

THE EMPEROR'S BLADES

BRIAN
STAVELEY

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Chronicle of the Unbewn Throne, Book I

BRIAN
STAVELEY



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
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For my parents, who read me stories

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CONTENTS

Title Page
Copyright Notice
Dedication
Acknowledgments
Map

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

Chapter 50

Appendix

About the Author

Copyright

PROLOGUE

Rot. It was the rot, Tan'is reflected as he stared down into his daughter's eyes, that had taken his child.

Screams and imprecations, pleading and sobbing shivered the air as the long lines of prisoners filled the valley. The scent of blood and urine thickened in the noon heat. Tan'is ignored it all, focusing instead on the face of this daughter of his who knelt, clutching at his knees. Faith was a woman grown now, thirty years and a month. At a casual glance she might have passed as healthy—bright gray eyes, lean shoulders, strong limbs—but the Csestriim no longer bore healthy children, not for centuries.

“Father,” the woman begged, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Those tears, too—a symptom of the rot.

There were other words for it, of course. The children, in their ignorance or innocence, called this affliction *age*, but in this, as in so much else, they erred. Age was not decrepitude. Tan'is himself was old, hundreds of years old, and yet his sinews remained strong, his mind nimble—if needed, he could run all day, all night, and the better part of the next day. Most of the Csestriim were older still, thousands upon thousands of years, and yet they continued to walk the earth, those who had not fallen in the long wars with the Nevariim. No; time passed, stars swung through their silent arcs, seasons gave way one to the next, and yet none of these, in and of itself, brought harm. It was not age but rot that gnawed at the children, consuming their bowels and brains, sapping strength, eroding whatever meager intelligence they once possessed. Rot, and then death.

“Father,” Faith pleaded, unable to proceed past that single word.

“Daughter,” Tan'is replied.

“You don't...,” she gasped, glancing over her shoulder toward the ditch, toward where the *doran'se* went about their work, steel flashing in the sunlight. “You can't...”

Tan'is cocked his head to the side. He had tried to understand this daughter of his, tried to understand *all* the children. Though he was no healer, as a soldier he had learned long ago to tend shattered bones and ruptured skin, to treat the festering flesh that came from a soiled wound or the racking coughs of men too long in the field. And yet this ... he could no more comprehend the nature of this decay than he could cure it.

“It has you, daughter. The rot has you.”

He reached down and ran a finger along the creases in Faith's forehead, sketched the delicate tracery of lines beside her eyes, lifted a slender filament of silver hair from the brown locks. Just a few decades of sun and wind had already begun to roughen her smooth olive skin. He had wondered when she first burst from between her mother's thighs, strong-lunged and screaming, if perhaps she might grow up unscathed. The question had intrigued him, and now it was answered.

“It touches you gently,” he pointed out, “but its grip will grow stronger.”

“And so you have to do *this*?” she exploded, jerking her head desperately toward the freshly turned earthen ditch. “*This* is what it comes to?”

Tan’is shook his head. “It was not my decision. The council voted.”

“Why? Why do you *hate* us?”

“Hate?” he replied. “That is your word, child, not ours.”

“It’s not just a *word*. It describes a feeling, a *real thing*. A *truth* about the world.”

Tan’is nodded. He had heard such arguments before. *Hate, courage, fear*. Those who thought that rot an affliction merely of the flesh understood nothing. It corroded the mind as well, rusting the very foundations of thought and reason.

“I grew from your seed,” Faith continued, as though that followed logically from what came before. “You fed me when I was small!”

“This is the way of many creatures: wolves, eagles, horses. When they are young, dependent, a must rely on their progenitors.”

“Wolves, eagles, and horses *protect* their children!” she protested, weeping openly now, clawing at the backs of his legs. “I’ve seen it! They guard and tend, feed and nurture. They *raise* their young. She reached a trembling, imploring hand toward her father’s face. “Why will you not raise us?”

“Wolves,” Tan’is replied, brushing away his daughter’s hand, “raise their young to be wolves. Eagles, eagles. You—,” he continued, frowning once more, “we have raised you, but you are broken. Polluted. Compromised. You can see it for yourself,” he said, gesturing to the hunched, defeated forms that stood waiting at the rim of the pit—hundreds of them, just waiting. “Even without this, you would die on your own, and soon.”

“But we’re *people*. We are your *children*.”

Tan’is shook his head wearily. It was no good reasoning with one whose reason had decayed.

“You can never be what we are,” he said quietly, drawing his knife.

At the sight of the blade, Faith made a strangled sound deep in her throat and flinched away. Tan’is wondered if she would try to run. A few did. They never made it far. This daughter of his, however, did not run. Instead, she balled her hands into white, trembling fists, and then, with an obvious effort of will, straightened from her knees. Standing, she was able to look him directly in the eye, and though tears plastered her hair to her cheeks, she no longer wept. For once, however briefly, the disfiguring terror had left her. She looked almost whole, hale.

“And you cannot love us for what *we* are?” she asked, words slow, steady for the first time. “Even polluted, even broken? Even rotten, you cannot love us?”

“Love,” Tan’is repeated, tasting the strange syllable, revolving it on his tongue as he drove the knife in and up, past the muscle, past the ribs, into her galloping heart, “like hate—it is your word, daughter, not ours.”

1

The sun hung just over the peaks, a silent, furious ember drenching the granite cliffs in a bloody red light when Kaden found the shattered carcass of the goat.

He'd been dogging the creature over the tortuous mountain trails for hours, scanning for tracks where the ground was soft enough, making guesses when he came to bare rock, doubling back when he guessed wrong. It was slow work and tedious, the kind of task the older monks delighted in assigning to their pupils. As the sun sank and the eastern sky purpled to a vicious bruise, he started to wonder how he would be spending the night in the high peaks with only his roughspun robe for comfort. Spring had arrived weeks earlier according to the Annurian calendar, but the monks didn't pay any heed to the calendar and neither did the weather, which remained hard and grudging. Scraps of dirty snow lingered in the long shadows, cold seeped from the stones, and the needles of the few gnarled junipers were still more gray than green.

"Come on, you old bastard," he muttered, checking another track. "You don't want to sleep out here any more than I do."

The mountains comprised a maze of cuts and canyons, washed-out gullies and rubble-strewn ledges. Kaden had already crossed three streams gorged with snowmelt, frothing at the hard walls that hemmed them in, and his robe was damp with spray. It would freeze when the sun dropped. How the goat had made its way past the rushing water, he had no idea.

"If you drag me around these peaks much longer..." he began, but the words died on his lips as he spotted his quarry at last—thirty paces distant, wedged in a narrow defile, only the hindquarters visible.

Although he couldn't get a good look at the thing—it seemed to have trapped itself between a large boulder and the canyon wall—he could tell at once that something was wrong. The creature was still too still, and there was an unnaturalness to the angle of the haunches, the stiffness in the legs.

"Come on, goat," he murmured as he approached, hoping the animal hadn't managed to hurt itself too badly. The Shin monks were not rich, and they relied on their flocks for milk and meat. If Kaden returned with an animal that was injured, or worse, dead, his *umial* would impose a severe penance.

"Come on, old fellow," he said, working his way slowly up the canyon. The goat appeared stuck, but if it *could* run, he didn't want to end up chasing it all over the Bone Mountains. "Better grazing down below. We'll walk back together."

The evening shadows hid the blood until he was nearly standing in it, the pool wide and dark and still. Something had gutted the animal, hacked a savage slice across the haunch and into the stomach, cleaving muscle and driving into the viscera. As Kaden watched, the last lingering drops of blood

trickled out, turning the soft belly hair into a sodden, ropy mess, running down the stiff legs like urine.

“Shael take it,” he cursed, vaulting over the wedged boulder. It wasn’t so unusual for a crag cat to take a goat, but now he’d have to carry the carcass back to the monastery across his shoulders. “You had to go wandering,” he said. “You had...”

The words trailed off, and his spine stiffened as he got a good look at the animal for the first time. A quick cold fear blazed over his skin. He took a breath, then extinguished the emotion. Shin training wasn’t good for much, but after eight years, he *had* managed to tame his feelings; fear, envy, anger, exuberance—he still felt them, but they did not penetrate so deeply as they once had. Even within the fortress of his calm, however, he couldn’t help but stare.

Whatever had gutted the goat did not stop there. Some creature—Kaden struggled in vain to think of what—had hacked the animal’s head from its shoulders, severing the strong sinew and muscle with sharp, brutal strokes until only the stump of the neck remained. Crag cats would take the occasion of flagging member of a herd, but not like this. These wounds were vicious, unnecessary, lacking the quotidian economy of other kills he had seen in the wild. The animal had not simply been slaughtered; it had been destroyed.

Kaden cast about, searching for the rest of the carcass. Stones and branches had washed down with the early spring floods and lodged at the choke point of the defile in a weed-matted mess of silt and skeletal wooden fingers, sun-bleached and grasping. So much detritus clogged the canyon that it took him a while to locate the head, which lay tossed on its side a few paces distant. Much of the hair had been torn away and the bone split open. The brain was gone, scooped from the trencher of the skull though with a spoon.

Kaden’s first thought was to flee. Blood still dripped from the goat’s gory coat, more black than red in the fading light, and whatever had mauled it could still be in the rocks, guarding its kill. None of the local predators would be likely to attack Kaden—he was tall for his seventeen years, lean and strong from half a lifetime of labor—but then, none of the local predators would have hacked the head from the goat and eaten its brain either.

He turned toward the canyon mouth. The sun had settled below the steppe, leaving just a burnt smudge above the grasslands to the west. Already night filled the canyon like oil seeping into a bowl. Even if he left immediately, even if he ran at his fastest lope, he’d be covering the last few miles to the monastery in full dark. Though he thought he had long outgrown his fear of night in the mountains, he didn’t relish the idea of stumbling along the rock-strewn path, an unknown predator following in the darkness.

He took a step away from the shattered creature, then hesitated.

“Heng’s going to want a painting of this,” he muttered, forcing himself to turn back to the carnage.

Anyone with a brush and a scrap of parchment could make a painting, but the Shin expected rather more of their novices and acolytes. Painting was the product of seeing, and the monks had their own way of seeing. *Saama’an*, they called it: “the carved mind.” It was only an exercise, of course, a step on the long path leading to the ultimate liberation of *vaniate*, but it had its meager uses. During his eight years in the mountains, Kaden had learned to see, to *really* see the world as it was: the track of a brindled bear, the serration of a forksleaf petal, the crenellations of a distant peak. He had spent countless hours, weeks, *years* looking, seeing, memorizing. He could paint any of a thousand plants

animals down to the last finial feather, and he could internalize a new scene in heartbeats.

He took two slow breaths, clearing a space in his head, a blank slate on which to carve each minute particular. The fear remained, but the fear was an impediment, and he pared it down, focusing on the task at hand. With the slate prepared, he set to work. It took only a few breaths to etch the severed head, the pools of dark blood, the mangled carcass of the animal. The lines were sure and certain, finer than any brushstroke, and unlike normal memory, the process left him with a sharp, vivid image as durable as the stones on which he stood, one he would be able to recall and scrutinize at will. He finished the *saama'an* and let out a long, careful breath.

Fear is blindness, he muttered, repeating the old Shin aphorism. *Calmness, sight*.

The words provided cold comfort in the face of the bloody scene, but now that he had the carving done, he could leave. He glanced once over his shoulder, searching the cliffs for some sign of the predator, then turned toward the opening of the defile. As the night's dark fog rolled over the peaks, he raced through the darkness down the treacherous trails, sandaled feet darting past the downed limbs and ankle-breaking rocks. His legs, chill and stiff after so many hours creeping after the goat, warmed to the motion while his heart settled into a steady tempo.

You're not running away, he told himself, *just heading home*.

Still, he breathed a small sigh of relief a mile down the path when he rounded a tower of rock—the Talon, the monks called it—and could make out Ashk'lan in the distance. Thousands of feet below him, the scant stone buildings perched on a narrow ledge as though huddled away from the abyss. Warm lights glowed in some of the windows. There would be a fire in the refectory kitchen, lamps kindled in the meditation hall, the quiet hum of the Shin going about their evening ablutions and rituals. *Safe*. The word rose unbidden to his mind. It was safe down there, and despite his resolve, Kaden increased his pace, running toward those few, faint lights, fleeing whatever prowled the unknown darkness behind him.

2

Kaden crossed the ledges just outside Ashk'lan's central square at a run, then slowed as he entered the courtyard. His alarm, so sharp and palpable when he first saw the slaughtered goat, had faded as he descended from the high peaks and drew closer to the warmth and companionship of the monastery. Now, moving toward the main cluster of buildings, he felt foolish to have run so fast. Whatever killed the animal remained a mystery, to be sure, but the mountain trails posed their own dangers, especially to someone foolish enough to run them in the darkness. Kaden slowed to a walk, gathering his thoughts.

Bad enough I lost the goat. Heng would whip me bloody if I managed to break my own leg in the process.

The gravel of the monastery paths crunched beneath his feet, the only sound save for the keening of the wind as it gusted and fell, skirling through the gnarled branches and between the cold stone walls. The monks were all inside already, hunched over their bowls or seated cross-legged in the meditation hall, fasting, pursuing emptiness. When he reached the refectory, a long, low stone building weathered by storm and rain until it looked almost a part of the mountain itself, Kaden paused to scoop a handful of water from the wooden barrel outside the door. As the draft washed down his throat, he took a moment to steady his breathing and slow his heart. It wouldn't do to approach his *umial* in a state of mental disarray. Above all else, the Shin valued stillness, clarity. Kaden had been whipped by his masters for rushing, for shouting, for acting in haste, or moving without consideration. Besides, he was home now. Whatever killed the goat wasn't likely to come prowling among the stern buildings.

Up close, Ashk'lan didn't look like much, especially at night: three long, stone halls with wooden roofs—the dormitory, refectory, and meditation hall—forming three sides to a rough square, their pale granite walls washed as though with milk in the moonlight. The whole compound perched on the cliff's edge, and the fourth side of the square opened out onto cloud, sky, and an unobstructed view of the foothills and distant steppe to the west. Already the grasslands far below were vibrant with the spring froth of flowers: swaying blue chalenders, clusters of nun's blossom, riots of tiny white fairy knots. At night, however, beneath the cold, inscrutable gaze of the stars, the steppe was invisible. Staring out past the ledges, Kaden found himself facing a vast emptiness, a great dark void. It felt as though Ashk'lan stood at the world's end, clinging to the cliffs, holding vigil against a nothingness that threatened to engulf creation. After a second swig of water, he turned away. The night had grown cold, and now that he had stopped running, gusts of wind off the Bone Mountains sliced through his sweaty robe like shards of ice.

With a rumble in his stomach, he turned toward the yellow glow and murmur of conversation

emanating from the windows of the refectory. At this hour—just after sunset but before night prayer—most of the monks would be taking a modest evening meal of salted mutton, turnips, and hard, dark bread. Heng, Kaden's *umial*, would be inside with the rest, and with any luck, Kaden could report what he had seen, dash off a quick painting to show the scene, and sit down to a warm meal of his own. Such fare was far more meager than the delicacies he remembered from his early years in the Dawn Palace before his father sent him away, but the monks had a saying: *Hunger is flavor*.

They were great ones for sayings, the Shin, passing them down from one generation to the next, though trying to make up for the order's lack of liturgy and formal ritual. The Blank God cared nothing for the pomp and pageantry of the urban temples. While the young gods glugged themselves on music, prayer, and offerings laid upon elaborate altars, the Blank God demanded of the Shin one thing only: sacrifice, not of wine or wealth, but of the self. *The mind is a flame*, the monks said. *Blow it out*.

After eight years, Kaden still wasn't sure what that meant, and with his stomach rumbling impatiently, he couldn't be bothered to contemplate it. He pushed open the heavy refectory door, letting the gentle hum of conversation wash over him. Monks were scattered around the hall, some at rough tables, their heads bent over their bowls, others standing in front of a fire that crackled in the hearth at the far end of the room. Several sat playing stones, their eyes blank as they studied the lines of resistance and attack unfolding across the board.

The men were as varied as the lands from which they had come—tall, pale, blocky Edishmen from the far north, where the sea spent half the year as ice; wiry Hannans, hands and forearms inked with the patterns of the jungle tribes just north of the Waist; even a few Manjari, green-eyed, their brown skin a shade darker than Kaden's own. Despite their disparate appearances, however, the monks shared something, a hardness, a stillness born of a life lived in the hard, still mountains far from the comforts of the world where they had been raised.

The Shin were a small order, with barely two hundred monks at Ashk'lan. The young gods—Eir, Heqet, Orella, and the rest—drew adherents from three continents and enjoyed temples in almost every town and city, palatial spaces draped with silk and crusted with gold, some of which rivaled the dwellings of the richest ministers and atreps. Heqet alone must have commanded thousands of priests and ten times that number who came to worship at his altar when they felt the need of courage.

The less savory gods had their adherents as well. Stories abounded of the halls of Rassambur and the bloody servants of Ananshael, tales of chalices carved from skulls and dripping marrow, of infants strangled in their sleep, of dark orgies where sex and death were hideously mingled. Some claimed that only a tenth of those who entered the doors ever returned. *Taken by the Lord of Bones*, people whispered. *Taken by Death himself*.

The older gods, aloof from the world and indifferent to the affairs of humans, drew few adherents. Nonetheless, they had their names—Intarra and her consort, Hull the Bat, Pta and Astar's name—and scattered throughout the three continents, thousands worshipped those names.

Only the Blank God remained nameless, faceless. The Shin held that he was the oldest, the most cryptic and powerful. Outside Ashk'lan, most people thought he was dead, or had never existed. Slaughtered by Ae, some said, when she made the world and the heavens and stars. That seemed perfectly plausible to Kaden. He had seen no sign of the god in his years running up and down the mountain passes.

He scanned the room for his fellow acolytes, and from a table over by the wall, Akiil caught his eye. He was seated on a long bench with Serkhan and fat Phirum Prumm—the only acolyte at Ashk’lan who maintained his girth despite the endless running, hauling, and building required by the older monks. Kaden nodded in response and was about to cross to them when he spotted Heng on the other side of the hall. He stifled a sigh—the *umial* would impose some sort of nasty penance if his pupil sat down to dinner without reporting back first. Hopefully it wouldn’t take long to relate the tale of the slaughtered goat; then Kaden could join the others; then he could finally have a bowl of stew.

Huy Heng was hard to miss. In many ways, he seemed like he belonged in one of the fine walled halls of Annur rather than here, cloistered in a remote monastery a hundred leagues beyond the border of the empire. While the other monks went about their duties with quiet sobriety, Heng hummed as he tended the goats, sang as he lugged great sacks of clay up from the shallows, and kept up a steady stream of jests as he chopped turnips for the refectory pots. He could even tell jokes while he beat his pupils bloody. At the moment, he was regaling the brothers at his table with a tale involving elaborate hand gestures and some sort of birdcall. When he saw Kaden approach, however, the grin slipped from his face.

“I found the goat,” Kaden began without preamble.

Heng extended both hands, as though to stop the words before they reached him.

“I’m not your *umial* any longer,” he said.

Kaden blinked. Scial Nin, the abbot, reassigned acolytes and *umials* every year or so, but not usually by surprise. Not in the middle of dinner.

“What happened?” he asked, suddenly cautious.

“It’s time for you to move on.”

“Now?”

“The present is the present. Tomorrow will still be ‘now.’”

Kaden swallowed an acerbic remark; even if Heng was no longer his *umial*, the monk could still whip him. “Who am I getting?” he asked instead.

“Rampuri Tan,” Heng replied, his voice flat, devoid of its usual laughter.

Kaden stared. Rampuri Tan did not take pupils. Sometimes, despite his faded brown robe and shaved head, despite the days he spent sitting cross-legged, eyes fixed in his devotion to the Black God, Tan didn’t seem like a monk at all. There was nothing Kaden could put his finger on, but the novices felt it, too, had developed a hundred theories, attributing to the man a series of implausible pasts by turn both shadowy and glorious: he earned the scars on his face fighting wild animals in the arena at The Bend; he was a murderer and a thief, who had repented of his crimes and taken up a life of contemplation; he was the dispossessed brother of some lord or atrep, hiding at Ashk’lan only long enough to build his revenge. Kaden wasn’t much inclined to believe any of the stories, but he had noticed the common thread: violence. Violence and danger. Whoever Rampuri Tan had been before arriving at Ashk’lan, Kaden wasn’t eager to have the man for his *umial*.

“He is expecting you,” Heng continued, something like pity tingeing his voice. “I promised to send you to his cell as soon as you arrived.”

Kaden spared a glance over his shoulder for the table where his friends sat, slurping down the stew and enjoying the few unstructured minutes of conversation that were allowed them each day.

“Now,” Heng said, breaking into his thoughts.

The walk from the refectory to the dormitory was not far—a hundred paces across the square, then up a short path between two lines of stunted junipers. Kaden covered the distance quickly, eager to be out of the wind, and pushed open the heavy wooden door. All the monks, even Scial Nin, the abbot, slept in identical chambers opening off the long, central hallway. The cells were small, barely large enough to fit a pallet, a rough woven mat, and a couple of shelves, but then, the Shin spent most of their time outdoors, in the workshops, or in meditation.

Inside the building and out of the slicing wind, Kaden slowed, readying himself for the encounter. It was hard to know what to expect—some masters liked to test a student immediately; some preferred to wait and watch, judging the aptitudes and weaknesses of the younger monk before deciding on a course of instruction.

He’s just another new master, Kaden told himself. Heng was new a year ago, and you got used to him.

And yet, something about the situation felt odd, unsettling. First the slaughtered goat, then the unexpected transfer when he should have been seated on a long bench with a steaming bowl in front of him, arguing with Akiil and the rest of the acolytes....

He filled his lungs slowly, then emptied them. Worry was doing no good.

Live now, he told himself, rehearsing one of the standard Shin aphorisms. The future is a dream. And yet, a part of his thoughts—a voice that refused to be stilled or settled—reminded him that not all dreams were pleasant, that sometimes, no matter how one thrashed or turned, it was impossible to wake.

3

Rampuri Tan sat on the floor inside his small cell, his back to the door, a broad sheet of blank parchment spread on the flagstones before him. He held a brush in his left hand, but however long he had been sitting, had not yet dipped it into the saucer of black ink at his side.

“Enter,” the man said, beckoning with his free hand without turning toward the door.

Kaden crossed the threshold, then paused. The first few moments with a new *umial* could set the tone for the entire relationship. Most of the monks wanted to make an impression on their pupils early, and Kaden wasn't eager to earn himself some grueling penance because of a careless misstep or lapse in judgment. Tan, however, seemed content to contemplate his blank page in silence, and so Kaden schooled himself to patience, attending to his strange new master.

It wasn't hard to see where the novices had come up with the idea that the older monk had fought in the arena. Though well into his fifth decade, Tan was built like a boulder, thick in the shoulders and neck, and powerfully muscled. Furrowed scars, pale against his darker skin, ran through the stubble on his scalp, as though some clawed beast had raked at his head again and again, slicing the flesh right down to the skull. Whatever inflicted the wounds, they must have been excruciating. Kaden's mind jumped back to the carcass of the goat, and he shivered.

“You found the animal that Heng sent you for,” the older monk began abruptly. It was not a question, and for a moment Kaden hesitated.

“Yes,” he said finally.

“Have you returned it to its flock?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It had been killed. Savagely killed.”

Tan lowered the brush, rose fluidly to his feet, and turned to face his pupil for the first time. He was tall, almost as tall as Kaden, and suddenly it felt as though there was very little space in the small cell. His eyes, dark and hard as filed nails, fixed Kaden to the spot. Back in Annur, there were men from western Eridroa and the far south, animal handlers, who could bend bears and jaguars to their will, all with the power of their gaze. Kaden felt like one of those creatures now, and it was with a great effort that he continued to meet the eyes of his new *umial*.

“Crag cat?” the older monk asked.

Kaden shook his head. “Something severed its neck—hacked straight through. Then consumed the brain.”

Tan considered him, then gestured to the brush, bowl, and parchment lying on the floor. “Paint it.”

Kaden took his seat with some relief. Whatever surprises were in store for him under Tan's tutelage, at least the older monk shared some habits with Heng—if he heard about something unusual, he wanted an image. Well, that was easy enough. Kaden took two breaths, composed his thoughts, then summoned the *saama'an*. The sight filled his mind in all its detail—the sopping hair, the gobbets of hanging flesh, the empty bowl of the skull cast aside like broken crockery. He dipped the tip of the brush into the bowl and began to paint.

The work went quickly—his study with the monks had provided plenty of time to hone his craft—and when he was finished, he set down the brush. The painting on the parchment could have been the image of his mind reflected in a pool of still water.

Silence filled the room behind him, silence huge and heavy as stone. Kaden was tempted to turn around, but he had been instructed to sit and to paint, nothing else, and so, the painting finished, he sat.

“This is what you saw?” Tan asked at last.

Kaden nodded.

“And you had the presence of mind to remain for the *saama'an*.”

Satisfaction swelled in Kaden. Maybe training under Tan wouldn't be so bad after all.

“Anything else?” the monk asked.

“Nothing else.”

The lash came down so hard and unexpectedly, Kaden bit into his tongue. Pain screamed across his back in a bright, bold line as his mouth filled with the coppery taste of blood. He started to reach back to block the next blow, then forced the instinct down. Tan was his *umial* now, and it was the man's prerogative to dole out penance and punishment as he saw fit. The reason for the sudden assault remained a mystery, but Kaden knew how to deal with a whipping.

Eight years among the Shin had taught him that *pain* was far too general a term for the multitude of sensations it purported to describe. He had learned the brutal ache of feet submerged too long in ice water and the furious stinging and itching of those same feet as they warmed. He had studied the dejected, reluctant soreness of muscles worked past exhaustion and the blossoms of agony that bloomed the next day as he kneaded the tender flesh under his thumbs. There was the quick, bright pain of a clean wound after the knife slipped and the low, drumming throb of the headache after fasting for a week. The Shin were great believers in pain. It was a reminder, they said, of how tightly we are bound to our own flesh. A reminder of failure.

“Finish the painting,” Tan said.

Kaden called the *saama'an* back to mind, then compared it with the parchment before him. He had transferred the details faithfully.

“It is finished,” he replied reluctantly.

The lash came down again, although this time he was prepared. His mind absorbed the shock as his body swayed slightly with the blow.

“Finish the painting,” Tan said again.

Kaden hesitated. Asking questions of one's *umial* was usually a fast route to penance, but since he was being beaten already, a little more clarity couldn't hurt.

“Is this a test?” he asked tentatively. The monks created all sorts of tests for their pupils, trials .

which the novices and acolytes attempted to prove their understanding and competence.

The lash took him across the shoulders again. The first two blows had split open the robe, and Kaden could feel the switch tearing into his bare skin.

“This is what it is,” Tan replied. “Call it a test if you like, but the name is not the thing.”

Kaden suppressed a groan. Whatever eccentricities Tan might possess, he spoke in the same infuriating gnostic pronouncements as the rest of the Shin.

“I don’t remember anything else,” Kaden said. “That’s the entire *saama’an*.”

“It’s not enough,” Tan said, but this time he withheld the lash.

“It’s the entire thing,” Kaden protested. “The goat, the head, the pools of blood, even a few stray hairs that were stuck on a rock. I copied everything there.”

Tan *did* hit him for that. Twice.

“Any fool can see what’s there,” the monk responded dryly. “A child looking at the world can tell you what is in front of him. You need to see what is not there. You need to look at what is *not* in front of you.”

Kaden struggled to make some kind of sense out of this. “Whatever killed the goat isn’t there,” he began slowly.

Another lash.

“Of course not. You scared it away. Or it left on its own. Either way, you wouldn’t *expect* to find a wild animal hunkered over its prey if it heard or scented a man approaching.”

“So I’m looking for something that should be there, but isn’t.”

“Think in your mind. Use your tongue when you have something to say.”

Tan followed the words with three more sharp blows. The gashes wept blood. Kaden could feel it running down his back, hot, and wet, and sticky. He had had worse beatings before, but always for a major mistake, a serious penance, never in the course of a simple dialogue. It was becoming more difficult to ignore the lacerating pain, and he struggled to keep his mind on the subject at hand. Tan wasn’t going to stop whipping him out of mercy; that much was clear.

You need to see what is not there.

It was typical Shin nonsense, but like much of that nonsense, would probably turn out to be true.

Kaden scanned the *saama’an*. Every part of the goat was accounted for, even the intestines, which lay piled in sloppy blue-white ropes beneath the creature’s abdomen. The brain was gone, but he had painted the broken skull clearly, showed where it was scooped out. What *else* would he expect to see? He’d been tracking the goat, followed it to the canyon, and ...

“Tracks,” he said, realization coming with the word. “Where are the tracks of whatever killed it?”

“That,” Tan said, “is a very good question. Were they present?”

Kaden tried to remember. “I’m not sure. They’re not in the *saama’an* ... but I was focused on the goat.”

“It seems that those golden eyes of yours don’t see any better than anyone else’s.”

Kaden blinked. He’d never had a *umial* mention his eyes before—that was too close to mentioning his father or his birthright. The Shin were profoundly egalitarian. Novices were novices; acolytes were acolytes; and full brothers were all equal before the Blank God. Kaden’s eyes, however, *were* unique. Tan had called them “golden,” but in fact, the irises blazed. As a child, Kaden had stared at his

father's eyes—all Annurian Emperors shared them—marveling at the way the color seemed to shimmer and burn. Sometimes they raged bright as a fire caught in high wind; others, they smoldered with dark, red heat. His sister, Adare, had the eyes, too, though hers seemed to spark and snap like a blaze of green twigs. As the oldest of the Emperor's children, Adare rarely focused her bright gaze on her younger brothers, and when she did, it was usually in a flash of irritation. According to the family, the burning eyes came from Intarra herself, the Lady of Light, who had taken human form centuries millennia earlier—no one seemed quite sure—to seduce one of Kaden's forebears. Those eyes marked him as the true heir to the Unhewn Throne, to Annur itself, an empire that sprawled across two continents.

The Shin, of course, had no more interest in empires than they did in Intarra. The Lady of Light was one of the old gods, older than Meshkent and Maat, older even than Ananshael, Lord of Bones. Upon her depended the arc of the sun in the sky, the heat of the day, the numinous glow of the moon. And yet, according to the monks, she was a child, an infant playing with fire in the vast mansion of emptiness, the unending and eternal void that was home to the Blank God. One day Kaden would return to Annur to claim his place on the Unhewn Throne, but while he lived at Ashk'lan, he was just another monk, expected to work hard and obey. The eyes certainly weren't saving him from Tan's brutal interrogation.

"Maybe the tracks were there," Kaden concluded weakly. "I can't be sure."

For a while Tan said nothing, and Kaden wondered if the beating was about to resume.

"The monks have been too easy on you," Tan concluded finally, voice level but hard. "I will not make that mistake."

Only later, as Kaden lay awake in his bunk, breathing shallowly to try to ease the pain of his inflamed back, did he realize what his new *umial* had said: "the monks." As though Rampuri Tan were not one of them.

4

Even with the salt-sharp breeze gusting in off the sea, the bodies stank.

Adaman Fane's Wing had found the ship on a routine patrol two days earlier, sails rent and luffing, dried blood on the rails, the crew cut to pieces and left to rot on the decks. By the time the cadets arrived, the searing springtime sun had started its work, bloating bellies and pulling skin tight over knuckles and skulls. Flies crawled in and out of dead sailors' ears, foraged between slack lips, and paused to rub their mandibles over desiccated eyeballs.

"Any theories?" Ha Lin asked, nudging the nearest body with her toe.

Valyn shrugged. "I think we can rule out a cavalry charge."

"Very helpful," she shot back, lips pursed, almond eyes skeptically narrowed.

"Whoever did this, they were good. Take a look here."

He squatted to peel back the crusted cloth from a nasty stab puncture just below the fourth rib. L. knelt beside him, licked her little finger, then slid it into the wound up to the second knuckle.

A stranger meeting Ha Lin on the street might mistake her for a carefree merchant's daughter on the cusp of womanhood: buoyant and blithe, brown skin tanned from long hours in the sun, glossy black hair pulled back from her forehead and gathered in a leather thong. She had a soldier's eyes though. For the past eight years, she'd been through the same training as Valyn, the same training as all the cadets on the deck of the doomed vessel, and the Kettral had long ago hardened her to the sight of death.

Still, Valyn couldn't help but see her for the attractive young woman she was. As a rule, the soldiers avoided romantic entanglements on the Islands. Whores of both sexes were cheap over Hook, and no one wanted a lover's quarrel between men and women trained to kill in dozens of ways. Nonetheless, Valyn sometimes found his eyes straying from the exercise at hand to Ha Lin, to the quirk of her lip, the shape of her figure beneath her combat blacks. He tried to hide his glances—they were embarrassing and unprofessional—but he thought, from the wry grin that sometimes flickered across her face, that she had caught him looking on more than one occasion.

She didn't seem to mind. Sometimes she even looked back with that bold, disarming stare of hers. It was easy to wonder what might have evolved between them if they'd grown up somewhere different, somewhere that training didn't subsume an entire life. Of course, "somewhere different" for Valyn hui'Malkeenian meant the Dawn Palace, which had its own rules and taboos; as a member of the imperial family, he couldn't have loved her any more than he could as a soldier.

Forget it, he told himself angrily. He was there to focus on the exercise, not to spend the morning daydreaming about other lives.

“Professional,” Lin said appreciatively, evidently unaware that his mind had drifted. She pulled her finger out and wiped the crusted gore on her blacks. “Deep enough to burst the kidney, but not so deep as to get the blade stuck.”

Valyn nodded. “There are plenty more like that, more than you’d expect from amateurs.”

He considered the purpling contusion a moment longer, then straightened up and stared out over the slapping chop of the Iron Sea. After all the blood, it felt good to look at the unblemished blue for a minute, the wide expanse of the meridian sky.

“Enough lounging!” Adaman Fane bellowed, cuffing Valyn across the back of the head as he strode the length of the deck, stepping over the sprawled bodies as though they were downed spars or coils of rope. “Get your asses aft!” The massive bald trainer had been with the Kettral better than twenty years and still swam across the sound to Hook and back every morning before dawn. He had little patience for cadets standing around during one of his exercises.

Valyn joined the rest. He knew them all, of course; the Kettral were as small a fighting force as they were elite—the enormous birds that they used to drop in behind enemy lines couldn’t carry more than five or six soldiers at a time. The Empire relied on the Kettral when a mission had to be executed quickly and quietly—for everything else, the Annurian legions could usually get the job done, or the navy, or the marines.

Valyn’s training group numbered twenty-six, seven of whom had flown out to the abandoned ship with Fane for the morning’s exercise. They were a strange crew: Annick Frencha, slim as a boy, snow-pale, and silent as stone; Balendin with his cruel grin and the falcon perched on his shoulder; Tala tall, serious, bright eyes set in a face dark as coal; Gwenna Sharpe, impossibly reckless and incurably hot-tempered; Sami Yurl, the arrogant blond son of one of the empire’s most powerful atreps, bronze-skinned as a god and vicious as a viper with his blades. They didn’t have much in common aside from the fact that someone in command believed that one day they could be very, very good at killing people. Provided nothing killed them first.

All the training, all the lessons, the eight years of language study, demolitions work, navigation practice, weapons sparring, the sleepless nights on watch, the never-ending physical abuse, all intended to harden both the body and the mind, all of it aimed at one goal: Hull’s Trial. Valyn remembered his first day on the Islands as though it had been branded on his mind. The new recruits had stepped off the ship straight into a barrage of curses and insults, into the fierce, angry faces of the veterans who called this distant archipelago their home, who seemed to resent any incursion, even by those eager to follow in their footsteps. Before he’d taken two steps, someone cuffed him across the cheek, then drove his face into the wet, salty sand until he could barely breathe.

“Get this in your heads,” someone—one of the commanders?—hollered. “Just because some incompetent bureaucrat has seen fit to ship you out here to our precious Qirin Islands, it does *not* mean you will *ever* become Kettral. Some of you will be begging for mercy before the week is out. Others we will break in the course of training. Many of you will die, falling from birds, drowned in the spring storms, sobbing pathetically to yourselves as you submit to fleshrot in some miserable Hanna backwater. And that’s the easy part! That’s the fucking *fun* part. Those of you lucky or stubborn enough to live through the training will still need to face Hull’s Trial.”

Hull’s Trial. Despite eight years of whispered speculation, neither Valyn nor the other cadets knew

what it was any more than they had when they first arrived on Qarsh. It always seemed so distant, invisible as a ship beyond the cusp of the horizon. No one forgot it, but it was possible to ignore it for a while; after all, no one reached Hull's Trial if he didn't survive the years of training leading up to it. And yet, after all those years, it had come at last, like a debt long due. In a little over a month, Valyn and the others would earn the rank of full Kettral or they would die.

"Maybe we can start this morning's parade of incompetence," Fane began, tugging Valyn's attention back to the present, "with Ha Lin's assessment." He gestured with a huge hand for her to begin. It was a standard exercise. The Kettral were always dragging cadets to fresh battlefields, the examination of which would both harden them to the sight of death and hone their tactical understanding.

"It was a night attack," Lin replied, voice crisp and confident. "Otherwise, the sailors on deck would have seen their assailants. The raiding party came from starboard—you can see the gouges left by the grapples on the rails. When the—"

"Sweet 'Shael on a stick," Fane interrupted, raising a hand to silence her. "A first-year could tell me all this. Will someone please explain something that's *not* obscenely obvious?" He cast about with his eyes finally fixing on Valyn. "How about His Most Radiant Highness?"

Valyn hated the title. It wasn't even accurate, for one thing—despite the fact that his father was Emperor, *he* was never going to sit the Unhewn Throne—and for another, his high birth was irrelevant. There were no ranks on the Islands, no special perquisites or prerogatives. If anything, Valyn probably worked a little harder than most. Still, he'd learned long ago that complaining just landed you deeper in the shit, and he did not, at the moment, need to spend more time in the shit, so he took a deep breath and began.

"The crew barely even knew they were in trouble—"

Before he could finish the sentence, Fane cut him off with a snort and a curt chop of his hand.

"I give you ten minutes to look over this 'Kent-kissing goat fuck, and your only conclusion is that it was a surprise attack? What have you been doing? Pilfering rings and going through pockets?"

"I was just starting—"

"And now you're finished. How about you, Yurl?" Fane asked, pointing to the tall blond youth. "Maybe you can find some way to contribute to His Most Radiant Highness's exhaustive analysis."

"There's just so much to say," Sami Yurl began, shooting Valyn a satisfied smirk.

"That spit-licking son of a whore," Lin hissed, low enough that only Valyn could hear.

Though all the cadets endured the same privations and aimed at the same goal, there were rifts in the group. Most of the young soldiers enlisted out of a hybrid desire to defend the empire, see the world, and fly those enormous birds to which only the Kettral had access. For a peasant's son from the plains of Sia, the Kettral offered opportunities too fantastic to be believed. Others, however, came to the Islands for other reasons: the chance to fight, to inflict pain, to take life—these drew some rotting flesh-drawing vultures. Despite Sami Yurl's smooth good looks, he was a brutal and nasty fighter. Unlike most of the other cadets, he seemed never to have put his past behind him, striding around the Islands as though expecting everyone to bow and scrape. It was tempting to dismiss him as the pampered, puffed-up son of a lord, an aristocratic fool who had lucked into the cadets through coin and family connections. The truth was more galling: Yurl was an effective, dangerous fighter, better with

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