



DREAMS
OF THE
DYING

The Twelfth World, Book I

NICOLAS LIETZAU

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In loving memory of Max Henning Ischreyt

For Pale

Tae ite nū'iwilo, tae hūnā 'o

„Ich stell’ dieselbe Frage, immer wieder
Sie sagen, lebe, liebe, dichte Lieder
Mich sucht dieselbe Leere, Tag für Tag
Ein Punkt im Raum, mein Schlafgemach.“

—Katharina Liebenberger, Ein Heer aus sieben Chören

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear reader,

If you have played or heard of my videogame *Enderal: Forgotten Stories*, you might have heard about *Dreams of the Dying* being in the same universe. This is no longer the case with the publication of this new and revised edition since an unexpected licensing issue forced me to sever all ties to the game. The story remains identical to the old edition, but the names of the series, several locations, and a few characters were changed. Rest assured, Jespar stays Jespar.

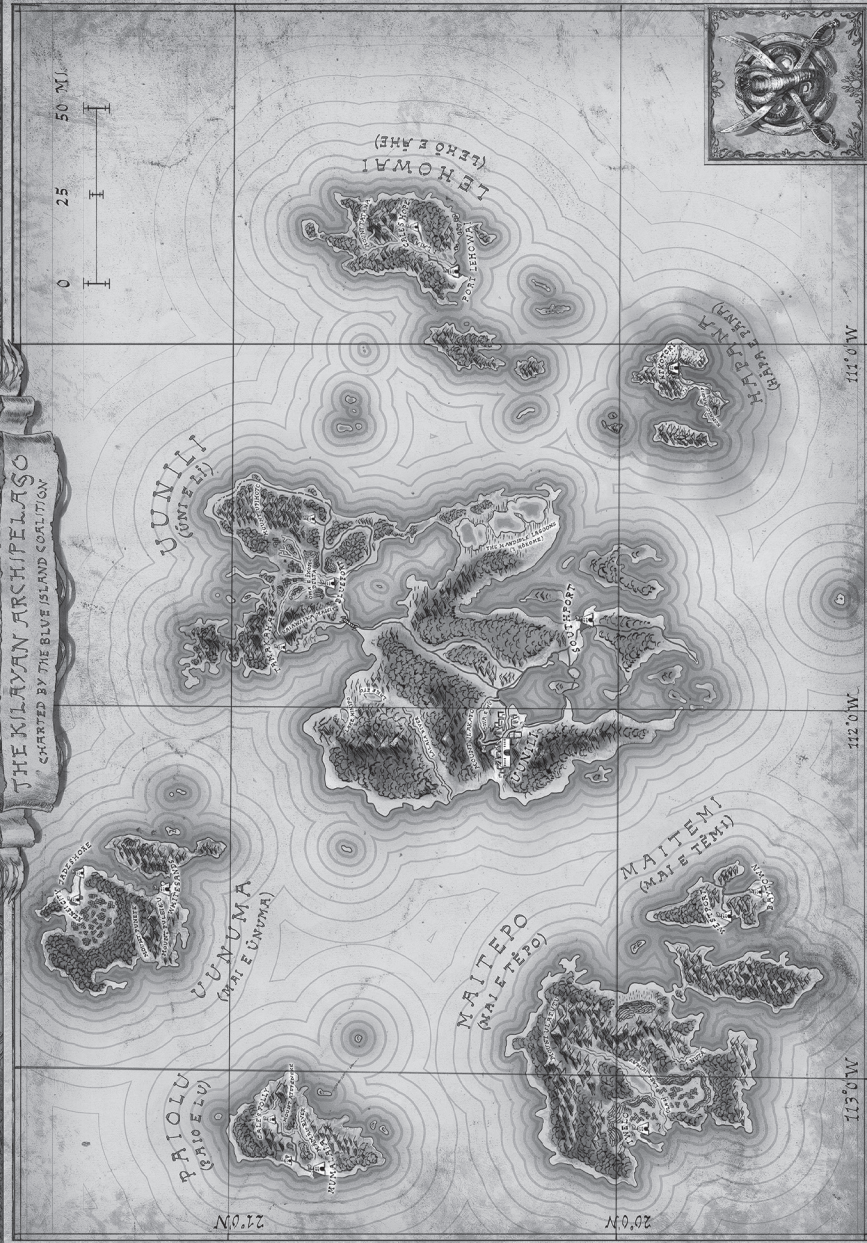
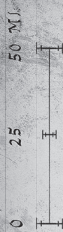
Please know that this was the last resort. I wish there were another option.

All that said, *Dreams of the Dying* and the entire *Twelfth World* series remain heavily inspired by my previous work on *Enderal* and all its characters.

Enjoy the novel!

Nicolas

THE KILAYAN ARCHIPELAGO
CHARTED BY THE SILVE ISLAND COALITION



Help her.

Say something.

“You want to know a secret?”

*Her sobs fade, and her eyes meet his. Slowly they move, fragile little
windows turning on rusted hinges.*

“It’ll get better. It always does.”

He sticks out his pinkie.

“I promise.”

CHAPTER ?

BUT MY JUDGMENT IS

DAY SEVEN

1ST MOON OF RAINY SEASON, 1226 A.A.



he mind is a malleable thing. Soil, if you're feeling poetic. Depending on the seed, anything will grow in it, from graceful gardens to idyllic meadows, from weedy forests to foggy swamps. Harmonious or chaotic, peaceful or perilous, healthy or ill—it's all a matter of seeds.

That's why Jespar's mind reacted the way it did—quite frankly, in a manner no one would consider sane—when the Corpse found him in the museum of dead animals. Jespar felt nothing. Not when the Corpse came limping out of that dark aisle with his burning hands drawing flickering shadows across the animal exhibits around him. Not when he eased down on the pedestal of the one across Jespar—a giant centipede, its legs unfurling behind the Corpse like a halo of thorns. Not when his lips split in a smile.

No fear, no horror, no panic.

The mind is a malleable thing.

The Corpse clasped his hands between his knees and leaned in. Even now, three years after they first met in Jespar's nightmares, his smile looked so different from that of the dead man he represented. Once, it had been cold and ashamed, the kind reserved for a prodigal son. Now, it was warm and mournful, that of a man sitting at an old friend's deathbed.

"Did you truly think he could keep you safe?"

"You're not here," Jespar said. "You're not real."

The corner of the Corpse's lips lifted ever so slightly. "You are right, boy, I am not. But when did that ever matter? Our minds shape reality ... that is why superstitious peasants burn witches, jealous lovers murder their beloved, and lonely veterans put nooses around their necks. Now, tell me, did you really believe it? That the boy could keep us away forever?"

Jespar groped for his brandy flask and took a deep swallow. It stung, but he barely felt it. "Not real."

"So you did. Hm. I thought you knew better." The Corpse closed his eyes and sighed, circling a burning thumb over the bloody lotus flower carved into his forehead. Flames licked at his greasy hair but didn't spread. "It is such a tragedy, you know? None of this would have ever happened had you not refused to see. Sixteen years, boy, sixteen years, and here you are, still choosing to be blind. Then again, I suppose it is only human, isn't it? To prefer ignorance over uncomfortable truths?"

Jespar felt the Pull coming now, that cold pulse beating its way up from the depths of his mind. He killed the rest of his brandy, his head spinning from the packed punch of booze, fear, and utter exhaustion.

"Fine, ignore me if you must. I only want you to know that I never wished for things to end like this. You had your chance to

stop it, your chance to see, but you squandered it. Now live with the consequences.”

The Corpse stood. The Pull was almost there now, each beat sending chills into his bones as a blue veil closed over the world.

“You’re not real,” Jespar whispered. “You’re *not* here.”

“Maybe not,” the Corpse replied. “But my judgment is.”

PART ONE



DROUGHT

CHAPTER ONE

GOLDEN SOIL

DAY ONE

6TH MOON OF DRY SEASON, 1226 A.A.



Alongside poverty, war, and bad wine, Jespar had always considered low ceiling beams over beds one of humanity's worst inventions. He also belonged to the unfortunate few whose subconscious didn't remind them of the danger looming above, which was why reality greeted him with a head-on slam into thirty pounds of solid house support as he jerked awake.

He cried out and dropped back into bed, hands pressed against his forehead, stars shooting across his lids. They blasted on for a bit, then gave way to Jespar's second-least favorite part of waking: the afterglow of yet another crippling nightmare.

"Bloody hell," he muttered. "Bloody hell."

With sixteen years of insomnia and nightmares to his credit, the words "restful" and "sleep" had long become two estranged lovers, but ever since Jespar had accepted that ominous invitation, they seemed

to have parted ways for good. Before, two nightmares a week were an exception. In the past seven days, he'd had four.

He lay still for a couple breaths, then forced himself up. As always, the memories of his dreams were a hazy blur, images and sensations connected only by a pervasive sense of dread and recurring leitmotifs, the most dominant one the Corpse with the burning hands.

As always, they left him feeling like utter shit.

"I'm awake," he said. "I'm awake."

When the echoes of the nightmare finally faded, Jespar grew aware of something else: he had no clue where he was.

The room around him had all the allure of a mangy horse forced into a gaudy harness: red upholstery and curvy armrests en masse, but poor-quality wood. The scent was that of patchouli and roses, but with a dash of ammonia. Golden picture frames and garish ornamentation adorned the walls, but it was the sort sold by the jolly peddler who also brews "love potions." Lamentably, Jespar's bed was no exception: while the snake design of the bedposts tried hard for an exotic flair, the peeling paint, a foul-smelling mattress, and dried stains of dubious origin on the bedding dispelled all illusions.

Where the hell ...?

The door burst open. A mountain of fat and muscle stood under the lintel, staring at Jespar from a blocky, hard face that would have looked intimidating even without the scowl and the greasy, long black hair framing it.

"That the freeloader?" he asked someone behind him.

Muttered agreement followed.

Jespar barely made it out of bed before a ringed fist flew toward him. Instinctively, he dodged, but a headache thwarted his plan by flaring up at that very moment; the fist sank into his stomach and hurled him back onto the mattress.

Wheezing, Jespar shielded himself, anticipating the next blow. When it didn't come, he peeked past his fingers and saw the man looming over him, his tree-trunk arms crossed over his lurid green shirt.

“That’s for scarin’ the girls with yer bloody screamin’. Now, pay the fuck up.” His working-class vernacular combined with his accent—*pey awb*—made for a mix that Jespar almost mistook for another language.

“What do you mea—”

“Ye paid for three hours, not a sleepover, that’s fifteen sar extra. Now, pay up and get yer coinless ass outta here ‘fore I toss it out the *weenduw*.” *Window?* Most likely. But what—

Jespar glanced at the rumpled clothes on the floor. At the stains on the bedding. At the corset over a nearby chair’s backrest.

Things fell into place.

“Sure,” he managed. “Sure, I’ll pay.” He rummaged his pockets for coins and counted them. Eleven sar and fifty toul. “Here. That’s all I’ve g—”

The man grabbed him, yanked open the shutters, and tossed him out into the predawn night. Two things went through half-naked Jespar’s mind before he, wearing breeches only, landed hard in the mud of some alley: first, good thing the room had been on ground level; second, bouncers took their threats quite literally.

A wadded-up ball of cloth splashed into a puddle beside him, sloshing him with brown water.

“Next time, ye’ll pay with yer fuckin’ teeth!”

The window slammed shut.

A minute ticked by as Jespar lay there and reflected on his life choices. With a groan and as much dignity as he could muster, he got up, dressed, and girdled his swordbelt. A middle-aged woman

peered at him from the alley's mouth, and a fat cat from another puddle a few steps over. When Jespar stared back, the woman moved on, but the cat did not.

"What are you looking at?" Jespar asked.

It wagged its tail in what might have been the feline approximation of a shrug. Then it wobbled away.

"Right," Jespar said. He shouldered his haversack, growing aware of an itch on his back. "Right."

Judging by the dark blue of the sky, sunrise was still an hour or two away. Since he wouldn't be meeting his employer until afternoon, that gave him plenty of time to fix himself up and explore this wondrous and exotic country around him. Pulling his scarf a little looser, Jespar oriented himself. Even from here, some four leagues from the capital, he could see its colossal white walls rising along the slope of the massive mountain in the west.

Uunili.

The Alabaster City, the heart of the Kilayan Archipelago, the wealthiest metropolis in the Illumined World.

A new beginning.

In the half-light of dawn, Jespar made for the marina.



The ship that Jespar had arrived on—the *Morning Dew*—was bound for the capital, but when an overcrowded harbor thwarted that plan, it anchored at Southport instead. The captain encouraged the vexed travelers to look on the bright side: Southport, a colonial harbor town on the eastern cape of the bay bifurcating the southern tip of Uunili, was merely a "nice mornin's walk" from Uunili City, and the "refreshin' sea breeze" was the perfect way to become accustomed to the searing hot, muggy beast that was the Archipelago's dry season.

“Start with the rice wine, then tackle the absinthe,” the captain advised. Jespar wasn’t thrilled about that walk but shelved the idiom for future usage.

After half an hour of passing through alleys formed by brightly colored houses, Jespar reached its eponymous harbor. He strolled along the marina for a bit, then sat on a solitary crate to appease his post-inebrious headache and appreciate the view of the vast inlet between the two capes. The sun was just rising, tinting the fog over the water a pale orange; tiny boats dotted the horizon, fisherfolk working the seas for their morning haul.

Pretty.

It was only Jespar’s second day in Kilay, and he had yet to see the Alabaster City from inside, but he already understood why so many poems mentioned this glittering country.

First, there was the landscape: white beaches with palm trees stretching on for leagues. The ocean, turquoise and blue. The green mountain panorama.

Second was Uunili, the colossal city nestled in the junction of the two capes and extending far up the bay-side slope of the mountain that ran along the entire western cape, Mount Ilakato. The tall city walls occluded most of the lower districts from sight, but what Jespar saw of the upper ones could have been taken from a painting: blocky white pyramids with dashes of azure and gold rose within a composition of parks and gleaming streets. The structures grew more imposing the farther up the mountain they were and culminated in several colossal pyramids clustered around the peak.

The magnates’ ziggurats.

Jespar could only see three from where he was sitting, but he knew there were seven in total. Especially since the Silence, Kilay’s magnates were often likened—and even likened themselves—to gods, and seeing their abodes made it easy to understand why. Egomani-

acally inclined or not, awaking in a mountaintop palace basked in a golden sunrise did little to dampen illusions of grandeur.

Jespar scratched his back, then took a sip from his flask and swished the water around his mouth. Down the harbor promenade, three kids were playing with an alapu, a clumsy but energetic animal native to the Archipelago. With their potbellies, bushy tails, and moon-eyed, ursine faces, they seemed a crossbreed between a bear cub, a piglet, and a raccoon. The kids were kicking a tiny round sack to each other, laughing as the alapu chased it, squeaking and tumbling over its paws.

Bit by bit, Jespar's memories of the previous night returned. There had been drinks with the sailors of the *Morning Dew*, which explained the headache. There had been some Kilayan betting game and a bar fight, which explained his empty purse and the bruises that weren't the bouncer's doing. There had been two whores—a woman with heavy makeup and a young man with thinning hair—who had most likely looked prettier when Jespar had been high and hammered.

He sighed. Wasn't this supposed to be a turn of the page? If that mysterious invitation didn't turn out to be a sham—and the advance pay covering the passage to Kilay strongly suggested it wasn't—the job would be enough for him to start fresh anywhere he wanted. No more drifting, no more day jobs, no more sleeping out in the cold.

A new beginning.

Inspiring intentions, no doubt. With sobering success, Jespar tried to imagine an epic tale of redemption that started with the hero getting shitfaced with two strumpets.

He rummaged his hidden boot pouch for money—thanking chance he'd put the Starfall Era coin his Brossantian contact had given him there and not into his purse—and came up with twenty-one sar, just enough for breakfast, a pipe, and a bath. Remem-

bering the stains on the brothel's bedsheets, he decided to start with the bath.



As he sauntered down the pier searching for a bathing house, Jespar allowed his impressions of the city to settle in. He had arrived in Kilay with a bagful of preconceptions, finding some of them confirmed and others disproved. The contrast between the “haves” and “have-nots” *was* as stark they said it was: while frescoes and statues adorned the fancier buildings, such as the Blue Islands Coalition's offices, only makeshift posts and scaffolding kept some of the back-alley houses from falling apart. Like he had also expected, no one paid him much attention, despite his skin and hair color making him stick out like a pigeon among blackbirds. People of all ethnicities crossed his path, Kilayan and Khîran, Brossantian and Chapaj, to the nomadic people that were the Elliath and the Makai. Jespar was just another traveler.

As far as misapprehensions were concerned, one struck Jespar as particularly curious: a country putting the pursuit of wealth, status, and freedom above all else, Kilay enjoyed a reputation for being as pious as a whore was chaste, yet Jespar spotted a surprising number of people wearing prayer rings around their upper arms—five on the right, four on the left—the symbols of the Nine Celestials. He even came across several priestesses, one of them performing rites before the sculpture of an elegant woman at a town square. *Caleste*, Jespar thought as he regarded the stone woman, whose hair went down to her feet, a cobra snaking around her skywards-raised arms. The goddess of love, trade, and ambition, the most revered Celestial here on Kilay.

Jespar knew the nations of the Illumined World differed in devotion to the Celestials, the nine humans who had risen to godhood during the ending period of the long dark age after Starfall, united most of the known world, and ruled it ever since. The Silence—the term used to describe their now two-hundred-year absence—was the subject of many heated discussions in the more secular corners of the world, such as Khîra, Kilay, or Northern Brossant. Jespar had often imagined how those scholarly debates in Qurrâb’s universities must have looked like.

“Debased, ungrateful infidels,” exclaims the outcast Celestialist professor. “The gods are still with us, they merely decided to withdraw as a punishment for our succumbing to Corruption! Every minute of every day, they still watch us from high up in Coson Tar, watching sadly as humanity debases further, heading toward another dark age! Only if we atone will they return and bring peace to our world once more. Trust in the guidance of the Divine Order!”

“Ha! You bug-brained fool!” the atheist professor barks back, daredevil in his outspokenness. “Every lucid mind can see there were no Celestials in the first place. They were just a lie promulgated by the Order to legitimize its power! It is time for the corrupt clergy to be tried for their deception so that a new era of rationality can reign!”

An incensed post-theist jumps from his seat. “You ignorant children of a meager camel! Yes, the gods are no more, but how can you deny the historical records of their great deeds? How can you fail to see the simple truth, that they existed in all their magnificence but have perished? The Order must not step down but simply acknowledge the facts, so that we may find new lodestars together!”

“My treasured and despised friends,” the nontheist states coolly. “You are all wrong. The Gods both existed and didn’t.”

Wild laughter explodes in the hall. “Listen to this fool! The desert sun has clearly fried all sense from her mind! She is contradicting herself!”

“I am not,” retorts the nontheist calmly. “Tell me, do the illusions of a street magician not seem divine to a little child? The ‘gods’ existed, yes, but they were never true deities—only skilled dimensionists whose powers tricked the Starfall Era commoners into believing they were divine. And, by the excretions of the sacred donkey, the Order is still doing it! Why else would they forbid speaking about dimensionism to the Uninitiated? Why else do they force scholars and Sighted to take the Oath of the Arcane lest they be outcast?” She leaps up from her seat and thrusts a triumphant finger at the Celestialist. “Because there is nothing an oppressor fears more than the cleansing light of knowledge!”

Indignation, insults, and flying eggs ensue.

While Jespar didn’t feel strongly about the matter, he recalled once voicing his own explanation for the Silence to his tutor: perhaps, he had mused, the Celestials had withdrawn willfully, as the Order contended. Not out of indignation over the world’s Corruption, but because they simply had wearied of humankind’s perpetual stupidity and turned toward the more pleasant aspects of life—probably those involving wine, food, and naked skin.

His theory had earned him a stern look.

The priestess placed a bowlful of herbs on the sculpture’s plinth and lit them. Then she rose to her feet and successively touched her forehead, mouth, and chest.

Odd, Jespar thought as he watched her go about her way. With all their talk of self-determination and the Great Dream, it really didn’t make much sense for Kilayans to be more than lip-service believers or post-theists, at least to Jespar. Yet here they were: prayer rings, priestesses, statues. Probably, he surmised, it was that age-old classic of “making sure.” You didn’t really believe in the gods but said your sunrise prayers anyway, just in case Hell and Beyond existed after all.

I confess, now pass me the wine.

Grinning, he went on. By the time Jespar found a bathing house near Southport's market square, the sky's last hues of red had turned into azure. Everything about the place promised refreshment: the blue-golden paint of the three tapering stone blocks it was built from, the sound of splashing water wafting through the unglazed windows, the name painted onto the square recess over the entrance—"Lake of the gods."

A clerk wearing a thigh-length purple silk coat with golden buttons and loose white silk trousers greeted Jespar inside.

"May you prosper, ma'sao," he chirped. "Have you come to indulge in the divine waters of our humble establishment?"

Jespar, picturing himself in a sprawling pool full of mermaids, confirmed this was the case.

"We have different options, ma'sao."

A minute later, Jespar was back on the street. Divine waters or not, fifty sar an hour was more than he could afford or would have been willing to spend even if he could have. *A river it is*, he thought and went to a vegetable vendor to ask for directions. The woman told him about a natural pool just half a league out of town. When Jespar offered her fifteen toul in return, she declined. "Nah. Ye'll need it."

"What do you mean?"

A hollow smile on her lips, the woman retied the leather band woven into her hair, sea conches and wood rings strung along its length. "Ye'll see, ma'sao. Ye'll see."

Following her directions, Jespar found his way to Southport's northern outskirts. Cobblestone paving gave way to gravel, varicolored mud-brick houses to adobe huts, and well-dressed officials to farmers and workers in simple linen. Not much later, Jespar was making his way down a path along the eastern coast, a fresh breeze ruffling his hair. A banana plantation spread to his left, a patch of jungle sloped toward the beach to his right, the countless palms sharing the soil with exotic trees and bushes. Jespar couldn't name

most of them, but he recognized a few: there were tamukas, thin trees whose branchless trunks culminated in a crown of foliage shaped like a mushroom cap; lightrose bushes with their burgundy and violet blossoms; and, of course, the prismatic tokiflowers that grew in shady spots and were the Kilayans' primary source of dye for their garments. Save for the occasional withered frond and sun-parched meadow—the signs of a long dry season—the landscape was a celebration of life and fertility.

It must have been half an hour until the path forked, one branch continuing down the shoreline, the other turning into the jungle. Recalling the merchant's instructions, Jespar took the latter, working his way through the undergrowth while shooing away the *katakos*, a species of bloodsucking insects with vibrant butterfly wings. Heat and sweat did their best to worsen the itch on his back, so when Jespar finally heard the sounds of a waterfall in the distance, it was like a horn call proclaiming the end of a battle. His relief waned when he realized voices mixed into the swooshing. There were people down by the pond, and they were talking.

Not talking—arguing. And quite aggressively so.

Jespar put a hand on *Due Process's* pommel—the Brossantian longsword he'd long ago bought from a down-on-his-luck mercenary, and whose name he'd kept despite the eyeroll inducing pun that it was—and went on. A few turns and *katako* bites later, the path sloped down a hill, leading to a natural pool nestled in a rock formation. Bushes and trees adorned the terraces, two rivers cast curtains of water into the basin. The shouting came from four figures on the shingle, all obscured by the thicket.

Warily, Jespar began the descent. The figures became discernible: two men—one tall and one bulky—a woman, and a child. The tall man and the woman wore the indigo shirts and leather cuirasses of the Blue Guard; the man and the girl had on a skirt down to the

knees, topless and barefoot. Jespar got a little closer, then crouched behind a bush to observe.

With their dark skin, broad faces, and eyes like willow-leaves, the bulky man and the girl were clearly Makehu; as was custom among the Archipelago natives, the man had umako around his eyes, permanent paint etched under the skin with a hot needle. For the first time in moons, Jespar thought of Naka, his former Makehu comrade. Downing drinks in some rancid inn, Jespar had once asked him what his umako depicted, wild bursts of black framing even darker irises.

What do you think, Etōkoka?

An explosion of birdshit?

Laughing, Naka had given him the finger.

Realizing he was smiling, a cold knot formed in his stomach. He killed the memory and turned his attention back to the argument in progress.

“... i’okatū swimm’d them waters ‘fore ye wakemō even came here! It’s me right to be here, me bloody right!” *Wlaati raitu*. A strong Makehu accent tinged the man’s Brossantian, exchanging sounds foreign to his mother tongue with familiar ones and adding vowels to words that ended on consonants.

“Yes,” the guardswoman replied. “And nobody is denying you that right, as long as you pay. Now beat it.”

Fists clenched, the Makehu addressed the male guard. “Kalaia e i’okatū lai,” he said—or something along those lines. Three years had passed since the incident in the Village, and Jespar hadn’t spoken or heard Makehu since.

The guardswoman frowned. “What did he say?”

Her comrade looked sideways. He shared the man’s willow-leaf eyes, but his head was slimmer and his cheeks stubbled. “Doesn’t matter.”

“I told him he oughta be ashamed of hisself,” the Makehu said. “Chummin’ up with wakemō, who ain’t never done nothin’ but

hound us. Ye really think yer one of them, huh? Just 'cause ye speak all fancy and suck their golden cocks now?"

The guardswoman put a hand on her scimitar. "You should be very careful now, friend."

"Look," the guardsman said. "This has nothing to do with our blood. Makehu, Kilayan, outlander, the rules are the same for everybody. By the Golden Soil Decree, these waters now belong to Third Magnate Vel'Nyx, and if you want to use them, you have to pay. I'm sorry."

The girl tugged at her father's skirt and muttered something, but his fists remained balled.

The guardsman tacked on a smile. "Okay, tēmī, tell you what, I'll make it four for you. I—"

The Makehu shoved him. For a tick, the guardsman flailed his arms almost comically as he struggled for balance. Then he crashed down on the shingle, his surprised cry in unison with that of the girl.

"*Fuck off!* Ūkonō, I work for the Coalition when ye two was still shittin' in yer mothers' laps, so don't ye fuckin' dare speak down to me! *Not me!*"

Steel flashed in the sunlight. The guardswoman had drawn her scimitar. "All right, you have-not, that does it. You're going to jail."

The Makehu stepped toward her. "Make me."

Jespar was at least ten strides away, yet something about the Makehu's voice and the look that came with it made his stomach eely. *Hatred*. What he saw there was a pure, seething hatred that went far beyond the words traded in this dispute; this man was a soil sucked dry by years of drought, just waiting for the spark to ignite.

Jespar knew the look. He'd seen it hundreds of times during his years with the Wayfarers.

Just when he decided to intervene, the girl began to cry. The Makehu froze. He looked at his daughter, then to the guardswoman,

then to his daughter again, his fists balling and relaxing as though he were battling a cramp.

The fury left him. “Ye ain’t gettin’ away with this, ‘ma’sae,’ mark me words.” He glanced at the downed guard. “And don’t ye ever dare call me ‘tēmī’ again, miwāmalā. Yer a disgrace.”

Miwāmalā. “Mixed waters”—a Makehu slur for biracials that Naka had worn with pride.

The Makehu took his daughter’s hand, and they left, stalking right past the bush where Jespar was hiding. He waited for them to pass, then let out a breath and turned his attention back to the guards. The man was scrambling to his feet, his comrade frowning. “I’ll make it four for you, tēmī? That coinless asshole barks at us for doing our job, and you’re giving him a bloody discount?”

“That ‘coinless asshole’ just wanted a bath and a canteen of water for his family. If you like the idea of that girl crying herself to sleep with a sore throat, fine. I know I don’t.”

The guardswoman curled her lip. She slammed her weapon back into its sheath. “Well, as you say, Ma’sao Holier-Than-Thou. I gotta piss.”

After she had disappeared into the bushes, her comrade sat on a rock by the shingle and gazed into the water. Jespar seized the chance and slipped out of his cover.

Noticing him, the guard rose with a sigh. “I’m sorry, ma’sao, but—”

“Li nekē,” Jespar said. “Nekē li. Kaia ‘atete āpa.” *It costs. I know.*

The guard raised a brow. “You ... speak Makehu?”

“Kōpū.” Jespar nodded at the pool. “Did I hear that right? This pond is private property?”

The guard, probably still trying to reconcile Jespar’s appearance with his Makehu, didn’t answer right away. He rubbed his neck. “Yeah, has been for a moon. Magnate Vel’Nyx bought almost the entire jungle from here to the Mandibles, and apparently that fellow hadn’t heard the news yet.”

“How do you buy an entire jungle?”

“Courtesy of the Golden Soil Decree. You haven’t been here long, huh?”

“Since yesterday. What’s the deal with that decree?”

“Well, basically, it puts the entire Archipelago up for sale.” The Makehu wiped the sweat from his forehead. *No umako*, Jespar noted. “Every forest, every beach, and every pebble that doesn’t already belong to someone can now be bought.”

“Like this pool.”

“Yes. And because Vel’Nyx decided she’s not rich enough yet, using it now costs.” He patted the crest embroidered onto his cuirass, a cobra over two crossed scimitars. “So that’s our glorious duty these days: telling folk who barely have enough to feed their kids to get their water elsewhere. Guess you saw what happened?”

“I did.”

“Well, I don’t blame the man, you know? Kilay has always been run by the folk with the most coin, but, I mean, charging someone for *water*?” He exhaled. “This won’t end well, ma’sao. It won’t end well.”

The guardswoman reappeared from the bushes. The man cast her a tired look. “Anyway, for just six sar, you can drink and splash about the pool all you like. What do you say?”



After Jespar had paid, the guards went on patrol. He undressed and stashed his clothes, swordbelt, and haversack under a little precipice, then walked waist-deep into the pool and splashed water into his face. A smile claimed his lips.

Funny.

It was as mundane as you could get, but it had always been things like this that made Jespar feel most at peace. Mulled wine following a day out in the cold. Sun on his eyelids. A dry blanket after rain.

You're right, father. I never was a good Tre Moreste.

Sixteen years it had been, yet the memories were still there, Ammarond Eamis tre Moreste's endless lectures on morality and justice, his tirades on simpletons who wasted their days playing dice, and, of course, the many glowers for Jespar whenever he had once again proved to be a disappointment.

And even so, for all his father's holiness, Jespar couldn't remember having ever seen him content—not when he had eaten the countless delicacies their private chefs had prepared each night, not when he stood before the giant library window and watched the snow dance from the sky, not even when Arlin and Soromer had spent all their savings on buying him a Makai water clock for his birthday. Apparently, virtue only came with a steel rod shoved all the way up your behind.

And what about you, dear Jespar?

No, he surely wasn't the epitome of happiness—after all the shit that had happened, who would be? Still, barring the occasional nightmare and spell of melancholia, he was content.

Life was all right.

The ripples calmed, and a tired face stared back from the reflection.

Ma'sao Tre Moreste, you look like shit.

Jespar's stubble, scarce on the cheeks but dense around the mouth, had grown shaggy, too short to pass as a proper beard, too long to fly as the trademark of the rugged maverick—not that his unrelentingly boyish features had much potential for the manly kind of ruggedness women apparently swooned over to begin with. Bags clung to his eyes, and his hair was an unkempt shock of ash-blond bristles, slightly receding at the temples.

He raked his hands through his hair, ending up with a couple of strands, some blond, some gray. It was getting grayer; he couldn't tell from the reflection, but he remembered how the strumpet from

last night had teased him when he had told her he had only just turned twenty-eight.

“I like it,” her male companion had mused, trailing his fingers up Jespar’s thigh. “I bet he’s got experience.”

To his inebriated mind, that comment had been the pinnacle of erotic banter. Now he cringed at the memory.

“Jespar tre Moreste,” he muttered, “where’s your dignity?”

Wondering if it had ever existed in the first place, Jespar plunged headfirst into the pool.



When Jespar left the basin, his drowsiness had washed off along with the mud and sweat, and the itch between his shoulders felt better. It was a rash, as it turned out; he could feel the bumps. Using one of his throwing knives, he gave himself a rudimentary shave, relying on the reflection in the water to guide him, then changed into his second set of clothes—foregoing the protection of his leather cuirass in exchange for ventilation—and returned to Southport. Three of his remaining fifteen sar went to a washerwoman to clean his clothes, four to an innkeeper for a classic Kilayan breakfast—rice, beans, fried plantains, and a tangy black herbal infusion called ‘tea’ that left Jespar feeling pleasantly awake—and, lastly, two sar initially intended for a cobbler to fix his soles to a hungry urchin.

Judging by the sun, it was about two hours before noon when he embarked on his journey to the capital to meet his contact. There was no need to ask for directions this time. For another three sar, he took a ferry to the other side of the inlet—thanks to the overcrowded harbor, the ones straight to Uunili were laughably expensive—then followed along the great road meandering up the coast, trotting side by side with the stream of travelers, peasants, and fortune seekers. Listening to them chat about work, dreams, worries, and the latest

news, Jespar learned that the Golden Soil Decree was on everyone's lips and that the Makehu from the pool was not alone in his outrage. There was also talk of a new underground movement claiming to fight injustice in the country, a trade embargo by Xats'al that threatened many jobs, and some nobleman who had mysteriously disappeared from the public eye.

One and a half hours of "nice mornin' walk" later, he reached the first houses and farms of Uunili's sprawling outskirts, also known as the Stone District. Another two hours, and a blistering lobster sunburn on his neck later, and he had reached the colossal gate of the city's titanic walls that sealed off the inner part of the city. A long queue preceded it, leading up to a pocket of guards who either waved the travelers through or sent them back. Bidding his last hopes at a sweat-free, well-groomed appearance goodbye, Jespar joined the line and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

And waited.

By the time a pockmarked man waved him over, his feet were sore and his throat dry as sand.

The guard thrust out a hand palm up. "Papers, outlander."

Bracing himself for a volley of questions, Jespar handed him the sealed letter of passage that had come with the invitation. He'd been longing to read it for the entire sea journey, but the instructions he'd been given along with the money for the passage had made it clear that doing so or showing it to anyone but a Blue Guard would "end his mission before it started," a delightfully ambiguous statement.

The guard tore off the seal, then read the letter a total of three times, his countenance changing with each run—from annoyance to surprise, from surprise to bewilderment, from bewilderment to a peculiar, intimidated distrust.

“Where did you get this?”

Jespar opened his mouth but caught himself in time. There’d been another instruction: total secrecy.

“Can’t say. I’m sorry.”

The guard eyed him the way you’d look at someone who was either a mass murderer or the child of a Celestial. At last, he settled on a nervous smile and returned the parchment. “Of course, ma’sao, thank you. Forgive me for keeping you.”

“No sweat.”

From “outlander” to “ma’sao” in five minutes, Jespar thought as he crossed the gate. And all it took was one letter.

This was getting interesting.



A popular Kilayan sea shanty claimed that among trade, cunning, and fertility, Caleste also counted beauty among her areas of divine expertise. It also contended that the Alabaster City was her favorite mistress and was no less than the goddess’s kisses that granted her fabled beauty.

If that were the case, Jespar concluded as Uunili’s inner city unfolded before him, Caleste had clearly preferred some body parts over others. While lots of passion and tongue had been involved in the upslope districts with their alabaster villas and green parks, the ones along the foothills had received a mere kiss on the cheek, the architecture shifting focus from beauty to function. Platonic feelings must have prevailed in the slum areas just outside the walls, where colorful but crumbly brick houses shared the ground with adobe huts, all crammed together for, seemingly, the sole purpose of fitting as many structures into as little space as possible.

The shanty sung of the Seven Ziggurats but left out the ramshackle dwellings, praised the bosoms of Kilayan women but skipped the emaciated beggars on the roadside, rhapsodized over the city's unique aroma of spices, perfume, and the sea's breeze but failed to mention the dashes of sweat, piss, and shit. People were everywhere, an endless stream of all colors, shapes, and sizes, drifting through the many streets, alleys, and plazas, melting and flowing like an ever-changing kaleidoscope. Chatter, laughs, and shouts filled the air and mixed with the sounds of feet on gravel, clanging anvils, barking dogs, and braying donkeys. And as Jespar maneuvered his way through the endless crowd, he had a realization: if Uunili were a lover, she was a volatile one.

One day, she'd be your wings, the next, the riptide that drowned you; her promise was tempting but her hunger voracious; her lips invited, but her teeth bit hard. This city gorged on motion and got high on flux, and the boundless energy she exuded in return was as invigorating as it was intoxicating, as mesmerizing as it was deadly.

But there was also something else, an element Jespar imagined hadn't always been there but which now pervaded the city like a pernicious undercurrent. It hid in the details: how the haggling at the market stalls was just a little *too* heated. How there were just a little *too* many patrols. How there just a little *too* many frowns among passersby for them to be the result of a bad day.

Tension.

Uunili was a fabric stretched to the breaking point.

For what must have been two hours, Jespar fought his way through the outer rings of the inner city—also known as the Steel District—dodging dirty wash water sloshed from windows above, traversing narrow alleys, dusty roads, and open plazas. The sun blazing down and the high walls keeping out the wind, Jespar's itch and the sweat had gotten to a point where only the fear of an arrest for public indecency stopped him from tearing off his shirt and going on bare-

ched. And yet, when his destination finally appeared around the corner of yet another busy street, he paused in awe.

The Great Bazaar.

A colossal stone pavilion rose before him, sunlight falling through square openings in the roof and illuminating a carpet of stalls and tents. A flood of smells both exotic and mundane wafted from inside, riding atop the sounds of chatter, shouting, footfalls, and music.

For a while, Jespar just watched. The war had ended a long time ago, yet it was until recently that every trip into a crowd had carried the risk of a panic attack. To his surprise, there had been none of that in Uunili. Yes, he had clutched the pommel of his sword since crossing the city gate; yes, there had been the feeling of someone staring at the back of his neck; yes, a part of him couldn't stop wondering how *anyone* could saunter about so carefree in a crowd where any passerby could theoretically shove a dagger into your side and leave before anyone else noticed. Still, the panic hadn't come. Worse nightmares or not, it seemed like time did some healing after all.

Jespar took a deep breath and entered the pavilion. He had somewhere to be.

As he had expected, the bazaar's assortment was endless. Farmers proffered food, blacksmiths tools and weapons, tailors clothes. A woman with her hair woven into snakelike braids sat at a table full of gems and pendants and offered to read his fortune; a man with a striking mustache promised Jespar a concoction that would grow his manhood to inconceivable dimensions; a fire eater spouted flaming cones before an awed audience. Jespar was almost at his destination when a voice cut over the din.

"Make way! Make way for Third Magnate Vel'Nyx!" The impossible happened when the crowd obliged at once, parting to clear a lane in the middle. An armed escort appeared from toward where Jespar was headed, a dozen guards forming a phalanx around a blue-and-gold litter.

“Make way for Third Magnate Vel’Nyx!” the front guard repeated, banging the hilt of his scimitar against his shield. “Make way!”

Like most people, Jespar stood on his toes and craned his neck as the litter passed him by, but a curtain sealed off the interior, and all Jespar could make out were the lower halves of two women sitting across from each other. Only their hands were visible beneath the rim of the drape, one pair young and smooth with painted fingernails, the other slender and dotted with age spots. When the escort had passed, the lane closed as fast as it had formed, and people resumed their business. Jespar watched the litter fade into the bustle, then followed suit and went about his way.

The meeting point was a *napaawo* in a secluded corner of the bazaar. An abbreviation of the Makehu term “*napāwo e kulubika*,” which, if Jespar recalled correctly, meant “tent of dreams,” a *napaawo* was an establishment where customers could consume various drugs; with the meeting still a few hours away, Jespar was itching to try out some of Kilay’s fabled nightflower.

Rug-covered screens dulled the noise and light from the market, blue and violet paper lanterns immersing the place in a dreamy gloom. Jespar used his last three sar to order a pipe pouch and a pipe of “Purple Mairad” from Uunuma, First Flush, then made himself comfortable on a secluded chaise. There were only four other guests: a woman whose matronly features and conservative burgundy dress made her look out of place in the establishment, a teenage couple kissing vigorously in the corner, and a man whose glassy stare gave him the air of someone smoking to forget.

The attendant brought Jespar’s pipe, proffering it bowl first; guessing the protocol, Jespar smelled the petals and nodded. When the attendant was gone, Jespar leaned into the cushions and took a deep drag. Several breaths went by, then the drug kicked in, warmth forming in his chest, his sight going blurry. When his vision refo-

cused again, the colors were softer, melting into each other like a still-wet painting dipped into water.

Smiling, Jespar fished a book from his haversack—a short story collection he'd bought in Thalvere—made himself comfortable, and began to read.

Life was all right.

He had almost reached the other cover by the time the tent flap opened, revealing a tall, bald Khîran and two guards. The effects of the nightflower had eased off and left Jespar with blissful drowsiness, so he barely paid the newcomers any attention until they advanced toward him. The guards wore chainmail, helmet, and greaves fashioned from scales that glowed a subtle turquoise. Jespar recognized it as nuvium, an ore as durable as steel and as light as leather—a single nugget cost more than what a farmer made in a moon. The Khîran's long sapphire robe broke with the Kilayan upper class's fashion conventions, but his abundance of jewelry and the blue kohl around his eyes did not, all contrasting strikingly with his sable skin. His gait was slightly jerky, as though he had some kind of impediment.

"Ma'sao Tre Moreste?" Zero accent, neither Kilayan nor Khîran.

Jespar put down the book and held out his hand. "Yes. Are you—"

"Show me the proof," the Khîran replied, ignoring his outstretched hand.

Aren't you lovely? Jespar produced the Starfall Era coin from his boot pouch and offered it to the Khîran. The man studied it briefly, then handed it back to Jespar. "Very well. I'm Zagâsh Inqshi, counselor of your employer." He glanced at Jespar's pipe. "If I recall correctly, you were instructed to wait, not to indulge."

Jespar smiled apologetically. "I have a habit of missing that part."

Not even a snort. "Follow me."

After hours in the shade, the afternoon sun hit Jespar like a slap with a hot, wet towel. At a brisk pace, Inqshi navigated them through

the bustling city maze to the backyard of a grand building adorned with Coalition banners; a blue-and-gold litter much like the one Jespar had seen in the bazaar stood in the shadow of palms, surrounded by about a dozen people, all of whom sprang to their feet the second Inqshi came into sight. Jespar counted seven guards and four bare-chested, muscular men, presumably carriers. Not paying them further heed, Inqshi went straight to a guardswoman whose broad shoulders and cropped hair—unusual for both men and women in the Archipelago—contrasted with her feminine face. Six blue gems adorned the cobra emblem of her uniform. A sergeant, Jespar guessed.

“Ready?” Inqshi asked.

“Yes, Counselor,” the sergeant replied. “Is that—”

“Our guest, yes.”

The sergeant gave Jespar a once-over, then offered her gloved hand. “Pleased to meet you, ma’sao. I’m Sergeant Maadira.” She had no accent, but something about how she spoke sounded stilted.

They shook. “Tre Moreste. Jespar tre Moreste.”

Maadira glanced at his swordbelt. “I will have to ask you to hand that over.”

Jespar did as told, the nervous veteran voice in his head deaf to the argument that there were easier ways to murder someone than shipping him halfway across the Illumined World and tricking him into a golden litter.

“Thank you.” Maadira took the belt and casually tossed it to one of the guards, a handsome young man, who caught it with unfazed dexterity and passed it on to a pockmarked colleague. Then Maadira signaled to the carriers, who at once took up position between the front and rear carrying poles of the litter. A guard stepped beside the entrance and lifted the heavy curtain, gesturing into the empty box. Inqshi ducked in with all the casual swagger of a jaded king.

Expectant looks fell on Jespar.

Quite unroyally, he hit his head against the doorjamb as he followed the counselor’s example.



The mood in the litter turned out as fun as Jespar had expected—Inqshi met his attempts to strike up a conversation with terse answers, and when Jespar carefully inquired whether he'd done anything to vex him, it earned him a scoff. Diagnosing the man with an incurable case of prickhood, Jespar turned his attention to the city passing by beyond the small glass-paned window instead.

Fortune Road.

According to the Kilayan scholar Jespar had often talked to on the three-week ship journey, this was the name of the thoroughfare that meandered up Mount Ilakato in sweeping switchbacks and connected the different districts. "Look at your feet, and you'll know where you are," the woman had explained. "Fortune Road is more than a road. It is a symbol."

Jespar understood now: with every step his journey had taken him up the mountain, the ground under his feet had improved. Dirt and dust for the Stone District where commoners lived, cobblestone for the Steel District that housed the low-class merchants and craftsmen. Now that the litter had crossed a guarded gate about a quarter up the mountain, the carriers treaded on flagstone.

The Jade District. As a person who had grown up in a manor with a thousand square-stride property and who had seen Castle Thalvere up close, Jespar hadn't pictured himself marveling at the Alabaster City's fabled upper-class district; yet here he was, spellbound by the beauty passing by the window. It wasn't just the lavishness of the villas, with their multiple stories, expansive gardens, and intricate frescoes; it wasn't the parks waiting around every corner; it wasn't the effortlessly elegant silk-and-leather garments of the denizens who passed them by. It was the coherence of it all. Certainly, everything had its unique touches, but the key aesthetics were the same and gave the place an almost unreal quality, like some fantas-

tical utopia where poverty and ugliness didn't exist, allowing society to focus on the pursuit of beauty alone.

The poor at the bottom, the rich at the top, and a road leading from one to the other.

Not the most imaginative concept, granted, but there was an almost disarming frankness about it. On the Blue Islands, "working one's way to the top" wasn't just a figure of speech. It was reality.

Many leagues of luxury later, laughter and music became audible in the distance. Jespar, drowsy from the rough night, the petals, and the sway of the litter, peeked outside, but the westering sun made it hard to see anything.

"A festivity," Inqshi said. "Vel'Tuul is celebrating his name day."
Look at that. He speaks. "Should I know him?"

"The Fifth Magnate."

"Oh. Okay."

"No one worth your attention, though. He's one of those simpletons who inherited a boatload of money from his parents and has nothing better to do than squander it on concubines and lavish orgies. If the nobility didn't enjoy getting shitfaced so much, I doubt Vel'Tuul would still be in the Coalition."

Jespar ventured a smile. "I think I know the type."

"Every country has its share."

Silence followed. Just when Jespar was ready to resume window staring, Inqshi continued.

"Jespar Andery tre Moreste, born in Allion, 1198 After the Arrival. Your brothers and your father perished in a tragic incident sixteen years ago, effectively making you the last male heir of the family."

Jespar said nothing.

"Seven years following said accident, you left your homeland for Brossant, where you spent the past nine years, first as a day laborer, then as a mercenary." He leaned in, elbows on knees. "Here's my

first question: the Tre Moreste family name is still highly respected in your homeland, and you inherited a considerable fortune. Why in the world would a man throw that away for a life as a..." His nostrils twitched. "Vagrant?"

A lump had formed in Jespar's throat. "You're well informed."

"Yes, that's my job. Now answer my question: why leave Allion and everything you had there behind?"

Because staying there would have smothered me. "Because I wanted to turn the page. You know, be my own man."

"Be your own man," Inqshi echoed. "Why, isn't that a noble sentiment. And that was reason enough for you to leave your own si—"

"Counselor, do you mind telling me what my reasons for going abroad have to do with this mission?"

Inqshi's face clouded at the interruption, but Jespar held his gaze. Finally, the counselor made the smallest of nods, an emperor granting pardon to a traitor. "Well, I suppose you're right, that part isn't relevant. The next one is, though. During those nine years you spent in Brossant, you first worked as a day laborer, but eventually took to mercenary work, together with another vagrant, who, interestingly enough, was an Archipelago native. It was mostly grunt work at first, but, in the end, you joined the 'Wayfarers', some kind of ... humanitarian mercenary corps?"

Humanitarian, all right. "Yeah, I guess you could call them that." It came out just how he wanted it: flat, neutral, indifferent. Not a hint of the lump in his throat that had grown bigger with each of Inqshi's words. Another sensation had joined it, one Jespar knew all too well and that he had come to call the "phantom noose," a faint pressure around his neck that tightened in certain situations.

"Mm-hm. And do I understand correctly that these 'Wayfarers' fought for the Middle Realm in their war against the South? Against the 'Loons?'"

“Just indirectly,” Jespar said. “We only ever did defensive missions, like protecting villages and farmers or helping out refugees. Do-gooder stuff, as you said, but I have a hunch you know all of that already.”

The corners of Inqshi’s mouth lifted. “You’re right, I do. I’m actually more interested in why you left the Wayfarers in 1223 and then essentially vanished from the map for three full years. You didn’t even take your Makehu friend with you or collect your outstanding pay.”

The noose pulled tighter; the lump grew. “Your sources couldn’t tell you anything about that part?”

“Is there anything to tell?”

Yes. A lot. “No. I left the Wayfarers because I was sick of the war and wanted to turn the page.”

“Seems like you’re quite the page-turner.”

Jespar gave a strained sigh. “Look, ma’sao, what’s the point of this? I’m a veteran who happens to come from a noble family, that’s it. No friends in high places, no undiscovered Sights, just someone trying to get by.”

Inqshi studied him. Then he exhaled softly and shook his head. “I don’t understand what makes you so special.”

“I never said I was.”

“Yes, and I believe you. That’s the problem. I just can’t fathom why the hell we would hire a coinless scrounger instead of a professional.”

“You tell me.”

“And there’s the rub, Jespar tre Moreste: I can’t. My master insisted it had to be you and no one else, and when I asked why, all I got were evasive answers. I’ve been racking my brain over this for the past four weeks, and it simply doesn’t make any sense.” He regarded his hands, his golden rings reflecting the sunlight falling through the litter window. “Especially not considering what’s at stake here.”

Before Jespar could answer, someone outside screamed.

INTERLUDE

THE MAN

FORTY-ONE YEARS BEFORE

2ND MOON OF RAINY SEASON, 1185 A.A.



It's one of the bad days. The catch in the morning: bad. The mood at breakfast: bad. The sales at the market: bad. One look at Popa and how his fingers dig into the stall, and the boy knows there will be no laughter tonight.

Around midday, a woman approaches them, not a real upper but wearing quality clothes. She asks if they sell lobsters. Popa lowers his head and tells her they don't.

"Caleste curse me," the woman says. "Ten stinking fish merchants and not one has lobsters? No wonder you're coinless."

Popa stares after her as she stalks off, with that look of his that the boy has come to detest: anger and defeat in the same expression.

Three hours and few sales later, they are dismantling the stall. A man hurries toward them, hair windblown. Do they sell lobsters? The price doesn't matter.

Popa's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Sorry, ma'sao. We don't."

It's on the way back home that the boy finally asks Popa the question that's bothered him the whole afternoon: why *aren't* they selling lobsters? He remembers they used to.

Popa scoffs. "Cause the fat cats ain't done nothin' but eat 'em for years, and now they're all gone."

"You mean all the lobsters?" the boy asks. "In the entire Archipelago?"

Popa's lower lip twitches. The boy shouldn't have said it like this, the way an upper would have. "Well, folks say there's some swarms left near Paiolu, but the Coalition ain't lettin' us fish 'em 'cause then they'd go *ixint*." He spits. "Free country, me arse."

"*Colonies*", not *swarms*, the boy thinks. "*Extinct*", not "*ixint*".

The evening passes as expected. Mamah makes dinner, but it's just a scoop of rice and half a plantain each like it has been the whole week. They have leftover dried fish from the market, but Popa wants to keep it for tomorrow. It's stupid, thinks the boy. Who the hell buys old fish when there's fresh ones at the next stall?

The second Popa has finished his plate, he stands and leaves without a word. Mamah gazes after him and sighs. The boy helps her clean up, then asks for her permission to go out and play. Mamah raises an eyebrow and tells him it's late.

"The neighbor's sons asked me over to play Akati with them," the boy replies, knowing it'll sway her. Usually, he chooses to keep to himself, and Mamah wishes he didn't. It works. He can go but must be back by nightfall.

As expected, the boy finds Popa sitting on a tree stump up by what the slit-eyes call "Spirit Hill", a place where they put offerings to their bird god into an iron bowl at the foot of a tall, spiky stone—"obelisk" is the proper word for it. Popa goes there often—not to pray to the bird god, he says, but because the view is beauti-

ful. The boy knows it's a double lie: he's seen Popa drop coins into the bowl and then put one hand to his chest the way the slit-eyes do, and while it's true that Popa always ends up sitting at the hill's lip and looking into the distance, he never does so without a bottle of rice wine beside him. Or two.

The place *is* beautiful, though. Long rainy season showers have restored the jungle's verdant green, and the sun hangs purple and orange just over the horizon. Pink and red tokiflowers grow all around the obelisk, and rainwater fills the offering bowl, mirroring the sunset.

Popa sits at his usual spot, drinking.

"Popa?"

His father whirls around. First, he looks ashamed, but then the shame turns into anger. "Bloody hell. What're ye doin' here, lad? Ye should be in bed!"

The boy lowers his head. "I know, but it's about the lo—" He catches himself and switches to the accent and the vernacular he trains so hard to get rid of. "It's about 'em lobsters."

"What d'ye mean?"

"I think I know a way we can still sell 'em."

"Didn't ye listen, or what? I told ye they's gone."

"Yes, I know, Popa, but what if there's a way even so?"

"Ye ain't makin' sense, lad. Go home."

Sensing Popa's anger rising, it takes the boy all his courage to go on. "Please just hear me out, Popa. When ye cut off the shell, lobster meat is white with a tinge of red, and it tastes mild and a little sweet, don't it? Almost like emperor shrimps."

"Yer point?"

"My point is, with a bit of red salt for the color and some cane sugar juice for the taste, who'd know the difference?"

“Wait a bloody minute. Are ye sayin’ we should sell shrimps as lobsters?”

“Why not?”

Popa scoffs. “Don’t be daft. The people want the whole thing, not chunks of meat.”

“Better odd-lookin’ chunks of meat than nothin’, right?” the boy says. “And when they ask why we don’t sell ’em whole, we just say we had to pickle ’em so they don’t go foul. Popa, they *wanna* believe it’s lobster meat, so they’re gonna buy it.”

Popa looks at the boy, squinting. “What if the Coalition finds out?” he asks slowly. “They’re gonna whip our backs bloody.”

“I don’t think they will,” the boy says, dropping the vernacular as his excitement grows. “You know the saying, ‘If you sign the deal, don’t whine if they steal’—it’s the customer’s responsibility not to get swindled. We wouldn’t be committing a crime, Popa, we’d just be playing the game the way the winners do.”

The bloody, golden sun bathing Popa in a feverish light, a dragonfly lands on his shoulder—the spirit animal of Noalara, goddess of freedom, hope, and winds. If that wasn’t a sign, then what was?

Probably feeling the same, Popa’s lips curl upward. It’s the faintest of smiles, but still enough to make the boy the proudest child on Kilay. “Come here, lad,” Popa says, patting his thigh.

The boy does as his father asked. Popa smells of rice drink, but right now, the boy doesn’t mind. He has made him proud, and that’s all that matters.

Popa starts to massage the boy’s right shoulder, the way he does whenever the boy has done well. How long has it been? “Bright lad,” Popa says. “Such a bright lad. Ye always were, y’know? All ’em nice ideas ye got and that fancy way ye talk, ‘ma’sao, may I help you’ here, ‘ma’sao, let me kiss your feet’ there. I wonder who ye got it from, really do ... Can’t have been Mamah and can’t have been me,

right?” He kneads harder, his thumb digging into the boy’s shoulder. “I mean, we’re just two simple, coinless have-nots too daft to understand the way the ‘winners’ think.”

The boy freezes. “Popa—”

“Ye know what I think, son? I think ye need a lesson.” Popa stands, yanks the boy up by his neck, and drags him over to the offering bowl at the foot of the obelisk. The boy is so surprised he doesn’t even struggle.

“Wait, I—”

Before the boy can finish the sentence, Popa has already thrust his head into the bowl, and the world goes dark. He screams instinctively, and water rushes into his mouth, he coughs, spits, sucks in more.

He can’t. He can’t.

Harsh words, yes. Slaps, yes. Strikes with a cane, that one time the boy broke the fishing rod, yes. But this?

It’s a lesson, he thinks, somehow managing to rise above the panic. It’s a lesson, and he’ll pull me up, he has to!

He doesn’t.

His mouth fills with water, his lungs start to burn. *He has to!*

He doesn’t.

The boy flails his arms and kicks, feeling his muscles weaken and his sight going dark, *Gods, he has to, he has to, he—*

Air.

His face hovers over the bowl now, his lungs ablaze, his heart hammering into his ribs. He gasps for air, sucks more water into his windpipe, coughs it out, wheezes, coughs more.

Popa squats beside him, his hand hard in the boy’s neck. “Are ye listenin’, lad?”

Never, the boy thinks. He’d never do this.

Never.

Popa shoves him back toward the water. A finger-length over the surface, the boy manages a croak.

“What was that?”

“Yeah,” the boy coughs. “Yeah, Popa, I’m ... I’m listenin’.”

Yanking him back up, Popa pulls him close so that their faces are level. “Lemme ask ye a question, lad. If Caleste favors the cunnin’, why are we here?”

“I—”

“Why do we eat the same shit every night, why does everyone have more than us, *why are we here?*” Spittle sprays into the boy’s eyes, and Popa’s rice-wine breath makes him nauseous. “Bloody hell, d’ye really think I haven’t tried to give ye and Mamah the life ye deserve, d’ye really think I didn’t work until me fingers bled and me back broke? For fuck’s sake, lad, I did! I tried, over and over and over, but it just ain’t workin’! And d’ye know why?”

Not realizing Popa actually wants an answer, the boy just stares into his eyes. Amber in the evening light, the boy doesn’t recognize them.

Keeping one hand on the boy’s collar, Popa slaps him. Stars explode, blood wells up in the boy’s mouth. He has bitten his tongue.

“Answer the *godsdamned* question!”

“No!” the boy blurts out. “Gods, no, Popa, I don’t!”

“Cause we ain’t got the same tools! ’Cause this cunt of a goddess did *not* make us all equal, ’cause some folk is born smart, some dumb, some rich, some poor, and if yer born at the bottom, that’s where ye fuckin’ *stay!* Life’s a battlefield and it’s eat or get eaten, and us folk, we’ve never had the weapons to win! Bloody hell, lad, I tried, I *fuckin’* tried!”

He lets go.

The boy drops to the ground like a wet cloth. Moaning, he crawls to the obelisk and presses himself against the stone, hands raised to shield himself from the man he doesn’t know anymore.

And then, just like that, Popa is back.

He stares at his hands, water dripping from his callused fingers. Swallows. Opens his mouth. He will tell the boy he's sorry, hug him and invite him to head back home so they can play a round of Akati with Mamah and pretend this never happened.

But Popa doesn't.

Instead, he speaks the words the boy will always remember. "There's a place for folk like us, lad. Sometimes, ye've just gotta make do with the hand ye've been dealt."

And he leaves.

That night, as he lies on his hay mattress, the boy hears Mamah and Popa fighting. They often argue ever since the boy's brother was born dead and Mamah turned barren, but usually, the quarrels are short and end with her falling into line. This time, it goes on and on. Until something shatters, and the door slams shut.

For a time, the house is silent except for Mamah's sobs behind the bamboo screen. Then she stops and appears by his bedroll.

"Pack yer things," she says and thrusts a haversack into his hands. Her right eye is swollen, and there's a gash on her lip.

The boy doesn't argue. He takes his second set of clothes, his carving knife, and his burlap alapu toy. He also takes the Akati cards Popa gave him for his eighth birthday.

They leave.

Only when they're past the village does he dare to speak. "What about Popa?" he says.

The silence that follows is so long the boy is surprised when Mamah does answer after all.

"We're better off without him."