



DANIEL HARDMAN

CORDIMANCY

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1

boy on naming day ~ Toril

Toril stepped forward again, letting river sweep over his head as he sank.

Water invaded his nostrils. Sunlight dimmed and greened. Turbulence muted the drumbeat from the shore behind him.

He knew his mam stood there, lip to teeth, her sari wet, half leaning over the rope that priests held to restrain the crowd. She had reached to him as he walked past, not able to help herself—then pulled back at a hard stare from Toril's tat.

Another step. The stone that he carried as an anchor hung heavy in his arms. He shivered at the cold sand between his toes.

Ears straining, he found the rhythm of the drummers and allowed it to pace him as his mind invoked the incantation:

*I stand at the fork in the path of my three,
Wet and unnamed as the day I took breath...*

He released a third of his air in a rush of bubbles. The pressure in his lungs eased, but he felt the first pangs for new air.

Tat promised the magic would come, Toril told himself.

*Which human, which kindred, which person I'll be—
I'll choose, then I'll walk, then I'll hold till the death.*

He waited.

Nothing.

He promised it would come before air mattered...

Another rush of bubbles. The pounding in his chest redoubled.

His lungs felt compressed, depleted. He longed to release the weight that pushed him against the riverbed, kick up, and fling his head into daylight and air. The surface was so close.

But that would mean the easy choice of most of the other children who'd entered the water today. He'd have no grand destiny as a ward of Karkita, and not even magic as a consolation prize. He'd be no better than the timid who halted when the water reached their knees.

Mam would hug him fiercely and tell him she was glad to have him back, and she'd mean it. Amar's death was still too fresh for her to feel otherwise.

Tat would try to smile as well, but there would be sorrow in his eyes. No glory for the son of Hasha, the clan chief.

Others witnessing the naming day would look away, either pleased with his failure, or pitying him.

A trickle of bubbles emptied his lungs completely. He pushed back rising panic.

I'll choose, then I'll walk, then I'll hold till the death.

I'll choose, then I'll walk, then I'll hold till the death.

I'll choose, then I'll walk, then I'll hold till the death.

The words got faster. He couldn't hear the drums anymore, couldn't hear the swirling current. The roar inside his eardrums, the lurching of his heart deafened. Emerald tilted toward black. His fingers trembled.

And then...

A thrill of power stabbed out from his heart, transfixed his lungs, consumed his belly, swept along arms and legs, burned out of fingers and toes. Heat shot up his neck, suffused his face, set lips and tongue afire.

Time slowed. Breath no longer mattered.

Vision returned—but with such astonishing clarity that he felt like a blind boy introduced to sight for the first time. The graininess of the boulder in his hands, the white along the edges of his ragged thumbnails, darting shadows of trout in the deeps of the center current—details leapt at him faster than he could process.

Nor was sight the only sense competing for his attention. Moments ago, he'd been unaware of smell at all; now the odor of the river seemed to flood his sinuses. He caught the fishiness, the algae and reeds, perhaps a whiff of pine, perhaps a hint of peppery watercress. He even detected the dust of yesterday's pre-rain parch in the wetness, and the odor of smokewood oil that had clung to the comb as Mam bound his hair for the ceremony this morning.

Toril heard the eddy downstream of his ribs. He felt rays strike his shoulders through the gloom, knew exactly which muscles were lit and which were bathed in shade, understood the gradations of clamminess permeating flesh and bone. He tasted cinnamon and cloves from the morning's breakfast roll on the back of his tongue. Blood shot through his chest and throat. He sensed thousands of hairs along his calves and forearms twitch in buffeting water.

He felt urgently alive.

And for the first time he understood Amar.

He'd only been five when his older brother emerged from the water, skin flushing gold, face exultant. He'd watched his mam's face register shock, then sorrow, then determination. He'd seen his tat's jaw clench, watched him step forward to wrap his son in a blanket and clasp him tight—and Toril the child had wondered at the choice that took his older brother down the fork of the half lives. Didn't Amar love his parents?

Didn't Amar love *him*? How could he abandon all he held dear, in a capitulation to Dashnal's fire?

Now he knew.

Toril realized that in the seven years since Amar's naming day, he—not his older brother—was the one who'd been half living. Or far less than half, perhaps. That Amar would embrace the magic seemed not only reasonable, but inevitable. Wasn't that Toril's plan now, as well? How could he consider any other?

*To walk in the path of the fire, of heart beat,
Is to know in each moment a lifetime complete.*

He had skimmed those lines in *Memimir Taran-ya* in the weeks leading to his naming ceremony. They seemed not to need much pondering. Everyone saw that time worked differently for the half lives. They moved so fast, died so soon...

But he hadn't understood that they lived so much.

I have wronged you, Amar.

Toril lifted his right foot. One step forward, and his path was chosen.

And then he hesitated.

The god of fire and war was a jealous master, more than any of the other Five. He had not come here to choose Dashnal as his tutelary.

Were the lines on Mam's face any less real than the life now bursting in his veins? She'd stood there, cheeks streaked, as the fire of Amar's funeral pyre rose last month. Tat had put his arm around her, his own shoulders hunched in grief, unable even to speak at the wake hosted by his son's adopted people. Amar had flamed out quickly, sired no children before dying of old age. He'd found friends, lived with honor among the *osipi*, earned their respect. But he'd dashed Tat's hopes for a successor, and broken Mother's heart.

As tears leaked into the swirling water, Toril moved his foot back to its starting point.

I do not choose the path of fire.

He swallowed the sadness in his throat, willed the power in his veins to diminish, willed the shoving at his ribs to slow.

The fire fought. He felt boiling at his fingertips, sizzle along his lips—but he reached out with his mind and pulled frigidness from the flow and drew it into himself, desperately, like a thirsty man sucking raindrops from his palms even as the moisture rolls away.

Karkita, help me!

Little by little, tremble and heat subsided. First his toes cooled to ambient temperature, then his legs. The riot in his ears softened into an ordinary human muddle. Color faded; flickering shadow became murk once again.

How long had he been beneath the swirling surface? Long enough to worry those on shore, he thought—but the flow of magic had skewed his sense of time. For some reason, the need for breath remained remote.

He swallowed again. For most, the ordeal ended here—either because they had no desire to try fire's complement, or because they lacked the ability to continue.

Now, at last, he would learn if he could better his tat's achievement.

*To live with the age and the strength of a tree,
Renounce all heart fire, walk ice-ward, walk free.*

Those lines were etched in his memory. He'd repeated them like a litany, dozens of times each day, as he'd practiced the heart-slowing exercises. Karkita was the index finger on Heaven's Fist—the goddess of wisdom and statecraft, long life and moon. Each night as he spread maps across his desk and dreamed of what might lie beyond the eastern wild, or wondered if he'd be the first to sail the western sea and return with tales of strange lands, he'd imagined himself as one of her *sata*—tall, colorless, polished in manner, possessed of the learning of many lifetimes... The iron self-discipline that

enabled them to renounce magic completely was more than paid back in physical toughness and opportunity. Sata were the world's philosophers and generals and scholars.

It could be his, if he had the courage to walk in ice.

He concentrated, willing an ever slower rhythm into his heart. Thump. Thummp... Thhhumpp... The water sliding past his fingertips began to seem warm by comparison with his flesh. The aftertaste in his mouth was gone. The river had lost all smell.

His hands and feet began to ache.

No sata had led Clan Kelun in eight hundred years. Not since Irov ur Hapno. Tat said it was because it didn't work—sata lived solitary, childless lives, outlasting by generations the people they'd grown up with—and their sense of clan identity suffered as a result. He said Toril should keep his magic, if he could get any, and turn it into an asset for everyone's benefit. But Toril had read the histories. Irov was the one who'd brought knowledge of mining back to the mountains of his childhood. He'd turned goatherds and country bumpkins into prosperous merchants who supplied neighbors with copper and silver, gold and iron. He'd founded the schools that taught every child of the clan to read zufan script, to multiply on their abacus, and to measure the seasons by the stars.

Clan Kelun would not simply *export* a sata if Toril walked the path of ice; he would leave for a time, and see the world—but he'd return, full of ideas and wisdom, to serve the people. And when Hasha became too frail to retain the staff, Toril ur Hasha would step forward and take his rightful post of leadership.

Now the ache of the ice was bone-deep. It radiated through his shoulders, his neck, his skull.

He pulled his left foot out of the sand. It seemed to move with infinite slowness. He still felt no need to breathe, but the ice was wearing him down.

A winter day slipped out of his memory and ran across the stage of his mind. He and Amar had been exploring along the margins of the pond above the *durga*—the fortified fort where

they lived, at the center of Noemi. They'd cut a hole in the frozen surface, and Amar had challenged him to push his arm in and hold it there as long as he could stand the pain. Toril had lain prone on the ice, first gritting his teeth, then whimpering into the snow. Amar's chuckles turned to amazement, then to exasperation, and finally to worry.

"Take it out," Amar had said.

"I can... stand it," Toril gasped.

"Take it out!"

"You said as long as I could."

Amar had pulled out his arm, finally. It was mottled white and blue. Toril had surrendered to sobs. He'd never imagined such pain. How could he have forgotten that ordeal, thought walking the path of ice, now, would be an easy exercise of will?

This pain was worse. Worse by far.

Every part of Toril's body ached, but especially his face and his chest. His lips and tongue, his relentlessly beating heart refused to surrender to the ice forming around his fingers. He felt that he'd been raising his foot forever to take the step that would seal his choice, but through the dimness he saw only the slightest bend in his knee. Fresh moisture would have welled from his eyes, if his tear ducts had not been frozen shut. A groan died in his chest.

His mam would be proud if he emerged pale and ice-crustled, he knew. Sata were so rare, and they always brought prestige and prosperity to the family they came from. But he'd seen the way she looked at the little ones frolicking at the *paoro*. She wanted grandbabies. Amar couldn't keep their line alive, now. She wanted him to choose the middle path.

But I choose the path of ice, he thought. *Karkita! Ice!*

And yet his leg would not move, his heart would not slow, and his lips, even as they mouthed the words, burned anew.

His tat had been through this. He'd stood in the river himself, years ago, felt the magic rise, pushed through it. He'd also tested the ice, Toril knew, but Tat had always been reluctant to speak of the ordeal. Just said the ice had been cruel,

that he'd been glad to leave the water with his human destiny and the tingling in his fingers. He was proud of the endowment of hand magic—manumancy—that Akeet, god of craft and work, had blessed him with as proof of his courage.

Others who braved the river—some of them—gained the talent to kindle with lips, or eyes, or ears.

Mam was a tried “heart”. Supposedly hearts could kindle; there were legends about it. But Toril knew what a heart really was: a dud. She'd been through the same ordeal, but she'd left the water with no magical skill at all. Nothing. Anybody who skipped the ordeal was automatically a heart, and most who endured had that outcome as well. Would that be Toril's fate, too, if he yielded? Would he have nothing to show for his pain? Would all his dreams crumble into the ordinary?

The path of ice!

Toril closed his eyes, summoned all his remaining grit and energy into the words, forced his mouth to form the syllables behind closed lips, fought blossoming panic from his lungs.

But it was no use. Steam boiled off his upper lip as the magic within him rebelled—fire defying cold.

Exhausted, Toril relaxed his straining thigh. His left foot sank back into place as if pinioned by an immense weight.

The middle path, his burning tongue conceded silently.

He dropped the stone and reached for light and oxygen and nothing he'd hoped for.

Toril waded shivering onto the riverbank, mouth ablaze. The girls who'd done the ceremony before him looked bedraggled, standing behind the priestess who'd supervised. He wondered how they'd fared.

Blisters were swelling all around his lips. Hasha had seen them, he knew—his eyes had widened as he'd approached to throw a blanket around his son's shoulders. Was he disappointed with Toril's failure to renounce the magic, or pleased that some remnant of it seemed to be focusing into a permanent endowment?

How did Toril feel about being a lip? That was what the blisters meant, wasn't it?

"Step forward," said the priest who was his guide.

Toril complied.

"Your mother gave you a name to share with friend and foe on the day you were born. Will you learn what was in her heart, and test whether you have carried that name well?"

"Yes."

The priest nodded.

Toril's mother, eyes still wet, stepped behind Toril's shoulder and whispered in his ear. "Ta- for *father*, or- for *son*, -il for *joy*. A son who is his father's joy." She squeezed his shoulders, and Toril could hear the smile. "To- for *from*, -eril for *heart*. A treasure from my heart." She squeezed again. "Tora-il, ninth great grandson of Kelun and founder of the *parijan* to which I was born." She squeezed a final time.

Toril felt a warm glow. He'd guessed the first meaning, and the third, but not the second. It pleased him to feel the connection to his mam. That, at least, was happy today.

"Have you heard?" asked the priest.

"Yes."

"Now you must take a name of your *own* choosing." The priest nodded to Toril's mother, who lifted a blindfold and tied it around her son's eyes.

He felt the scratch of burlap as a sack was thrust into his hand.

"Lead him," said the priest.

Toril heard his tat walk across the gravel, then felt strong hands on his shoulders. The drummers started again. Even though they chose a slow rhythm, Toril struggled to keep pace; his feet slipped and flinched on sharp stone. After a couple dozen steps, he felt Tat turn him. He was behind the curtain that the witnesses held to give him privacy. He stood on bare sand now.

"Dump it," whispered Tat.

Toril allowed rocks to drop onto the sand in front of him. Then he handed the empty bag to his father and received the handle of a broom in return. He swept lightly; the goal was to brush away pebbles, leaving only a pattern of larger stones that would form the quattroglyphs suggesting a name.

What would he see when he pulled off the blindfold? Could he salvage any of the dream that he'd taken into the water, by finding a name that suggested learning, prestige, or power? Would any of The Five Who Speak manifest their interest in him?

One of his friends had confided that he'd ignored the rocks entirely, just picking a name that he liked. Toril had been horrified—both because this disrespected the gods' guidance on the course of one's life, and because his friend had broken the taboo of never speaking about one's self-name after the ceremony.

He would never share his name so casually.

And he would study the rocks to see what possibilities The Five had written there.

Toril stopped sweeping. He held the broom out, waited till it was pulled from his hand, and stood until his father dropped the blindfold.

He saw nothing but a jumble of rocks.

He felt a new wave of resignation, to match the moment when he'd admitted defeat in the river. He jerked his head and blinked angrily.

Tat sensed his mood and squatted to Toril's left. He reached out and touched a fist-sized egg of a stone, worn smooth by eons in the river bed.

"See the narrow side?" he whispered. "Narrow or light for the pointing end; wide or dark for the other." He touched two other stones near the first. "Here is the center of the glyph. The first and the third point out; the second points in; the fourth is missing. This is 'fire.' You see?"

He looked up at his son, eyes crinkling.

Toril hesitated, then nodded. A dozen pebbles cluttered in and around the pattern that his father had identified, but if he squinted to suppress what was irrelevant, the shape was obvious. Sort of.

A month ago he'd rolled his eyes at his father's quizzing. He knew all the glyphs by heart—had known them for years.

But what he saw now was not so clear. Was that implying that his future was murky, or was he just too dense to read? Or had he simply relinquished the broom too soon?

Tat gestured a pace to his left. "Here is 'home,'" he said, voice low enough to be inaudible to those waiting beyond the curtain. "And over there I see 'heart.'"

He raised his eyebrows to be sure Toril agreed.

"Now find your name, son. Take your time." He stood up and walked around the curtain.

Toril started to lick his lips, then flinched as the burning intensified. He pushed the pain aside and studied the stones, taking a step or two in each direction, careful not to disturb any of the patterns near his feet.

For a dozen heartbeats, he stood motionless, scanning. Another dozen heartbeats passed. And another. He saw a heap that might be a skewed version of 'flower', if he approached it from a certain angle. Or 'dove', if he came at it from the opposite side. Those words belonged to Akeet's twin sister—Jurivna, goddess of spring. He'd never felt much affinity for her, though, and the arrangement lacked symmetry anyway...

He picked his way around the stones and looked again.

Nothing.

He squatted, hoping that patterns might emerge.

Should he use the quattroglyphs his father had already identified? 'Fire' and 'heart' and 'home' were each powerful words, but there was something repellent in the connotation that came as he savored them together. Besides, his hair was still wet from the river portion of the ordeal, where he'd disavowed the fire streaming out of his heart; claiming those words now felt incongruous, disingenuous. Dashnal would be offended.

Perhaps his friend had not been crazy to simply choose a name that he liked. In the end, the self name had to be a personal choice; that was why he was on this side of the curtain alone. There was no requirement that the name come from rock—it was just a way for The Five to suggest possibilities.

Were they telling him to stop looking for a glorious pattern to his life?

As Toril shifted to another vantage point, his eyes followed the tracks the broom had made, and his forehead wrinkled. Quattroglyphs weren't always formed with stones... In one story he'd read with his mother, a lover had left quattroglyphs for his sweetheart on a muddy road using prints from a boot with a distinctive heel. He'd passed the messages in broad daylight, right under the nose of parents and a matchmaker with other ideas, and won her heart so that in the end the arranged marriage had to be abandoned.

What did his brush strokes say?

"Seek."

It was clear as ink on parchment, once he focused on the negative space he'd unwittingly created. Taking a step forward, he saw a mound of pebbles at the nexus of the glyph. The augment mark converted verbs into people. Not "seek" then — "seeker."

Yes.

This resonated. Toril could see himself as a seeker. It bound him to Karkita. He longed to bring glory to his clan. He craved knowledge. He wanted to see the world. He wanted—he sought—something besides the everyday.

Maybe he could not walk in ice. Maybe he would only have a human lifetime, but he could spend it seeking for what others had never dreamed. He would be the pride of his parents.

Toril squatted at the center of the glyph, heart warming. "I am Seeker," he thought. "Seeker of ..." What word could he add that would complete the thought—and the name—in just the right way? The Five had guided him to the first part, and he would fill in the second.

"Seeker of Glory," sounded selfish and shallow. "Seeker of Honor?" Better, but not worth embracing. "Seeker of ... Knowledge? Goodness?"

He looked down at the dirt. Right between his toes was the mound that had converted the glyph into a noun. Now he saw that it, too, was a pattern—a perfectly executed arrangement of tiny pebbles.

His answer. He felt his lips tingle as the magic rose in confirmation.

First and third stones wider at the center, fourth narrow, second missing: "Help."

Wait...

As with the nexus of the broom's glyph, there was a tiny mark at the center. Another noun.

"Helper..." Sometimes he'd seen this quattroglyph used for "friend" as well.

Except that the first mark was conflicted. It was wide at the center, but also lighter in color. A conflicted first mark was a way to diminish or subtract...

"Helpless Seeker?"

"Seeker of the Helpless?"

That was a name from the fifth god—the smallest finger on the hand, the Unpaired One who wandered mountaintops and adopted anyone the other Speakers didn't want. How did he feel about being named by Gitám, god of dregs, lost causes, broken pottery, and orphans?

2

the antechild ~ Malena, a decade later

"You're making a mistake."

Malena sighed. "You've made your opinion clear. Can we agree to differ?" She saw her father draw breath for a retort, and cut him off by gesturing at the servants who had appeared in the doorway, shoulders straining at the trunk they carried. "You can leave that here," she said, nodding toward the foot of the nearest bed. "Set it down gently, please. Its contents are fragile."

Her younger sister, oblivious to the conversational tension, flopped on the bed next to the one she'd chosen, bare heels flashing. "Will you show me the heartstone before we leave, Malena?"

Malena felt her ears and throat flush. Tupa was old enough not to ask such embarrassing questions, especially in a loud voice that anyone could overhear. Hanging the heartstone happened when a marriage was consummated, and disclosing anything about the stone or the circumstances of its bestowal flouted taboo. So much for help changing the subject.

Her mother turned from the shutters she'd just pushed open at the window and glared. "Tulespa! Have you ever seen any woman's heartstone? Have you seen mine?"

"No."

“Well, then.”

“But she’s my sister.”

“She’s the *semanya* of Noemi,” Malena’s mam said. “In a few years, she might be our clan mother. The time for you two to trade girl talk is long past. Show some respect for Malena’s new station.”

Malena winced. She eyed the serving woman filling the washbasin in the corner. Was Mam’s smugness obvious to others? She wasn’t eager to begin her married life with a reputation as a self-interested social climber. “The wedding’s not till tomorrow,” she said. “For now we’re still guests. And regardless of what happens, I hope Tupa always talks to me like a sister.”

She crossed to Tupa’s bed, bent, and reached out to brush crumbs off the younger girl’s cheeks. “But no, I’m not going to violate my husband’s confidence just to satisfy your curiosity.”

Tupa sat up and pushed at her cheek herself. “I liked Hasha,” she said. “He seems nice.”

“Yes,” said Malena, relaxing slightly.

The clan chief had provided a ceremonial but cordial greeting when they rode into his durga an hour earlier. Normally such duties would have fallen to his wife, but the former clan mother had passed away the year before. Toril, in his early twenties, might have helped—except that tradition called for bridegrooms to remain in seclusion until the wedding proper. And everybody knew how traditional—some said “hidebound—Hasha was. So after a meal and some friendly conversation, Hasha had conducted them to the guest chambers himself. By then Malena thought he looked tired; he’d seemed relieved when he turned away at the door, leaving them in the care of staff.

“Will I get to come back for a visit when you have a child?” Tupa asked.

Malena snorted. Heaven’s Fist! How many conversational firecrackers would her sister lob? Had Malena been this clueless about proper conversation when she was eleven?

"You're assuming there'll *be* a baby," she said, pulling out the pin that bound her hair into a clasp at her neck. "That sort of thing isn't something you schedule. Anyway, you'll be in fosterage in a few months. Decisions about travel will be up to your near parents."

"Don't start with the 'it happens when it happens' bit," said Malena's father, grunting as he pulled at his boots from the far side of the chamber. "The timing's not that mysterious, and it's under your control."

Malena's face reddened again.

"The timing *is* mysterious," said Malena's mother. "Look how widely spaced your own daughters are. Five my witness, you and I tried hard enough for more."

"Can we please change the subject?" Malena said. "Something besides the details of childbearing?"

"The line of Shavir is dying out," Malena's father pressed on. "I was the last male descendant. I need a grandson. And so does Hasha. Toril's his one remaining son, and there are no cousins in the parijan. No secret about any of it, and no reason to be shy that you want to produce a child."

Malena slapped the bed in exasperation. "I don't need this lecture again."

"No?" said her father. "When I hear you tell Tupa that having a baby is only an assumption, it makes me wonder."

Malena found herself gritting her teeth. Did every bride run a gauntlet of mortification before her wedding? Did her parents have no sense for the privacy they were abusing, by discussing such matters in front of strangers? She followed the serving woman who was exiting the room with an empty water pitcher, and shut the door with a thump.

"Women in our line have not had an easy time with pregnancies," said her mother, aiming to placate. "I put my mam in her grave, and my sister died in childbirth as well. Veshumi is still trying."

"So I'm supposed to prepare myself to be patient?" shot back Malena's father. "Our oldest has had six years to produce issue

to cement our ties to Rovin. And nothing to show for it. Now our second is marrying into the line of the clan chief himself. We can't squander our opportunity to give Hasha an heir. Dally too long, and Toril's affections could wander."

Malena's mam looked at her lap.

Malena swallowed. "I know my duty."

Her father crossed the room and put his hands on Malena's shoulders. "Good," he said softly. "I've worked all my life to get us here. We're not flirting with poverty anymore. We're a respected family. It's been twelve generations since the line of Shavir held the staff of clan chief; you can restore us to the status we deserve. I'm proud of you, and of the match you've made."

"I understand."

He straightened, thrust a hand into the gap at the split of his *kurta*, and pulled out a pouch that hung beside his heart. When he upended it, an ornate ring dropped into the palm of his hand. He held it out to Malena.

She stared at the gold band. It was a man's ring, bulky rather than delicate—meant for fingers thicker and longer than her own. A square emerald the size of a thumbnail was bracketed in the metal, diamonds studding either side. The band itself had a serpentine inlay of lighter gold alloy that circled the ring. It was a striking and precious heirloom.

She did not move.

"Take it!"

Still Malena stared straight ahead.

Her father stepped to the chest that servants had carried in and laid at the foot of Malena's bed. He threw back the lid, tossed some clothing aside, and puffed as he dragged the chest into Malena's field of view. A shaft of green porcelain lay on velvet, protruding from a burst of white petal shapes and a disc that been painted daisy yellow. Beside the flower sat an ocarina. The instrument—also ceramic—sparkled with the fire of mica-enhanced glaze, but it had obviously been repaired. Its body was cracked and worn.

"This is what you propose to offer as an antechild?" her father demanded. "Instead of Shavir's signet? What can you be thinking?"

Malena sighed.

"The antechild is the symbolic down payment a wife brings to her marriage. Bride price has been flowing our direction all summer, and Hasha's been most generous. That team of *marwaris* was magnificent; their saddles alone are worth half our household goods. He's sent precious spices, bolts of wool and linen, silver wristbands studded with topaz..." He lifted his hands in frustration. "And you want to respond to such a gesture with some... amateur pottery? How does that reflect on your family? People will think we're paupers, or arrogant fools, or both."

Malena closed the lid of the chest. "First of all, the bride price came from Toril, not Hasha. He raised and trained the horses himself, or so I'm told. He selected the jewelry, and the harp, and the books. And he's the one I'm marrying, remember—not his famous father. Second, *people* won't think anything at all about my choice of antechild, since the gift is given wife-to-husband, at a time of my choosing. It may not be a taboo subject, like the heartstone, but it's still nobody's business."

"You're foolish if you think nobody will learn what you give," said Malena's mother. "Tongues will wag. Hasha will know."

"Perhaps."

"I don't understand this vanity about your handiwork," her mother said. "Must you offer something that you've made yourself, just to showcase your flair? I gave your father a tapestry, but it was one I commissioned, not one I wove."

Malena flushed but did not respond.

"Far more valuable that way," her father said, nodding. "And it made a worthy antechild. It hangs where all can appreciate your mother's judgment and virtue."

“The signet would have symbolic value,” Mam said. “If Toril were seen to wear it, it would bind him to us in a way that all would recognize.”

Malena stood.

“I will give the gift I’ve chosen,” she said, stepping toward the sunset streaming through the window. “It suits my purpose.”

3

interruptions ~ Toril

When a hollow clap from the Voice interrupted the wedding ceremony, Toril bit his lip.

Emotion flickered on his bride's face, he noticed. Was it impatience? Annoyance? He had no chance to analyze; the decorum that Malena exuded with her beaded sari, lapis lazuli, and silk ribbons slipped back into place almost instantly.

Toril's own reaction was worry. The Sisterhood had assigned this Voice to his home when he was young, and he knew her to be polite. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen her stiffen and reach for parchment, but her quill had scratched just a few lines. If the magical message she'd received was both brief and urgent, it wasn't good news—and only a sender who outranked Toril's father would demand immediate action.

As the priest faltered, the Voice cleared her throat. "Gorumim would speak with Hasha, chief of Kelun Clan," she announced.

Toril watched consternation play across his father's gaunt features.

"I'll hear him shortly," Hasha rasped. The Voice began to protest, but Hasha raised a hand. "Even *he* can wait for the knot. We will hurry."

The priest abandoned his homily and jumped to the binding procedure. "Woman and Man awoke in the dawn of the world," he recited, uncoiling a cord that braided Toril's indigo parijan color into Malena's silver, "and all the first day, they were alone. And when night came, darkness pressed upon the land, and every creature sought its nest. Then did Man yearn; yea, and Woman trembled.

"And Five Who Speak conferred, and of their number, Gitám offered to comfort them. And He did give them to one another, and said, 'Be one.' And He breathed fire into their hearts and into their tears, and He did fling the tears heavenward, and they became *zburil*, the stars.

"Then Man said, 'What does it mean?'

"And Gitám said: 'I will teach you to be a light in the darkness, and together you will seed the firmament with the fire that I give you. And in the morning I will come.'"

The priest paused. At this point the bride was supposed to finish the recitation.

"And Woman felt the fire in her heart, and smiled," Malena lilted.

The priest turned to Toril. "Man, will you be one with Woman in tears, in darkness, in fire, and in dawn?"

Toril lifted Malena's wrist and placed his left palm against her right. His fingertips splayed past hers like shadows cast by the pale ovals of her nails. Her touch was light, rigid.

"Yes," he said.

The priest repeated the question to Malena, and received a second yes. Then he opened his fist and grasped the end of the cord between finger and thumb. "I bind you together, as The Five ordained, in the promise that dawn will come. You are Toril en-Noemi ur-Hasha sa-Pena-Kelun; become Toril i-Malena. You are Malena en-Shavir iv-Sanina sa-Teluilsir-Kelun; become Malena i-Toril."

As he spoke, he wove the thread around their fingers, beginning away from the thumb, working back and forth twice. Malena met Toril's gaze and smiled slightly.

The crowd, gathered in ochre dusk in the courtyard surrounding the durga, remained silent until the priest lifted their bound hands for all to see. Then a smattering of applause and the pluck of oud and dulcimer signaled the end of formalities.

After the priest unwound the cord and handed it to the groom, Toril leaned toward Malena. "I must attend the Voice," he whispered. "I'll return to the feast as soon as we're done."

Malena's composure wobbled. "Gorumim only summoned your father."

"I know. But if I don't go, I'll be called later. Best to get it over with." Over Malena's shoulder, Toril could see Hasha shuffling to the council chambers, leaning on the Voice.

"Then I will come, too. A bride should not host a feast alone."

Toril shook his head. "It is business for the clan chief."

His new wife's look was eloquent. He could tell that she wanted to point out the impropriety of his own participation. Perhaps she also wanted to reiterate her discomfort presiding at a table in front of strangers, with no one from Toril's family beside her.

He wished he had time to explain. Malena had only seen Hasha for half a day, when he was projecting cheer and grace for the wedding. The man had never recovered from the heartbreak of his wife's death, and nagging illness had further sapped his vitality—a fact that they'd worked hard to hide from the public. Hasha's mind was as sharp as ever, but more and more he relied on Toril to do the legwork of administration.

"Everyone heard the summons; they'll understand if we're gone for a little while," Toril finally said. When Malena drew breath to protest again, he lowered his tone even more, lips brushing her ear. "If you don't believe I'm more interested in hanging your heartstone than attending to politics, I'll convince you shortly." He stepped back and smiled at her blush, then winked and hurried away.

The Voice was just clearing her throat when Toril closed the door from the hall. Hasha waved him over to his seat at the head of the rosewood table that dominated the room.

“Gorumim, Lord Protector of the Realm, to the chiefs of the southern clans,” the Voice began, her tone sinking into a baritone gravel like the speaker she proxied. “Osipi incursions along the border require our urgent attention. A war council of the clans is therefore convened in Bakar, at ninth hour tomorrow.”

Toril and his father exchanged glances.

“Arrive quietly and with minimal retinue, that we may confer in private. May this Voice be earnest from the chief of Kelun Clan,” the Voice concluded, features relaxing as her tone regained its feminine timbre. “That is all.”

Hasha’s cough broke the silence that followed, his rounded shoulders heaving as he struggled for breath between each spasm.

“*Dagezhív izǵg*,” Toril murmured. The words for *breathe easy* in the magical tongue were not ones he’d studied in his years of training, but he’d looked them up and used them often in recent months.

At his naming ceremony, he’d mourned his failure to walk the path of the sata. Now he considered the Five’s gift of ordinary human life, and a magic talent to go with it, a blessing. Toril’s power was all that kept his father breathing, he sometimes thought.

He felt a tingle on his lips as the utterance formed. When heat bit his tongue, Toril finished exhaling, then closed his eyes and allowed his chest to expand, focusing on the sensation of inflow. His knees trembled; healing magic plumbed the life force of its user more than any other kind. It was exhausting, even for someone with his aptitude.

In a moment Hasha straightened and shook his head. “Evil tidings,” he panted, gesturing toward the Voice.

Toril nodded weakly.

“The same message went to all the clan chiefs?” Hasha asked the Voice.

“I assume so,” she said. “What is your reply?” The formula at the end of the message was a demand—polite, but unequivocal—that Hasha confirm his intention to attend with an immediate response.

Hasha stared at the saffron-robed woman until she cast her eyes down. “I will tell you when I’m ready, Sister. We are the raja’s loyal subjects, but the Kelun do not dance when his favorite general snaps his fingers.”

“What osipi incursions is Gorumim talking about?” Toril wondered aloud, as the silence became awkward. Kelun holdings encompassed most of the Sumago Mountains and shared much frontier with Merukesh. But osipi travelers favored more populous lowland roads, both for convenience of travel and the warmth they needed; as a result, he seldom saw the gold-skinned race.

“Pavilshani Clan is always complaining about how the osipi deplete game on the grasslands this time of year. They feed like locusts,” Hasha observed.

“And they pay to hunt there. That’s hardly an incursion.”

“I agree. But lately the tone of the complaints seems more ugly. I heard rumors of a lynching earlier this month in Sotalio.”

“Osipi did the lynching?”

“They were on the receiving end. Maybe that got some *abu* mad enough to retaliate.”

Toril shuddered. The *ahu* were particularly fearsome osipi warriors; if any decided to repay mistreatment in kind, woe to their intended target.

“A minor feud doesn’t mean we should go to war,” he said. “Gorumim’s just looking for an excuse to levy more men into the Guard.”

“Perhaps. But we can’t afford to ignore the summons. If others vote to fight, Kelun will end up involved whether we like it or not.”

Toril sighed. Clans held land in fief from the raja; as long as they paid tribute and provided troops as agreed, they were semi-autonomous. But if they defied the raja or ignored a mandate from a quorum of peer clans, their fief could be eroded or wholly revoked.

“You really shouldn’t travel at all, but if you go, you need time. Tell him you’ll come in a week. Gorumim isn’t this far south. He will use a shimsal instead of attending in person; a delay will not inconvenience him all that much.”

Hasha rubbed his beard. “I think the timing is important, somehow. We’re the only ones who can get to Bakar on such short notice, so he must have begun notifying the other clan chiefs days ago. If I keep them waiting, they won’t like it.”

“He waits to tell you until you can’t refuse or delay without insulting the other clans,” Toril growled. “But if his spies are as good as rumor says, he probably knows you’re not well enough to ride so hard.”

“I don’t like it either. The date is annoying. But it’s the subject of the council that troubles me most. War is always hungrier than its keeper expects. I feel fey.” Hasha paused, saw Toril’s expression, and grimaced. “Never underestimate a sata, son. Gorumim has outlived four generations of rajas; he knows how the game’s played. I think he wants to force me to pass the staff to Rovin.”

Toril grunted. Rovin headed another Kelun parijan; his ambition to become chief was well known. He was prosperous, and he’d married well. Two of the parijans were in his pocket. Hasha’s sterling reputation, wits, and considerable fortune were all that forestalled a challenge.

The summons was an ideal lever to pry Toril’s father from power. Only a clan chief could represent his people at a war council. Hasha could not damage the prestige or influence of the clan by ignoring Gorumim’s summons, or by arriving late. Yet he could not travel quickly in such poor health. The graceful way out was to appoint a successor, and Rovin was the inevitable choice.

A year earlier, Toril would have dismissed the idea angrily. But tumors beneath the ribs made his father's retirement imminent, one way or the other. He could not deny the logic of it.

Hasha began to laugh. For a moment it degenerated to a cough, but he gasped and managed a final chuckle. "Hah! I'll teach Rovin to scheme. And Gorumim, too." He turned to the Voice, who looked as stymied as Toril.

"Sister, you may send my reply now. Say: 'Let this Voice be earnest from the chief of Kelun Clan, who will arrive in Bakar at the appointed time.'"

The Voice bent over her quill, shorthand flowing across the parchment as she scribbled. When finished, she used a knife at her belt to slice off the written portion, rolled it tightly, walked to the nearest lamp, muttered an incantation, and held the paper to the flame. She caught the ash with her other hand as it sagged, and, closing her eyes, rubbed it on her ears. Again she whispered.

"The ride will kill you!" Toril burst out, when the magic was done.

Hasha smiled at his son and turned to face the Voice. "Now I need you to be a witness."

"A witness to what?" she asked.

He turned to Toril. "To my son taking the staff. He will go to Bakar as chief of Kelun Clan."

"What?" Toril exclaimed. "They won't take me as a proxy. And you can't appoint me. I'm not a parijan head."

"I didn't say I was appointing you."

Several heartbeats passed while Toril absorbed this. "But the only other way to take the staff is by challenge."

Hasha waited.

"That's why you need a witness?"

Hasha nodded.

"Don't ask me to fight you," Toril said, turning pale. "You'd be better off riding to Bakar."

Hasha snorted. “I don’t know whether to be proud of your loyalty, insulted by your over-confidence, or impatient at your guesswork. This is your moment, Toril. I’ve trained you for it for years; Gorumim just chose the timing.”

Toril’s forehead wrinkled.

“When is a challenge won?” his father prompted.

“If the vanquished can draw his weapon nevermore,” Toril quoted, “and it be witnessed, then shall the staff be taken.” His words slowed as he considered. “It usually means a fight to the death. But Feonil became chief of Itaxu Clan when he blinded Telo in a duel. Telo could never use the sling again...”

“Now you’re thinking like a clan chief. I told you history would be useful.”

“Hifir cut off the hand of Etasín...”

“I see a better way for you.”

“What?”

Toril’s father glanced at the Voice. “Mark what we say,” he instructed. “You will doubtless be questioned, and I won’t have this disputed on a technicality. The word of the Sisterhood ought to satisfy any of the parijan heads.” He turned back to Toril. “Do you challenge me for the staff of Kelun?”

“Not if I have to hurt you.”

“Trust me,” Hasha said. His eyes drilled into Toril’s. “Do you challenge me?”

end of preview

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