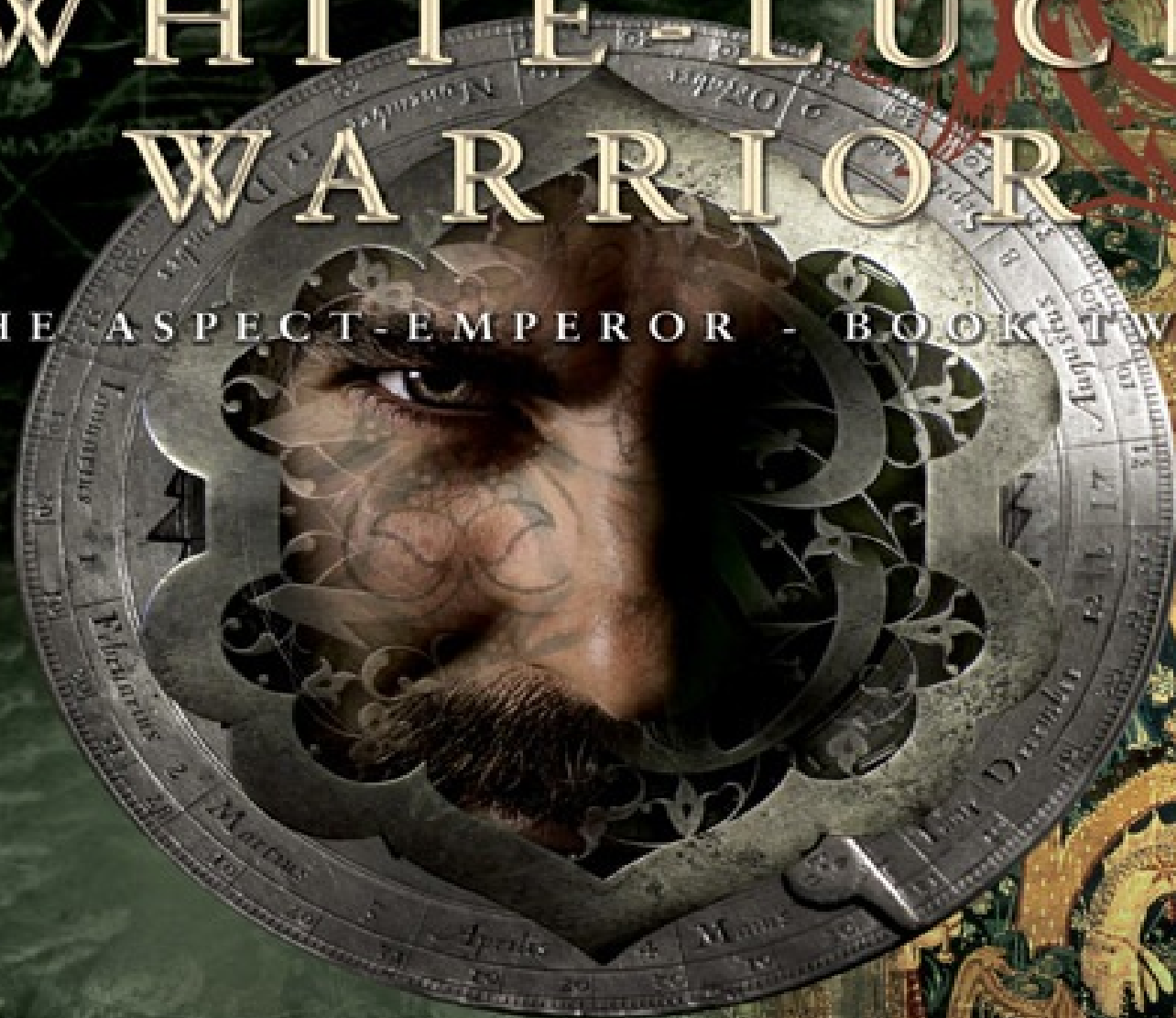


R. SCOTT
BAKKER

THE
WHITE-LUCK
WARRIOR

THE ASPECT-EMPEROR - BOOK TWO



Also by R. Scott Bakker

THE PRINCE OF NOTHING SERIES

The Darkness That Comes Before, Book One

The Warrior-Prophet, Book Two

The Thousandfold Thought. Book Three

THE ASPECT-EMPEROR SERIES

The Judging Eye, Book One

WRITING AS SCOTT BAKKER

Neuropath

Disciple of the Dog

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To Roger Eichorn



The heavens, the sun, the whole of nature is a corpse. Nature is given over to the spiritual, and indeed to spiritual subjectivity; thus the course of nature is everywhere broken in upon by miracles.

—HEGEL, *LECTURES ON THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY*

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Wars, as a rule, fall within the compass of history. They mark the pitch of competing powers, the ebb of some and the ascendancy of others, the ebb and flow of dominance across the ages. But there is a war that Men have waged for so long they have forgotten the languages they first used to describe it. It is a war that makes mere skirmishes out of the destruction of tribes and nations.

There is no name for this war; Men cannot reference what transcends the short interval of their comprehension. It began when they were little more than savages roaming the wilds, in an age before iron or script or bronze. An Ark, vast and golden, toppled from the void, scorching the horizon, throwing up a ring of mountains with the violence of its descent. And from it crawled the dread and monstrous Inchoroi, a race who had come to seal the World against the Heavens and so save the obscenities they had called their souls.

The Nonmen held sway in those ancient days, a long-lived people that surpassed Men not only in beauty and intellect but in wrath and jealousy as well. With their Ishroi heroes and Quya mages, they fought titanic battles and stood vigilant during epochal truces. They endured the Inchoroi weapons of light. They survived the treachery of the Aporetics, who provided their foe with thousands of sorcerous killing Choraes. They overcame the horrors their enemy crafted to people his legions: the Sranc, the Bashrag, and, most fearsome of all, the Wracu. But their avarice at last betrayed them. After centuries of intermittent war, they made peace with the invaders in return for the gift of ageless immortality—a gift that was in fact a fell weapon, the Plague of Wombs.

In the end, the Nonmen hunted the Inchoroi to the brink of annihilation. Exhausted, culled of their strength, they retired to their underworld mansions to mourn the loss of their wives and daughters and the inevitable extinction of their glorious race. Their surviving mages sealed the Ark, which they had come to call Min-Uroikas, and hid it from the world with devious glamours. And from the eastern mountains, the first tribes of Men began claiming the lands the Nonmen had abandoned—Men who had never known the yoke of slavery. Of the surviving Ishroi Kings, some fought, only to be dragged under by the tide of numbers, while others simply left their great gates unguarded, bared their necks to the licentious fury of a lesser race.

And so human history was born, and perhaps the Nameless War would have ended with the fading of its principals. But the golden Ark still existed, and the lust for knowledge has ever been a cancer in the hearts of Men.

Centuries passed, and the mantle of human civilization crept along the great river basins of Eärv and outward, bringing bronze where there had been flint, cloth where there had been skins, and writing where there had been recital. Great cities rose to teeming life. The wilds gave way to cultivated horizons.

Nowhere were Men more bold in their works, or more overweening in their pride, than in the North where commerce with the Nonmen had allowed them to outstrip their more swarthy cousins to the South. In the legendary city of Sauglish, those who could discern the joints of existence founded the first sorcerous Schools. As their learning and power waxed, a reckless few turned to the rumours they had heard whispered by their Nonman teachers—rumours of the great golden Ark. The wise were quick to see the peril, and the Schoolmen of Mangaecca, who coveted secrets above all others, were censured and finally outlawed.

But it was too late. Min-Uroikas was found—occupied.

The fools discovered and awakened the last two surviving Inchoroi, Aurax and Aurang, who had

concealed themselves in the labyrinthine recesses of the Ark. And at their hoary knees the outlaw Schoolmen learned that damnation, the burden that all sorcerers bore, need not be inevitable. They learned that the world could be shut against the judgment of Heaven. So they forged a common purpose with the twin abominations, a Consult, and bent their cunning to the aborted designs of the Inchoroi.

They relearned the principles of the material, the Tekne. They mastered the manipulations of the flesh. And after generations of study and searching, after filling the pits of Min-Uroikas with innumerable corpses, they realized the most catastrophic of the Inchoroi's untold depravities: Mog-Pharau, the No-God.

They made themselves slaves to better destroy the world.

And so the Nameless War raged anew. What has come to be called the First Apocalypse destroyed the great Norsirai nations of the North, laying ruin to the greatest glories of Men. But for Seswatha, the Grandmaster of the Gnostic School of Sohonc, the entire world would have been lost. At his urging, Anasûrimbor Celmomas II, the High-King of the North's mightiest nation, Kûniûri, called on his tributaries and allies to join him in a Holy War against Min-Uroikas, which Men now called Golgotterath. But his Ordeal foundered, and the might of the Norsirai perished. Seswatha fled south to the Ketyai nations of the Three Seas, bearing the greatest of the legendary Inchoroi weapons, the Heron Spear. With Anaxophus, the High-King of Kyraneas, he met the No-God on the Plains of Mengedda and, by dint of valour and providence, overcame the dread Whirlwind.

The No-God was dead, but his slaves and his stronghold remained. Golgotterath had not fallen, and the Consult, blasted by ages of unnatural life, continued to plot their salvation.

The years passed, and the Men of the Three Seas forgot, as Men inevitably do, the horrors endured by their fathers. Empires rose and empires fell. The Latter Prophet, Inri Sejenus, reinterpreted the Tusk, the First Scripture, and within a few centuries, the faith of Inrithism, organized and administered by the Thousand Temples and its spiritual leader, the Shriah, came to dominate the entire Three Seas. The great Anagogic Schools arose in response to the Inrithi persecution of sorcerers. Using Choraë, the Inrithi warred against them, attempting to purify the Three Seas.

Then Fane, the self-proclaimed Prophet of the so-called Solitary God, united the Kianene, the desert peoples of the Great Carathay, and declared war against the Tusk and the Thousand Temples. After centuries and several jihads, the Fanim and their eyeless sorcerer-priests, the Cishaurim, conquered nearly all the western Three Seas, including the holy city of Shimeh, the birthplace of Inri Sejenus. Only the moribund remnants of the Nansur Empire continued to resist them.

War and strife ruled the South. The two great faiths of Inrithism and Fanimry skirmished, though trade and pilgrimage were tolerated when commercially convenient. The great families and nations vied for military and mercantile dominance. The minor and major Schools squabbled and plotted. And the Thousand Temples pursued earthly ambitions under the leadership of corrupt and ineffectual Shriahs.

The First Apocalypse had become little more than legend. The Consult and the No-God had dwindled into myth, something old wives tell small children. After two thousand years, only the Schoolmen of the Mandate, who relived the Apocalypse each night through the eyes of Seswatha, could recall the horror of Mog-Pharau. Though the mighty and the learned considered them fools, their possession of the Gnosis, the sorcery of the Ancient North, commanded respect and mortal envy. Driven by nightmares, they wandered the labyrinths of power, scouring the Three Seas for signs of their ancient and implacable foe—for the Consult.

And as always, they found nothing.

Some argued that the Consult, which had survived the armed might of empires, had finally succumbed to the toll of ages. Others thought that they had turned inward, seeking less arduous means to forestall their damnation. But since the Sranc had multiplied across the northern wilds, no expedition could be sent to Golgotterath to settle the matter. The Mandate alone knew of the Nameless War. They alone stood guard, but they suffocated in a pall of ignorance.

The Thousand Temples elected a new, enigmatic Shriah, a man called Maithanet, who demanded the Inrithi recapture the holy city of the Latter Prophet, Shimeh, from the Fanim. Word of his call spread across the Three Seas and beyond, and faithful from all the great Inrithi nations—Galeoth, Thunyerus, Ce Tydonn, Conriya, High Ainon, and their tributaries—travelled to the city of Momem, the capital of the Nansurium, to swear their swords and their lives to Inri Sejenus. To become Men of the Tusk.

And so was born the First Holy War. Internal feuds plagued the campaign from the very beginning, for there was no shortage of those who would bend the Holy War to their selfish ends. Not until the Second Siege of Caraskand and the Circumfixion of one of their own would this fractiousness be overcome. Not until the Men of the Tusk found a *living* prophet to follow—a man who could see into the hearts of Men. A man like a god.

Anasûrimbor Kellhus.

Far to the north, in the very penumbra of Golgotterath, a group of ascetics called the Dûnyain had concealed themselves in Ishuäl, the secret redoubt of the Kûniüric High-Kings. For two thousand years they had pursued their sacred study, breeding for reflex and intellect, training in the ways of limbo, thought, and face—all for the sake of reason, the Logos. In the effort to transform themselves into the perfect expression of the Logos, the Dûnyain had dedicated their entire existence to mastering the irrationalities of history, custom, and passion—all those things that determine human thought. In this way, they believed, they would eventually grasp what they called the Absolute, and so become true self-moving souls.

But their glorious isolation had been interrupted. After thirty years of exile, one of their number, Anasûrimbor Moënghus, reappeared in their dreams, demanding they send to him his son, Kellhus. Knowing only that Moënghus dwelt in a distant city called Shimeh, the Dûnyain dispatched Kellhus on an arduous journey through lands long abandoned by Men—sent him to kill his father.

But Moënghus knew the world in ways his cloistered brethren could not. He knew well the revelations that awaited his son, for they had been his revelations thirty years previous. He knew that Kellhus would discover sorcery, whose existence the forefathers of the Dûnyain had suppressed. He knew that given his son's abilities, Men would be little more than children to him, that Kellhus would see their thoughts in the nuances of their expression, and that with mere words he would be able to exact any devotion, any sacrifice. He knew, moreover, that eventually Kellhus would encounter the Consult, who hid behind faces that only Dûnyain eyes could see—that he would come to see what Men with their blinkered souls could not: the Nameless War.

For centuries the Consult had evaded their old foe, the School of Mandate, by creating doppelgangers, spies who could take on any face, any voice, without resorting to sorcery and its telltale Mark. By capturing and torturing these abominations, Moënghus learned that the Consult had not abandoned their ancient plot to shut the world against Heaven, that within a score of years they would be able to resurrect the No-God and bring about a second Apocalypse. For years he walked the innumerable paths of the Probability Trance, plotting future after future, searching for the thread of act and consequence that would save the world. For years he crafted his Thousandfold Thought.

Moënghus knew, and so prepared the way for Kellhus. He sent out his world-born son, Maithanet, to seize the Thousand Temples from within, so that he might craft the First Holy War, the weapon Kellhus would need to seize absolute power, and so unite the Three Seas against the doom that waited for their future. What he did not know, could not know, was that Kellhus would see *further* than he had ever thought beyond his Thousandfold Thought ...

And go mad.

Little more than an impoverished wayfarer when he first joined the Holy War, Kellhus used his strength, bearing, intellect, and insight to convince ever more Men of the Tusk that he was the Warrior-Prophecy come to save Mankind from the Second Apocalypse. He understood that Men, who embrace baseless beliefs the way drunkards imbibe wine, would render anything to him, so long as they believed he could save their souls. He also befriended the Schoolman the Mandate had dispatched to watch the Holy War, Drusas Achamian, knowing that the Gnosis, the sorcery of the Ancient North, would provide him with inestimable power. And he seduced Achamian's lover, Esmenet, knowing that her intellect made her the ideal vessel for his seed—for sons strong enough to bear the onerous burden of Dûnyain blood.

By the time the battle-hardened remnants of the campaign at last invested Holy Shimeh, Kellhus possessed the host body and soul. The Men of the Tusk had become his Zaudunyani, his Tribe of Truth. While the Holy War assailed the city's walls, he confronted his father, Moënghus, mortally wounding him, explaining that only with his death could the Thousandfold Thought be realized. Days later Anasûrimbor Kellhus was acclaimed Aspect-Emperor, the first in a millennium, by none other than the Shriah of the Thousand Temples, his half-brother, Maithanet. Even the School of Mandate, who saw his coming as the fulfillment of their most hallowed prophecies, knelt and kissed his knee.

But he had made one mistake. He had allowed Cnaiür urs Skiötha, a Scylvendi chieftain who had accompanied him on his trek to the Three Seas, to learn too much of his true nature. Before his death the barbarian revealed these truths to Drusas Achamian, who had harboured heartbreaking suspicions of his own.

Before the eyes of the entire Holy War, Achamian repudiated Kellhus, whom he had worshipped, Esmenet, whom he had loved, and the Mandate masters he had served. Then he fled into the wilderness, becoming the world's only sorcerer without a school. A Wizard.

Now, after twenty years of conversion and bloodshed, Anasûrimbor Kellhus plots the conclusion of his father's Thousandfold Thought. His New Empire spans the entirety of the Three Seas, from the legendary fortress of Auvangshei on the frontiers of Zeüm to the shrouded headwaters of the River Sayut, from the sweltering coasts of Kutnarmu to the wild rim of the Osthwai Mountains—all the lands that had once been Fanim or Inrithi. It was easily the equal of the old Ceneian Empire in terms of geographical extent and likely far greater when it came to population. A hundred mighty cities, and almost as many languages. A dozen proud nations. Two thousand years of mangled history.

And the Nameless War is nameless no longer. Men call it the Great Ordeal.

The Judging Eye

Achamian

For twenty years Drusas Achamian has kept a painstaking record of his Dreams of the First Apocalypse.

He lives as an exile, the world's only Wizard, on the savage northeastern frontier of the empire. Anasûrimbor Kellhus has raised doubts about his supposed divinity. The Sranc once besieged his half-ruined tower, but the scalpers have driven the inhuman creatures over the mountains, chasing the Holy

Bounty. For years now Achamian has lived in peace, hunting his sleep for hints and rumours of Ishuäl, the hidden fastness of the Dûnyain. If he can find Ishuäl, he believes, he can answer the question that burns so bright in so many learned souls ...

Who is the Aspect-Emperor?

This peace is shattered when Anasûrimbor Mimara, the daughter of his former wife, arrives demanding that he teach her sorcery. Her resemblance to her mother, Esmenet—who has become Empress of the Three Seas—returns the old Wizard to all the pains he sought to escape. He refuses her demand, bids her to leave time and again, but she defies him and takes up a vigil outside his tower.

Mimara, who has never forgiven her mother for selling her into childhood slavery, has fled the Imperial Court with no intention of returning. She is one of the Few. She possesses the ability to see the fabric of existence and so the power to learn sorcery—and this, she has decided, is the one thing that will lift her from the mire of shame and recrimination that is her life. She believes she has nothing else.

But she also possesses a different kind of sight, one both more precious and more significant: on rare occasions, she can see the *morality* of things, the goodness and the evil inherent to them. She has what the ancients called the Judging Eye.

Day and night she howls at the old Wizard in his tower, demanding that he teach her. The first time he comes down, he strikes her. The second time he tries to reason with her. He explains his lifelong quest to discover the truth of Anasûrimbor Kellhus—her stepfather. He seeks the location of Ishuäl because it is the Aspect-Emperor's birthplace, and the truth of a man, he insists, always lies in his origins. He tells her how his Dreams have slowly transformed, abandoning the epic atrocities of the First Apocalypse and focusing more and more upon the mundane details of Seswatha's ancient life. Because of this, he now knows *how* to find Ishuäl: he must recover a map that lies hidden in the ruins of ancient Sauglish, far to the north.

“You have become a prophet,” she tells him. “A prophet of the past.”

And then, in yet one more attempt to win his tutelage, she seduces him.

Only in the shameful aftermath does she tell the old Wizard that he has dwelt upon his suspicion for too long. The Aspect-Emperor has already embarked on his quest to destroy the Consult and save the world from a Second Apocalypse. The Great Ordeal marches.

Achamian abandons Mimara at his tower and strikes out for the nearest scalper outpost. Here he contracts a company called the Skin Eaters to join his quest, deceiving them with promises of the Coffers, the Holy Library's famed treasury. The Captain of the company, a Veteran of the First Holy War named Lord Kosoter, troubles him, as does Incariol, his mysterious Nonman companion, but time is short, and he can think of no one else who would accompany him on such a mad trek. He must somehow reach the Library of Sauglish, and thence Ishuäl, before the Great Ordeal reaches the gates of Golgotterath. The scalper company departs shortly thereafter, planning to cross the Osthwai Mountains into the Sranc-infested North.

Mimara is not so easily dissuaded. She shadows the scalpers without appreciating the cunning of their forest craft. She is discovered, and Achamian is forced to save her, saying that she is his wife's daughter. Fearing that she will reveal his true purposes, he at last relents. He allows her to accompany him on his quest and agrees to teach her sorcery.

Shortly after, they learn that a spring blizzard has closed the passes through the Osthwai Mountains, perhaps delaying them for weeks—for too long. Only one path remains open to them: the accursed halls of Cil-Aujas.

They camp before the entrance to the derelict Nonman Mansion, plagued with apprehensions. The ~~with the coming of dawn, they descend into the heart of the mountain. For days they wander the~~ wrecked halls, led by Incariol and his ancient memories. Deep in the Mansion, Mimara finally confesses her sporadic ability to see the morality of things, and Achamian, obviously troubled, tells her that she possesses the Judging Eye. She presses him to tell her more, but the old Wizard refuses. Before she can berate him properly, the company discovers that it is not alone in the Mansion.

Sranc assail them with fury and countless numbers. Despite the sorcerous toll exacted by Incariol and Achamian, the company is overcome, and the survivors are forced to flee down into the bowels of Cil-Aujas. Achamian is knocked unconscious by a Sranc bearing a Chora. Mimara kills the creature and pockets the thing. They flee through the mines that riddle the foundations of the mountain and find themselves on the scorched rim of a burning lake. The Sranc pour after them, a howling tide. They flee along a stair and would certainly perish were it not for Incariol and his sorcerous might. Their route sealed behind them, they find themselves in an ancient slave pit, huddling among the bones of a dead dragon. Only a handful survive.

While they recover themselves, Incariol dispenses Qirri, an ancient Nonman remedy. Mimara finds herself staring at her Chora. It is an abomination in her sorcerous eyes, yet she persists gazing. The Judging Eye opens, and the thing is miraculously transformed. Suddenly she sees it for what it truly is: a white burning Tear of God. She turns to Somandutta, the scalper who has become her protector with the Wizard incapacitated. But he sees nothing ...

Then she notices the stranger sitting in their midst.

Incariol recognizes the figure as the shade of Gin'yursis, the ancient Nonman King of Cil-Aujas. The wraith dons the Nonman as if he were clothing. While the company stands watching in dread, the Qirri finally revives the old Wizard. Recognizing their peril, he begins screaming at them to flee.

Again they race into the black, while something dark and nebulous pursues them. In desperation Achamian brings the ceiling crashing down, sealing the company even deeper within the doom of the Mansion.

They find themselves at the bottom of a vast well, what Achamian remembers as the Great Mediocrity. From his ancient Dreams, a stair that plumbs the whole mountain. The sky is little more than a prick of light above them. The battered Skin Eaters rejoice. All they need do is climb ...

But Gin'yursis rises from the deeps to claim them, dragging Hell itself as his mantle.

Mimara's Judging Eye opens. She raises high her brilliant Tear of God ...

The Great Ordeal

Far to the north, young Varalt Sorweel finds himself staring down upon the boggling might of the Southron Believer-Kings. He is the only son of Varalt Harweel, the King of Sakarpus, who has resisted the Aspect-Emperor's demand to yield his ancient city and its famed Chora. Standing with his father on the high curtain walls, the adolescent realizes that he and his people are doomed. Then, miraculously, a stork—a bird that is holy to the Sakarpi—appears on the battlements above his father. The two commune in the charged silence that follows, then King Harweel turns and commands that Sorweel be taken to safety. "See that no harm comes to him!" he cries. "He will be our final swordstroke! Our vengeance!" Dragged away screaming, the young man watches sorcerous flames engulf the parapets and his father upon them. A desperate flight ensues, and it seems that the *Aspect-Emperor himself* pursues them through the chaotic streets.

The pursuit ends in the apparent safety of the citadel. Blasting through walls, Anasûrimbor Kellhus effortlessly kills his protectors. He approaches the adolescent Prince, but rather than seizing

striking him, he *embraces* him. Tells him that he is forgiven.

The city secure, the Great Ordeal prepares for the long march across the trackless wilds. Sorweel finds himself desolate for the loss of his father and the shame of his new circumstances. As the new King of Sakarpus, he is naught but a tool of the New Empire, a way for the Aspect-Emperor to legitimize his tyranny. Before the host departs, none other than Moënghus and Kayûtas, the elder sons of Anasûrimbor Kellhus, visit him in his palace. They tell him he is to join the Ordeal as the symbol of his nation's commitment to their holy cause. The following day Sorweel finds himself part of the Scions, a horse company composed of princely hostages from across the rim of the New Empire. This is how he meets and befriends Zsoronga ut Nganka'kull, the Successor Prince of Zeüm.

A Mandate sorcerer named Eskeles is assigned to tutor him in Sheyic, the common tongue of the Three Seas, and through him the young King learns the reasons why so many worship the Aspect-Emperor so fervently. For the first time he begins to doubt his father ... What if the Aspect-Emperor spoke true? What if the world *really was* about to end?

Why else would someone so cunning march so many Men to their doom?

Sorweel is also provided a slave named Porsparian to attend to his needs, a wizened old man who is anything but the submissive thrall he pretends to be. One night Sorweel watches him tear away the tunic and mould the face of the Goddess Yatwer from the dirt. Before his eyes, mud bubbles up as spit from her earthen lips. The slave palms this mud and smears it across the incredulous King's cheeks.

The following morning Sorweel attends a Council of Potentates with Zsoronga and Eskeles. He is dread waxed as he watches the Holy Aspect-Emperor move from lord to lord, declaring the truths that he thinks hidden in their souls. He fears what will happen when he sees the hatred and treachery smouldering in his own. But when Anasûrimbor Kellhus comes to him, he *congratulates* Sorweel for grasping the truth and, before everyone assembled, declares him one of the Believer-Kings.

Esmenet

Far to the south in Momemn, the capital of the New Empire, Esmenet struggles to rule in her husband's absence. With Kellhus and the bulk of his armed might absent, the embers of insurrection have begun to ignite across the Three Seas. The Imperial Court regards her with condescension. Fanayal ab Kascamandri, the Padirajah of what had been the heathen Kianene Empire before the First Holy War, grows ever more bold on the fringes of the Great Carathay Desert. Psatma Nannaferi, the outlawed Mother-Supreme of the Cult of Yatwer, prophesies the coming of the White-Luck Warrior, the god-sent assassin who will murder the Aspect-Emperor and his progeny. Even the *Gods*, it seems, have turned against the Anasûrimbor Dynasty. Esmenet turns to her brother-in-law, Maithanet, the Shriah of the Thousand Temples, for his clarity of vision and strength, yet she wonders why her husband would leave the Mantle in *her* incapable hands, when his brother is Dûnyain like himself.

She also has the travails of her own family to contend with. All her eldest children have gone. Mimara has fled—to Achamian, she hopes and prays. Kayûtas, Serwa, and her stepson, Moënghus, ride with their father in the Great Ordeal. Theliopa remains with her as an adviser, but the girl is scarcely human, she is so narrow and analytical. The next youngest, the mad and murderous Inrilatas, Esmenet keeps imprisoned atop the Andiamine Heights. Only her very youngest, the twins Samarmas and Kelmomas, provide her with any comfort. She clings to them as if they were flotsam in a shipwreck, not realizing that Kelmomas, like his brother Inrilatas, has inherited too many of her father's gifts. The boy has already driven away Mimara with the cunning of his insinuations. Now he plots deeper ways to secure sole possession of his mother's heart.

He will tolerate no rivals.

In the city of Iothiah, meanwhile, the White-Luck Warrior reveals himself to Psatma Nannaferi who summons all her High Priestesses to plot the destruction of the Anasûrimbor. None other than Yatwer, the monstrous Mother of Birth, moves against the Aspect-Emperor. As the Goddess most favoured by slaves and caste-menials, she commands tremendous temporal power. Unrest spreads among the servile poor.

Even as the first rumours of this sedition reach his mother in Momemn, young Kelmomas continues his own devious insurrection. Where before he had driven Mimara away, now he engineers the death of his idiot twin, Samarmas, knowing that grief for his loss will make his mother even more desperate for his love.

Capsized by the death of Samarmas, bewildered by the possibility that the Hundred themselves might hunt her family, Esmenet turns to her brother-in-law, Maithanet. He reminds her that the Gods can save neither the No-God nor the coming Apocalypse and so perceives her husband as a threat instead of a saviour.

At his bidding, Esmenet summons Sharacinth, the officially sanctioned Matriarch of the Yatwerians, with the intention of setting the Cult against itself. When they fail to cow the woman, Kellhus himself arrives and breaks her will to resist with sheer force of presence. The blubbering Matriarch yields, promising to wrest her Cult from Psatma Nannaferi. The Aspect-Emperor returns to the Great Ordeal, dismaying his Empress with his indifference to their son's death.

Realizing that his mother turns to him the more circumstances turn against her, Kelmomas sets out that very night, using his Dûnyain blood to steal across the Imperial Precincts, and murders Sharacinth and her retinue.

Rumours of her assassination travel quickly, igniting the embers of sedition among the slaves and caste-menials. Riots erupt across the New Empire.

Esmenet does turn to Kelmomas for comfort. At night, she takes to embracing him in her bed while the smell of smoke and the sound of screams and shouts waft through windows. Intoxicated with success, the young Prince-Imperial begins plotting against his uncle, Maithanet, knowing that the man alone possesses the ability to see through his deception.

CHAPTER ONE

The Meorn Wilderness

Without rules, madness. Without discipline, death.

—NANSUR MILITARY MAXIM

Spring, 20 New Imperial Year (4132 Year-of-the-Tusk), the “Long Side”

Even when the Skin Eaters walked ways sheeted in sunlight, some shadow of Cil-Aujas lingered in their eyes. The reflection of friends lost. The glint of things not quite survived.

Not two days had passed since they had escaped the derelict underworld mansion. There was madness in the deep, and the scalpers wore it more as fact than trophy. Decimated by Sranc. Pursued through serpentine deeps to the very brink of Hell. They had been transformed, these men who had survived seasons of hunting and harvesting inhuman scalps in pursuit of the Holy Bounty. Their hearts, which had been heaped with scars, now stood cracked open. They walked raw, whether trekking across mountain ridges or filing through forest tunnels. And for all their regret they were thankful. Gentle breezes carried the kiss of blessings. Shadows. Rain. Any sign of an open sky, no matter how indirect, occasioned some small rejoice.

They walked with the wonder of those who could not fathom their breath, their heartbeat. What they could not believe they still lived.

Too few of them remained for the old scalper discipline to hold—or so it seemed to the old Wizard. If any Rules of the Slog remained, they would have to be discovered on the way.

The Captain still commanded them. If anything he seemed more archaic, more inscrutable and more cruel. His Ainoni garb, which was tattered before, had been reduced to black-stained rags. His shield, which he wore slung over his back, sported innumerable dents and clefts. But his authority, like everything else, had been transformed by their passage—not so much eroded as superimposed over other possibilities. Events had sorted them.

Sarl was the primary example. Once the mouthpiece of the Captain, he now skulked in the rear of their ragged line, his eyes fixed on his drunken steps, his fingers picking at the scabbed remnant of the wound on his cheek. Periodically he would cackle, a sharp, glutinous sound that jarred the others from their marching reveries. He spoke to no one, content to endlessly mutter to himself—nonsense about seeing Hell mostly. Once or twice a day he would begin barking about the Coffers. “The Slog and Slogs! Yes! Yes!” The few glances he spared his Captain were filled with wounded terror.

If the decimated company yet possessed a second it was Galian. The Nansur had emerged almost unscathed from Cil-Aujas—a tribute to his luck and a boost to his prestige. Aside from soldiers, no one understood the importance of luck quite so profoundly as scalpers. Galian, along with Pokwas and Xonghis, had become a nucleus of sorts, a kind of conspiracy of the sane within the greater company. Strangely enough, they found their power in *keeping* their counsel. When the Captain described this that course of action, the Skin Eaters’ eyes inevitably turned to the Nansur Columnary. Almost without exception Galian would pause for the sake of words unspoken, then nod his head aye: he would

never so foolish as to contradict the Captain.

~~And the Captain was never so foolish as to provoke his contradiction.~~

As always, Xonghis ranged ahead, continually trotting where everyone save Cleric trudged. Were not for his hunting skills, the expedition would have almost certainly perished. Pokwas, his scars gruesome with clotted blood, rarely ventured from Galian's side. Every dusk the three would find place apart from the others, gnaw sorcery-cooked meat, and trade murmurs. Xonghis was always glancing about, fingers combing his slight Jekki beard, his almond eyes sorting his surroundings even as he spoke or listened to his comrades. He rarely laughed. Pokwas invariably ministered to his greytulwar, sometimes praying as he did so. Something in his voice continually seemed to swing about the possibility of outrage, like a drunk nursing grudges. His laughter typically boomed. Galian always seemed to be sitting between them, even though their little triangle possessed no centre. The former Columnary was forever scraping the stubble from his chin. He seemed to watch his scalper brothers with the exclusion of the world, his eyes as keen as an alarmed father's. His laughter was always silent.

For whatever reason, Soma and Sutadra found themselves on the outside of this impromptu cabal. The gaunt Kianene, Sutadra, remained silent and watchful the same as before, though an intensity had crept into his eyes that was almost audible. He looked like a man hanging on the words of his wife-murderer, waiting for a confession. Soma was perhaps the least changed, the one most inclined to speak and act in the old ways. And true to form, the Nilnameshi caste-noble seemed utterly oblivious to the distrust that this incited in his comrades.

Nothing should be the same after Cil-Aujas.

The surviving Galeoth formed another small faction, one that was at once more mutinous and more complacent. If they were more liable to bellyache or, worse yet, openly question the expedition, they were also more inclined to shrink from the scalding chill of the Captain's gaze. For whatever reason, the underworld trial had exacted the heaviest toll from them. Wonard's injuries, which he took to hiding like a wounded dog, had become septic. He marched with the flat-eyed look of someone who simply carried himself from place to place without wit or comprehension. Hameron continually cried out in his sleep, and seemed to sob as much as breathe over the course of the day. Only Conger seemed to improve as the days wore on. Despite the endless trudging, his limp had all but vanished.

But no one had been more transformed in the collective eye than Cleric. Where before they had walked with an enigma, one rounded warm and smooth by long acquaintance, now they walked with Nonman *Ishroi* ... a Quya Mage.

Even for men so bitten, it was no small thing to walk with a legend. And for a Wizard steeped in the ancient ways, it was cause for more than a few sleepless watches ...



With the Osthwai Mountains to the southwest, night fell with the finality of a hammer. Since this was a skinny country, they marched "on the dark," as Sarl had put it, without fires or illumination of any sort. They became a company of shadows, skulkers between the trees, loathe to speak. The fact of their losses always loomed the largest, it seemed, when they made camp. A kind of desolation haunted them. They would eat with the vacant look of those thrown from the grooves of a kinder life.

Each night, Cleric wandered among them, wordlessly dispensing miniscule smudges of Qirri. He seemed taller without his cloak. Cracked blood still clotted the nimble links of his hauberk. The Nail of Heaven threw lines of blue and white across the polish of his scalp and skin. His eyes, when they blinked, seemed more animal than otherwise.

Afterward he would sit, head bowed, next to the Captain, who either sat like a stone or leaned

forward to lecture the Nonman in a continuous, growling whisper. No one could fathom what was said.

The Qirri would soak into their veins, a touch of bitter on the tongue that became a slow-spreading warmth, stretching revival. And their thoughts, relieved of bodily deprivations, would climb into remembered moulds.

The shadows would begin to mutter, like children testing the absence of a violent father.

The Nonman's voice would rise from the hushed chorus, Sheyic spoken with foreign accents and deep, alien intonations. A different kind of silence would fall across them, the Skin Eaters as well as the Wizard and the girl. A silence, not of expectation, but of men who awaited tidings of themselves. Places faraway.

And the sermon would begin, every bit as disordered and beautiful as the speaker.

"You have wandered out of light and life," he began one night. They still picked their way through the foothills, following ridges flanged by innumerable ravines, so they had camped high. Cleric sat upon a bare stone shelf, his face toward the blackening bulk of Aenaratiol, the Ziggurat. By some fluke of happenstance, Achamian and Mimara found themselves sitting a stage higher, so they could see the mountain shadows encompass the forested tracts over his shoulders. It almost seemed they had found him thus, sitting cross-legged before the wilderness they would dare cross, a sentinel waiting to judge their folly.

"You have *seen* what so few of your kind have seen. Now, no matter where you walk, you will be able to look about and see the *piling of powers*. Empires of the sky. Empires of the deep ..."

His great head leaned forward, white and waxen as a candle against the dark.

"Ever are Men stranded on the surface of things. And ever do they confuse what they see with the sum of what matters. Ever do they forget the rank *insignificance* of the visible. And when they do honour the beyond—the *beneath*—they render it according to what is familiar ... They *disfigure* it for comfort's sake."

The old Wizard sat rigid.

"But you ... you *know* ... You know that what lies beyond resembles us no more than the potted plant resembles the urn ..."

A sudden mountain gust swept the high ridges, whisked through the gnarled jack pine that crooked the stone about them. Mimara raised a hand to brush the hair from her face.

"You who have glimpsed Hell."

"The Slog!" Sarl exclaimed in hoary tones. "The Slog of Slogs—just as I told you!" His laugh was half gurgle and half rasp.

But the company had ceased to hear these intrusions, let alone glance at their former Sergeant.

"All things have a place," Cleric said. "Death has its place. You have plumbed the depths, passed beyond the gates of life, and you have been where only the dead have been, seen what only the dead have seen ..."

The Wizard found himself flinching from the Nonman's black-glittering gaze.

"May it greet you as an old friend when you return."

A moment of pondering silence.

"The Coffers!" Sarl croaked, his face raisin-wrinkled with hilarity. "The *Coffers*, lads!"

Darkness claimed the wild horizon.



Kiampas dead. Oxwora dead. Sarl deranged. And dozens of other Skin Eaters the Wizard had never known outside the continuity of their presence ... Dead.

The toll Achamian had feared had become real. Blood had been let, lives had been lost in the dead tumble, all in the name of *his* convictions ... and the lie he had told in their dread service.

Distance and abstraction are ever the twin lures of disaster. When he paused to recollect it, that first step from his tower seemed absurd with ease. What was one step? Two? And all the walking that followed, across the wild, into the Obsidian Gate, step after step ... Down into mountainous nethers.

All for the sake of finding Ishuäl ... The name spoken by a mad barbarian so many years ago. The cradle of Anasûrimbor Kellhus. The hidden refuge of the *Dûnyain*.

Now, wrecked and heartbroken, they continued the long march to Sauglish, the ruined City of Robes, in the hope of plundering the Coffers, the famed sorcerous vault beneath the Library of Sauglish. Achamian had promised them riches, baubles that would make them princes. He had told them nothing of the map he hoped to find there, nor of the capricious Dreams that guided him.

He had glimpsed the Whore's shadow from the very beginning—from the moment he had set eyes on Mimara, it seemed. All along he had known the toll of his mad mission. And yet, he had let his lies and transgressions accumulate, taking heart in flabby rationalization.

The *truth*, he had told himself. The truth demanded sacrifice, from him and from others.

Could a man be called murderer when he killed in the name of truth?

Come nightfall, Achamian often peered at them through the gloom, these men who had risked all in the name of his lies. Scalpers hugging themselves against the chill. Foul. Ragged. Eyes pricked with madness. Not so much broken as disfigured—crippled strong. Only yesterday, it seemed, he had watched them strut and caper, trade jokes and boasts in the manner of men in the shadow of imminent battle. They were going to follow their Captain across the ends of the earth to loot a treasury out of legend. They were going to return princes. Now, scarcely anything remained of that bombast—save Soma, whose peculiar idiocy had rendered changeless, and Sarl, who had gone insane. The old Wizard watched them and he mourned what he had done almost as much as he feared what he was about to do.

One night he caught Mimara watching his watching. She was one of those women with a canny gift for seeing into masculine faces. She was forever guessing his chaotic humours.

“You feel remorse,” she said in reply to his quizzical look.

“Cil-Aujas has made you right,” he replied under his breath. She had called him a murderer on the far side of the mountains, had threatened to reveal his lies to the others if he turned her away.

“It has wronged me more,” she replied.

In the absence of consequences, lies were as easy as breathing, as simple as song. During his days as a Mandate Schoolman, Achamian had told innumerable falsehoods to innumerable people, and a fair number of fatal truths as well. He had destroyed reputations, even lives, in the pursuit of an abstraction, the Consult. He had even killed one of his beloved pupils, Inrau, in the name of what could not be touched or seen. He found himself wondering what it must be like for his former brother now that the Consult had been revealed. What would it be like to belong to an *Imperial* School, to have princes and kings stammer in your presence? According to Mimara, they even carried Shrial Warrants, holy writs that exempted them from the laws of the lands that hosted them.

Mandate Schoolmen with *Shrial Warrants*! What would that be like?

He would never know. On the day the Consult had ceased being mere abstraction, the day Anasûrimbor Kellhus had been declared Aspect-Emperor, he had decided to hunt another obscurity, the origins of the man who had revealed them—and in his *Dreams*, no less. Maybe that was his doom. Maybe that would be the tragic irony that defined the lay of his life. Hunting smoke. Throwing the number-sticks of damnation. Sacrificing the actual for the possible.

The eternal outcast. Doubter and Believer.

With more men to kill.



Dreams are only possessed upon waking, which is why men are so keen to heap words upon them after the fact. They engulf your horizons, pin your very frame to turbulent unreality. They are the hand that reaches behind the mountains, beyond the sky, beneath the deepest sockets of the earth. They are the ignorance that tyrannizes our every choice. Dreams are the darkness that only slumber can illuminate.

The old Wizard walked slots beneath mighty foundations. The stones, he knew, were among the oldest in the complex, part of the original structure raised by Carû-Ongonean, the third and perhaps the greatest of the Umeri God-Kings. Here ... This was the place where the Nonmen of the famed Tutelage, the Siqû, had come to live among the Kûniûri. This was the place where the first Quyan text had been translated and stored, and where the first sorcerous School, the Sohonc, had been born.

Here ... The famed Library of Sauglish.

Temple. Fortress. Granary of many things, wisdom and power foremost among them.

The walls seemed to close about him, so narrow was the way. Candles squatted in sconces along the walls. Whenever he neared one, it sparked to white life, while the one previous vanished into strings of smoke. Over and over, until it seemed there was but one flame leaping from wick to wick.

But the illumination was never quite enough. For every ten steps, five took him through absolute shadow, allowing him to see the layering of ancient Wards without the confusion of worldly sights. Ugly, the way all sorcery is ugly, and yet beautiful all the same, like the rigging of great ships, one ethereal—and as deadly as gallows. In the millennium since its construction, the Library—and the Sohonc—had never been conquered. The Cond Yoke. The Skettic invasions. No matter what the conquering nation, civilized or barbaric, they all sheathed their swords and came to terms. Whether perfumed and erudite like Osseoratha or unwashed and illiterate like Aulyanau the Conqueror, they all came to Sauglish bearing gifts instead of threats ... They all knew.

This was the *Library*.

The corridor ended in blind walls. Holding tight the ornate map-case Celmomas had given him, the Grandmaster spoke the sorcerous words. Meaning flashed through his eyes and mouth, and he trod *through* monolithic stone. The Cant of Sideways Stepping.

Blinking, he found himself in the Upper Pausal, a narrow rostrum overlooking the Pausal proper, a dark antechamber long and deep enough to hold a war galley. Batteries of candles set below sparked to spontaneous life. Seswatha descended the right stair, map-case firmly in hand. Of all the innumerable rooms of the Library, only the Pausal could boast Nonmen artisanship because only it had been hewn out of living rock. Twining figures adorned the walls, frieze stacked upon frieze, representations of the Tutelage and the first great peace between the High Norsirai and the False Men—as the Tusk called the Cûnuroi. But like so many who entered this room, Seswatha scarcely noticed them. And how could he when the stigmatic blemish of sorcery so assaulted his gaze?

It was always the same whenever one of the Few, those who could see the mark that the sorcerers cut into the natural, walked the Pausal. One thing and one thing only commanded their gaze ... the Great Gate of Wheels. The portal that was a lock, and the lock that was a portal.

The entrance to the Coffers.

To mundane eyes it was a wonder of scale and machination. To arcane eyes it was nothing less than a miracle of interlocking deformities: enormous incantation wheels carved from milk-white marble turning through a frame of bronze set with constellations of faces carved of black diorite, instilled

animata—or proxies, as they called them—enslaved souls, whose only purpose was to complete the circuit between watcher and watched that was the foundation of all reality, sorcerous or not. So hideous was the Mark of the thing, so metaphysically disfigured, that bile bubbled to the back of his throat whenever he found himself before it.

Quya magic. Deeper than deep.

Seswatha paused on the stair, warred with his stomach. He looked down and for some reason felt no surprise, no alarm, to see that the golden map-case had become an infant's inert form. Blue and green. Mottled with black bruising, as if it had perished while lying on its face. Slicked with the sweat of the dead.

Such is the madness of dreams that we can assume the continuity of even the most jarring things. An infant corpse, it seemed, had always been what he carried. Achamian followed the grooves of the Dream thoughtful only of what had been thought, oblivious to the discrepancies. Only when he came to a halt beneath the arcane machinery of the Gate, only when he commanded the proxies to roll back the Gate, did he find himself skidding across un-lived life ...

Squirming. The dead baby was twisting and straining against his hands.

The Great Gate of Wheels rumbled to cracking life. At last the Archmage gazed down in horror.

Black eyes shining up with newborn blariness. Fat-webbed arms reaching out, tiny fingers clutching.

Revulsion. Flailing panic. He cast the thing the way a boy might throw off a spider or a snake, but simply hung in the air before him, made a cradle of empty space. Behind it, the wheels of the Gate continued their groaning tumble.

“This,” Seswatha gasped, “is not what hap—!”

The last of the great bronze cogs had ceased their clacking. The Gate of Wheels was drawing open ...

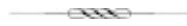
The infant had dropped from the air. A golden tube clattered where it had fallen. Beyond it, the ponderous bronze machinery of the Gate folded into blackness. A gust swept out across the antechamber.

Achamian stood immobile.

Wind roiled and twisted. His gown tugged at his limbs. A rumble shivered through the walls and lintels, deep, as if a tempest lashed some world inside the world. The Gate, which stood within the Library's deepest heart, now opened onto the sky—not the Coffers, the sky! And he could see the *Library*, as though the Pausal hung from a great height above it. Bastions collapsing. Walls flying outward in strings of sand. And he could see *it* ... the horror of horrors within billowing skirts of dust and debris, a mountain of black-spinning wind that linked wrecked earth to flickering clouds. Existence itself howled.

TELL ME ... the Whirlwind said.

WHAT DO YOU SEE?



WHAT AM I?

The Mandate libraries in Atyersus possessed many maps, some old, others new. On all save the most ancient, the land the Skin Eaters dared cross was called the Meorn Wilderness, a name that carried many implications for the learned squints that regarded it.

The scalpers, however, simply called it the Long Side. They had heard the stories, of course. They knew the vast forests they plumbed had once been cultivated horizons. Even more, they had seen the

ruins: the stone-stumped grottos that were the lost city of Teleol, and the fortress of Maimor—Fatwall, as they called it. They knew of the Meori Empire. They knew that once, so very long ago, the wilderness and savagery had lain to the *south* of the Osthwai Mountains. And the thoughtful among them would wonder at the way the slow leakage of years could bring about such grand and dramatic reversals.

When the first companies of Scalpoi had crossed into the Wilderness some ten years previous, they had been overwhelmed by the numbers and the ferocity of the Sranc clans they had found. The “Stupid Days,” the old veterans called them, because every slog seemed a throw of the number-sticks. But the game was plentiful. And the foothills offered endless possibilities for ambush—the key to nearly every Captain’s success. Within a matter of five years, the Scalpoi had driven the Sranc into the lowland forests, the Great Mop, taking so many scalps that the Holy Bounty had to be halved, lest the New Empire go bankrupt.

The reconquest of the Great Meori Empire had begun, albeit by Men who resembled the Sranc more than otherwise. When Fatwall, or Maimor, was discovered, the Holy Aspect-Emperor even sent a Judge and a company of Ministrate Pikemen to occupy the abandoned fortress over the summer months. Many among the Imperial Apparati spoke of reclaiming all the ancient Meori provinces—from the Osthwai Mountains to the Sea of Cerish—within ten scant years. Some even argued the Holy Bounty should take precedence over the Great Ordeal. Why wage war against one, they dared ask, when with mere gold you could battle against *all*?

But the forests, vast and deep and dark, made a mockery of these hopes. No matter how many companies filed into them, no matter how many bales of scalps they carried out, the frontier ceased its creeping retreat and remained fixed, year after year. For the first time since the calling of the Holy Bounty the Sranc did not dwindle and withdraw. One Imperial Mathematician, the notorious Mepmerat of Shigek, claimed that the Scalpoi had at last encountered a population of Sranc that could reproduce as fast as they could slaughter—that the Bounty had become *futile*, in effect. He would be imprisoned for his impious accuracy.

For their part, the Scalpoi cared nothing for squint-eyed calculations or petty political aspirations. One need only probe the verges of the Great Mop to understand why the skinnies had stopped running. The Mop was like no forest known to Men of the Three Seas. Trees so vast and hoary they had raised berms about their bases, creating troughs like the swells of a stormy sea. The thatching of the canopy so dense that little more than grey-green light attenuated the filtered gloom. The ground devoid of undergrowth, broken only by the colossal bones of trees long dead. For Sranc, the Mop was a kind of paradise: perpetually dark with easy earth rich in grubs. It provided for all but their most dreaded appetites.

That is, until the coming of Men.



Xonghis had led them down from the mountains into the foothills at a northwest tangent, so nearly a week passed before the expedition entered the Mop. The plan was to skirt the forest’s edges and march to Fatwall, ancient Maimor, with the hope of resupplying. Mimara fairly clung to the Wizard during this time, sometimes actually leaned against him, even though she possessed no real wounds of consequence. Her mother had done the same, years before in the First Holy War, and the memories would have struck Achamian deep—pain deep—had not the pandemonium of the previous days been so complete. He could scarce blink without glimpsing some shredded glimpse of their ordeal.

When he asked her what happened at the bottom of the Great Medial Screw, she never answered,

least not satisfactorily. According to her, the Wight-in-the-Mountain had been driven away by her Chorae and that was that. When he reminded her that the Captain also carried a Chorae, one that apparently made no difference, she would simply shrug as if to say, “Well, *I’m* not the Captain, am I?” Time and again, Achamian found himself circling back to the issue. He could not do otherwise. Even when he ignored her, he could sense her Chorae against her breast, like a whiff of oblivion, or the scratch of some otherworldly burr.

The School of Mandate had long eschewed the Daimotic Arts: Seswatha had believed Ciphrang too capricious to be yoked to human intent. Still, Achamian had some understanding of the metaphysics involved. He knew that some agencies could be summoned shorn of the Outside, plucked whole as they were, while others bore their realities *with them*, swamping the World with porous madness. The shadow of Gin’yursis, Achamian knew, had been one of the latter.

Chorae only negated violations of the Real; they returned the world to its fundamental frame. But Gin’yursis had come as *figure and frame*—a symbol wedded to the very Hell that gave it meaning ...

Mimara’s Chorae should have been *useless*.

“Please, girl. Indulge an old man’s confusion.”

It involved the Judging Eye ... somehow. He knew it in his bones.

“Enough. It was madness, I told you. I don’t know what happened!”

“More. There has to be something more!”

She fixed him with her damning glare. “What an old hypocrite you are ...”

She was right, of course. As hard as he pressed her about what had happened, she pressed him harder for details of the Judging Eye—and he was even more evasive. A part of him suspected that she refused to answer out of some peevish desire for retribution.

What does one say to the doomed? What could knowing provide other than the air of a executioner’s vigil? To know one’s doom was to know futility, to walk with a darkened, deadened heart.

To forget hope.

The old Wizard knew this as much from his Dreams as from his life. Of all the lessons he had learned at life’s uncaring knee, perhaps this was the most hard won. So when she pestered him with questions—gazing at him with Esmenet’s eyes and airs—he would bristle. “The Judging Eye is the stuff of witches lore and old wives’ tales! I have no *knowledge* to share, only rumours and misapprehensions!”

“Then tell me those!”

“Bah! Leave me in peace!”

He was *sparing* her, he told himself. Of course his refusal to answer simply stoked her fears, but fearing and knowing were two different things. There is mercy in ignorance; Men are born appreciating this. Scarce a day passes when we do not save others from things—small and great—that would be worse for knowing.

The old Wizard wasn’t the only one to suffer Mimara’s rancour. Somandutta drew abreast of them one morning, his manner at once pensive and breezy with false good humour. He began by asking her questions, then plied her with various inane observations when she refused to reply. He was trying, the old Wizard knew, to rekindle something of their old banter, perhaps hoping to find unspoken forgiveness in the resumption of old ways and manners. His approach was at once cowardly and eminently male: he was literally asking her to *pretend* that he had not abandoned her in Cil-Auja. And she was having none of it.

“Mimara ... please,” he finally hazarded. “I know ... I know I wronged you ... down ... down *there*.”
But everything happened so ... so quickly.”

“But that’s the way it is with fools, isn’t it?” she said, her tone so light it could only be scathing.
“The world is quick and they are slow.”

Perhaps she had happened upon an old and profound fear of his. Perhaps she had simply shocked him with the summary ease of her condemnation. Either way, the young Nilnameshi caste-noble came to an abrupt stop, stood dumbfounded as the others trudged past. He ducked away from Galian and his teasing attempt to pinch his cheek.

Afterward Achamian joined him on the trail, moved more by the memory of Esmenet and the similarities of *her* pique than by real pity. “Give her time,” he said. “She’s fierce in her feelings, but her heart is forgiving ...” He trailed, realizing this wasn’t quite true. “She’s too quick not to appreciate the ... difficulties,” he added.

“Difficulties?”

Achamian frowned at the petulance of the young man’s tone. The fact was he agreed with Mimara. He did think Soma was a fool—but a well-meaning one. “Have you ever heard the saying, ‘Courage for men is fodder for dragons?’”

“No,” the fulsome lips admitted. “What does it mean?”

“That courage is more complicated than simple souls credit ... Mimara may be many things, Soma, but simple isn’t one of them. We all need time to build fences about what ... what happened.”

The wide brown eyes studied him for a moment. Even after everything they had endured, the same affable light illuminated his gaze. “Give her time ...” Soma repeated in the tone of a young man’s taking heart.

“Time,” the old Wizard said, resuming his march.

Afterward he found himself hoping the daft fool didn’t confuse his advice for paternal permission. The thought of the man wooing Mimara made him bristle as if he really *were* her father. The question of why he felt this way plagued him for a good portion of the afternoon. For all her capricious strength, something about Anasûrimbor Mimara demanded protection, a frailty so at odds with the tenor of her declarations that it could only seem tragic ... beautiful. The air of things too extraordinary to long survive the world’s rigour.

This realization, if anything, made her company more irritating.

“The woman saved your life,” Pokwas told him one evening, when the to-and-fro of men milling found them side by side. “That means deep things in my country.”

“She saved *all* our lives,” Achamian said.

“I know,” the towering Sword-dancer replied with a solemn nod. “But *yours* in particular, Wizard. Several times.” A look of wonder crept into his face.

“What?” Achamian could feel the old scowl building, the one that had aged into his expression.

“You’re so *old*,” Pokwas said with a shrug. “Who risks everything to pluck an *empty* wineskin from a raging river? Who?”

Achamian snorted in laughter, wondered how long it had been since he had laughed. “An empty wineskin’s daughter,” he replied. And even as a part of him flinched from the lie—for it seemed sacrilegious to deceive men with whom he had shared utter and abject hardship—another part of him slumped backward in a kind of marvelling anxiousness.

Maybe this lie had also come true.



She watches the Wizard by moonlight, reviews his features the way a mother reviews her children: the counting of things beloved. ~~The eyebrows like moustaches, the white hermit beard, the hand that~~ clutches his breast. Night after night she watches.

Before, Drusas Achamian had been a riddle, a maddening puzzle. She could scarce look at him without railing in anger. So stingy! So miserly! There he sat, warm and fat with knowledge, while she haunted his stoop, begging, starving ... *Starving!* Of all the sins between people, few are so unforgivable as being needed.

But now.

He looks every bit as wild as before, hung in wolf-pelts, stooped with years. Despite bathing in the chill blast of mountain streams (an episode that would have occasioned hilarity had the expedition not been so battered), he still carries the stain of Sranc blood across his knuckles and his cheek. They are to do.

And still he denies her. Still he complains, upbraids, and rebukes.

The only difference is that she loves him.

She remembers her mother's first descriptions of him, back when the Andiamine Heights had been her home, when gold and incense had been her constant companions. "Have I ever told you about Akka?" the Empress asked, surprising her daughter in the Sacral Enclosure. There was always the twitch, a body-wide plucking of tendons, whenever her mother caught her unawares. Her jaw would tighten, and she would turn to see *herself*—as she knew she would be in twenty years' time. Mother draped in white and turquoise silks, a gown reminiscent of those worn by Shrial Nuns.

"Is he my father?" she had replied.

Her mother shrank from the question, recoiled even. Asking about her father was Mimara's weapon of choice. Questions of paternity were at once accusations of whorishness. Woe to the woman who did not know. But this time the question seemed to strike her mother particularly hard, to the point where she paused to blink away tears.

"Your f-father," she stammered. "Yes."

Stunned silence. Mimara had not expected this. She knows now that her mother lied, that Esmenet said this simply to rob her daughter of the hateful question. Well ... perhaps not simply. Mimara had learned enough about Achamian to understand her mother's passion, to understand how she might name him her daughter's father ... in her soul's heart, at least. Everyone tells lies to dull the world's sharper, more complicated edges—some more pretty than others.

"What was he like?" she asked.

Her mother never looked so beautiful as when she smiled. Beautiful and hateful both. "Foolish, like all men. Wise. Petty. Gentle."

"Why did you leave him?"

Another question meant to injure. Only this time, Mimara found herself flinching instead of celebrating. Hurting her mother where she herself was concerned was one thing: victims have rights over criminals—do they not? Hurting her for things entirely her own, however, said more about Mimara than Mimara cared to hear.

Few passions require quite so much certainty as spite.

"Kellhus," Esmenet replied, her voice dim and damaged. *You win*, her eyes conceded as she turned to leave. "I chose Kellhus."

Now, watching the Wizard by moonlight, Mimara cannot stop thinking about her mother. She imagines the wrack that had to have been her soul, coming to her daughter again and again, each time

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