

ARÖN

TALES OF KHAYAL

BOOK 1

by

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Uhibbook Publishing
Sharjah Publishing City
U.A.E

www.uhibbook.com

First published in United Arab Emirates by Uhibbook Publishing FZC 2025

Approved by U.A.E National Media Council

Media File Number: MF-02-6662024

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Paperback ISBN: 978-9948-684-73-2

E-book: 978-9948-686-71-2

To Neil King, who connected the dots.

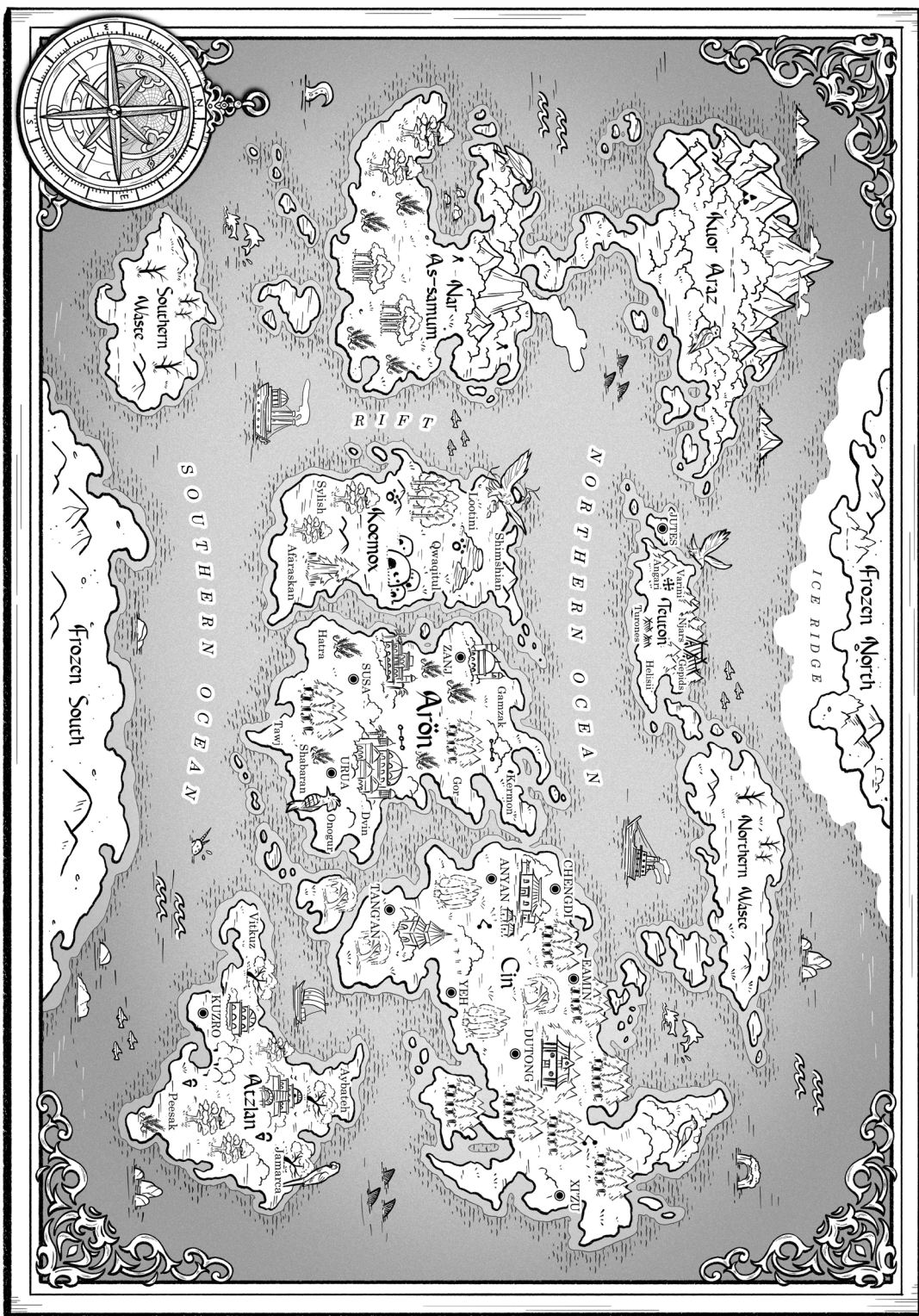


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*What has been foretold in legend of the
Final Standing will come to pass, for it is
written on tablets of light, placed within a
chronicle, upon a dais on a celestial plane.*

*Every generation lives with this knowledge;
all expect to see its signs, yet few can
claim to have seen anything at all.*



-1-
DVIN

*For a seed to sprout and become a tree of significance,
it must be buried deep in the soil.*

THE WISDOM OF THE WAY

WINTER ARRIVES EARLY IN ARÖN; a cool breeze ripples through the flanks of the northern army. Long-range acoustic cannons roll across muddy fields. Each infantryman carries a sonic rifle, and some have handguns and steel sabres. A light rain-shower ends and the clammy air stinks of sweat and fear.

Alifa observes the wet sheen on the fields of Dvin. She adjusts her white headscarf; some of her silky black hair falls across her forehead. She stands silently by the flap to the entrance of the medical tent, where the cold air snatches at her apron. The sun remains a spectre, low in a cloudless sky.

Under the heavens, the armies of the northern sultan assemble for battle with the southern sultana. In all her sixteen years of life on Ikleel, Alifa cannot remember a time when she was not in a medical unit. *Men will die today*, she thinks. *Far from their homes. Others will be injured, and for what? A fight between two cousins.*

‘Alifa.’ It is the voice of Kira, the head nurse.

‘Coming,’ she replies. Alifa takes a deep breath, the air cold in her lungs, stares at the soldiers, shakes her head, then ducks back into the suffocating tent. Inside, soldiers sprawl on stretchers, and in the dim light, she is being asked to attend to an injured man.

‘Says he has a wrist sprain – see what you can do,’ says Kira, before leaving her.

'How did it happen?' Alifa asks the dejected soldier.

'Does it matter?' he mutters.

'It might,' Alifa replies.

'It's a sprained wrist – my sword hand as well, can't lift my bloody weapon.'

'I see,' Alifa says. *He wants any excuse to avoid fighting. One less soldier won't make a difference.* Alifa starts to wrap the man's wrist.

'How long do I need to rest it?' he asks.

'Until you don't feel any pain,' Alifa says.

The soldier nods.

'Alifa,' Kira calls out. 'Need your help.'

She leaves the soldier, attends a new one slumped on a stretcher. Kira crouches over the patient, who has a nasty gash in the side of his stomach. Blood oozes out.

'Lad got caught between two rivals having a sword fight. Farmer's boy, by the looks of him. Hold the gauze,' Kira instructs, then walks away.

'Kira?' Alifa calls after her.

The head nurse takes out her scroll-light, unwraps the canvas cloth with the meshed liquid algae display, slides the *kamish* made of ironwood from its side and taps the greenish-blue screen. Writing right to left, Kira scribbles something on the scroll-light, looks back at Alifa, shakes her head, moves on.

Probably the death entry for this fellow, thinks Alifa.

Alifa studies the bleeding soldier. *He's not going to make it. Who does he leave behind? Distraught parents, troubled siblings, a sweetheart perhaps? What a waste.*

Unless.

She looks around: no one is close. Alifa uses her healing.

Immediately a tingling fills her hand, then surges into the dying

man. She trains her attention on his injury, willing it to heal, then feels her own energy draining. Hesitantly, she withdraws the gauze from the wound. Blood no longer leaks. It congeals and the wound starts to seal. The soldier has a fighting chance. He remains unconscious, oblivious to what is happening. *By the Will of the Creator, I pray it is enough*, Alifa hopes.

‘You! Come here.’

It’s an angry voice and when Alifa turns, she recognises one of the fearsome Black Axes, loyal stalwarts of the Sultan of the north. Dressed in a mixture of leather and metal armour with black greaves, his broad belt housing several knives, the man is of middling height, rippling with muscle. Two taller, broader Black Axes come in after him. The Black Axes are elite martial warriors, favourites of the Sultan, and they know it.

‘Coming,’ Alifa replies, sounding obedient. *No need to rattle the Black Axes*, she thinks. *But this poor fellow hasn’t fully recovered. I need to give him another dose of healing when I regain my strength.*

‘Now, girl!’ the Black Axe roars, as he slams the flat of his palm on a table and sends a bundle of bandages and a wooden jar of water tumbling to the floor.

The medical tent is suddenly empty, apart from injured or dying soldiers. Even the fellow with the sprained wrist has disappeared. Alifa realises she is the only member of the medical staff present. *The others, they must have seen the Black Axes approaching.*

‘Come on Vartez, the fighting starts soon, we need to get going,’ the tallest Black Axe grumbles.

‘I want this shrapnel out of my arm. Otherwise how am I going to kill southerners?’ Vartez says. ‘Girl, why aren’t you here!’

The wounded soldier: if he doesn’t get a second dose of healing, he won’t make it.

‘Please, this man is dying, I’m just trying to help him,’ Alifa implores.

Vartez glares at the soldier spreadeagled on the stretcher. Marches over, takes out his knife and in one swift movement, slams the weapon through the soldier’s heart. The man’s body convulses, eyes open in shock, before he lies still. Vartez withdraws the blade, cleans the steel on the bedroll.

‘Well, he’s dead now, no need to help him,’ Vartez bellows, to cheers from the other two Black Axes.

‘You ... killed him,’ Alifa exclaims.

‘He looks like some useless farmhand who didn’t want to be here. I’ve sent him on his way.’

‘But ...’ Alifa says.

‘Bah! Stupid girl, I’m the fighter. Help me, not him.’

Alifa doesn’t let her anger show but it rages. She stares at the ground, calming her thoughts. *There are other ways to get even with men like Vartez*, she thinks.

Vartez grabs Alifa by her apron, hauls her up. ‘Get on with it, girl! I have a battle to fight. Take this shrapnel out.’ The Black Axe motions to the metal protruding from his right arm.

Alifa glances at the dead man. No amount of healing will bring him back now. *I was so close. If only I was stronger, I could have healed him.* But she wasn’t and she doesn’t even know what healing is, or why she has it, but it’s useful, like the other little gifts she has.

‘All right,’ she says. ‘Sit there,’ she motions to Vartez, pointing at a wooden stool.

The Black Axe lumbers across and lowers himself. Alifa focusses on the stool, then nudges it. It moves out from under Vartez, causing the Black Axe to hit the ground. His comrades erupt in fits of laughter and Alifa cannot help but smile.

‘What?’ Vartez says, grimacing as he gets up. ‘You!’ he howls at Alifa. ‘You did that deliberately, gave me a broken stool. Why, I’m going to gut you.’

The Black Axe unsheathes his knife again and lunges at Alifa, who leaps back, then nudges another stool to come between them, Vartez trips over it, falls flat on his face.

‘Hah!’ the Black Axes roar. ‘If you can’t keep your feet, Vartez, you won’t last long in the battle,’ the tall one says, slapping the other fellow on the back as they explode in laughter.

‘Damn nurse, I’ll skin and gut you,’ Vartez growls, kicking the stool.

Just then, a deep bellowing horn sounds.

‘We need to go: we’re being summoned,’ says the third Black Axe.

‘This will only take a minute,’ Vartez spits as he comes for Alifa.

The tallest Black Axe is now beside Vartez. ‘Later, after the battle. She’s not going anywhere, we know where to find her. Do what you need to after the real fighting.’ The Black Axe glares at her with distaste.

‘She’s not worth our time,’ says the third man.

Vartez seems to calm down. ‘All right,’ he says. He points at Alifa. ‘You’re dead.’ With that the Black Axe marches out, kicking over a table of medical supplies, sending bottles and scalpels flying. With cold stares, the other two Black Axes also leave.

Alifa lets out a long breath.

Moments later the doctor and the other nurses return as though nothing happened. They simply set about their work, barely giving Alifa a look. Even the injured soldier with the sprained wrist saunters back, finds an empty stretcher and lies down.

Alifa returns to the dead soldier. ‘Sorry, friend.’

‘Wrap him up,’ says the doctor, appearing by her side, barely looking up from his scroll-light as he uses his *kamish* to fill out a report. ‘Take him out back. There is a grove nearby, bury him there. There will be plenty more going to the same place after the fighting. Better get the gravediggers busy.’

‘Yes, Doctor,’ Alifa replies, wondering whether she will ever own a scroll-light and *kamish*. She doubts it: she can’t afford it. The scroll-masters charge an extortionate amount for the privilege of calibrating a person with such tools.

Alifa wraps the soldier in the bloody bedroll, then wraps him again in a white cloth, before dragging his body on a bamboo stretcher out the rear to the nearby grove. The gravediggers have already prepared some burial holes and Alifa leaves the dead man in their company. She prays that the Creator will take the soul of the dead man and reunite him with his loved ones in the Gardens of Liyuün. As Alifa returns through a thicket of trees she hears voices coming up the path. Black Axes. She ducks low, hides behind the trunk of an oak.

Alifa notices a man approach from the military camp, the tallest man she has ever seen. The Sultan of the north, Artay! He is rumoured to be seven foot tall and seeing how he looms a full head above all around him, Alifa can believe it. He is immensely broad, his shaggy black beard bounces against his breastplate, and his coal-black hair sticks out from under his helmet. The emblem of a Black Axe is embossed on it. Artay strides up the gravel path, flanked by Black Axes, before stopping yards from Alifa’s hiding place.

‘Your Majesty,’ says a Black Axe, with a bow.

‘What news, Commander?’ Artay asks, his voice deep and powerful. If a bear could talk, it would sound something like this, Alifa thinks.

‘Gamzak has been raided by the Zandal,’ the Commander says.

‘What is the status of the port?’ Artay asks.

‘They looted, then burned the city.’

Artay clenches his gauntleted fist. The veins on his massive forearm tighten.

‘Do we have it under control?’ Artay asks.

‘Yes, Your Majesty.’

‘Is there a chance of another raid on Kermon or Gor?’ Artay enquires.

‘Possibly. It is difficult to say. We have sent ships out to patrol the coastline and raise the alarm should the Zandal be spotted once more.’

Artay is silent. He shuts his eyes and all around him wait. Alifa holds her breath.

‘General,’ Artay instructs another Black Axe. ‘We cannot lose face with the Sultana, my dear cousin Negin. Send out our most disposable regiment.’

‘The Nanga Pagaals?’

‘Yes,’ Artay continues. ‘Let the drugged fools cause mayhem. No need to equip them with any sonic weapons. The Vanimal assassination team is already deployed; let it fulfil its mission to kill my cousin. If, as I suspect, she has Conduits protecting her, it will be another matter to take up with the Emperor. After the raid, withdraw all forces, and march back north, double time. We need to protect our own territory.’

‘Yes, Sire,’ the general replies.

‘And General, don’t do anything rash. Follow me north as soon as you have word from the assassination team,’ Artay says.

The general winces.

‘Is there something else?’ Artay asks.

‘The Vanimals are ...’

Artay cuts him off. ‘Unpredictable beasts, I know, but expendable mercenaries, wouldn’t you agree?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘Good, I would rather lose some Vanimals than men in this situation.’

‘Yes, Sire.’

The giant sultan marches towards an enormous black vehicle with tractor-like wheels. Artay gets inside and it starts to slowly roll away, as other Black Axes mount similar vehicles and still more follow on horseback.

When the coast is clear, Alifa emerges, and trudges back to the medical tent. *Who – or what – are Conduits?*



BREAKING THE SEALS

Until you are tested, integrity is but a label.

THE BOOK OF HERALDS

THE ARMY OF ARTAY, the Sultan of the north, assembles on a flat expanse of land. The mountains of Dvin lie to the east, beyond which the jagged straits lead to the Middle Sea. Comprising one hundred thousand soldiers, the northern force is spearheaded by the fearsome Black Axes.

Wrapped in a dark grey cloak, his face hidden under a hood, Zorar sits on his brown mare, watching the northern army. His keen dark brown eyes take in the formation as he assesses the troop numbers. A gust of wind buffets his riding cloak, dancing around his steed. Zorar thinks: *This battle can be avoided, should be avoided, but it requires dialogue.*

A middle-aged man about Zorar's age approaches, on an open-topped algae-fuelled vehicle with wide tractor tyres that churn the grass. The driver brings the vehicle to a halt in front of the woman to Zorar's left.

'Your Majesty,' the newcomer says.

'General Ramin, your assessment?' she asks. She is Negin, Sultana of the south, the woman Zorar deeply loves, and who loves him.

Both know they can never be with one another.

Her bright brown eyes twinkle and although she is in the fourth decade of her life, her olive-coloured skin retains the suppleness of youth. A fine floral design runs up her breastplate and greaves. Her helmet shines gold and a red cape hangs from her shoulders.

The General glances over his shoulder. His soldiers are arranged in a phalanx facing the enemy who are in a similar arrangement. 'It is an odd formation,' Ramin says.

'Odd?' Negin asks.

'Too defensive,' Ramin says. 'Sultan Artay is known for his aggressive risk-taking. I expected him to set up his notorious wolf-snap manoeuvre.'

'Should we not be grateful if he means to fight a conventional battle?' Negin asks.

'We should, but something doesn't add up.'

The General is right to be cautious, thinks Zorar. In fact, Ramin is an able military commander, loved by his soldiers and no stranger to hard work.

Turning to Zorar, the General's tone is cold and formal. 'Zorar, I trust you will remain as an observer. We do not need the intervention of *your* kind.'

'He is here at my say,' Negin retorts.

Zorar exchanges an affectionate look with Negin.

'I mean no offence, Your Majesty,' Ramin says. 'But we know that Conduits are outlawed across the Empire. If Emperor Behrooz were to hear about any intervention ...'

'You know as well as I do, Ramin, that the Emperor is fixated on dancing girls and intoxicants, paying little heed to what is happening here.'

'Your Majesty knows best.' The General tilts his head.

'I will remain an observer,' Zorar says.

The General nods.

Then Zorar adds, with an impish smile: 'Unless the unexpected happens.'

'Humph!' Ramin mutters, before motioning for his driver to

turn the slow-moving vehicle back towards the main body of his troops.

‘Don’t pay attention to him, Zorar. Conduits will always be welcome in my dominion,’ Negin says.

Then more softly she adds, ‘You will always be welcome.’

‘Thank you,’ he whispers.

Fondly they contemplate one another, before Negin raises her chin, looks to the horizon and says, ‘But we do need to lift this nonsensical imperial ban on Conduits.’

‘Yes, Your Majesty,’ Zorar says.

‘If only my cousin Behrooz ruled effectively, it would rid us of disunity, but even rulers are slaves to history.’

Negin regards her armed forces. Zorar wants to press the matter of the ban but considers now is not the right time. *When will be the right time*, he wonders.

Horns blare across the battlefield and a riotous cry goes up from the northern forces. Zorar surveys a rabble dressed in loincloths breaking away from the main force. Nanga Pagaals. Dishevelled men, high on drugs, with white paint on their brown skins, wild hair, beards untrimmed and untamed. Each is carrying a spear; they holler as they sprint towards the southern forces.

Within minutes they cross the verdant meadow separating the two armies. General Ramin’s southern infantry steps up, rifles are aimed and then the *pop-pop* of the sonic weapons is followed by line upon line of Nanga Paagals hitting the ground. Those who survive charge toward the southern force, waving spears, uttering defiant war cries. Those not mowed down by the sonic weapons are impaled on lances held in defensive positions. And Zorar considers: *What is Artay playing at? Unless.*

The *whoosh* of an axe flying through the air alerts Zorar to the



danger. Immediately his hand reaches out, whipping his cloak away. Semi-transparent lines only visible to Conduits leap from his hand to deflect the axe from striking Negin. Two more axes come at the Sultana. Zorar leaps onto the back of his horse, balances on the saddle and threads the other axes away from the monarch. Two beastlike men approach at remarkable speed, scattering the royal guard. Vanimals!

The Vanimals, humanlike but a head taller than most humans and possessed of animalistic features, slash with swords and daggers, leaving a bloody path. The Sultana's royal guard crumple before the hideous onslaught. Vibrations in the air cause Zorar to spin to the right. Half a dozen arrows fly at Negin. He deflects another dagger thrown at her. He cannot reach the arrows.

He sees more semi-transparent lines appear, propelling every arrow away from its target. Azadeh runs through a mass of southern soldiers. She has that familiar determined look on her face, her hair tied back in plaits, the hood of her cloak thrown back. Two Vanimals head towards her, drawing sonic rifles from their backs, as another Conduit, the muscular Nimar, rushes in to help her.

Zorar leaps from his horse, lands nimbly on the soil, unsheathes his sword, falls into a defensive crouch before Negin. A Vanimal breaks through a line of terrified soldiers, leaps like a predatory tiger, baring sharp white teeth, eyes wild with the thrill of the fight. The Vanimal lands before him, skids on the ground, hoping to catch him by surprise, boots aimed at Zorar's shins. Zorar leaps into the air, backflips, lands, and his sword flicks out at the Vanimal, whose axe comes up in a defensive block. The steel of the blade meets the iron of the axe, setting off sparks.

The Vanimal is almost two heads taller than him and broad as an ox, but is on his feet fast, leaping at Negin. Zorar launches

himself, wraps his arms around the huge frame of the Vanimal. They both land, roll over one another. Zorar untangles himself, draws a dagger, aims at the Vanimal's jugular. His opponent pushes him off: the Vanimal is faster than expected. The Vanimal rolls forward and two daggers appear in his hands. He thrusts at Zorar.

Zorar leaps back.

The guttural steel voice of the Vanimal is distinctive as it rasps. 'Human filth.'

'Look who's talking,' Zorar says, sniffing the stench coming off the beast.

The Vanimal springs. Zorar deflects one dagger with his weapon, the other he smacks away with his hand, before he drives the Vanimal down with a knee in the neck. Zorar rolls forward. Drawing on his Conduit strength, he drags the colossal beastlike man behind and over him, before slamming him into the ground, head-first, snapping his neck, breaking his spine. The Vanimal spasms, then goes still.

A fourth Vanimal, hidden till now, sprints towards the Sultana. The Vanimal takes several heavy sonic blasts in the chest from the royal guards, but his sturdy armour deflects the impact. A group of soldiers defends Negin against the approaching Vanimal. Invisible threads fly from Zorar's hand, yanking his sword from the ground, before he sprints at the Vanimal. The assassin, spotting the oncoming Zorar, swings his mighty spiked mace. Zorar ducks, opens a gash in the belly of the Vanimal, spins in mid-air, then in one swift movement takes off the Vanimal's head.

Zorar shifts his gaze toward Nimar and Azadeh and is relieved to see they have overcome the two Vanimals, who now lie still on the ground.

'Your Majesty,' Zorar says, approaching Negin.

Boom!

A crack of thunder, as though the sky has split, is followed by an ongoing chorus of blasts. The ground shakes, judders, vibrates. Men and animals topple, vehicles tip. Overhead the blue sky begins to change and an unnatural darkness creeps up from the horizon till the sky turns pitch black.

The thunderclaps and the earthquake cease. Silence. A comet soars overhead; as high as an eagle climbs. Emerging from the north, it heads south in a fiery inferno, lighting up the battlefield. The comet dips over the southern horizon. Disappears.

Zorar's heart races as terror fills every part of his being.

The Final Standing!

Then as suddenly as it came, the darkness steals away, following the path of the comet. The sky is restored to its natural blue hue, the sun is visible once more, the wind can be felt and slowly men and women across the battlefield turn and stare at one another. Shock is visible on every face.

Zorar kneels down. Palms flat on the earth, head lowered, he trembles, every fibre within his body fearful, on edge.

Mörtan, the Corroder, rises!

He feels for the source through the soil. He lost connection when darkness filled the sky. Was he blocked from it? Trembling hands clench into fists. He stands, composes himself, walks unsteadily towards Sultana Negin, offers his hand to help her up. She gratefully slips her hand into his and for a moment they look into each other's eyes. Zorar lets go.

Negin smooths down her dress. She is shaking. 'Is it really ... are we truly in the end time?' She studies the look of consternation on his face.

All around them, soldiers rise to their feet. Slowly the sounds

of men, animals and machines return. The army of the north has remained where it was.

‘It would seem like it,’ Zorar replies.

‘Do you not know?’ she asks.

General Ramin scrambles up to the Sultana, wiping mud off his uniform. ‘The northern army retreats, Your Majesty,’ he says, pointing across the battlefield. ‘But ...’ He turns to Zorar. ‘Is it truly the Hour?’

This time Zorar remains silent. He merely nods.

‘Damn unlucky, is all I’d say,’ Ramin declares.

He thinks once more of the Final Standing. *Oh, by the Creator, not in my lifetime!*

‘Shall we rout them as they retreat?’ Ramin asks. ‘We may not get a better opportunity.’

Negin considers his request before replying. ‘No, leave them. Whatever caused Artay to retreat may end up being the cause of our two peoples coming together. Besides, if the world is coming to an end, let us at least be in our own homes when it happens.’

‘But ...’ the General says.

‘No,’ Negin says. Her steely gaze silences Ramin. ‘Remain vigilant and camp in Dvin. Send scouts to track the progress of the retreating northern army. When we are sure they have left, demobilise and return to Urua.’

Negin exchanges a concerned look with Zorar, before departing with her military officers. As she does so, the Hefter, Nimar, comes up beside Zorar. His penetrating black eyes stare at Zorar, as the Threader Azadeh joins them.

‘The Final Standing approaches,’ Nimar says.

‘I wish it were not so,’ Zorar says.

Azadeh whispers, ‘The end of time.’

‘How long have we got?’ Nimar asks.

‘That was the first sign. “A comet will turn the sky black as it flies north to south.” After that, we do not know. It could be years or even decades before the Final Standing itself. It could be less. We simply do not know. But the signs will come quickly, like grains of sand slipping from your hand.’

‘I wish it were not so,’ Azadeh laments.

‘There was something else,’ Zorar says.

‘More?’ Nimar arches an eyebrow.

‘When the horizon turned pitch black, I sensed a pulse from a Grand Conduit in the northern army.’

Nimar says, ‘Sultan Artay does not have Conduits.’

‘Who could it be?’ asks Azadeh.

‘Maybe someone who doesn’t know they are a Grand Conduit. If Mörtan is about to return to Ikleel we will need all the Conduits we can find,’ Zorar replies.





UNCOVERING A CONDUIT

*Deprivation can be a gift,
for it is a doorway to awareness.*

THE WISDOM OF THE WAY

TO ALIFA'S SURPRISE the medical tent does not see an influx of the newly-injured. *Perhaps*, she thinks, *the southern army capitulated*. She takes a stroll outside, observes the retreating northern army. *So soon*.

She recalls the shock when the thunderclap sounded, the earth shook, and the entire sky went black. Like others, she thought it was the end of the world. But unlike others, she felt a stabbing pain in her heart. As she watched the fiery comet pass overhead, she thought her heart was going to burst and she fell to the ground.

I need to leave. But where can I go? Alifa considers her role as a nurse: it provides her with regular food and shelter, a modicum of dignity. *What more do I want?*

She thinks about the death of the young soldier earlier, stabbed by the Black Axe. She had almost healed him. Almost, not quite. *What is this healing gift?* she ponders, not for the first time. It comes in trickles; she has little idea how or why. *Someone must know what it is. Who?*

'Alifa,' the Doctor calls.

'Coming,' she replies.

'Tell the gravediggers not to expect any more bodies except for those of the Nanga Paagals. No more graves need digging.'

'I will, Doctor.'

For the second time that day she visits the gravediggers and conveys the message, whereupon they put down their tools and take a break under a sycamore tree. Before returning to the medical tent, Alifa sits on the stump of a felled tree and looks around the silent woods. Time passes and she thinks, as she often does: *I wonder what the south is like*. Ghastly tales of Urua, the dark malevolent southern capital, have dissuaded her from finding out.

I need to get back, she counsels herself, as she stands up, then halts once more. Something is drawing her south, a magnetic resonance. She turns, looks south again. Shakes her head.

Hours have passed, for when she heads back, few soldiers remain. There's a field between her and the medical unit when three men with black axes appear.

Vartez.

Instantly they surround her, the two larger men lifting her by either arm, running with her back into the forest, toward the closest tree.

'Thought you'd make me look stupid,' Vartez snaps in her ear. 'Thought I would forget!' The Black Axe punches her in the stomach. The other two wind a rope around her, pulling her against the tree trunk. Her back is pressed against the tree, her arms pinned on either side, the rope tight around her neck. She cannot move her head. The rope is looped several times, pinning her legs as well.

The other two Black Axes snigger as they consider her situation.

'Had to catch you unawares girl, didn't want you using trickery,' Vartez says.

Although her face is jammed to one side, Alifa feels an overwhelming sense of calm wash over her. She should be terrified. She isn't.

'What trickery?' Alifa asks.

‘Don’t play me for a fool, girl,’ Vartez snaps. ‘Your kind are known for it. A little nudge here and there, make things move a few inches, trip people up. It’s no wonder you people aren’t welcome in the north.’

There are others like me? Alifa thinks.

‘Who are we?’ Alifa asks. She should be panicking, but she is filled with a soothing sensation.

Vartez yanks a long hunting knife from the scabbard on his belt. ‘But once a cold shaft of steel goes through the heart you all end up the same. Dead.’

Vartez pulls the weapon back and drives it at Alifa. Unexpectedly the weapon and Vartez’s arm catch in mid-air. Wide-eyed, Vartez tries to pull his arm down but it’s immobile.

‘What are you doing, girl?’ Vartez growls.

Nothing. But she cannot tell him that.

‘Slit her throat,’ Vartez barks at the others. They draw knives, but before they can take any action, the blades fly from their hands, disappearing into the undergrowth. Both men are flung against tree trunks, arms pinned back. Legs parted.

‘What!’ the Black Axes exclaim, heads turning wildly from side to side.

Vartez, held paralysed, strains to break free. Sweat streaks his brow. The knife he holds starts to turn back towards the Black Axe himself. Eyes wide with horror, Vartez releases the blade.

‘Why you ...’ Vartez says, launching himself at Alifa. His body is yanked back, as though he were a puppet on a string. Thrown against a tree trunk opposite, Vartez is now restrained by invisible threads. He flails his arms, screams, curses Alifa. She is as surprised as he is. Then, as she gazes in wonder at the Black Axe, he is rotated upside down, so that his head is now inches off the ground. The

sight is comical, but Alifa is not sure whether to laugh or cry. *Did I do this*, she asks herself.

Three robed figures approach across the field. One is a man in his late forties. Immaculately dressed for such a setting, he wears a mischievous smile and there's an astonishing air of confidence in his stride. To his left is a woman, her hair in ponytails and a determined look on her face. Her long fingers make movements and if Alifa didn't know better she would say invisible threads connect her and the three Black Axes. To the other side of the man is a dark-coloured fellow, powerfully built, with a generous smile. His beard has a distinct point to it.

Who are they? When Alifa makes eye contact with the man in the centre, a tremendous feeling of calm swells within her once more.

The newcomers approach Alifa. In one swift movement, the dark man flicks out a knife, cuts the ropes binding her.

'Better?' the other man asks.

'Yes,' Alifa stutters.

'Good,' he says, turns to the Black Axes. 'You know who we are?'

The Black Axes stop struggling. Nod.

'You know what we can do.'

Again, nods.

'In keeping with the spirit of a day where there was no significant fighting,' the man announces, 'you may go. Return to your army with your weapons.'

The Black Axes are stunned. Whatever pins the men to the trees is removed. They fall to the ground. Vartez lands on his head. Grumbling, but relieved. In a softer tone Vartez says: 'We will do as you command.'

'You may leave,' the man tells them.

With that the three men collect their weapons before running

north. Minutes pass.

The woman tilts her head to one side, as though listening for something. 'Ah, here it comes,' she says, as Alifa hears a whoosh in the air.

The woman waves her hand as though swatting a fly, after which Alifa hears the thud of an arrow in a tree trunk behind her. The Black Axes just tried to kill her.

'May I?' the dark man asks the other.

'If you must,' the other replies.

In one swift movement, the dark muscular man removes a bow, nocks an arrow, draws back the bowstring and fires. He rapidly repeats the manoeuvre two more times. Alifa hears cries of pain from the forest.

The bowman smiles, his brilliant white teeth showing. 'Just in the thigh; they'll remember it.'

'One got it in the backside,' the woman adds with a wry smile.

'My aim must be off,' the dark man says.

The other man turns to Alifa. 'They won't be bothering you again.'

'Thank you,' Alifa stutters.

'Zorar. You may call me Zorar,' he says. 'And this fine lady with the nimble fingers is Azadeh and our less than precise bowman is Nimar.' Zorar grins at his companions before turning back to her.

'I am Alifa,' she says.

Zorar smiles. She senses that coolness and serenity enter her heart once more. He asks, 'Do you know who we are?'

She shakes her head.

'We are Conduits, part of the *Nurani Kha* Order,' Zorar says.

She now recalls hearing stories about Conduits from childhood, that they are some kind of witches and warlocks. Something inside

her triggers and before she knows it she says, 'Aren't *Kha* Orders mixed up with Mörtan the Corroder?'

'Some are,' Zorar says. 'They are *Dhulmi*, serving Mörtan. Our *Kha* Order is a *Nurani* one. We oppose Mörtan.'

'How do I know you're telling the truth?' Alifa asks.

'The girl has a point, Zorar,' Nimar says.

'You can't know, Alifa. Not here. But if you come with us to Urua, to the south, then I think you'll realise we are with the noble Heralds. We uphold the criterion, established by the Creator.'

'Come with you!' Alifa exclaims. 'Why would I do that?'

'Because you are one of us,' Nimar interjects. 'You are a wielder of *Kha*: a Conduit.'

Alifa, takes a step back. 'I ...' She struggles for words.

'Have you ever been able to move objects, Alifa, just by thinking they should be moved?' Zorar asks.

'I ... yes,' Alifa replies.

'Or been able to make a wound better, simply by placing your hand on it and willing it?'

'Yes,' Alifa says. *But I couldn't save the dying soldier*, she reminds herself.

'There are many things you can do, which you do not even know of. But come south with us and we will teach you,' Zorar says. Alifa feels that wave of serenity wash over her once more.

Alifa remains silent. *There are others like me. I want to learn, but can I trust them? Yet they saved me, saved me from certain death.* Letting out a deep breath she says: 'I haven't got anywhere else to go.'

'Your family?' Zorar asks.

'There are none that I know of.'

'You are welcome to join us, Alifa,' Zorar says. 'We can be family for you, if you want us to be.'

Family, she would like to be part of a family. How can I be sure they have my best interests at heart?

They wait silently.

I cannot be sure, but then I cannot be sure of anything else either.

‘I ...’ she pauses, stares north. *There is nothing for me there.* ‘I will come with you.’

Zorar’s face lights up. ‘There is much to learn. The work is hard and unrewarding at times: you will be pushed to your limit. No matter how many you help or save, no one will know you, no one will thank you for what you do.’

‘I think I understand,’ Alifa says.

‘You will come to understand.’

‘Is Urua as awful as they say it is?’ Alifa asks.

‘What do they say?’ Nimar asks.

‘In the north they say Urua is a nasty city, filled with flaming terraces, smoky walkways, foul odours and most of all, rude people.’

The three Conduits exchange looks with one another.

‘Why,’ Zorar says. ‘That’s exactly what we heard the capital of the north, Zanj, is like.’





URUA

*Become balanced like a mountain and
you will be unmoved by storms.*

THE BOOK OF HERALDS

EVERY BUILDING IN THE STONE CITY OF URUA, capital of the south, seems fragrant, the air infused with sweet-smelling incense and slow burning perfumed *oud*. Tawny-coloured buildings, ancient libraries, craft souks, entire quarters brimming with artisanal knowledge, all rest easy in the shade of cedars, oaks, minarets and spires. Mystics, metaphysicians and scientists, polymaths of world renown, all meander along cobbled pathways heading to dervish lodges, universities and centres of knowledge and learning. Merchants' horse-drawn carts and slow-moving vehicles with wide tractor tyres carry fresh produce picked daily on farms surrounding the city. Urua is a self-reliant marvel; the city seems to inhale and exhale, at peace with itself and all who occupy it.

In one intricate alley, where the footpath is a mosaic of azure tiles, and fountains supply citizens with crystal-clear drinking water, Alifa waits. Her mouth is wide open: she is amazed at the sights around her. In the night she had not taken in the marvel of Urua, but now by day, it overwhelms her. This is not the city described by northerners; this is a land of dreams. Then she remembers once more the stabbing pain in her heart when the comet flew overhead. Zorar mentioned it has something to do with the Final Standing. She does not know what this is but suspects she will soon learn of its consequence. *It has an ominous air to it – the Final Standing. What*

are people standing for and what is final about it?

From the far end of the street, beside a green flag with an outline of a hoopoe bird, a tall, well-built man casually strolls in her direction. As he draws closer Alifa is mesmerised by his good looks and winning smile, his chiselled jaw, his perfectly coiffed hair held back by a red headband. Two-day-old stubble covers his lower face and as he comes closer, she notes his eyes are like a deep well.

Two young women on the other side of the street halt, stare at the passing man, whisper to each other, smile as he walks past them. They give him a shy wave, to which he graciously bows, flashing that charming smile. One woman almost topples and is supported by the other. A slightly older woman, walking with her husband, promptly stops to take in this most gorgeous man, and lets out a long sigh. The husband walks on. This dashing figure, in his buccaneering boots and belt, a sword in a sheath by his side, places his hand on his heart and bows to the woman.

For the second time that morning Alifa reminds herself to shut her gawping mouth.

The fellow now turns his penetrating gaze on Alifa and the young northerner gulps. Her mouth goes dry and she can feel the heat rising in her cheeks.

‘You must be Alifa?’ he says in a deep resonant voice.

Alifa is silent.

The man arches a perfect eyebrow. ‘Or maybe you are not?’

‘I am she. I am Alifa.’

The man places a hand on his heart. ‘Goodwill to you, Alifa.’

‘Goodwill,’ Alifa replies.

‘I am Jamshi. Zorar asked me to collect you from this spot. He had an important matter to attend to this morning. Come, let us go,’ he says, as Alifa joins him and they continue down the street.

Heads turn as Jamshi strolls by. He acknowledges most well-wishers with either a sparkling smile, a hand on his heart, or when they are close enough, he utters the traditional greeting of the Arön empire: 'Goodwill.'

'How was your first night in Urua?' Jamshi asks.

'Restful,' Alifa says.

In truth she has never slept in such a comfortable bed and the novelty of a room to herself, with clear running water and a toilet, was not lost on her. She woke several times in the night, wondering why it was so quiet.

'You seem uncertain,' Jamshi comments.

'I'm not used to the silence,' Alifa replies.

'Zorar said he found you with the northern army.'

'Yes.'

Jamshi rubs his chin. 'Uncertainty, noise, danger, death – I suppose these are the only certainties when you are in an army.'

'Something like that,' Alifa says, preferring not to think about it, as she regards a green-domed building they walk past, sparkling sapphires set into its walls. *Will this new life in the south be better than my time in the north? It must be. Oh, by the Creator I pray for it.*

Jamshi tells Alifa to wait as he enters the premises of a scroll-keeper and takes out his scroll-light and *kamish*. He deposits the device with the scroll-keeper for maintenance, before returning to the footpath. Moments later, they stop once more, at the Dallah Wala, where Jamshi collects two cups of *kahwa*, offering one to Alifa. They sip the sweet-tasting beverage, before continuing.

The pair turn into a small square where a group of old men sits together and a large crowd of children dances and jumps to the sound of the music they play. One elder plays an *oud*, a fretless stringed instrument; beside him is a *duff* player, tapping the ends of

the drum, and then there is a flute player who conjures a harmonious melody.

When the *oud* player notices them, he immediately stops and waves them over. 'Jamshi!' the musician exclaims.

Jamshi smiles, glances at his watch. 'We will be late, if ...'

'Sayyidi ... the children want to hear the world's greatest troubadour play,' the *oud* player says, hand on heart, beckoning them again.

'Next time Sidi – I have to go, but I will return,' Jamshi says with a dramatic twirl of his hands.

'But you promised ...' a voice calls out.

Jamshi stops. Winks at Alifa, turns to the crowd and sings in the most harmonious voice she has ever heard:

'The promise I made; I commit to.

The songs I sing, I sing for you.

The promise I made I commit to.

The songs I sing, I sing for you.

But today this is all I can do.

I will return with songs anew.'

Alifa notices the looks of disappointment on the faces of the musicians and children. Several children wave and Alifa returns their gesture.

'Keep moving, Alifa,' Jamshi says. 'If we stop, I will forget the time and Zorar does not like to be kept waiting.'

'You are a musician?' Alifa asks.

'I have some skill,' Jamshi replies, but she thinks he is hiding the extent of his ability.

'The man called you the world's greatest troubadour.'

'I've been promising to play something, but recently the demands of the royal court and our other ... commitments, and now

this situation with the Final Standing, have meant I've done fewer impromptu performances for the public.'

'You perform at the court of the Sultana of the south?'

'They have some uses for me.'

Alifa is about to ask another question, when Jamshi turns sharp right down a narrow pathway. It slants downwards, then they turn left, descending a set of stairs and entering a courtyard with a sycamore tree at its centre, around which there flows a stream of water. Several sand-coloured and reddish-brown buildings form a colourful ring around the courtyard, which is bedecked with a dazzling display of marigolds, hibiscus, jasmine, roses and bougainvillea.

Jamshi leads her towards a light tan two-storey building with intricate wooden panel carvings on its façade. It has several stained-glass windows and azure tilework. They enter a large hall with a high ceiling. Mosaics in shades of ink blue, rose red and sunflower yellow run around it, and hallways branch off in four directions. They go straight past a set of stairs and up to the next level. Walking down a corridor, they see that paintings featuring calligraphic brushstrokes adorn the walls. They arrive at a large circular *majlis* with twelve high-backed chairs.

'Ah, we're early. Take a seat Alifa. Let me pour some hibiscus tea.'

Floor to ceiling windows run the length of the room and Alifa notes the lush verdant landscaped garden where trees grow: mangoes, papaya, guava and figs. Around a pond are beds of hyacinth, marigolds and lilies, and elsewhere banks of hibiscus and lotus provide colourful cover.

Alifa stands silently by the window. *The south is unlike anything I was told, she thinks. Why did I ever doubt myself about moving here? Yet can it truly be so good? Nothing in life tends to be what it seems.*

'Here you go.' Jamshi passes the tea to her.

'Thank you.'

'I hear you're a Nourisher?' Jamshi asks.

Alifa's expression is blank.

'Ah, the look on your face tells me you're not familiar with Conduit abilities.'

'I am not,' Alifa replies. 'Do you have a ... an ability?'

Jamshi nods, rubs his chin. 'I am known as a Clarifier.'

'What is that?'

'Through words, music and art, Clarifiers remind the soul of its true purpose, which is to return to the Creator.'

'I see,' Alifa says, though in truth she is not sure what Jamshi is saying. 'But you are a troubadour.'

'We all need to pay the bills. My employment with the royal court allows me certain privileges, but when the work of the Order comes up, it takes priority.'

Another man appears in the doorway. He looks to be in his late forties, possibly older, slightly portly, with a moustache and goat-ee beard, wavy hair down to his neck and the cheekiest of smiles. He wears loose khaki-coloured trousers, a baggy shirt, and a reddish-brown waistcoat. A patterned scarf is tossed casually around his neck.

'Durayd,' Jamshi says. The two men clutch elbows before hugging.

'Found the right woman yet?' asks Durayd.

Jamshi turns a touch red. 'There are so many to choose from, it's quite an ordeal.'

'Bah! You fool. You'll never find the ideal wife that way. Just marry the best one available, and work with her to make yourselves perfect for each other.'

‘You make it sound so simple,’ Jamshi says.

‘It is, my friend. Don’t complicate matters.’ Durayd roars in laughter, slaps Jamshi on the back and turns to Alifa. ‘New Conduit?’

‘Apparently a Nourisher,’ Jamshi says. ‘Her name is Alifa.’

‘Alifa,’ Durayd says. ‘Goodwill to you.’

Alifa replies. She can smell the aroma of *kahwa* coming from Durayd. A sense of calm falls over her. Alifa thinks that Durayd is such a kind, generous dignified man, the very thought of upsetting him is suddenly anathema to her.

‘Durayd! Go easy on her,’ Jamshi says.

‘What!’ Alifa exclaims.

‘I’m just making friends,’ Durayd retorts.

‘By manipulating emotions,’ Jamshi says.

‘Merely drawing out the innate kindness that resides in the girl’s heart,’ Durayd replies.

Alifa looks from one man to the other. ‘You made me feel calm? You can do that?’

‘Durayd here is what they call a Calmer,’ Jamshi says.

‘Oh!’ Alifa says. ‘Are you still calming me?’

‘No, you just needed a touch and your good character surfaced quickly. Rarity these days: most people are harder work.’

Jamshi pours Durayd a glass of tea, after which Azadeh appears by the doorway. She still wears the steely look of determination Alifa noticed the first time they met in the forest of Dvin. Her hair is tied in plaits, and her long fingers remind Alifa of the twigs of a tree.

‘Gentlemen and lady,’ Azadeh says.

‘Goodwill, Azadeh!’ cries Durayd. ‘Been too long. How are your husband and children?’

‘Goodwill, Durayd, they are well. Thank you.’ Turning towards

the troubadour Azadeh asks: 'Married yet?'

Jamshi bends towards Alifa, a guilty smile on his face. 'They have my best interests at heart.'

'Find a wife, before I find one for you,' Azadeh declares.

'Worth taking Azadeh up on the offer, Jamshi – she is an agronomist after all. Cultivation is her forte,' Durayd adds, winking at Alifa.

Surprisingly, Alifa cannot help but like these people; they have a certain companionship with one another. They even treat her like a long-time friend.

'You should know, Alifa, the garden back there is Azadeh's handiwork, but to see what she can really do, you should visit her in her food-forest south of Urua,' Durayd says.

'How are you, Alifa?' Azadeh addresses her.

'Well, thank you,' Alifa says.

'Nourisher apparently,' Durayd adds.

'I know. Always need a good Nourisher in the forest: lot of animals and plants to take care of. A little bit of extra healing at times is never a bad thing,' says Azadeh.

'I can use my ... abilities on animals and plants?' Alifa asks.

The three of them look at one another in bemusement.

'She's new,' Jamshi adds.

'She is!' a voice announces from the doorway.

Zorar enters, elegant and imposing, in a long dark blue robe with golden seams and a mosaic pattern running along the edges. His face shines with a serene smile, which he shares with Alifa.

'Goodwill to you all,' Zorar says. He turns to Alifa. 'Rest well?'

'Yes, thank you.'

Nimar appears at the door, his muscular frame filling it, and further greetings are exchanged. Two more join them: first, Kaşifa, Chief Librarian of the royal court, who dresses like an austere scholar in

sombre shades, despite only being in her late twenties. Tall and thin, Kaşifa has a solemn serious-minded look to her. The man who enters next is Belal, an in-demand apothecary and acupuncturist who has a surgery in Urua. His concoctions of herbs and cures are known far and wide, according to Durayd. He is a Nourisher. Belal is of medium build, with silky hair fashioned into a long ponytail. His beard is wispy, and he wears several rings set with an assortment of stones, as well as a variety of necklaces.

The eight now seat themselves in the *majlis*, around the circular table.

‘Everyone is here, except for Cinan. He was called to court for the commission of a new observatory,’ explains Zorar.

‘Another one?’ Durayd asks.

‘The Sultana is a patron of the arts and sciences,’ Zorar replies.

Alifa thinks: *Sultana Negin invests in art, culture and the sciences, whilst her cousin Sultan Artay wishes to wage war upon her.*

‘One other person needs to attend this meeting,’ Zorar says. ‘I asked him to wait a few minutes. Nimar, please ask him to come in.’

The Hefter departs, returns with another man. The newcomer is dressed in a tight grey and black suit, with a military cut. He is short and wears a worried expression. His hair is cropped and his face clean-shaven.

‘Wait a minute! Is that ...’ Durayd says.

‘General Ramin, you are most welcome,’ Zorar says. He stands, shakes his hand and directs the General to a chair, before pouring him a glass of tea.

Ramin accepts the tea, turning the hot glass around in his fingers. Observes those seated with the eye of a clinician assessing the sick.

‘What is he doing here?’ Azadeh asks Zorar. ‘He abhors Conduits.’

Ramin’s face twitches. He sips the tea.

Zorar says: 'After the assassination attempt on the Sultana, she asked that General Ramin and I should put aside our differences. A matter has come to her attention that requires our collaboration.'

'The Final Standing maybe?' Durayd asks.

'Another matter,' Zorar says.

Durayd arches an eyebrow.

The General turns to Durayd. '*Dallah Wala Kahwa*. I've visited your outlets several times. Never knew you were a Conduit, Durayd.'

'And knowing it, will you continue to visit?' Durayd asks.

'I will embrace this new spirit of comradeship.'

Durayd nods.

The General eyes Jamshi. 'I should have suspected, for your words are so powerful and clear, your music enough to make a man weep or cry. You recently played at the autumn festival. I and my family were in the audience. There was not a dry eye in the hall, including my own, after you finished the performance.'

'I will take it as a compliment,' Jamshi says.

Ramin scans the others, recognising Kaşifa. 'Chief Librarian,' the General nods.

Kaşifa's austere expression does not change.

'The General has assured me that your identities and these discussions will remain within these walls. Is that not so,' says Zorar.

'Most certainly.'

'Go ahead then, General,' Zorar encourages.

Ramin takes another sip of the tea. 'Good tea,' he says. 'Hibiscus, I think.'

Jamshi nods.

'In recent months,' Ramin declares, 'a group called the Syndicate, made up of Teutons from the north, has established a commercial and political foothold in Arön. It would seem our Emperor likes

them and has bestowed several lucrative commercial arrangements on them.'

Ramin examines the hibiscus tea. Twirls the glass slowly in his fingers. 'By all accounts the Emperor is addicted to the narcotic Opius. The Syndicate is now the largest global supplier of Opius, farming it at industrial scale in the Northern Wastes. They have made some arrangement with the Zandal and have flooded Cin, leading to an Opius epidemic. Now they enter Arön.'

'Opius is highly addictive,' Belal the apothecary says. 'After only a single shot, the body craves it.'

Ramin nods before pressing on with his case. 'The Syndicate has tabled several reforms with the Emperor – some relate to agriculture and farming, some to industrial mechanisation, and some, in my opinion, are criminal, such as flooding our cities with Opius.'

'What is the Emperor's response?' Kaşifa asks.

'Favourable,' says Ramin. 'The Emperor has appointed advisors from the Syndicate into every ministry. He has issued an imperial decree instructing Sultana Negin to facilitate the Syndicate's entry into the south. As you know the Teutons are opening an Embassy in Urua this month. To all intents and purposes this will be the commercial centre for the Syndicate in our capital.'

'This is all statecraft,' Durayd says. 'Hardly our area of expertise.'

The General glances at Zorar, who nods. 'Indeed, but there is another connected matter that has come to our attention.' Ramin pauses; the twitch is back under his left eye. 'The Syndicate use Conduits, like you,' he declares.

A hush fills the *majlis*.

'Whoa!' Durayd cries.

Ramin presses on. 'The Syndicate used Conduits to great effect

in Cin. At this time we do not know how many they have in Urua, but they have them, we know this.'

'Any Grand Conduits?' Nimar asks.

Ramin shrugs. 'Maybe, I wouldn't know.'

'That's why you need us, General,' Durayd says, cocking his head to one side. 'But what do we get from this arrangement?'

All heads turn back to the General.

'As you know,' Ramin starts, 'the Sultana has kept Conduits close. When the time is right, she will make the necessary representations with the Emperor to lift the empire-wide ban on Conduits.'

'Is that a promise?' Durayd probes.

'It is a commitment from your ruler,' Ramin says.

'Umm,' Durayd looks across at Zorar, his expression uncertain.

The *majlis* is quiet once more.

'What do you need us to do?' Nimar asks.

'Use your abilities,' Ramin says. 'Get close to the Syndicate. Find out about their plans for Arön. What are they going to do, when, how, who? Share this information with me, and together we can repel these people from the empire and send them back to the north.'

Alifa remains silent, studies the faces. Zorar sits forward, rests his arms on the table. 'If the Syndicate uses Conduits, we need to level up the field. If the Syndicate's Conduits follow the *Dhulmi* Order, they are servants of Mörtan. Recent events have shown that the Final Standing is coming and with it Mörtan will return.' He stops and looks at Ramin. 'Let us just say we cannot allow *Dhulmi* Conduits to flourish in Arön.'

Zorar gently twirls the agate stone ring that adorns his right index finger.

'I can't say I trust the military,' Azadeh says. 'But if you think this is the right thing to do, I'll follow you.'

Zorar nods.

‘Nimar?’ Zorar asks.

‘You have my support.’

He looks at Jamshi.

‘I suppose it’s an opportunity to write some new songs, more upbeat perhaps. I’m in.’

‘Durayd?’

‘I don’t have a good feeling about this, Zorar. Many of us have kept our abilities hidden from men such as Ramin. If the military turns on us *again*, where do we go?’

‘Durayd, do we have a choice?’ Zorar says. ‘Should the Syndicate get their way, they will topple the economy of the empire. Some profit, most lose. Besides, the Teutons hate *kahwa*, they drink tea! What would happen to Dallah Wala?’

The stout man rubs his chin, laughs out loud. ‘Well, now that you put it that way, count me in.’

‘Belal?’ Zorar asks.

‘I know the effects of Opius,’ the apothecary says. ‘And though I do not trust the General, in the interests of keeping Arön clear of Opius, you have my support.’

Zorar nods and turns to Kaşifa who says: ‘I will start researching the Syndicate and what else the Teutons have been up to recently that may impact us.’

‘Thank you,’ says Zorar. He looks at Alifa.

Taking her cue, she nods enthusiastically.

Zorar swings his gaze back to the General. ‘You have our support,’ he says.





ELEMENTAL

There is a light deep in your heart which He has sent from an invisible realm. Polish your heart and you will become that light.

THE WISDOM OF THE WAY

AFTER LUNCH, THE OTHERS LEAVE. Zorar remains at the lodge with Alifa. Zorar has hinted she is more than a Nourisher. Alifa thinks: *I don't understand these people. I want to understand them.*

'Alifa, I want to begin your training now.'

'Here?' Alifa asks.

'Not quite here,' Zorar replies. 'But nearby.'

He leads Alifa out the dining room, down the corridor, back to the central entrance hall, then along another corridor. They pass a library – its doors are open, Alifa marvels at the thousands of books, filling shelves from floor to ceiling. Tomes encapsulating centuries of knowledge, in green leather jackets, or with dark brown spines and sand-coloured covers.

The corridor ends at a plain-looking door. Zorar opens it to reveal a metal grille which he pulls to one side.

'Go on,' he invites her.

The space is tight, with stonework on either side. Alifa steps in and Zorar follows, shuts the door and pulls the grille back into place. He unlocks a mechanism, pulls a lever. The lift judders, then descends.

When they reach the basement, Zorar reattaches the lock on the lever, then opens the grille, and the door. They step out into a well-lit corridor sloping downwards. At the end of the corridor is an

entrance to another room.

‘Come on,’ Zorar encourages Alifa.

They emerge into a large circular room; mosaic tiles intricately decorate the domed ceiling. Geometric patterns are carved into walls around the room. Elsewhere maroon calligraphic brushstrokes appear against a sandstone finish. Azure and topaz inlaid tiles run around the edges of the room. In the centre is an enormous circle. The floor is a complex geometric design; the degree of craftsmanship mesmerises Alifa.

To one side, seven waist-height glass cylinders contain elements in varying colours.

‘This is the training circle,’ Zorar says. ‘We learn how to access the Source through the seven elements.’ Noticing the absent look on her face, Zorar pauses. ‘What do you know of *Kha* and what we do?’

‘Nothing,’ she says.

‘Do you know of the Heralds?’ Zorar enquires.

‘I have heard of them.’

‘And what of the Primordial Promise?’

She shakes her head.

‘Let us begin with the Primordial Promise, for this is our divine history,’ Zorar says. ‘It is an ancient commitment every human made to the Creator. When we were created, He, the Creator, asked us to recognise Him. We all affirmed Him as our Lord.’

‘I don’t remember,’ Alifa replies.

‘None of us do. This elemental bond was made by our spirits before we were given physical bodies,’ Zorar says. ‘From what we know of our ancient history, a descent took place from the heavenly abode. Three types of beings were sent to Ikleel – Humans, Vanimals and the Djüne.’

‘I’ve seen Vanimals: the Sultan of the north keeps some,’ Alifa

says. 'But the Djüne, aren't they just folk tale and myth?'

'If only it were the case.'

'Oh.'

Zorar picks up a book. 'I want you to read this later. It's a history of Ikleel. As you know we are in what the historians call the third epoch. This book contains the histories of the first and second epochs. It's important for you to understand, especially now that ... the Final Standing approaches.'

'This ... Final Standing, what does it mean?'

Zorar lets out a long sigh. 'We do not really know; our records are buried deep within vaults which no one has accessed for millennia. Kaşifa is now investigating the imperial archives. Yet the major sign, the one that starts everything is what you witnessed at the Battle of Dvin. As to what that everything is, possibly it's the end of human life upon Ikleel. As to when, we do not know. Anyway, read that book. Perhaps you might uncover something useful which I have forgotten.'

'I will,' she says.

Zorar strides over to a wall upon which hangs a large map of the world.

'Ikleel,' Zorar says.

Alifa notes that the continents, land masses and oceans are etched onto the brass plate hanging there.

Zorar looks at the map. 'As far as we know a Herald was sent to every people and nation on Ikleel. Some Heralds brought oratory, others stories, some songs, artwork, others books of revelation.'

'How many Heralds were there?' Alifa asks.

'Tens of thousands, possibly more. What we do know is that every Herald was a Grand Conduit and of their descendants, some manifested the abilities of Conduits and fewer developed into

Grand Conduits.'

'Am I ... descended from a Herald?' she asks.

Zorar nods enthusiastically. 'You are a very special person, Alifa. In fact, you are probably descended from two Heralds, since we think the chance of a Grand Conduit appearing becomes greater when two Heraldic bloodlines merge.'

Her throat is dry and she feels a tear well up. In wonderment and awe, she stares with renewed interest at the map. *I didn't even know my parents; how can I possibly learn my ancestry?*

'We draw our power, this thing we call *Kha*, from the Source, a spring which we think emanates from the ocean surrounding the throne of the Creator. We cannot touch the Source; it is too much for any human to bear. We must use the elements to channel *Kha*, this ability we have. Hence, we are sometimes called Conduits.'

Zorar pauses.

'I think I understand,' she says, when she realises he is waiting for her to say something.

They walk back to the central circle with the mosaic floor. Zorar stops beside the line of waist-high cylinders. From the first cylinder he draws a handful of dark rich soil and rubs it between his fingers. It crumbles. 'Soil is made of several elements,' Zorar says.

Moving across to a cylinder brimming to the top he clutches a handful of the contents. 'Sand,' he says, as he takes some granules, places them in the palm of his hand and with the fingers of his other hand rubs them into his palm. Moments later there is a glow, like a firefly dancing over his outstretched palm. It lasts mere seconds. Alifa is unsure whether her eyes have deceived her.

Zorar turns to look at Alifa, and she is overwhelmed by a sense of relief. She felt the same when first meeting Durayd. 'You're calming me with this *Kha*,' Alifa says.

‘That’s right,’ replies Zorar. ‘I wasn’t very subtle about it, I just hit you full on. The more subtle you are, the less someone knows you’re calming them. The best effects by practitioners of *Kha* like Durayd are imperceptible. Now you try.’

He directs her to the cylinder and she takes some sand, placing it into her left palm.

Zorar continues. ‘As a Grand Conduit, you can tap into the Source to strengthen your *Kha* through the sand particles. But you can only reach it through your heart.’

‘My heart?’ she asks, staring at the grains of sand in her hand.

‘Yes, the illumination of the heart is more powerful than the eyes, for when you access the spiritual heart, the light, the *Nur*, which the Creator has placed within you, you gain access to the realm of the metaphysical, beyond the material world. This is where the powers of *Nurani Kha* reside, in the metaphysical, that which can only be accessed by the spiritual aspect of your person, and the organ in the body that is most connected to the spiritual realm, to the Source, is the human heart. Learn to see with your heart and you will connect with the Source. Try it.’

Alifa is unsure. She rubs the sand particles in her palm, waits for something to happen, to see the glow. Nothing.

‘Take it slow, no need to rush. Breathe, calm yourself, try again, with the heart,’ Zorar reassures her. Zorar slips a green agate ring off his finger, places it in an inside pocket.

Listen with my heart, feel with it, see with it, she tells herself.

She presses down on the sand particles. A sudden surge produces an incredible sense of elation. Despite herself, she smiles. From the particles of sand, a glow forms, like a firefly rising from the palm of her hand.

‘Oh!’ she exclaims, then watches the glow go out.

‘Yes, you have it,’ Zorar says. ‘Now direct that emotion at me.’

Alifa, beaming from ear to ear, thrusts the feeling in his direction, like a river boat leaving one shore to cross to the other. She imagines ripples moving across a placid lake.

‘Yes!’ Zorar says. ‘I feel great!’

‘How long can I keep on making you feel calm?’ Alifa asks.

‘Length of time is less important. When you nudge a person’s emotions, their own internal mechanism will take over and the sense of calm will unfold. If you need to calm a group of people, then you will need to draw more of the Source. There are many factors at play: the capacity of the Conduit, and the litanies invoked. You will learn more as you progress. In time you may be as proficient as Durayd.’

‘Once I draw on the Source, how long can I keep it, before it extinguishes?’

‘Good question,’ Zorar says. ‘It remains as a reserve within until you use it.’

‘I don’t feel it anymore,’ Alifa says.

‘That’s because you hit me with a full dose of *Kha*. With experience, you’ll learn to release your energy incrementally. That way you keep your reserves for longer.’

Zorar moves to the next cylinder. The substance is white and clear.

‘Silica,’ says Zorar. ‘A component of sand. When you reach for the Source through silica, you access another of the emotional abilities, that of a Clarifier.’

‘What does a Clarifier do?’ Alifa asks.

‘A Clarifier reminds a person of their true purpose.’

‘Which is?’

‘From the Creator we came and to the Creator we will return.’

A Clarifier removes distractions from the human heart, reminds a person of their journey back to the Creator. It is a very delicate and elusive skill, which Jamshi is best placed to teach you.'

Alifa collects up particles of silica from the cylinder, places them into the cup of her palm, then rubs them with her fingers.

'With your heart,' Zorar whispers.

The glow appears, rising from her palm, before it winks out seconds later.

Alifa closes her eyes, reaches for the Source. An overpowering sense of detachment hits her. She is like a reed shorn from the riverbank, lost from its home, cast down river, when all she wants is to return home to the safety of the riverbank. Her eyes open and tears pour down her cheeks.

'What happened?' she fumbles the words.

Zorar casts a sympathetic look at her. He places a hand on her shoulder. 'You just became aware of your spirit.'

'My spirit,' she whispers.

'It has been veiled from you,' he says. 'Possibly your entire life. Now you know what the spirit yearns for. It aches to return to the Creator, to be in the divine presence. This is what Clarifiers do: they remind a person of their spirit, by lifting the veils around it. We are spirits having a physical experience in this world but when we die we return to our true form.'

'What does a spirit look like?' Alifa asks, wiping tears from her face.

'The Heralds speak of the spirit as pure light; it is the size of a large ant. Tiny, compared to our physical bodies, but it is who we are. It is our essence.'

The size of an ant!

'The spirit within you is tethered to another realm, tap into it

and you will access all the beauty and majesty of that which is hidden,' Zorar studies her carefully, gives her time to regain her composure before he says, 'are you ready to move to the next element?'

Taking a deep breath, Alifa nods.

They approach a cylinder containing a very pale brown substance.

'Corallite,' Zorar says. 'Another element, though it is found in the soil of the sea.'

Whoosh! Alifa turns to witness a sword fly through the air before Zorar seizes it. He raises his other hand and a shield flies off a wall into his grip. 'Threading. When you tap into the Source through the corallite you learn to thread objects around you. You can tug in your direction, as I just did, or you can ...' The sword soars from his grip and embeds itself in a wooden beam at a cross-section of the dome. 'Thrust.'

Alifa places some of the corallite in her palm, rubs with her index finger. The glow forms.

Zorar takes several steps away from her.

Alifa reaches for the Source through corallite. Faint white lines appear around her, like the web of a spider. A thread!

'Now, tug this shield from my grip,' Zorar instructs.

Alifa reaches out with her hand, aiming for the shield, and notices a single thicker thread appear in her vision. It attaches to the shield and she tugs. The shield slams into her, knocks her off her feet.

Zorar is beside her, offering a hand up. 'Are you all right?'

The shield is in Alifa's hand, but she also feels a bruise coming up around her knuckles.

'It takes practice. You tugged too hard, when a softer tug would have done. The heavier the object the more force you need to apply,

but then the heavier the object coming at you, the more precise you need to be.'

Zorar takes ten paces away from her and says, 'Now, thread the shield to me. Remember, moderate your effort.'

Alifa holds the shield in her hand. In her mind she draws a straight line to Zorar. Immediately faint white lines, like iced spiderwebs appear, heading towards him. One line is particularly thick. She thrusts the shield along that line. It flies from her hand, but at a speed that makes it easy for Zorar to catch.

'Yes, you have it. It normally takes a novice much longer to get to grips with thrusts, but you have a natural affinity for it,' Zorar says.

Alifa smiles. Thinks back to the time she knocked over the Black Axe in the medical tent.

Zorar strolls across to a sword stand, beside which is a set of ten black *meels*, hefty clubs with short handles, used by warriors for training. He motions for Alifa to pick up the second one from the right.

She lifts it. It's heavy, but manageable.

'Can you swing it over your head?'

She tries and just manages it, before putting it down again.

'Now try the fifth one,' he says.

Alifa hesitates. She tries, all the while knowing she won't be able to lift it over her head. She grips the handle of the *meel*. She cannot even move it from its stand.

'I can't,' she gasps.

Zorar walks back to another cylinder.

'Ochre,' he says. 'This gives you physical strength, allows you to lift heavy objects.'

Alifa places the ochre in her palm, rubs it and the glow appears. *With my heart, see with my heart*, she reminds herself. A surge of *Kha*

flows through her muscles.

‘Oh!’ she exclaims.

‘Try the fifth again,’ Zorar instructs.

She strides over to the *meel* stand. Grips the fifth *meel* by the handle. Draws it with ease and without much effort lifts it high over her head.

Zorar smiles. ‘You are a quick learner.’

Alifa swings the *meel* around, like she has seen northern wrestlers do, switches it from one hand to the other. It feels light.

‘Try the eighth one,’ Zorar encourages.

Putting the other *meel* back, she hesitates: the eighth *meel* is large, very chubby.

‘Go on,’ he says.

She tries and lifts it clear over her head in a single movement. With an effort she swings it between her arms before placing it back in the stand.

Alifa puffs out her cheeks, suddenly feeling tired.

‘That was a very good first attempt. As with the other elements, over time you will learn to draw more *Kha* and maintain higher levels of reserve. I suspect you will be able to lift two of the heaviest *meels* at the same time and swing them around. But remember, you must learn when your power is draining, because if you’re carrying a heavy load when it goes, you’ll be crushed. An experienced Hefter like Nimar knows their limits.’

Zorar walks back to the set of cylinders and stands beside the cream element.

‘Limestone,’ Zorar says. ‘This is where we access our healing abilities, to be what we call a Nourisher. You already have some experience of this, but you still have much to learn. Belal is the best Nourisher I know, and I’ll let him train you.’

Zorar gestures to the next cylinder, containing a jet-black element. ‘Obsidian. We access this to imbue. An Imbuer like Kaşifa can infuse an inanimate object with memories, so when another Imbuer touches it, they can also access the memory. Let me demonstrate.’

Zorar strides over to a table where pens and scrolls are kept. He lifts one of the pens. Holds it between the tips of his fingers, shuts his eyes for a short while, then opens them and hands the pen to Alifa.

‘I have imbued or planted a memory in this pen. See if you can access it.’

She accesses the Source through obsidian, then feels with her heart. Alifa examines the pen. A picture appears in her head. She sees the three Black Axes surround her, tie her to the tree before Vartez lifts his weapon.

‘I saw myself and the Black Axes, but ... through your eyes,’ she says.

‘That’s right. Imbuing can be very useful when you need to send someone a message, or you want to send a message across time.’

‘Across time?’

‘We have objects that were imbued hundreds, maybe thousands of years ago.’

Alifa shakes his head. ‘But how do I know if a memory has been left inside an object?’

‘You don’t,’ says Zorar. ‘Which is what makes the role of an Imbuer tedious work: you have to search through hundreds of objects which have no such memory to perhaps find one that does. Fortunately, Imbuers have developed a system over the years, whereby they are more likely to imbue certain types of objects, such as an astrolabe, or a compass. This makes it easier for another Imbuer to

access the memory. If of course you are trying to hide your memory for a specific person alone, then there may be other forms of cryptography that can be used. I will ask Kaşifa to show you more.'

She nods, thinks about the possible ways she can use the skill of an Imbuer. 'So, someone from the past could compose a specific message for me?'

'Yes,' Zorar says.

Only no one would want to send me a message, she thinks.

Zorar looks at the final cylinder. 'This cylinder contains volcanic ash and is used by a Revealer. Cinan is the most experienced Revealer I have worked with, as Chief Architect of Urua. It is better he shows you what a Revealer can do.'

He guides Alifa to a set of *tasbeah*, ceremonial beads linked together. *Tasbeah* sets are arranged on a table, are of different colours and sizes but each has ninety-nine beads strung along a single strand.

Zorar picks up a set. 'The elements are not always around us, so we carry these *tasbeah*. Each bead contains the element that a particular Conduit can use. So, in this one,' he picks up a brown set. 'All of the beads are filled with sand particles for a Calmer to access.'

Zorar selects the last bead closest to what would be the conjoining section at the top of the *tasbeah*, moves it along, till it passes through a ring at the point before where the first bead is located, where it then comes away from the remainder of the set. Once in the palm of his hand, Zorar rubs the bead with his fingers and Alifa notices sand particles in his hand, the bead has emptied its contents though the bead itself remains intact. The now familiar glow forms.

'Each bead is painstakingly made. When one bead comes away from the others it begins to empty, allowing you to access the element within and so tap into your *Kha* abilities.'

‘Wouldn’t it be easier to keep the elements in a phial?’ Alifa asks.

‘You could do that,’ Zorar says. ‘Indeed, the *Dhulmi Kha* Conduits keep their elements in ironwood cartridges which they wear like belts around their waists. We use the *tasbeah*, because the beads also serve as part of the daily litany you will perform as a Conduit. The more invocations you pronounce over your beads, the longer the element contained within will last. Once a bead has been emptied, you will later need to refill it and reattach it to the set.’

Zorar withdraws a magnificent *tasbeah* from within the folds of his robes. It is rosewood in colour. The ring around which a bead is removed is brass. He holds the *tasbeah* in his hand. ‘Some of these beads in this set, I have been reading litanies over for months, others for years.’

He guides her across to another table, containing many *tasbeahs*. ‘These are the *tasbeahs* of a Grand Conduit. Each bead contains particles from all of the elements. I will show you how to make your own beads and fill them. This is an important craft to learn and it will serve you well in your function as a Grand Conduit. For now, I want you to pick one.’

She is taken aback. *He offers me a priceless tasbeah.*

‘Whichever one you recommend,’ Alifa says, as her eyes stray to a camel-coloured set, with white and gold trimmings.

Zorar examines the dozens of *tasbeah* sets on the table. After glancing at her, he looks at the *tasbeahs* once more. He takes a step towards one, hesitates, then picks up the camel-coloured one which Alifa had had her eyes on. ‘This is the one for you,’ he says.

Alifa takes it in both hands. The beads are smooth and cool to touch. She moves them between her fingers.

Zorar steps back. ‘Yes, I think that suits you very much.’

‘Thank you,’ Alifa says.

‘No need to show off when you’re walking down the street: people might get the wrong impression. But always have them on your person. They will serve as a doorway to the Source. You can access your full *Kha* powers when you remove a bead. Just remember to keep the bead in safe place, so that you can reuse it later once filled and reattached to the set. As for the invocations to read over them, I will share these with you. The more you moisten your tongue with the litanies, the deeper your connection to the Source, the more you can harness your *Kha* as a Grand Conduit.’

Alifa nods.

Zorar takes out the agate ring he had slipped into his robe and puts it back on his finger. From his other inside pocket, he takes out a similar ring encased in silver and hands it to Alifa.

‘Wear this at all times,’ he says. ‘It will disguise you from other Grand Conduits.’

Alifa turns the green agate ring around in her hand. ‘Disguise me?’

‘Grand Conduits of the *Dhulmi* Order wear chromite rings. If you come across one of them, they will only have one thought in mind.’

‘Which is?’ she asks.

‘To convert you or kill you.’



APPENDIX A: A TUTORIAL

IN THE LODGE, at the start of Alifa's training, Zorar conducts a tutorial with Alifa, in which he explains the history of Ikleel. He begins in the following manner:

'Our divine history informs us that in the first epoch, there was a great rivalry between the Djüne, who are like fiery demons and Vanimals, who are humanlike in form but have animalistic natures and properties. Both the Djüne and Vanimals live very long lives.'

'How long ago was that first epoch?' Alifa asks.

'We cannot be sure, but it may have been a hundred thousand years ago or perhaps even several hundred thousand years ago when the descent took place, that is, when humans, Djünes and Vanimals descended to Ikleel. Possibly even longer than that. We really don't know.'

'Descended?'

'We believe it was from a divine abode.'

'Where?'

'We do not know, nor is it important to know where it was. When we leave this realm upon our deaths and return to the Creator it will be revealed to us.'

'The first epoch was such a long time.'

'For humans, but not for the Djüne and the Vanimals.'

Zorar continues. 'The Djüne occupied the land of Nar-as-Samum, which would be to the extreme west of us, and Vanimals made Küor Araz, a territory north of Nar-as-Samum, their habitation. For thousands of years, they fought across their borders. Till one day, humans appeared in their territory. At first, they ignored such

weak beings, but slowly humans spread into their lands, set up trading posts, and began to set down roots. We do not know precisely what happened, but the arrival of the humans caused the Djüne and the Vanimals to set aside their rivalry and unite to repel humans spreading in Ikleel.'

'There was a war between humans and the Djüne and Vanimals?'

'Like no other,' Zorar says. 'Under the leadership of Volgorok, ruler of the Djüne, the Djüne and Vanimals engaged humanity at the Battle of Rift on the western shores of Koemox. The humans rallied around the Heralds. Yet even before the battle they knew they were outnumbered and did not possess the physical prowess of the Djüne and Vanimals, so a great quest was undertaken to recover the seven Vessels of Nur which also came down at the time of the descent. Many Heralds and other great heroes were lost in the quest for the Vessels. Yet find them they did and with the light of the Vessels the armies of the Heralds overcame Volgorok, who was driven back to the shadowlands of Nar-as-Samum. As for the Vanimals they retreated to Küor Araz, vowing to never engage with either Djüne or humans again.'

'But this Volgorok, I'm guessing he came back?' Alifa asks.

'He did,' Zorar says. 'Historians label the period after the Battle of the Rift, the second epoch – the golden age of humanity, where under the guidance of the Heralds, humans spread to all corners of Ikleel. Trade routes were established, centres of education and learning built. Some of the greatest Heralds of the time came together to construct the Isthmus, a parallel realm to the physical world, to remind humans of our eventual return to the Gardens of Liyuün.'

Alifa has heard of Liyuün, but in tall tales of valour and heroism.

She wishes she'd paid more attention.

'Yet deep in the shadowlands of Nar-as-Samum, Volgorok and his deputy Mörtan plotted and schemed. Their envy of humans knew no bounds,' Zorar says. 'Having learned from their mistakes, Volgorok and Mörtan recruited men and women to their cause, through the promise of *Dhulmi* powers. Over the centuries their acolytes secretly rose to prominent positions and matters came to a head when their human helpers took control of several major cities, thereupon declaring fealty to Volgorok.'

'What happened?' Alifa says.

'The humans rallied behind the Heralds. Volgorok was slain. Mörtan and the remaining Djüne escaped into the Isthmus.'

'The Isthmus, this parallel realm?' Alifa asks.

'Yes, unbeknown to the Heralds, Mörtan the Conjuror had created a *Dhulmi* part, and corrupted the remainder of the Isthmus as he descended deep into *Dhulm*. Mörtan has also made other changes which you will learn about when you enter the Isthmus.'

'I can go into this Isthmus?' Alifa asks.

'Of course: you are a Conduit.'

'Are there still any Heralds?' Alifa asks.

'No,' Zorar says. 'The last Herald died several thousand years ago. In this, what is known as the third epoch, we have only ourselves, should ... Mörtan and the Djüne return.'

'They can come back?' Alifa asks.

Zorar grimaces. 'We can cover this topic another time.'

Alifa studies Zorar. *He does not want to tell me. Not yet.*



APPENDIX B: THE CONDUITS

THE CONDUITS BELIEVE the Source emanates from the Divine realm. The primary *Kha* Conduits are:

NURANI KHA	DHULMI KHA
Calmers Settle people down, soothing their anxieties and worries, making them reflective and thoughtful.	Agitators Incite people to become aggressive and impulsive, rousing a sense of narcissism within them.
Clarifiers Remind people who they are and what is their purpose – souls on a journey back to the Creator.	Distractors Confuse and befuddle people so that they lose their focus and purpose and are stirred by the frivolous.
Nourishers Regenerate living matter. Helpful in recovery from illnesses and wounds.	Decayers Degenerate living matter that already has some decay within it. Where an illness or wound is detected they can cause this to worsen.
Threaders Use <i>Kha</i> to propel themselves or objects across short and longer distances. Near invisible white lines emanate from their fingertips which only Conduits can see, so enabling them to tug or thrust.	
Hefters Tap into <i>Kha</i> to lift and shift heavy weights, taking on the work of several people. Helpful in a fight when outnumbered.	
Imbuers Infuse an inanimate object with memories, so when another Imbuer touches it, they can access the memory of what was left. Helpful for sending messages across time.	
Revealers Have the ability to perceive matters that are hidden. This may be as simple as a blueprint, traps, locks. More importantly to spot patterns which appear obscure.	

Conduits can access one of the *Kha* abilities. A Grand Conduit is one who can access and use all of the *Kha* abilities.

Conduits cannot access the Source directly but must harness it through an element. Conduits access their *Kha* abilities through:

ELEMENT	KHA ABILITY
Sand	Calmer/Agitator
Silica	Clarifier/Distractor
Corallite	Threader
Ochre	Hefter
Obsidian	Imbuer
Limestone	Nourisher/Decayer
Volcanic ash	Revealer

The elements are stored in either the beads of a *tasbeah* made from ironwood or cartridges made from ironwood.



APPENDIX C: THE ISTHMUS

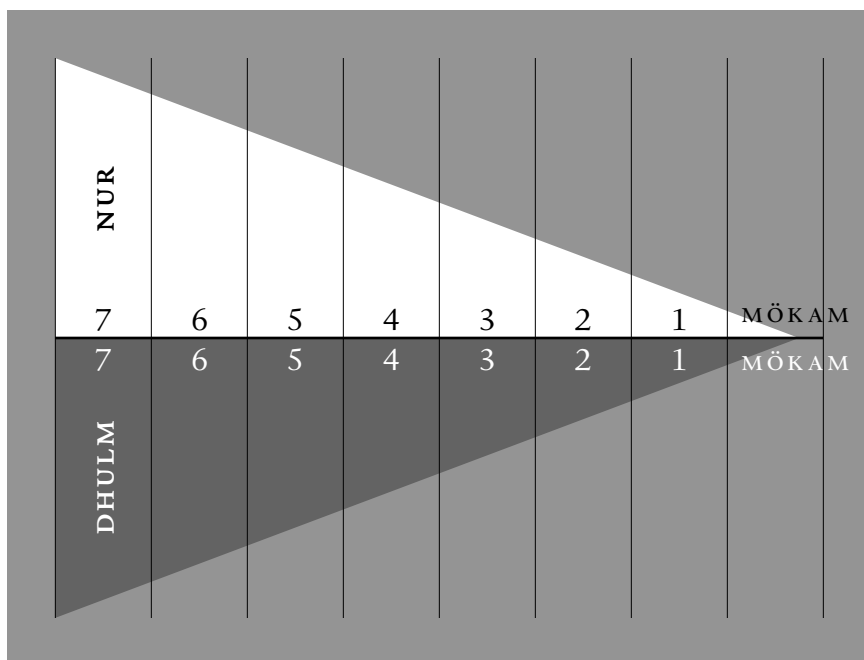
THE ISTHMUS IS ENTERED through physical Gateways which are scattered across Ikleel. Their locations remain a secret carefully guarded by Conduits. It was originally constructed to allow every person, the opportunity to spend forty days and nights reflecting on their journey back to the Creator. After the corruption sown by Mörtan, the Heralds warned that only Conduits should enter it.

The Isthmus itself is a point between two realms, the physical and what lies beyond – the metaphysical.

In the *Nurani* part Conduits ascend through the levels. In the *Dhulmi* part Conduits descend through the levels. The state of the Conduit's heart determines what he or she experiences when entering the Isthmus. However, those who have sworn to take the path of *Nur* will always enter the *Nurani* and those of *Dhulm* will always enter the *Dhulmi*.

Within the *Nurani* part of the Isthmus a Conduit can enter *Dhulm* by willingly submitting to the ground fog at any level. In the *Dhulmi* part a Conduit can enter *Nur* by stepping into the shard of light that is always breaking through the clouds. However, their 'letting go' of *Dhulm* must be genuine, or else they will be obliterated by the light.

Each Mökam (station/level) of the Isthmus holds different relics, which often take the form of jewels, or old artifacts which may even look like junk to the casual observer. Relics can amplify the powers of a Conduit in the physical world. A relic obtained from a higher/lower Mökam of the Isthmus will be more potent than others. An Imbuer is key to understanding the potential of a relic.



LEVEL	DESCRIPTION
1	Similar to the physical world, but powers are amplified.
2	Firmer connection to the Source, greater <i>Kha</i> abilities.
3	Stronger connection to the Source. Lifespan starts to lengthen. The relics associated with this level are thumb rings and signet rings.
4	Deeper connection to the Source. The relics associated with this level are anklets, armlets and bracelets.
5	Still deeper connection to the Source. The relics associated with this level are artifacts such as pendants, celestial orbs, astrolabes, moonstones and sunstones.
6	Isthmus contains relics from the first epoch. The divine primordial script becomes apparent in the architecture of the Isthmus. The relics associated with this level are sky discs.
7	The uttermost horizon of physical possibilities. Any further progress results in annihilation via <i>Nur</i> or <i>Dhulm</i> . The relics associated with this level are tablets inscribed with the primordial language of all beings.

Each Mökam, whether it is on the *Nurani* or *Dhulmi* side has a unique resonance to it. The sound heard aligns with the position of the Mökam, as well as the relics that can be found there. Every Mökam of ascension in *Nur* will cause the sound to become further harmonised with the divine realm, which resides across the celestial sea. The converse is true of the sounds of descension in *Dhulm*, which constrict the heart and thoughts.

At each level there are also relics which contain unique sounds that can be used by Conduits in the outside world. *Nurani* and *Dhulmi* sounds have been imbued into certain relics and can be harnessed in the world outside the Isthmus. In a similar manner a relic with a sound from the Isthmus can be a shield against a sonic weapon, as it muffles the vibratory impact.

Each Mökam has a particular attribute – in the first waystation of *Nur* it is resolution, whereas in *Dhulm* it is indecision.



APPENDIX D:

CAST OF CHARACTERS

The primary cast of characters within Book One are:

<i>Alifa</i>	<i>Grand Conduit, Nurani Order, apprentice to Zorar.</i>
<i>Almas</i>	<i>Head of the Sethee Bank.</i>
<i>Artay</i>	<i>Sultan of the north of Arön, leader of the notorious Black Axe army division.</i>
<i>Ayu</i>	<i>Assassin in the service of the Patriarch of the Peak.</i>
<i>Azadeh</i>	<i>Threader (Conduit), Nurani Order, serves under Zorar. Agronomist.</i>
<i>Behrooz</i>	<i>Emperor of Arön.</i>
<i>Belal</i>	<i>Healer (Conduit), Nurani Order, serves under Zorar. Apothecary, acupuncturist.</i>
<i>Bouson</i>	<i>Brigadier in the armies of the south of Arön, serving under Ramin.</i>
<i>Brant</i>	<i>Grand Conduit, Dhulmi Order, Teuton deputy ambassador to Arön.</i>
<i>Cinan</i>	<i>Revealer (Conduit), Nurani Order, serves under Zorar. Imperial architect of Arön.</i>
<i>Dassin</i>	<i>Traveller from Koemox.</i>
<i>Daria</i>	<i>Scroll-Master in Urua.</i>
<i>Darrick</i>	<i>One of four Harbingers who serve Mörtan.</i>
<i>Durayd</i>	<i>Calmer (Conduit), Nurani Order, serves under Zorar, owner of Dallah Wala.</i>
<i>Gurgen</i>	<i>One of the Vanimals.</i>
<i>Hale</i>	<i>Young geologist and phycology enthusiast, nephew of Orinda.</i>
<i>Hildebrandt</i>	<i>Bodyguard to Chief Kerbasy.</i>
<i>Jamshi</i>	<i>Clarifier (Conduit), Nurani Order, serves under Zorar. Troubadour to the royal court in the south of Arön.</i>
<i>Juud</i>	<i>Assassin in the service of the Patriarch of the Peak.</i>

<i>Kaivan</i>	<i>Assassin in the service of the Patriarch of the Peak.</i>
<i>Kansabar</i>	<i>Imperial Vizier to Emperor Behrooz.</i>
<i>Kaşıfa</i>	<i>Imbuer (Conduit), Nurani Order, serves under Zorar. Chief Librarian of the royal archives in the south of Arön.</i>
<i>Kerbasy</i>	<i>Chief of the Zandal, wild tribes of the Northern Wastes.</i>
<i>Konrad</i>	<i>Threader (Conduit), Dhulmi Order, serves under Brant.</i>
<i>Lin</i>	<i>Daughter of the Cin ambassador to Arön.</i>
<i>Mörtan</i>	<i>The Corroder, disciple of Volgorok.</i>
<i>Negin</i>	<i>Sultana of the south of Arön, ruler of Urua and patron of the arts and sciences.</i>
<i>Nimar</i>	<i>Hefter (Conduit), Nurani Order, serves under Zorar. Merchant and trader.</i>
<i>Orinda</i>	<i>Teuton noblewoman, wife of Paxon.</i>
<i>Patriarch</i>	<i>Patriarch of the Peak, head of the order of assassins, located outside Urua.</i>
<i>Paxon</i>	<i>Teuton ambassador to Arön, husband of Orinda.</i>
<i>Pedram</i>	<i>Hefter (Conduit).</i>
<i>Ramin</i>	<i>General of the armies of Negin.</i>
<i>Rasa</i>	<i>One of four Harbingers who serve Mörtan.</i>
<i>Vard</i>	<i>Assassin in the service of the Patriarch of the Peak.</i>
<i>Vartez</i>	<i>Member of the Black Axe army division.</i>
<i>Zorar</i>	<i>Grand Conduit, Nurani Order, serves Negin.</i>



APPENDIX E:

GLOSSARY

<i>Dhulm</i>	Darkness, a veil cast over, an absence of light.
<i>Duff</i>	Drum, musical instrument.
<i>Himma</i>	Resolve
<i>Ilkidee</i>	Ancient language of the first epoch.
<i>Isthmus</i>	A place between the physical and the metaphysical realms.
<i>Kamish</i>	Writing instrument, used with a scroll-light.
<i>Kha</i>	Originating from the Source, a divine energy, conducted by conduits.
<i>Khidmat-gars</i>	A place of refuge for the destitute.
<i>Liyuün</i>	Heavenly abode, highest paradise.
<i>Majlis</i>	Assembly hall for hosting guests.
<i>Nur</i>	Light, illumination.
<i>Opius</i>	Narcotic with highly addictive properties.
<i>Oud</i>	Fragrant scent from a wood origin
<i>Oud guitar</i>	Fretless guitar
<i>Scroll-light</i>	Rollable screen with an algae liquid display, used to send and receive data.
<i>Sherwani</i>	Long form of jacket or coat.
<i>Souk</i>	Marketplace for trade.
<i>Tasbeah</i>	Beads upon which a litany is performed.
<i>Vizier</i>	First minister to the ruler.



KHAYAAAL

*“The capacity of the heart to give forms to
spiritual realities that don’t have any form,
and to spiritualise material realities
that do have form.”*

DR SAMIR MAHMOUD



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