

Chapter 1 - Naira

There are a multitude of spirits who dwell before the Wheel and each has their own name, a chain with which to bind them.

There are but three Gods who dwell behind the Wheel, and none will know their names.

Lore of the Threesome

The masorax's hunger vibrated along Naira's legs where chafed skin met hard shining scales. The great snake rippled under her, its elämää enhancing already prodigious strength as it slithered through the desert. They would need to stop for the night soon. Would there be prey for the masoraxi? There had not been, the previous night.

The red dunes of the desert shimmered in the afternoon sun. The air was oppressive, dry heat biting all the way down to her lungs. Reaching beyond her blood and bones, she drew on her own elämää, soothing her body's complaints. Eddies of wind played out on the desolate landscape. Not even the desert nomads roamed here, in the heart of the Cidan Mashada.

A cascade of sand made her turn to see her right-hand husband, Darisia. His black masorax looped long trails in the sand as he drew level with her. "We will have to set dew-traps for water." His tenor voice was gravelly with exhaustion. Only his liquid black eyes were visible through the veil of his cabolad, the all-enveloping garb worn by a right-hand husband. The rigors of their journey painted the garment in stains, its original white color a distant memory.

"Perhaps Tahil has found the place of his dreamscape." It was hard to speak, her mouth was dust-dry. "There is supposedly a well there and he cannot be far ahead, I can see the track of his masoraxi, still."

"Perhaps," Darisia echoed doubtfully and they continued, deeper into the desert, following the trail of their left-hand husband. The golden disk of the sun was slowly drowning in the haze that beckoned on the western horizon when the desert landscape changed.

In the slack between two dunes lay the ruined stones of a temple. Great basalt blocks tumbled about as though some giant child had scattered its toys there. A single pillar remained standing, the Wheel and the Three carved in golden lines, marking the center of what would have been the floor of a nomad temple.

It was by this pillar that Tahil waited for them. His ebony skin gleamed wet and salty, sweat staining his brief silk loincloth. Sand clung to the tight black rows of braids on his head, a gleaming red mist in the setting sun. He had been here long enough to unsaddle his masorax, the beast was nowhere to be seen. Glass sowah charms glittered on his wrist as he raised his arm to wave them in.

"It is the place of my dreamscape," Tahil's basso voice rumbled as they dismounted. "There is a well shaft sunk deep that surely still holds water."

Naira freed her masorax of saddle, bridle, and pack. "Or perhaps it does not and that is why this temple is abandoned."

"Do you doubt me?" Tahil held up a rope. "I will find water."

"Or you will find your death." Darisia's dark eyes were wide. "A desert pit with even the ghost of water might well have some lurking beast."

"If I do, you will share our Beloved's bed alone on the ride back. Come." He slung the rope over his shoulder and led them across the broken floor of the temple. Here and there, carved into heavy basalt rock, sowah images illustrated the prayers of the faithful, a cry to the Gods. It brought Naira comfort to see the familiar icons, echoing the designs of the glass charms dangling from her wrists.

Where an altar once stood, there was a black pit. "Here." Tahil held out the end of his rope for Darisia. "Hold the rope."

Darisia turned his gaze to Naira, who nodded her acquiescence. Tahil's elämää was strong and he was skilled at habi. There were few things in the desert that would kill him outright. She hoped. They needed more than dew-trap water. If this truly was a well, someone had to go down. Worry beat a tattoo against her ribcage as Tahil vanished below the lip.

The shadow of the central pillar had grown long before their left-hand husband reappeared. His teeth flashed white. "The water is sweet and there is much of it." He unslung his waterskin from across his body.

Relief as wide as the sky flooded through Naira as she drank greedily and passed the skin to Darisia. Here, in the privacy of their desert camp, he had taken off the veil, revealing his bronze skin and kissable lips. Black corkscrew coils fell back as he tilted the skin over his face. Water bubbled in the corners of his mouth as he drank.

"A bucket could have filled while you were gone." Naira turned back to Tahil. "Did you find any reason why we are called here?"

"It is a deep well, I only explored a little. I found a tunnel with what looked like a sowah image carved on the wall, but I did not think following it on my own was wise."

"What looked like a sowah image?" The phrasing seemed odd to her.

"It was of the style and colors, but it is not one that I know." He held out his hands, palms up. "I am not a scholar."

Naira frowned at the scattered stones of the temple. The masoraxi were hunting, they would keep other predators at bay. She would have prayed for guidance, but the Goddess had been silent for many years now.

It was a great risk, coming here only on the word of her left-hand husband. In Magadla, the other Exalted were already scheming who would take her place if she died out here in the shifting sands.

She set the thought aside, there would be room in the cistern when they returned to the Holy City to worry about politics. "One of us will need to stay up here with the rope." The words tripped on her tongue as she said them, and the last words of the Goddess came back to her.

If you would hear my voice again, remember this: I am the Balancer. Weight and Counterweight. Modesty and Wantonness. Creation and Destruction. Right-Hand and Left-Hand. There must always be

Balance. There will come a time when you think you only need the one. If you would hear my voice, remember this: I am the Balancer.

“No,” she corrected herself. “We must find a way for all three of us to go down.”

Tahil walked up to a massive basalt stone block, its black shadow mingling with the coming darkness. “This will do if we can flake off a piece large enough to cover the well but small enough that we can get past. We can lay it over the top and tie the rope to it.”

“Basalt is a hard rock.” Darisia walked over to join him, running his hands over the stone. “This will not flake, not unless we have a drill. I will check the other stones.”

“Should we wait for tomorrow to go down?” Tahil asked her as Darisia walked among the fallen stones.

“Will sunlight make a difference in an underground pit?” Naira’s shoulders rippled under the thin straps of her khomei as she shrugged. “And there will be a moon tonight.”

“Here!” Darisia called them. He had found a stone rod, a weathered lintel from long ago. The lintel was solid and as thick as Naira’s waist. Even with their elämääs flooding strength into corded muscles, it was a hard walk back to the well, sands shifting under their sandals. There was a thin gap left, enough to squeeze through, though they might leave some skin behind.

Naira touched her sowah charms, considering the setting sun. “Let us eat and pray first, then we shall go down.”

The long rope coiled into the darkness, only the faint light of Tahil’s torch calling her from below. Heat had fled from the desert with the setting sun and Naira’s skin shivered with cold. Hand over hand, she sank into the clammy darkness of the well.

“Here is the upwelling.” Tahil held out the torch to show her the source of water bubbling slowly through the sand. “Here it runs into this passageway and see the charm?”

Darisia joined them at the entrance to the tunnel, the image etched into the lintel drawing their fascinated regard. It was drawn as a sowah charm, it had the gold of creation, the red of destruction and the balancing blue colors in the right proportion and yet it was not a sowah image that Naira had ever seen. Two chains hung from either side of a horizontal blue bar. On the right chain hung a gold Wheel and the left a red Wheel. None of the symbols or animals or the gods themselves were present in the charm.

“Perhaps a sign that was never written.” Darisia traced the lines with an outstretched finger.

“Perhaps.” Naira took the torch from Tahil. “Come.” She led the way into the tunnel, water smoothed stones slick underfoot. There was a fragrance lingering in the air that teased her, calling her deeper into the earth. Flickering torchlight revealed cut stone forming the walls of the tunnel. This place had been built.

They had not gone far when the passageway ended abruptly in a flat stone wall. The runoff water continued into hole as thick as Naira’s arm, but they would never fit through that.

Carved at chest-height were three slits in the rock, one straight, the other two curved on either side of it, as though two hands were cupping a third held between them.

“The Eye.” Darisia breathed reverently, moving to Naira’s right side.

It did look like the sign of blessing. "I think our hands go into it." Naira touched a fingertip to the straight slit. "I can see no other way to proceed."

"Shine the fire on it a little longer." Tahil grimaced. "If I'm sticking my hand into a hole, I want to be sure that both spider and scorpion have enough time to leave."

"Weren't you the one who climbed down into a hole without knowing what you would find?" Naira laughed at him as she brought the torch close to the slits.

"That was different." He shuddered. "That wasn't my hand where some eight-legged thing could crawl over my fingers without warning."

They waited for a ladle of water to pass. Finally, Tahil declared himself ready and in concert, they made the sign of the Threesome, Naira's hand straight, the two men each cupping a hand on either side of hers. Slowly they slid the God's Eye towards the gaps in the stone wall.

For a moment nothing happened.

Golden light flooded around them, so bright it pierced the eye. A searing pain ripped into Naira's hand, like a rod thrust through her palm and she screamed in agony. On either side, the men's voices joined hers, a chorus of torment in the bright white light. Dark shapes flashed in the golden luminescence, sowah signs of the gods dancing. The two tailed lion, the birthing honeybee, the poisonous masorax. The comet, the breath of the Goddess, the dawn crown. Naira's knees collapsed under the pain, but her hand was held fast, and she hung suspended from her shoulder as the signs of the gods danced in stark silhouettes about the grotto.

The dark relief of unconsciousness beckoned as the light fled for the nooks and crannies and the pain faded, her hand released. Naira fell to knees. "Goddess's Tits! That hurt." She cradled her hand. There was no injury upon it, just the ghost of torment.

"Look." Tahil's voice still held the echo of pain, but he had managed to get to his feet. "Some of the light remained behind."

His finger pointed back the way they had come. Lying in the water was a glowing flower, wrought of metal. Silver stem opened into a golden blossom shaped like a cup on a saucer.

A foreign scent flooded Naira's senses. It was as though the musky smell of the adeeg cat mingled with the spicy aroma of cinnamon roasting over a fire, all wrapped around with the fresh smell of rains falling onto the savannah. It was not a desert smell.

Naira cautiously approached, leaning forward to pick up the strange artifact. Her hand still ached with phantom pain, her grip cautious on the silver stem.

Find me.

The faint voice whispered through her mind, a memory drifting from a time before. The voice of the Goddess. Hope rising in her breast, she clasped the flower between her palms. "Where?" She prayed out loud. "Where? Goddess, please?"

But the presence was gone.

"Beloved?" Tahil dropped to his knees next to her as the light of the flower faded.

Strong arms slid around her shoulders as a sob welled up from deep inside her. Then Darisia was there on her right-hand side and the men held her until the overwhelming emotions subsided. "I heard the Goddess, but all she said was to find her."

"Let's get out of this hole and see what we have. Where is the torch?" Darisia asked.

"Wet and dead." Tahil helped Naira stand. "Come, I have my hand on the wall of the tunnel."

It was a short walk back to the rope and even so, they slipped a few times, grazing hands and knees on the stones, the darkness and the wet challenging even their elämää-fueled muscles. Naira stopped to heal her hands before climbing the rough rope. Abrasions from climbing on top of abrasions from falling was too much to contemplate after the searing agony that had brought the flower to them. Silver moonlight beckoned her up and out.

They had set a desert tent with its back to the great basalt rock that Tahil originally wanted to flake. Darisia lit the laid-out charcoal and Naira held up the metal flower to the flames.

"What does this mean?" Darisia stretched out a finger to touch it, pausing above the gilded petals, awe written on his face. "What are we supposed to do? What happened in the cavern?"

"There is some writing in the most ancient dogma that speak of chambers of testing," Naira mused, trying to remember. "It is lore so old the language is barely understandable. If I remember right, there were places where priests went to hear the will of the Gods. But I don't understand what this flower means. I have never seen any like it."

"I think we must find where the flower grows." Tahil spoke with customary pragmatism, his words grounding Naira. "And perhaps there, we will find the Goddess again."

"Wherever that is, it is not on Kisangi." Naira bit her lip in thought. "We shall have to travel far. The other Exalted will not agree to us journeying to Goddess-alone knows where and leaving the Hub Throne empty. Surely, they will demand that I step down. As it is, I spent the favors of a lifetime coming here."

"Does it matter?" Darisia's voice trembled with wonder. "For the voice of the Goddess to return to us, it would be worth it."

But it did matter. Decades of politics would wither unrepaid, the pinnacle of power lost to them. "What say you, left-hand husband?" Naira asked Tahil. He had once held a God's mandate and had yielded it. "Does it matter to you?"

"As long as I have my Beloved." Tahil took her hand in his. "And my husband." He smiled at Darisia. "I am content. But it is your position. Your power to set down or no."

Naira considered that, cradling the flower in her hands. It was heavy with hope. Or perhaps with destiny. Or perhaps just because it was wrought entirely out of metal.

It had not been the politics of the Magadla that had set her feet onto the path of becoming a priestess. Looking up at her husbands, she made her decision.

"The Goddess calls. We shall answer."

Chapter 2 - Louis

A year born in ghost lights is a year born in glory.

Sayings of the Rullara.

His daughter's little hand curled in his, Louis approached the giant bonfire blazing on the ice. The flames reared up into the polar night, forming the shape of the great Wheel, though the heat was lost to the frigid heart of the northern winter. Memories crowded his throat, a myriad of fire festivals gone by, aspirations for the new year rising in a tower of smoke. "Have you got your wish?"

"Yes, Pappa." She held up a small wood carving, slipping a little as they stopped.

Louis thought that it was supposed to look like a house, though it was not very well carved. A master woodcarver his eight-year-old was not. "It's time to send it to Wheel."

"Can I tell you my wish, Pappa?" she asked softly.

"If you whisper it very quietly so that the spirits don't hear it." He dropped to one knee and adjusted the hood of her reindeer parka so that it sheltered her red hair, so reminiscent of his own russet locks.

She leaned close to him, the carving held between them. Her little lips were soft on his ear. "I wish that you didn't have to go anywhere this year. That you can just stay at Rocaille with us."

Louis hugged her. There was little else he could do. Her wish was almost certainly not going to be granted. The drums echoed their shared heartbeat in the small space between them. He savored her breath against his cheek, small arms coiled around his neck. This memory, at least, they would both carry before duty called him away.

"Come, Loyssa." He rose reluctantly. "It's time to make your wish and then we can feed the fire."

They joined Roul, who was helping Isabella with her wish. A glow lit the little girl's face as she greeted Loyssa. Roul gave him a grin and a clap on the shoulder. "Happy new year, Louis!"

"Happy new year!" Laughing he returned the buffet, sending his friend off balance on the ice. Southerner that he was, Roul was not quite steady on the lake.

Loyssa cast her wish into the flames and watched as the smoke mingled with the glow, a tall column that rose to the heavens. She and Isabella fed old bread to the fire, their small heads hidden in fur lined parkas. The two girls had become friends in the days that passed since Louis had brought Isabella and Roul to Rocaille.

Around them, the other denizens of the fortress watched the dancers gyrating in the empty hub, wraithlike among the flames and the smoke. Deep drumbeats jolted through their bodies as they bid farewell to the old year and welcome the new. Acrid, oily smoke rose from their poi. The fumes' aroma lingered in the air, a sour note in the otherwise crisp winter night. Sable walls loomed behind them, the long shadow of Rocaille Fortress reaching across the frozen lake.

"I was right." Roul lifted Isabella onto his shoulders. "The festival of flames is spectacular here."

"But no ghost lights tonight." Louis swung his daughter up to his shoulders.

"Well, I've seen them." Roul stamped his feet in the cold. "Spectacular but cold!"

"Don't fret your southern bones." Louis laughed. "The dance is nearly done, then the dancers will lead us back to the castle and the feast."

As soot blackened an already dark sky, the dancers spun to a spectacular finale. The whirling poi climbed the night as they formed a pyramid of fire, urging the hopes and dreams of the citizens of Rocaille higher. Flaming wings crowned the pyramid, a final surge to bring forth a golden new year. The drums urged a thunderous crescendo, an echoing heartbeat that rolled over the frozen lake.

The old year was done. The new had come.

Roul took the lead as they walked back to Rocaille. "The Blood Gate is really here? Under this lake?"

"So Herself says." Louis considered the long path across the lake. The pink granite walls of the fortress glistened like pale blood in the light from the torches and the embers of the Wheel. "Though it's certainly not physical, I swam here as a boy."

"Brice Rennaud isn't as constrained by winter as we are, shouldn't we be doing more? We've been here a week already and all we've done is read."

Louis grimaced as he thought of the small library of books Herself had given them, all with accompanying commentaries written in her clear hand. "Getting tired of reading about magic?"

"The magic parts are interesting." Roul kicked a bit of ice out of his path, watching it careen across the lake. "But half those books are legends, a quarter is history dry enough to put an alehouse to sleep, and the rest is magic so obscure I need to read it five times before it makes sense. My concern is more application. We're not actually doing anything and who knows what the trollkarl is planning."

"There are agents keeping an eye on him, I am sure. We have all winter and I doubt it's going to be just reading." Louis held Loyssa's ankles as the little girl wiggled on his shoulders. "But Herself might be waiting for Taika to get back. She left for the Snow Council the day after we arrived."

"No." A cool voice sent icy needles racing up Louis's spine. He turned and found his mother behind them. She wore a deep blue gown and cloak that complemented her flaming red hair. Rich velvet fabric flowed in graceful lines from a bodice that sparkled sapphire, a starry night echoing the glittering snowfields all around them. Hanging from her shoulder, the purple Ducal Sash cut a dark line across her body, azure snake of their family picked out in gleaming gems. Her clothing made no concession to the weather, she seemed indifferent to the knife point wind whistling in from the northern glaciers. "No, that is not what I'm waiting for. Roll your wrist," she instructed Louis.

He didn't need to ask which one. In their flight from Somfaux Castle, he had taken a fall on his left wrist to protect Isabella. The injury lingered, even with the aid of magic. He gripped both

Loyssa's ankles with his right hand and rolled the wrist in question, showing the range of movement. Pleasure curled his lips into a smile. The tendons were finally responding properly.

"Good." The satisfaction in her voice echoed his own pleasure and held a measure of relief besides. "I wish to see you both tomorrow in the salle. At the third ring of the morning candle."

Louis inclined his head in acknowledgement. She glided past the two young men without pause and continued to the fortress.

"Well." Louis took a deep breath, the cold air burning down his throat. "There you are. She was waiting for my wrist to heal."

"Is she angry with you?" Roul asked him as they walked on.

Louis rubbed a finger along his jawline. Herself was difficult to read at the best of times. "Hard to say."

"She isn't," Loyssa's girlish voice said from his shoulders.

"And how would you know?" Louis swung his daughter down as they entered the warren of corridors that started as the fortress gate.

The heat washed over them as they stripped off reindeer parkas, intense after the aching chill of the frozen lake.

"She told me so. I asked her if you were in trouble, and she said no. So, she's not angry."

"Children." Roul grinned, his teeth flashing white against his almond skin. "No fear."

Louis chuckled in agreement as they reached the greathall. Immense trestle tables groaned with food. Reindeer basked in cranberry sauce. Salmon, pike and rowan swam in butter and herbs. Berrywine barrels drew the celebrants like bees to honey.

"Tonight is dancing and feasting." The flame from the ballroom's time candle flickered just above the final rose-flecked granite ring in the timeboard. The evening was almost done, the morning candle would soon be lit. "You two may stay up for a couple of dances, then it's bed for you both."

The two little girls complained a bit, but, in the end, they were happy enough to be tucked into the large bed they shared. Roul and Louis returned to the ballroom to find the dancing still in full swing.

Roul snagged a fluted cup on their return. "This is amazing!" He stared at the golden liquid in the smooth porcelain with approval. "What is it?"

Louis took a sip from his own cup. "Lakka. It's distilled from cloudberry."

"Why don't we have any of it in the south?"

"There's almost never enough of it left to export after the festival," Louis replied with a chuckle.

Roul savored the drink slowly as the dancing whirled about the floor. "I always feel so awkward at these parties."

"Maybe it's just the wrong kind of dancing," Louis replied. "Let me have a word with the musicians."

A turning of the flame later the music changed to a tune with a drumbeat. A flute wound its way high and wild between the pulses of the tympani and the dance floor changed from the couples to circles, men and women stamping their feet in time with that fey cadence.

Mindful of the long year ahead, Louis let the music take him, forming another treasured memory for the fight that was coming. Boots hammered into the flagstones, hands clapped in sharp accents. This was worth fighting for. His people, his family, his friends. He turned and twisted with the circle partners and alone as the beat dictated until the musicians played another slower tune for couples. They went to find drinks, both sweaty from the wild stamping dances.

Roul drank down a glass of blueberry wine. "We probably shouldn't stay up too late. Especially as sunrise won't end the festival - will it?"

"Not unless you plan on waiting a week." Louis snorted with amusement. "But you're right. The third ring is early."

"Have you heard anything from Somfaux?" Roul tapped a refill and contemplated the dance floor. "Everything that happened this autumn feels so unreal up here."

"I've heard that the Countess Yolanda remains unofficially in charge of Etendulat, and her court is now in Iselra." Louis pondered the news he had received from various agents scattered about the Empire. "Somfaux suffers through this winter with the river barge trade in hiatus and their stores destroyed in the fire. The Emperor sent a delegation to Chamalle to try and smooth things over with your uncle. I heard that he sent one of the Imperial cousins, so he's worried enough to use his own bloodkin as ambassador."

"Unless I misjudge my uncle, it's going to take more than a high-ranking delegation to smooth over the death of my father." Roul growled.

Louis held his hands up, palms outwards. "I'm just giving you the news. I also think Herself is in communication with your uncle. A bluron bird came yesterday and its harness bore the crest of Trachelag."

Roul glanced up to the high table where Herself was holding court. "Are you going to ask your mother for a dance?"

On the far side of the ball room floor Herself was talking with a small group of northern nobles. Rocaille was not a popular fortress in winter. The festival of flames up here was always a quiet affair and this year was no different.

"Yes," he answered Roul, recklessness rising through his belly. "Why not?"

They walked across the ballroom to the high table on the dais.

"A dance, your Grace?" Louis extended his hand.

The little crowd of nobles turned to stare at him for a flicker of the flame and then turned wide eyes back to the Duchess. Even in their midst, she was remote. So had she been throughout Louis's childhood. Moments of love sparingly dotted in a frozen sea. The corners of her lips quivered, and she rose to place her hand in his. Only her fingertips brushed his palm.

"If you wish."

Louis could feel his hand tremble as he led his mother, his liege, onto the dance floor. The musicians seemed to sense the gravity of the dance and played an elegant tune, the delicate tones of the glockenspiel guiding the dancers' steps.

"Loyssa says that you are not angry with me." He led her through a complicated turn.

"I told Loyssa that you were not in trouble." Her voice was cool, expression inscrutable as ever.

"So, you are angry with me?"

"No." A hint of amusement colored her tone.

Louis focused on the dance for a few steps. "You have barely spoken to me since we arrived." They twisted their arms together.

Her blue gown swirled as she came out of the turn. "Are you a child to need your mother's reassurance?"

"No," Louis gritted out.

The dance came to an end, and she rested the palm of her hand over his heart. Their green eyes, the exact mirror of each other, met and the corners of her mouth tilted upward.

"I am glad you are home, my son." Warmth kissed her voice like the first blush of the light returned after Winter Dark, unexpected, beautiful and all too brief. She left Louis standing on the edge of the dance floor.

Roul had managed to snag another thimbleful of lakka from somewhere. "That looked exciting."

"Herself is a complicated woman." Louis ran a hand through his hair. "Come on, we'd better get to bed. It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

"How do you know?"

"She said she was glad I was home. Last time she came that close to expressing affection, I barely slept for a week, the training she put me through."

Roul rolled his eyes but followed Louis away from the party.

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The next morning found them both in the salle. The room had been prepared for them. Lit lanterns hung from chains, the illumination a necessity against the polar night. A fire roared in the hearth, its heat blunting icy chill to bearable cold.

A weapons rack squatted against the far wall, stocked with wooden swords, daggers, and shields. Duchess Claire de la Roche waited for them, hand resting on the wooden rack. Her plain tunic and leggings could not be more different from the gown of the festival feast. At her side stood a lanky man with iron grey hair that flopped in tousled curls against his warm tawny brown skin. His eyes were dark pools in the shadows. Louis's spirits lifted at the sight of Byron, the old armsmaster. The man was a tyrant, but a beloved one. Fond memories of rough and tumble play while learning the warrior's craft rolled through Louis's thoughts.

"Your Grace," Roul and Louis spoke in unison as they bowed to Herself.

“Good morning.” Her black clad arm described an elegant sweep as she waved them up. “Brice Rennaurd represents a threat like no other. His ability to wield sang sorcellerie, his position as the Emperor’s Maitombre and his interest in the power that feeds the Blood Gate requires extra-ordinary skills from all of us who would oppose him.” She paused a moment, considering the two of them thoughtfully. “Magic is our greatest weapon, but also his. Our application of the art must be impeccable if we are to defeat a trollkarl. Starting today, I want you to run the habi trail every morning, taking no more time than a single ring. After you’ve run the trail, I want you to use your dusang three times.” She pointed at Roul. “You will manifest that cage of blades that your family uses to defend itself, and you,” her finger moved to Louis, “will step through the shadows of this salle.”

Louis met Roul’s eye as he considered this.

“Three times will see us unconscious lady.” Roul pointed out.

“Then Byron will wake you up and you’ll continue. You can’t faint like flowers and expect to win against the likes of Brice Rennaurd.”

Byron grinned at that and Louis couldn’t help but return his smile.

The armsmaster clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s good to see you again, Milord. Have you been working on your sword skills?”

“Probably not enough to satisfy you.” Louis wobbled a bit under the buffet. “Byron, this is Roul, Roul, this is our armsmaster, Byron.”

“A pleasure to meet you, sir.” Roul bowed at the title of armsmaster. The scions of Tranchelag held the art of the blade in esteem above all else.

“Now that everyone is introduced, set about your exercises.” There was no impatience in Herself’s voice, but the command was clear. “The candle doesn’t burn less while you chat. During the first ring of the evening, start teaching the girls habi. From that too, you will learn.” She walked past them, her long red braid the only splash of color against her tunic as she left them to do as she bid.

“What’s the habi run?” Roul stripped off his shoes and stockings, following Louis’s lead.

“It’s a path through the fortress that we use to practice habi in the winter.” Louis limbered up, stretching his muscles slowly. “Just follow me. Shout if you get stuck or lose me.”

“How long does it take to run this thing?”

“You heard her. It takes a nub or we have to do it again.”

“Of course it does.” Roul groaned.

Louis finished stretching and checked the candle. Just about on the half ring. He pointed at the candle and Byron stuck a nail into it, one nub below the wax lip.

Their candle was lit.

Louis let his consciousness sink into his body, beyond the rushing flow of life in his veins. He reached for his elämää, that throbbing power in his blood and bones, pounding in time with his heart. Reveling in his mastery of magic, he flooded its heat into his muscles. Power erupted against his skin, strength straining for release.

The first flight of stairs he took five at a time, Roul hot on his heels. From the top of the stairs, he leapt onto the balustrade of the gallery that ran along the high walls of the greathall. The pink granite of the narrow stone railing was smooth underfoot.

Far below, servants ignored the two running men, well used to the eccentricities of Herself and her family.

Louis flung himself into space, his arms stretched for the heavy ropes strung from the roof. Below him, Roul latched onto the rope. His breath came in heavy gasps.

“Are you with me?” Louis called down.

“I’m with you,” Roul heaved back. “Don’t make us late. I don’t want to do this again today.”

Louis nodded with grim tenacity and started to swing the rope for the leap to the wall. As he flew through the air, he forced his fingers and toes into a longer, stronger shape. He slammed into the rough stonework of wall and clung there, Roul landing next him. Louis started the slow crab climb toward the roof where a nest of nets hung.

“Is she trying to kill us?” Roul panted as they hooked onto the suspended path.

Louis twisted his neck to peer ahead for the route down the far wall. “Less talking, more climbing.”

They managed to complete the trail before running out of wick, running into the salle as the nail clattered onto the striking platform of the candle. Louis sank to the floor, Roul flopped down next to him.

“No rest now.” Byron nudged Louis in the ribs with the toe of his boot. “You owe me three manifestations of dusang.”

Louis groaned but extended a hand to Roul. They heaved each other up and shared a tired smile. The habi trail had exhausted Louis’s reserves and the power of his elämää came slowly but come it did. He focused his mind and reached for the shadows, seeking that slippery darkness where the candle did not burn.

The cold embrace of the shadows folded around him as the sweet tang of blood flooded his mouth. The length of the salle flowed past as he stepped into one shadow and out of another, covering the distance before the candle could flicker.

A spinning step revealed Roul, enveloped in a crimson haze. The sweeping dance of his blade left behind red limned phantom swords, hanging in the air like afterimages. Those ghostly blades were solid enough to block a blow, he had seen them save Roul’s life more than once.

“That’s one.” Byron gave them a merciless grin as they paused, harsh breaths echoing through the salle. “Two to go.”

Roul had been right. They dropped from exhaustion. Louis still had a pounding headache by the first evening ring when it came time to start the little girls on their path to learning habi. Fortunately, the initial lessons were very gentle on the teacher.

They took Loyssa and Isabella to the salle after supper and sat both down cross-legged before the roaring fire.

"I want you both to close your eyes." Louis instructed and both girls obediently closed their eyes. "Now, listen to the beating of your heart."

Loyssa's little face scrunched up, but Isabella's expression smoothed out and her lips curved up in a smile.

"Don't try too hard." Louis kept his voice low and peaceful. "Just listen for your heartbeat. Once you have the rhythm of your blood, I want you to tap every fourth beat on your knee."

Isabella started the tap immediately, but Loyssa's candle burnt down a bit before she grasped the pulse of her heart enough to tap. Louis let them practice for a nib and then brought the lesson to a close.

"That will be enough for tonight. I want you to practice this every day until you can find your heartbeat in an instant and tap out that tempo."

"Yes, Pappa."

"Yes, Louis."

"Very good, and now you may go and play until half-two of the evening candle."

The two little girls happily skipped off into the castle. Louis turned his gaze toward Roul. His friend sat with his back to the wall, blond curls flopped over closed eyes. "You call this helping me train them?" He nudged a flaccid leg.

"Planning." Roul grunted, opening his eyes a crack. "I'm planning lessons."

Louis burst out laughing. Lassitude permeated his limbs, tinged with a sense of satisfaction. His wrist had not even twinged and his elämää was as powerful as ever. He offered Roul a hand up. "I'm for bed. Tomorrow is going to be worse."

Roul hauled on the hand, giving Louis a sour look. "And aren't you just as jolly as the morning lark."

Chapter 3 - Naira

That which is known is known because it is written. But that which is known is not written on paper, quick to perish and hard to preserve. No, that which is known is written on the great quartz sheets beneath the Temple of Magadla and it is written with The Pen of Knowing, which has ever been in the hands of The Balancer.

Knowledge of the Threesome

Harsh footsteps broke the deep silence of Magadla's great library. A staccato beat that shattered Naira's studious mood. Long strides carried Khady towards the secluded study. The Exalted's khamei swirled in green waves down to her ankles, hard leather of her soles slapping onto the wooden floor. Dark eyes flashed as she met Naira's gaze, expression set in determined lines.

Naira closed the tome before her, sliding a leather bookmark into place. She had been dreading this confrontation since their return from the desert some ten days earlier, but she owed her friend more than the Balancer's silence.

"Your Holiness." Khady bowed with precision, correct in every detail down to her hands forming the Eye of the Gods. She offered her palms, respect yielded to Naira's position.

"So formal, Khady?" Naira placed her hands on the open palms. She drew back in a light caress which ended with fingers snapped, an echoing sound in the vaulted library.

"You have not treated me as a friend, Naira." Khady's voice held suppressed anger, though her words were correct. "First you vanish into the desert for tens of days. Upon your return, you say nothing but let the water rise in the tower while you read and the rest of the Exalted scheme and plot. I have held them at bay as best I can, but now I hear a rumor that your husbands are purchasing supplies and enquiring about guides to travel north!"

Naira rubbed her chin. The decisions made in the desert seemed far away here in Magadla's great library. Saying the words would make it real. "You are right, Khady. I should have told you earlier. Come, let us find a quiet room."

She gathered up the Pen of Knowing and resettled the Balancer's Crown on her head. More than thirty years and the rainbow-colored cloth was still an uncomfortable accoutrement.

The two women wound their way through the dark shelves packed to the rafters with books. The Order of the Threesome had been collecting knowledge for years beyond counting, building additional rooms as they ran out of space. Scholars haunted the library, seekers of knowledge who knew the meal was too vast for one human life. They bowed deeply as the two women passed them, awe on their faces. Following on their heels, Naira's Dagger kept a close watch. Legend had it that a Balancer had once been assassinated by a mad scholar.

Naira led her friend past the scriptorium. Sacred ink rolled off glass nibs as the scribes worked tirelessly to copy the most ancient of manuscripts. Beyond the scriptorium rose the Holy Triangle, private domain of the Balancer and her husbands. The great edifice was built entirely

of the glass bricks of Fariweb and it glittered in the sun, blinding light obscuring the stained glass that formed the sowah images echoed in the bracelets worn by the faithful.

A narrow wooden staircase led up four flights to the vantage point of the tower with its magnificent view. Magadla lay spread out beneath them, the gleaming water of the Holy Dam visible at the edge of the city.

Beneath satin and silk tents of the sprawling bazaar, the wealth of nations changed hands daily. Dominating the center space, the great water clock tower rose. Time washed inexorably from its spout, a silver flow of mercury that set the bells dancing every hour as the float reached the gear. At the outer edges of the bazaar, close to the lake shore, lay the slave pens with their miserable merchandise, most destined for the great mines that bordered the desert.

“What is going on?” Khady prompted.

Naira turned away from her contemplation of the Holy City. “Let me start at the beginning.” She sat down on the simple bench from where she could barely see the gleaming azure lake. “The day that the Goddess fell silent, I received one last message from Her. It was because of this that I followed Tahl’s dreamscape into the desert. I knew in my bones that the float had reached the gear.”

“Did you find Her?” Khady sat next to her and leaned forward eagerly, a hunger reflected in her voice. The silence of the goddess these twenty-seven years had been hard for all the Exalted.

“I heard Her Voice but the once.” Naira’s gaze was far away as she answered. From her satchel, she drew the metal flower. “She sent me this and told me to find Her.”

“Why did you tell no one?” Khady demanded. “This is not a secret that should be kept from the Exalted! It is not your right!”

Naira stared at her coldly and Khady dropped her eyes. “Forgive me, I forgot myself.”

“If I thought this flower could be found here on Kisangi, I would have spoken.” Naira’s gaze softened at her friend’s apology. She turned back to the view, giving Khady time to recover from the silent rebuke. “I have never heard of this flower’s like and in all my reading since our return, I have not found it.”

“What do you propose, then?”

“I have written to the Master Smith of the House of Daggers. He sent a reply two days ago.” Naira turned dark eyes toward her friend. “He knows where the flower grows and he is willing to share that information.”

“But why the secrecy? The Balancer may travel to Forge Islands, it has been done.”

“Because in his letter he says that the flower may be found only in the far north, beyond the Sunroad Archipelago.”

“The north.” Khady’s voice shook and her dark skin grew ashen, “Where few venture and none return? That north?”

“That north.” Naira agreed reluctantly, a flutter of nervous wings making her hands tremble. “He also says he has more information, a way to get there. He is willing to share it with me, for a price. From the Forge Islands, I will journey on to the north.”

"What of the Hub Throne?" Khady's gaze was shrewd. "You have ruled well, but no-one will agree to leave it vacant so long."

"I will step down." Naira smiled painfully. It was a task yet undone, the hardest one to face. "There is no other way. Do you think I have the political capital to influence the election of my successor?"

"If you support Makena." Khady's laugh was a touch bitter.

"She would not be my first choice." Naira rubbed her eyes, "Are you still in her grace?"

"For the most part. If you must step down, she is the best option you have."

"So shall it be. On the morrow, I'll inform the Exalted that I must travel and that I am stepping down as Balancer."

"Will you tell the others why?"

"No. I do not wish to undergo the rituals to prove the truth of my visions, I do not wish to share the remembrance with any of them and most of all, I don't want to give them false hope. Who knows how long I shall be gone or even if I shall survive?"

"Surely the Goddess will guide your steps?"

"Sometimes Her guidance leads to the Left-Hand God." Naira took a deep breath, willing fear to leave her. It had been Tahil's vision. A vision of the Left-Hand God. She set that thought aside, no need to burden Khady with her concerns.

"And she has been silent for twenty-seven years, Khady. Find Me, that was all She sent. I have been called and I will answer, but to say I will return with Her-" She shook her head. "No. That I will not do."

"Naira, how long has it been since you travelled without the support of the Order?" Khady gave her a doubtful look. "The desert is one thing, but out there." She motioned beyond the Holy Dam in the direction of Fariweb and Uwak. "You have enemies. I don't think this is wisdom's path."

Naira produced a single sheet of paper from her satchel and wordlessly handed it to her. Khady read the brief lines, her eyebrows knotting in a frown. "Is this from the Fragmented Visions?"

"Yes."

"It is nonsense Naira, the questionable translations of a madman's ravings."

"And yet, I have the metal wrought flower, its origins unknown." Naira pointed out the line. "And the Master Smith does point the way."

"It says five shall walk the Sunroad," Khady objected. "You and your husbands are only three."

"The Smith wishes to send two Daggers with us." Naira took the paper back. "When I read that in his reply, I knew. I hate this, Khady, and I fear it. I don't know where I'm going or why, but I feel the jaws of prophecy closing in around me."

Khady hesitated for a ladle, then extended an uncertain hand. Naira nodded and Khady's arm curled around her. "I am sorry. Are you sure you are not letting a desire to hear the Goddess once more lead you astray?"

“I am very sure. I miss Her Voice, but not so much that I would leave Kisangi for the sake of adventure. I am no questing youth after all.” Naira rested her head against her friend’s shoulder, taking comfort in the simple human touch.

“Then let me help you. There are river-caravans a-plenty leaving for Uwak now that the spring rains have passed. I’ll manage Makena and we’ll get you on the way to the House of Daggers before another ten-day is gone.”

Chapter 4 - Louis

Hearken now and hear of the beginnings. Once there lived a woman whose name is lost to history. This woman was born a trollkarl and her hunger for power knew no bounds. Though she drained the power of her tribe to the last drop, she yearned for more still.

In her hunger, she became aware of the latticework of life that runs through each living thing. Through study and foul ritual, she feed off the power that was never hers to take. And in so doing, she removed herself from the latticework. She became Asipidmalla, The Thing Beyond.

Asipidmalla grew in power and her hunger for the life of living creatures grew into an insatiable need. Her existence could no longer be sustained by this world. Indeed, her existence was now anathema and the more she fed, the more she needed.

The Snow Council and the Tribal Council pooled their wisdom and knowledge to devise a plan. They would turn the very latticework against Asipidmalla. Because she was herself female, the female trollkarls of the Tribes could feel her energy more closely and they would sacrifice themselves to lend the power of their lives to building a gibbet for Asipidmalla. The male trollkarls would use the places where the females sacrificed themselves and they would fashion nodes in the latticework of life. The drummers would make of these nodes a river of power that would feed a Gate and they would force Asipidmalla behind that Gate. They believed that from this place beyond the world, she would not be able to feed, and in time, she would consume herself.

Their plan worked in part, the Gate was erected and Asipidmalla was contained, but she did not die. Instead, the prison embraced her. She cannot escape it, but only if the latticework continues to feed the prison which they named The Blood Gate. And there Asipidmalla abides still, behind the Gate that the Blutben feeds.

The Legend of Asipidmalla

Shadows rolled aside for Louis to step through, taking him past Roul's manifestation of blades. It was his third manifestation of dusang and his feet remained firmly under him.

"We did it!" Roul whooped.

"Wheel's Rim! That feels good." Louis wiped sweaty strands of hair out of his eyes.

"Well done." Herself's cool voice surprised them both.

Louis turned to see his mother standing perhaps three steps behind him, her profile obscured by the leaping shadows cast from the hearth in the salle. She had not been there a flicker before.

"Thank you." He grinned at her words. Her cool tone did not discourage him, praise from Herself was as rare as sunlight in winter and lifted his spirits in equal measure.

"That is not the end of it, of course." She tilted her head.

A nervous flutter riffled in Louis's stomach.

"It is time to expand your studies," she continued. "However, before that let's see you stretch this strength a little further. Byron has setup a small chamciel in the old greathall. Go and have a bout of elyas."

Louis stared at her. He wasn't certain he could have a normal sword bout right now, never mind a bout of elyas. And the girls' lesson as well today. He opened his mouth to protest, but she interrupted him before he could even draw breath.

"Do you have something to say, my son?" Clear warning stained the innocuous question.

"No, your Grace."

"Then do as you are bid."

"Yes, your Grace."

"Come to my study tonight at the third evening ring. To defeat Brice Rennaud's ambitions will require skills neither of you currently possess."

"Yes, your Grace."

She nodded and left. Triumph turned sour and Louis wondered if anything would ever be easy with Herself. He turned to Byron. "I hope your field has a net to catch us."

A deep chuckle rumbled from the armstrong's belly, his face alight with humor at Louis's disgust. "You'll be fine. I made the poles low, the tallest is only the height of two men from the floor."

Louis groaned but followed Byron through the warren of corridors to the old greathall. The fortress of Rocaille was ancient. It had been built even before the northern kingdom of Blanuit had joined the Empire of Lumiaron. Born of necessity from the polar winter, corridors connected all the buildings. In this labyrinthian lair of the northern dukes, it was easy for a visitor to get turned around and even denizens of the fortress occasionally got lost in the unused parts. Many of the passages and buildings had been rebuilt, repurposed, and sometimes abandoned for generations.

Roul rubbed his nose as they passed the great kennels where the sledge dogs slept, bushy tails wrapped tight around their bodies. "I haven't seen a stable."

"There is one, but it's empty." Louis sneezed as the musty smell of dog fur tickled his nostrils. "Rocaille's horses are taken south for the winter, they do poorly in the cold."

"And this old greathall?"

"It used to be my grandfather's greathall, or so my uncle told me. After my mother donned the purple sash, she had an even older building rebuilt for the new greathall."

"I wonder why," Roul mused.

Louis just shrugged as Byron opened a large iron-shod door made of pale birch. The room beyond was a cavernous space. No rushes softened the floor and the bare walls reflected back the winter chill. The fire that roared in the central hearth had little impact on the echoing hall.

Great stone pots provided mooring for nine thick posts of varying lengths, topped by wooden platforms.

"Only nine poles?" Roul asked.

"There's not enough room for a full chamciel." Byron pointed at the nearest platform. "Roul, you'll mount this side. Louis, far side. Herself wants live blades, so the match continues until one of you yields or you need to use remy to continue."

"Can't I just yield?" Louis asked sourly.

“Is that all the gumption you have?” Byron planted his fists on his hips. “It’s just one bout. Off you go, milord.”

Louis sighed and trotted through the poles to the far side. The pots were set meters apart, round platforms the size of a body shield. His only comfort was that Roul was a far better swordsman than he was, and the bout would surely end fast. He forced what remained of his *elämä* to flow into his legs and leapt onto the lowest platform in his third of the field. Byron had been gentle in the height at least; the mounting platform was only the height of a man.

He drew his blade and saluted Roul, who returned the gesture. Louis leapt for a taller perch. A height advantage might help him survive at least a turning of the flame and no matter how tired, he wasn’t going to just roll over.

Roul bounded from platform to platform with the grace of a snow leopard scaling a high mountain pass. He considered Louis’s guard position thoughtfully from a lower post, blade held tip down in a one-handed grip.

Louis spread his feet, distributing his weight evenly, and waited.

Roul jumped low, not toward Louis’s platform but toward the pole that held up a mid-range platform. His feet connected solidly to the shaft and his body tilted mid-air. A strong shove of muscles launched him toward the apex of the hall. Glittering sword threatening, he hung above Louis for a flicker. His shadow flared in the dim light of the hearth and in that flicker, he became the legendary *kokko*, the crow whose breath was fire.

The choice was dodge or block. Louis leapt for the middle-height platform. Wood cracked behind him as Roul landed where he had been.

Spinning on his heels, Louis swept his blade up defensively, but he was too slow. Roul vaulted across the platforms, body a lance aimed at Louis. The blade swept up as the young chevalier landed on the balls of stockinged feet, the edge whispered up Louis’s tunic and kissed his throat.

Louis’s sword clattered on the platform as he opened his hand. “I yield.”

Roul flashed a fierce grin and stepped back, allowing Louis to collect his blade.

“Well done, Roul.” Byron wagged a finger in Louis’s direction. “Tomorrow, do better, milord. You’re disgracing my teaching.”

Louis leapt off the platform and left the hall shaking his head.

After two weeks of training the little girls, it was the moment of truth. They had mastered the skill of finding their heartbeat and tapping out the tattoo on their knees. It was time for them reach to for their *elämäs*.

Roul had not attended their lessons since falling asleep in the first one, but Louis asked him to join tonight, to keep watch over Isabella in this dangerous phase. Louis sat cross-legged before his daughter, Roul mirrored his pose before Isabella.

“Find your heartbeats,” Louis commanded.

The two little girls closed their eyes and their fingers beat the fourth beat of their hearts. Louis waited until he was sure they both had settled into the rhythm before resuming the lesson.

“I want you to think about your blood as it rushes through your veins. Your blood as pushed by your heart. I want you to feel the rush of life through your veins, pounded by your heart. That bright power burning in your blood, that is your elämää.”

He gave them a dribble of wax to think on that.

“Now, I want you to draw that power to the surface. Every fourth beat of your heart, I want you to think about it beating the blood closer to your skin, bubbling up from inside you to rise through your bones. I want to see you blush with power as the heat of your life reaches your skin.”

He watched Loyssa as closely as he knew Roul watched Isabella. Habi was personal to each habieur, the body shielding the elämää from view, but there were danger signs to watch for. If blood started to pearl on skin, the student was drawing their physical blood to the skin and stood in danger of exsanguination as they literally sweated out their blood.

Louis kept his eyes focused on Loyssa’s mouth. She was so slight, he feared her falling into the other trap, drawing too much of her power. If her lips turned blue and her breath ran short, it would be time to forcefully interrupt the lesson.

He could almost feel his daughter’s heart beating as he watched her. Did she have enough elämää to learn the ways of power? His heart constricted at the thought of repudiating her if she could not manifest habi. No, she was his daughter, of course she could master magic. He listened to her little fingers beating out the four-beat tattoo. He could almost sink into her body with his mind. Her elämää was just there, right under the skin. Impossibly, he could feel her battle to lift the power.

He reached out a gentle hand in his mind. He sought only to help her but felt a dizzying rush of life. Power flooded his body, a sweet taste in the back of his throat, a warmth in his belly. It was as though he was drinking water from a clear mountain stream, and he simply could not get enough.

A discordant tempo buzzed in his ears. It interrupted the hot flow, and he raised a hand to bat the beat away. Something seized his wrist and he struggled against that grip. He wanted, no, he *needed* to return to that honeyed water of life.

A hard blow connected with the back of his head and everything went dark.