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“What is hunger but Death?”  
The Upanishads

## THE PACT

JANIS WAS DEAD.

That should have disturbed him, but as a veteran of the Shimmer he accepted its flood of impressions. The character of its formless expanse. Everyone who dreamed recognized it, but for those who had spent their lives entering by choice, as he had, the Shimmer was a kind of home. He knew it as the eternal chaos between universes. A realm of abstraction where Lethi god-beings dwelled, wizards explored, and the infinite dead and yet-to-be-born swirled in a sea of potentiality. Some speculated that the Shimmer was real, and it was growth in realms like Urias that was the dream. Most of them were wizards who had lost their minds. Janis had once thought as they did, but he'd chosen a different path. He saw the Shimmer as Death, and that was how it embraced him now.

His body oozed blood as it descended into an abyss. It was like watching a doll. The pain he endured was deeper, in the essence of who he was.

All the triumphs and losses accrued over 22 years of life were leaking away as his body spasmed. His mind was fracturing, evaporating into the countless potential Janis's that had never been or would never be. How had this happened? He grasped at memories that slipped away like fish. Clutched one that blossomed within him like a flare. Flames, blood on his hands; screams, shouting; could make out a face...

Renea.

His sister. Her violet eyes glistening as she regarded him from a stone rampart. Someone had arms around her, thin face leering at him. Who?

*Finally, you are where you deserve to be...*

A presence coalesced, reading his dissolving mind like a tome. Janis struggled for a name, and as he did, an image formed of a pale face with coal-black eyes. The man with Renea. His name wouldn't come.

*It's because you are dead, son of Aphora...*

No, Janis thought. Not yet.

*"As the body goes, so goes the mind." Fourth Apothegm.*

Janis reached into the Shimmer with everything he had. "Help me, Lethi," he screamed into the storm of abstractions. "Give me life and I will give you substance."

The presence laughed into Janis's soul. His name rose like a sickness. Orinax. Betrayer, murderer, kidnapper. He'd fled with Renea. When? Why?

*You were narrow-minded, arrogant, and petty. Your sister has far more potential. Soon, all Urias will witness it, and all the bloated kings and nobles of this world will fall before us But you will not because you will be no more.* His essence dissipated. Janis groped for it. One last chance to stay tethered to reality. *Surrender. Death is all the World Tree has for you.* He disappeared, and only the swirling, maddening darkness remained. Janis called out again, but even the god-beings and lesser Lethi had abandoned him.

Rage swept through his fading essence. Hate for Orinax, but most of all for himself. Who was he that he could have failed so utterly? He couldn't remember.

The being that was Janis flickered like a sputtering flame. He would be no more and lose Renea forever. Why was that important? No, the question was, "how could it not be?" She was his family, and his enemy had taken her. Yet there was such release in letting the pieces of himself drift away. Soon, it would all be over. He could accept it. Perhaps it would be as the ancient priests had said, and he would be reborn in some happier universe with better fortune.

He felt something nearby, like a ripple in a bottomless ocean. Another presence. Was it in Urias or the Shimmer?

*Hail, broken one...*

It spoke in a whisper, caught by his fading mind over a distance so great he couldn't conceive of it. Its mind was alien. The more he looked, the less he understood. It felt like staring off the edge of a cliff with no bottom.

*There is a way you can yet survive...*

"How?" Janis intimated.

*Agree to make me manifest through you, and I will give you lives.*

"Never," Janis thought. It wanted to own him. To make him a mage. A mere vessel for alien powers.

*A partnership... a symbiosis... we will sustain... grow...*

In Urias, his body sank to the bottom of the abyss. In time, it would decay and scatter, the same as his soul. Could he accept being a sorcerer? Living in partnership with a Lethi of the Shimmer given life?

*Bring me into existence, and I will give you the power to crush your enemies...*

He saw it as it's said the prophets and shamans first glimpsed piercing the Veil between reality and the Shimmer. He was godlike, using his mind and control over the Veil to rupture hundreds, thousands of his enemies. Could it be

true? Should he believe it?

*All can be yours... but you must accept...*

The rage swelled in Janis's heart. What difference did it make what he had to sacrifice if the choice was between death and vengeance? Being something at all was better than being an abstraction. If it meant he could save Renea...

*Revenge...*

On the wizard who'd killed him, the gods and people who'd left him for dead, reborn in a universe only redeemable through destruction.

*Choose now or perish...*

The last of Janis's memories slithered out into the ocean of thoughts and endless potentialities as his lungs swelled to burst.

He chose vengeance.

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HE WOKE COUGHING, lungs on fire, his body a wet rag. He was on the edge of a foul lake. One of the smaller ones that caravans often stopped at to feed their daks and other cattle. He tried to stand, cringed from the pain, and forced himself to keep going. Vomited up more of the foul liquid, collapsing back to the wet mud. Sucked in air. One, two, three... caught his breath and took in what was to have been his grave. "Lake" was a generous word for it. The water was sludge. He remembered... it bubbled up from underground. That's what he'd been sinking in. What he'd died in. The thought sent a shiver through his body. His insides felt putrid, his chest like it had been scraped with scythes. He breathed in again, each sweet caress of the wounds reminding him that yes, he was alive.

Alive, but not whole.

Who was he? "Son of Aphora" the presence had called him. He searched his memory like a child groping through an old house, only to find it empty. Room after room was bare except for one. Filled with scorching heat, Renea's eyes on him from the rampart, a dark figure looming behind her.

Orinax.

It was hard to stand up again, but he did anyway. The Wastes of Southern Saurius baked around him under the thick heat of the tri-suns, the earth flayed like a leper's skin. The Waste. He pictured endless dunes, ruins; unbearable heat,

danger lurking in every scrap of shade. Yes, he remembered. It was hell, and yet he was happy to be alive in it.

The lake was at the bottom of a crater. There were many in the Waste. Depressions created eons ago, when ancient Set had battled rebels and god-beings on Urias's surface. This was a larger one from the looks of it, its lip starting its ascent a hundred paces away from him. That meant he was far outside the city. J'Soon. Minarets and palaces, bazaars and slums. Somehow he remembered all that, but nothing about himself. He looked around. The heat of the suns scalded his orange skin. How had he gotten here?

As if in answer, a pungent stench seeped into him. He looked down. He was standing atop a heap of bloated bodies, some mutilated, so only their sigils and armor gave them away. Servants, women, merchants, soldiers. Who were they? Who had done this? He strained his brain, trying to remember. A man in a golden robe among a crowd, leering; soldiers killing soldiers in a magnificent banquet hall; sigils ripped to shreds as a palace burned. None of it made sense. He stepped on what had once been a girl of indiscriminate age, his foot sinking in through her body like stepping on a bowl of porridge. He had to get out of here. To find out what happened, who he was. As he approached the distant lip, he clutched his stomach, squishing the organs underneath him with each step.

How was he going to survive? Who would recognize him?

The wizard would, and so would Renea. Yes, that's what he had to do. Free her. All he had to do was to find and kill Orinax. He smirked. The sound thudded against the thick air, as inconsequential as his chances. He stumbled over the bodies as he trudged across the soggy graveyard for what seemed like the rest of history. His body was a tired, cut-up muscle, half-spasming as he forced it forward.

"Hey! A live one!" someone yelled from above.

He looked up. A silhouette loomed on the edge of the lip above him. The man's form was bulky with heavy armor. Two banners attached to his back waved in the wind underneath the orange sky as he sat atop his horse. Janis stopped his slow march and squinted up at him.

A dozen others crowded beside him. Some rode horses. Others, the lesser mercenaries, held long scimitars and wore patchy leather armor as they leered at him from their masters' sides.

"It is our lucky day, brothers," one of them boomed. Third from the middle, atop a horse. The leader. "This one's bounty will pay for these days of tired hunting. A bonus to the first man to go down there and collect."



No one moved. An arrow struck the head of a corpse at Janis's feet. "Walk to us, Janis of House Aphora, and we'll make your end quick."

Janis... that was his name. Memories bubbled up, hazy and incomplete.

"No," he said. His voice gravel in his ears.

"If we have to go down there to kill you, we'll make it last a week."

"You couldn't last any longer than you would in bed, bottom feeder."

The boss reeled back on his horse and yelled in rage. Arrows streaked past Janis's face, plunging into bodies below him. The leader stood still as the others on horseback raced down the hill. A thrill shuddered through him. He'd died already today. What was facing it again? He grinned. The horseman in the lead angled his spear down to pierce Janis's face. He brought his hand up and took a defensive posture, one leg swinging behind him. It came to him naturally. Where had he learned that?

The mercenary was within five paces when the hunger welled up inside him like psychic spew, fueled by his deep rage. He perceived just how to direct it, the knowledge present in his mind the same as how to walk or swim. If he moved his fingers like so, positioned his hands, he could translate his mind's energy into kinetic form, direct it out in an arc.

The mercenary's upper body slid apart like minced cattle. Blood misted into the air, then gushed over the crumpling horse, its body blown outward as if the man had eaten a firebomb. Time slowed down. Terror spread across the other horsemen's faces as they closed the distance with doom. Something inside him reached out and consumed the man's essence before it passed through the Veil to the Shimmer. Janis's strength grew. The mercenary's body dissolved as Janis breathed in the deconstructed material and felt his wounds tighten as they healed. He was confused, disgusted, and overcome with titillating glee that more was to come.

"Mage!" one of them screamed.

Janis widened his grin.

He finished the other horseman with a few more flicks of his wrist. Their blood and viscera hung suspended in the air as he breathed it in. Their essences became sickly sweet energy inside him that swept his disgust away. The footmen tried to flee. He found he could see them from the Shimmer, projecting his mind out into that great expanse and peering through the Veil as if into a fishbowl. Janis reached out and, using the energy consumed from their brothers-in-arms, manipulated the surrounding space to crush them. He reached for their essences as they crossed the Veil and plucked them into himself like taking pastries from a

baker's shelves. Their bodies dissolved like the others had as the force within him broke them down.

"What have you done?" their leader said with hushed terror. His horse neighed as he fought to control it.

Janis couldn't talk. His memory was a sludgy pastiche of emotions, images, and perceptions. He remembered the presence in the Shimmer, the promise of power, and the need for vengeance. He'd made a deal. Experienced a hunger he'd only dimly appreciated before, something deep within himself that he'd never named, but which now demanded to be sated. This man in front of him was the perfect food, and Janis's burning need for vengeance was the perfect motivation.

"More," Janis muttered through gritted teeth, his lips peeling back in a twisted smile.

The lead mercenary didn't reply. In the dim light, he seemed one with his horse, his spear held aloft in the air, banners fluttering off his back. The energy bolt caught Janis in his stomach. His nostrils filled with the stench of burning flesh and the acrid aftertaste of super-heated air. He regained consciousness with a view of the sky from his back, his ruined clothes burned to ash. He rolled to the side with a wince; the pain permeating out of his chest.

"Still alive?" the mercenary said. Janis couldn't believe it himself. His opponent had one of the ancient weapons of the Suzerainty.

He pushed himself up and looked down at his chest, expecting to see a mass of charred blood and bone. What he saw was no less disturbing. A pulsating black blob, exposed to the world through flecked holes in his skin, including one large one below his heart. Fleshy pink tentacles poked out from around it, stretching across his skin before submerging back underneath it all along his chest. He fought the urge to touch it.

"Whatever cheap Lethi you've sold yourself to for a few more seconds of life will share your fate," the mercenary said. "Your House is fallen. I looted this Trajan weapon from your old treasury and liberated your brothers into the Shimmer. Now it's time you followed them!"

Memories flashed: his brother Gar'Sha, sliced in the back by a traitorous guard; Aron vomiting up his guts from poisoned food; his mother prostrate on a table as she bled out, his father beaten with bats. Janis's rage returned, overcoming the grief that engulfed him. *Take him...*

The mercenary lifted the spear; no, not a spear, a short-range bolt thrower. Janis tapped into the slain mercenary's souls to bend the gravity in front of him,

channeling the symbiote's power directly. His opponent fired another bolt of energy, the glowing orb super-heating the air as it screamed towards him. He redirected it into the lip of the crater. It struck with the force of a dozen catapults, hurling mud and viscera into the air. The man's horse reeled to Janis's right, the mercenary crying out as it flung him to the corpse-riddled ground. He was on his feet in seconds, hand unsheathing his sword. Janis strode toward him.

The man yelled, "Die, demon!" Janis flung out telekinetic knives, flinging flecks of decaying blood and bile into the air as he missed and sliced up the corpses instead. The mercenary got halfway between them, flung a dagger; Janis dodged. The man leaped into the air, sword above his head, eyes crazed with the lust for victory, throat still bellowing his war cry.

Janis realized at least a dozen ways to dodge the attack. Only one appealed to him.

He waved his hand up, channeling air into a compressed packet that the mercenary's momentum carried him straight into. The explosion blew out his legs with such impact that only his upper torso landed on the ground with a squishy plunk.

Janis stood naked and smothered in blood. He regained control of his breathing. It was a technique he'd learned years before. When? He remembered total silence, lurking in a single place for days, waiting for the perfect opening. Yes, he'd been an assassin once. For how long? On whose behalf? Why couldn't he remember? The mercenary's suffering screams jolted him back to the present. Janis shoved the man's torso with his foot so that he faced the sky, then looked down on the contorted face as the life drained from it. Blood bubbled from the man's throat. He glared at Janis with a mixture of hate and fear that Janis had seen countless times before on faces he no longer remembered.

"You..." the man said, continuing with some nonsense. His words too smothered with blood to be comprehensible. "Don't know..."

The rage remained within him, competing with a profound sadness. An empathy he couldn't afford to feel. "I know I've liberated you from your arrogance."

The mercenary's lips caricatured a smile. More blood seeped out of their thin crevice. "I know... who betrayed you..." he managed.

"Orinax," Janis replied.

The man coughed. "Closer."

Janis bent down and grabbed his throat. "Tell me, and I'll let you join the Shimmer instead of consuming you like the rest." The symbiote squirmed with

distaste, but he ignored it. He was in charge. Exhaustion crept in. The initial magic had used his own body for energy, the Shimmer requiring a price for every change in reality. It had cost him.

The infuriating smile lingered. Janis could sense the man's consciousness fading away. "Remember me when you find out," the man said.

"You're already forgotten." Janis grabbed his face and felt his mind reel back as the symbiote inhaled his essence into itself.

As quickly as it enlivened him, it faded. His limbs felt shackled to the earth. His legs wobbled as if filled with water. Pain coursed through him as the alien creature spread itself throughout his body, tightening its hold on his bones as it spread within him down his arms and legs. It was growing deeper into him, body and soul. Every time he performed magic without its help, it grew stronger, puncturing deeper into the unseen parts of his mind. What would that mean? He fell and rejoined the corpses on the ground, his mind reeling.

What had he given life to?

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JANIS RACED UNDER trees that blot out the suns, his little feet sprinting across ground cover so thick he never touched dirt, roping servants and others into hide and seek games, climbing trees. He was in his family's garden. He knew it the way people know things in dreams. The small shrines to gods of the Yabboleth; the minor paths that carved through dense foliage; small hills that peered out over the minarets and lean-toes of J'Soon. He and Renea would go to the pond sometimes and command minor Lethi to flick poy fish out into the air.

"When I grow up, I'm going to make Lethi build me an ocean," he said.

"With fish bigger than the house." Renea looked skeptical. "You don't believe me?"

"How many fish?"

"So many. Infinite fish."

She laughed. "That's way too many. You'll never command a strong enough Lethi for that."

"Anything's possible for a wizard. You'll see."

Janis flicked his finger up and a poy the size of a house cat catapulted out from the water, spun in a sweaty spiral, and collapsed back in. When he looked

back at Renea, she regarded him with sadness.

“What’s wrong, Re?”

She gave a lackluster smile. “This isn’t exactly how it was,” Re says to him. “But it’s close.” Her violet eyes always looked big, peering out from the pitch-black hair that formed a bubble around her face. She looked wistful, appraising him with a mind too sharp for any five-year-old to have. “Youth always seems so much simpler, doesn’t it?” She lowered her hands and stopped plucking fish from the water, looking at her reflection in it instead. “If only magic worked the way we thought it did.”

Memories cascaded through his mind: Renea a few years older, lying in repose, sweaty and pale, her face scrunched in pain as she faced untold horrors in the Shimmer to bend greater Lethi to her will; the days of mental training memorizing the Apothegms, honing her mind to survive the chaos of the Shimmer as Orinax struck her arm with a metal rod. “No,” he’d yell. “Repeat after me.” The waking dream of swallowing the sorgin zorrotz drugs daily.

“I didn’t know,” he whispered.

Her eyebrows arched like crescent moons. “You did,” she said. “That’s why you turned it down.” She kicked a pebble at her feet. It slid into the water and plunged into the dark. “I wish I could really talk to you like we used to. But you’re a figure in a dream. As with all things in Urias, redemption only begins with death.”

He looked around the pond, settling on a massive oak that rose to the right, its thick branches stretching over the pond. “I remember this,” he said, “but I don’t know why.”

“You’re lost to the Shimmer. Soon, there will be nothing of you left.” She sighed. A tear struck down her cheek. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t stop it.”

“I was dead,” he replied. He touched her shoulder. “But I’m not anymore.” He smiled.

She read his youthful face. “I’ve come back. I’m going to help you.”

“You’re telling the truth.” She looked up into the purple sky, smirked, and wiped a tear away. “I can’t believe it.”

“Me neither.”

“How?”

“I... I don’t know. I made a pact with something.”

Concern. “Janis, you’re not strong enough. You can’t be-”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m here, and I will not let Orinax get away with what he’s done.” She contemplated this without response. “Where are you, Re?”

She shook her head. Smudged the tears away. “There are things happening that are bigger than you or me. You’re not strong enough to face them, and you shouldn’t have given up so much to try. Let Orinax go. Don’t waste your second chance at a real life.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because I know what real responsibility is. Being a wizard is being a slave to it.”

“What responsibility?” She shook her head. He clutched her shoulder. “You can resist him, Re. I’ll help you.” She pulled away from him. “Fight him. Tell me where you are. We can face whatever responsibility he’s foisted on you together and get revenge on everyone who did this to us.”

“Why didn’t you make this offer before?” she muttered. Before he could answer, she reached up to the sky and plucked a leaf twirling in the air. She pressed it between her fingers. “Do you remember how Father built this place?” She waited. “He pillaged a whole House’s fortune for the trees. Most of Saurius can’t support the simplest crops. Ten thousand people died so he could walk through this garden, and we could play in it.”

“I don’t remember that.”

She nodded. “Then something lucky came from our trauma. I know that and so much more. If you are truly alive, if this isn’t just my mind playing tricks on me, then listen.” She took one of his tiny hands in hers. “Abandon this quest. Vengeance doesn’t matter. Don’t look back, not even for a second. You’re not knowledgeable enough to face him, nor strong enough to face yourself.”

Something massive was growing in the sky, expanding like an incoming meteor. “You think I’m going to let that bastard get away with what he’s done?”

“Let it go,” she repeated.

The meteor grew, its tendrils squirming into the dirt underneath them, up the tree trunks and down the leaves. “Let it go?” He pulled away and balled his tiny hands. “Maybe I was once a spineless worm that would. But even if I was that same man, do you think they’d let me? People have already tried to kill me.”

“They mean nothing. Forget them.”

“Orinax won’t forget.”

“He will. Just stay away.”

“You don’t know the power I have now,” Janis said. “What I’ve given up to stay alive. There is no turning back.”

She sighed. “I do, though, and so did you once. After everything we’ve been through together, you’re right back where you started.”

He shook his head, body trembling with frustration. "I don't remember."

"You always had the aptitude, but not the spirit."

"Well, I have it now," he screamed. "Who cares who I was? Who I am now will not let you go, not for any duty you might have to that creature."

She let the leaf go. The wind caught it, hurling it higher. They watched it disintegrate and scatter away towards the purple-black sky. "You used to be the only one who could understand me. Now, you're just a sad shadow."

"You don't have to face this duty alone. I'm going to find you. I promise."

"You can't stop it," she said. "Nothing can."

The wind picked up. The leaves swirled around her, and as he watched, she disintegrated into them.

"Re!" Janis yelled. But she was already gone, specs swirling into the strange sky, and he was so small and powerless. The presence faded with her, but he could feel its amusement.

## THE HUNT

PAIN.

EACH SENSE probed by a hot iron. Flashes of insight: the smell of incense; coarse hands massaging ointment into his skin; the wind catching an open tent door; the sound of hushed voices.

He woke up. The pain was less. Was he dead again? On opening his eyes could make out the flickering interior of a medium-sized tent. One candle in the center cast an orange glow that threw shadows dancing along the walls. He lay there for some time, his mind drifting as he cataloged recent events as best he could. Had it all really happened? It was the conversation with Renea that made it all real. She was still alive. Had traversed the Shimmer to speak to him in his dreams and warn him off. Protect him. She should have known better.

The tent flap opened. A man entered. He wore a dusty turban and loose-fitting tunic with pants, cut in the traditional Uma way. A gypsy of the traveling caravans had found him, probably while plundering the corpses. Janis had an urge to feel disgusted, and yet he didn't.

"You're awake," the man said in a thick accent. Janis nodded. He approached a small basin at the end of the bed. The tent was plush for something always on the move. An ornate samovar stood on a stand by the door. The Uma dunked his hand into the basin and pulled out a sopping sponge. He walked to the edge of the bed, regarding Janis with deep brown eyes.

"You've had a fever. I want to wipe the sweat away, that's all."

Janis nodded. The sponge was immediately soothing against his forehead. He realized how thirsty he was.

"Water to drink?" the man asked. Janis nodded. The Uma returned with a small glass bottle. Janis sucked it down in a few gulps. "When we found you, I was sure you were dead. Imagine my surprise when I rolled you onto your back."

Janis inhaled air with a sharp gasp and looked down at his chest. The symbiote was pulsating in sync with his heartbeat. He lowered the bottle and took a deep breath. The man watched him. "You have nothing to fear from me. I'm in your debt."

The man pulled a small stool from under the bed and sat on it. "We must all fear the creatures of the Shimmer and beyond," he said, tired. "And those who



deal with them.”

Janis considered defending himself, then thought better of it. “Why help me then?”

“You are Janis, third son of House Aphora,” the man said, his eyes filled with sorrow. “To some, that would be a reason to kill you. But your House was always honest with me, and I’ve profited from your dominance in J’Soon.” Janis held his gaze. “The Arawat have a long memory, and we still serve one who is your master.”

The Arawat... his stomach churned at the name. He remembered the man in the golden robe. “You don’t remember, do you?” Janis shook his head. “It happens to those who cross the Veil, as you have. Some bits of yourself might return with time, if you look inward. If you can stand to be honest with yourself.” The Uma pulled a scroll from his belt and handed it to Janis. Janis’s hand trembled as he grasped and unfurled it.

The man stood up. “I’ll give you some privacy,” he said.

“No,” Janis replied. “Please, stay.” The man regarded him, then sat back down. The letter was written in some kind of code, but Janis found he could understand it.

Shadowstalker Aphora,

If you’ve gotten this letter, then Eli has found you. He’s been an agent of mine among the Uma for many years. You can trust him. I don’t know what you’ll remember on waking. Know that your family is dead, betrayed by Orinax for something in their possession. I’m trying to discover what. There is nothing I could do except have Eli look for you. As of this writing, the Arawat already suspect you’re alive. They have put a high bounty on your head. Do not return to J’Soon. Make your way to B’lac. Forces Orinax allied with are based there. A cult. I will know more when I meet you. Wait for me at the tavern.

Trust no one.

May the Shadows keep you,  
Brethor, Shadowmaster

Janis exhaled. A cocktail of regret, rage, and betrayal swelled in him. He relived his family’s fate. Could feel the flames on his skin. His hands trembled. Who was this Brethor? A single image popped into his mind: a somber man with light, bark-like skin singed brown, sporting a thick gray beard. Shadowmaster...

Janis's master. He'd been an assassin. A spy. Was that this man's doing? "Where is B'lac?"

"A couple days' journey north, along the southern tip of the Pikean Peaks," Eli said.

"You didn't read this letter?"

Eli shook his head. "I know only that I was to find you and, were I able, to help you get to where Brethor would meet you."

"You... know him, then?" He nodded once. "And you knew my family?"

"In a way," he replied. Janis tried to stand, but the man held out his arm. "Not yet. You'll need another day to recuperate."

"How long have I been out?" Janis finished standing, his head swimming. He toppled, but caught himself.

"Three days," the man said. "You are too tired. Brethor would want you to rest."

Janis sighed. "Your name is Eli?" he whispered.

"Elisham, but you may call me Eli."

"I don't have another day. These... Arawat. They'll be after me. I need a horse and enough food to get there."

"You'll need more if you hope to avoid the bounty hunters."

"I'll move faster alone."

"You're in no condition, and the Waste is merciless." He walked to a nearby rack and grabbed a pitch-black robe from it.

Janis took the robe and put it on. It had many folds, with a simple rope to tie it around the waist. Despite its thickness, it was also breathable and light in the Uma way. Janis checked a weight in the pockets. There were even a few specs inside.

"Someday I'll repay my debt to you. I swear it."

Eli nodded. "I serve your master. There is nothing to repay. Except..."

"Ask."

"We were to find Janis Aphora, Shadowstalker. Not a mage."

"You've found Janis the survivor," he replied. Eli looked unconvinced. "It's not my master, if that's what you're worried about."

"We Uma do not know these gods as you do. They are creatures of death given life. We do not trust them. None in the Waste do."

"You have nothing to fear from me."

Eli sighed. "You must hide this about yourself if you're to survive and meet our master."

So Brethor was his master. Or had been. He grit his teeth at the thought as much as at the pain of standing. He didn't like the idea at all.

"I will. Where is this tracker?"

"Come with me."

Eli led him through narrow gaps between tents of various sizes, past camels and horses, the smell of spices and cooked meat permeating the air. It's good it was night. Though Eli had been honest so far, he couldn't be sure there weren't others who'd take the chance at earning the bounty. The Uma were an opportunistic bunch.

Eli stopped as they passed a woman caring for a couple of horses. He spoke to her in the Uma tongue, then turned to Janis. "This is Sciana."

She looked at Janis like he was another clueless customer come to gawk at their wares. A torch hanging from a tent a few paces away illuminated her face well. Angular cheeks, a sharp chin, and sharp eyes underneath thick brown hair that cascaded down her back.

"This is the tracker?" Janis asked.

She said something to Eli. He muttered back in a harsh tone. She looked unimpressed. The two went back and forth for a second as she rubbed the horse's side.

"I won't beg for someone's help. Give me a horse and supplies and I'll be on my way."

She looked at him. She had a long scar that ran down from her forehead over her right eye. "You talk like you'd have lived had we not pulled you from the death pit."

"You had your reasons."

"They've run out."

Janis made a show of brushing some dust from his robe. This was a negotiation now. "I remember little, but one thing is that it's the Uma way to take charge of a man's life saved in the Waste."

Sciana made a show of fitting a new saddle to the horse and adjusting it, ignoring him as she pretended to pay close attention to a task she could probably do in her sleep.

"Whatever you think of my decision, Sciana," Eli said, "I've committed to this path. We've tied our fortunes to his, and must do whatever we can to help him."

She regarded the old man with resentful sympathy, said something in the Uma tongue, and then looked at Janis again. "What can you promise for helping

you?”

“Loyalty,” he replied.

Sciana scoffed. “How generous.”

“I’m going to have my revenge. When I do, I’ll make sure you profit from it.”

“A promise made by every desperate man.”

Bitterness seethed in him. He didn’t want to care about this, but he could tell from the hollowness he felt Eli was right. He was exhausted. This woman was asking for gifts, but what she wanted was a cause. “The man who betrayed my family has taken my sister,” Janis said.

Her eyebrows flit up. “Oh?”

“Yes. I’m going to do whatever it takes to free her.”

Sciana brushed the horse. “My choice of two of items from your vault, and you have a deal, along with ten percent of whatever fortune you gather from the Arawat for the caravan.”

“Sciana,” Eli hissed.

“Those are my terms. Eli might be our serai, but he has risked all of us in helping you. We deserve compensation.”

Janis took proper stock of her. She wore the sword at her side with confidence, and even in the relative dark, he could see that her tight leather armor had seen some use. He didn’t know what had been in his family’s vault, anyway. Right now, it was nothing.

“Five percent,” he said.

“Ten.”

“Seven-and-a-half.”

“Sciana,” Eli whispered.

She sighed and nodded. Janis nodded back. “We should go.”

She motioned to the horse. “He’s ready for you.” She walked to the other one beside it and climbed into its saddle. Janis walked up to the horse and reached for its head. It shied away from him. “Her name is Cth’tata,” Sciana said. Janis walked closer, but it pulled back to avoid him. The Uma created special bonds with their horses. Some claimed they even shared minds. “She fears you,” Sciana said. “She’s never let a sorcerer ride her before.”

A sorcerer...

He pulled its head closer. “I understand,” he whispered. “It’s new to me, too. Everything is.”

The symbiote rose in the back of his mind, hungry as ever. He calmed

himself, clamping down on the dark presence looming below his conscious thoughts. The horse eased up, but climbing into the saddle was difficult. When he looked back at Eli after jostling the reins, he could see the man was embarrassed for him.

“Thank you for your help,” Janis said.

Eli reached out and helped him control Cth'tata. He looked up into Janis's eyes. “Remember, the creature inside you is not your friend. Do as Brethor says, he has never steered me wrong.” Janis nodded. “Good luck, Janis of House Aphora. May you find fortune again.”

Sciana cracked her reins and galloped out of the camp. Janis bunched his reins together and followed her.

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THEY TRAVELED UNDER the star-scarred barren dunes of the Waste for a few hours before Sciana stopped and made camp. It was in the circular recess of a large ruin that had been fallow for so long it had become a mesa. Janis watched the shadows from the flames as they danced on the smooth stone walls rising around them. What purpose had this place served? Who had lived here?

He'd tied Cth'tata up to the same small, dry tree as her own horse, then followed her to the fire. She was cooking strips of meat, and there were some vegetables in a pot. The aroma aroused his physical hunger.

She eyed him as he sat staring into the flames. He'd lost track of time. She handed him a piece of meat and he ate it immediately. He looked up at the haze of nebulae and stars above, beyond the nook they'd secreted themselves in.

“You ride well, for one of the merchant class.”

“I was no merchant,” he replied.

“Maybe not, but you were still of their class.”

Janis didn't have the energy to argue. He didn't remember enough about it, anyway. It was likely midnight. Perhaps even early morning. His sapient hood returned to him as he ate and drank. “Are we close?” he asked.

“If you can keep up, we should make it by nightfall tomorrow.”

“Why not faster?”

She looked at him like he was an idiot. “The Arawat have people everywhere. Bounty hunters, assassins, mercenaries. They'll have the common

roads covered. We must stick to the open Waste and what canyons can provide shade.”

He almost hazarded to tell her of just how strong a sorcerer he was, but he decided against it. The power scared him. He willed his mind to wander to other things. Images of J’Soon. The spires of the trading halls, the tents of the bazaar, smells of the open-air kitchens. He almost lay down. He was so overcome. The memories were thick, the emotions intense. Then a great sadness took him. Even if all went well, it was unlikely he’d ever set foot in his childhood home again. Once he had Re, perhaps the two of them could raise an army.

“You’re wandering in thought,” Sciana said.

“I was... thinking about what I’ll do once I’ve killed Orinax,” Janis replied. She shook her head. “Don’t drink water you don’t have.”

“Some Uma wisdom?”

She tended to the vegetables in the pot. “You’re not even sure if you’re up to killing this Orinax. That must be your priority. As it is, you’re to meet with your master. Whatever happens after that will reveal the paths before you.”

He wanted to say he knew no master, but decided against it. She produced two bowls and slopped some stew into them. “You serve Brethor as well?”

She kept her face straight, but he could tell she was seething. “He is an ally. Nothing more.”

He took a bite. The warmth exploded across his taste buds, numbing them. He sighed with relief. She sat back down. “And you?”

“What about me?”

She took a bite. “You were an assassin, yes? One of the Shadowstalkers?” She asked through her food, watching him as though she might catch him in a lie.

“I suppose so.”

She snickered. “You either were or you weren’t.”

“I don’t remember.”

She stared at him as she chewed. He took another bite. She ripped some thin bread and dunked it. “You remember your family? The ambush?” He shook his head. “You truly don’t remember who you were?”

“Flashes, sometimes. Images.” She waited for more. “Minarets in the orange light of the tri-suns, flags snapping in the wind. Crowds in J’Soon.”

She nodded. “I’ve seen the city. It is a wonder to behold.”

His mood darkened. “My mother bleeding on a table, my father beaten by bats. Orinax taking Renea. A burning palace.” He considered his next bite.

“Death.” She coughed. He took his next bite. They avoided looking at each other as she caught her breath.

“I’m sorry for your troubles,” she muttered. She looked like she wanted to say more, but kept her lips tight.

For the first time since dying, he didn’t want to focus on them. “How long have you lived in the Waste?”

“My whole life.”

“Do you know what this place was?”

“There is a man in our caravan. You would call him a... a one who remembers ancient times.”

“A historian,” Janis said through his food.

She nodded. “Yes. He would know such things. To most of us, this is a remnant of a time best forgotten.”

“Some people love history.”

She eyed him as she slurped some of her soup. “In the end, the Waste puts them all to bed.”

“I remember people in J’Soon that dreamed of resurrecting the old Suzerainty.”

She smirked. “Silly city folk. Who else would want to bring back the people who kidnapped and murdered my people? Practiced their dark magics at our expense?” She shook her head. “This is what they deserved. The Waste is a paradise for us compared to that.” She paused and looked away. “Perhaps there was a time before the age of wizards when we sapiens kept to ourselves and used our own powers to change the world. Such a time is only a dream, now. The Waste is real.” Janis didn’t argue. They ate in silence, finished the food, rolled out their sleeping mats, and slept under the stars.

He found no rest. It was only an instant before she was rustling him awake. He helped her roll up the mats and pack up the horses, and they were off again. They traveled by day to avoid enemies. Sciana explained that the Waste was dangerous to travel through under the intense heat and travelers often avoided it. He could see why. His body vented water under the breathable robes. The suns swung to their zenith above them, and he wondered whether it wasn’t wiser to risk detection at night than dehydration during the day. Time dilated into an eternity of constant shuffling. The Waste was dry as ash. They passed more ruins. Some low in the ground and decayed but recognizable; others so decrepit that, like the mesa they’d slept beside last night, they took on new shapes. Some were indistinguishable from stalactites or hills. He wondered if the ash that

comprised some of the dunes wasn't the disintegrated remains of ancient cities like J'Soon. He remembered his grandfather telling stories of ancient times when Ethurien was visible in the night sky, its cities floating among the stars like a vision. He grasped for memories from his childhood, but they passed like mist. There was something looming deep down. A memory he'd long suppressed. He could feel it, but couldn't recall any of its specifics. He only remembered some servant's names, the look on his mother's face as she scolded him for some reason, the sweat on his body training with Brethor to be a Shadowstalker.

Sciana was right. That's what he'd been. A Shadowstalker. Haunter of the night, collector of secrets.

He was fumbling for the specifics when Sciana stopped in front of him. "Down," she hissed as she slid off her horse. They'd been trotting towards the end of a low ridge to their left. He snapped into the present and slid off Cth'tata, nearly fell, then pulled the stubborn horse toward hers. She stayed low as she climbed the ridge and peeked over its edge. He followed. She held up her hand and motioned him to approach.

He settled on the cracked earth beside her. The Waste spread out before them for miles toward an infinite horizon. The remains of an old fortress sat half-sunk in a dune, recognizable by what had once been pillars along its outside. His throat was parched. "What?" he whispered.

She hushed him and pointed to their right. He searched through the shimmering haze. He was about to chastise her when he saw it. A cloud of dust blooming into the air like smoke. Buzzing like a fleet of hornets grew in the desert air. He saw strange Settian chariots in his mind's eye, ones that only the richest in J'Soon could afford. "The Ustis Hussars," she replied. "The most ruthless and best outfitted of the Waste's mercenaries."

They shot into view. A column of Settian chariots and machines, metal huts on wheels that careened over the dry Waste with reckless abandon. They were a few leagues away, and yet the sound and sight of it was still intimidating. "How did you hear them before I did?"

She looked at him like he was an idiot again. He seethed. "If a lance is this close, they'll have scouts nearby. We must be cautious." She pulled back from the ledge. He watched the spectacle for a moment longer, then followed.

They loped along for the rest of the day. Janis would wait as Sciana demanded to stop and listen or scout ahead on her own. They ran out of water. His mind swam in a stew of negative possibilities. How much could he trust her? How long could they last without water? When B'lac rose ahead in the deep



night like a beacon, he nearly collapsed off of his horse with relief. It was the dead of night when they rode under its simple gate. He took in little of the town as they approached what he hoped was an inn. She slid off of her horse; he followed suit. The inn was tight. Busy. Sciana spoke with the innkeeper as Janis stood in the corner eyeing the crowd. Gamblers playing bones. Two men keeping to themselves at a table at the far end of the room. They made a point of not looking at him. She returned and handed him a key. "I'm going to get water for the horses. You need sleep." He grabbed the key and went upstairs.

That night, he dreamed of falling through an endless void. He was facing up like the towers of J'Soon rose on either side of him, growing longer and longer as he plummeted. His family watched, commenting on his fall as the long minaret above him cracked open, revealing a spinning clock. He felt something hunger in the void beneath him. Its tendrils reaching into his mind, digging deeper.

He woke up with his eyes still in the dream. It was obvious what the Shimmer was telling him. He was running out of time. He looked around. There was no Sciana, and the other simple bed looked undisturbed. He got up, threw on his robes, and departed.

The inn was in one of the town hubs. Out the front doors, merchants haggled with customers in small shops that neighbored it, encircling a small dry fountain in the center. The architecture was old Trajan, sandstone foundations with arches and rounded roofs. He wondered if some buildings could be traced back the thousand years or so to the old Suzerainty. He stepped out and checked on their horses. Cth'tata and Sciana's horse were still tied up, so she hadn't abandoned him. There was no way an Uma would leave their horses behind. He looked around the activity in the square again, unable to shake the feeling that it or something else was watching him. A gaze both distant and disconcerting. The symbiote was the reason he was still alive, but it was also a magnet for attention. The hunger returned. He clamped it down. He now had two mouths to feed. The prospect of what it enjoyed consuming made him sick.

He perched himself at a table in the inn's corner and ordered some breakfast, a plate of vegetables with cheese. He looked for Brethor among the other customers, but one resembled the stern man from his memory. It wasn't much. A few images of the man's face, hazy recollections of his training. The mercenary captain had claimed someone closer to him than Orinax had betrayed him. Could it be Brethor? How much did he know? He searched his memories for an answer. His breakfast came. He ate as he kept trying to remember. Nothing came. How

long could he afford to wait?

“Have a few specs for a game of chance?” a voice said. Janis turned and looked down at a boy. He was maybe 15, with a face like an egg set on its side and a pair of dirty goggles over a bandana browned by dust and sweat. He was scrawny, wearing a ripped and filthy tunic and pants. Obviously a beggar. Janis opened his mouth to shoo the urchin away when a stream of memories hit him in a torrent. He had a friend like this once. A boy he met on the streets. Yes... Motie. Later, he'd taken him into their house as his compatriot to save him from the street. Same short brown hair and strong cheekbones. Same eyes. Like a younger brother. Motie had always been there for him. Where was he now?

“Hey. You drunk?” the boy asked.

Janis realized he'd been staring at the kid with his mouth hanging open. He closed it. “No,” Janis said.

“How about one game? Just a half-spec to start, so you can learn the rules.”

Janis looked away to hide his tears. Motie had been there that night. He suppressed a sob. This was too much. “I said no.”

“Maris won't like it if you just sit here looking gloomy. Ruins business.”

“I don't know who Maris is, and I don't care.”

Someone dropped a glass at the bar, catching everyone's attention. Janis's reflexes were quick enough, however, to catch the boy's arm as it pulled back from the small fold in his robes where he kept food and coins. He was about to smile at the brazen pick-pocketing attempt when the boy pulled away and revealed it wasn't his arm, but a wiry metal appendage instead. The boy reached past Janis's grip and plucked the meager treasure from the contraption's hold.

“Thanks, mister!”

“What?” Janis said. The boy scrambled to the door. “Hey,” Janis yelled.

A man laughed at the bar. Janis leaped up from his chair and after the boy. When he pushed through the door, the sun struck his face so hard he nearly fell back through it. He hissed, then listened. Pit pat pit pat. The kid was racing away to his left. He ran after the sound before his eyes adjusted to the light, weaving through the crowd as best he could. The boy was only a few paces ahead, but he was fast, and the bazaar was crowded. As his eyes adjusted, he tried to pick out the brown bandana among the shawls, turbans, and dark reddish hair. He bumped past a woman with a large bag of goods that called out in angry shock. He kept going, the latent Shadowstalker skills coming back as he tried to keep up, feet flying across the rough earth as he found gaps and tiny openings to earn just a few seconds and stay on the kid.

More than once Janis was sure he'd lost him, only to pick out the percussive patter of his running or the bobbing bandanna. Before long, they were past the bazaar, racing down half-empty streets between clay houses connected above by wooden ramps and bridges. He lost him again. Leaped up the walls of some connected units and looked among the maze of alleys.

"Stop," he yelled as the kid dove into a tiny alley just underneath him. Janis hopped onto the next roof and listened, senses attuned to the trembling of wind chimes and someone washing food in the house underneath him. He felt the boy make a break for the open, but when he went to find him, he saw only a massive junkyard. Janis hopped across the rooftops and dropped to the ground.

It was a graveyard of ancient metals and Trajan artifacts, some of them as far back as the Suzerainty's time, stacked in mounds that towered higher than the houses whose rooftops he'd just been traversing. Janis walked between the heaps of ancient trash, sensitive to every sound and tremor in the place. It was the perfect hiding place for a thief. He had to be ready for anything.

Janis found him in the center of a three-story rusted chassis. Janis approached behind him as he counted his treasure. The kid was overconfident, his attention entirely consumed by the meager gains, but he nearly got away again just as Janis jumped and grabbed him by the tunic.

He flung his arms and legs out, scrambling to land a blow. Janis held him out at arm's length and slapped the haphazard attacks away.

"Let me go, you sad madman," the boy screamed.

"Give me back what's mine."

"Who chases a kid through an entire market just for a couple specs?"

"I do. Now give it here."

The kid flung them onto the floor. "Fine, take your money and go. You might be even poorer than me."

Janis dropped him and, despite the shame of it, picked up the few coins from the floor, secreting them away in his robes again as he stood back up. The boy was perched on some junk in the chassis's corner, his small body encased in shadow with the harsh beams of Urias's suns cutting across the gap between them from the wide-open side of the old artifact. From the way he was standing, Janis could make out a small crossbow in his right hand.

"What's that?"

"A crossbow, what does it look like?"

"You built that yourself?"

The boy squinted at him, suspicious. "Yeah. Don't even think about testing

me. I can put a bolt through your eye, easy.”

Janis stood up. Memories of Motie returned. He tried to push them away, but they weren't having it. They were about the same age, even, from when he met Motie. 15 or 16. “I wouldn't dream of it. What's your name?”

The kid shifted his head back. “Ruck.”

“That a family name?”

“Go rut yourself.” Janis laughed. “What's your name you think you're so special?”

“Janis,” Janis replied.

“Yeah, well, that's a stupid name to me. What kind of family name is that?”

“A cursed one, most likely,” Janis replied. “It was of House Aphora.”

Ruck's eyes softened in the dim light, but he didn't lower his crossbow. “You're lying,” he said. “They're rich.”

“Were rich,” Janis said. “Now, all dead.” He winced. He hadn't actually said it out loud like that.

Ruck swallowed. Janis felt Sciana slip inside before he saw her. “It's okay, Sciana. The boy's harmless.”

“Who are you talking to?” Ruck asked.

“Me,” Sciana answered, stepping into the light from under a shadow just inside the chassis to their right, an arrow notched in her bow. “Drop it,” she said.

Ruck looked at her, scared but also disappointed, as though the game was now up, but he still wanted to play.

“I said he's harmless,” Janis said.

“I heard you.”

Ruck lowered his crossbow. Sciana followed suit with her bow. “Any sign of Brethor in town?” Janis asked.

“No. But there's a man here who might know something, a priest. There's some gossip he recently met with a couple that sound like your sister and her kidnapper.”

“Priest?” Ruck asked. “The only one calling himself a priest around here is Yaffar, and he's a priest the same way my brother's a pawnbroker.”

“What do you mean?” Janis asked.

Ruck jumped down onto the metal of the chassis, causing the shell to shake. “I mean, he's a liar. But unlike Ifir, he's also crazy, even crazier than you.”

“How's that?”

“He's a member of some religion, but it's just a bunch of people in the desert trying to dig up old Trajan stuff.”

“A religion? Like a cult?”

“That’s what they say,” Ruck said. “But I’ve been out there. Other than all the drugs they use, I don’t know what they’re worshiping.”

“Oh, yeah?” Janis eyed Sciana.

She scowled. “We’re to wait here for Brethor.”

“We could wait for weeks. All the while the Arawat are searching for me. Their people will come through here, eventually.”

Sciana crossed her arms, her bow still in hand. “Eli said we’re not to continue on our own without him.”

“He read my note?” Sciana shrugged.

“I could help you get out there,” Ruck offered. Janis and Sciana broke their standoff to look at him. Sciana scoffed. “No, really. I’m probably the only one other than Yaffar who could, and you can’t trust him. He’s a lying crazy person.”

“What would that cost me?” Janis asked.

“Janis-”

“Easy,” Ruck interrupted. “I want what I helped them build.”

Ruck’s posture and confidence was a spitting image of Motie. Janis inhaled. He felt an odd mixture of emotions, like he wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. “And what was that?”

“I grew up in the junkyard, helping Ifir sell stuff to the pilgrims and such. He had me work for them for a while, doing repairs on Trajan stuff...” he trailed off, eyes peering into some dark memories he didn’t want to consider. “Anyway, that’s all over now. But I know where it is. I want something I was working on. It’s only fair. I’m the reason it’s usable.”

Janis pretended to think for a second. “Done,” he said. Ruck cheered.

“I say we stay.”

“We’re going,” Janis replied. “The boy will lead us.”

Sciana glared at him. “I don’t follow your orders.”

“Then stay and wait for the Arawat.” He turned and bent under the opening in the chassis, stepping out into the suns. “Alright, Ruck. We’re going back to the inn to pick up my horse, and then you show me the way to this cult. You’ll get what we agreed, but you do as I say. Understand?”

“Long as you make good, we won’t have any trouble,” Ruck said as he bounded out behind Janis.

“It’s my horse,” Sciana said.

Janis faced her. Her green eyes glowed from under the shade, the scar on her face like a visible marker of her rage, completing a picture of savage beauty. “Do

you wish to fight me for it?” She didn’t move. Neither did he. Ruck looked between them. “You should know already that Brethor mentioned this cult and that he was looking into it himself. Perhaps he needs our help. Either way, our goals are aligned. We risk more waiting here for him than we do looking into it ourselves.”

She glared at him for a few seconds more. “Fine,” she said, seething. Her shoulders relaxed. She followed them out from under the chassis. Ruck ran ahead of the two of them, and she passed him without looking at him. “From now on, you and I decide together. Understand?” He didn’t respond, and she didn’t wait for an answer.

The suns had stretched to either side of the horizon as they approached the inn. It was late afternoon, and the bazaar was noticeably less crowded. “Maybe we should wait,” Sciana said, looking up at the sun. “The Waste will be dangerous for us to travel through by night.”

Ruck said something in response, but Janis didn’t hear it. The symbiote writhed in his chest. It recognized something nearby. A powerful being. Malevolent. Knowledgeable. It reached out for him through the Shimmer. He remembered calling out for its help as the Shimmer took him.

Janis Aphora... A miasma surrounded his senses. You should have died when you had the chance... a Lethi hovering in his mind’s eye like a dark cloud. Its voice reverberated through time and space as though refracting through countless unseen dimensions. Janis scanned the faces of those still walking the bazaar as he slunk beneath the thin shadow of a shop they’d just passed. He recognized the voice, the presence... a name emerged: Qinra. Member of the Yabboleth, the pantheon of god-beings that lived within the Shimmer. The god of cunning through power. His family’s patron.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Ruck said something, but he ignored it as he submerged his mind into the Shimmer, feeling for the Lethi’s edge. He fumbled, tried again. The Shimmer swirled around him, memories and dream images colliding with potential futures and pasts in a deluge of experience. He had to stay calm. Focus. He felt hot. Strained harder. Yes, there was someone nearby. No, not someone. Something. A sapien consumed by Qinra himself, serving as host to the god-being’s avatar in Urias. He could feel the man’s pain even though he couldn’t make him out among the sapien minds around him, picture Qinra’s essence swirling in his brainstem, manifesting as growths that sunk deep to keep the god-being’s purchase in Urias. Janis winced as he glimpsed the mage’s suffering. It bled into the Shimmer like a gushing wound.

Qinra was hunting him. Why? He thought to answer, then inhaled sharply as he felt further. He felt Orinax's power pulling the god-being's strings. The wizard had willed Qinra to come for him, and the god had answered.

"We can't stay here," he said. Sciana turned to him, angry. Her expression melted into concern.

"Well, yeah. We knew that," Ruck said.

"What is it?" Sciana whispered.

"Qinra's here."

"Who?" Ruck asked. Sciana's eyes hardened.

"Why? How?"

"Orinax," he replied. She sidled up next to him as she inched her bow into a ready position. Janis wasn't used to being in the Shimmer and awake at the same time. Everything was happening all at once, a myriad of futures and possibilities opening before him. The experience was disorienting, like living in a waking dream. "We have to leave."

"We need our supplies from the inn. I'll run and-"

"No," Janis interjected. "The horses. Now."

He rushed through the crowd toward the outdoor hitching post. "How is that possible?" Sciana asked as she strode behind him, her head on a swivel. "Isn't Qinra a god of your people?"

"Gods can be bought," Janis replied. Ruck muttered to himself about how they were crazy. A wall of customers smothered the entrance to the inn. Janis could feel their pursuer somewhere inside. Sciana saddled her horse as he approached Cth'tata. As she tried to pull away, a black stallion past her nipped at her neck.

"What are you doing?" Sciana whispered.

Janis walked around Cth'tata and touched the stallion's back. It didn't move. The symbiote tightened inside him. "Buying us a head start."

It didn't need any encouragement. He channeled its store of energy to suck the air around the horse's mouth, suffocating it. Sciana hissed in horror as it collapsed to the ground. The other horses became frantic. Cth'tata reeled from him as he pulled her towards him and leaped onto her back.

"Monster," Sciana said, her eyes filled with hate. Someone in the crowd cried out as they scattered from the entrance, some of them pushing to the ground. A man in a dark cloak stood like a sun blaring out from a passing cloud. Qinra's power and hate surged through the mage into the Shimmer for all who could feel or see it.

“Run!” Janis yelled. Flames crested towards them. He lifted his hand and used the last of his stored power to shield them as the wave crashed against it. Pain arced through his brain, the lattice of atoms protecting them held together by his mind’s will and the energy of stolen souls, sending the feedback directly into his senses. Sciana scooped Ruck onto her horse and fled. He grit his teeth as Cth’tata galloped into the square behind them. Burning hair, screams behind him. His head trembled. The mage’s attacks bloomed like a fourth sun. They fled through the gate, serenaded by alarm bells and screams.

“What the Shimmer was that?” Ruck yelled, terrified.

Janis lowered the shield and slouched against Cth’tata’s back. It could have been five minutes or an hour between then and when Sciana slowed the horse down and helped him sit upright in the seat. “Your nose,” she muttered. He brought a trembling hand to his face and wiped the thick blood from his upper lip and around his mouth.

“It’s nothing,” he said. He flicked blood onto the sand. Looked at Ruck. “You know the way?” Ruck nodded. “You two go in front.” She sidled up and grabbed his hand. He could feel the terror and anger, but see the pity. That was what hurt the most. “Go,” he said.

“You need to take care of that,” she whispered.

He pulled his hand away. “I will when we get there.”

“You’re no good to me if you die before we see Brethor.”

“Just worry about getting me through this shithole,” he said, with more bitterness than he meant to. He spat blood onto the ground. “Let me worry about the mage.”

She pressed her lips together, nodded once, then faced the open Waste. He hoped she didn’t see as he clutched his chest, the symbiote’s tendrils sinking deeper within him.

#

Ruck led them across dry hillocks with only the wind as company, turning them northeast shortly after fleeing from B’lac. He knew the way using the moon and a few landmarks. He was confident, but after a few hours, Janis wondered if the boy wasn’t all confidence and no substance. Finally, his concerns evaporated when Ruck tapped Sciana’s side and told them they should dismount. They were close. Janis dismounted, peering up at the canopy of stars sweeping over the lip of the dune like grains of sand.



Sciana was nervous, Ruck less so. Being so young made the activity in B'lac exciting more than anything. Sciana had no such illusions. To her, the killing of a horse was worse than killing a human. Horses were regarded with a religious zeal among the Uma. That he'd killed an enemy's horse to save their lives didn't change that. It also made her realize how dire their situation was. He could tell from the way her green eyes avoided his when he faced her, by the feel of her gaze on his back when he looked away. She must be wondering what else he could do. The Uma hated magic and recognized the Yabboleth the way they recognized most foreigners: with limitless suspicion. This was something beyond her ability to comprehend. Even he was surprised and horrified by it, but it had saved their lives. That had to count for something. Best if she didn't know the real cost.

"It's just north of this hill," Ruck said. It was the longest sentence any of them had spoken since their escape. "They have people on a tower out front that keep watch. I didn't know if you wanted to sneak inside."

"It's a ruin?" Janis asked. Ruck nodded. Janis looked at Sciana. "What do you think?"

"Most of the ruins in the Waste are unstable. Sneaking in would be dangerous."

"I know how it's laid out. I'll show you."

Sciana sneered at the prospect. He didn't like it either. Ruck would be unpredictable in a true fight. They might have to find out just how unpredictable at some point, but he'd rather avoid it.

"Do they accept pilgrims?"

"Sometimes people came to visit. Usually caravans, to trade and stuff. Patrols from J'Soon trying to catch Waste crews. I don't know about pilgrims."

"We'll have to risk it." He held out Cth'tata's reins to Sciana. "Scout the outside. See if you can find any other ways in."

"You're a fool if you go in there alone," she said. She didn't reach out to accept the reins.

"I might be a fool whatever I do."

Sciana grabbed the reins from him. "If they are in league with the Arawat, they'll know who you are," she said.

"Then this will be a quick conversation."

"What about me?" Ruck asked.

"Guard the horses."

"But I know this place. I can help you."

“Not this time.”

“You better not be ripping me off.” Janis chuckled. “I’ll sneak inside. You won’t even know I’m there. I can be like your very own snatch-it.”

“What?”

Ruck grinned. “The arm I used to steal your stuff.”

He looked at Sciana. She shrugged. “Fine,” Janis said. “Just be careful.” Ruck cheered as he walked the rest of the way up the ridge. Sciana grabbed his arm as he made to follow.

“I recognize what you did back there was to save us. Among my people, such an act is...”

He nodded. “I know.”

She nodded back. “That boy is our responsibility now.”

“I won’t let anything happen to him.”

She didn’t pull her eyes away, though he could tell it took genuine effort. “I’ll secure them and come in after you.” She gripped his hand. “This is a terrible power you have now. It must be you that wields it, and not the other way around.” He remembered their conversation the night before. How she’d condemned the ancient priests and thaumaturge for their selfishness. “If you don’t...”

She wore the struggle within her without shame. To be allied with a sorcerer was bad enough, but one as close to a mage as him? “I understand,” he replied. He let her go. He missed the warmth of it.

The shrine, if that’s indeed what it had ever been, was another ancient Trajan ruin wallowing in the Waste. The only difference was this one was rebuilt. The customary dome of the Trajan style was cracked open like an egg, the building itself overgrown with dead vines and crusted with mold, but it looked sturdy. Perhaps it had been a palace or a fortress of the local satrap. It was possible it had even been a temple. Janis didn’t really care.

He didn’t see Ruck as he walked up the path towards the structure, but he could feel the boy’s presence nearby thanks to his burgeoning experience with the Shimmer. There were also minds beyond a large double door that towered up towards the roof of the structure. How many exactly he didn’t know, but enough that the symbiote squirmed with anticipation. Ornamental towers flanked the door on either side, one of which was leaning so far to Janis’s left he wondered what force was keeping it up.

“Who goes there?” A voice called. From its pitch, Janis figured it to be from atop the not-leaning tower. He kept walking. “Stop now or we’ll fire on you,”

the voice yelled again. Janis stopped about thirty paces from the door. He looked up at the tower above him, his robe whipping in the wind. It was five stories up, only a little higher than the roof of the complex.

“I’m a traveler,” Janis yelled. “On pilgrimage.”

“What makes you think we accept them?”

“Nothing,” Janis shouted. The shouter waited. “I’ve lost my faith in the Yabboleth. I seek new truths. A new power to believe in.” It was a risk, but a calculated one. Qinra was of the Yabboleth, and that alone would make his bitterness sound authentic. They were the accepted pantheon of beings these religious types followed, and whose Lethi the wizards, sorcerers, and mages had dealings with. Usually, anyway. If the townspeople viewed them as a cult, then it stood to reason they weren’t followers of the pantheon.

“Which of the false gods have you denounced?” the man yelled.

“Qinra. May his dark cloud disperse to nothing.”

Something shifted past the door. Janis watched as it creaked open. A sapien exited wearing blue robes that appeared almost black in the fading light. One figure became three as they spread out in front of him. “What is your name?” asked the one in the center.

“Ibin,” Janis responded. The man approached. Janis breathed in just before he slapped him across the face. Janis grit his teeth.

“You wish to enter? To serve on your journey to hidden knowledge?”

“Yes.”

The man slapped him again, this time hard enough to draw blood. Janis let it run down from his mouth. The man lifted his cowl enough for Janis to make out his face. He had a bulbous nose smothered with warts and scars, a sign he had recently survived the pox. “If you’re found unworthy, we will slough you off into the Shimmer. Do you accept this risk?”

“I do.”

The ambassador grabbed him by the neck and analyzed his face the way a jeweler might inspect a precious stone. The two figures flanking him approached as the pox survivor let him go and turned to the door. “Follow.”

The inside featured the strange artificial lights of the Suzerainty, rehabbed enough to project a ghostly white hue from lamps strung along the walls haphazardly. It showed some level of ingenuity by the cultists to have figured out how to keep them powered. More than he’d care to admit. Janis followed the ambassador to a large central hallway, taking a right turn into a tubular one that curved back to the left. They passed one large metal door with a single porthole.

Janis glimpsed what was on the other side: men in robes standing over sapien bodies in various forms of transition, their faces twisted in pain.

“You practice biomancy?”

The ambassador turned his head to the side briefly. “One of the great truths you shall learn to appreciate is change defines that everything. It is controlling that change that brings power, and serves the One True God.”

Janis nodded once, and the man turned back around. Biomancy was only practiced by one sorcerer school he knew of. Altering living creatures was even more difficult than creating new ones, and knowledge of both were closely held secrets. That these cultists were engaging in it meant they were competent, industrious, and insane.

They entered an expansive circular room. There were more lamps along the wall, but the center was lit by the stars through the cracked dome high above them. Janis took it all in. The white lamps hung from wires strung along the walls like vines. A few were set up on large pedestals aimed at the high walls, creating a dramatic shadow for the center of the chamber where a man was resting cross-legged, his eyes closed under the soft silvery starlight. There was no hair anywhere on his almost naked body, and the only thing covering his genitalia was a simple white loincloth.

“Malarlo,” the ambassador said. The mostly naked man opened his eyes but didn’t acknowledge the ambassador otherwise. “I apologize for disturbing your contemplation. Another pilgrim has approached us. He hopes to become a disciple.”

“Is that so?” Malarlo said. He stood up in one smooth motion and strode to the edge of the shadow to Janis’s left. His body was lanky, his skin albino white, showing he’d been inside for months and potentially years. Malarlo pulled up robes from the floor. They were as pearly white as his loincloth. He scrutinized Janis as he adjusted them on his body. “Let us hope he can survive the process better than the others.” He stepped closer. “It is not a simple path to arrive here. Few know of it.”

“I wandered for many days and nights,” Janis replied with as much gravity as he could muster. “I heard stories. Rumors. I had to see for myself.”

“There is something strange about you,” Malarlo said. Janis could feel the man’s mind probing his own, reaching out through the Shimmer to sense his feelings. He felt him reel back.

“You are a sorcerer,” Malarlo said.

“I was a follower of Qinra, but have abandoned him.”

“What is the name of the Lethi you’ve bonded with?”

To know the name of a sorcerer’s Lethi was to have power over them. “I don’t know,” Janis said and meant it. Malarlo appraised him with his cold eyes. They bulged with surprise. “I sense you tell the truth. How can you not know?”

“They left me for dead when Qinra abandoned me. It approached me in the Shimmer. I did what I had to do to survive.”

Malarlo stepped closer, trying to peer under his still lowered hood. Janis didn’t move a muscle.

“A true symbiote. How interesting. May I?” He held out a hand towards Janis’s robes. Janis bit back his revulsion and opened his robe. Malarlo’s eyes widened with sickening wonder as he beheld the symbiote. “Beautiful,” he said. He reached out towards it but held himself from touching it. “You may close it,” Malarlo said. Janis did so. “What have you heard about us?”

“That you are a mysterious power that helped destroy the House Aphora of J’Soon, once powerful followers of Qinra.” It was a risk, but he had to take it. “That you gained an artifact of substantial power.”

“Is that so?” Janis felt the cultist’s eyes on him as he stared at the floor. “Where did you hear this?”

“I was in J’Soon when the massacre happened.” He waited. “Is it true?”

“True enough,” Malarlo said. The cultist crossed his arms. “You wish power.”

“I wish to serve a new master.”

Malarlo scoffed. “And what use would we have for such a sniveling cretin that would join anyone?”

“Not just anyone. I traveled far to come here.” Malarlo pursed his lips. Janis could feel him probing, hoping to discern the nature of Janis’s symbiote and the extent of his power. He could feel the thing squirming inside him with the urge to feed. He suppressed it. “Please, great Malarlo. I witnessed the overthrow of the only power I’d ever known. I wish only to know what you serve.”

“You dare make a demand of me?”

“No. I only hope to understand.”

“Then despair, for it’s not for you to understand. Only to serve.”

“And how may I know how to serve?”

“By swearing your loyalty, binding yourself to us, and renouncing all other gods.” Janis didn’t respond. The man had knowledge of the Shimmer, enough that such a promise could be binding. He couldn’t possibly allow that. “Do that, or merge with the Shimmer. The choice is yours.”

Janis nodded as if he was considering it. “There is another choice,” he said. Before anyone could react, he reached out to the symbiote and felt it surge with power, its hunger and arousal at the violence to come, almost causing him to collapse in a mixture of pleasure and ravenous desire. He killed the one behind him first, stretching his arm in one quick motion and directing his thoughts to super-heat the surrounding air. The cultist burst into flames, the light and heat causing the others to lift their arms up to shield their eyes. Janis let him burn, paying attention to it in the back of his mind to feed on the man’s life before it escaped to the Shimmer, but turning to the other cultist on his right. He motioned quickly with his right arm, the symbiote allowing him to channel the possibilities of the Shimmer into whatever reality he wanted. His simple finger movements projected telekinetic blades that sliced through the cultist’s body. He was pink mist in seconds.

The ambassador was faster to react. He repelled Janis’s first attempt at the same maneuver, shielding himself from the kinetic blades with quick maneuvers of his arms that reflected them into the walls of the temple, puncturing holes and casting dust across the now bloody-slicked floor. Janis fed on the escaping life forces of the two dying cultists, their bodies disintegrating as he super-heated the air in his hands and hurled the ball of fire at the ambassador. The man tried to block it, but the explosion hurled him back against the wall like spewed phlegm. Before he could gather himself, Janis jabbed with his left hand, puncturing his chest and letting his lifeless body fall to the floor. He looked up in horror. “No,” he said Janis lifted his hands and inhaled his essence.

Malarlo hadn’t moved. The cult leader was standing in the center of the chamber, his hands folded together in front of him, his hairless face as passive as ever. Janis could feel the life essences of the men he’d killed swirling inside him as the symbiote consumed them. Its tendrils dug deeper. He imagined it like branches squeezing his heart. Felt sick with energy.

“Quite a display, Janis Aphora,” Malarlo said.

“You should’ve killed me when I entered,” Janis said through the delirious haze.

“The wizard said you would come,” Malarlo said. “And we do not fear death. For it is only a return to potential and eventual rebirth.”

Janis walked towards him. Malarlo smiled. Janis felt woozy at the prospect of feeding on his soul. Why was he so sanguine? “Tell me why Orinax betrayed my family, and I might let you disappear into the Shimmer,” Janis said, swelling the air in his right hand until it was a condensed packet.

“You’ve bonded with a fascinating Lethi. In all my time in the Shimmer, I’ve never encountered one like it. If I had the time, I would love to dissect you.” Janis felt another presence enter the room, one he’d felt before. “Watching you is its own treat, though. I sacrificed these men so you could expend yourself enough that we might learn what it is. The process was painful, but useful. All sacrifices for the Yrgamon are worthy because through it we will live again.”

The mage was here. “Tell me,” he screamed.

Malarlo scoffed. “You sad little man. You don’t have any idea as to the forces arrayed against you.”

Qinra.

The mage attacked before Janis could attack Malarlo, Qinra’s telekinetic blast sending him face-first onto the floor. His Shadowstalker instinct kicked in. He rolled into the shadows, leaping up and pressing his body against the wall to buy just a few seconds. He tried to pick out the mage in the starlight, but the husk was too quick. The god-being had possessed many sapiens in its time. Countless, perhaps. He was against an entity that held a deeper understanding of what it was doing than he’d probably ever have. Janis could barely bend gravity into a shield before the flames hit it, the heat burning his hands as the pressure inched him against the wall. It was, mercifully, not as tied to his brain, keeping his mind free to find a way out. The mage pressed his advantage. “Janis,” the god-being hissed through enslaved vocals. It was like his name emanated through countless more world branches. Janis grit his teeth. “Die.”

Janis struggled to dive away, but the flames covered everything. He could feel Qinra’s hate for him, and Orinax’s drive for his destruction. Could tease out the vague impressions from the alien mind, though only barely. Soon, it wouldn’t matter if he wasn’t able to move.

He felt Sciana’s presence before he saw her. It was like a distant beacon of light on an otherwise black shore. Arrows flew at the demon, forcing it to shift its attention from Janis just long enough for him to throw himself to the floor, exhausted.

Malarlo had disappeared, but the mage was visible now. Its body glowed from inside, its skin covered in dark red splotches and creases emitting a red glow as though his insides were magma. Sciana sprinted across the opposing wall as the mage hurled telekinetic blasts at it, kicking more dust into the air. The walls crumbled. Janis pushed himself to his feet as the dome cracked above them.

“Kill it,” Sciana screamed as she fired another arrow at it. The mage waved

an arm up and blew it out of midair. Janis sliced up with his arm, sending his own telekinetic blast at the husk. It sliced through its chest, unleashing more of the eerie glow and sending it to its knees. Janis raced towards it, compressing an even larger one in his open palm, when the mage looked up, its skin coagulating over the once crippling wound. Janis screamed with rage as he hurled his attack, demolishing the wall behind the mage as it leaped away.

He threw up a shield again just as the telekinetic attacks sliced and pounded against it, straining even his symbiote's power. "Sciana," Janis yelled. "He's too strong. Get out."

She was a presence to his right, a hazy thought in the back of his mind as he concentrated fully on holding the mage's attacks at bay. His nose was bleeding again, his skin on fire. He heard her fire an arrow and wondered what possible good she thought that could achieve. The dome above them cracked further, a massive boulder landing between him and the mage. He looked up as the rest of it followed, throwing himself aside as great stone blocks collapsed into the center of the chamber and onto the mage.

He stood up, coughing. She helped him up. "We have to hurry," he managed. "Surely it's dead," she said.

"No," he exhaled through a raw esophagus. A soft red glow seeped out through the creases in the rock as if a swarm of fireflies was approaching just outside a door. "Run."

He led them down the curving hallway until they reached a circular chamber with branches spiraling in three more directions. Janis hissed. Sciana studied the ground and sniffed the air. He watched her as she inspected each of the hallway entrances, returning to the first after checking all three. "The leader went this way." Janis squinted at her. "The Uma don't need magic," she replied. "We leave that to you heathens and apostates. It makes our methods sounder, not less." The mage's presence grew behind them. "We don't have time for you to doubt me."

They ran down it. There were no further branches, only a door at the other end. A group of cultists stood beating on it, wailing. "Malarlo. We are loyal servants. Please."

"That door is old Trajan," Sciana said. "Nothing can get through."

"We will," Janis said. He strode down towards the dozen cultists.

Sciana grabbed his arm. "Don't." He tried to pull away. She held on. "You are losing yourself to this thing the same way that creature behind us did."

"I'm powerful enough," Janis replied.

She stared into his eyes. He noticed a small imperfection in the right one, the



one with the scar. “This won’t bring them back.”

“No,” he replied. “But it’ll remind the world that they’re gone and that I’m still here. What do you care what happens to me?”

He pulled his arm away, and this time she let him. Took a few more steps, then began his culling, collecting the electricity from the surrounding lamps, causing them to flicker and drawing the attention of some of the group. One of them even pointed at him before he arced it into the air just above their heads. Sciana turned away as the entire group shuddered, spasmed, and fell to the floor. Janis inhaled and collected their life energy with one massive injection of power. He felt the symbiote swell, its tentacles clutching his insides and skin tighter, trembling with the ecstasy of it. Janis pressed his hands together, condensing the air between them until his hands naturally pushed apart from the growing pressure. When they reached shoulder length and he could barely hold the tremendous pressure, he hurled it at the door, blowing it off its hinges.

Even with all that it cost, he could still feel the energy coursing through him from having consumed so many lives at once. “Come,” he said, half in a dream state. It was more intoxicating than soma, more revelatory than the sorgin zorrotz Renea used to eat. He strode through the door as Sciana followed. She did not look down. There were no more corpses to see.

Janis stepped into the cool air and looked up at the stars. Behind him lay the remnants of the collapsed dome, before them a courtyard littered with ruins of stone and metal.

“What is this place?” she asked.

Colossal statues, perfectly cut renditions of sapiens, god-beings of the Yabboleth, and some Janis didn’t recognize, lay upright or in shambles before them. Wires stretched from some large metal objects, twisting around a toppled column. “I don’t know,” Janis replied. “But he’s here.”

Sciana walked past him. “This way.”

Janis followed as she crouched, sneaking towards a stuttering bit of light that glowed just past one of the fallen statues in front of them. It was of an ancient Trajan warrior, his bolt caster held in his hand in front of him. Maybe it had been a kind of sentry statue, meant to intimidate those who walked this courtyard thousands of years ago. Now, all it watched was the passage of time in the sky.

Janis felt Malarlo before he heard the man. His yelling was audible under the rumble and crackling of something past the statue, his words muffled and indistinct. Sciana edged around the foot of the fallen statue, but Janis grabbed her wrist. She jerked back to him and he held up his hand, signaling to wait.

“I want to hear what he’s saying,” Janis whispered.

She looked angry as she leaned towards his ear. “There’s no time,” she whispered, annoyed, before she leaned back and motioned with her head behind him. As his high dissipated, he remembered the mage. Felt the dark presence growing. They rounded the jagged base of the statue and saw a flat disk on the ground surrounded by a glass tube. Malarlo was standing inside it, a tentacle attached to his head, its mouth folded over and obscuring it all the way to his neck.

“Is it eating him?” Sciana asked.

Janis strained to hear past the sound of the artifact working nearby. “Only his words,” Janis replied. Sciana looked confused. “He’s communicating with someone.”

Janis held out his hand. Sciana handed him her curved dagger, then notched an arrow in her bow. Janis got to the glass tube and tried to find a way inside, but it was seamless. How had Malarlo gotten inside? He followed the wires. Most stretched from a large Trajan window nearby, its surface glowing with arcane symbols moving in rapid succession. Janis approached it. There were buttons and knobs all along its base, but he did not know what they meant.

“Hey,” Ruck said. “Want some help?”

He’d perched on top of the strange tentacle encasing Malarlo’s head. It was attached to yet another piece of machinery.

“What are you doing? Get down from there.”

Ruck looked annoyed. “You want to see who he’s talking to or not?”

“Do you actually know what you’re doing?”

“Of course,” Ruck said, crossing his arms. “I told you, I worked on this thing for them. Yabbo, it’s like you don’t even listen to me.”

Janis exhaled. He nodded. Ruck swung his small body underneath the base of the tentacle and set to work. Janis could feel the mage approaching. Qinra’s dark cloud of hate spreading through the Shimmer towards him, hoping to snuff him out. He was about to tell Ruck to hurry when the tentacle whined and detached from Malarlo’s head, snapping back into the base like a frog’s tongue until only a small bit of it lay dangling out. The glass tube that had separated him from the world slid into the ground just as fast.

“Whoops,” Ruck said.

Malarlo fell back on his heels, blinking incessantly. Janis grabbed him by the throat and pulled him to his knees. That got his attention.

“Where is Orinax?” Janis asked. Malarlo struggled against his grip. Janis

kneaded his chest. “Why did you back the Arawat in killing my family?” What he’d taken for choking became more clear as laughter as Malarlo glared up at him.

“All creation is change,” Malarlo said, foam escaping from inside his mouth. Janis reached down, trying to clear the airway, but he’d already taken the poison. “Until we meet again, Aphora.”

Malarlo choked his last. Janis dropped his body and looked at the Trajan window. “Sorry,” Ruck called over the sound of the artifact. “I tried, but they’d changed it somehow.”

Qinra’s presence loomed behind them. They’d bought some time burying it in the rubble, had even wounded it, but it was repairing its connection to the physical world with every step, fueled by the god-being’s hate. His only chance at learning why Orinax had betrayed him had died with Malarlo. Janis’s frustration fed into his rage. The symbiote ignited it to a crescendo in what would soon become an eruption of mindless energy. Janis knew he should stop it, but the urge was so strong. What difference did it make if he let the anger expel itself? He could kill the mage, maybe even consume Qinra himself. What would that feel like? The power would be incredible.

“You alright?” Ruck asked. He snapped his head up. His body was trembling. He’d almost lost himself. Ruck’s small face looked worried underneath the retracted tentacle like a suspended star.

“No,” Janis said. He regarded the Trajan window. “If I use it, can it help me find Orinax?”

“Definitely,” the boy interjected. He tinkered with something on the pole he was hanging from. He stood up. “Just step to where Malarlo was. You’ll see.”

“How does it work?”

“How the Shimmer should I know?”

Janis stepped into the flat circle on the ground and faced the window. He tried to take the same stance that Malarlo had. He felt silly. The retractable tentacle dangled luridly from its socket, maybe 20 paces diagonally from his face. What was it? Something the Trajans transported here a millennium ago? Another piece of Etheurien magic they sacrificed their peasants for? He remembered the legends about how the world had been before they’d communicated with the creatures in the Shimmer and other branches beyond. The Trajans had learned to project and focus their minds into the Shimmer using drugs and artifacts. This must be one of them. A way to enhance a practitioner's abilities.

“Janis,” Sciana said as she approached, her arrow still strung.

“Stay back,” Janis said.

“It’s okay,” Ruck called out. “It’s perfectly safe. Just one more second.”

“It’s getting close,” she said.

“This may be our only chance to find the wizard.” He could see it terrified her. Not her natural state. “Find us a way out,” he continued. He turned back to the lurid nub of the tentacle.

“Okay,” Ruck said. “Just look right at it and think you want it to grab you.” Janis did. The tentacle didn’t move. “Well, aren’t you going to do it?” Ruck asked.

“I am doing it,” Janis replied.

“Try harder.”

Janis cleared his mind. He let the feeling of approaching doom that was the ever-strengthening mage sink away from the light of his attention. All his thirst for revenge, the horrors of what he’d witnessed, even the deep-seated shame at having failed his family, dissipated. He breathed in and willed the thing to come. He thought about Renea and Orinax, his desire to know exactly where they were and what Orinax wanted. Desire overcame every other thought and sense, so much so that he only barely noticed that the tentacle had been squirming out towards him for the past few seconds like a cat edging out from underneath a bed. He let himself swim in desire until he felt it grip his face.

It was like he’d dipped his head into a marsh, only the feeling was pleasant. The more he thought of it, the more it felt like entering a womb. He reeled back, the idea of regaining that lost innocence so repugnant he nearly pulled away completely. The tentacle did the same. He couldn’t let it. He redoubled his desirous thoughts.

He could hear Ruck and Sciana talking, but as if they were leagues away. Solid ideas in an abstract world. He focused on Orinax. Willed himself to remember everything he could. The Shimmer floated before him. Inscrutable. Unknowable. Had he lost those memories forever? Was he doomed to remaining the pale shadow of a former self he’d never regain?

The memories poured into him: his time as a child training with Brethor; the wizard watching from a balcony three floors up as Janis struggled with the other initiates to pass the dangerous training courses. Brethor: gray-haired, with a thick neck and heavy shoulders. Even then, his darkened skin was cracked like the Waste’s. Janis would look away at Orinax, fascinated by his sister’s own Brethor. Scared of him. The wizard had dark brown hair that cascaded down his

back and smooth, nearly olive skin that seemed to glow green in the dim light of the course. In retrospect, he'd never trusted the man. He couldn't remember why. He'd just known his kind was dangerous. His eyes were two slivers of obsidian, his mouth curled upward as though he was laughing at some joke at your expense, but that he'd never share with you.

Blotchy colors came together into images of terrain: mountains, rivers, towns filled with strange faces. He saw towers of metal looming above a wall, edged with spikes and weaponry, segmented like pieces of a puzzle. The images zoomed out. Drew closer to a crowded bridge. He was looking out from its edge towards the pit below, her face smothered with a white cloak their mother had gotten her when she'd first become a wizard-in-training. Her violet eyes peered out from underneath its hood, as melancholy and thoughtful as he remembered.

And then Janis saw him.

Orinax stood behind her, his own cowl lowered from his head, expression neutral as he too appraised the large gate ahead. Why had he betrayed them? The images shifted again. Orinax inside a great vault. His family's vault. Standing before the muted metal where his father kept their most valuable treasures. He used a key to unlock it, whispering some incantation for it to open without him needing to pull. The wizard entered, selected an item from one shelf, and slipped it under his robes. He didn't see it, but as if in response, the Trajan magic showed him what he'd missed. An ornate collapsible bar. It was gold and etched with Trajan symbols. He'd seen it before, but where? The image grew splotchy again. Janis focused. Where were they now? What was that place?

He was in a lavish bedroom. High ceiling, weighty tomes on carved shelves, the smell of ancient knowledge. Renea stood in front of a window overlooking J'Soon. He had his arms crossed. Frustrated, angry. Why was the artifact showing him this?

"Speak your mind, sister."

She sighed. He waited for the words he knew were coming.

"You always wanted to get away from hurting people. That was why you ran away all those times when we were young."

"What else am I supposed to do?" he asked. A packaged answer. "This is the only way I can fulfill my duty."

She looked at him. "That's Aron talking."

He saw an image of his oldest brother. His tall ears flanking his narrow head. "He isn't wrong."

"Your duty is being an assassin? Even Father looks down on it." He sighed.

“You didn’t used to care what they thought was necessary. You cared about what was actually good for us. For yourself.”

“And where did that get me?” he asked. Speaking the bitterness was like bloodletting a poison. “If I’d been what they wanted me to be, if I’d accepted the mantle of House Wizard...”

“Stop,” she whispered. They stood in silence.

“I promised I would make it up to you, Re. If this is the way, then so be it.”

“There is another way.”

“What?”

She opened her mouth as if to speak, then thought better of it. He sighed. “I have to go prepare for the mission tonight. I’m about to kill the Arawat’s Master at Arms. It will end this war, save thousands of other lives, and prove that I can fulfill my place in the family. The onus won’t be on you for much longer.”

She said nothing. He turned and left.

Was this one of Renea’s memories? He felt an intense urge to know where she was. To speak with her. To understand what was going on. He felt the tentacle and the machine behind it churning through ways to make him understand. A map formed, its layout yanked from his mind in a way that made him feel sick.

He was back on the bridge. Orinax turned and faced him, those obsidian eyes now glaring straight into his own with menace. *Ahhh*, the wizard said, though his lips remained closed. *Janis*.

It was like a massive ogre snatched his throat. The image stuttered. His emotions lit with impressions and knowledge of things he couldn’t understand. *You thought you could search for me with such a blunt instrument and come away unscathed?*

Janis pushed back. The wizard’s eyes widened in surprised amusement. *You killed that fool Malarlo, yes? As I hoped. But what power do you serve now, Shadowstalker?*

He felt Orinax using the connection much like the artifact, probing his mind for answers, peering into memories he couldn’t recall himself. He tried to make his mind go blank. Orinax chuckled. Janis could feel some presence behind him, far more powerful than even the wizard, pressing on the man like a river behind a dam. *What is it you’re hiding?* He probed the symbiote within and scowled. *You’ve made a pact. Do you think this Lethi can save you?* Orinax leaned closer as the world dimmed. *Die*.

Janis struck with all the force he could muster. The image shattered, the

impressions rippling away into nothing as Urias erupted into his senses again. The artifact exploded, shattering the tube and hurling him against the distant statue. Janis fell to the floor, coughing as he grasped at his own throat.

Where was Ruck? Had he left the thing? It was a smoldering ruin. He pushed himself to his feet. “Ruck? Sciana,” he yelled. He fell again. His back spasmed. The symbiote trembled along his bones. He was still so weak without it, little more than a puppet. No. Never that. He pushed himself back up. “Are you there?”

Ruck scampered up to him. “You okay? I got us away when it started spiking. I knew it couldn’t be good.”

“Get him up,” Sciana said. Hands gripped him under his shoulders, cupping his armpits and yanking him up as he gulped for air. “We need to get the horses.”

“There’s no time,” Ruck said as they dragged him across the ground. He felt his feet scrape against the strange stone. The world was a sea of impressions swimming in his vision, making him want to vomit. He could feel the mage was close.

“We don’t have a choice.”

“The chariot I built is just over there.”

“I’m not leaving my horses behind.”

“You want to go back through that thing?”

Janis took a step, causing the entire group to stutter as he regained his balance. “Where’s this ‘chariot?’”

He looked down, still massaging his throat, to see Ruck beamed. “This way,” the boy yelled, running ahead of them between two statues and out of the immediate courtyard. Janis followed him.

“Janis,” Sciana called out. Janis looked back at her. Despite her best efforts, he could tell it terrified her. “I can’t leave my horse.”

Qinra was closing in. The god-being had almost completely repaired its host's body and was even now gathering a terrifying amount of power. “The mage is too close, Sciana. I can feel it.” She pursed her lips. He held out his hand.

She exhaled, seething, and rushed ahead of him. They crossed between the fallen statues into a Trajan mausoleum, not unlike the graveyard Janis had originally chased Ruck into back at the village. Mountains of ancient metal objects lay heaped in piles, creating tight corridors littered with parts that Janis and Sciana traversed as fast as possible. “Ruck,” Janis called out. Sciana huffed and tracked the young boy through the bizarre maze. Janis stumbled behind her,

his mind still swirling from his experience in the tentacle.

He nearly tripped as Sciana pulled him around a corner and into a clearing. Junk and tools lay sprawled around a large chariot, only there was no harness, the seats facing forward, with a few bars keeping them from being entirely exposed to the elements. Sciana stopped.

“No,” she said.

Ruck leaped onto the hood of the chariot. “Come on,” he shouted.

“I won’t,” Sciana said.

Janis put an arm around her shoulder. “You don’t have a choice,” he said, motioning behind them. The courtyard glowed blood red. Sciana hissed as Janis pushed her towards the Trajan chariot, his stomach finding its footing as much as his feet were. Ruck dove into the front seat and went to work on a panel of knobs, twisting and turning things underneath with a large, round tool.

“Get in.”

“You know how to ride this thing?” Sciana asked.

Ruck looked up at her like she was an idiot. “You drive a chariot. And of course not, but Janis will. Right?”

Janis coughed. “I don’t know.”

Ruck bit his lip. “Oh,” Ruck said. “Well look, it’s easy.” He hopped up on the seat behind a large wheel that extended from the chassis. “There are two pedals under here. The one on the right goes, the one on the left stops. You use this to guide it.” He pointed to the wheel.

“That’s it?” Janis asked.

Ruck shrugged. “Yeah.”

“This is ridiculous,” Sciana said.

“Malarlo made me fix it up, but he’d never let me drive it. Said I couldn’t be trusted.” Ruck smiled. “Turned out he was right.”

Janis got in the seat. “Is this the technology that you wanted?”

“No,” Ruck said. “The transponder was.”

“Transponder?”

Ruck looked annoyed. “The thing you just broke.”

Something large unseated a slew of precariously perched trash behind them. They all looked at the entrance to the clearing as the red glow grew.

“Janis...”

Janis tested the knobs. “Get in.”

Ruck settled into the front seat and pressed a button. The chariot’s heart grumbled to life. Sciana looked terrified. “You want to die?” Janis asked. She



glowered at him, then grabbed the metal bar above the seats and swung herself into the back. She landed and immediately strung an arrow in her bow.

Ruck turned around. "You're supposed to sit."

"Just go," she yelled. The rumbling of its heart and the feel of the wheel conjured up memories. No images, just the sense of how to turn, when to hit the pedal, and how to wield the thing. Janis hit the gas. Sciana held her footing, gripping the bar as Janis spun the chariot in circles around the clearing to face the way they'd come. The red glow loomed.

"What are you doing?" Sciana shouted.

Ruck slammed a pole in the center console forward. "Getting us out of here," Janis replied. He slammed on the go pedal. The chariot raced forward just as the mage rounded the corner. His skin was more cracked than before, red light and blood oozing out from within the shell of a body, his eyes enraged as he howled.

Janis planned to hit him dead on, but the mage brought up his arm, unleashing a wall of raw energy that pummeled the earth between them. Janis swung left, nearly sending the chariot into a mound of ancient trash as the shock wave rippled towards and past them. He swung the wheel back to the other side, sliding the chariot past the mage as he tried to engulf them in flames. Arcs of fire poured from his hands, igniting metal and dirt and blowing pieces of the rubbish into the air. Janis swung the wheel back again, Sciana still standing just behind him, holding onto the chariot's frame with both arms now.

"Look out," Ruck screamed. Janis yanked the wheel to the right just before they careened into a massive metal panel, flames singing the ground just behind them and heating the back of his neck. Janis kept his foot on the pedal, twisting and turning through the tight makeshift paths.

Sciana leaned down in his ear. "You're going back the way we came," she yelled. A plan had formed in the back of his mind where impressions from the transponder lingered, bubbling like fiery blood. He drove the chariot through the gap in decrepit statues they'd originally entered the junkyard through, the transponder just ahead of them.

"Hold on," Janis yelled. Foot still on the pedal, his right hand on the wheel, he leaned out the open gap in the frame and extended his hand toward the smoking tower he knew was the transponder's mind. Electricity coiled around his outstretched hand as he manipulated the surrounding atoms.

"What are you doing?" Sciana screamed. Janis answered by hurling the bolt at the machine just as they passed it, striking it on its panel, and overloading the delicate materials inside. He swung back into his seat and sent the chariot up the

sloping sides of one statue, careening over the perimeter wall of the courtyard and back into the Waste.

They landed with a thud on the hard-packed earth. The chariot shuttered with the impact. The wheels churned dirt behind them as he lay on the pedal.

“Ease off,” Ruck yelled. Janis pulled back from the pedal a little and the chariot lurched forward. He immediately hit it again, and they careened into the open Waste.

Sciana sat down. Ruck laughed. “That was amazing.”

“What were you thinking?” Sciana hissed.

The flash came earlier than he expected. The shock wave nearly toppled them, but their momentum was enough to keep them going. Sciana and Ruck both turned around, covering their eyes.

“Whoa,” Ruck said.

Despite the questions lurking in his heart, Janis grinned.

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THEY MADE CAMP on top of a small mesa overlooking the Waste, one of the few hills that attained any altitude at all. Sciana refused to look at or acknowledge him as she cooked their food. More skewered meat and soup. He’d offered to help, but she’d insulted his cooking and refused. The aromas made his stomach grumble.

“How did you know to do that?” Ruck asked, sitting with his knees to his chest, arms folded around them. Janis lay to his right across from Sciana, watching her as she did her work at the fire. He was languid with exhaustion.

“It showed me things inside it. I don’t understand all of them, but I didn’t need to.”

“I never knew it could do that. They didn’t let me work on it much.”

“How did you know how to work it then?”

Ruck smiled at him. “Just cause they never let me doesn’t mean I didn’t do it.”

Janis chuckled. He looked into the flames. “How did you ever get taken by them?” Sciana asked as she sliced vegetables into the soup.

“My parents died when I was young,” Ruck said. “My brother made a deal with the Society for some stuff. He was getting his business going, and to help I

had to work on stuff for them. When they saw how good I was, they put me to work on more complicated things.”

“The Society?” Janis asked.

Ruck nodded. “That’s what they call themselves.”

“How many Trajan artifacts did they have?”

Ruck shrugged. “I was only ever in the back. They’d dig stuff up all the time, but most of it was useless.”

“You going back to your brother?” Janis asked.

“Yabbo no. I don’t talk to him anymore.” Ruck looked at him. “I thought... well, since I helped you out and all, and I didn’t even get to use the transponder like I wanted...”

Janis glowered. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Hey, the only reason you even got this far is cause of me. And I’m the only one who knows how to keep the chariot working.” Ruck lowered his arms and legs and leaned forward. “You owe me.”

Janis sighed. The boy was right, but the thought of having to divert any focus at all to keeping the kid alive annoyed him to no end. Visions of Motie’s fate lingered. “I’m on a dangerous quest that has nothing to do with you.”

“Yeah, it does. I’ve helped so far,” Ruck said.

“I can’t let anything get in my way. You understand? I won’t be able to help you if you get in trouble.”

“Fine,” Ruck said. “I don’t care. I can’t go back to B’lac. There’s nothing for me there. I’m the best Etheurioscaper in the whole Confederacy.” He read Janis’s sigh. “The best you’re going to find, anyway. I want to prove it. To help you get your life back. I know what it’s like to have it taken away.”

Janis looked at Ruck now with all seriousness. “So long as you understand the risk.”

“I understand.”

Janis nodded. Ruck cheered. Sciana poured some of the soup into a simple bowl before plucking two skewers from their perch. She sat back and began eating. Ruck approached the fire. “In J’Soon, a cook always serves the guests first,” Janis said.

“Well, I’m not your cook, and you’re not my guest,” Sciana replied. She chewed a piece of meat from the skewer as Ruck served himself.

“How do you two know each other, anyway?” Ruck asked. “Now that I’m a full member of the group.”

“We don’t know each other, and we’re not a group,” Sciana said through her

food.

Ruck walked back to his spot. “A lover’s spat, I see,” he said, as if he had dozens of those already.

Janis laughed. Sciana looked at the boy impassively. “She has her reasons for being here, same as you,” Janis said.

“Reasons that are quickly fading,” Sciana replied.

“Why?”

She flung the now empty skewer into the flames. “Did you find the wizard, or was everything we went through back there to feed your bloodlust?”

“He nearly killed me, but I saw where he was.”

“So where is he?”

“I only remember images. Emotions.”

“Of course you do.”

“They were waiting on some kind of bridge outside of a large city. It had strange walls. The bridge was over a deep chasm. I didn’t recognize it. Metal towers. A massive wall built from interlocking pieces, topped with ballistas and arc cannons.”

“The city of Vrear,” Sciana said before eating her soup. Despite his hunger, Janis waited.

“You’re sure?”

She nodded. “The center of the Domain?” Ruck asked. Janis looked at him and saw the terror in his eyes. “I’ve heard stories...”

“It’s a couple of days from here, on the other side of the Peaks,” Sciana said.

“Mountains?” Ruck asked. “But we have the chariot. We could get there end of tomorrow if we-”

“No,” Sciana said, putting her bowl down with authority. “The Waste up on the outskirts of the Domain isn’t safe. Not even the Uma dare travel through the Scythian Ridge.”

“Why not?” Janis asked.

She glared at him. The anger simmering in the pits of her eyes extended out across her entire face. “It’s a death trap, filled with bandits and mercenaries looking for their next score. If the Arawat has anyone waiting for you anywhere, they’ll be waiting for you there.”

“Maybe,” Janis said. “But we don’t have time to get over the Peaks. Orinax knows we’re coming. Our only hope is to get to Vrear in time to catch him.”

Sciana stood up. “If you wish to take the advice of this boy over my own, so be it. You’ve taken your own council as it is. My job was to get you to B’lac.

I've done that. You don't need me here anymore."

With that, she picked up her things and walked into the dark. "Sciana?" Ruck asked. "Don't go. I'm sorry."

Janis sighed. If there was trouble in the Ridge, Sciana was their best chance to elude or survive it. More than that, she was the only reason he'd survived his engagement with the mage. Despite his raw power, he was still a novice, and he couldn't depend on his old Shadowstalker skills given his still damaged state.

"Wait," Janis said. Her footsteps stopped. She stood in silhouette against the starry sky, her outline encased in silver light, hair like a waterfall of shadow. "You won't survive out here."

"I won't survive with you either, it seems."

"You and I have a deal."

"Deal's off," she said. "It's already cost me more than it's worth. However much we wanted to profit off of your victory against this wizard, it's obvious you're as possessed and wretched as he is."

"A duty, then, to get me to Brethor."

Her eyes narrowed. "You dare speak to me of duty? You've spurned him the same as you spurned everything in your life, even your own soul."

"But not my sister." She didn't move as she considered this. "My duty was to protecting my family. I remember that, now. I failed, but I can rescue her. Brethor's duty is the same, and so is yours." Janis walked closer and touched her shoulder. "I apologize for all that happened back there."

She shrugged him off. "Do you? My horses are dead, and for what? So you could feed that creature encased where your heart should be?" She shook her head. "Eli believed you to be someone we could at least work with. I see now his optimism got the better of him. You'll never return to J'Soon. Our caravan will have to come to terms with the Arawat to survive."

He lowered his head and sighed. "I need your help."

"And who are you to ask for it?"

"Someone who loves and wants to save his sister." He looked back up at her, could see even in the dim light that he had her attention. It was manipulative, but it was also true.

"I don't know her. How am I supposed to trust your impression of her when you live as you do?"

He could feel the edge of her breath on his face. "Because I've already sacrificed everything I am to save her. The Arawat will punish everyone who had dealings with my family, your caravan included. But you can hurt them first,

or at least return with something to help you survive the coming fight.” He gripped her shoulder again. This time, she didn’t pull away. “Please.”

“Going through the pass is suicide,” she said.

“Okay,” Janis said. “We’ll go over the Peaks.”

That night he lay awake, his mind alive with impressions from the transponder and fractured memories from his past. What had the conversation with Renea meant? Had the transponder shown him one of her memories? He certainly didn’t recognize himself in it. He’d seemed arrogant and cynical. Perhaps he had been. He’d also seen Brethor in there. Had felt his presence even when facing Orinax on the bridge outside of Vrear. The other, darker and more powerful presence had overshadowed it, but it had been there all the same. Was Brethor close? He would’ve learned of Qinra’s attack in B’lac if he’d arrived there tonight. Perhaps he was after Orinax himself? What was the presence behind Orinax? Or was it the other way around? Orinax was a wizard, not a sorcerer or mage. He was accustomed to dominating the minds of lesser Lethi and even gods in the Shimmer. Was he controlling something that could scare even a member of the Yabboleth like Qinra? Or was he in league with it?

Janis heard a footstep nearby. Brethor came to him in a flash, watching and commanding as Janis failed again to avoid being surprised in the night during training. He found the dagger at his belt with his left hand, right pinioned to the ground ready to launch him into an attack, when he felt Sciana lean close to him in the dark. She eyed him over the blade. “It’s cold. Better not to be spread out. Do you have room?” He lowered the dagger and nodded. She sidled up next to him. “Don’t get any ideas,” she said.

“Of course not.”

She pressed close. He stared up at the sky above. “You don’t remember who you were, do you? Who Brethor was, what your family was?”

He sighed. “No.”

“Eli claims it happens sometimes to those near death.”

“I wasn’t near death, I was dead.”

She slid an arm off his chest. They listened to each other’s breaths. “I met you years ago.”

“Really?”

“Elisham came to pay tribute to House Aphora to earn your family’s protection. There were a dozen caravanserai there. You were standing on a platform as the serai bowed and presented their gifts to the great Dewan. I remember hating you.”

Janis smirked. "Why?"

"You were so... certain of yourself. Of your place in the world. And yet you gave off such bitterness. I could tell you despised it." He didn't respond. She slid across to look up at him. "There isn't much of that boy left in you now. You're someone else, I think."

"Better?"

"I don't know."

"Why?"

She looked into his eyes. "Actual pain can bring real wisdom or terrible stupidity."

"I don't want to be stupid."

"Then stop."

"Maybe with your help..."

They inched their lips closer and kissed. She pulled away. "I'm not here for you," she whispered. "But for me."

She slipped a hand across his chest, her breath close. He lifted his face, stretching his left hand from his dagger to her neck and bringing her to him. When they finished, she regarded the sky with him. "The Uma believe that the Waste was once a jungle and that someday it will be again."

"What do you believe?"

"That we live in the world we created, and that all we can do is hope to survive it." She got up and got dressed again. "You're making the right choice about the Ridge. The Peaks are tough enough."

He was about to respond when the shadows shifted behind her. He grabbed her leg and yanked it, pulling her to the ground as two crossbow bolts whistled through the air. She rolled to the side as he grabbed his dagger and ran. It was a figure dressed in light armor and wearing a cloth mask. He unsheathed his sword as Janis hurtled towards him, swinging it up and fast. Janis slid below the swipe and stabbed up with his dagger, catching the man in his chest. His attacker howled and brought his sword down. It would've sliced his back but for the arrow that plunged into the man's face, knocking him back. Janis looked back and nodded at Sciana. The shadows shifted behind her again. "Behind you," he yelled. She turned and fired into the dark. Janis ran towards her as she fired again, then hissed.

The figure jumped on a small chariot and buzzed off into the deep night. "Hussars," Sciana said.

"What's going on?" Ruck said. Janis turned to the boy as he saw the corpse

and jumped back. "Can we catch him?" Janis asked.

Sciana shook her head. "These were scouts. The lance won't be far."

"Whoa, a Hussar," Ruck said. Sciana lowered her bow.

"We have to make for the Ridge."

"You said it was suicide."

She pulled her leather cuirass over her head as Ruck patted the dead Waster's pockets. "We don't have a choice, now. They'd overtake us in the Peaks."

"You've seen what I'm capable of."

"I've seen what they're capable of, too. There are too many. Our only chance is in the Ridge." She tightened her right arm pad. "You're going to get your way."

They stamped out the glowing cinders, loaded the chariot, and set off. It was the deep dark of early morning as they approached the distant ridge. It looked like a long wall stretching east towards the horizon. Sciana clumped arrows in tight packets along the back of the chariot. Ruck sat quietly in the front seat. The eastern sun was peeking out from below the horizon, its rays illuminating the entrance to the Ridge. It was the Gash, a crack in the otherwise daunting cliffs of the Scythian Ridge that stretched from the mountain range to the west and ended at Lake Or'Sa to the east. The Waste became sandier as they approached as if it didn't want them to leave. Ruck bailed out dirt and grit from their seats as Sciana leaned forward.

"They're coming," she said. He turned and looked back. Beyond the orange-yellow sands of the Wastes, past the milky heatwaves dissipating off of the dead earth, a clump of shadows was growing. He only looked a second, but it was enough to know that the cloud rising above them wasn't a trick of the light. It was the great plume of dust their chariots were blowing into the sky. He turned back. The Gash looked quiet and small against the expanse of the Ridge, but he could tell it was at least half a league wide.

"We'll make it."

"Don't stop. Not for anything," she said. As they got closer, he could make out small landings and ridges rippling either side of the canyon as the Gash opened up beyond its entrance. Perfect hiding spots for anyone laying an ambush.

"How long is it?"

"Roughly two leagues," she said. "If we don't make it through in less than an hour, we won't make it at all."

"Pay attention to everything going on with this thing. Understand?" Ruck



nodded, terror overtaking him. Janis patted his back. "I'm going to get us through," he said.

Sciana tapped the back of his seat, then brought both hands on either of the rails as she hunched in the back. Janis pressed down even harder on the pedal as they approached the rift in the cliffside, each wall of the ridge rising at least five stories above them on either side. There was no trading traffic. No line to wait in other than an overturned cart lying half-buried in the sand, its side punctured open. He saw Ruck regard it out of the corner of his eyes.

"Stay focused," he said as they roared into the Gash. The suns disappeared behind the cliffs above them.

Sounds echoed off the cliff walls. They bounced, crunching rock beneath them. The chariot's thrumming rebounded off the cliffs, smothering them in the sound of their passage. If there was anyone that didn't know about them already, they would soon.

They hit their first obstacle, a tight curve that forced him to plunge between a small gap. A sapien wearing leather armor and a metal helmet popped up on the ridge above and hurled a long javelin at them. Janis threw up his hand just as the man let it go, aiming for the tight gap just ahead of them. He focused, projecting a quick telekinetic blast that caught the thing in midair, flinging it away. It exploded against the cliff behind them, throwing their attacker back. Then they were through the gap, and all hell broke loose.

Masked figures leaped up from behind cover on both sides of the tall ridge beyond. The ground ahead was littered with corpses and the overturned carts of past adventurers. Arrows and javelins flew around them. Janis held up his left hand and focused, feeling the world around them from his perch in the Shimmer. He channeled the symbiote's power to create a telekinetic shield above his head, creating it with his own mind so that each explosion sent feedback through the Shimmer like someone had just punched him in the face. He nearly lost control of the wheel as Sciana fired back. Ruck grabbed it and guided him around an overturned Uma caravan. Janis saw bleached bone, red sand, a ruptured tarp, and broken wood. Then it was gone. They were about to hit another piece of wreckage. He wrested the wheel away. "Get down," he yelled.

Janis veered left around a downed airship, his feet maneuvering from pedal to pedal so fast he was sure to make a mistake any second. Sciana screamed something, but he didn't hear her. Keeping the shield up was draining him. He hadn't known he could experience feedback like that. Couldn't do it and drive at the same time. He saw a gap in the massive airship. Without thinking twice, he

veered into it, the rigging and metal overhang providing some haphazard cover. He lowered his shield.

“What if there’s not a way out?” Ruck asked.

“I’ll make one. Just make sure this thing keeps running.”

“Hussars,” Sciana yelled.

“What?” Janis screamed back.

Sciana bent down. “The Hussars are here,” she yelled. He looked back for the briefest second, but he didn’t need to. One of their armored Trajan chariots was already pulling up on their right, its scarlet flags waving defiantly in the stale air, showing the crossed scimitars that was their sigil over the armored chariot.

“Shit,” Janis said. He gritted his teeth as the half-buried part of the airship’s deck between became completely submerged below the sand. Their chariot was all metal plates haphazardly attached to a frame, not unlike their own, only it was larger with spikes arrayed along the roof and front. A panel opened and a bolt of energy streaked between them and the airship’s rigging, just missing them and pummeling into the metal of the distant hull. The ruin groaned. Sciana hissed and fired an arrow into the hole. A man screamed, and the panel closed again.

“Go faster,” she yelled.

Three panels opened. Two Hussars leaned out, bolt casters in hand. Janis didn’t wait to see what waited in the third. He shoved the chariot into a lower gear and slammed on the pedal, thrusting them ahead just as the Hussars unleashed their attack, energy bolts sending reams of super-heated metal spinning in the tight corridor. Sciana held on, regained her balance, and fired at one before he could finish slinking back into cover, catching him in the chest. Janis struggled to cut them off, but they gained too quickly. Another bit of deck rose between them. He looked back. Two more Hussar chariots were catching up fast.

“Janis,” Sciana screamed.

“Take the wheel,” he said to Ruck.

“I don’t know how,” the boy yelled back.

“You want to die? Take it.”

Ruck reached over and grabbed it as Janis reached up, grabbed the rail, and swung his body up, twisting around to face the armored chariot careening behind them. The left panel on the front had already opened, revealing a massive arc caster bending down to aim at them. Janis summoned up the symbiote within

him and felt it clutch to his body like a drowning man, sucking in all the life energy from him it could. He flung his right arm out, hurling an edge of telekinetic energy at the front that sliced into the metal, carving into it but not through it.

Sciana fired an arrow through the gap. A man screamed inside. He felt the Hussar's mind receding to the Shimmer. Janis reached out and consumed it instead, feeding it to the symbiote rather than relying just on his own energy. The force of it hit him in his spine like a jolt of soma. He gripped a piece of reality from the Shimmer and, with one strong motion, commanded it up. The hard earth answered, dry rock jolting underneath their chariot, sending it into the ceiling above them and back down as a tumbling ruin. The chariot just behind it couldn't dodge fast enough and careened into it. They exploded, blowing Janis into the dash as Ruck nearly lost control. Janis flipped around. "Get out," he yelled. Ruck hopped back into his seat as Janis shifted and grabbed the wheel, regaining control. Sunlight poured in from the end of the airship ahead.

"There's still one to our right," Sciana yelled.

"We're near the end, get down," he screamed, but the sound of something ahead drowned him out. Ruck yelled into the roar. Janis held onto the gear stick, ready to lower it again if needed, when they careened out from within the airship.

The suns slapped him in the face, dazing him for a second, but he threw up the kinetic shield, anyway. He felt the blasts hit against his mind as it caught whatever they were throwing at them, including something that made his spine tingle and his thoughts turn to mush. The world devolved into impressions he couldn't understand. A figure here, a shadow there; a rock, a crevice, a tree, a ruin. Two people were screaming. What were their names again? He was moving quick, that much he knew. Was that safe? He felt something alien writhe inside him, gaining ground on his weakened mind. That was something to protect against, but he couldn't remember why. Every why seemed unimportant now.

"Janis," a woman yelled. That was his name, wasn't it? Yes. Janis of House Aphora.

It came back to him then. A surge of memories hit him like a gust of ice. Renea, Brethor, his mother's corpse lying dead on the table, bleeding out, older brother begging for mercy, the arrows, the downed retainers, the laughing Arawat mercenaries, the smell of it, the stench.

Orinax.

He came back to see the chariot was hurtling towards the wall of the ridge,

marauders throwing everything they had. A group of them to the right were wielding a machine that was perched on the back of a horse-drawn wagon, a kind of dish smothered in dust. The symbiote writhed with anger and pain. He knew intuitively that was what had hit him.

If I help you, it'll feel our connection and close it...

They knew now they were dealing with a sorcerer, and they had ways to handle it.

Janis hit the brake and turn the wheel hard to the right in front of the lead Hussar chariot. Its front panel opened. Janis careened to the other side of it just before it would have crashed into them, plunging towards the ridge wall ahead. The chariot died. The bandits above were circling to get a better position.

Sciana pat the back of his seat. "Now, now, now!"

"I can't," he said. He restarted the chariot instead, its heart coughing and wheezing but not pumping. "Ruck!"

Ruck dove underneath the dash. Sciana fired at the bandits above, catching one in his leg and sending the others behind cover for at least a moment. The Hussar chariot was turning. In seconds, it would be on them. He heard Sciana curse just before she fired at the thing's front right tire.

The arrow hit. The Hussar chariot sped up towards them, death waiting in the black pit of its open front panel. Then the arrow's barbs popped open, shredding through the wheel. The chariot lurched to its left, casting sand over its roof and front as it veered to their right and towards the cliffside.

The heart started. He heard Ruck tap the inside and hit the pedal. He was getting weak holding up the shield. Like he might pass out any second. Janis hit the go pedal with all he had.

The chariot's wheels spun and caught. He kept it going as close to the cliffside as possible as arrows and bullets rained down on them. Janis lowered his arm.

"Shield us," Sciana yelled, trying to fire back.

"I can't," he wheezed, but there was no way she could hear him.

"Janis," she screamed.

He motioned to the bandit's vehicle with the dish. "Bring that thing down."

She changed her aim at the last second, unleashing an arrow that just missed one of the dish operators. They ducked for cover behind the thing, twisting it to stay aimed at the chariot as Janis sent the vehicle hurtling towards the tight corridor that led out into the rest of the Gash and away from what Sciana had rightfully called a deathtrap. An arrow hit his back right shoulder. He grimaced.

Warmth spread down his back as he tried to keep the chariot aimed down the length of the cliff wall. Sciana fired again, but the dish operators were behind cover. The bandits above were getting in a better position. Janis figured he had seconds, not minutes.

“Hold on,” Sciana said before wrapping her legs around the frame of the chariot and lowering her arms to the ground. He tried to turn and look, but the arrow sticking out of his back made turning difficult. They were only a few lengths away from the exit, but it wasn’t enough time. The bandits lifted their arc throwers and bows.

“Sciana,” he screamed.

He saw her lift herself back up out of the corner of his eye, one of the bulbous javelins the bandits had been using in hand. She notched it in her bow, took aim, and fired.

He dodged the first energy blast from above, veering the chariot to the right and away from the cliff wall as the blue energy ball struck where they would’ve been, flinging melting rock and debris into the air. Some of it cut into his left side, blasting across his cheek as he crouched low to avoid the arrows puncturing his seat and the inside of the chariot. He heard an explosion and saw that Sciana had hit the dish squarely on its surface, shattering the metal and throwing the operators onto the ground. Janis lifted his hand and felt the symbiote respond to his urging. The next energy pulse hit his barrier and sent a spike of pain through his head, but it protected them. They made it through the pass and out of the clearing.

“Sciana, are they following? Are there more Hussars?”

He turned and saw her splayed across the back seat, two arrows in her chest, blood gushing out of her mouth. In all the excitement, he hadn’t noticed the symbiote squirming with anticipation at the chance to feed on her life.

“Ruck, get out here,” he yelled. The boy said something, but he couldn’t hear it. He could feel something gaining behind them, looked back and saw a giant armored chariot, bigger than those they’d destroyed before. At least double the size. It crashed through the downed chariot behind them with ease as it followed them into the ravine’s entrance. A turret on the top aimed with an arc caster, the energy weapon swinging left and right, trying to find the best angle to fire at them. “Check her.”

Ruck crawled out from under the dash, his eyes widening when he saw Sciana in the back. She was barely hanging on. Janis could feel it. “Help her.”

“There’s nothing,” Sciana said. She coughed as she tried to move. Janis

followed the twisting ravine as its walls narrowed. He could feel bandits racing to keep up above them.

“Don’t move.”

She lurched forward, then fell back. Ruck helped her up. The Hussar vehicle gained on them.

Sciana glared at him. “Don’t do it,” she said. “I go now to be with my ancestors, as it should be.”

Guilt wasn’t an emotion Janis had indulged in very often. At least, from what he could remember of his past life. It certainly felt that he did now. “Then go in peace,” he said. Sciana snickered, coughing, before she fell back on the seat and let herself slide away.

“Help her,” Ruck yelled.

“Take the wheel.” Janis didn’t wait to hear him argue, he just let go and jumped into the back with her. Ruck leaped past to replace him, the chariot nearly rolling over. Janis ignored the boy’s swearing and the woman dying at his feet to face down the Hussar chariot as its arc thrower locked in and fired. He swung his arm up and used a telekinetic wave to hurl it away from them. The symbiote gripped him in some deep recess of his primal mind.

Give her to me...

Janis squashed it, forcing it to take from his own life energy instead as he supercharged the electrons in the space between his hands, letting their furious buzzing grow until arcs of lightning raced between his fingers faster than his eyes could see. The top of the chariot suddenly opened and two Hussars climbed from inside. Before Janis thought to hurl his counterattack, they leaped onto the chariot.

He hurled it as they landed. The lightning struck the outside of the chariot, electrocuting Hussars within. He consumed them as the chariot veered away, but he could feel a few of them were still alive inside. He’d injured the driver, but the Hussar had insulated himself from Janis’s attack somehow. The two Hussars landed on their chariot and held on to get leverage as Janis collapsed, his chest on fire from the energy it’d taken to strike the chariot.

“Janis,” Ruck yelled as one of them lifted his sword to cut him. In one quick move, Janis blocked it with his dagger. The Hussar kicked him, then thrust with his scimitar. Janis dodged to the right, the blade slicing him on his left side as he lunged forward with the dagger in his right hand, catching the Hussar in the chest. The man grunted through his mask and tried to shift. Janis didn’t give him the chance, leaping forward and onto the man, stabbing him repeatedly. The

symbiote fed on his life energy as Janis saw a shadow spread across the chariot below him. The other Hussar. There wasn't room to dodge, nor the time to find another way. Janis turned to catch his enemy with a telekinetic blast, but there wasn't time. He was going to die. The chariot lurched them all forward as Ruck braked hard.

The Hussar hurled into the dash face first with a sickening crunch. Janis grabbed the back of his head and bashed it into the dash again and again until it sounded like a wet sponge, then grabbed him by the chest and chucked him over the side. Ruck pressed the button to start the chariot again, but it wheezed pathetically. The boy's hand shook as he tried again. Janis looked behind them and saw the Hussar chariot barreling down on them.

"Ruck."

"I know," the boy said.

"We need it now."

"It's not magic, I can't-"

The heart of the thing thrummed to life. Ruck slammed on the pedal and they lurched forward towards the widening ravine. It plunged into marshlands about half a league below. Tall cliffs loomed on either side of the remaining path.

"Are we going to get through that?"

"I don't know," he said. His young was face etched with concern as he stared down the incoming soggy earth before them. If they couldn't get through it, the Hussars certainly could not. The road down was littered with rocks, trees hanging over the path from the ridges above. It was only a few chariot lengths across. Their own felt like it might disassemble at any moment. Janis reached behind him and felt the broken arrow in his back. He gripped what was left of the shaft and yanked it out, along with chunks of his flesh.

"If we don't make it down there, we're finished," he said.

"I know," Ruck replied. The Hussar chariot was gaining on them. At this rate, it'd take them before they could reach the marshland. He was planning a way to slow down or even destroy the thing when they hit the trap.

It was a crude arrangement, probably a pressure plate under the earth connected to an assortment of metal spikes and debris that, once set off, snapped into the sides of the chariot, sending the thing rolling down the hill and setting off more traps on its way until it crashed against the last remaining bit of ridgeline as little more than an accretion of junk metal. The whole thing was over in seconds. Janis came to his senses to find himself still in the front seat, Ruck struggling to get out of the driver's seat, blood and dust on the boy's face.

He regarded his hands like an audience member regards the play at a theater.

He remembered something from the last night at his parent's estate. His older brother, Gar'Sha, Master-at-Arms, patting him on the back during the feast. "We finally did it, and you even had a part to play. Imagine that." Gar'sha's laugh was a deep chuckle, like his lungs were drums his personality beat on with practiced ease. What part had he played? He couldn't remember. Only that he was already coming down from one drug the Shadowstalkers take for concentration, soma, and that only drinking would save him now. Except that it wouldn't, would it? He should have never made it out of that feast. He turned and saw Renea standing behind him with Orinax, the wizard's hand on her back as he smiled at Janis.

Something struck him across the face and he was back in the crashed chariot, Ruck's brown eyes tight with fear as they stared into his own. "Wake up. We need to get out, now!"

Janis could hear the chariot bearing down on them outside, but it was slower than it had been. Twisted metal encased them in their own chariot, sunlight poking through as it does between gaps in a slaver's stall.

"I can't bend it back."

"Stand back," Janis said. He used the symbiote's stolen power, gripping the edges of the metal with his mind and forcing it back. Ruck exhaled with awe as the metal bent back and opened up like a flower. Janis felt nauseous as he followed the boy out. The Hussars were maneuvering towards them carefully, following the path their wrecked chariot had made.

"What do we do?" Ruck asked. He looked out on the marsh. "We'll never get through there without the chariot."

Janis looked back inside and saw Sciana's crumpled body in the tortured remains of the chariot. He remembered her lying next to him under the stars of the Waste, the cocky way she held herself, the glare in her eyes when she'd told him that this plan was doomed to fail. He heard her voice as if from the Shimmer. "We will not make it through there alive," it rang. And she'd been right.

The rage built up in him. Rage at his ineptitude and weakness, at the Arawat and what they'd done to him and his family, at his own damaged memory and the Yabboleth who always, no matter what was claimed about them, played sapiens as puppets for their incomprehensible desires.

Ruck shouted something and Janis looked back up from his perch on the twisted metal to see the bandits had surrounded them once again on the ridge just



above them. Ruck found cover under a small rock as arrows rained down around him, a few of the bandits racing to find footing just above Janis. He looked back up and saw they were attacking the Hussars as well. A bolt of energy struck the thing's side, nearly blowing it open. The Hussars inside fired back, their arc caster turret lobbing a blue energy bolt back at the landing above.

He heard Ruck crying as he brought his legs to his chest. Could feel the life force of all the enemies arrayed against them like flickering flames in the inert darkness of the world. Flames that if he could bring into himself and the symbiote's maw would burn inside and through him instead.

He wanted nothing more.

Janis pulled out the small dagger he kept in his boot and, with a tiny telekinetic push with his other hand, launched himself towards the ridge above. He grabbed a small bush there and climbed up onto the ledge before his weight could pull him back down to the earth below. There were half a dozen bandits before him, most with ranged weapons of various kinds, all wearing dirty tunics or leather armor, their faces sheathed with cloth or dusty clay masks. The one closest lifted the clumsy wood frame of a foreign arquebus at Janis and yelled in surprise.

Janis reacted with his old skills before he consciously thought to use them. He crouched as the man fired, the bullet streaking above him as he dashed across the five paces and sliced the shooter's throat open. His left hand unsheathed the bandit's scimitar as he twisted out of the way of the arrows and haphazard arquebus shots. The memories inhabited his body again, bringing them to life like a shadow stuttering between frames. He stalked them, their screams resonant as he flitted between their lives. His conscious mind caught up and jolted him back to the present. He was standing above the litany of their corpses, their blood splattered on his black and dusty robes. He controlled his breath.

"Please," one of them said through his cheap synthetic mask. "Don't kill me. I didn't have a choice."

He heard himself speak as though through a transponder. "Who directed you?"

He focused on the bandit. The sapien was on its back, arms trembling, head bobbing between prostration and pleading. "She came to us in our dreams. Some of us tried to deny but..." the cretin whimpered. "The pain was too much."

"She?" He nodded. The pathetic bandit nodded before he could continue. Janis heard the battle going on in the ravine below.

"She commanded you to fight the Hussars as well?"

The sapien grabbed his leg. "Please," he said. There was nothing more to learn from this one. Janis plunged his dagger into the sapien's neck to make it quick, then let the symbiote devour him. It was like he'd just consumed a series of stimulants. He imagined himself as how the chariot would feel if it was fully charged, were the chariot a thing that could feel at all. The symbiote gripped him with ecstasy and, to his shame, he let it.

"Janis?" Ruck yelled from below. He sounded like he was trying to decide whether he should be scared, curious, or overjoyed. Janis approached the edge of the cliff and saw him standing behind the rock jumble below. "You're alive," Ruck shouted, excited. A massive explosion rocked the cliff, and they both looked up towards the battle. A cloud of dust smothered the Hussar armored chariot from a massive hole they'd blown out of the cliff. "We need to get out of here," Ruck yelled.

"We won't make it through the marsh fast enough without a way through," Janis said. As if to gauge how right that could be, Ruck looked the other way and out over the great bog that stood between them and Vrear. Janis wished suddenly that he'd heeded Sciana about her cherished horses as well.

Horses...

Janis reached out through the symbiote to feel the life forces of the surrounding creatures. He tried to concentrate. It was a mess of feeling. He focused harder. What did the sapiens in the Hussar chariot feel like? He fumbled with it, but a unique signature came into focus as if he was picking out what makes one language different from another. On the ridge nearby was something that he couldn't be sure was a horse, but which he could say wasn't sapien.

He came back to Urias and saw that the Hussars were barreling towards Ruck. He gave it thirty seconds.

"Wait here," he said, then turned back towards the mountain behind him. Ruck shouted, but the boy's voice faded as he sprinted up the mountain. He rounded the corner. It was there, chained to a spike embedded in the ground within a small alcove carved out of the sheer rock. It stood to its full height, craning its neck so that its eyes could regard him above its stubby snout, the elaborate horns that jut from out of its forehead coalescing into one emphatic promontory of steely bone. Janis had never seen a creature like it before. It was like a horse, only the size of two horses both width, height, and length-wise. It had a long neck and horns. A true beast, though from the saddle strapped on its back it was clear they must at least try to ride it. He approached. It exhaled sharply and lowered its head. He didn't have time for this.

He ran towards it. It flung its head up to skewer him and he crouched, leaping just as it would have struck him. He ran along the curved wall to get around to its back. It gave out a sharp, enraged shriek as it tried to turn its head back and twist its body away. Janis landed on the massive saddle and found two footholds for a regular-sized sapien to take command of it. With one flick of his fingers, he sent a tight kinetic scythe that cut the chain, then gripped the reins back towards him as the creature rose on its massive legs and bucked. He threw his weight forward, towards the creature's neck, and forced it back down. He let his mind go tranquil as it had when speaking to Cth'tata, feeling for the horse's mind or life force, whatever it was he could manipulate, and exuded his desire to escape. What he found underneath him was utterly foreign.

"I'll give you freedom. Just do the same for me," he intimated. In response, it thundered forward and out towards the cliffside. Janis pulled with the reins as best he could, guiding it in a sclerotic way towards Ruck below. They passed debris from the bandit position on their way down, bodies and equipment splayed like so many tossed pebbles. He saw a half-broken bolt caster and thrust out with his mind, yanking it into his right hand.

The tank was beyond the rock face, Hussar mercenaries spread out and approaching the boy. Janis grit his teeth. He was going to crack the reins when the creature leaped into their midst, throwing Janis back in the saddle like a warrior god, arc caster lowered towards them as it trampled a Hussar without stumbling. Janis jutted his arm forward to send the charged bolt towards the first Hussar in his sight. The blue energy singed the air and blew the man's body apart. His creature thundered over more of the Hussars, Janis catching stragglers with bolts of energy every time he felt the rod recharge, sucking their life forces into himself as they scrambled for cover hopelessly. The last couple made for the tank as its operator tried to bring its weapons to focus on them. He could feel the creature's bloodlust give way to fear. Janis wondered how the beast could understand what it was facing. He fired one last bolt at the two escaping Hussars and missed, the energy ball screaming into the dented hull of the chariot. Sparks flew. The chariot remained.

The power of so many lives surged through him. The creature remained immobile below him as he held his hands out towards the tank, super-heating the air between them until a ball of liquid plasma expanded and grew. He fed it, spending much of the lives he'd gathered, watching as the arc caster charged on the tank's top, ready to fire and destroy him. The blue energy glowed at the end of the barrel. He thundered his hands together.

The plasma smothered the tank, melting it on contact until it was a jagged sphere the size of a handball in less than a second. The sound was unlike anything he'd ever heard. It reminded him of scratching a chalkboard like he used to do to torture his tutors as a child, only happening so fast it hurt. A slight wind blew through the sudden silence in the ravine and out towards the marsh, as though the ravine was hoping to expel them like mucous. It caught his robes and caressed his skin. He let his bloodlust and the symbiote's strange high settle down. The creature pawed at the ground. He tried to read its emotions, but it was too bizarre to understand. He was probably fooling himself, but he got the sense it was thankful, or maybe even in awe.

Janis looked back towards the rock outcropping. "It's finished."

Ruck peeked out from behind it, then stepped out and took in the scene. He looked scared when he saw what was left of the tank. "I thought you'd run away," he said.

"Had to find us a proper way out," Janis replied. He guided the creature towards Ruck. The boy backed away. "It's okay," Janis said. "I think he's proven he's with us."

Ruck shook his head. "You can't just ride creatures in the Waste. You don't know who they might serve, or what they might eat..."

"I can." Janis ushered the creature towards him. "You coming with?"

Ruck swallowed, then held his hand up. Janis reached down and pulled the boy up behind him. "What about Sciana?" Ruck asked.

She's dead, Janis wanted to say. Guilt, unbidden and foreign, unspooled itself in his mind. She'd signed up for risking death, but then she'd been right about choosing this path, and she'd saved his life. He grit his teeth at that. It was the Aphora way to owe no one anything, not even family. That was a road to servitude and weakness, to depending on politics like the Arawat instead of financial position and power like his own family. But look at what had happened to that, and now he owed her, even if she was dead. Especially because she was. It was a debt he couldn't allow to hang over his head.

He stopped their strange steed by the wreckage of the chariot and slid off it. Ruck held on tightly like the thing might take off, but it watched Janis instead as he climbed inside the ruined artifact and returned with Sciana's body. Ruck helped him pull it up and place her along the creature's back. He strapped her in as Ruck looked at her, his face scrunched with pain. "I don't like it," he said.

"You wanted to get her."

"I mean, I don't like that she died."

Janis tightened the last cinch. “Me neither,” he wanted to say. He tasted metal in the back of his throat.

“She was our friend,” Ruck replied. He pulled himself up in front of the boy, sat, and cracked the reins. As they approached the marsh, he wondered if he’d ever gotten used to it himself, or ever would.

“Yes,” he said. “And for that, we’ll honor her.” He led them towards the marsh. As they crossed into the deep bog, he hoped the boy couldn’t read the symbiote’s disturbing desire on his face.

## THE REVELATION

THEY BURIED HER on the other side of the bog. Janis didn't know the Uma custom, but he knew that in J'Soon one only buried enemies in soft sand or clay to show how little they mattered. He and Ruck dug up the hard, rich dirt beyond the bog and placed her inside of it. He felt hollow; her face branded in his memory. Another victim of his cursed fate. When they were finished, they got back on the creature and continued to Vrear.

The Domain was a rigidly regimented place. That much was clear from the rows of segmented farmland that stretched to either side of them on the busy road. Golems lumbered through rows of wheat, barley, and plants Janis had no name for. Some were as tall as the trees they plucked fruit from, others only the size of his legs. Ruck had a million questions about them, but he stopped asking after an hour of riding. Janis didn't have any answers. He'd never been to the Domain. All he knew about it was that being the priests of ancient Set had bound to living stone managed it. Its essence gave the golems life, its mind directed the lives of the citizens of Vrear. More than that, Janis couldn't say.

They could see it in the distance by midday on their third day of travel. The ancient metal tower at its center shone like a beacon. The walls were as strange as Janis remembered from his vision, etched with symbols and topped with ancient weapons. As they crossed the bridge, Janis couldn't help but look for where he'd seen Renea and her kidnapper on it. Orinax must have hurt her to get her to influence the bandits like that. That they'd fought the Hussars as well showed that she'd at least tried to balance it out, had fought back against his influence the only way she could.

The closer they got, the colder Vrear looked. As they approached the Auspicious Gate, they had to walk their steed on foot. Ruck pointed out the various lights and faces swimming on the walls, watching them. Is that why they were so strangely shaped? Guards approached, one of them towering almost to the ceiling of the gate. He was encased in boxy metal plate armor so that it impossible to know if it was a giant in armor or a golem. "Your Zata must be lodged outside the walls," the regular-sized sapien said. Janis looked among the group of them. They had broad swords at their hips.

"My what?"

He indicated their steed, his eyes irritated from deep behind the helmet.

“Your Zata. Biomanced creatures are not allowed within the walls of Vrear.”

“I have nowhere to put it.”

The guard held out his gauntleted hand. “We have a stable. It’s 30 specs a day.”

Janis had only known the thing for a day or two, and yet he felt some turmoil handing the reins to the guard. It looked at him and snorted. He approached it and held his arm out. It lowered its head towards his own. “I’ll come for you when my business here is done,” he whispered to it. Could feel it had conflicting emotions. “Serve me well, and I’ll see to it you’re free after this,” he continued. It grunted in understanding. He watched as two guards guided it away. The rest directed him inside, towards the Visitor’s Quadrant.

Most of Vrear was off-limits to visitors. It was just as well. J’Soon’s streets might swim in blood, arteries pressurized by greed and politics, but at least there was a soul there. His memories of the spires of the Confederacy’s H’laal dome, or the minarets with their House flags swaying in the Waste’s wind, still conjured nostalgia. Vrear had nothing like that. Its streets were sterile metal walkways, its impressive ziggurats and towers ultimately lacking in inspiration. They were sheer metal, flat and gray. All he knew of it was the name of an inn where Brethor kept a safehouse. They got directions, and he led the boy towards it, past the busy warehouses and stockyards. Sciana’s dark omen echoed in the back of his mind. He thought of Eli and his family. All the people he’d let down. The uniform streets of Vrear brought back strange memories. He’d always hated his family. The abdication to duty they enforced. The selfish goals they sought after. And yet, he felt pain at their loss. They hadn’t been good people, perhaps, but they’d been *his* people, and at least they’d sought prosperity for the Confederacy. If not for Orinax, they’d still be alive. Janis was no closer to understanding why Orinax had betrayed them, or the force working behind it all. Hopefully, someone in Vrear would know where they were. He was ready to start his search until he saw the inn.

It was eight stories tall, the upper levels rising above the central tavern and lit by a haphazard series of lanterns all wired up in a way that was eerily reminiscent of the Society’s compound. When they entered, he approached the clerk past the tables of gamblers. Exhaustion overcame him with each step. Janis barely tracked their conversation. The clerk gave him a key and a room designation. Ruck noted it. Janis took the key.

Ruck stayed quiet until they got inside. It was an alien space with curves and smooth walls. Little more than a storage closet in J’Soon. Janis collapsed on the

bed.

“I thought we were going to go look for your sister,” Ruck said.

“We will,” Janis managed.

“I’m going to go look around.” Janis grunted. “Alright, I’m leaving.”

“Fine. Now shut up. I need to sleep.”

Ruck snorted. He imagined it as the Zata, its nostrils expelling mist as it guided him through a land of corpses. They littered the ground below, and looking up, he saw them disappear into the horizon. Legions of corpses intersected by creeks of burbling blood. The sky was struck purple with nebulae and the aspects of god-beings.

“There is a price to all power,” the Zata said. “You will pay it eventually if you don’t abandon it.”

“You’re wise, for a horse,” Janis replied. He swayed from side to side on the powerful creature’s back and tried not to pay attention to the stench. The Zata laughed.

“Only because you’re a sapien.”

“I know what I’m about, creature.”

“So all sorcerer’s say.”

“Where are we?” Janis realized right after thinking it was the land of the dead. “There is no land of the dead. It is a myth.”

“There are regions beyond the Branches of the World Tree. Some exist only in the soul.” The Zata looked back at him, its black eye squinting as it regarded him.

Janis looked up again at the sky and saw a hole there. A dark spot into whose gaping maw stars and nebulae swirled. An ominous plate serving itself a healthy portion of what hung above.

“Few sapiens get the chance to peer into it so brazenly.”

“I’m not just any sapien.” The creature snorted again. “That’s the creature I made my pact with?”

“Yes,” the Zata said. “Though what it is, I cannot say.”

“And it doesn’t matter, because it’s serving its purpose.”

“When that disk becomes the entirety of your sky, you will cease to be Janis Aphora,” the Zata said. Janis could hear a female voice along the gruff edges, something soft and recognizable.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Despite all that has happened and will happen,” the Zata continued, its voice becoming more feminine as it did so, “I care for you.”



“Re?”

The Zata didn't look back at him. “Did you ever stop to think that you're doing what it wants? That you're not consuming others, but your own soul? You must expel this thing while you can and turn away. Fight the Arawat, take your vengeance, but leave me behind. For your own sake, as your sister, please.”

“You're scared,” Janis replied. He looked down at the bodies again, but recognized some of them and forced himself to look away. “You think Orinax is so strong, but we can defeat him together. We can face anything.”

“I'm trying to help you,” she said.

The anger sizzled inside him. “Then fight him.”

“You sound just like what we used to hate.”

“Where are you, Re?”

“We used to laugh at Aron and Gar'Sha for their ambition. Now you've sacrificed everything for power just like them, and you don't even understand how to use it. I took the cowl so that you wouldn't have to, and you've betrayed that sacrifice.”

The accusation stung. Even though he couldn't remember it well, some part of him knew she spoke true. “Why are you trying to protect him?” The silence hurt more than her barbs.

“Your idea of duty is so narrow, and your power so unearned. You don't understand what's at stake, and I won't be able to protect you.”

“Tell me. Let me help.”

She sighed. “I don't want your help. I want you to be free.”

“I survived to save you, and neither spiteful god-beings nor ambitious families or deranged cultists are going to stand in my way.”

He realized he was shouting. Renea sighed sadly through the creature's nostrils. “You live in a dreamworld, Janis. And for all its unreality, it is still so small, and will cost you so much.”

His body swayed too strongly. He fell off of the Zata's back, plunging into the soft mushy bodies below, sinking into them just like he had outside of J'Soon in the crater. Their insides smothered him until all there was only the rage, and a deeper memory... a book in a room he wasn't supposed to enter...a book he was never supposed to read...

He came to in the small apartment and saw the silhouette of a man standing at the end of the bed, watching him. In a flash, he'd unsheathed his dagger and lunged for him. The silhouette grabbed his arm and pulled him to his left, disorienting him and blocking him from retaliating with his left arm. Janis let his

momentum carry him into the man's bulk. They sparred for a second as Janis pulled up a second, smaller dagger attached to his thigh. The man grabbed it, holding both of his arms as they strained to kill him. "So you're not entirely soft," a gruff voice said.

"Brethor?"

The old man pushed him away. Janis held his daggers low. Brethor stepped into a bar of moonlight from the window to his right. The Visitor's Quarter sparkled with artificial lights, like the night sky reflected on a still but cluttered pond. His bearded face was as Janis remembered it. Same deep wrinkles in the forehead, rough skin and cold blue eyes. The only difference was his hair was grayer. "So you remember your master, if only when he's staring you in the face." His hands remained at his hips.

"Memory is not such a simple thing, now."

"You were to wait for me in B'lac."

Janis sheathed his daggers. "There wasn't time."

Brethor's eyes narrowed. He nodded once. "So I heard on arriving. The Arawat are terrified you'll rally an army and return."

"It was a mage in service to Orinax that attacked me."

He looked out the window. "Yes, but the wizard has leveraged the god-being's service through the promise of Arawat slaves. They're united in their desire to killing you, it seems." He looked at Janis. "You're lucky you got away like you did."

"You got here quickly."

"Not by the standards of the Or'Sa Channel. It took me a day to get into Vrear undetected. The Arawat have placed quite the bounty on both of us."

"How did you know I'd come here?"

"Because I know something of what Orinax wants." He faced Janis. "Where did you go, what did you learn? Did Eli find you? What was your journey here like? Out with it, boy. We need to move quickly." Janis glared at him, the dying words of the sputtering mercenary lingering in his mind. And he'd so badly wanted to forget the man. "Someone close," he'd said.

"Why? You were just a mercenary. What do you care about my family's fate?"

Brethor studied him. He sighed. "What's happened has effected your memory worse than you know. For that I'm truly sorry." He approached. Janis struggled to keep his hands off of his daggers. Brethor gripped his shoulder. "You are like a son to me. Do you understand? Search your mind. Remember."

Janis tried. He recalled training with Brethor and other children... the face of his first kill, following Brethor into a local bandit's camp... Orinax watching him display his skills for his father...

Janis swallowed and nodded. Brethor nodded to him. "No one wants to learn of Orinax's plan more than me, and the Arawat want me dead almost as much as you. Shadowmaster or not, they view me as an Aphora retainer." He scoffed, but continued looking into Janis's eyes. Janis nodded again. Brethor pat him on the shoulder. "Ok." He stepped back. "Now tell me."

As Janis opened his mouth, the door flew open and Ruck ran inside. Brethor's dagger was only inches from the boy's eye when Janis caught his elbow. "He's with me," Janis said.

"Janis," Ruck cried out.

Brethor nudged Janis back. His body relaxed as he sheathed the dagger under his black tunic. "We don't have the means to hire servants."

"I'm not a servant," Ruck said. "I'm part of his team. Right, Janis?"

Brethor glanced at Janis. "We need to talk," Janis replied. "Stay up here and keep watch."

"But--"

"I'm serious. Stay here. I'll be back in an hour."

Brethor walked past the boy without a second look. Ruck stopped Janis as he followed. "I don't trust him."

Janis looked up at Brethor waiting outside the door. "Wait until we leave, then go to the Zata. Get it ready for us." Ruck nodded. "If anything happens--"

"I'll have it ready."

Janis nodded, then followed Brethor out.

The third floor bar had a tall ceiling and an open floor plan, much like the largest drinking halls in J'Soon. A long window hugged the wall by the bar. A few towers lingered in the distant fog, their lights bleary past the rain pelting the inch-thick glass. Janis had never seen fog as thick or rain as heavy. Looking out the window as they walked along the bar, past the mercenaries and pilgrims that hugged drinks, Janis marveled at how alien Vrear was. Both its weather and history. J'Soon followed the ancient ways. It was a confederacy that traced itself back to the old barons of the Setian Suzerainty that had ruled in that era, and when Trajan Set fell, they had united to carve out their own little realm from the shattered empire. Vrear was alien. They kept their dealings with the rest of Saurius to a minimum. Even this Visitor's Quadrant was bizarre.

They took a seat at the end of the bar. It was crowded and loud, but Brethor

seemed to relax after seeing that the exits were within sight. He ordered them two drinks in an accent Janis didn't recognize, then waited until the bartender dropped them off and left. He held up his drink. "To survival," he said. They clinked glasses. Janis took a sip. "Now, explain yourself."

Janis shared what had happened, carefully leaving out his pact with the symbiote, the presence he'd felt behind Orinax, and his dreams with Renea. Brethor drank intermittently as he listened, his eyes steady as he took in the information. When Janis finished, he splayed his hand on the counter around his glass and nodded. "She was one of Eli's daughters," he said.

Janis felt his heart sink towards his chest. It made him think of the symbiote pulsating there, just under his robes. "She died honorably. You said you have knowledge about Orinax."

Brethor flicked his eyes towards him and then to the window. "How much do you remember about the night of the ambush?"

Janis remembered his mother's prostrate corpse on one table, blood gushing from her throat. "I remember enough."

Brethor nodded. "My search held me up from B'lac because I was extracting some answers from an Arawat commander. Orinax had approached them with a deal: he'd betray your father if they let him leave the estate with whatever he wanted. They'd always planned to kill him once they had their victory, but Orinax is a wizard. They've had little luck so far."

"Why kidnap Renea?"

Brethor shook his head. "All I know is that he wanted this Channeler you mentioned."

"What does it do?"

Brethor analyzed him. "Your father hired treasure hunters from time to time. Crews that brave the ancient Trajan ruins. Your brother Aron called it a waste of money, but your father enjoyed financing it, anyway. The gambler in him, I suppose. This time, he actually got his hands on something. A true artifact of power from the old Suzerainty. Or so the treasure hunter claimed. Your father asked me to verify its origin."

"And did you?"

Brethor shrugged. "I showed replicas of it to someone who'd know. I'm no sorcerer, but according to this source, it allows someone who knows how to use it to channel power directly from the Shimmer. No intermediary or sacrifice required."

Janis thought about that. Usually, magic required becoming host to, dealing

with, or subordinating a Lethi from the Shimmer to help affect the world from outside itself. The Lethi were desperate to be manifested, and sapiens were desperate for power. They were the relay, but sapiens were the energy. Sorcerers and mages gave of themselves or others, and wizards used secret methods, but there was no way to avoid it. The wizard apothegm popped into his mind, “Magic is mind and body.” If there were a way to bridge the Veil directly, then...

“With it one of the god-beings could-”

“Yes,” Brethor said. “Someone could use it to manifest one of the Yabboleth here fully. Not as a mage, but as a living entity.”

Janis thought of the presence behind Orinax and the wizard’s power over Qinra. “He could have made a pact with one.”

“Or he could be trying to harness their power for himself. We don’t know enough to say what the wizard wants with it. All we know is that he was willing to kill your family to get it, and that his plan has something to do with this cult. The important thing is to find out what we can here, then split up and meet in Qestis.”

“Why Qestis?”

“Something big is happening there with this cult. I’ll know more when you meet me there.”

“You said you knew I’d come this way because you know what Orinax wants.” Brethor finished his drink, then placed the glass down carefully. Janis waited. “What is it?”

“We have tasks to take care of in this city. What you called a cult is actually the Society of Yrgamon. There is a coven here. If we hurry, we can take it. Orinax is dangerous and cunning, we must be ready before-”

“I’m ready now,” Janis interjected. Brethor clenched his jaw. “You know where he is. You have no right to hold it from me. Renea was your charge and mine. We have a duty to rescue her.”

“Don’t speak to me of duty. Yours lies with me. I am your master, and more of a father to you than your own ever was. I will not let you waste your life on a suicide mission.”

“Renea doesn’t have time for you to wait.” Janis leaned in. “I’m as good as I’m ever going to be. He won’t be expecting it. He’s arrogant, like most wizards, and mortal like them as well.”

Brethor eyed him for a long minute. Janis didn’t waver. The old man sighed. “He’s to be northeast of here, between Liliath and Iyre on the Channel.” Janis exhaled. “You have little time. He’s being picked up and ferried north.”

“How do you know?”

“The Arawat.”

“They’re going to ambush him?”

Brethor nodded once. He stood up out of his seat. “You’re going to need to use everything I’ve taught you, but he will weak.”

“Why are you telling me this instead of showing me?”

“Because it is foolish and petty, as your family often was.” The sting hit him deep. “But I can see you are committed. Not even the fires of the Aphora estate could burn out your loyalty to them, though it should have. Perhaps it’s made it worse. We have important business in Qestis, but if you must do this thing, I will not stop you. Should you die, it will leave our guild in disgrace, but I’ll not let you drag us from our mission.” He grabbed Janis’s shoulder and pulled him close. “You are a Shadowstalker. My greatest protege. And when you have finished with this petty need for revenge, you will join me in Qestis and help usher in a new age for our guild.”

“You wouldn’t think it foolish if you knew the power I have now.” Brethor looked confused. As he opened his mouth to answer, Janis felt Qinra’s sickly presence saturate his senses. He rose from the stool like a delirious drunk, knocking it to the floor. Brethor steeled himself. “Qinra is here,” Janis said.

They both turned and took in the busy tavern. A seated bald man to their left cackled at his table. Others played ziggurat, dhoka pipes in their mouths; groups of mercenaries haggled with merchants looking to get on the road as servers slipped between and around them. “You’re sure?” Brethor asked. Janis nodded. The mage was close, but in the chaos he couldn’t pinpoint where. He searched the faces of the men nearby. Hardened, bearded faces, some brown and others orange; some waxy with alcohol, others brittle by years of smoking. All sapien, though. “We’ll take the back stairs out,” Brethor said. Janis didn’t move. He could just see a man through the crowd, dressed in brown robes, his face shrouded under the ethereal Vrearean lamps.

“It’s too late for that,” Janis said.

Brethor unsheathed a sword at his side. The mage surrendered all pretense. His body glowed from the inside like smoldering charcoal as he shed the robes. In his mind’s eye, Janis could see his face, the pain clear on what had once been sapien but was now contorted into a misshapen mass of skin and bone. It screamed and lashed out at him with its arm, flaming tendrils stretching from within the cracks in its skin, slicing through the unfortunates close to it as they swung blindly toward Janis.

The screams subsided as the flames disintegrated their throats. He kicked Brethor to the bar as the stream ignited the air between him, singeing his robes. The tavern descended into chaos. The mage howled at him again, its open mouth exuding light and heat like a dragon. The next attack wouldn't be so easy to dodge.

Janis raced away from the bar toward the banister overlooking the whole of the inn, people now peeking out from behind closed doors to see what all the ruckus was about. Vrearan soldiers would be here any minute, and if Vrear's reputation held true, they wouldn't hold Janis in much higher regard than the creature now trying to kill him. "Janis," Brethor yelled. The old man flung a knife at the mage, striking him in his chest and unleashing more of the eldritch glow. "Get behind him." The mage turned his attention to Brethor and flung a wave of fire at him. Brethor jumped behind the bar as the rolling wave crashed against it, burning away the wooden facade and inspiring the metal beneath to glow. The air smelled of melted skin and burned hair.

Janis looked for the closest victim. It was a middle-aged man, drunk by the look of it, probably a traveling laborer. Janis didn't have time to think about it. He reached out through the symbiote as the mage stalked towards Brethor. The man scrambled to his feet, half stunned, and then Janis was on him, his knife in the man's chest. Again and again. He let the symbiote consume the man's essence into himself and felt power surge through him. Heat and pain spread across his back. He turned and conjured a kinetic shield just as a ribbon of flame nearly struck him.

Fire sprayed onto the walls, the bar itself already an inferno, as other denizens burned alive or hurled themselves from the balcony. Janis stood up, one outstretched hand holding the oppressive flames at bay as he walked back out to face the creature.

He felt sick at the thought of it, but as the power drained from him just holding the thing back, he also knew that if he wanted to survive, he had no other choice. With his other arm, he sent telekinetic blasts that punctured the chests of a group of visitors trying to make the stairway nearby, sucking their life force into himself as he strode towards Qinra's slave. He projected the shield away from him and toward it with the boost in his energy, driving the flames back on the thing until it finally gave way and stopped. In the thin gap of time before the next attack, he could see that the mage profane body. Flesh slid off its frame as the demon inside screeched with rage.

"Scream all you want, Qinra," Janis said. "I'm going to break you into

pieces.”

The mage laughed. It was no sapien laugh, but seemed to echo through unseen dimensions around him. “You think you are powerful, fallen son? I have seen the future paths of your branch’s growth. Every one ends in your annihilation.”

The mage hunched over as if under the weight of so much power, or perhaps in pain. Janis let the energy he’d stolen blossom within him. “We mortals all know that,” he said. “Doesn’t mean I can’t kill a god-being on my way out.”

Without warning, it leaped at Janis, its arms holding two glowing orbs in each hand. He tried to catch it with a telekinetic slice in mid air but only achieved cutting one orb. Flames leaked from it like blood from a wound, spreading across the floor and obscuring the creature’s path. Janis barely dodged as the second orb hit the ground behind him.

The world erupted into a haze of splinters, metal, and blood. Janis felt himself falling. He twisted in midair as best he could, his body wielding the old Shadowstalker training even as his mind struggled to understand what was happening.

*Stop our fall.*

Janis reached out his hand and compressed the air between him and the ground, creating a kind of packet that he fell into smoothly. He shot his hand up just as a massive chunk of the ceiling nearly toppled on him, shielding his physical body from direct impact as it shattered itself on his barrier, spikes of pain shooting through his mind. He peered through the settling dust. Shadowy forms scurried this way and that, seeking cover or a way out. Everything was muffled as though in a sandstorm. Janis walked through the ruins towards what he thought was the 1<sup>st</sup> floor bar, his senses keen, the symbiote’s power still thrumming.

The mage’s glow gave him away. He was trying to hide among a group of dazed survivors as they scrambled for any exit they could find, all of them cast into a slight red haze that even in the dust riddled air he could make out from halfway across the now ruined bar.

“Get down,” he yelled. A few realized in time. He couldn’t worry about the rest.

He jabbed with his fingers, unleashing a wave of telekinetic blasts, each of which was thinner than the edge of an atom. They punctured the creature along with some bystanders. Janis consumed their lives even as he dodged the counterattack, a wall of flame that swept over him, singeing the hair on his arms



and burning his flesh as it careened to the other side of the inn and blew the wall there open. Flames were everywhere, the heat unbearable. He could feel his skin charring black and melting off his body in gobs, but even as it did, the symbiote channeled the stolen life force of other sapiens to repair it, healing him almost immediately.

How long could it continue? Eventually, he was going to run out of people to consume. Qinra had no issue. He would ride this mage into the ground until the man's essence was ground to nothing. Janis had tried all that had come instinctively. Telekinetic attacks, compressed air, energized molecules. His enemy had brushed them all aside, wounded but ultimately stronger, as though it was feeding off the pain.

Janis grit his teeth. Feeding off the pain. That was it.

The mage lurched toward him, its frame even larger now, the points where he'd punctured it swelling with flames that charred the host's skin and caused it to sop off the bone. Everything about the mage screamed anguish as the demon inside directed him onward with relentless poise. Janis stood and waited.

He reached out with his mind to grasp for the consciousness across from him. He could just make it out through the dreamy haze of the Shimmer. A packet of personality secreted away underneath the uncompromising rage of the outer entity that twisted around his brain stem, squeezing it into a tiny space still afforded to the man in his own mind. Janis could see Qinra's avatar feeding off of the suffering it was causing to what was, Janis had to admit, a pitiable sapien.

Janis watched the demon raise its host's hand in physical reality the way a puppeteer would. Witness the anger and pain manifest as flames in the mage's bony hand. In the Shimmer, though, he saw an opening.

The symbiote recoiled as he tried to call on its power. It felt displeasure. Understood that there was nothing there for it to consume. It wanted *a life*. Nothing less.

*But it is a life*, Janis voiced in his mind. *Qinra's connection*.

Elation and hunger surged within him, taking his breath away. Janis reached out through the Shimmer to the mage's polluted mind and the symbiote followed, riding his connection like a tidal wave and smothering the demon's connection, usurping it and reaching for the pitiable essence underneath, sucking the mage's pain into itself.

The flames dissipated in physical reality as he felt the demon try to fight the inexhaustible hunger of Janis's symbiote. At first, it wrestled with it over the mage's mind the way Janis's older brother used to wrestle with him when they

were children. Janis could feel its confidence even in the face of the unknown. Imagined it laughing as it grappled with Janis and the dark pit he'd brought along with him. Then, similar to what had happened between Janis and one of his brother's, he felt the demon's fear.

*What is this thing you have brought into the world? Mindless, endless hunger. I have faced it before...* Qinra spoke to him in the Shimmer. The god-being's avatar struggled but ultimately relented as the symbiote consumed the mind that was its host.

"Enjoy the Shimmer, you worthless shit-being," Janis replied.

As the symbiote consumed more of the mage, Qinra's hold in reality disappeared. *You know not what you have done. The deepest hunger consumes its host...* the god-being said. And then Qinra was gone.

What was left of the mage's ruined body collapsed to the dust riddled floor like a sheet settling after a wind has passed. Janis strode over to him, dimly aware that outside the building a crowd had gathered. Men in armor with swords. Giant golems at the ready.

The mage was sputtering for each slight breath through an exposed esophagus as Janis stood over him. His eyes were human again, the splits in his skin now a series of scars criss-crossing his body. He tried to speak, but couldn't find the energy. Janis knelt down and brought his ear close to the man's mouth.

"How?" the mage managed. There was little of the man's mind left, but he wanted answers. Janis could see the mage's memories in the Shimmer as though projected on the wall of his own mind. He'd joined a sorcerer school, but when Orinax promised him power, he fell for the allure. Janis could see the poverty and abuse he'd experienced all his young life. Magic was simply too addicting. Even as the pain grew, he couldn't refuse.

"He allowed Qinra, lord of deceit, to possess you. He was going to betray you from the start." The man shook. Nodding, maybe. Janis probed his mind while he could, parts of it fragmenting into the ever shifting dreamscape of the Shimmer, where they would become one with the rest of the madness, lost to him forever. The mage intimated Janis was right. He grasped the man's fragmenting mind in his own, like a child holding a pile of sand in its small hands. As the pathetic sapien disintegrated to nothing, Janis following him dangerously close to dissolution himself, probing for the presence he'd felt looming behind Orinax while using the transponder. He dug deeper, reaching for any piece of it he could grasp, pushing through the mage's disappearing mind to get hold of something he could understand. Orinax had recruited this man to be

Qinra's host long ago. He must know something.

He saw her in a flash. By the Channel, Vrear clearly to the south, her purple eyes gazing at him sadly.

*You should've left it alone, Janis*, she said with closed lips. A force struck him like a slap in the face, as though the Shimmer itself had decided he was no longer welcome. The air left his lungs as his body flew back into a piece of rubble at the inn, his mind and the symbiote's collapsing back into his body in one explosive second.

He grasped the ground and coughed. Sucked in air. The symbiote surged within him, though he could tell that even it was stunned by what had just happened. Janis tried to stumble to his feet, but dropped to one knee as he caught his breath. The mage's body remained where it was, a puddle of skin and bone, but nothing more.

Soldiers clamored through the rubble that used to be the entrance. Janis pushed himself to his feet. They'd arrest and question everyone they found. He peered through the mountain of debris in the other direction, but there was nothing but the jagged edges of broken stone and metal. He edged up a slab and toppled over the side as the first soldiers entered. He felt like a flicked tuning fork, his body painful and yet thrumming with energy in an intoxicating mix. He stumbled away from the slab towards what he hoped was a path out, weaving over and through the rubble as he heard the soldiers spread out behind him.

He felt the water on his face. He was outside what was left of the inn, Vrear's lights a welcome sight through the thick fog. He lifted his face up and opened his mouth for the rain.

"Hey," a gruff voice said. Janis turned and a steel fist hit him in the face. He hit the ground hard, eyes filled with colorful shapes as he took in the foggy sky. "Stay down," the guard said. He tried to summon the symbiote's power, but his mind couldn't settle on anything. It was like he was floating in a storm. He leaned up. The man stepped on his chest. A row of more guards stood lined up behind him, a giant with them. "Get bindings and give word to the Hesiarch. We'll need a control cable."

The guards waited. Janis listened to the downpour as he resigned himself to his fate. Whatever a 'control cable' was, it couldn't be good. The rain sounded louder, further away. As he listened, it became clear it was a growing commotion past the line of guards. The one holding him down peered around another for a better look when something barreled through the surrounding guards and swat him aside like a beetle. Janis blinked as he tried to grasp what was happening.

“Janis, get up,” a voice yelled. “Hurry.”

Ruck.

He heaved himself to his feet. Guards yelled to his right, but their voices sounded distant in the rain. The Zata kicked its legs out, hitting two aside. The ground shook as the giant lumbered for them. Janis finally snapped to the present enough to see he had only seconds. He leapt up the side of the giant creature and took Ruck’s arm. The boy pulled with all his strength. Janis swung onto the side and slapped the Zata on the back. “Go,” he yelled.

It nearly kicked him off as it thundered down the wide boulevard. Janis grabbed a thin tuft of hair and pulled himself up. Ruck held onto the saddle as if he was hugging his mother. Janis turned and saw the giant running after them, its metal legs screeching over steel and concrete as it gained on them. Janis held on. The Zata took a hard left. Energy bolts streaked around them. One struck a tower to his right, hurling molten rock down on the street before them. The Zata dodged the biggest rocks. Janis tried to conjure a telekinetic shield, but he was too dazed. And the symbiote...

He felt sick, as if he’d eaten rotten meat. He imagined its tendrils seeping deeper within him, gripping him tighter. Ruck was saying something, but he couldn’t understand it. Something had broken in him during his fight with Qinra. He’d consumed too much, had given the thing too much power...

Images flashed in his mind: the Auspicious Gate, giants holding the entrance. The Channel beyond. It was their only chance. Did Janis want to take the risk? He realized it was the Zata, communicating with him through the Shimmer as only sapien minds could learn to do. He nodded. Take it.

Another left turn, another wide boulevard. The Zata picked up speed. Janis held Ruck down. “Stay down,” he said. Ruck grimaced and nodded. Janis looked up and saw the arc cannons on the walls ahead, searching for a shot.

“We’ll never make it,” Ruck said.

Janis reached inside himself, past the sickness, and grasped the intoxicating energy yet again. “We’ll make it,” he said.

The cannons unleashed on them. Energy bolts screamed through the air on a collision course with the Zata. There was no hope of dodging them. Janis calmed his mind and reached through the Shimmer. He saw the bolts as energy concentrations. Waves passing through a medium. He saw that if he just changed the surrounding medium, he would deflect them at little cost to himself. The knowledge simply appeared in his mind, unbidden and obvious. He directed the symbiote’s power and cleaved reality as if it was made of sand, building banks

that redirected the waves. In Urias, the impossible happened. The energy bolts that were only seconds from obliterating the Zata and its riders twisted and streaked towards the giants instead. They had no time to move as the deadly waves pummeled into their chests, blowing their insides out behind them. Black, milky resin splattered against the walls. They toppled as the Zata galloped past them and under the gate as it shut, nearly cleaving the noble beast in half.

They were through.

“That was incredible,” Ruck shouted. He turned back as he cheered. Janis bounced on the saddle behind him, his inert body sliding off the edge. Ruck grabbed his arm as his legs slid off the side. “Stop,” he yelled. The creature didn’t listen. He grit his teeth and held on. Janis’s body dangled precariously, but the man didn’t wake. Ruck yanked harder... harder...

He edged Janis back onto the bouncing saddle and held. The Zata showed no signs of slowing. He hoped it was at least going in the right direction.

Meanwhile, Janis dreamed. He imagined calling out in a pitch black cave. “Renea,” he yelled. His voice reverberated through a space too massive to comprehend, then drifted away. Leaving him only with silence.

“Did you betray me?”

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THE SUN WAS rising when they arrived at the Channel. The largest river in Saurius, it had many names, but only one function everyone accepted. Its water sparkled in the morning light, a far cry from the muddy marshes they’d crossed further south. After a few hours, the Zata finally stopped on a hill leagues away from Vrear, under a canopy of dry thorn root. It was one of the few breeds of foliage still thriving in Saurius. Ruck slid Janis off the creature’s back and then fell to the ground, landing in a puff of dust. He brushed himself off, wary of the thing’s horns and regal head, and slid the Shadowstalker to the slight shade offered by the root’s trunk. The Zata wandered off.

“Hey,” Ruck yelled.

“Leave him,” Janis said. “He did as he promised. I’ll do the same.”

Janis coughed as the Zata trotted away. “How do you feel?” Ruck asked.

“Fine,” Janis replied. He stood up with a thick grunt.

“I’m tired. We should rest.”

Janis stood to his full height and brushed the dust from his robes. His mind was still hazy. The same as it might be after a long night out. That was something he used to do, he remembered. Drinking. Whoring. “We don’t have time,” he said.

“We’re lucky we got out of there alive.”

“It wasn’t luck.”

“I told you not to trust that guy,” the boy said. Janis had forgotten about Brethor in the mayhem. He hadn’t seen where the wily old murderer had gotten to, but Brethor had killed mage’s before. The man was old because he was a survivor.

“Duly noted.” Janis looked over the grassy hills and wondered how a place so austere and cold like the Domain could support such abundant life. In J’Soon a single hill like this one would cost a significant part of his family’s fortune. He knew because they were among the only families in the city to possess one. Yet here these were empty.

Someone screamed in the distance. “Did you hear that?” Janis asked.

“No. What?”

Metal clanged. He imagined pairs of feet sliding through the grass. Bright blades streaking through morning light. He remembered what Brethor had said and strode north towards the sound. “Janis? Hey.” Ruck ran to keep up. “You’re not healthy enough.” Janis didn’t slow down to accommodate him. Ruck hopped along to face him. “I heard you talking in your sleep. You were saying some weird things. I know you want to get your sister, but you have to think about yourself. You sounded scared. Tired. You did a lot to get us out of there. It must have taken something from you to do it. Just wait a few minutes.” Janis continued, drawn to the haunting sounds he’d heard just a moment ago. He could swear he’d heard fighting just over the next hill.

He didn’t realize Ruck was still talking until they crested the hill. The boy’s silence became clear then, enforced by a scene of bloody carnage that stretched in the field below them. Arawat banners fluttered in the wind off the Channel above retainers floating face down in the crystal waters of its bank. Black splotches scorched the earth where men had once stood, and the ash of grass burned off in the fighting smothered the entire scene. Janis should have been happy seeing what had become of his enemies. All he felt was the hollowness of impending doom.

“Who are they?” Ruck asked. Janis marched down the hill. Ruck waited, scared, but then rushed him to catch up. As he got closer, Janis could make out

the contorted faces of dead mercenaries at his feet. Some were impaled on their own spears, others half incinerated or split asunder. There thick puddles of sludge where entire squads must have been liquidated. Janis could read carnage the way a sorcerer read books. Whoever had done this had both relished it and considered it an afterthought.

He stopped when he saw Jah'san Arawat's banner. Twin black scimitars forming a white rising sun with a red background. Janis slowed on his approach. He remembered Jah'san's thin smile as he'd watched his men bludgeon Janis's father with bats. Remembered the sound it made when they'd cracked his skull. Janis walked over the twisted bodies until he picked out the most garish armor. He kicked the body over and saw Jah'san's face. His mouth was frozen in unimaginable pain, eyes blown open to stare at eternity. Janis recalled what those eyes had seen as Ruck stepped closer behind him. "Do you think Renea is here?" Janis's anger simmered. It had nowhere to go, and so his mind stewed on it. He'd been so focused on Orinax, he'd forgotten that this was his true enemy. And now he was dead. "Janis? Should we... look?"

"No," Janis said. He swallowed and looked up to a gently sloping hillside to the north. Grass still swayed there in the easy wind. He strode over the bodies towards it.

"Do you think she escaped? Got on a boat, maybe?" Ruck followed, but kept his distance. Janis climbed the hill, passing a few more bodies along the way. Some of them were dressed in the white robes of the Society. So, they'd planned to meet here, and the Arawat had planned their destruction. The boy was likely right, and the survivors had fled by boat. But...

He was on the other side of the hill, facing north up the Channel and away from the carnage. The grass fluttered in great sheets around him, giving him the look of a forgotten epitaph or ruin of the Waste left to feed time's erosion. Janis took in the scene as Ruck approached, admiring a rising sun as its rays spread across the twinkling water beyond them. Ruck's breath caught in his throat as he stopped by Janis's side. The two of them stood silent, waiting for the wizard to do something fantastic. Open a portal to another branch, perhaps, or shapeshift into an unspeakable horror. After a minute of tranquility, Janis unsheathed his dagger and approached. Ruck put an arm across his chest. "It's got to be a trap," he said. Janis looked at the boy but didn't see him. "Why would he ever just be sitting there like that? After all this time, how would he not fight you to the death?"

Janis grasped Ruck's wrist and peeled the boy's hand away. He walked up

behind the wizard, crossing him by his right shoulder, and faced him. Orinax didn't look up at him, his face bent low as if in deep contemplation, his black eyes quivering with tears as he peered north with hopeless attachment.

"Look at me," Janis said. When he didn't, Janis grabbed his face. "I said look at me."

Orinax blinked repeatedly. He smiled like a madman does when a person stumbles in the street. "You've come too late, Shadowstalker," Orinax said, his voice ragged.

"How long?"

"A few hours at least." Orinax wheezed a high-pitched laugh. "She is gone. Gone away." The truth of his words dragged on his face as if he'd attached weights to his mouth. He wailed, flung his head to the ground, and beat his neck.

"When did she take you?" Janis asked, his throat tight. Orinax wouldn't stop. Janis grabbed his arm before the next blow and yanked him up. "Speak."

Orinax ran his tongue over parched lips. "It was... so long ago. So sweet... so sweet." Janis grabbed him by the neck. He squeezed the dagger's hilt hard into his palm, feeling its edges like a ledge. Orinax looked at him. "Please," the wizard said. "Kill me." He sobbed again. "She's abandoned me."

Janis pushed him away and hissed with frustration. Ruck approached. "What's... happened to him?"

"Renea," Janis whispered. His spine tingled just saying her name.

"Your sister? But I thought..." Ruck trailed off.

"Orinax didn't take her - she took him. Possessed his mind, perhaps ages ago, and turned him into her puppet. With him as her cat's paw, she could make deals with cultists and god-beings, even my family's worst enemies." The thoughts connected into a web whose full structure he still didn't comprehend, but whose strands he could feel.

"But why?" Ruck asked.

"For a loftier goal than you could ever understand," the wizard spat.

Janis pulled him close. Orinax struggled against his grip. "Help me anyway." The wizard shut his eyes and then opened them. "Someone has polluted her mind. Who?" He squeezed. "Tell me."

"No one," Orinax managed. Janis squeezed harder despite himself.

"Janis, you'll kill him," Ruck said.

"You lie," Janis said, inching his face closer. "I felt the presence moving you. Tell me the truth." He watched the wizard's eyes bulge, felt his artery grow weak, but the man just grinned at him, spittle leaking out onto his cheek. Janis



flung him to the ground. Orinax coughed and rubbed his neck.

“No lie,” Orinax said.

“Then why?”

Orinax smiled as though taken by bliss. “An idea.”

Janis wanted nothing more than to stab him right then. “What idea?”

“Trees that grow on their own,” Orinax replied. “Harvests so plentiful you can pick fruit from the street.”

“That makes little sense.”

Orinax laughed. “Novice sorcerer, what can you say about what makes sense or not?”

The wizard’s robes were in tatters. Renea had left him here for Janis to find. It was a message: he knew nothing, and she wasn’t afraid of whatever Janis might do with him. In fact, she’d left him to die.

“She betrayed us... for a dream?”

“Yes,” Orinax said. “But what is the power of one family in one city next to the power to create a new world?” Orinax’s grin melted into a desperate sob. “Take me with you again, Renea. Please...”

Orinax fell to the earth and took great heaps of it in his hands, as though grabbing her robes. Ruck walked towards him. “Look, I know this guy helped do some terrible things. But look at him. Maybe we just leave it. The people you really want are back in J’Soon, right? Maybe we go back there and fight them. Or just go somewhere else. Anywhere. You can be whoever you want now.” He paused, breathing in to gather courage. “It’s like my brother back in B’lac. I could’ve tried to mess him up after he sold me to the Society, but why bother? It was just going to ruin my life. I realized the only person I owed something to was myself. I was free.”

There was something appealing about it. Total freedom. The opportunity to cast off his family name and responsibilities, the terrible weight of their deaths and mantle. But just thinking about it, he remembered his mother’s corpse again, his brother Gar’Sha calling for help, the carnage in what had once been his family’s sanctuary.

“I owe myself the truth, and I owe her,” Janis said. The rage that had been simmering bubbled up. He clenched his fist.

“She’s betrayed you. You don’t owe her.”

“She once said that I owed my family what I knew was best for them, not what they thought was best for themselves. For years we were all each other had. Us against the world. And she left me to die with the rest. Forced me to become

this... thing to survive. All for a silly dream.” His fists trembled. “I owe her learning why, and stopping her for her own good, even though she’ll hate it. Even though she’ll try to kill me at every turn.”

Janis walked back to the wizard, dagger in hand, ready to plunge it into the man’s chest. Orinax inhaled and closed his eyes, awaiting deliverance. Janis was ready to give it to him when Ruck jumped between them. “Wait. You don’t want to do this. It’s just what he wants.”

“Get out of the way, Ruck.”

“No. I heard Sciana tell you she was staying to monitor you, to protect you from yourself. Well, she’s gone, but I’m still here, and I won’t let you become the person who thing wants you to be. Maybe he’s everything you hate, but it’s not worth killing him. Not now.”

The dagger shook in Janis’s fist. He glowered at the wizard. “Where’s she going?”

“The Pearl of Saurius.”

Pearl of Saurius... “Qestis?” Orinax nodded. It was where Brethor had said to meet him. The old man must have known more than he’d let on. “What’s her connection to the Society? Why were they helping you?”

“They have knowledge essential to understanding the Channeler’s real potential.”

Janis pushed forward, but Ruck pushed him back. He remembered seeing the wizard on the rampart with Renea before the two escaped. The onyx eyes watching him during his training. He’d always feared this man and what he could do. Now he was a puppet stripped of its strings. A tool and nothing more.

*He played his role... He deserves death...*

He did, it’s true, but what good did killing him serve? Renea had left him behind, expecting Janis to kill him. The smarter move was to commandeer him. To put him to better use.

*He betrayed you... killed your family...*

He helped betray them, but he wasn’t the architect.

*Kill him... feed me...*

The symbiote squirmed in Janis’s psyche. Its hunger was a bottomless well that plunged deeper and deeper. He’d come so far for this moment, and now it seemed so empty. Renea...

How could it be her? What dream could she have that would justify such a betrayal?

*Feed...*

Janis sheathed the dagger and backed away, his arm trembling. Orinax watched. "You aren't worth my dagger," Janis said. "But maybe, you'll earn it by serving me."

"Kill me," Orinax yelled. He brought his head to the earth, bowing pathetically. Janis pursed his lips.

"Get on your feet," Ruck said. Orinax lifted his head, still kneeling. "I said get up," Ruck said.

"Shut up, boy. I'm here to die. Don't you understand? That's all I want." He broke into frantic, soul-sucking sobs again. "That's all I can do for her. To make her happy."

Janis turned to him. "It won't happen. Join me or leave."

"No," the wizard said, clenching his fists. As he did an image flashed in Janis's memory: Orinax sneering at him from the rampart, Renea's violet eyes regarding him from behind her silver wizard's cowl, already steeped in sorrow but also filled with something he hadn't noticed before: resolve.

"Fine. Ruck." Janis motioned. The boy followed. Orinax cried as they walked away. Ruck looked back over his shoulder. Janis was going to do it. He was going to leave the pathetic wretch to live in the world he'd created.

*No.*

Janis's arm reached out of its own accord, his mind encircling the man's body with his power. Something opened within him and the symbiote bridged the gap between them as thick, ropy bands of pure void plunged into the wizard's eyes and open mouth. Orinax's scream was like nothing he'd ever heard. The wail of a banshee or a dying animal, the screech of a crashing coach - anything but the cry of a sapien. His body deflated like a crushed skein of wine, imploding into the bands of void as the symbiote fed until his physical body disintegrated in real time, peeling away in flakes and dissolving in the excess heat of the exchange. Janis watched as the man's face exuded indescribable pain, his body disappearing through his own mouth as he regarded Janis one last time. Then his face disappeared through the same breach until even that peeled away. The void bands retracted back into Janis's chest. He fell to the ground.

"Janis," he heard Ruck call.

*We needed him, the symbiote intimated. There can be no turning back.*

Janis spasmed as he tried to breathe. He pushed the symbiote down within himself, controlled the surging passion. His rage had consumed him enough for the symbiote to ride that and use him to affect the world. Long enough to make him a mage and not a sorcerer. A host and not a partner.

He felt the power surge in him. He struggled to hold on to who he was. Felt his body moving, but he knew not where.

Who was he?

An Aphora, a Shadowstalker, a sapien, a brother.

A brother...

This was all who he'd been, not who he was now. Except for the last one. The last one still stood. But something new superseded it.

A sorcerer. A damned one. A disciple of vengeance...

Yes.

He could hold on to that. He could learn why he'd become what he was.

*We will claim what is ours...*

As he felt Ruck pull him up the hill, one thought consumed his scrambled mind.

What had he done?



C.C. Rasmussen

# SCION OF CHAOS



## **BOOK 2: SCION of Chaos**

After selling his soul for vengeance and slaughtering a host of mercenaries, killers, and even demonic gods, Janis learns that he's been betrayed by those closest to him. The very one he was hoping to save.

Now, with his young friend Ruck at his side, Janis races to catch them in Qestis, the "Jewel of Saurius." An ancient city ruled by a mysterious cabal of wizards called The Circle, where dark magic is the norm and treachery the binding rule.

Janis learns early that his old master Brethor might know more than he'd let on. He plans to meet Brethor in the city's cold embrace, but soon after arriving discovers that someone has assassinated the old killer. The Guard's prime suspect? Ruck, who's slated to be executed the next morning.

Janis will have to ally with sorceresses, crime lords, and pirates if he hopes to navigate the dark alleys of the strange city to find Brethor's real killer and save his friend. There are secrets in Qestis not even The Circle knows, and dangers more sinister than he'd ever imagined.

They will test him, conjuring memories from his past and push him to surrender more of himself to the creature inside.

The quest for vengeance continues.

Janis hungers for it.

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## Author Bio



CC Rasmussen is a fan of dark fantasy and science fiction. He lives in a mysterious location somewhere along the American West Coast.

If you'd like to try and discover more about him and his later work, visit <https://www.ccrasmussen.com/>.

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