returned to the bedroom.

At the very bottom of the large chest of his personal belongings, there lay a heavy leather pouch. He drew it out and carried it to the balcony, where he knelt and opened it. Delving one hand inside, he withdrew a handful of soft desert sand, which he scattered into the grave he had dug. A second handful followed it, and then a third, until the bed of the grave held a soft and thin layer of sand atop the soil.

Closing the pouch, he returned it to the chest and bent to wash his hands in the bowl of water, drying them on the damp cloth as best he could.

He turned, sliding both arms beneath the frail body that was all that remained in this earthly realm of his beloved Chaperone. Lifting him up, he carried him around to the other side of the bed, where he laid him gently down upon the top of the blanket.

With infinite tenderness, he wrapped the blanket around Mhenheli's body, shrouding him in the beautiful blue softness that had once cradled them both. And then, he lifted him once more, carrying him out to the balcony.

As if laying a sleepy child down in his bed, as he had once been laid down into his own bed by those same hands so many years ago, he rested Mhenheli upon the bed of sand down in the warm soil. He picked up the shovel once more, and slowly and carefully he buried his beloved Chaperone.

The little pot of flowers he then brought out with him, planting it atop the mound of soft earth, whispering to it a plea that it would grow strong and true. And then, finally, he brought the candle to the head of the grave, placing it in a copper stand and setting it down.

His work finally done, he lay down beside the grave, closing his eyes and finally allowing grief to wash over him.

Outside, the skies quietly clouded over, and a rare gentle rain began to fall.

COME BACK TO US

N'dachVeip didn't hold out much hope that he would be able to see Paix, but nonetheless he was determined to try, day after day if he had to. The pain in the blue eyes that had stared at him for only a moment as Paix had walked past him in the gardens the night before had haunted his dreams, giving him the most restless night he'd had in years.

This morning, Hadita had cooked him a hearty meal to break his fast, kissed him, and then watched as he'd set out for the castle. Even if Paix wouldn't see him, he

had resolved to be there in his capacity as the most senior noble of the city, in case he was needed.

He didn't feel capable of taking up such responsibility, but Hadita's words would not leave him.

"My people have a saying: 'Every hand reaches out to those who mourn'. It is our way, to do whatever we can for those in grief. Reach out your hand, my strong and beautiful man. He carried you once, when you desperately needed it. You must do the same for him. Give the gift of your hand to your oldest and dearest friend."

And so, he was here, walking toward the captain of the guard who had turned him away only the day before. He could feel Q'alamet's eyes on him as he approached, and the man bowed to him.

"Grav'n," he said.

N'dachVeip came to a halt. "I suppose there's no hope that I…" he began, gesturing with one hand to the door behind Q'alamet.

To his surprise, Q'alamet hesitated.

"The king ordered that not a soul was to be permitted entry to his quarters," he said. "Until tomorrow… which is now today."

Oh, thank the gods.

Q'alamet opened the door for him, and he stepped inside, waiting as the door closed quietly behind him.

He had been in Paix's quarters on a number of occasions and knew them fairly well. It was late enough in the morning that Paix should be awake, if he had even slept at all last night, but still N'dachVeip crept on silent feet through the outer room and through the door into Paix's bedroom.

He was braced to see anything, but what he saw told him everything. The copper bowl of water beside the bed, with the crumpled cloth beside it. The missing blue blanket. The door to the outer balcony half open.

Through that door, another story presented itself to him. He saw the shovel leaning against the wall. The long mound of soft dirt, atop which delicate pink flowers had been planted. The brown candle, still burning at the head of the grave.

And Paix, sitting with his back against the wall just outside and to the right of the door, his knees drawn up and his arms hugging them, his neck bent, his gaze fixed upon the grave. Still robed, still veiled, in that dusky pink of deep mourning.

There was nothing that N'dachVeip could say. Once, when his whole world had fallen apart, Paix had been there for him. Now he was here for Paix, and he quietly sat down beside him, offering only his company and his comfort if Paix was ready to accept it.

They sat together for a long time, in utter silence. The clean scent of the pines that covered the distant mountains drifted across the balcony as the sun moved past its zenith and slowly made its way into the soft warmth of late afternoon.

Finally, Paix spoke.

"I loved him," he whispered.

Oh… oh, my friend.

"I loved him," he said again, his voice trembling. "He gave me his heart, and I gave him mine. And now he walks among the stars, alone, with my heart his only company."

N'dachVeip turned toward him.

"Then he does not walk there alone, but instead he has you with him, does he not?" he said gently. "And you have him still with you, here." He placed his palm against Paix's chest. "Right here."

That one touch, just that simple touch, was enough to bring forth a sob from his dearest friend; a sob like that of a child lost and alone.

"I miss him," Paix whimpered. "I miss him *so much*."

Just as he had comforted his own children, just as Paix had once comforted him, N'dachVeip wrapped his arms around Paix and simply held him tightly. He held on as his friend's shoulders shook, as his breath hitched and gasped, as he sniffled and choked down the sobs that he so badly needed to give voice to.

"I've got you," N'dachVeip murmured, his arms tightening, his hand rubbing slowly and warmly up and down Paix's back. "I've always got you. You can let go now, my friend."

And the calm and serene desert king broke apart in his arms. The first low, keening sob became a wail of anguish; a wretched sound of grief the intensity of which N'dachVeip had never heard before and prayed that he would never hear again. Paix's fists beat against N'dachVeip's shoulders as he cried his pain out to the evening skies and to his oldest and dearest friend, untrammelled and wild grief consuming him until he had scarcely any breath left in him, and his sobs died into mournful whimpers, and finally silence.

It was a weary N'dachVeip who trudged in through the front door of his home the next morning. He had stayed with Paix all day and all night, sitting quietly with him on the balcony for hours, and then putting him to bed. He'd found another blue blanket in the chest by the door, draping it over his weary friend, and then pulled up a chair, where he sat wrapped in his cloak, watching over Paix as he finally slipped into an exhausted sleep.

Hadita looked up from her embroidery as the door opened and her husband walked in. Hastily, she laid down the embroidery hoop and hurried over to him, her dark eyes searching his, filled with concern.

He bent his head to kiss her, wrapping his arms around her.

"I need to sit down," was all he murmured, leading her over to the couch. There he sat, one elbow resting on the arm of the couch, and he let his forehead sink into his palm as he sighed heavily.

Hadita nestled up to his side, embracing him.

"The king mourns," she said softly, as she rested her head on his shoulder.

"No," N'dachVeip murmured, his voice hoarse with emotion. "The king is beyond mourning. He is utterly broken."

Hadita closed her eyes. "The Chaperone served him for a long time," she said. "From my knowledge, the king was but a child of seven years and the Chaperone a young man of seventeen when he entered royal service. And the position of royal Chaperone in our society is one of devoted service and intimacy, a sort of confidante as well as a servant. The king feels the loss of such closeness."

"Mhenheli was more than just a Chaperone to him." N'dachVeip turned to look down at her, sliding his arm around her waist and hugging her to his side. "*I loved him*, he told me as he sobbed in my arms. *He gave me his heart, and I gave him mine. And now he walks among the stars, alone, with my heart his only company*."

Hadita made a soft, wounded sound of sorrow. "I had wondered as much," she whispered. "The looks I sometimes saw them give each other… they reminded me of the looks we share. The king never took a wife, nor any lover or companion that we knew of."

"That we knew of." N'dachVeip said quietly. "Because he had who he needed by his side every day. Mhenheli was Consort in all but name, and yet the grief that I

felt from my friend tells me their relationship ran much, much deeper even than that. It was a wild and desperate grief, the like of which I pray I never see again."

"Oh, my love… Such a grief as that… They must have been stars-bound," Hadita murmured, her tone mournful. "I have heard tell of it only in legends and fireside stories. There is a companionship that surpasses mortal love. It goes beyond the grave, and beyond time. The tales speak of two people destined to find each other in every life that they live. They are bound together by the stars, and so we call them stars-bound. After they die and are reborn into a new life, they are drawn to each other again and again, and somehow always seem to find each other in some way."

N'dachVeip stared down at her, his eyes widening, then closing tightly as the realisation of what she had said washed over him.

"But Paix is immortal," he whispered, his mind going back to the broken man who wept in his arms, his wild grief untrammelled in its pain and anguish. "He will never have any other life but this."

Hadita nodded sadly. "He has forever lost his stars-bound."

SO MUCH

The cool air of a spring morning, fresh before dawn touched the sky with the paintbrush of its beauty, drifted through the open windows. Their shutters had not been closed, as the scents of the night were so beautiful at this time of year; dusky pollens mingling with the clean freshness of pine from the nearby mountains.

Paix knelt beside the chest that held Mhenheli's most precious belongings. From within, he reached for something beautiful, something he never knew his Chaperone had possessed. Slowly, he withdrew it, a long looped string of beads. They were of copper, both new and old, beautiful glossy amber, and pure quartz. Five lengths in total, separated by larger polished deepslate beads speckled with emerald glints. On either side of each deepslate bead, a thin beaten copper cartouche bore the familiar Paixandrian symbol of 'trust'.

Slowly, Paix looped the beads once around his finger, letting them rest loosely against his emerald ring. Winding them back around his hand, he wrapped them three times around his wrist, securing them with the copper clasp at that point. The loop that remained hanging down he caught up with his thumb and forefinger, and he began silently counting through them.

He rose to his feet, passing the beads through his hand over and over as he walked out onto the long balcony, nodding to the guard who opened the door to him.

“New face,” he murmured as the door closed.

He turned to face the distant hills, slowly and calmly passing each bead between thumb and forefinger as he watched the sun paint the sky with its most beautiful palette.

Maah’qab, if the Vigil’s Grace allows it, I will be with you throughout eternity, watching over you. As I walk with the stars, I will walk by your side, and though you may not see me, I will be there, always, in some way.

“The sky is a beautiful pink, maah’qab,” he whispered. “And it slowly is becoming such a lovely golden peach. And now, as it brightens into warm gold I hear the sunrise horn sounding. There are many people in the streets this morning, and they are turning to face the statue as we all wait for the sun to rise. Its rays slowly move up her skirts, shining off the rooftops as it rises higher, its rays shimmering over the hills… and now… her golden wing sings out its beauty in a blaze of light.”

He watched for a moment more in silence, as the reflected light coruscated from the statue’s golden wing. And then, in unison with his people below, he murmured, “Grant their next lives a bountiful harvest.”

CHAPTER 71

Days bled into days bled into days. Paix cared not for the passing of time, for - where once every moment had been precious - now every moment reminded him of the emptiness around him.

His quarters were bereft of life. No other heartbeat, no other breath, no other soft rustle of fabric or whisper of sandals across the floor, no scratch of quill nib over paper. The brazier did not crackle into life, the scent of sha' spices did not fill the air, and the ever-present quiet companionship was no more.

But worst of all, most painful of all, were his empty arms at night. He would lay himself down, pull the covers over himself, and instinctively reach out, only to be met with nothing. Tears would gather and spill over; a rivulet of sorrow and loneliness that lost itself in his pillow.

But in the mornings, when he awoke, he was never wholly alone. His hand would be resting in soft, ethereal, teal-coloured fur, and the quiet snoring of a cat would be close by him; sometimes upon the pillow, and sometimes nestled warmly against him. His fingers would stroke through that fur as it had done through Mhenheli's hair in those final days, and while the memory still wrung tears from him, these peaceful morning moments were a balm that slowly and quietly began to heal the raw wound of loss carved through him.

He had taken Mhenheli's accounts book, and - beneath the final entry - he had drawn a small lit candle. He wore Mhenheli's beads, sometimes around his neck and sometimes wrapped around his wrist and hand. And he watched the sun rise every morning, whispering the tale of that day's beauty into the silent air, for Mhenheli had promised to walk by his side every day, and would surely hear it even if he could not see it.

N'dachVeip visited regularly, proving to be the only thing that kept him from sinking into a deep well of despair. He had offered to take up the role of ruling the city, and for that Paix had mumbled his thanks again and again, at each visit. He knew that his old friend had never been comfortable in such a position, even over his own people, but that he had offered to do so for Paix was humbling, and a debt that Paix was not sure he could ever repay.

Sometimes N'dachVeip just sat with him, keeping him company, and while he could never take the place of Mhenheli, just having another person in the room - another heartbeat, another breath - made the loneliness just a little bit more bearable.

Sometimes he would consult Paix on a matter that he wanted guidance on. Paix knew this was his old friend's gentle way of trying to draw him back to the world of the living, attempting to engage his interest once more in what was going on around him. And sometimes Paix would reply, but more often than not he would simply give his friend a sorrowful look and shake his head.

And sometimes N'dachVeip would simply sit beside him and hold him. The tears that flowed in those times were now quieter, softer; no longer wild and anguished. With those arms around him, holding him tightly in the kind of big, warm hug that only his old friend had ever been able to give him, the world slowly began to right itself.

Weeks bled into weeks bled into weeks. After Mhenheli's death, N'dachVeip had issued a proclamation that all Paixandrians should enter a period of mourning for one month, and this time had now passed. He reported that, still, many of them continued to wear a small item in the mourning colour - an armband or a scarf - and Paix had murmured that they did so out of respect for him. While he still mourned, so would they.

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"Would it be all right if Hadita accompanies me tomorrow?" N'dachVeip had asked one afternoon. "She's been asking me every day how you are, and it would put her mind at ease if she could see for herself, because she keeps giving me doubtful looks when I say that you're doing as well as might be expected."

Paix had acquiesced as graciously as he could, though he would have preferred only N'dachVeip's company. Again, he'd wondered if this was another attempt to slowly reintegrate him into the daily life of his people, but he could not in all conscience tell his old friend that his beloved wife could not accompany him.

And so, he sat on the couch, awaiting their arrival. N'dachVeip had told him they would come at around the time of the midday meal, and that he should not request any food to be delivered for them.

He had whiled away the morning making himself a little more presentable than he had been bothering to do of late, combing his hair and even trimming his beard, holding back the tears that threatened to make yet another appearance, for it was the first time in many years that his own hands had done this.

He had neatened the room as much as he could, making the bed, tidying the cushions, putting away his journal, opening the shutters, and even lighting some incense. And, as he did so, he actually managed a half-smile.

You wily old fox. With just that request for your wife to visit with you today, here you have me doing more than I have done for myself in weeks. With you, I felt permitted to be unkempt, for my bed to be unmade and my quarters untidy. But I could not bear for Hadita to see me this way.

The knock came soon enough, the guard outside answering his command to allow his guests in. N'dachVeip walked in first, as Paix stood from the couch, and within a moment those arms were around him in a big, warm hug. But over his shoulder, the warm and smiling figure of Hadita had entered the room behind him, a covered basket over her arm. She still wore a mourning veil, in honour of Paix, and as N'dachVeip released him from the hug, Paix gave her his full attention.

N'dachVeip took the basket from his wife, setting it down on the low table by the couches. Paix touched the fingertips of both hands to his forehead, as Hadita returned the gesture, then he took her hands in his and bowed his head to her.

"Onorait, it warms my heart to see you," she said softly, her dark eyes looking up at him, searching his face and taking in the fact that he was still fully robed and veiled in mourning. She likely also did not miss that his face was thinner and more gaunt than it usually was.

"I told N'dachVeip that you should not trouble yourself to order food for us," she continued, "because I have brought some instead. I thought you might like some familiar Paixandrian treats."

"She's been baking up a storm," N'dachVeip said, eyeing the basket with a grin. "You're lucky I didn't sneak some of it from that basket on the way up here."

Paix managed a smile as he gestured to the couches, waiting for them both to settle before he sat down.

"I was beginning to get a little hungry," he murmured, "so thank you for your thoughtfulness, Hadita."

"I'm afraid that you can't take the mother out of me," Hadita said, with a smile. "My children may be all grown now and no longer needing hugs and treats after scraps and scrapes, but I still know how to make comfort food when a heart needs it."

She pulled back the cover from the basket and began to lift items from it. First, a tall cloth-wrapped lidded jug, the spout of which emitted a faint curl of steam. Next, another little basket whose lid she pulled back to reveal several of Paix's favourite small honey breads. A pot of fresh dates followed, and then a covered

bowl of heavily spiced rice with vegetables and rich meat. And, lastly, a plate of *esaki*, at the sight of which N'dachVeip groaned happily.

"I swear," he muttered, "I'm glad you don't bake that every day, or I'd be as tall sideways as I am upways."

"I would still love you, even if you were as round as a ball," Hadita said with a sidelong grin at him. "But your clothes would not!"

Paix listened and watched fondly, unable to help the faint smile that played about his lips. And then, as she unwrapped the tall jug, Hadita looked over at him.

"I made some sha'," she said hesitantly, "but N'dachVeip likes the same blend of spices as you do, so if you would rather not…"

That scent had just reached him as she spoke those words, and his heart gave a painful wrench. Nonetheless, he gave her a smile - a tremulous one, but a smile nonetheless - and murmured his thanks.

She held out a delicate copper cup to him, filled with spiced sha'. He took it, and to his surprise his fingers did not tremble. Nor did his eyes fill with tears as he raised the cup to his lips.

It was not quite the same as the way Mhenheli had always made it. His Chaperone had known he preferred a little more cardamom and black pepper, whereas Hadita's blend was smoother and more subtle, a little heavier on the cinnamon. It warmed him through, and somehow it calmed the anxious hammering of his heart.

They ate and drank together, with N'dachVeip informing Paix of the progress of circuit farm and warehouse upgrades, as well as the ambassadorial visit from the lands deep within the jungle.

"If I didn't know better, I could swear he was Ser'Zhege's brother," he observed. "Looked exactly like him! But he addressed me as if he didn't know me, and he was a lot younger than Ser'Zhege had been before… well, before things happened. Maybe a distant relative? Who knows."

Paix leaned forward. "Is this the place known to some as The Sanctuary?" he asked. "I have heard of it, and some of their traders attend the markets on the Greatbridge."

"That's the one! They sell meat pies shaped like a crescent moon. Right tasty they are, too."

Paix nodded, his brows knit in thought. "Indeed. And their language is akin to that of Old Mythish, but a little more lyrical in tone. It was curious to hear. Tell me, what

did their ambassador have to say? Was it just a courtesy visit, or was something more behind it?"

***

They talked until late in the afternoon, their discussion veering from ambassadorial visits to family life. Paix ordered honey wine to be brought to his quarters, and they sat and drank as they talked into the evening.

Slowly, and gently, with smiles and chatter around him, Paix found himself leaning forward, engaged and curious for the first time in weeks. And so, when Hadita ventured to ask him something he had no hesitation in responding.

"Onorait, might I see where the Chaperone rests?"

Paix saw N'dachVeip glance first at her, then at him. He saw the worry that flashed through his old friend's eyes. But, in response, he got to his feet and held out a hand to her.

"Of course," he murmured, as she rose and took his hand.

He led her out to the balcony, where the stars were out, and where the candle still burned. The flowers had spread, slowly making their way over the soft mound of earth, and a cushion lay against one wall, which he often sat upon when he spent time out there.

Hadita moved to the foot end of the grave, touched the fingertips of both hands to her forehead, and bowed low. Paix watched, his heart full, as she afforded his beloved Chaperone the gesture of highest honour and respect among their people.

She straightened and looked around, taking in the view of the mountains, and she breathed in the air. Then, she turned and smiled at Paix.

"He rests in a beautiful place," she murmured. "Thank you, Onorait."

***

The basket was empty of all save the bowls and other containers, and as Hadita packed them away and settled the cover back over them, Paix poured them all a final cup from the jug of honey wine.

"It would be wonderful to see you both again," he murmured as he offered them each their cup. "Please… consider it?"

N'dachVeip's smile was broad as he accepted his drink.

“If it means I get to eat my fill of *esaki* then I’m all for that notion,” he said.

“Round as a ball,” Hadita whispered to him, with a little teasing smile and a nudge of her elbow, before she also accepted her cup and turned her attention to Paix.

“As soon as you would have us again, let N’dachVeip know, and I will - as he puts it - bake up a storm again,” she said. “And… I will be bold enough to ask, Onorait, if I may offer a gift to you? I have skill with a needle, and so if you desire it, I could perhaps sew a cushion or a small pillow, or perhaps a marker for your books?”

Paix hesitated.

“I…” he began. “There might be…”

He lowered his head. Could he ask her to do that? Would she accept, or would she find it too maudlin a request? He could… try asking?

Slowly, he got to his feet and walked over to the heavy drawers by the wall. Pulling open the top one, he smoothed his hands over the black robes within. One set he had buried Mhenheli in, but three more sets still lay within the drawer, neatly folded.

“I will not be upset or offended if you refuse,” he murmured, as he drew the topmost set of robes out, letting them lay along one arm as he rested the other arm along the top of them. “I… had not known what to do with them, so they have lain in here as they always have.”

He looked over toward her. She had risen to her feet and was walking over to him. Gently, she placed her hand over his as it lay atop the old, soft fabric.

“It would be an honour,” she said quietly. “I will make whatever you desire from this precious cloth.”

“A pillow, that I may have something to hold,” he whispered. “But after that… I leave the choice to you.”

She took the offered robes with a smile and a nod. “I will bring something new with me each time we visit.”

He smiled. “I would like that.”

***

The throne room was relatively quiet, but the two guards standing by the door watched in surprise as a tall robed and veiled figure walked out of the king’s quarters, made his way across the room, and through the archway into the corridor. They glanced at each other, each with their eyebrows raised. The king

had not been seen for weeks, confining himself to mourn alone in his quarters, and yet after a visit by the Grav'n and his wife, here he was wandering the castle?

Not some five minutes later, the figure walked back in, cradling a brightly coloured little pot from the hothouse. Planted in it was a beautiful little cluster of pink desert flowers, which he carried back into his quarters.

Twenty or so minutes after that, the Grav'n and his wife left the king's quarters. The Grav'n was smiling broadly and carrying a heavy basket over one arm, and his wife was holding the same little pot of flowers, smiling at it in delight.

"You were right," the guards heard the Grav'n say as they approached. "Zhavi, you've done in one afternoon what I have not been able to do in weeks."

He slipped his free arm about her waist and kissed the top of her head, then nodded at the guards as they both walked through the archway into the corridor behind.

"Every hand reaches out to those who mourn," they heard her say.

And, inside those lonely quarters, a tentative peace lay upon the brow of the king who lay down that night in his empty bed.

CHAPTER 72

Pix's field notes book was indeed somewhere in the castle. He finally located it on the desk in the royal quarters, but he had no idea how it got there. It was positioned in such a way that it looked as though someone had been sitting at the desk and reading through it, but that someone sure as hell hadn't been him. He wouldn't have risked sitting on the fragile furniture in here, and if he'd put the book down for a moment then he would have done so on a corner of the desk, to remind himself to pick it back up again.

He reached out to take it, but his hand hesitated. Was that *dust* on it?

He bent closer, leaning down to stare at the leather-bound book. Yes. Yes, it had a thin film of dust covering it. But… it had only been missing for a couple of days at most. And a quick glance up at the sunlight that filtered in through the open shutters showed very few dust motes dancing in the air. There was no way a book could get *this* dusty in just forty-eight hours. The dust accumulated in here was that of *centuries*, not days.

He straightened and carefully picked up the book, taking note of the clear rectangle on the desk where it had lain. The desk itself was not overly dusty, but it had a grimy patina of age that he was very familiar with.

That layer was not present where his book had been.

"What the hell…?" he muttered, looking back down at the book in his hand. He raised it up and blew across the cover, sending a soft little cloud of particles swirling out in a waltz through the sunbeams.

He looked again at the clear space on the desk. Then back at the book.

"Your book came to me," he murmured. "Did mine go to you?"

The reason he'd been hunting for this book suddenly jabbed at him, and he quickly opened it, leafing through to the last page he'd updated. And there, fading right before his eyes, were those words again:

He is coming.

He almost missed what was so peculiar about them, as they vanished so quickly, but he just caught it in time.

The words were written three times on the same line. The first set was lightly penned or faded, the second a little darker, the last darker still. The letters on the

lower layers peeked out from beneath the upper ones, as if they were each written in a different time and their authors had not seen the other lines.

And then they were gone.

***

Back in his own room, Pix laid the book on the desk and set down his rucksack against the wall. Sitting on the bed, he unbuckled his boots, having had to get used to wearing them again after enduring a painful ankle sprain from clambering over ruins in his more comfortable desert-style clothing and sandals. And, because it felt weird to be wearing the boots with those clothes, he'd also returned to his familiar thick brown pants and blue shirt.

At first it had felt odd. Wrong, even. But, almost in resignation, he had managed to grow accustomed to the feel of them again. After all, throughout his life he'd had to grow accustomed to all kinds of different clothes as fashions changed through the ages. At least, he supposed, it had given him a valuable - even precious - insight into what it was like to wear any given style of clothing at any given time period. Still, some fashions had been utterly ridiculous, and he'd felt downright stupid in a few of them, even at the time when everyone else was wearing the same thing.

But for climbing over rocks and ruins? Yeah, good ankle support was a must, and he'd paid for his desire for comfort. His ankle was still a bit fragile and painful, but the boots braced it well, so he'd put up with them feeling weird until they felt like a part of him once again.

He stood the boots up beside the rucksack, and stretched his legs out, gingerly rotating the damaged ankle. The swelling and redness had gone down, thankfully, but he still moved much more carefully while it was in this state. After all, if anything happened out here - any kind of medical emergency or serious injury - he hadn't a hope in hell of getting to a hospital. And immortal or no, he *could* still get hurt.

He took his time changing into the loose comfort of the linen pants and tunic and slipped his feet into the sandals. Carefully, he limped over to the desk, sitting down with a sigh of relief. The trek up to and then back down from the castle had taken him the better part of an afternoon, leaning heavily on a sturdy branch that he'd fashioned into a kind of walking staff. But it had been worth it to finally get his hands on his field notes book again.

He still had no idea how it had ended up there, filmed with dust, on the desk of his other self from that other time. But he had an idea - albeit a harebrained one - of how he might find out.

Now comfortably dressed and sitting at his desk, he opened his inkwell and the book, dipped his quill, and began to write.

To Paix,

Or… to my other self? I'm not certain what to call you, but if you are indeed my other self in another time then surely you go by the same name as I once did, so Paix I shall call you.

To be honest, I'm not sure if I should even be doing this. Are separate versions of the same person even supposed to attempt communication across timelines? But, stars, if it works then just think of the possibilities!

I should, I suppose, introduce myself? I now call myself Pix, for which my students can be blamed. They found it difficult to pronounce my true name, and so I have been stuck with 'Pix' for quite some time now. From that information you might also surmise that I am a teacher. Or, rather, I was a teacher, a professor of archaeology. In fact, I held the archaeology chair at my university until I retired, but that's by the by.

I don't recall hearing the word 'archaeology' when I lived in the time you live in. In fact, I give you the word in English, because I have no word for it in Paixandrian. I will summarise it briefly as a study of history, which I have always been fascinated by, and no doubt you are too. I travel the world, seeking out ancient sites to document, and that's how I found this place.

A'lumiya. People, together. It's a beautiful place, and it has welcomed me. I may be a traveller from its broken and ruined future, but it has held out its arms to me and given me a home. I have spent months documenting every street, every building; all the small things that I find are priceless to my eyes, and I record them all in this book… which, if you have indeed been reading it, you will have noted.

I wonder what you think of this? That there is a version of you somewhere in another time, walking around and living among the ruins of the place that is so vibrant and living for you. And I have seen it that way! The city has given me such joy, allowing me to see the Greatbridge in its bustling glory, the statue in her painted and gilded wonder, the sunrises and sunsets, the castle so filled with life and busyness.

Always, I return to the present day, when the quiet of the savannah is so peaceful. But I glory in its past when I am permitted to. You surely are blessed to experience it every day.

I wonder, too, what happened? Why did the city fall into ruin? I see no signs of siege or war. Rather, it feels as if A'lumiya slowly fell into decay, with no known cause. I hope that the city's end was gentle and painless, and caused no grief to you and those who lived here.

One final wondering, and I hesitate to even write these words. But… where are you now? If, like me, you linger through time, then you must exist somewhere out in the world, in your own timeline. I found my book on your desk, so if you are reading it then you are in the city's past, so you might not even know your future.

I hope it is, or will be, a happy one.

Your other self,
Pix

P.S. Could you please bring the book back to my room next time? It's in the hill just opposite the brewery.

P.P.S. That one day with Mhenheli was the joy of my life. Forgive me.

He closed the inkwell, set the quill back on its stand and watched the ink slowly dry. With a sigh, he got to his feet and limped over to the chest, crouching to open it. There, atop the blue travelling cloak, with the neatly folded black fabric ribbon and the old accounts book beside it, lay the journal of his other self, still where he had left it.

Carefully kicking off his sandals, he settled down on the bed, smiling to himself as Malin seized the opportunity to hop up beside him and curl up against him, purring warmly.

He had devoured this entire journal, but there was so much precious information in it that he would be quite happy to read it all over again, but when he opened it where he had left off, his eyes widened.

The final, tear-spattered entry was no longer the last in the book. Yes, there was one blank page after it, but then the journal picked up again, almost a full year later.

Last night, Menet walked with the stars. Loyal to the end, he insisted that I remain veiled even at his bedside, though tradition dictates that I should be bare-headed. His respect for my mourning touched me deeply, as did his words. He spoke of his pride in Q'alamet, who had taken the role of the son he had never had.

Indeed, Q'alamet was present, as I had relieved him of his duty outside my quarters when I left, telling him that he should accompany me. He saw by the totem in my hand where I was headed, and both he and Menet's wife were with my faithful old captain as he breathed his last.

I had thought that the first death after Mhenheli's would have cut me to the quick, that it would remind me of those agonising first weeks of loneliness without him. But instead, I felt a warm sorrow, akin to that which I had always felt at a deathbed. And I knew it was time. I had healed enough.

I sat by Mhenheli's resting place for hours after my duties to Menet were done. Beneath the stars, talking quietly to him, as I do at the end of every day. But that night, I told him I would lay aside part of my mourning raiment. Only the robes, for I cannot bear yet to part with the veil, but I begged his forgiveness and blessing to do so. Laying aside my mourning, I do not lay aside my beloved Chaperone.

Beside my bed this morning, I woke to find the pot of desert flowers in full and brilliant bloom, whereas yesterday they were but promising little buds. This, I take as Mhenheli's blessing, for those same flowers cover him, and I now sit at my desk in my usual raiment, but still veiled.

N'dachVeip and Hadita will be here for the midday meal. I must ready myself for their visit.

***

It must have been the early hours of the morning when Pix cracked open a bleary eye. Malin was curled up next to his head, their tail twitching as they dreamed. In fact, it was that tail - thwacking across his face - that had awoken him. Stars, he'd nodded off while reading!

He could feel the book still beneath his hand, and he craned his neck to look down, hoping he'd not damaged any of the pages when he'd let it go. Thankfully, all seemed intact and unharmed, and he heaved a sigh, gently pushing Malin's tail away from where it was tickling under his nose again.

Carefully easing himself upright, he tilted his head left and right to ease out the cricks in his neck from sleeping in the same position for what was probably several hours. By his side, Malin huffed a sigh, rolled onto their back, and stretched out, turning themself into an impossibly long, leggy noodle with claws at each end.

Pix chuckled, risking a tickle of that exposed belly. Sure enough, up came Malin's head to blink at him, then - moments later - in went the paws to trap his wrist, the front two grabbing it, and the back two pedalling frantically against it as he laughed.

"All right, all right," he said, extricating his hand from the playful attack. "I'm sorry. No more belly tickles without warning."

Onorait Paix read late

"I did." He settled back against the wall behind the pillow, gaze moving lazily around the room. "This whole book back and forth thing is… weird."

make bird tool marks?

Pix scritched Malin's cheek, earning himself a low, rumbling purr and some very enthusiastic scent-marking.

"Yeah. I made bird tool marks," he said. "You think he'll be able to read them somehow?"

Malin was too absorbed in the scritching to respond, except with more purring and head-rubbing, but as Pix lost himself in thought, so his hand - and thus the scritches - stilled, and finally he felt a feline reply interrupt those thoughts.

Onorait Paix look

"Hm?" He looked down at Malin, who was stretching out again. "Look at what? You're not tempting me into another belly rub. I value my hand too much."

more bird tool marks

Immediately, Pix's gaze snapped over to the book, which still lay open on the desk.

"You've got to be *kidding me*," he whispered, slowly edging off the bed and onto his feet. Warily, he limped over to the desk, hardly daring to look at the book. He could see, without even looking too closely, that there were more words on the page than he had left there.

The first few words - in his own familiar hand, though not written by him - finally sank into his gaze, and he reached out to grab hold of the back of the chair to

steady himself. Slowly, he sat down, not letting go of the chair until he was secure on the seat, and not taking his wide eyes off the book.

Pix. Teacher. Spoken of by Xsia-Minai'Te as another self who wanders another time.

I have seen these ruins, laid as a phantom over the buildings of my time. I have seen you, walking through them, sad of eye and weary of limb, your hand touching only that spectral world and not my living world. As a ghost you are to me, and yet your words reach across time.

Would that we could speak. I write here in hopes that my words, too, reach across time. May the Vigil's Grace grant it so, that my words are seen by your eyes, for I must thank you for what you did. Mhenheli now walks with the stars, but I know now that for one day he served you as you somehow walked in my time. It was to you that he held out his heart, for you had told him what he meant to you. It was you who accepted that heart. It was you who led me to the happiness I had long craved.

I have no forgiveness for you, for it is not needed. Instead, I have only gratitude. Would that we could speak. Would that we could meet. I would embrace you, for my words are a poor messenger for my heart.

Wherever you are, may the Vigil's Grace and Love cradle you until the sadness is gone from your eyes, and eternally thereafter.

Paix

Pix sat back in the chair, stunned, his gaze moving rapidly over the words, scarcely able to take them in. This was… This was…

He froze. Beneath the words of his other self, a faint line spun itself into words.

He is coming.

A darker line overlaid it.

He is coming.

Another line, darker still, overlaid that one.

He is coming.

Three. Three times, again. But no.

Wait.

A fourth.

Silvered, glittering, shimmering like starlight. Brighter than all the others, its argent thread spooled out over them all.

He is coming.

And then, all four faded to nothing.

CHAPTER 73

Long fingers sifted through his hair, carefully easing out and neatening the tousles of sleep. His eyes still closed, he smiled and drifted along the pleasant stream of semi-wakefulness, enjoying this delicate attention that he had missed so much. Gentle lips brushed his mouth, smiling against it, and then the touch was gone, leaving him with a sensation of pure calm and peace.

Paix lay there for a few minutes more, the easy haze of his night's rest slowly falling away until his mind was more present than dreaming. The sounds that drifted through the walls of his tent were those of the dusk before dawn, the whisper of dry grasses and the faintest trill of a distant bird. Not a soul was in the streets outside yet, not a footstep touched the cobblestones, and yet there was a presence in the room that comforted and soothed.

He reached up to rest his hand on the pillow, and it found soft fur. Another smile graced his lips as he finally opened his eyes and saw curled up by his head the ethereal teal form of the kitten he had decided to call Malin.

Their eyes were closed, their nose was tucked under the tip of their little tail, and their ears twitched and flicked. He let his fingertips gently brush through their glowing fur, and they slowly raised their head, blinked a few times, then rasped their tongue over the back of his hand.

"I dream of him, and I wake with your here," Paix whispered to them. "You were a tiny bird until the night he walked with the stars, and since that night you have taken a form that comforts me so greatly."

Malin continued to lick the back of Paix's hand, and he watched them fondly.

"The last words that he spoke to me while living," he murmured, "were 'thank you'. You, my beloved little friend, came into being because of Nehle-aalh, and you have grown with gratitude until you are able to offer me solace in this form. And… I sense him here. Just the faintest echo of him, little enough that I might consider it a wishful thought, but it is a sense that I welcome and hold onto."

Onorait Paix sense black cloth friend

Paix's breath caught in his throat, and he raised his head from the pillow to stare at Malin. Those words had entered his head like any other thought, but the voice he heard them in was not that of his own mind. Instead, it was soft and sweet and vibrating, almost as if spoken through a purr.

"Stars…" he whispered. "What magic is this? You touch my mind with words?"

A familiar golden warmth shimmered within him; a warmth that he had long ago learned to pay close attention to, for it spoke to him when he needed to hear it. Malin butted their head against his hand, purring, and he absent-mindedly stroked their cheek as the warmth twisted and curled like smoke.

"Nothing… is ever truly lost," he eventually murmured, turning his focus back onto Malin. "I think… that you do not speak for him, but instead for yourself. Yet he is a small part of you, as are countless others. This is why, to me, you feel as many rather than as one. Is this what you mean when you touch my mind with those words? That I sense him within you?"

black cloth friend memory love

Paix let his head fall back onto the pillow once more, another smile dancing about his lips.

"I like that you call him by that name," he said softly. "Black cloth friend."

In response, Malin gave a small '*mrrt*' noise - a sound that made Paix chuckle - as they stretched out and then stood up. He watched as they jumped down from his bed, sniffing around the carpets on the floor for a moment, then they walked over to his desk and hopped up on the chair.

bird tool marks

Paix frowned, not understanding whatever that was supposed to mean. He rose up on his elbow and yawned. It had been late when he'd gone to bed, and he had not felt like making the long trek back up to his quarters in the castle.

His tent still stood in the same place where it had been set up when the caravan had first arrived here. Over the years, to protect its heavy cloth from the elements, a wooden frame had been built around and over it, and the Mythish stonemasons had surrounded that frame with a beautiful construction of polished and decorated sandstone, imported from the red hill town far to the southwest, whose land holdings included an expanse of desert that Paix longed to visit. The stonemasons' skill at working with their materials - for truly were they well named 'stone whisperers' - was most pronounced at the façade of this protective sandstone, for they had carved the smooth walls into a facsimile of the draped cloth behind it, leaving an open space as if the cloth that covered the entrance to the stone 'tent' had been pinned up. Behind this, the true cloth entrance hung, and this was his way in and out of his occasional home down here in the city.

Many times had his architects offered to design him a more structured residence, and had laid plans before him with their suggestions. But he had gently refused them all, saying that his tent reminded him from whence he had come, and it

held tender memories for him that he sometimes wished to surround himself with. And, while he missed the constant gentle movement of the cloth walls and ceiling around him - the outside breeze now blocked by the protective sandstone - within the tent was still a precious place for him.

He sat up slowly and stretched, yawning once again. With another glance toward Malin, he saw that they were tentatively sniffing at something upon his desk. Something that… had not been there when he had gone to sleep, for he had left his desk clear of all but his quill stand and inkwells the last time he had been here.

He reached for the simple long linen robe draped over the end of the bed, slipping his arms into it as he got to his feet, pulling it around him, and tying its belt loosely around his waist. He did not bother with his sandals, for now that he was on his feet he could see what Malin was sniffing at.

An open book lay upon his desk, and a quill rested in the stand. As he approached, Malin's words finally made sense. The quill: a tool made from the feather of a bird, and a book could be filled with marks that were made with it. Of course. But from whence had this book appeared?

He reached down a hand to scoop Malin up from the chair, cradling them against his chest as he sat down, gazing at the book. His own hand lay before him on the pages, but these were not words that he had set down.

> *To Paix,*
>
> *Or… to my other self? I'm not certain what to call you, but if you are indeed my other self in another time then surely you go by the same name as I once did, so Paix I shall call you.*
>
> *To be honest, I'm not sure if I should even be doing this. Are separate versions of the same person even supposed to attempt communication across timelines? But, stars, if it works then just think of the possibilities!*

His other self! The one spoken of by Xsia-Minai'Te. The one who had slain the elemental, and who wandered the world in another time, burdened by the guilt of what he had done. The one *he had seen*, walking as a ghost through a spectral ruin of the city and entering this very tent!

This was that other self's hand, identical to his own. These were that other self's words, addressed directly to him.

"My life was split in twain," he whispered, enthralled, "and that part of me cleaved off now reaches out to me across time…"

He devoured the words eagerly. His other self was a teacher, a man who loved history, much as he himself did. His writing was filled with strange words that Paix did not understand - 'archaeology' and 'university' and mention of holding a chair, whatever that meant - but those words soon melted into memory as he read on.

His other self, this future-living man calling himself 'Pix', had walked in what was for him the city's past! He wrote of seeing the Greatbridge 'in its bustling glory', and of the statue and the castle come to life and filled with busyness for him. He wrote of his joy at seeing them. *He had been here, in this time.*

"Was that when I saw you?" Paix whispered. "As I saw a ghost over my living city, did you see a living city over the ghost of its ruins?"

> *P.S. Could you please bring the book back to my room next time? It's in the hill just opposite the brewery.*

He looked up at the cloth walls of the tent before him, his eyes wide. Slowly, he glanced around, as if expecting the spectral figure of himself to appear before him. His room… was here? Right here? But… in a hill? Stars, how far in the future was this? Was his tent gone, and a mound of earth covering the stones built around it to protect it? Was that the room where his other self lived? It had to be, for the brewery was opposite the tent.

"We share the same space," he murmured, "but not the same time. But… what do you mean by 'bring the book *back*'—"

Wait. He *knew* this book! It was identical to the one he had found upon his desk in the castle, months ago! At the time he had still been drowning in grief, his sleep so shattered that he scarcely knew one day from the next, and he had assumed it was one of his own that he had taken down from his shelves in an attempt to distract himself. The fact that it had vanished only a day or two later had completely slipped from his memory.

Slowly, he returned to the book and read the final line.

> *P.P.S. That one day with Mhenheli was the joy of my life. Forgive me.*

His throat tightened. His eyes softened and welled. Here, then, was proof of what he had long wondered; that it was to this other self that Mhenheli had held out his heart, and this other self who had accepted and cradled that precious gift.

The night when he had seen this ghostly other self, he had gone to sleep down here in the city, in the very bed from which he had just arisen. And yet, in the

morning he had awoken in his bed in the castle with Mhenheli sleeping beside him. And, much later, he had spoken tenderly to Mhenheli, telling his beloved Chaperone what he meant to him, only to have Mhenheli smile and kiss him, whispering that he had already gifted him those words on that first evening together.

He covered his face with both hands, trying to steady his breath. Slowly, he drew his hands down until his fingers covered his mouth as he stared at the words. One hand drifted down and turned the book back to its first page.

These Stones Remember
~
A City Through Time
by
Onorait Paix al-Lareiff

Upon the second page, an exquisite poem spoke deeply to him, reminding him so much of his beautiful home. His other self had felt it, had known it; they were one in their love of A'lumiya.

The third page was where he lost himself, and for the next few hours the slow *shsh* of paper was the only sound within the tent, even as the city bustled into life without. Sketches, notes, redstone schematics, thoughts, snippets of poetry and marginalia, occasional frustrations, frequent delights; all lay before his rapt eyes.

Here, a perfect schematic of the copper ageing machine - the one he had affectionately named *Dar'veh Ehr-maah Nu'hazin* as he had guided his engineers through the building of it. There, a beautiful sketch of the statue as she must look in the time of his other self but surrounded by notes detailing how she looked… well, *now*.

Fascinated, he pored over sketches of the city's buildings in their ruined future state, floorplans that he knew so well, little details guessed at - mostly with unerring accuracy.

And then, an unexpected mess of a page; the writing upon it little more than a scrawl, crossed through with shaky lines, but the words beneath the lines could still be made out.

> ~~*Why were you here? I did not expect to see you anywhere ever again but in my dreams, and even then, you have passed through those so briefly that I felt every loss of you anew like a raw, open wound upon waking.*~~

~~Why do you haunt me? Why were you here?~~

Nothing more on that page, but on the page after that…

Tazah q'adisi,

I must begin this letter with the earliest times, in which I was but a small boy whose wish for fun and play was far too consumed for his liking with learning and things of importance only to grown-ups. I may have been a prince, but beneath my royal robes and titles I was still a normal, naughty little child when first you came into my service.

His heart was laid bare before him in the words of his other self. It could have been his own hand writing this letter, his own emotions spilled onto the paper. Tears welled once more as he read this missive from the future, from this fragment of his life who had never experienced the quiet comfort of having Mhenheli by his side as they watched this beautiful city grow.

So now, when you cannot see or hear my words and when it is far too late, for my own sanity and hopeful closure of the wound I have borne in my heart for millennia, I would tell you that in truth I was as devoted to you as you were to me, and my life's regret is that I never told you that you were my strength, my compass and guiding star, my confidante and my most beloved.

I miss you more than I have words to express, and I pray that the Grace of the Vigil holds you as tenderly as my heart does.

Paix.

Millennia. *Millennia*. Oh, stars, to hold such pain and guilt and loss for so long! His heart *ached* for this long distant, far future man; this piece of himself, this *part* of himself who lived an entirely different life and yet still ended up here in this exact place, sleeping barely an arm's length but a whole world away from him.

"What can I do?" he whispered. "Would that I could somehow cross time as you have and hold you, would that I could give you comfort and somehow ease the burden that you have borne for too long. Why am I so helpless? I cannot bear it! Why can I not do anything to help you?"

Onorait Paix make bird tool marks

Pulled from his thoughts, he stared down at Malin, still sitting on his lap. They blinked back at him, then turned around a few times before settling down in a perfect little circle across his thighs. Distractedly, he rested a hand on their flank,

letting his fingers move softly through their fur as his gaze moved up to where the quill lay in its rest.

"I suppose," he said slowly, "that no harm could come of trying…"

He turned the book to its final written page, where the letter from his other self lay. He picked up the quill. He dipped its nib into the inkwell. He began to write.

> *Pix. Teacher. Spoken of by Xsia-Minai'Te as another self who wanders another time.*

Long minutes later, he placed the quill back into its rest and sat back in the chair, re-reading his response. Would his other self see it? Would this be the beginning of a correspondence across time? The thought of that sent a frisson through him, a shiver of something that he could not quite understand. But that thought was not enough. It had fired something within him; something he had no answer to, but he knew of someone who *might* have an answer.

Carefully setting Malin down on the chair, he walked back to the bed, disrobed, and pulled on his tunic, pants, and ivory coat. He slipped his feet into his sandals, draped the mourning veil over his head and around his shoulders, and left the tent.

Unseen, as Malin hopped down from the chair and trotted out after him, more words slowly appeared upon the page beneath his own; lighter, darker, darker still, and then silvered.

> *He is coming.*

CHAPTER 74

She had heard the footsteps ascending the many stairs of the Crystal Tower long before their maker knocked courteously upon the door. One of the greatest benefits of so many crystals being imbued into the building of this great tower was that it became an extension of herself, allowing her to both see and hear far and wide; a skill that had proven beneficial for her position as Royal Advisor.

“Come in, Paix,” she called, cheerfully. “There’s no need to knock!”

In response, the door slowly opened, revealing the king standing there, his hand raised as if ready to knock, and an amused smirk on his lips. He lowered his hand as he walked in and closed the door behind him, then turned to face her.

“If I’ve told you once,” Xsia-Minai’Te chided gently, “then I’ve told you a thousand times. That door is always open to you with no need to request entry. I already know it’s you, before you’re even halfway up the stairs.”

He bowed slightly to her. “I am well aware,” he murmured, straightening and walking over to her chair. “But it is a courtesy that I nonetheless refuse to drop. You look well,” he added, bending to kiss her cheek.

“As do you,” she replied with a smile, her hand palming against the side of his bearded cheek as she searched his face for any signs of sadness or weariness. To her relief, she found none; only his usual calm serenity, despite the fact that he was still veiled in mourning.

“Pull up a chair,” she said, gesturing to one of the comfortable armchairs by the far wall. “Just toss the books onto the desk.”

She watched as he carefully moved the books, because of course he wouldn’t heed that advice to just toss them somewhere and carried the chair to place it opposite her own armchair. Once he had sat down, she eyed him.

“So,” she said. “Have you come just to chat and hear my gossip, or are you after some actual advice?”

He shot her a rueful smile. “A little of both, I fear. Do you recall, long ago just after you had arrived at the caravan, we spoke of a different time?”

Slowly, she rubbed the palm of her hand over her lower arm. It was aching a little and distracting her. She saw his gaze flick down ever so briefly to that arm, before it returned to focus its full attention on her face.

“I remember that, yes,” she said. “In fact, I’m surprised that you didn’t come to me sooner, if you wanted to discuss it further. But then,” she heaved a little sigh, “you’ve had much to occupy you over the years.”

“He has written me a letter.”

She stared at him. “He’s *what?*”

“He has written me a letter,” Paix said again. “And I have written one to him in return, though I know not whether he will read it.”

“Wait… go back a second. How did you… What did he…”

She shook her head, trying to clear it. Quartz and Chrysocolla, this was not how she had expected today to turn out!

“Right,” she said, after taking a deep breath. “Let me try that again. How did he write you a letter? Did you just find it lying about somewhere?”

Paix sat back in his chair, elbows resting on the arms, fingers steepling as he touched the tips of them to his lips briefly.

“I suppose that would be the best way to describe it, yes,” he eventually murmured. “I awoke in my tent and found an open book on my desk. Written in the book was a letter addressed ‘*To Paix, or to my other self*’.”

Xsia-Minai’Te’s jaw dropped. “Well, where is it? Didn’t you bring it with you?”

He smiled at her, a little sadly. “It disappeared shortly after I responded. But… I think that we may have… established a form of communication?”

Her jaw dropped even more. “How can you say something like that so calmly? Can you hear yourself, Paix? You ‘may have established a form of ‘communication’ *with another version of yourself, living in another history!*”

“He begged my forgiveness,” Paix whispered. “He has walked in his past, which is our present, and he…”

He pinched his fingers to the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes.

“It was to him that Mhenheli gave his heart, thinking that self was me.” His voice was scarcely a breath. “It was he who accepted that heart, leading me into the joy of my life. And yet… he begged for my forgiveness, because the one day and night he spent in this time was the joy of *his* life.”

He looked up at her, his expression pained. “I had twenty years of that joy. He had but one day, and then he returned to his own time, to live without it once more.”

Xsia-Minai’Te’s heart melted.

“Oh, Paix,” she murmured. “You said you wrote back to him. What did you write?”

“That no forgiveness was needed, and that I had only gratitude to offer him,” Paix said. “That I wished I could hold him until all the guilt that I had seen in his eyes might disappear.”

Xsia-Minai’Te blinked. “Paix… You’re not giving me the full story here. The guilt you’d *seen in his eyes?* When did you see him?”

He sighed. “That very same night, going into my tent. Except, he simply drifted through it, his hand before him as if opening a door instead of raising a cloth cover. Something… strange had happened before that moment. I saw what I can only describe as a ghost of the city - a ruined ghost - drifting down over the buildings. And then I saw him, equally ghostly.”

Xsia-Minai’Te sat forward in her seat. “Did he see you?”

He shook his head.

“No. After he had vanished, the ghostly vision dissipated. I entered the tent and found it as it always is. No sign of him. But his letter spoke of him living in a room opposite the brewery. I believe he is living in the remains of the stone walls that protect my tent.”

“You’re both occupying the same space!” Xsia-Minai’Te shrugged back her sleeves and called her sight stone to her hand. “That may be why you can communicate! Same space, different timeline! Let me try something…”

She closed her eyes, pouring her focus into the sight stone. It had been quite some time since she'd expended this much effort in seeing, but Paix's words intrigued her and fired in her a desire to know, to investigate. If they were both living within A’lumiya, there may be a chance that she, too, could see him.

She sent her sight deep into the stone, and slowly it began to refract, growing the strange facets that it had done once before. Of a sudden, everything seemed to shift sideways, as though the ground beneath the Crystal Tower had lurched…

…and there before her, she saw ruins.

She cast her mind out, seeking any living presence, and found one high up on the tall plateau behind the city. In fact, it was very, very close by.

“He’s here,” she whispered, holding out her free hand. “Somewhere in this tower. Give me your hand.”

A warm palm slipped into hers, hesitated for a moment - she knew why, but that would have to wait - and then clasped her hand more firmly. Carefully, she let her

magic slip along the connection between them both, drawing his mind into the sight.

“Can you feel it?” she murmured. “He’s somewhere very close by. I sense his presence. In fact, Quartz and Chrysocolla… I think he’s in this very room!”

“I see him,” she heard Paix whisper. “He is crouched by your bookshelves, where your staff is propped up. But I see him and this room as I saw these things before, as a ghostly ruin. Your staff is not there, the bookshelves are crumbling, and some bricks have fallen to the floor. He is carefully removing them.”

The sense began to fade away from her, and she quickly let Paix’s mind go with a gentle push back toward him, safely away from the magic that she drew back into herself.

She opened her eyes, breathing as if winded from a long run. Paix was crouched before her, both of his hands cradling her palm as he looked up at her, concern etching a deep furrow between his brows.

She let the sight stone return to where it needed to go, and it vanished with a faint pop. She sat back and heaved a sigh.

“I think I went too far,” she muttered.

Paix’s fingers gently stroked over the back of her hand. “Do you need to lie down?” he asked.

“I’ll be all right,” she replied. “It’s just… been a while, and I definitely moved forward too far there. Sideways on its own is fine, as is forward on its own. But sideways and forward together?” She sighed again. “That’s more than I’ve ever done before. It takes a greater and older magic than mine to sustain that for very long. But… you saw him again?”

He nodded. “He was wearing different raiment. The last time I saw him, he was dressed much as I usually am. This time, he wore what I can only assume is the clothing of his time. Tall brown boots, a kind of brown breeches, and a blue shirt. And he was moving the fallen bricks with great care, as if to uncover something beneath them.”

She smiled weakly at him. “Perhaps the remnants of my staff,” she murmured. “It’s old enough and magical enough that it would survive through aeons, if need be.”

He was looking down at her hand, his fingers still stroking over the back of it. Oh dear. She was not going to escape the inevitable question that was surely on the tip of his tongue…

“What is happening to you?” Paix whispered.

And there it was.

She sighed again. “I’m getting old. And, for my kind, this is what happens when we get old.”

He lifted his fingers, gazing at the faint dusting of glittering powder on their tips. “But,” he began, in a voice filled with wonder, “this is—“

“Mica powder, yes. That’s how it begins. Our skin starts to form thin, flexible layers of mica.”

He stared up at her. “You *crystallise?*” he whispered.

She lifted her other hand, palming it against his cheek. “You know,” she said, with an impish grin, “you’re smarter than you look. Yes, we crystallise. It only aches a little bit, much like getting old does for everyone else.”

Oh, Quartz and Chrysocolla, his eyes were filling with tears. She couldn’t have that!

“I’ve got many, many years left yet, dear Paix,” she murmured. “I’m going to live longer than the average human. I’ll just get a bit slower, that’s all. Being in a hot place helps. At some point I’ll probably welcome a fireplace in here, too, though that will mean it’ll probably be uncomfortably hot for anyone else who wants to visit.”

He raised the back of her hand to his lips, bowed his head, and kissed it gently. When he raised his head again, his lips were dusted with shimmering mica powder.

She grinned. “Now that’s made you look pretty, I must say. Want some for your eyes, too?”

At that, he couldn’t help but chuckle.

“I would not be so vain,” he murmured. “You are reminding me of my mu’enaah.”

“Your lovely old nurse that I’ve heard so many stories of?” She raised an eyebrow. Then, to his nod, she added, “Good! From what you’ve told me about her, she had a naughty sense of humour, and you need someone like that around you! Now go and sit back down again. I know your folk crouch in that way for ages like it’s nothing, but it’s making my knees ache just looking at you.”

Once he was seated again, she gave him a satisfied nod. “Better,” she said. “Now, back to the reason you came here. When I asked if this was a social visit or if you wanted some advice, you said you wanted a little of both. So, what was the advice you needed?”

She watched his gaze drift across the room to where her staff was propped up against the wall.

“You have already given me a little of it, I think,” he murmured. “But… I would know if there is a way that we could… meet.”

“I’m not sure that would be a good idea,” she said. “And I don’t have the power to bring that kind of thing to pass. I can move my sight through time, and I can bring your mind along with me, but only for short periods of time. I cannot bring your entire self. Goodness knows, I couldn’t even take my own self on a journey across time.”

He sighed. “Then there is no hope?”

His entire being radiated sorrow, as though everything within him had hung every hope on the possibility of the impossible.

“I said, all those years ago,” she murmured, “that perhaps in your dreams you might meet him. That might still happen.”

“I have had many dreams, but he is never in them.”

She smiled. “I’m sure you would rather be with the subject of those dreams than with your other self.”

Paix’s fingers unconsciously drifted up to neaten the mourning veil that he wore. In that small movement, Xsia-Minai’Te saw an echo of Mhenheli’s touch. But then she saw something else.

She had never stopped seeing Paix’s wings; she had simply grown so accustomed to the sight of them that she barely gave them a thought anymore. Likewise, the golden light that emanated from him. Like the wings, only she could see it, although Paix sometimes mentioned that he felt it.

But now, it slowly began to glow brighter, radiating out from him. It should have been blinding, but it didn’t hurt her eyes. Instead, she watched it, fascinated, as it streamed out from him, and beautiful golden rays of it moved past her, toward where her staff lay against the wall. And then, those rays moved, curving and shimmering as if following something - or *someone* - that was also moving slowly toward the door.

Well well…

“Are you all right?”

She blinked, looking back at Paix, who was watching her. The light had returned to him, settled once more into the beautiful soft warm glow that emanated from him.

“I’m fine,” she murmured, smiling at him. “And, you know, I think you should just let things take their course. That’s my advice. Just wait and see what happens.”

He glanced at the door, and she realised she must have turned her head to watch the rays of light.

“And something *will* happen?” he asked.

“I think you’ll find that it will, eventually. Yes.”

CHAPTER 75

“I visited the Greatbridge market today, maah’qab. Such a hustle and bustle, and a cacophony of noises and smells and sights. It is a glory every time I venture there. A confusing glory, granted, but a glory nonetheless.”

Paix smiled to himself as he allowed his head to rest back against the stone wall and settled himself more comfortably on the floor cushion. Beyond the balcony’s roof the stars were bright in the clear indigo sky, and the cool scent of pine meandered on a warm breeze to dance with the sweet floral redolence of the tiny little desert blooms that carpeted the ground over Mhenheli’s grave.

Paix closed his eyes, breathing slowly, letting the mingled scents lead his mind into its usual wanderings that it betook when he sat out here at the end of each day. The warm glow of the candle’s flame - the only light other than that of the stars - was a soft glow that he could still see and feel, even through his closed lids.

He smiled again.

“That flame is just like you,” he whispered. “I still feel you around me. Just as you promised, you walk with me always. Be it in the comforting form of Malin or in the echoes of my dreams, you are my constant companion.”

Opening his eyes, he looked up at the distant stars, his gaze tracing the lines of familiar constellations. For long moments, he sat still and silent, mentally documenting them. The Sheaf lay low on the horizon, just past the mountains; a tall arrangement of stars that betokened the time of harvest and had long been a favourite of his. Instantly recognisable as it arched upwards, two of the brightest of its denizens lay at its opposite corners, and three more lay across the cinch at its centre. Indeed, its shape had once prompted G'tehm ah-Shker to jest that it should be renamed The Constellation of Time, for it resembled an hourglass.

“I feel sometimes,” Paix murmured, as he watched it, “that he was correct in naming it so. It, too, has been a constant for me; always the one to draw my eye when I look upwards. And now, as time passes for all save me, its meaning becomes more… bitter. Its flavour is as dark to me as that drink made from the roasted beans brought to market by the folk of The Sanctuary. I can savour its taste and the wakefulness that it can bring, but after that clarity there is always a sour aftertaste and a tiredness.”

He sighed, letting his gaze rest instead on the warmer, more comforting light of the candle flame.

“I grow maudlin, and that is not a mood that I will burden you with, maah’qab. I shall speak to you instead of the joyful noise of singing and laughter that came

from the tavern as I walked past on my way home from the market tonight. There is talk of a wandering bard who has found the city, and who spends his evenings entertaining the tavern's patrons with outlandish songs and tales. Yaschda'nal described him as 'trailing joy and chaos in his wake', and to judge from the merriment that I heard tonight that is a most apt depiction of him. While I am not in a mind for frivolity this evening, I may pass a few hours there another time."

He reached out to gently brush back a sprig of delicate pink flowers that drooped onto the stone surround of the small garden.

"Join your companions," he whispered to it. "Seek not the cold of stone before you, but the warm comfort of the friends that lie behind you."

Onorait Paix speak flower or self?

He turned. One paw rested on his thigh, followed by another, and then Malin hopped fully into his lap, there to stretch up and rub their cheek against his chin.

He smiled, laying a hand on their back and stroking down it, watching as they arched their spine, and their tail stiffened upright before shuddering at the end of each stroke.

"Ah," he murmured to them, "now that is a question for the ages, hm? As ever, you somehow know my heart, my dear little friend. I would spare that flower the future that I know I must have. Let it bloom brightly as I have done with those that I love around me, and then - still surrounded by its companions - fade, as I cannot."

Malin butted their head against his chest, making a small '*mrrt*' that sounded akin to a noise of protest.

Paix chuckled. "I know that you will be with me always, and that is a great comfort to me. But as those who came here with me grow old, I will soon have none to speak with of places that once were; places so dear to us that it tore our hearts to leave them. Places that held such past joys and such terrible sorrows. Soon, my friend, I shall be the only one to remember."

not gone then

"Not while I still remember them, no. And I have endeavoured to record what I could. From the time we left Paixandria, I listened to the personal histories of every soul who came to us, and with their blessing I set down those histories. If all they could give to me in their grief were the names of those they had loved and lost, then my duty was to honour them by recording those names. All live who are still remembered by someone, and yet… it is a burden of great worry to me that one day - perhaps hundreds of years in the future - those names will fade from my memory. Can one mind hold so much without breaking?"

Onorait Paix make bird tool marks. names histories paper remember not gone

"I have tried to," Paix said, sighing as Malin settled in his lap. "I have written so much, but books do not last forever. They are fragile. What will become of my histories in a hundred years? In a thousand, even?"

teacher self know

"I have heard nothing more from him since the single letter that we exchanged, though I left the book in my tent and began a new journal to keep here in my quarters. Perhaps he has left this place, for I have not seen him nor a sight of the ghostly ruins of the city since that sole visitation. My hopes that we might one day meet were dashed years ago, my little friend."

Malin's head suddenly lifted, their ears perked, their whiskers twitching as they sniffed at the air. Paix watched them, curiously. What had they sensed?

And then, a few moments later, he felt it.

He bowed his head, took a slow and steadying breath, and gently lifted Malin from his lap, setting them down beside him.

***

It was the second longest and loneliest walk of his life.

Outside the castle, he paused and looked out over the city. It was quiet and still, shimmering with the golden warmth of its many lamps and lights that echoed the golden twist inside his chest.

He reached into the pocket of his ivory coat, his fingers finding the old familiar string of beads and counting a set of them between finger and thumb, and then he continued walking as he counted the next set, and the set after that. Beneath the beads something else lay neatly folded; something he had doffed years ago but would wear again this night.

Down the long-stepped slope toward the city, now expanded beyond its original boundaries and sprawling below him. Down and down, past the many lamps glimmering on sills and steps; the beautiful warm comfort of a city where no door was ever locked and a welcome always awaited behind every one.

He stopped at the door that had always welcomed him most warmly of all. With one more slow and calming breath, he relinquished the beads, removed his hand from his coat pocket, and knocked gently.

A minute or so later, the heavy wooden door opened, letting a golden arch of light spill out onto the cobbled road. In the doorway stood a silent Yaschda'nal, his

eyes heavy and sleepless. He stared at Paix for a moment, then cast his gaze down and nodded, opening the door fully to let him in.

Paix stepped inside the manor house, into the warmth that had always embraced him and loved him unconditionally. Behind him, Yaschda'nal closed the door and gestured to another door that was open toward the back of the main living area. Beyond that door, Paix could see several people standing, and he walked toward it, with Yaschda'nal leading the way.

Just inside the doorway, Venyi'fkha turned, seeing his brother and the king standing together. His gaze moved down to the small copper totem in the king's hand, and he too bowed his head, stepping aside to let them both into the room beyond.

The walls of that room were lined with people, and it lifted Paix's heavy heart to walk into such love. In the bed, surrounded by his family, lay N'dachVeip, his once fiery red hair now pure white, his friendly face now deeply creased with age, his eyes closed as he breathed shallowly.

Upon a chair pulled up to the other side of the bed, Hadita sat quietly, her grey hair long and unbound around her shoulders, her dark eyes fixed upon her husband's face, his hand clasped in hers as she leaned forward and gently stroked her fingers through his hair.

She looked up as Paix entered. He touched his fingertips to his forehead and bowed low to her; the gesture of respect from a Paixandrian king to those who will soon mourn. When he straightened, Hadita's tears had spilled over, and her gaze was once again on N'dachVeip's face.

A chair sat empty and waiting on this side of the bed, and an unlit red candle rested upon the low table.

He was expected.

He sat in the chair, leaned forward, and took N'dachVeip's other hand. His old friend's eyes slowly opened, momentarily confused, then he spotted Paix… and smiled.

"Hullo, Paix," he murmured. "What're you doing here at this time of night, eh?"

Yaschda'nal bent over the bed by his mother's side, carefully settling the old copper hearing contraption around his father's head as best he could.

Once it was in place, Paix returned that smile. "I promised that I would be here on this night," he said softly. "And so here I am, my dear friend."

"Promised?" N'dachVeip blinked at him, then looked around, finally seeing his sons and daughters surrounding his bed, together with their sons and daughters, some few of those even carrying and rocking sleepy babies of their own, his great-grandchildren. And, beside his bed, her eyes filled with tears that coursed down her beautiful face, his beloved wife.

"Oh," he whispered. "*That* promise. Doesn't feel like more than five minutes since we arrived here." His lips quirked. "Time really does run past you at full pelt when your life is such a joy, doesn't it?"

"It does, yes," Paix said, watching him with a fond smile.

"Do I have to say those words right now?"

Paix shook his head. "Take all the time that you need, my friend. This is not something to be rushed. I will be here when you are ready."

N'dachVeip nodded, looking around him at his large and loving family.

"I've been so blessed," he murmured. "Look at you all, my beautiful loves, making your own lives and ways in the world. I'm so proud of you all."

And then he turned to Hadita. She smiled through her tears, leaning in close to kiss him.

"Zhavi," he whispered to her. "You've been the light in my life. I've tried to tell you and show you every day how much I love you, and if this Well of Stars thing is as real as you've told me, then I'll be there waiting for you with both my heart and my arms open wide. Thank you, my love, for everything."

"It is real," Hadita whispered. "And when it is time for me to journey there, we will be together again. This is only a parting until then."

She kissed him once more. "I love you, my dear, silly, funny, beautiful, beloved man. May the Vigil hold you as lovingly as I do until it is time for me to take you from her arms and into my own again."

And then, finally, N'dachVeip turned to Paix.

"One last big hug for your old friend?" he murmured.

"With all my heart." Rising from his seat, Paix sat on the edge of the bed and leaned forward, his arms embracing his dearest friend. He felt N'dachVeip's arms encircle him in return, and they held each other for a long and heartfelt moment.

"Such has been our friendship," N'dachVeip whispered into his ear. "You once saved me with a hug, and I once did the same for you."

“We may yet have one more,” Paix said, so softly that he knew the words would probably not be heard.

He waited until his old friend’s arms finally rested on the bed once more, then he drew away and sat back down on the chair. Hadita took one of N’dachVeip’s hands, and Paix took the other. A long, yet peaceful silence filled the room.

“Is my candle ready?” N’dachVeip eventually mumbled.

“It is, my love,” Hadita replied.

“Bright red?”

She smiled. “As red as your scarf.”

“Good. Best colour, that.”

He sighed, closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again, looking at Paix.

“My name has been N’dachVeip,” he murmured. “I was Grav’n er-Rachzem. My candle—“

In his eyes a brief memory of anguish flickered. A soft, agonised silence bloomed.

He swallowed.

“My candle will shine brightly,” he continued, hoarsely. “For, though a terrible thing happened at my hand… I have devoted my entire life to those around me, and the name and memory and legacy of my people will live on in my beloved family. I have helped to rebuild what was lost as best I could, and together we have all made this beautiful place. For that, I am at peace, and I can now rest content.”

The hand in Paix’s palm grew heavy, and Paix gently placed the copper totem into it, closing his old friend’s fingers around it with a murmur of, “Now forever undying.”

He rested that hand back on N’dachVeip’s now still chest and leaned over him once more to whisper the blessing. As the only non-Paixandrian for whom he had carried out this duty, N’dachVeip deserved a blessing that befitted his old, lost homeland.

"The wild plains lie open before you, the hills rise to meet you, and the forges blaze bright for you. The winds carry you, and the stars embrace you. The Vigil's light shines upon you and through you, for the Vigil is Love and you are Loved. Your life has blessed this earth, and to the earth you return. Maah'Qiza liaah-qun."

Slowly, he sat back, and his gaze met Hadita’s.

“There is a candle to be lit,” she said softly.

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The gardens lay quiet and peaceful beneath the feathered wing of the statue as Paix knelt inside the central circle of white stone and set the red candle down. Slowly, it rose to hover before him, waiting.

Above them, the golden glow of the Conduit grew in brightness as Paix raised his hands up toward it. Its light rained down through the acacia leaves, filling his palms with shimmering liquid radiance. One hand he touched to the base of the candle, letting it rest in the light, and the other hand he slowly tipped above it. The light poured down, touched the wick, and a bright flame leaped up, dancing merrily as if it embodied his old friend's joyful sense of humour.

He smiled as he let the remaining light pour onto the ground and the candle slowly sank down until it rested once more on the white stone. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hadita - now veiled in mourning - kneel beside him, respectfully just outside the small white circle of stone. In her hand she held an old and beloved soft red wool scarf, carefully folded. Around them both, Hadita's and N'dachVeip's family had gathered.

He reached into his coat pocket, beneath the beads, and drew out a thing he had now not worn in many years but would wear again for his dearest old friend. It was the work of but a moment to drape the mourning veil over his head, and then he rested one hand upon the ground beside him, palm upwards and inviting.

Every hand reaches out to those who mourn.

A moment later, he felt Hadita's warm palm rest in that hand, and he clasped it gently as he bowed his head to begin the vigil.

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When he arrived in the Land Beyond Death, he found N'dachVeip staring at the large island that held the obsidian pillars. Once again young and flame-haired, and no longer in need of the copper hearing contraption, his jaw was agape as he looked about him, startling a little as Paix landed beside him.

For a moment he was clearly too bewildered to speak. But finally, he managed something.

"What the…?"

Paix smiled. "No doubt this place is familiar to you."

“Horribly familiar,” N’dachVeip mumbled. “Why am I here? Do I have to relive parts of my life, or something? Please say I don’t have to go through that battle and its aftermath again. I honestly don’t think I could bear it.”

“No, my friend,” Paix reassured. “Nothing of the sort. This is the Land Beyond Death. All Paixandrian souls come here as they journey to the stars, and because the Vigil granted my request to permit you entry to the Well of Stars, you have come here also.”

“But…” N’dachVeip gestured toward the large island and its huge obsidian pillars. “I’ve been here before. This is where the… the shard came from. Me and the others killed that great big elemental thing. How could we have come here and done that if we were not Paixandrian and this is a place only Paixandrian people can access after they’re dead?”

You were destined to free this place. In doing so you set free my beloved servant from the endless pain of the void’s grasp, and you also liberated me. That is why, Vigilfriend, I granted you access when my servant begged it of me.

Again, N’dachVeip’s mouth fell open and his eyes widened.

“Was that…?”

Paix nodded. “The Vigil, yes. It is rare for her to speak directly to anyone but me. Mhenheli was the only other that I know of whom she has spoken to.”

N'dachVeip closed his mouth. Then he laughed softly. “Well,” he said. “It seems that I’m in honoured company then. But that doesn’t explain what you’re doing here. If you’re her servant, then… I freed you from the void’s grasp? So, you’ve been here before?”

“Coming here is part of my duty to all Paixandrian souls. And, of course, to you,” Paix said, stepping closer to him. “And, before the elemental was slain, my only way back home was…”

He nodded toward the inky blackness that surrounded them.

N’dachVeip stared at him.

“Falling into the void?” he mumbled. “Then I’m right glad to have helped end that. From what I’ve heard, the void is a torment.”

Paix smiled, then reached out and lifted N’dachVeip effortlessly into his arms.

“It was,” he said softly. “But yes, you helped end that torment. Your candle shines brightly in the living world, where I and your family keep vigil over it, my dear friend. Now the next part of your journey must continue.”

After a moment of bewildered silence, N'dachVeip said, "You said I wouldn't be reliving my life. But you carried me like this once before, when I was too weak to walk. You found me, you fed me, then you carried me to a safety that - even though I felt I didn't deserve it - I had feared would never come."

"Ah, but then I carried you on foot," Paix said, as he let his wings unfurl. "This time… things are a little different."

N'dachVeip gazed up at the wings, his expression a mixture of fascination, astonishment, and curiosity. Then he arched one eyebrow and lowered the other; a characteristic little quirk of expression that he had always assumed when trying to figure out some contraption that was vexing him.

"Why do I get the strangest feeling that I've seen those before?" he murmured. "And why am I not even *surprised* to see them?"

"Maybe in another life or another time," Paix said gently. "Or maybe in a dream."

They soared silently into the air, the great wings slowly carrying them across the void.

"Or maybe," N'dachVeip said, with his familiar mischievous grin, "you were a god all along, and you just kept it really quiet."

Paix laughed. "You are not the first to say that to me here, and I am certain that you will not be the last. But I am no god, my friend. I am just a man."

"*Just* a man," N'dachVeip snorted, clearly deeply amused. "A man with wings. A man who can fly. A man who can go beyond death and return again. You certainly don't meet any definition of 'just' a man that I've heard of."

"Nevertheless, that is all I am, my friend. A man, perhaps, with a few additional abilities. A prophet, yes; I will grant you that. But a prophet is still just a man."

He felt a long finger poke him in the bicep.

"I'm not letting go of this one, Paix. What is the Vigil, if not a god? Well, a goddess, at any rate. And what are you, if not now the living - and immortal, I might remind you - embodiment of the Vigil?"

He paused.

"Actually, come to think of it," he mused, frowning and distracted by his own thoughts as he was often wont to be, as they moved across the void toward a sandstone well that drew ever closer in the inky blackness. "If the Vigil is a goddess, and you are her living embodiment, then that would make you both masculine *and* feminine, right? So indeed, you cannot say that you are 'just a man'. What *are* you now?"

Paix chuckled.

“Confused?” he offered, as he stepped lightly down onto the broad sandstone rim of the Well of Stars.

N’dachVeip cackled as he glanced over his shoulder, looking straight down into the Well.

“I like to give you stuff to think about,” he began. Then, “Ohh… is that it? Huh. It literally *is* a well that’s filled with stars. I suppose when I jump in then at least I can’t drown now. Never was the best swimmer when I was alive. And that… feels like a very odd thing to say.”

Gently, Paix set him down to stand beside him.

“There is no swimming,” he said. “And definitely no drowning. You simply step in, and you will fall slowly and calmly. Once any part of you touches the stars, only love and peace remain with you.”

N’dachVeip looked up at him.

“When Hadita’s time comes,” Paix said softly, “I will bring her to you.”

His old friend simply nodded, then held out his arms with a smile.

“I bet you thought I didn’t hear you when you said one more hug,” he murmured. “But I heard, and I’m holding you to that. C’mere.”

As Paix stepped into that familiar old embrace, it was as tight and warm as it had always been, and he returned it just as tightly, just as warmly.

“I shall miss this,” he whispered.

“Then I’ll make it the best I’ve ever given,” N’dachVeip replied, tightening the embrace until it was all-encompassing. The palm of one hand rubbed reassuringly up and down Paix’s back, and the love and warmth and compassion of his old friend almost broke him open.

At the foot of the ruins of Eastvale, he had held N’dachVeip like this once, not letting go until his friend understood that the devastation around them - though sparked by his hand - was not his fault. And, in return. N’dachVeip had held him like this once, pulling him back from drowning in the deep black waters of utter despair and not letting go until he could drift in the gentler sun-dappled shallows of grief.

They stood this way for a long time, each lost in his own memories of past embraces that had saved him. But eventually they drew apart a little, and Paix watched as N’dachVeip grinned up at him.

“That one should last you a good long while,” his old friend said, before his smile faded and he added softly, “Look after her, won’t you?”

“I promise I will,” Paix murmured.

N’dachVeip nodded, then glanced behind himself at the beautiful Well of Stars.

“Right then,” he said, letting Paix go and squaring his shoulders. “Time to do something I’ve never done before, and that’s take a dip in starlight. See you!”

And, with that, he hopped off the edge of the sandstone well, clearly expecting to dive feet-first into eternity.

His toes touched the stars and slowly began to sink, as he turned around to look at Paix with an expression of comical surprise that melted into a sheepish grin.

“Well, that was anti-climactic,” he said.

And they both dissolved into laughter, as Paix crouched on the edge of the sandstone well, his heart lighter than he’d thought it might be when this moment came and watched with fond amusement as his dear old friend finally walked with the stars, his uncontrollable infectious cackling being the last sound that Paix ever heard from him.

CHAPTER 76

A'LUMIYA - CONSTELLATION OF THE WELL - YEAR 65

I have just returned from a visit to Hadita. Bless that house. As ever, it is filled with joy and children, and she is at the centre of it all, smiling and in her happiest of places. Indeed, it is not possible to visit that household without being climbed upon by young ones and asked to play. I am quite sure some of my citizens would be surprised to see their king pretending to be a Q'ayadasi for a caravan of small and noisy little camels as they snort and crawl their way around the manor, but it lifts my heart to express the child within now and then. If naught else, then seeing Hadita's comely face wrinkled with joy as she giggles at the sight of us is a delight in itself.

The quill paused as Paix smiled at the memory. He had mimicked the Q'ayadasi's calls so well that Hadita had teased that he had missed his vocation…

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"Stars preserve me, if this were my caravan!" he retorted, laughing as his 'camels' abandoned their orderly line and instead piled on each other for a spirited wrestling match.

Finally afforded some respite from the play, he sat back down again and leaned forward to pour the sha' prepared by Takhib'zhala, Hadita's granddaughter, who was attempting to marshal the wrestling into a more distant corner of the large main room, so as to lessen the disturbance.

He held out one cup to Hadita, who took it with a murmur of thanks, cradling it in both hands. Even at her advanced age, her fingers were still steady, but one could never be too careful with hot liquids.

"How are you finding the new lenses?" Paix asked, as he poured a cup for Takhib'zhala, and finally one for himself. He sat back in his chair and sipped the sha', giving his host his full attention.

"Oh, they are wonderful!" Hadita said softly, with a grateful glance toward her granddaughter. "And they allow me to see my stitches so clearly. I had feared I must give up my embroidery and was so upset at the thought. But Takhib'zhala takes after her grandfather in more than name. She is a tinkerer through and through and reminds me so much of N'dachVeip."

"I hear my name mentioned," Takhib'zhala called from across the room. "Are you gossiping about me, Ah'lamah-sh'la?"

“Not gossiping, maah’tazi,” Hadita called back. “Praising! The king asked how I fare with the lenses you created for my poor old eyes.”

Leaving her charges to wrestle amongst themselves now that they were relatively out of the way, Takhib'zhala sank onto the other chair and - with a grateful nod and smile toward him - reached for the sha’ that Paix had poured for her.

“They are still comfortable?” she asked. “I meant to ask you if they needed any adjustment. I know for how long you and your friends like to sit and sew and chat. You let hours go by sometimes, losing yourselves in stitches and stories.”

“I barely notice they are on,” Hadita murmured, taking another sip of sha’. “And you have just reminded me of something that I finished yesterday. Would you fetch my bag of cloths from the cupboard over there?”

Obediently, Takhib'zhala retrieved the large bag, setting it down on the couch beside her grandmother and taking the sha’ from her so she could open it.

Out from the bag came a small, rectangular piece of soft, old black cloth, about the length of Hadita’s hand and the width of two fingers held together. It was exquisitely embroidered with copper threads that formed the Paixandrian symbols for love and loyalty. Tiny black stitches hemmed the piece, and a delicate little dusky pink lace border ran along the bottom of it.

Hadita held it out to Paix with a smile.

“This is the last piece,” she said softly. “There are but a few small scraps remaining now; not enough to make anything else. Ghefrin made the lace for it and dyed the thread especially that colour.”

Paix gazed down at it as it lay across his palm. It had been so long since the last beautiful creation from Mhenheli’s old robes; he had assumed the cloth had been completely used up.

“This is beautiful,” he whispered. “It sums his life so perfectly. Thank you.”

Before Hadita could respond, the front door of the manor opened and in walked Zhanik, a tall, broad Mythish woman who was hefting a heavy basket on one shoulder and carrying a bulging tied cloth in her other hand.

“By the goddess!” she exclaimed. “The Greatbridge market was heaving with people today. So many good bargains!”

Takhib'zhala set down the two sha’ cups she held and hastened over to Zhanik, pecking a kiss to her lips as she relieved her of the cloth burden. The delicious scents of fresh hot bread and roasted pork filled the air, distracting the young wrestlers and bringing them around to sniff and poke and wheedle for a treat.

“This is for the evening meal, you little scamps!” Zhanik laughed. “Away with your paws! If I feed you now, you’ll be spoiled for later!”

Hadita watched Zhanik and Takhib'zhala carry the basket and cloth wrap into the kitchen, the door closing quietly behind them. She smiled and turned back to Paix.

“A good match, that,” she murmured. “They remind me so much of you and the Chaperone, Onorait. Takhib'zhala never wanted children; said there were plenty in the family for her to love. But she wanted a companion, and she has found a good and loving one in Zhanik.”

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I watch my city grow, and its myriad peoples form new families. Old cultures blend across borders that once warred with each other. Mythish pledge to Paixandrian, Gilded promise to Rachzem, and all come together with past strife forgotten. The children of A’lumiya are taught all histories, that their ancestors may never be forgotten, but their blood is that of all folk interwoven. New names are formed from old languages, and new words find their way into our lexicon.

Once more, the quill paused, and Paix rested his fingertips on the beautiful black cloth marker, tracing the symbols embroidered on it. Hadita had fashioned so many items from the old robes, from the soft little cushion that rested upon the pillows of his bed, to the exquisite wall hanging, embroidered with a rendition of the Vigil, to the simple case for the old camel bone comb that he still used. Her industrious hands had surprised him every now and then with a new gift from that old treasure, and this marker for his books was the last of them.

He closed his eyes for a moment, as the significance of that washed over him. It had been eleven years since N’dachVeip had walked with the stars. Soon, he knew, he would feel the call from one of the last of his two remaining old friends.

And the other would not call to him at all.

He set the quill down in its stand, closed the inkwell, blew on the ink until it had dried, then settled the marker into its place. Closing the book, he tucked it away in his desk drawer and rose to his feet.

He had another visit to pay.

***

The room beyond the crystal-inlaid door was stifling hot, reminding Paix of the midday heat of the desert. Few but him could stand to be in this room for long these days, and as he closed the door behind him, he smiled as he heard a cheery voice from across the room.

“I was hoping to see you today!”

Turning, he bowed to Xsia-Minai’Te, who sat quite still in a comfortable chair beside the roaring fireplace.

“Come in, come in!” she urged him, her eyes swivelling to indicate the empty chair opposite her.

Carefully, he walked across the floor, crystalline mica powder crunching beneath his sandals as he did so. The entire room was coated in it. It piled up against the walls and around the legs of the two chairs. It filmed the window glass and every article of furniture. Tiny particles of it glittered in the air, raised by his deliberately slow movement across the floor. It was difficult not to disturb it, but he did his best.

Placing onto the seat the cushion that he had brought with him, he lowered himself into the empty chair, taking care not to crush the fine crystals that had spread outwards across the floor from around Xsia-Minai’Te’s feet and grown up around it. From her chair a beautiful array of huge multi-faceted crystals sprouted, making it appear to be more of an elegant quartz throne than the comfortable armchair it had once been.

“How are you?” he asked, his gaze searching her eyes for any hint of discomfort or pain. Relieved, he found none; instead seeing only her usual humour.

“Shiny and sparkly, of course,” she retorted. “I’ve told you countless times that this doesn’t hurt, even though it looks as if it might.”

He nodded, keeping his expression placid and calm, though the sight of his friend and trusted advisor ageing in this very particular manner disturbed and worried him greatly. Her form was now almost fully crystalline, her limbs semi-transparent, their solid quartz bones visible to his gaze.

She had not moved in months, frozen in place and fused to her chair, her crystallisation continuing outwards into the room. Yet it seemed not to worry or affect her. She had long ago ceased to need food or drink, requiring only heat to keep her from growing sluggish, and she occupied her mind with long and slow thoughts about the roots of the world, the mountains, and the deep rocks of the earth.

Without warning, the sight stone popped into existence before her near-frozen face.

“Do you remember me telling you long ago to be patient?” she asked.

Paix chuckled. “Many times, yes. To which precise occasion are you referring?”

The sight stone spun slowly in the air before her. A heavy aura of magic welled from it, scattering the mica crystals on the floor into whirling patterns that settled down after a few moments; a beautiful mandala forming at their feet.

“Your other self,” Xsia-Minai’Te said softly. “Remember him?”

“I could never forget him,” Paix admitted. “Though I have had no other contact from him, nor any sign of him. I assumed he had left this place in the time where he resides, so I had given up hope.”

“Silly man,” she chided. “The one thing you should never let go of is hope. No matter where or when or whatever the situation, always hold onto that.”

She was quiet for a moment, staring into the sight stone. Then, if her crystalline face were able to smile, it would have done. But the smile was present in her voice, nonetheless.

“He has not left,” she said softly. “I recall that I advised you to let things take their course, and that - eventually - something would happen.”

Paix sat forward, gazing at the sight stone. He had never seen anything in it, for he had not the abilities of Xsia-Minai’Te, but he stared into its facets, nonetheless.

“And… it is soon to happen?” he whispered.

Her gaze flicked to his face.

“Oh yes,” she said, her eyes sparkling even more than their crystalline state should rightly allow. “He is coming.”

***

The sun was a golden rim upon the distant hills, painting the skies above it with its brilliant brush. Soon, it would be surpassed by the deep indigo and glitter-speckled stars of night, but for these beautiful few minutes it provided a palette to soothe the soul.

Down in the city below, as Paix gloried in the vision from the covered walkway that had always been his and Mhenheli's favourite place to sit and watch the day's comings and goings, the sunset horn sounded, and the city fell quiet. But, before the second horn could sing out, he felt a familiar pull deep inside; a call that had come to him many times before but that never felt any less of a gentle sorrow.

Within five minutes, as the final sunset glow shimmered on the horizon, he was making his way through lamplit streets, a small copper totem in his hand. Those who saw him approaching parted to make way for him, for the streets were still busy at this hour, yet all knew what the sight of their king betokened when he walked with such slow and steady purpose, bearing that small and precious item in his hand.

The door of the manor house opened at his quiet knock, and Zhanik looked out. She nodded tearfully at him, then opened the door fully, and he stepped into the house that felt more like a home to him than did his own quarters.

“I don’t want her to go,” Zhanik whispered to him. “I know that’s what you’re here for, Ser, but I wish your visit was for any other reason than this.”

She sighed heavily, then gestured to where the door to the bedroom stood open. But Paix could not see into the room beyond, for the room without was filled with people.

Around that simple bedroom door, spilling out into the main room, all of Hadita’s friends had gathered; those who had spent hours with her, working with threads and lace and wools as they talked and sang and told tales. Even those who lay on the outskirts of her extended family - distant threads that had spun out from the fabric of her life - had now woven back together to be with her as it reached its close.

His heart full, Paix walked toward the bedroom door, the gathering outside it parting before him. As he entered the room beyond, he realised there was scarcely any part of it that was not filled with someone who loved the woman who lay in the bed.

He sat upon the chair that had been left empty for him; the same chair he had sat in eleven years before in this very room. On the low table beside the bed, a beautiful yellow candle waited, unlit.

He leaned forward, gently taking into his palm the weathered and industrious little hand that rested on the blanket.

“I know this hand,” Hadita whispered into the stillness of the room. “It has come to guide me to the stars and back into the arms of my beloved N’dachVeip.”

“It has, yes,” Paix murmured, tenderly.

Hadita opened her eyes, her wrinkled old face lighting up as she saw her family gathered around her.

“Oh,” she said softly. “All my babies are here…”

Paix could almost feel the room *vibrating* with love. It swelled through every tearful smile surrounding the bed, until it was a near tangible thing.

“My babies,” Hadita whispered again. “Stars, how I love you all.”

A sob from outside the room made her slowly turn her head. And, if it were even possible, her face lit up yet further as she saw her friends crowding just outside the door.

“And all my girls, too,” she said, her eyes bright with happiness.

As she fixed that soft, bright gaze on his face, Paix could not help but return her tender smile. Though she was in her ninetieth year, her eyes radiated the joy of a young woman, and her weathered face was beautiful.

“My name has been Hadita al-Tarida,” she murmured. “My candle will shine brightly, for I was blessed to have as many to love as my heart had room for. And that was so many… so many. I wish that I could kiss them all one last time, but you would be here for a very long while if I did that, Onorait. I will save those kisses for the one who waits for me, and who I have waited for so long to hold once more.”

Gently, Paix laid the totem in her hand.

“Now forever undying,” he said softly, as he folded her fingers over it and laid that hand on her still breast. Leaning forward once again, he whispered the blessing over her.

"The sands cradle you, the winds carry you, and the stars embrace you. The Vigil's light shines upon you and through you, for the Vigil is Love and you are Loved. Your life has blessed this earth, and to the earth you return. Maah'Qiza liaah-qun."

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The scent of night-blooming flowers drifted up from the gardens as the Vigil procession slowly made its way to the central white stone circle. At its head Paix walked slowly, cradling Hadita’s yellow candle in his cupped hands. Behind him there followed a mourning train like no other the great city of A’lumiya had ever seen. The small garden barely had space to accommodate them all, as they crammed in between shrubs and tree trunks.

Paix knelt in the centre of the circle and gently placed the candle before him. Overhead, the Conduit slowly began to spin, its golden light first dappling through the acacia leaves that it usually slept amongst. Then, as Paix raised his cupped hands, the light coalesced into droplets that fell like a tender rain shower, slowly filling his palms with glimmering liquid beauty.

The candle rose before him, and he brought one hand beneath it, allowing its base to dip into the pooled radiance. His other hand he lifted above the candle, tilting it to pour the light down onto it.

The moment the first splash of light touched the wick, a beautiful flame leapt up. It burned bright and full; the most lovely candle flame he had ever seen. It shimmered and danced like laughter, and as he lowered his hands to let the remaining light puddle on the ground before him, he watched the candle slowly rest itself back down on the white stone.

Behind him, a woman's voice slowly began to hum, and within moments it was joined by another, and then another. And as he bent his neck to begin the vigil, the softest Paixandrian mourning song mingled with the scent of the flowers, drifting out from the gardens and bringing doors and windows to open and people to gather on their steps and listen.

***

The sky was blacker than anything she had ever seen. Though no stars or sun were visible a light came from somewhere and made all things bright, save that encompassing darkness above and around her.

The land upon which she stood was golden yellow - as yellow as her candle - and it glittered and sparkled with the iridescence of thousands of tiny crystals embedded within it. She stooped to brush her fingers over it, and as she did so she smiled.

Her hand was smooth. Her bones no longer ached. And the hair that fell forward was no longer silver, but a beautiful familiar dark brown. Her vision was as perfect as it had once been, and the sound of her fingertips grazing over the ground was a whisper that she could hear quite clearly.

The strange light around her slowly began to grow in intensity and warmth. The tiny crystals beneath her fingers reflected a beautiful golden glow that appeared to be getting stronger and stronger. And then a quiet sound made her raise her head.

Before her… stood her king. But he was not her king. Not here. She knew that immediately as she gazed up at him, and as he smiled gently down at her.

"You are almost home," he murmured.

The golden glow came *from him*, and Hadita recognised it immediately. She had felt it once before, when standing by the Vigil as a young girl. Upon telling her ah'lamah of it, she had learned that it was the rare light of the Vigil itself.

“Not many see it, maah’maru. I certainly never have. But I have heard tell of it, and you are blessed to have known it.”

Her king, her beloved friend… *was* the Vigil.

Slowly, she stood up and began to raise her hands to her forehead.

“No,” he said softly, laying his own hand upon hers to still them. “Here I am just Paix, not Onorait. Here, we are equal in status, and it is my duty and honour to serve you.”

“Paix,” Hadita whispered, the simple name sounding strange on her tongue after a lifetime of only ever using his honorific. “What do you mean by ‘serve’ me?”

He stepped closer, taking both her hands in his and raising them to his lips to kiss the backs of her fingers.

“I sit vigil over your candle in the living world,” he murmured. “Your family and friends are with me, singing gently over your candle as it burns with the brightest, most beautiful flame I have ever seen. And I have come here to guide you on the final part of your journey. It is my duty to carry you across the void.”

She glanced to her side, gazing at the inky blackness.

“But… how?” she asked.

A soft rustling sound made her turn back, and her lips parted in surprise.

“Oh, blessed Vigil,” she whispered, staring at the huge wings that had spread out behind him. “I knew it to be true. I felt it within you.”

He lifted her into his arms, cradling her to him as tenderly as she had cradled each of her children. The thought struck her, and then she smiled.

“I always thought that you would have been a wonderful father,” she said softly, as he leapt effortlessly into the air and the great wings beat silently, carrying them both across the void. “And I sometimes lamented quietly to myself that you would never know the joy and the fierce, protective love that consumes you when a child enters your life.”

He smiled down at her, and she continued:

“But now I know. You *are* a father. Every one of us is your precious child. I can feel it in the way you hold me. It’s the way I held every one of my babies.”

“Of all I have held like this,” he murmured, “I knew it would be you who understood.”

In the distance, a familiar sandstone circle drew closer. Her smile widened.

“The Well of Stars,” she whispered. “Oh, beyond that lies my everything.”

The huge wings carried them the final distance, until Paix’s feet alighted quietly on the edge of the well. Carefully, he set Hadita down beside him.

“When you are ready, simply step in,” he said. “I will watch over you. The fall will be slow and gentle, and once any part of you touches the stars you will feel only encompassing peace and love.”

“Like my whole life, then,” she said, looking up at him with a bright smile. “Thank you for being my friend, Paix. It has been a joy and a blessing to have you in my life. And…”

She went up on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

As she drew back, she said softly, “I have kissed everyone that I love, except for you. I could not leave this life without remedying that.”

With those words, she let go of his hands and stepped backwards into the Well of Stars. Slowly, she began to sink into it, but before she was waist-deep in their beautiful swirling light, something happened that had never happened before.

A hand reached up from the Well, its palm open and inviting. With a soft sound of joy, Hadita slipped her hand into it, turning away from Paix. Another hand lifted from the stars, this one cradling her waist. And there, just barely visible for a moment, a brief glimpse of a crown of fiery red hair as both of those arms wrapped around her waist and drew her gently and lovingly into eternity.

For only the second time in his long life, Paix shed a tear on the edge of the Well of Stars. Unlike the first, this did not fall into its beautiful depths, but instead trickled down his cheek, losing itself in his beard as he smiled, his heart full, and turned away to fly home.

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The candle burned until just before dawn. As the sunrise horn sounded through the city, the last little flicker of flame danced and whirled, and then dissipated in a delicate smoky wisp. Gently, Paix eased the still-warm, soft puddle of yellow wax away from the white stone circle and carried it over to a sphere made of solid polished basalt that stood atop a low pillar in an open area of the garden. He placed the cooling wax on top of the sphere, where the heat of the sun would melt it completely, allowing its remains to trickle down the sphere and into a shallow channel that ran around its base. From this channel, anyone was welcome to scoop softened wax for making new candles, be they for simply lighting their

home or for the far more precious purpose of creating their own candle. Thus was each life continued at its end.

Hadita's family and friends slowly dispersed, some remaining in the gardens to rest and remember, and others returning to their homes. Paix decided to return to his own home, and so with a quiet farewell to those who remained in the gardens, he began the long walk back toward the castle.

The morning was fresh and clear, and Pix had awoken just as dawn had crested the distant hills. A filling breakfast had, as always, been left for him in the stone niche just outside his door. A generous flatbread, sliced through the middle and layered not only with butter but also with honey. That, together with a few sips of honey wine, fortified him for the day, and as he exited the room inside the hill, he looked back at Malin.

They had made themself quite comfortable atop his bed, tail curled around their nose as they formed their familiar little doughnut. Their side rose and fell softly, and occasionally their paws twitched.

Pix smiled, closed the door behind him, and began to make his way down the main cobbled street. Past the beautiful old manor house that had apparently belonged to his dear friend N'dachVeip, along the road that curved around the base of the plateau, and up the long and shallow steps that led to the castle. Through the barbican and into the main courtyard he paced, his step assured and steady now that his ankle had healed.

The climb was, as ever, a long one. But it afforded Paix the most beautiful view of the glory that was his beloved city, and not a single climb of these steps did he undertake without turning back at least once to look over the rooftops and gardens, and smile at the bustle of life in all its diversity and wonder that spread out far below him. He spotted flame-haired Rachzem folk, veiled Paixandrian women, swarthy Mythlanders, and - at this early hour - a gaggle of small children skipping and running and laughing toward the building where they would fill their heads with learning.

The scent of incense drifted up from around the feet of the statue, and Paix breathed it in, revelling in the increasing warmth of the day as the sky streaked itself with golds and oranges and pinks, and finally the brightest and clearest of blues.

“A glorious sunrise, maah’qab,” he murmured. “How you would love this one.”

He turned and continued walking toward the towers of the castle gates.

The Great Hall was quiet, the whispers of the past silent in the dancing dust motes just inside the entrance doors. Pix ducked inside, holding his breath for a moment as the hush of the building enveloped him. Somewhere outside, far distant, a bird trilled and broke the reverent quietude.

The carpet, though threadbare and moulded, still bore remnants of its rich colour as he walked down the Great Hall. He had been here several times in the city’s past, and so he marked the position of every person he knew would be here or there. The clerk, the guards, the merchants; all had their places here, and all those places now lay still and empty.

Down into the refectory, where N’dachVeip had once embraced him and warmed his heart. Stars, what he would give to be able to return to that moment and live it again. For his old friend it had been one hug among many, but for Pix it had been the first heartfelt hug - indeed, the first hug whatsoever - he had felt in decades. Possibly even centuries.

He paused, fingertips trailing over the heavy wooden table where his friend had strewn his plans for the manor house. A sigh caught his lungs, and he turned toward the small door at the back of the room.

“Onorait.” The guards at the castle gates saluted to Paix, and he nodded in response as he passed beneath the heavy portcullis.

The courtyard beyond was a-bustle with activity, deliveries already arriving from the city below. Crates of wines for the cellars, boxes of meats and vegetables for the kitchens, large barrels filled with glowing fruit from the orchards, and baskets of fish from the lake.

He wove his way through the lively swarms of merchants and clerks and carters, finally arriving in the relative calm of the Great Hall, where the rising sunlight already streamed in golden beams through the windows high in the walls.

With a smile and a nod to the clerk just inside the door, he made his way down the hall, pausing only to speak briefly with Q’alamet, who was loitering outside the entrance to the kitchens, enjoying a meat pie before his working day began.

It still struck Pix as odd why the entrance to the royal quarters was through such a small door and down such a winding corridor. He'd expected it to be at least a little more ostentatious. Perhaps he simply hadn't yet found the more regal entrance that would be taken by official delegations from other lands.

Down the long corridor toward the throne room he walked, enjoying the colourful dappled sunlight that shimmered across the mosaic floor through the broken stained-glass windows.

Up ahead, the throne and the huge carved tree upon the wall behind it. In its glory it had been a sight to behold, but to an archaeologist and historian even the fadings of past glories are beautiful things, and he approached it with a soft smile curving his lips.

His gaze lit upon the old piece of sandstone embedded into the back of the throne, and he paused his step so he could bow toward it; this surviving piece of the Vigil that had been carried hundreds of miles to this new land. Then he turned and headed toward the royal quarters.

Unseen, in a book that lay open on a desk in a room within a hill, words inked themselves onto paper: *He is coming*. Times three they wrote themselves; faded and then stronger and then darker still.

As Paix approached the hothouse corridor, one of its doors opened. A gust of warm air drifted out, following the figure of the Head Gardener, who nodded formally to him as he hefted a wooden tray of potted seedlings beneath one arm and closed the door behind him.

"Finally ready for planting out?" Paix asked, examining the sturdy little green sprouts. "I have just come from the gardens. They look wonderful. I particularly enjoy the night-scented blooms that you have planted there."

"Thank you, Onorait!" the man exclaimed, a broad beaming smile lighting up his face. "Yes, these are destined for the gardens. This particular variety only grows for one season, and so every year we replace them with fresh blooms."

"I look forward to seeing them in place," Paix murmured, nodding to the man before turning to pace through the final yards of the corridor and into the throne room.

His step hesitated as he felt a warm and golden twisting inside him; a familiar pull that— No, it felt a little different this time. For a moment he waited, wondering if another was calling to him to attend their final moments.

The pull faded, leaving only the golden twist that warmed his very core. His gaze flicked across to the throne, where the Vigil piece sat. Always at his back, so that it guided him when he took the throne in his official capacity, it now rested quiet both in his mind and in his gaze.

Though he had been in these quarters several times since that blessed and blissful day and night in the past with Mhenheli, Pix nonetheless still felt a strange wonder fill him as he entered the royal quarters. By now he knew the position of every piece of furniture, and he had marked where the now lost decorations had been. There was only one room he had not yet explored, and that was the small side room to the left of the door that led outside to the balcony.

Carefully, he pushed open the door to that room, gritting his teeth as its old hinges protested somewhat. Not daring to force it any further, he turned himself sideways to it and managed to shuffle through the gap and into the dimness of the room beyond.

To modern eyes this would be akin to a walk-in closet, but he knew what it truly was, for he had had one of his own many years ago. This was the king's robing room. There, by the wall, the tall wooden stand that had once held the regalia cloak. Against the back wall the small washstand used every morning and evening, its copper jug and bowl now green with verdigris but in remarkable condition, as was the wood of its frame.

And there, on the floor, something he had not seen in two thousand years: a very particular sturdy wooden chest. He crouched before it, staring down at it for several minutes before he opened it. Inside, as he expected, there sat a smaller oak box. His hands shook as he picked it up - oh stars, it was as weighty as he remembered it to be when filled with its precious cargo - and managed to shuffle his way out of the robing room, setting the box down on the edge of the table that stood in the centre of the main bedroom.

It was still in there. It had to be. The weight of the box alone told him that.

It was still in there.

Paix stood for quite some time, analysing the strange new sensation within. The golden twist was as familiar to him as breathing; the touch of the Vigil was one

that he knew intimately. For, though he walked as her embodiment in the world, she was still his guide in all things.

“What is this?” he whispered into the quiet of the empty throne room. “I feel a pull like that which calls me to my people in their dying, but it does not guide me to anywhere.”

His vision clouded, and he placed a hand against the wall to his side, steadying himself. Within the centre of his mind, a bright halo of light emerged, feathering outwards and surrounding two hands raised up. Sand trickled from between their opened fingers, and as the vision faded, he looked down.

Trust.

A faint trail of sand lay before him, beginning at the toes of his sandals, crossing the rich royal carpet, and heading toward his quarters.

Curious and cautious, he followed it, peeking around corners as he approached them. And, up ahead, he could see the trail disappear beneath the door to his private rooms.

His hands shaking, Pix fumbled with the latch on the box. He felt sick, his stomach churning and tumbling. The latch was stubborn, refusing all but brute force. Nervously, he wiped his palms on the thighs of his pants, licked across his upper lip, and tried again.

The latch sprung with a faint crunch, sending tiny filings of copper outwards. Oh damn. He should have been more careful!

“Stars,” he muttered. “Pull yourself together. There’s no reason to be nervous.”

And yet, why the hell wouldn’t he be? Inside this box might be the most important archaeological find of his life. Not merely for its general significance to the world, for he had already vowed that the world would never know of this place.

The significance of what might be in this box was, however, turning him into a shaking and near ragged bundle of nerves.

He reached out again, bracing a hand on either side of the box lid, and lifted as gently as he could, closing his eyes and turning away a little as he did so.

Paix stopped in front of the door. He looked down at the sand. Something… was shifting. He could feel it.

To his left. To his right.

He could feel it.

Something was happening.

He reached out, but the door opened silently of its own accord. He crept through it, then through the outer chamber. The final inner door opened for him without a touch, equally silently.

The room beyond was as it had always been, save one thing. A man stood at the centre table, his back to the door, his hands on the box that held the copper crown.

Had this been any other man, Paix would have shouted for his guards, but he realised that… he had not seen a single guard since leaving Q'alamet by the entrance to the kitchens.

But this man. *This man.*

Blue shirt. Brown breeches and boots. Not ethereal but *real* and standing before him.

His Other.

At last. Oh stars, *at last.*

Quietly, he stepped forward, then hesitated as a familiar weight settled upon his head and brow.

Holding his breath, his eyes closed, Pix finally eased the box open. In this moment, he felt a turmoil that had never struck him before. Nerves shattering, hands trembling, breath shivering. He couldn't look. Needed a moment. Just… a moment.

Stars, he wished he'd brought the old string of beads with him. Somehow, those had always calmed him whenever he felt stressed. But this was more than just stress, more than just the possibility of finding something incredibly important from his past.

Something he had fled from. Something he had abandoned, as he had abandoned his city and his people…

He took one shuddering inbreath and opened his eyes.

The box was empty.

A moment of sheer disbelief punched him in the gut, winding him. He almost doubled over in the anguish of disappointment, holding himself together by sheer willpower alone.

What had happened to it? The box had been the exact weight that he'd remembered it, back when it had held the crown. Had it—

He froze.

A creeping, shivering sensation that he was not alone flooded over him, from his head to his toes. Slowly he took his hands away from the sides of the box. He hadn't brought his sword with him, had nothing to defend himself with but his fists.

Who the hell would be here? Who had managed to find him out in the middle of nowhere?

He braced himself and turned around.

To his left. To his right.

Paix could sense them both. Somehow, he knew them. They had come here, too. Faded shimmering mists of himself, of his *Other*. They drew close, flanking him, growing warmer, growing brighter, growing *real*.

He swallowed through a dry throat, the copper crown a grounding weight upon his brow. Who were they, these versions of himself? They felt familiar and yet not so, as though they were not quite a part of him but were instead tied to him by something else.

Tied to him by time. Or by timelines. Or… by his Other.

To his left, another hand held his trident.

To his right, other shoulders wore his regalia cloak.

And before him, frozen still in the realisation that he was not alone in this room, his *Other.* Body braced for anything, head and hands unmoving as he listened to glean any clue who was there.

And then he turned.

And then he saw.

And then…

Unseen, in a book that lay open on a desk in a room within a hill, words wrote themselves.

He is here.

He is here.

He is here.

CHAPTER 77 – FINALE

Time has forgotten you. You walk outside his grasp. He has come. They have come.

Pix could feel the edge of the table - solid and unmoving - against the base of his spine. He braced his hands against it, his confidence in the strength of his knees completely shot in this moment.

He was no physicist, but… meeting versions of yourself from different times should *not* be possible. Of all the things that had happened to him since he'd found this place - walking in the past, interacting with the past, receiving offerings from the past, *exchanging letters with* the past - nothing… *absolutely, unequivocally nothing* could have prepared him for this.

On the far side of the room, just inside the door, stood three men. As real and solid as he was, they each nonetheless had a presence that was… *other*. A powerful presence that reached out to him, that felt familiar, that told him *'I am you'*.

His gaze flitted from one face to another, to another, recognising each. It was as if someone had placed a triptych mirror across the room from him, but changed each glass to be slightly, disconcertingly distorted.

To the left stood sorrow and guilt.

To the right stood curiosity and hope.

And in the centre… stood an angel.

He swallowed. Should he say something? What the hell should one say in moments like this? He couldn't move, hardly dared breathe, lest he disturb whatever was happening.

Whisper-quiet, sorrow and guilt took a step toward him. Instantly, Pix's full attention was on him, his eyes wide, his breath quickening. His was the face Pix knew best, for - though they were all his own - this face, its eyes limned with anguish and regret, was the one he still wore.

Step by slow step, sorrow and guilt approached until he stood before Pix. Regal. Calm. Suffering.

"Stand," he said, his voice quiet in the stillness of the room. "You need not that support. Stand."

It was not a command but an instruction; one that Pix instinctively could not refuse. Hesitantly, he removed his hands from the table, letting them hang

awkwardly by his side. He corrected his posture, unconsciously mirroring the *him* that stood before him.

Sorrow and guilt nodded, his lips curving into a faint approving smile as Pix watched him, his wariness and caution rapidly dissipating into rapt intrigue.

Sorrow and guilt held out both hands, palms upward. Pix stared at them, his gaze flicking briefly up to those eyes, then back down to the hands again. Still, he dared not move to touch them.

Sand slowly trickled through their fingers, seeming to come from nowhere.

Trust.

So, he did. He placed both his hands in those held out to him. They were warm and soft. He smiled faintly. His hands had once been like that after he'd spent days building a complicated circuit, handling oily redstone dust and components.

Heat swirled around him; the hot, dry sensation of home. He could smell the sand, the desert flowers, the cool fountains. He could hear the low murmur of many voices speaking his native tongue, the chatter of the souk, the laughter of children, the soft whisper of candle flames.

Tears pricked his eyes, and an ache gripped his heart. *Home*. While he had made A'lumiya his home, sorrow and guilt now reminded him that his heart lay buried deep beneath desert sands.

Together they both stood atop the natural observatory, watching the shimmering beauty of his home as it lay so peaceful, so perfect in the dark of the night. The jewel of the desert, nestled beneath the shelter of the mighty Anthill that had watched over it since the moment the first tents had been raised.

The ground beneath his feet began to tremble. He tried to close his eyes, to turn his head away, but he could not. Hollow-eyed, broken-hearted, he stared at everything he held dear, anxiety and anguish rising like an unstoppable bile in his throat.

No.

No.

No, please, no.

"I am the one who fled," sorrow and guilt murmured. "The one who - in his selfish desire for an easier way home - made a terrible mistake."

Pix choked back a sob as the trembling increased to a roar, and the precious jewel that lay before him was obliterated in fire and chaos.

“I am the one who walked for two thousand years, holding all of those lives within him. Every man, every woman, every child, every cat, every dog, every camel, every family, every memory, every bloodline, every history, every hope; all broken because of me.”

The pain in that voice sliced through him. He knew it like he knew his own heartbeat.

“I carried the mourning of the Vigil,” it continued. “For my whole life it has been there, softly burying itself deeper and deeper, but ever present. You know this, for I am the oldest, purest form of you.”

One of those hands let go of his, cradling his chin and lifting his head. He gazed into those blue eyes, breaking inside. The world around them faded, leaving behind the cool grey stone of the equally faded present day castle.

“I am your beginning,” sorrow and guilt said. “You are my end.”

He let go, then reached up to his own shoulders. Pix’s damp eyes widened as the beautiful broad sweep of heavy ivory silk was pushed back and gathered up by its copper-embroidered epaulettes.

The regalia cloak.

Sorrow and guilt reached out, and in one smooth movement, he swirled the cloak around Pix and onto his shoulders. Its familiar weight settled, and Pix could almost imagine the feel of long tanned fingers tweaking its drapes and ribbons into perfect place.

“I lost him, too,” sorrow and guilt whispered.

And it was that which broke Pix. Without thought of anything but a desperate wish to assuage the grief that had been his constant companion, he did the only thing he could. He reached out and embraced his sorrow and guilt, holding him in his arms and pulling him close. All he had to offer was silent comfort - a simple thing that held a tender power - and as he gave it with his whole heart, he felt it returned tenfold.

His own arms encircled him, his past holding him. Stars welled and poured around him as he stood quietly with his sorrow and guilt in a silver-speckled and whirling inky darkness.

“I have walked with you the longest,” sorrow and guilt murmured. “And I shall never truly leave you.”

A hand against his cheek raised his face, and he stared into his own eyes.

“But she called to you.”

Pix remembered those words, remembered his beloved mu'enaah speaking them to him. And so, he replied with the words he had given her so many years ago:

“She always has.”

Sorrow and guilt smiled at him.

“And she gave you something that is rare and precious,” he murmured. “Time.”

Sorrow and guilt kissed his cheek, then stepped forward… *into him*.

With a soft inbreath, Pix felt the world around him shift. Grey stone gave way to soft golden polished sandstone, savannah warmth melted into desert heat, and daylight softened into the evening warmth of oil lamps.

You are a piece of the past. To cure you of sorrow would be to destroy you.

Rapt, he stepped forward, feeling the long missed familiar thick heat dampen his skin. He reached out, fingertips grazing over the exquisite quill stand upon his desk. He looked around, and everything his gaze fell upon was a beautiful memory etched into his heart.

This is no dream. I am here. This is Paixandria. These are my quarters. Warm and living and present.

Slowly, tentatively, he let himself relax. His shoulders dropped, the cloak once again feeling like a natural extension of himself. It ghosted silently over the polished floor as he walked toward one of the windows; the one he had looked out of most often.

There, in the broad open square below, golden in her soft, candle-strewn beauty, the Vigil stood sentinel over his city, over his people. His jaw and eyes softened. His heart filled.

And he smiled.

In a book that lay open upon a desk in a room beneath a hill, one of three lines
- *He is here* - slowly faded, leaving behind only two.

Return…

The world around him faded, and he was back in the ancient castle once more. And, walking toward him, came his curiosity and hope. In his hand he carried a familiar thing that Pix himself had found months ago: his old trident.

“Which part of me are you?” Pix whispered.

Curiosity and hope stopped before him.

“I am the one who walked backwards in time and first witnessed what this place truly is,” he said. “I am the one who awoke in the past, who loved it and learned all he could from it. I embraced joyfully what I was given, without knowing the purpose of the gift.”

Curiosity and hope held out the trident to him, his eyes bright, his lips curved in the quiet smile of happiness and satisfaction that Pix had often been told he himself wore when deeply engrossed in a fascinating delve into history, be that with his nose in a book or his trowel in the dirt.

He took it, his fingers closing around it in the same place they always had. The carefully mended crack beneath the head of it was still visible, but as Pix looked at it the break slowly vanished, then reappeared, then vanished, as if he were looking at a before and after image that kept changing.

Curiosity and hope nodded. “It was broken and never broken, just as you were there and were not, just as this place breathes and is still. Everything has always been, and yet it never was.”

He lifted one hand, and reached for it with his other, tugging something from his finger. Pix stared as he held it out, waiting like a bridegroom for his betrothed to give him their hand.

“This, too, has walked backwards in time,” curiosity and hope murmured. “When I watched you arrive here, I saw upon your hand what this had become; old and thin, dented and battered. And yet, as you moved through the past, so did it begin to mend itself. And now, here, it remembers what it always was.”

Entranced, Pix held out his hand, the one that still bore the old, worn copper ring. Gently, curiosity and hope slid onto his finger the ring of the Copper King. As the two bands old and new touched they melded together until both reformed to their true glory, the exquisite cut emerald glittering in the light atop the gleaming bright copper band.

“I am the closest form of you,” curiosity and hope said, “one step removed back in time. As you walked forward, so I continued walking backward through the ages until I reached a certain point.”

Pix had a feeling he knew where - or who - that point was.

Curiosity and hope held out his arms. “Admittedly a bit tricky while holding a trident,” he murmured, his lips quirking into a grin. “But I have come here to do this, and I’m sure we will manage.”

Pix returned that grin. “Yeah,” he said. “I think we will.”

Carefully, ensuring that he kept the tines of the trident facing away, he enfolded both arms around his curiosity and hope. The ring felt warm and comfortingly heavy on his finger as he rested the flat of that hand against his *other's* back. And, in turn, the arms that embraced him did so with a loving warmth that brought to mind the hugs of his dear old friend N'dachVeip.

Together, they both sat in the branches of an acacia tree, gazing down through its leaves and watching him arrive in the city on that first day. Pix smiled as he witnessed with other eyes his own excitement and his discovery of the redstone line that opened the catacombs beneath the statue. As the sun wheeled overhead and stars took her place, he saw himself kindle a small campfire and sit outside the tent he'd erected in the shadow of the statue, cross-legged and scribbling for all he was worth into his battered old travel journal by the light of the dancing flames.

"That day I called you *emiah*," curiosity and hope murmured. "For I could not countenance that you were who that ring told me you were. Brother you were to me until I found you on your knees on the Greatbridge, weeping at its beauty and at what you perceived to be its emptiness."

The huge expanse of stone stretched before and behind them, as they both knelt under the blazing sun before him. Pix watched as tears streamed down his face and he begged to understand what had happened.

"I tried to reassure you that we were still here," curiosity and hope said softly. "That we had never left, that we were all around you. But you could neither hear nor understand. Not yet."

Once again, the darkness of night whirled around them, stars pouring and wheeling as though a waterfall of time.

"I walked away from you," curiosity and hope whispered, "but I did so that you might eventually find the one thing you so desperately sought."

A hand against his cheek raised his face, and he stared once more into his own eyes.

"She called to you," curiosity and hope said.

Pix smiled.

"She always has," he replied.

"And she gave you something that is rare and precious," curiosity and hope murmured. "A second chance."

Curiosity and hope kissed his cheek, then stepped forward… *into him*.

The world shifted yet again, and Pix looked up at the statue. The doors beneath her were still closed, and his body and mind were filled with wonder as he experienced the unutterable joy and excitement of that first day amid the ruins of what he only knew then as the ancient capital.

You are a piece of the past. To tell you how to live would be to prevent you living.

He hefted his rucksack higher onto his shoulder, stepped forward, and brushed his fingers against the warm stone of the statue's base, marvelling anew at how closely-fitted the massive blocks were, with barely the width of a sigh between them.

I had yet to call this place home, and yet I felt its pull already. It gave to me all that I needed to survive and to feel more settled than my old bones have felt in centuries.

He turned, shading his eyes with his hand, and gazed upward and to his right, toward the high plateau where the castle and all its memories lay waiting for him to discover.

And he smiled.

In a book that lay open upon a desk in a room beneath a hill, one of two lines - *He is here* - slowly faded, leaving behind only one.

Return…

The world around him faded, and he was back in the ancient castle once more. Only one presence remained with him in the room, and yet he could still feel the others somewhere within him.

He stood quietly, the trident providing something of a grounding comfort to hold onto as he raised his head and looked steadily at… the angel.

Huge pale wings rose behind him. A golden light emanated from him, almost blinding in its beauty. Atop his brow something metallic glittered, but the light was so bright that Pix could not quite make it out.

This was the *other* that he knew least of all. And yet… and yet… he felt as though they had already communicated with each other somehow.

And then his eyes widened.

"It's *you*," he whispered.

The angel walked toward him, and as he did so the glow softened, allowing Pix to see him fully. As with sorrow and guilt, and with curiosity and hope, this was his *other*, but an other that he almost did not know.

In his bright blue eyes there sang a peace and contentment and fulfilment that Pix could only yearn for. Upon his face there lay a serenity and calm that Pix had long forgotten, though echoes of it had touched him briefly over the past two years. Not even the faintest shiver of guilt could Pix sense around him, though he cradled with a tender caress an old and deep grief within him. And upon his brow the copper crown glinted, its Conduit slowly rotating and casting its golden light over his face, its emerald glittering against his forehead.

"At last," the angel murmured. "I have waited decades for this moment, but you have waited for millennia."

Pix gazed up at him.

Ribbons. Copper threads.

"Your wings…" he said softly. "They're… *broken*, like mine."

"I am the one," the angel said softly, "to whom you gave a second chance. You walked backwards toward me, and your journey began a new history. But, while it was a history that you could only touch for brief moments, my history became the sum of both. And so, my wings are your wings."

The golden light that suffused the angel slowly expanded, encompassing them both. Pix's lips parted and his eyes hooded as he understood it, as he knew it. It had been so long since he'd felt its touch this strongly, and he allowed himself to sink into the radiant joy and love of the Vigil's embrace. If he'd had the power to see his own face in that moment, he would have seen an ecstasy of a kind that not even a Renaissance sculptor would dare try to capture.

You are one. You are all. You are then. You are now.

A gentle hand took the trident from his fingers and laid it down upon the table behind him. He opened his eyes, only to find that the angel was so close that he could smell the faint scent of incense that clung to his clothing and hair.

And then… the angel raised his hands to his head and lifted the copper crown from his brow. Its Conduit and emerald slowly settled back into their cradles, and he turned it so that they faced him.

Pix swallowed as the angel gently placed the crown upon his head. Its familiar weight was a comfort that he had not felt in two thousand years; a strange grounding that settled a perfect peace within his chest. He felt the soft thrum of

the Conduit as it once again rose to cast its light over them both, and the coolness of the emerald as it settled against his forehead.

I call to you.

Tears began to well in Pix's eyes.

"You always have," he whispered.

The angel's arms enfolded him, pulling him close. Without thought, without hesitation, Pix returned the embrace. At first, it was a hug like those he had already received from his *others*, but then… ah, then those arms tightened around him, holding him like a precious child. One hand slid up to the back of his head, fingers feathering in his hair, drawing his cheek to the angel's cheek, until - like the stones in the base of the statue - they fitted together perfectly.

And there they stood, in a moment of time that stretched for eternity. Quiet. Still. Safe.

Those tears brimmed on the edges of Pix's lids. He sniffled, his fingers reflexively scrabbling against the angel's back, as he now knew N'dachVeip's once had against his in their desperate search for hope amid the wreckage of Eastvale.

He couldn't let go of the burden he had carried for so long… could he? Other than Malin, who slept peacefully in their little bed in his rooms down in the city, it was the one constant he still had left to him, the one thing he had brought out from his *home*.

The fingers that rested against the back of his head moved slowly, stroking through his hair. No other movement did the angel make but this soft, gentle one… and yet it broke through everything as though it were a sledgehammer.

"But I left them," Pix choked. "I ran away. You heard the first one say it. I fled. Left them to their fate."

Still that embrace did not leave him. Still those fingers stroked softly.

The tears spilled over.

"I—"

It was all he could get out before his voice deserted him. Rising from deep within, sorrow and anguish and guilt and pain and grief and regret welled up; uncontrollable, unstoppable, desperate to make itself heard at last, to make itself known to this beautiful angel who would understand it and hold it and love it.

He felt the softness of ribbons graze the side of his face, and through tear-blurred eyes he saw that the angel's wings were also now enfolding him in an embrace that he didn't deserve… he didn't… deserve… he…

He screwed his eyes shut, tears streaming down his face as the heavy burden in his heart cried out to him, and he stared at it with a sightless soul.

"Your people," the gentle voice of the angel reached him, "*our* people… were saved. You walked back two thousand years to save them. You saved them, and you brought them here. Together, you built this place, you made this home, and you live here with them still."

A wretched sob broke forth from Pix's throat.

"You saved them," the angel said again, his voice so tender and filled with love that it cracked Pix wide open. "Every single one of them. They live here still, their descendants many times over still look to you, know you, and love you. Keep that gentle sorrow within you but forgive yourself of the guilt that has gnawed at your bones for all these years. Walk out from beneath that shadow."

He stared at the burden in his heart. Then he reached out to it, and he touched it. It shied back from his fingers, and he quickly wrapped them around it, drawing it out and cradling it gently. It tilted its head to observe him curiously with shimmering violet eyes, its razored black scales glistening in the golden loving glow of the angel's light that surrounded them both.

Carefully, he brought it close to him, watching as its long neck arched so that it could continue looking at him. It trembled now, small and uncertain in his hand, and he stroked his fingertips over its head and down that long neck. At this touch it quieted, and he bent his neck to press a tender and penitent kiss to the crown of its scaly head.

Soft, breathy chirrups rippled up from its throat, and it nuzzled against his beard, butting its head against his chin in a manner that reminded him so much of his beloved little Malin.

"You will always be near to me," he whispered to the burden, "but I think that now we understand each other, and… that we can be friends."

He loosened his hold, and the burden stood in the palm of his hand, still chirruping contentedly for a few moments more. Then, it spread its scaly little wings and soared gracefully into the air, flapping in lazy arcs that ascended high like a lark on the morning breeze, then dove down like a kingfisher into water.

He smiled. Yes. This was an embrace that he deserved.

He opened his eyes.

Blue eyes gazed back at him, bright with joy.

“You cannot comprehend for how long I have wished to do that,” the angel murmured. “To take that pain from you, and to hold you until you knew only love and forgiveness.”

“Will you walk into me and disappear, as the others did?” Pix murmured, hoping against hope that somehow - he had no idea how, but *somehow* - this angel, this *other* would stay with him, or that they would be able to communicate as they once had, through the strange and slippery timelines of books upon desks in liminal spaces.

The angel regarded him thoughtfully.

“I think,” he finally said, “that we will meet many times again, though perhaps not always quite like this.”

And then, unlike the others, he stepped not forward, but back.

“I ask but one thing of you,” he said.

“Name it,” Pix murmured.

The angel smiled, picked up the trident, and held it out to him.

“Hide no longer behind the name that others gave to you,” he said. “Take back your name. Return to Paix. To Peace.”

Paix took the trident and smiled at the angel, who was stepping back yet further.

“From this moment,” he whispered, “I will.”

The golden light of the angel blazed, but Paix looked steadily at it, his heart suffused with its love. And then, the angel nodded its head with a satisfied smile, and the light began to fade.

“Wait…”

A long pause hung in the air. The angel watched him from within the light.

Paix gestured around him at the faded ruins of the castle.

“What happened to the city?” he asked.

The angel considered for a moment, then his lips curved one final time.

“I do not know,” he murmured, glancing around at the room. “But it is here for us now, and it is home.”

And then he was gone.

In a book that lay open upon a desk in a room beneath a hill, the final line - *He is here* - slowly faded, leaving behind an empty page.

Return…

Paix looked down from his window at the Vigil, golden and beautiful in the central square of Paixandria. Around it, his people went about their lives in the soft late afternoon light. He reached out a hand, resting it against the polished sandstone window casement, and he watched them quietly.

He wondered where the angel had gone, which time and place he had faded to, and whether he would ever truly see him again. Behind him, a quiet knock sounded against the door, which opened a moment later.

He turned. There stood Mhenheli, holding open the door for the servant who bore into the room a tray laden with the evening meal. Outside, the sunset horn sounded, bringing Paix's gaze back to the window. Far below in the city, his people turned as one to look up at the statue and pray for those who had gone before to reap a bountiful harvest.

He loved this place so much. It was here for him now, his home in all its histories, both new and faded.

He turned back from the window once more, and walked across the dusty floor to the old, ruined door that hung half open. He stepped out onto the balcony, where the scent of distant pines drifted on the air and mingled with the soft carpet of desert flowers in that precious garden where a brown candle still burned brightly.

A hand rested on his shoulder, and he turned. Mhenheli smiled at him, the sunrise golden on his face. Together, they sat down on the soft grass, raised their faces, and enjoyed the warmth of the sun's caress.

He opened his eyes, as Nehle-aalh gently shook his shoulder and fussed at him. The delegation from Mezalea had been waiting for a full half hour for him, and here he was daydreaming in the palace gardens!

He rose and walked after her, through polished sandstone corridors that became smooth grey stone. Up ahead, the long luxurious carpet of the throne room drew his gaze to the tree carved onto the wall with its myriad decorations, above the seat where a part of the Vigil rested always at his back.

Soft fur twined around his ankles, and he bent down, folding to sit cross-legged on the faded carpet, as the afternoon sunlight speckled tiny shards of colourful light through the broken stained-glass windows.

Malin hopped into his lap, turned around a few times, then settled there in a perfect glowing teal doughnut.

Paix thought of the warm desert breeze, and he was *there*, sitting on the polished sandstone floor of his quarters, Malin still snoozing contentedly in his lap.

He thought of Mhenheli, and he was *there*, sitting on the soft grass of the balcony as a silvered head rested contently on his shoulder, and Malin huffed a gentle sigh against his knee.

He thought of his little room beneath the hill, and he was *there*, sitting on the cosy bed with the soft sounds of the savannah night filtering in through the door, as Malin yawned and stretched out, then settled once more.

I am one. I am all. I am then. I am now.

The stars wheeled overhead as Onorait Paix al-Lareiff lay back and closed his eyes.

He had been given two gifts, and he was not sure which was the greater: time, or forgiveness.

As he drowsed into sleep, his fingers gently sifting through Malin's fur, one final thought drifted across his mind…

And yet do they not both go hand-in-hand?

Above the book that lay open upon the nearby desk, something shimmered. Argent light, unseen by peacefully slumbering eyes, gently drifted down onto the blank page, forming silvered words.

He is coming.

CHAPTER 78

EPILOGUE

~ PLENTY OF TIME ~

The approaching sunset burnished the upper walls of the newly appointed museum with a warm golden light, as Paix carefully finished mounting one of his older finds on the hooks in the wall before him. An exquisitely preserved upper fragment of a staff, excavated from the tall white tower of the castle; its wooden stave long gone, but the golden fixing that would have fitted over it was still intact and only slightly dented, since he'd found it beneath a small pile of rubble that had crumbled from the wall.

Set into the head of the staff was a beautiful large shard of amethyst, and he had arranged the object on the hooks in such a way that it would glint and catch the eye every time he walked past.

He sighed. So many wonderful things, and only his eyes to appreciate them. He had vowed never to share this place with anyone else, and had held true to that vow, no matter how many times the academic within him had reared its head to remind him these were priceless treasures and that he was keeping them hidden away when they should be shared with the world.

"I promised her that I would protect her and never share her secrets," he would whisper on those occasions, at which that faint nagging voice of academia would be silenced. But still, he longed for someone he could share these wonders with, for someone else to look upon them and marvel with him.

This was the museum of only one visitor: its curator. He had repurposed the large mansion building - the one with the ornate aged copper roof that he had seen on the very first day he arrived here; the one he now knew had been the home of N'dachVeip, Hadita, and their large, chaotic, loving family - and he had turned it into a place to store his precious finds. Some of those finds he kept in-situ, in particular the larger ones. But these smaller treasures deserved a place where they could shine, even if only his eyes would appreciate them. He had even fashioned displays and shelves for them from the many acacia trees surrounding the city, relishing the opportunity to work with the wood whose colour reminded him so much of his beloved copper.

He stepped back and examined the newest display with a small frown. From the moment he had lifted the crumbled stone brick that partially hid the amethyst, he had felt that he was being observed, that other eyes were watching him. And he had also felt a familiar pull. Somewhere back in his history, he had known this

staff, had seen it somewhere. But that history was so long and delved back so far that its precise location had faded from his memory.

Maybe that memory would return after he had spent the evening documenting his latest finds in his room. He'd found that the quiet time of meticulous transcription and recording had helped with that in some regard, so it might—

Above a book that lay open upon a desk in a room beneath a hill, an indigo-painted ceiling speckled with delicate silver stars slowly began to move. The stars turned as the painted sky swirled around the ceiling, a living and beautiful echo of eternity.

As they moved over the desk, the stars softly began to weep, their argent light falling onto the blank page and forming silvered words.

He is here.

A few moments later, the words faded away.

A golden warmth shimmered deep within Paix. A familiar warmth, one he had last felt barely two months before in the castle, as the angel had embraced him. The loving presence of the Vigil glowed, twining up through his chest and wrapping tenderly around his heart.

We… are not done.

He stilled, holding his breath.

Not yet.

He tilted his head, listening.

Your story does not begin here, and neither does it end.

He could hear something. Something unexpected. Something he had hoped never to hear in this place.

There is one more story left to be told.

Over the sound of the breeze soughing through the acacia leaves and dry grasses he could hear the faint slide of shoes walking up stone steps.

He was not in the past, that much he knew. If he were, then the building around him would be furnished as the manor once was, and not as a museum filled with the finds he had dug up.

That meant only one thing.

His heart started to pound, panic seizing him as a cold wash of dread poured over him. No. No no no! Someone had found this place! Someone else was here!

“Hello?”

The word echoed from the doorway, breaking the peaceful silence, followed a moment later by a couple more hesitant steps, this time on the floor of the museum itself.

“Ohh…” The voice lowered to a softer register; one of wonder and delight and… relief? “I’ve actually found—“

Paix stared wide-eyed at the back of the display he’d ducked behind, fear hammering through his chest as he tried desperately to keep his breathing quiet. Maybe… maybe if he kept completely still and silent they might go away?

But, oh, come *on*. It was obvious someone lived here. He’d left lying around enough signs of human occupation - not least the lit campfire over which his dinner was currently simmering in a pot - to make a complete embarrassment of himself if he tried to pretend he wasn’t here.

The thought brought a rueful smile to his lips. *You’re behaving like a child hiding his face and thinking that because he can’t see anyone else, he also can’t be seen.*

Well. His neck bent and his head lowered as he resigned himself to the fact. *The game is up. I’m so sorry, my beloved A’lumiya, but your secret is no longer only mine to keep.*

He forced his shoulders down, let out the faintest of shuddering breaths, inhaled again, lifted his head, and stepped out from behind the display.

Instantly, the man who stood just inside the doorway froze, staring at him. He was tall and tanned, probably in his mid-forties or so, wearing black pants, sturdy brown boots, a thin grey long-sleeved Henley shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and a black flannel shirt tied loosely around his waist. A worn leather backpack slung over one shoulder appeared to bear enough equipment to set up camp if needed. His hair was dark and neat, and a silver hoop pierced his right earlobe, from which there dangled what looked like a small clear gemstone.

“Professor al-Lareiff,” he murmured. “I can’t believe I’ve found you.”

Paix found himself longing for the beads that had always calmed him when wrapped around his wrist. Instead, anxiety wrapped itself around his gut; a

twisting nervousness pushing his hand to brace against the side of the exhibit and clutch it tightly enough that his knuckles whitened.

“Were you looking for me yourself?” he asked quietly. “Or did somebody else send you?”

The man let the backpack slide off his shoulder and set it down on the floor, against one of the exhibit walls. He then took another couple of hesitant steps into the museum.

“I came alone,” he said, both hands held out slightly in front of him, palms upwards as if to show they were empty and that he meant no harm.

As if he’s calming a spooked animal, Paix thought. *Is that how I look to him? A cornered beast in its den?*

He nodded, still keeping close to the display. “Might I ask… why?”

The man blinked. Then, “Oh! I… uh…” He palmed a hand to the nape of his neck, and his expression turned sheepish. “I’ve been studying your work for years - even wrote a dissertation around some of the themes in your book *‘Astrological Symbolism in Early Empire Cultures’* - and I found out that you’d left on an expedition just over two years ago but hadn’t been heard from since. I—“ That expression became even more sheepish. “I did a bit of research, asked around, and found out the last place you’d been seen and the direction you’d headed in, so I booked tickets and travelled out here. I’ve been walking for days…”

The exhausted emphasis on that last word, followed by the slight wobble of the man’s knees made Paix dart out from the display, sprinting across the floor and arriving only just in time to catch him as he crumpled.

His eyes were still open, but he groaned as Paix held onto him.

“Sorry,” he whispered. “I didn’t realise how little there would be to eat and drink in the open savannah. Not much of a botanist, so I wasn’t sure what was safe to eat and what would kill me.”

Paix sighed as he reached out to snag the man’s backpack, slinging it over one shoulder. “Just try not to pass out on me, all right?”

The man nodded, as Paix lifted him up in his arms and carried him out of the museum into the sunlight.

“Well,” Paix added, as he turned the corner onto the main cobbled street and resolutely ignored the weird feeling of *déjà vu* that had just snuck up beside him and dug a sharp elbow into him. “If I’m to be playing nursemaid to you for a while, might I have the pleasure of knowing your name, since you know mine?”

The man was silent for a moment, staring up at the statue. Paix watched him curiously, eventually murmuring a soft, “Hey, still with me?”

“Sorry,” the man said, looking back up at Paix. “Just… that statue. Wow. Uh, my name’s Maxwell, but I prefer Max.”

“Nice to meet you, Max. And if I catch you calling me Professor again, I may find myself forced to call you Maxwell, so it’s Paix if you don’t mind.”

Max looked a bit thrown. “Paix? Is that how you pronounce it? Your books and research papers all say ‘Pix’.”

“That was a name I used a while ago, but it wasn’t my real name,” Paix replied softly, “I’ve only recently reverted to using that real name once more.”

“Oh. Right.”

Paix chuckled. "In fact, I should congratulate you. Not many people can pronounce it correctly, but you managed it on the first try."

Having reached the door in the hillside, he leaned on the handle with one elbow, giving it as much of a shove as he could with his arms full. It swung open, revealing that - for the first time in what felt like months - the room beyond had changed again.

It was larger, which was not an unusual thing in itself. Most of its changes had necessitated an increase in size. But the reason for that change this time made him hesitate.

The bed - his lovely, cosy, comfortable single bed - was now a double.

He took a step back onto the cobbled road and turned his head to look up at the statue. Slowly, he raised both eyebrows at her.

As if in response, as the sun set behind her, a beautiful golden god ray shimmered briefly down the length of her arm and blazed out from between the fingers of her outstretched hand.

He gave her a wry smile, then turned back to the room again, stepping inside and closing the door behind him with his boot heel.

Max gazed around the room, his lips parted, his eyes wide. He stared at the sandstone carvings that bordered the upper walls, stopping at the one above the bed: the spire of the Vigil that reached into the sky.

“This… was *not* what I expected when I saw the outside of this place,” he murmured, sounding somewhat justifiably bewildered.

After a moment, he chuckled. “You live in a house inside a hill. Does that make you a Hobbit?”

Paix just smiled, carefully sitting Max down on the bed and crouching down to untie the laces of this unexpected guest’s boots and ease them off.

“Rest there for a bit,” was all he said. “I’ll be back with some food and drink in a few minutes.”

The cooking pot - filled with a hearty vegetable stew - had been slowly bubbling over the campfire outside for a good thirty or so minutes while Paix had tended to the museum, so its contents were meltingly delicious. He spooned a generous helping into a polished wooden bowl and carried it back into the room.

Max had made himself comfortable on the bed, cross-legged with his back to the wall, and was looking around him.

“Where did all this stuff come from?” he asked, clearly surprised to find such things as a double bed and a desk and chair inside what amounted to a cave in a wall, albeit a cave with a door and an unusual sandstone interior that did not match the outer stone in the slightest.

“You might want to eat something before I explain that.” Paix held out the bowl and spoon, and Max took it, his face lighting up as the scent of food reached him.

“When *was* the last time you ate something?” Paix asked, turning away to pour a cup of honey wine from the covered jug on his desk.

Turning back, he saw that Max was eating carefully, even though he must have been half-starved. Paix set the cup down on the bedside table, turned the desk chair around and sat on it, watching him.

“I lost count,” Max said between mouthfuls. “Perhaps four days. Maybe five. I’d rationed what I brought with me, but then those rations ran out. And that was when I found that not a lot of food grows naturally in the savannah.”

“And you said you’re not a botanist, so…”

“Exactly.” Max looked up, swallowed his latest mouthful, and turned thoughtful eyes on Paix. “But then… neither are you, as far as I know, so how did you manage for food while you made your way here?”

Paix smiled. “You’d be surprised,” he said softly, “at what skills I have picked up over the years. But you said you had been studying my work and came to find me. Might I ask to what purpose? Surely it wasn’t just because you were concerned for my safety…”

Max had finished the bowl of stew, and he let it rest in his lap as he reached for the cup of honey wine, taking a long sip. His eyes closed briefly, as though he were savouring the taste of it. Another slow sip, then his eyes opened again, soft and thoughtful as he gazed down into the cup.

"I read your book," he said. "*The Jewel of the Sands*. The one about the lost ancient desert empire and their city that's rumoured to still exist somewhere, buried beneath the sands. You'd gathered together so much research and wrote so eloquently about the place. Even though nobody has ever found it, it fascinated me because when I read it, I felt like I was *there*. And…"

His cheekbones turned rosy, even through his tan. "Uh… I know this is *really* presumptuous of me, but I wanted to talk to you about it. And I'd hoped that, in return, you might need… an assistant… out here in the field?"

Paix stared at him.

"You tracked me down halfway around the world and almost died of malnutrition… because of a book I once wrote?"

Max smiled ruefully. "Well, when you put it that way, it does sound rather ridiculous, doesn't it?"

Paix couldn't help but laugh. "Oh, absolutely! But, since you're here now and I can't very well send you away without you probably dying of malnutrition for real, I suppose… welcome to A'lumiya, the Ancient Capital. She clearly doesn't mind me sharing her with you, because… well…" He gestured toward the bed.

Max looked down at it.

"Um…" he said.

"Long story," Paix supplied. "Probably best told after you've had a good sleep. Are you done with that bowl?"

Silently, Max handed it over. Taking it, Paix went outside to refill it. As he crouched by the campfire, spooning more stew into the bowl, he glanced up at the statue, now glimmering in the moonlight against a darkening sky.

"There's more to this than meets the eye," he murmured to her. "I don't know what it is, or what you're planning - because I'm pretty sure you *are* planning something - but this feeling of *déjà vu* is like nothing I've experienced before. Is this some part of my history that's been lost and that you're bringing back to me?"

She was, of course, silent. She never answered him directly, preferring to respond by means of symbols. Tomorrow he would probably unearth some artefact that would give him a clue as to why this all felt so oddly, comfortingly *familiar*. He'd

met a *lot* of people over the course of 2,000 years, but there was just something about Max that he couldn't quite place.

Oh well. I probably bumped into him at some conference or dig site or what-have-you.

He sighed, shoving the spoon into the bowl and getting to his feet again with a mutter of, "Not sure what's going to happen when I move into another time, though. Is he going to come with me, or stay in the present, or what?"

Something teal and glowing caught his peripheral vision, and he turned as Malin trotted up to him with something in their mouth. Crouching down again, he reached out to scritch behind their ear, all worries forgotten.

"Hey there," he murmured. "Was it a good evening for exploration?"

Malin purred, leaning into the affectionate touch and dropping the object from their mouth. It was small and shiny and partially covered in fresh dirt. Clearly, they had dug it up from somewhere. Paix reached down for it, earning himself a batted paw on his arm as he stopped the scritching.

One thumb swiped over it, and he found himself staring at a small copper cartouche. Stamped into it was something very familiar to him: the Paixandrian pictographic symbol for 'trust'.

He looked up at the statue and smiled.

"All right," he whispered. "I will."

***

Max was curled up on the bed as Paix entered the room with the bowl and spoon, Malin padding at his heels. Paix had only just closed the door and taken one step further into the room, when Max reached down a hand toward the floor, rubbing thumb and fingers together and making encouraging little '*tch-tch-tch*' noises at Malin.

Paix had to hold onto the bowl very tightly to avoid dropping it in surprise. He stared as Malin trotted over to Max and butted up against his hand, as he scratched their cheek over and over.

"Well, aren't you adorable?" Max said softly, his face lit with a smile as he let himself be very enthusiastically scent-marked.

Slowly, Paix made his way over to the chair, still staring. He sat down, but didn't start eating.

“What’s their name?” Max asked.

“Malin.”

“Boy or girl?”

Paix raised the bowl, dipping the spoon into the stew and stirring it around a few times.

“Neither. Not he, nor she. Malin is they.”

He took a mouthful, watching as Max shrugged one shoulder.

“Fair enough,” Max said. “They’re a gorgeous colour. Almost like honey, or sand.”

Quietly, Paix made his way through the stew. So, Max could see Malin, but not as Paix saw them. To Max, Malin appeared to be a real cat, and not the ghostly glowing companion they had always been to Paix.

“Do you think the Jewel of the Sands is still out there somewhere?” Max asked softly, as he continued making a fuss of Malin. “Just waiting to be discovered?”

“If it wants to be, yes,” Paix replied, equally softly.

Max looked up at him, his dark eyes telling Paix that he wanted to say something but was reluctant to give voice to it.

“Do you think it wants to be?” was all he said.

Paix had finished his last mouthful and turned to rest the bowl down on the edge of the desk. That moment gave him time enough to compose himself before he turned back to face Max.

“If the right person went looking for it,” he murmured. “This place was the same, you know. She allowed me to find her, and she’s allowed you to find me.”

“The statue?”

Paix smiled. “The statue, the city, the goddess the statue represents; who knows? There’s a magic in this place, as there is in many places. When your hands delve into the earth here, they touch history, but more than that; they touch time itself. She’s half-hidden through the ages; sometimes there and sometimes not. She’s both ruined and whole at one and the same time. Her streets are deserted, yet they hum with life.”

Max’s hand had stilled. Malin huffed a sigh and padded over to their basket, hopping into it and circling a few times before they settled into their familiar little doughnut.

“See,” Max began, hesitantly. “That’s what I mean about eloquence. That’s what I saw in your book, what I felt in it. This is going to sound so… well, hopefully not creepy, but you spoke to me in that book. I felt as if I knew you.”

“I put a lot of myself into that book,” Paix murmured, getting to his feet. “That’s probably why.”

He picked up the bowl. “You should rest. I’m just going to wash this out, then I’ll be back. I have some writing to do this evening, but I’ll try not to disturb you.”

***

Max was asleep atop the blanket when Paix returned with the now-clean bowl, having scuffed out the campfire and covered the cooking pot. He would relight the fire in the morning, and the stew would be good enough for breakfast, once heated through again.

He set the bowl down and made his way over to the chest, opening it and taking out the clothes that he liked to wear in the evenings. As quietly as he could, he changed out of his shirt, pants, and boots, and slipped into the loose comfort of the linen pants and tunic, sliding his feet into a pair of sandals.

He stood quietly, looking down at Max’s peacefully sleeping face. His visitor’s hair had fallen across his eyes, and Paix very carefully tucked it back behind his ear. As he did so, the silver earring caught his gaze and he bent lower to examine it, casting another quick glance at Max’s face to ensure he was definitely asleep.

What he’d thought was a pear cut crystal that hung from the simple silver hoop was actually a small misshapen sphere, as if a raindrop or a tear had somehow magically been caught as it fell, and frozen in this unusual shape. For all its simplicity, it was so clear that it might have been mistaken for glass had it not held the kind of inner light and brilliance that he’d seen so many times before in beautiful works of crystal.

Chewing on his lower lip, he straightened again and sifted through the dusty mental corridors of his personal history. What was happening? Why did this all feel so strange, as if it were a long forgotten or buried memory? Something was tugging deep inside him, but it was as if he were trying to examine it through a window fogged with centuries of dust and grime. He should *know* this, but he couldn’t quite grasp it. Every time he reached for it, it spilled like sand through his fingers.

Think, think, think! Stars, why do I feel as if my brain has suddenly shut off access to something important? Something's telling me I should know this, so why in all the heavens can't I remember? Think!

For a moment - an infinitesimal sliver of a second - he thought he had something. A fleeting and tantalising *almost* moment of knowing, but then it vanished, leaving behind only frustration.

With a sigh, he turned the chair back to face the desk and sat down, uncapping one of the inkwells. He dipped the quill, opened his ledger, and began to write.

Two hours and three pages of meticulous recording later - including a detailed line sketch from memory of the staff head and crystal - he set the quill back down and closed the inkwell, rolling his shoulders back a few times, then tilting his head back and stretching his arms behind himself to ease out the stiffness in his shoulders.

He had quite forgotten his guest, having lost himself in the process of writing, so as he got to his feet and lifted both arms above his head in a glorious stretch that Malin would have been proud of, he was startled to see Max lying there on the bed, watching him with a strange look in his eyes.

"Sorry. I forgot you were there," Paix said, lowering his arms. "I hope I didn't wake you up?"

"No, you didn't. I've been awake for a while, listening to you write." Max hesitated. "It was soothing. The scratch of the nib and the occasional tap of it against the lip of the inkwell. It made me feel like I was somewhere else."

Paix glanced back at the desk and his writing instruments. "Anywhere in particular?" he asked, turning back to look at Max.

There was no answer to that. Instead, Max looked him up and down. His gaze paused momentarily on the emerald ring, then moved back up to his face.

"You got changed," he said.

"I did indeed." Paix walked around to the empty side of the bed. "These clothes are comfortable for the evenings. Familiar, even."

"Familiar?"

Paix hesitated, then tugged off the linen tunic, draping it over the chest. "Yes," he said, kicking off the sandals and then stepping out of the linen pants, adding the latter to the pile on the chest. He lifted the blanket and crisp white sheet and sank down onto the mattress with a sigh, pulling the covers back up over himself.

"Did you want me to move?"

Max's voice was small. Quiet. Uncertain. Paix half-turned to look at him.

"Of course not," he replied. "Although you probably won't have a comfortable night if you sleep on top of the bed in all your gear. Feel free to strip off and get in, if you're comfortable with that. I'll be out like a light shortly. It's been a long day."

With that, he turned back again and closed his eyes, not even giving a moment's thought to the level of trust he'd just put in this complete stranger. The city had turned his single bed into a double for a reason, after all. And he was, indeed, out like a light within minutes, slipping into a weary sleep before Max had even joined him under the covers.

***

To his relief, when he awoke, the city was still in its present. One of the last thoughts that had drifted across his mind as he'd nodded off was what on earth would happen if he woke in the city's past. Would Max be there in the past with him, or would Paix simply vanish from the present, leaving Max to worry and wonder what had happened? While he could control his own movement through time these days, occasionally the city still liked to surprise him with an unexpected trip into its history.

He sighed, opened his eyes, blinked a couple of times, then turned to look blearily at the other side of the bed.

Max was awake, and watching him, that strange look still in his eyes. Oddly, though, it didn't make Paix feel uncomfortable, as he might have expected from someone he'd never met before looking at him like that. More of that weirdness again. Clearly not even a good night's sleep could shake it off.

"Hey," Max said, smiling. "Good morning."

Paix scrubbed a hand over his eyes. Still half asleep, he mumbled a good morning, completely forgetting where he was and which language he should be using.

"T'alia mhasa."

Max chuckled. "Mhasa l'amsha."

Paix froze, his hand still over his eyes, suddenly wide awake, his brain frantically trying to process what he'd just heard. Should he respond? Keep the conversation going? Stars, he'd included some simple Paixandrian words and phrases in that book, so Max might have gleaned some from there, but the Paixandrian equivalent to '*morning, sleepyhead*' sure wasn't one of them.

He remembered a comfortable couch. A precious, lazy, golden afternoon. A hand with a tender smile behind it, holding out to him a cup of spiced sha'. A comb, followed by gentle fingers, running through his hair…

He blinked away that memory, shoving it far distant from him so it couldn't knife his heart again.

He had to move or say something, because otherwise the silence would be uncomfortably long, so he took his hand away from his eyes and faked a yawn, which turned - as they usually tend to - into a genuine yawn. Which, in turn, infected Max with a yawn.

Paix smiled, deciding to gloss over it. He might even have misheard.

"Seems that we're both sleepyheads this morning. Did you at least get *some* rest?"

In reply, Max held up something that had been resting on the other side of the bed. It was a well-thumbed paperback copy of *The Jewel of the Sands: Study of a Lost Desert Empire*. Paix noted that several page corners were dog-eared, and the book was stuffed full of scraps of paper with notes scribbled on them, making it appear much thicker than it actually was.

The slow realisation crept over him that he was sharing a bed with a man who had tracked him down halfway around the world, carrying what looked like an almost obsessively annotated and bookmarked copy of one of his more obscure published books. And that man was looking at him with a strange expression in his dark eyes.

He should be scared out of his wits by that realisation. But he wasn't. Not at all.

Why?

"I was reading the chapter about family life," Max said quietly. The timbre of his voice held an odd note, almost like eagerness mingled with dread; the sort of trembling that you feel shivering through your bones when you're going to attempt something that downright terrifies you, but you have to just power through the fear and get it done.

"In it, you mentioned something about some scraps of ancient writings that you'd found," he continued. "One of them detailed a simple ceremony where two people bound their lives together, be that akin to the romance of a wedding, or to an affirmation of a deep and intimate loving platonic relationship. You wrote that the writings only included the first word of the vow. '*Maah'qab*', which you'd translated to '*My heart*'."

Paix watched him, not moving. Like the morning greeting, that pronunciation had been eerily perfect, right down to the back-of-throat sounding of the ‘h’.

Something stirred deep within his past and reached forward through millennia to lay a gentle hand on him. And as it did so, the mystifying and frustrating fog of time and dust slowly began to clear from his mind, brief slivers of moments fading in and out of memory.

Sand. Golden light. Storms. Desert flowers.

Max had laid the book back down. His eyes looked almost fearful as he turned on his side to face Paix. He reached out to touch Paix’s shoulder, in the exact spot where the past was also touching him.

Spices. Books. Copper. Stars.

Max’s fingers were trembling.

“But you didn’t include the rest of it,” he whispered, his voice almost inaudible. “*‘Maah’qab tazu alaa'qab, id'haye nahid’. 'My heart cherishes your heart, for it knows we are one.'*”

Past and present slammed together, leaving a soft bloom of pain in Paix’s chest. Hoarsely, he murmured, “I have not heard those words in many, many years.”

“Yet back then you listened to others speak them so often,” Max replied. “But never the one who longed to say them to you and hear them returned.”

Tents. Candles. Journeys. Black cloth.

The past reached into Paix, wrapped its hand around his heart, and twisted slowly. His eyes began to blur with tears. The ache blossomed into something almost unbearable, something familiar; a millennia-old prayer that until now he had not dared allow himself to hope for in the years since whispering it on the edge of the Well of Stars.

I wept for him there. The only time I had permitted a tear to fall into the depths of eternity.

His gaze flicked briefly over to the small crystal droplet on Max’s earring.

The mattress shifted as Max moved closer to him. Paix was frozen to the spot, staring up at him, barely able to comprehend what was happening. But he had hope. Oh stars, he had hope.

Lifetimes. Endings. Grace. Love.

He felt a tear land on his shoulder as Max leaned over him. A hand caressed his cheek, its fingers then sliding into his hair almost desperately.

“Onorait,” Max whispered. “Maah’qab. The Vigil brought me back to you, as you begged her to.”

The past let go, sending him tumbling and falling, lost and rudderless. His vision suddenly cleared as his welling tears spilled over, and the fog over his mind lifted fully, letting him truly see those oh so achingly familiar dark eyes above him, and finally recognise the soul behind that face.

How had he not *seen?* How had he not *realised?*

He opened his mouth, but nothing would come. No words, no reason, no sense.

“I’m sorry,” Max was whispering, the words tripping over themselves in their urgency to be said. “I’m *so* sorry. I didn’t want to lie, but I didn’t know… didn’t know how to approach you, how to tell—“

Finally, a word found its way to Paix’s throat. Just one word; hoarse and disbelieving.

“… Mhenheli?”

Max smiled and nodded tearfully. “My parents gave me the name of Maxwell in this life, but I would take my true name from your lips in a heartbeat. Just to hear it again is…”

His mind reeling, Paix barely registered those words, but three of them jabbed at him.

“Wait… wait…” he gasped. “*In this life?*”

He palmed a hand against Max’s… against *Mhenheli’s* cheek.

“How many lives?” he begged.

A pause.

“Seventeen,” came the quiet reply. “This is the eighteenth.”

Paix was trembling now, bringing his other hand up to cradle that other cheek.

“You searched for me through seventeen lives?” he murmured, completely thrown, his world suddenly on its head in the space of a few moments.
“You *remembered* through seventeen lives?”

“Eighteen. I came close on a few of them. Missed you by a few months.” Mhenheli’s voice broke as he choked down a sob. “Once, by only three days—“

An anguished moan left Paix’s throat, and he silenced those words by wrapping his arms around Mhenheli, pulling him down, pulling him close, and holding him

tightly, sobbing quietly into his hair. Equally desperate arms wrapped around him, as Mhenheli buried his face against Paix's neck and wept.

For the second time in as many months, past and present melted seamlessly into one. And Paix *knew*. He could sense it, could feel it. This was, without doubt, his beloved Mhenheli. The part of him that had been missing for almost two thousand years had returned and fitted right back into where he belonged, by his side. He felt *right*. He felt *complete*.

He was whole again.

They held each other for what could have been minutes or hours or days, both lost in the exquisite contentment that was the reuniting of two stars-bound souls. Sobs died, tears dried, and they just rested together in each other's arms, drifting in a quiet, perfect, and loving peace.

But, deep down, dread tugged at Paix like a small and persistent child pulling at his coattails.

For how long? How many years do we have together this time? I will take with all my heart what time is given to us, but oh stars, the thought of losing him again…

His embrace tightened reflexively in response to the intrusive pain of those thoughts, as though Death had already once again begun her cruel, slow taking away of this perfect part of him.

"No more lifetimes. No more endings." Mhenheli's gentle voice found its way through those anguished thoughts. "The Vigil promised to me that when I finally found you, I would be as you are. Eternal."

Paix let his head fall back onto the pillow again, and found himself looking up into those dark eyes, his gaze stunned, and his eyes filled with wonder, disbelief, and hope.

"I never have to lose you again?" he whispered.

Mhenheli shook his head, smiling down at him. "Never again. You spoke that vow to me on the lip of the Well of Stars, and the Grace of the Vigil granted me remembrance through as many lives as I needed to find you and to complete that vow, and eternity thereafter to be by your side so that you would no longer have to wander the world alone."

He looked down at his hand, palm now resting gently on Paix's chest, over his heart, almost as if he couldn't quite believe this moment had finally come. Then his gaze moved back up to Paix's eyes.

“No more shutting yourself off from friendship or love, maah’qab, for fear of losing to death’s grasp those you care for,” he continued softly. “You’ve endured the pain and loneliness of losing so many, but I’m here for you, now and always. I’ve loved you for two thousand years, and I will walk with you wherever you wish to go and give you as much love as you wish to take.”

Paix brushed back a lock of dark hair from Mhenheli’s face, letting his fingers caress down his cheek. They grazed gently over the precious frozen tear on the earring, and his heart filled at the knowledge that at least this tiny part of him had been with his beloved Mhenheli throughout every lifetime he had lived and searched for him.

Slowly, he slid those fingers into Mhenheli’s hair, around to the back of his head, gently pulling him down until Mhenheli’s forehead rested against his own.

He closed his eyes. This was a love like no other. Uncomplicated devotion, stars-bound across eternity; the deeply intimate simplicity of the perfect platonic love that he had yearned for his entire life. In his other life here, he had cradled this precious gift in his hands for but twenty years, and then lost it for millennia. And now it had found him again, for good.

His words a breath of tenderness, he said softly, “Maah’qab tazu alaa'qab, id'haye nahid.”

Mhenheli’s breath hitched in a low sob of happiness. Then, equally softly, he spoke the vow in return. “Maah’qab tazu alaa'qab, id'haye nahid.”

Paix took the shuddering exhalation after that final word, letting it flow from Mhenheli’s mouth into his own, drinking it down and slaking the thirst of two thousand years of loneliness, as Mhenheli’s fingers feathered into his hair, holding him there.

***

Beloved. Nothing is ever truly lost. Once was carved into me the truth that I am Love. And I carved words into you; words so deep and true that you carried them without knowing your truths, but I promised you would know them one day. This is that day. You have had many names, many titles, but these are your truths. You are the daylight. You are the night. You are not alone. And I love you, because you are Love.

***

Slowly, reluctantly, Mhenheli raised his head. His eyes shone and his lips curved in a mischievous smile as Paix looked up at him.

“So, I guess you *do* need an assistant then?”

Paix laughed softly as Mhenheli bestowed upon him a choice, satisfied grin and lay back down against him. His head rested upon Paix’s shoulder, his breath coursed warm across Paix’s chest, and his fingers slowly and tenderly combed through Paix’s hair, as they had done so many times before.

With a contented sigh of pure, perfect happiness, Paix smiled.

“Later,” he murmured. “We have plenty of time.”

And, in their basket on the floor by the bed, Malin tucked the tip of their tail over their nose and snored gently.

~ END ~

Art:
Sabira | Flower of Laurelin
https://www.sabiralangevin.com/
(commissioned)

End notes

Thank you so much for joining me on this ride. I hope you had fun :)

While this is the end of the story itself, it's not the end of this world, nor of these characters. I have started posting These Stones Remember II on AO3, which will comprise a series of companion sketches, little tranches de vie, character studies, worldbuilding notes, AU scenes that never actually happened in the story, and even perhaps some crossovers with my other 'Empires collab group' stories that incorporate characters from *this* story. I have a bunch of ideas for these already and will work my way through them as time and inspiration strikes.

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OTHER WORKS

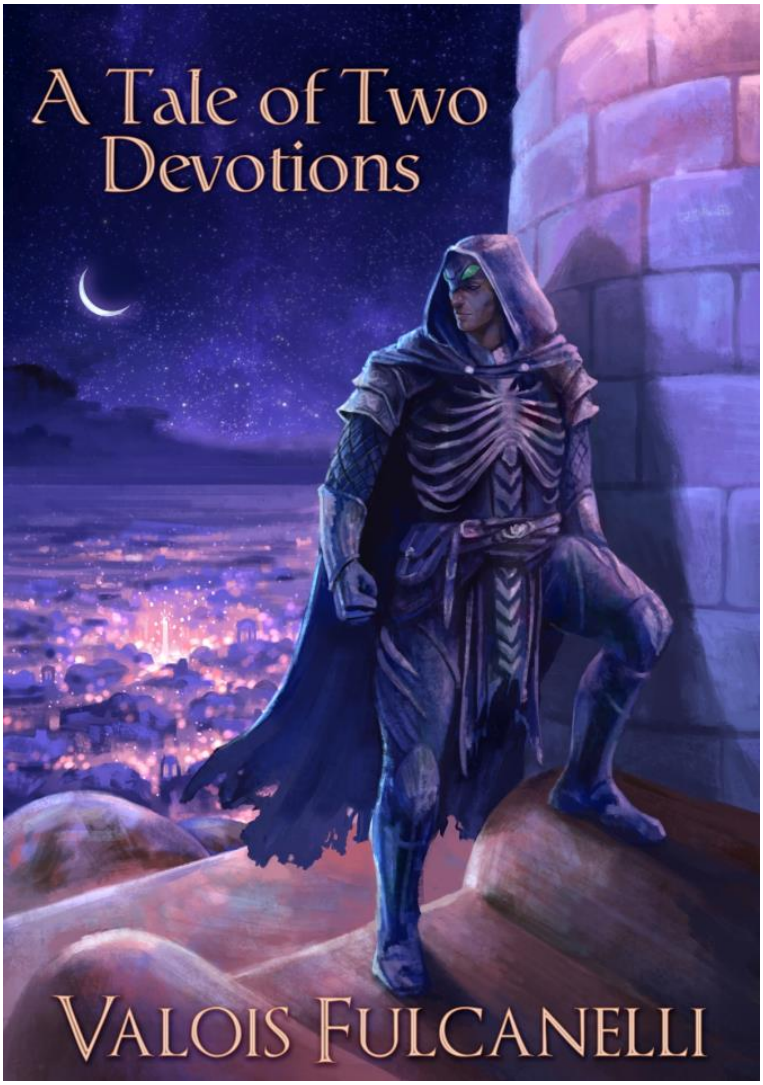
If you are interested in reading more of my work, you can find it here.

My current ongoing longfic (as of December 2024) is A Tale of Two Devotions, which updates with a new chapter every other week.

A TALE OF TWO DEVOTIONS

There are tales of ghosts that wander the desert with their eyes and mouths sealed shut with wax. Legends tell that this was so they could neither see nor speak of what was done to them in their dying moments.

The gilded, adorned, and adored Copper King did not know he had a twin; a freak of nature taken from their mother's childbed and raised to protect the glory of the Vigil, the city, its people, and the king.

Denied a name, known only as Phantom, the rooftops and alleys are his haunt as he watches over his brother's devotion to the Vigil; an obedience so deep that none in the city know how chained their king is to keeping their precious monument alive.

Nor do they know the price paid by their dead.