

EXALTED

THIRD EDITION

CIRCLE OF PROTECTION



MATT FORBECK
AND JAMES HUGGINS



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CHAPTER ONE

Palym gazed up at the massive metropolis growing from the ground before her as she and Xiao hiked closer to Great Forks. When they'd started out in the morning, she'd only been able to see the gilded roofs of its great temples shining in the first rays of dawn, but with every step they took closer, the city revealed a tiny bit more about itself. They had been walking for days on a road lined with shrines, hoping to see some glimpse of the city, knowing that it had to lie somewhere in the distance that yawned before them. To witness it now as they continued their long hike toward it so transfixed Palym that she found she often had to remind herself to breathe.

"Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?" she asked.

Xiao glanced around. There were others on the road, but no one else within earshot. Palym must have been talking to her. "It's pretty to look at, but it's rank with people," she said. "I can already smell it from here."

Palym wrinkled her nose. Xiao wasn't exaggerating. "We'll get used to it," she said. "Just like you got used to the smell of pig shit on your farm."

Xiao shook her head. "My parents tell everyone you get used to it," he said. "They're lying. I never did, and I was born there. It's one of the reasons I decided to come with you to the city, you know."

"Because of the smell of the pigs?"

Xiao shook her head again. "Because my parents were always lying. How can you live with people who treat you like that?"

"They're parents," Palym said. "It's their job to protect you, isn't it?"

"Then they did a terrible job of it," Xiao said with a shrug. "I don't know if I'll ever get that smell out of my nostrils."

"You just have to stop picking your nose." Palym grinned at her friend and waited for her to digest the insult. Then she scampered away, evading Xiao's vengeful smack. Palym fled down the road toward Great Forks, laughing. She was eager to get closer to their goal, anyway.

She was faster than Xiao and always had been, ever since they'd been in swaddling clothes together. It wasn't that Xiao was particularly slow. Palym had just always had a gift for speed. No one else in their village had ever been able to catch her either — especially not since she'd reached her full and considerable height.

When she'd announced to her family that she was leaving home, none of them had argued or even asked why. They'd long known she would not stay with them forever. Her mother had given her a hug, and her father had kissed her forehead.

"Don't forget us back here," her father had said as he'd wiped a rare tear from his eye.

"Your feet may carry you away from us swiftly," her mother had said. "But they can carry you back to us just as fast."

Palym had not objected to her mother's words, although she knew well that she had no plans to ever return. She told herself that she let her parents hold onto those words as a form of hope that might offer them some small consolation. Secretly, she clasped them to herself as well.

But the sight of the grand city rising before her and Xiao scattered all those sentiments to the wind. The idea of living in such a large place, surrounded by so many new and interesting souls, thrilled Palym.

"What's the first thing you want to do when we get there?" she asked Xiao, perhaps a little too loudly.

The other people they passed on the road stared at her as if she was an unruly child, but she ignored them. She was too excited to let the opinions of others bring her down. Many of the people in her village had gawked at her like that before, and she'd laughed them off. If they were too uptight to enjoy the world around them, she didn't care.

Despite that, Xiao shushed her, after finally catching up. "You draw too much attention to us," she said, still puffing from the effort.

"What's wrong with that?" Palym said with a mischievous smile. But the city's wide gates had grown much closer, and they drew her eyes away from Xiao.

Xiao scoffed and then spoke under her breath. "We don't know anyone in the city. Or on this road. Who knows if they're killers or thieves?"

Palym glanced at the people nearby: an older couple strolling hand in hand, a mother carrying her baby in a bamboo pack on her back, a trio of farmers leading their well-laden oxcarts to market. None of them seemed like they would be a threat in a dark alley on a moonless night, much less on an open road in the middle of the day.

"Let's find out," Palym said, and raised her lilting voice. "Excuse me? Are any of you walking the road with us killers? Do you have plans to perform mayhem upon us? No? How about thieves? Might you rob us blind of the few things we own? Anyone?"

Xiao groaned at her, but all the people around them laughed. There would be no death on the road today. Not for them.

Palym decided to give Xiao a break. Xiao needed to catch her breath after all. She wasn't built for running.

They walked in silence until they reached the line that had formed before the city's gates. Dozens of people stood there waiting on the rutted road, staring up at what little of the hilly metropolis they could see peeking over its high stone walls.

"What's the holdup?" Palym said as she craned her neck to peer further down the line.

"It's the same old thing," a farmer standing nearby grumbled as he tied a feedbag onto his grumpy, tired ox. "Troubles inside the city mean troubles for us out here."

"Ooh!" Palym arched her eyebrows at Xiao. "Sounds dangerous."

Xiao did her best to ignore this. She couldn't manage that for long, Palym knew.

The farmer pointed his chin toward the gate. "Most of the delay comes from the city guard inspecting every cart and carriage that comes into the city."

"But we don't have a cart," Xiao said, protesting.

"Then you can walk on ahead, I would think."

Palym flashed a grateful smile at the farmer and hustled past him. Xiao dashed after her once more.

"See?" Palym said. "People can be friendly and helpful. You just need to talk to them. Ask questions."

"We didn't ask that old man any questions."

"He would have helped us out faster if we had."

Xiao grumbled in a way that Palym heard as "You're right."

The guards at the gate — who wore practical armor and carried business-like blades — gave the two newcomers appraising glances. Xiao flinched away, unwilling to meet their gazes, but Palym looked the guards in their eyes in turn and gave them each a wide and easy smile.

Most of them were too busy inspecting incoming carts to bother with the pair, but one of the guards — an older woman with weary eyes — lit up at the young woman's grin. It broke the routine of her work and brightened an otherwise dreary day. She waved them both through with an appreciative smile of her own.

Palym could see that the guard had seen countless people enter Great Forks for the first time. The fact that this still made her happy to witness, even in the mildest way, gave Palym hope.

As Palym and Xiao emerged on the far side of the gate, Great Forks sprawled out before them, climbing the rise upon which it sat, to the central temples at the heart of the city. The two friends stood inside a large, open square lined by all sorts of shops and ringed with a long string of hawker stalls selling food of every kind, just the thing to welcome hungry travelers worn out

from the road. As Xiao had complained, the place was filled with so many different scents mixed into an exotic mélange that Palym had never experienced before. Rather than disgust her, though, the smells set her mouth watering and made her want to skip from stall to stall, sampling the wares of each of the hawkers, even though she guessed that getting through them all would require a solid week of gluttonous dining.

From the square, streets snaked off in three different directions in no apparent pattern, quickly winding out of sight. More people walked down each of them than lived in Palym's entire village, and they came in an astonishing variety. Old and young, short and tall, in all kinds of colors of hair and skin. They dressed in everything from hempen rags to silken gowns, in styles she knew and in others that stole her breath away.

"There are people here from all across Creation," she said in wonder. "They've left their homes behind to come to this, the most amazing city in any land. The city of a thousand gods, that promises blessings and opportunity to all."

Xiao scoffed at her. "Very poetic. Now how about we find a place to stay and perhaps something to eat?"

Palym reached out and took her grumpy friend by the arm. "I can't think of anything better. Nor anyone better to do it with."

Xiao lowered her eyes and blushed at the attention. "You are always so... *you*," she said in some strange mixture of resignation and admiration.

Palym gave her an innocent look. "Is there something wrong with that? Would you rather I was someone else?"

Xiao began to answer but realized Palym was giggling at her. "I'd rather you were a tray of dumplings," she said as she rubbed her empty belly.

"Let's find somewhere to fill our stomachs," Palym said. "The world always looks much kinder after that."

They found a hawker stall serving up savory dumplings, and they spent more of their limited money on them than they wanted to. The dumplings were delicious, though, better than anything Palym had ever eaten back home. "And this is just the kind of food you find in the stalls on the streets!" she said in amazement. "Imagine what they have in the actual buildings!"

When they were done, the sun was already riding lower in the sky, and the tall buildings cast the western sides of the streets in shadows. Their hunger sated, they set out to find a place to stay for the night, working their way deeper into the city.

"Why don't we just take a room in one of the inns near the gate?" Xiao said. She was worried about getting lost in such a large place.

"Those are for the pilgrims!" Palym said. She held up a finger to cut off Xiao's inevitable protest. "And *we* are not *pilgrims*. We're migrants. We came

to work and live here, maybe even for the rest of our lives. We're not paying pilgrim prices."

"Fine," Xiao said, seeing that this was an argument she could not possibly win. "Then lead us to our new home — at least for the night — in whatever way you will."

Palym gave her a mockingly haughty nod and then led the way deeper into the unfamiliar metropolis. "I'm glad to see you finally coming around to my way—"

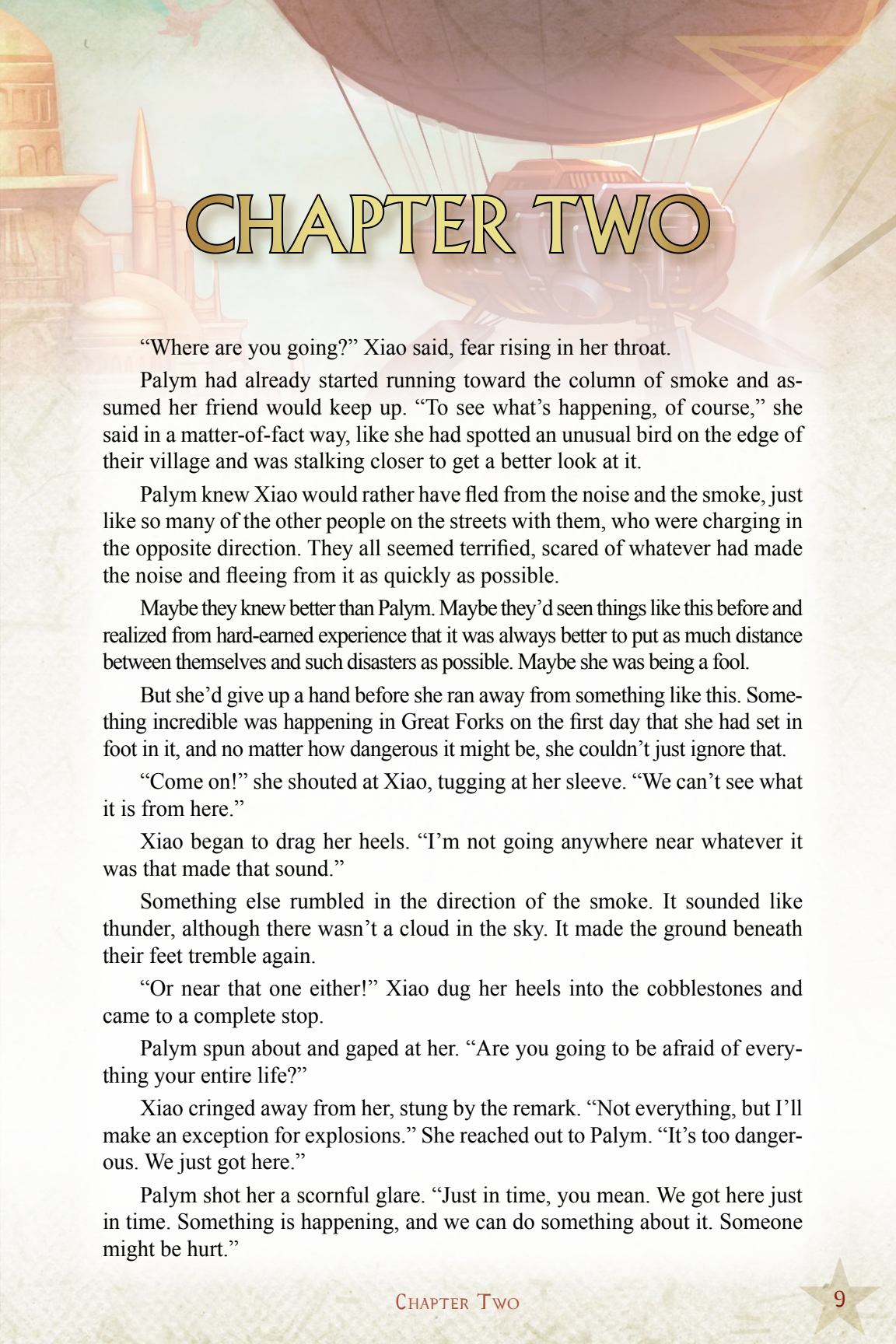
A massive explosion cut her off. It was so powerful that the ground beneath their feet trembled with the force of it. The cornices of nearby buildings crumbled, and pieces of them tumbled into the streets below.

"Gods!" Xiao said, startled and astonished. "I don't think I could ever get used to that!"

Then the screaming began. A thick column of smoke arose in the distance, a black smudge spiraling into the blue of the sky.

"No, Xiao," Palym said in a quiet voice. "Even in a city like this, this is not something that happens every day."





CHAPTER TWO

“Where are you going?” Xiao said, fear rising in her throat.

Palym had already started running toward the column of smoke and assumed her friend would keep up. “To see what’s happening, of course,” she said in a matter-of-fact way, like she had spotted an unusual bird on the edge of their village and was stalking closer to get a better look at it.

Palym knew Xiao would rather have fled from the noise and the smoke, just like so many of the other people on the streets with them, who were charging in the opposite direction. They all seemed terrified, scared of whatever had made the noise and fleeing from it as quickly as possible.

Maybe they knew better than Palym. Maybe they’d seen things like this before and realized from hard-earned experience that it was always better to put as much distance between themselves and such disasters as possible. Maybe she was being a fool.

But she’d give up a hand before she ran away from something like this. Something incredible was happening in Great Forks on the first day that she had set in foot in it, and no matter how dangerous it might be, she couldn’t just ignore that.

“Come on!” she shouted at Xiao, tugging at her sleeve. “We can’t see what it is from here.”

Xiao began to drag her heels. “I’m not going anywhere near whatever it was that made that sound.”

Something else rumbled in the direction of the smoke. It sounded like thunder, although there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. It made the ground beneath their feet tremble again.

“Or near that one either!” Xiao dug her heels into the cobblestones and came to a complete stop.

Palym spun about and gaped at her. “Are you going to be afraid of everything your entire life?”

Xiao cringed away from her, stung by the remark. “Not everything, but I’ll make an exception for explosions.” She reached out to Palym. “It’s too dangerous. We just got here.”

Palym shot her a scornful glare. “Just in time, you mean. We got here just in time. Something is happening, and we can do something about it. Someone might be hurt.”

“Someone probably is. Maybe lots of someones.”

“And we can do something to help. Would you have run away from trouble back in our village?”

Xiao saw where Palym was going and couldn’t see a way to avoid it. She shook her head.

“Well, this is our village now. If someone’s hurt, we go help them, right? If someone needs us, we answer the call.”

The ground trembled once more. This time Palym actually felt it move, as if something was rolling around beneath it.

Xiao grabbed for her hands. “And what if we wind up needing help instead?”

“Then we’d better make ourselves useful, so the people here know we’re worth helping, too,” she said.

With that, she took Xiao by the hand and tugged her friend toward the disaster, whatever it might be.

“Hold on,” Xiao said as she quit fighting and scrambled to keep up with Palym instead. “We don’t have to go charging straight into it, right? We can reconnoiter first. Figure out what it is. Maybe the noise and the smoke are just from big-city fireworks. Maybe it’s some kind of private celebration, and we’d be interrupting something.”

Palym rolled her eyes at Xiao. “Celebrations don’t cause screams like that. And nothing that loud is private.”

Xiao conceded her points with a shrug. “Can’t we at least find some higher ground, so we can scout it out first? Before we just bust in on it?”

Palym hated to admit it, even to herself, but Xiao had a point. There was no sense in trying to help if they didn’t know what kind of help might be needed. Otherwise, they might only make the disaster worse.

“Fine,” she said. “Once we get nearer, we’ll find a way to do that. But first we have to get closer, all right?”

Xiao nodded a wordless agreement, glad to have gotten her headstrong friend to acquiesce to anything at all in the heat of such a moment. Xiao shook her hand free so Palym could move faster and set to keeping up with the quicker young woman. Xiao wouldn’t have been able to manage it at all if there hadn’t been so many people on the streets, all of them racing the other way and slowing Palym down.

As it was, Palym still drew farther and farther away. Every time the ground trembled, Xiao’s footsteps faltered, but Palym’s did not. Soon, Xiao could only see Palym’s pale hair bobbing over the crowd, and she called out, “Wait!” so she wouldn’t lose Palym forever.

Palym’s feet urged her onward, but she hadn’t come all this way to Great Forks to lose Xiao on their first day there. She slowed to a trot until Xiao managed to catch up.

“What should we do if we get separated?” Xiao gasped.

“That’s not going to happen,” Palym said with a confidence Xiao had never understood and always wanted to experience.

“But what if?”

Palym squeezed her shoulder. “Don’t worry about what might happen to us. Worry about what we’re going to do.”

“Besides getting lost?”

Palym laughed at that. “What’s it mean to be lost in a city like this? We didn’t have anywhere to go yet anyhow.”

The ground rumbled again, and Palym and Xiao looked toward the smoke, which seemed to have widened now to be much broader than a column. It obscured the city’s most brilliant temples, previously visible over nearby roofs. The two friends were losing their bearings, surrounded by houses taller than they were used to.

Then some of those houses tumbled down, not far away. Roofs, walls, floors, and ceilings fell in their direction.

Palym felt the impact in her feet, and a new chorus of screams erupted from somewhere just beyond the rubble.

“I think we’re close enough,” Palym said. The edge of her confidence had faded but not been entirely blunted. Even if she now saw the wisdom of not dashing straight into the heart of the trouble, she still wasn’t about to flee from it.

She cast about until she spotted a tall building between them and the gap that had appeared in the skyline. “There,” she said. “We can get a better view from that rooftop.”

“And how do you know they’ll let us in?” Xiao said.

Palym flashed a smile. “Do you think anyone will actually still be there to stop us?”

Xiao grumbled at her. “No one else would be so stupid as to stay.”

Still, Xiao followed as Palym made her way to the building. The front door stood open, and no one so much as called out for them to stop as they stepped inside. Even to Xiao, the building still looked solid enough, and she gave a tentative nod when Palym pointed at a stairwell that ran upward.

Palym led the way toward the top of the building, taking the steps two at a time. Xiao puffed along after her, determined not to be left behind in such a place. If she was going to die in the collapse of a building, she at least did not want to die alone.

When Palym reached the top floor, she cast about for a way up onto the roof but found none. The place was well furnished, much better than her family’s home back in their village. No one had bothered to even shut the doors in

the house, much less take anything with them as they'd left. There was even a serving dish of noodles still steaming on the table in the dining room. She stifled a sudden urge to taste them.

"There," Xiao gasped, finally catching up. She pointed at a balcony that faced toward the grand central temples, gleaming in the rays of the sun.

Palym smiled at Xiao and charged out onto the balcony. The moment she emerged into the open air, though, she stopped cold to the point of holding her breath. Xiao followed an instant later and mirrored her reaction.

The scene splayed out before them was one of utter destruction. Whole city blocks had fallen in on themselves, and the buildings atop them had entirely collapsed. Many of them had been temples, their gleaming cornices now crumbling and idols toppled. The smoke that marred the horizon rose from several fires that had started in the debris. They were spreading steadily, threatening to consume the entire area.

From this vantage point, the screams were no longer distant and plaintive but close and immediate, and they came from countless voices scattered up and down the wreckage. In several places, people were struggling to pull themselves out from under the rubble. In others, they lay still, not moving at all.

Clouds of dust hung in the air, mixing with the rising smoke, and settling down over everything. The scent of broken bricks and splintered wood battled with the tang of burning fires and spilled blood.

Palym covered her mouth in horror. Xiao shaded her eyes.

It was too much to take in all at once. For them to have just entered Great Forks for the first time and to see part of the city pulverized like this overwhelmed them both. They could only stand there for a moment in shock, tears welling up in their eyes.

"What in the names of all the gods is happening here?" Palym said in a soft voice.

"We're in hell," Xiao said. "We have left home and fallen into hell."

The entire building shuddered, and both Palym and Xiao screamed. They clung to each other and to the balcony's railing, wondering if the structure might shake to the ground with them still in it. A crack appeared in the floor of the balcony, right between them, and they leaped away from each other, terrified that they might fall into it.

The crack failed to spread any farther. After a long moment, the two breathed a sigh of relief and began quietly chuckling at themselves for having believed they might be about to die.

Then another tremor struck the city, and a building across the way began to crumble into the pit where the others had all fallen. The building was already abandoned, so there was no one in it when it toppled over, but it landed on several people who'd been trying to extricate themselves from the building that had, until recently, stood next to it.

“All those people,” Xiao said in horrified awe. Palym couldn’t utter a word.

The collapse threw up another cloud of dust that seemed, somehow, to feed the fires, which billowed up into the sky in a scorching puff of flames. Xiao and Palym reared away from the baking heat and cringed back off the balcony, protecting their faces.

When the smoke began to clear again, Palym started to creep forward once more. Xiao reached out and grabbed her by the wrist to keep her from returning to the balcony.

“Where’re you going?” Xiao sputtered in disbelief. “There’s nothing for us out there. We need to leave this place — gods, this entire city — now.”

Palym glared and yanked her arm away from Xiao’s grasp. She had never allowed anyone to tell her where she couldn’t go before, and she wasn’t about to start here and now.

“All that suffering,” she said. “Can you just walk away from it?”

“Walk?” Xiao said. “No. Run? Yes.”

Palym stared at Xiao, unbelieving, and Xiao frowned back.

“Are you insane?” Xiao asked. “What can we do to help? We don’t know any of these people. We don’t know what’s happened here. We—”

A loud crack sundered the air outside. Unlike the previous noises, which had sounded — felt, even — like thunder, this sounded more like an axe cracking through a sapling, sharp as a bone sticking through skin.

Palym couldn’t help herself. She crept toward the balcony again. This time Xiao knew she couldn’t stop her friend. Rather than abandon Palym there, though, Xiao followed after her, only a few feet behind.

Back outside, Palym looked down into the massive pit, which was now large enough, she realized, that her entire village could have fit into it. The center of it seemed to have become deeper rather than higher, as she would have expected from all the buildings toppling into it. She soon saw why.

Something massive wriggled in the middle of the pit. Something that had been working its way up and out of the ground beneath the buildings.

Palym and Xiao looked down at it and beheld it in all its maddening glory, and they both began to scream.

CHAPTER THREE

“What in the names of all the gods in heaven and earth is that?” Xiao said when she finally stopped screaming.

Palym had no idea. She’d never seen such an abomination. Even to consider it horrified her, much less to actually see it. She closed her eyes and prayed that it would disappear and that she would never encounter anything like it ever again. Great Forks was the city of a thousand temples, after all.

The gods, though, didn’t answer. When Palym opened her eyes, the monstrosity remained there in the pit. Worse yet, it seemed to be pulling and flopping itself in her direction.

It resembled an arm that had been severed from the body of a gigantic lizard the size of a large hill. It did not end in a hand nor a fist, but in a clenched cluster of tentacles. Instead of suckers like those on an octopus, blisters covered the tentacles, glowing as if they contained white-hot coals striving to burn their way out through the creature’s flesh. The rest of the scaled arm — if that’s what, in fact, it was — lay coated in oozing wounds that bled an incandescent substance Palym could only interpret as molten steel.

The creature was as long and wide as a city street, and it thrashed about like a beast caught in its death throes, although Palym knew they could never be so lucky as to be watching it die right then. It snapped toward one of the buildings across the pit, its tentacles lashing out, and it tore the base out of the structure. The building came tumbling down on top of the thing, burying its tentacles but leaving the other end of it flopping free.

An instant later, the tentacles burst free from the rubble, sending it flying like shrapnel from an exploding shell. Palym threw herself backward, knocking both herself and Xiao to the floor.

A piece of roofing tile slashed Palym across the forehead, leaving a deep and bloody gash. Wiping the blood out of her eyes with the end of her sleeve, she helped a shaking Xiao to her feet.

“You were right,” Palym said. “We have to leave. Now.”

Xiao didn’t even pause to gloat. She just took Palym’s hand and headed for the stairs.

They only made it about halfway down before something struck the build-

ing they were in. The entire wall that had been facing the pit was ripped away, letting the rays of the lowering sun in as they pierced through the billowing cloud of smoke that threatened to blot out the sky.

Palym and Xiao tumbled down to the next landing in a heap, coughing and aching and praying for their lives. This time, it was Xiao who had taken the brunt of the blow, and it had stunned her senseless. When Palym stood up to flee, Xiao only stared up at her with unblinking eyes, unable to comprehend what steps they had taken in their lives that could possibly have led them to be right here in this very moment.

“It’s all right,” Palym said to her, the way that she would speak to a child, one still in swaddling clothes and unable to understand the way the world worked at all. “We’re going to be all right.”

Xiao didn’t argue the point. She just shivered and nodded. If she hadn’t — if Xiao had denied those comforting words — the last shreds of her sanity might have dissolved, and she would have collapsed right there, waiting for death to arrive. She let herself believe Palym instead.

Palym let herself believe it too. “Come on,” she said as she hauled Xiao upright. “We’re leaving.”

“Leaving?” Xiao said softly. “But we just got here?” Something inside her found that incredibly funny, and she began to laugh. Palym shushed her as much as she could but couldn’t stifle her entirely. After a moment’s effort, Palym stopped trying.

She looked down the stairwell and saw that the rest of the stairs had been torn away. In fact, much of the side of the building had collapsed in a heap at the bottom of the structure. The debris blocked their way out through the front door, but it gave them something to scramble down as well. She just needed to persuade Xiao to make a small leap off the landing to start.

“Come on,” Palym said as she coaxed Xiao to the edge and peered down. The drop couldn’t have been more than a couple yards to the top of the slope of the rubble beneath them. “We can do it.”

While Xiao had been willing to believe Palym’s laughable lie before, when confronted with having to make an actual jump, she froze. Instead of moving forward, she set her feet against Palym and shook her head from side to side, refusing to move forward even one more step.

“It’s not so far,” Palym said in as soothing a tone as she could manage. “We can just lower ourselves down and be out of here in no time at all.”

“No,” Xiao insisted, still shaking her head emphatically. “No, no, no, no, no.”

Something thumped down outside again, shaking the ground enough to cause a few loose bricks to tumble into the building’s interior. Fresh screams from the dying pierced the air, and Palym wondered how much longer it would be until those same screams would be coming from Xiao and her.

“We don’t have any choice,” Palym said as she hauled on Xiao’s arms, fruitlessly. “We have to get out of here before that creature brings the entire place down on top of our heads.”

“Buries us,” Xiao said blankly.

“Right.”

“Buried good. Buried safe.”

“No,” Palym said as she hauled on Xiao’s arms even harder. Xiao resisted, immovable. “Buried dead!”

Palym gave Xiao’s arms a hard yank, putting all her weight into the attempt. Rather than fight her efforts directly, Xiao just pulled her hands free. Surprised, Palym reached desperately for purchase but went tumbling backward into the open air.

She landed hard on the rubble below, which was uneven and full of jagged bits that stabbed at her and tore at her clothes. She rolled with the fall as best she could, though, and after a few painful seconds she wound up in a heap at the bottom of the debris slope, her legs tangled up over her head.

She straightened herself and pushed herself to her feet to discover that she was on the building’s first floor. The wall that had once stood between her and the pit beyond had been knocked in, and she could see right down into it now. Nothing stood between her and the beast.

The creature was still flailing about, causing rampant destruction in every direction it fell. It flung itself left, and another building collapsed. It flung itself right and reappeared a moment later with a crowd of people tangled in its tentacles, burning and screaming at its hot, slimy touch.

Palym glanced up, but couldn’t see Xiao. The stockier woman had scooted back from the edge of the landing and was presumably sitting there in one of the building’s last remaining corners. In a fit of ill temper, Palym imagined Xiao tucked into a fetal position and sucking her thumb.

Ultimately, Palym didn’t know where Xiao was. Worse yet, she didn’t see a good way to get up to where Xiao had been. She could climb to the top of the slope of rubble, but once she got there, it was too far for her to leap to make it up to the landing.

She refused to just abandon Xiao there, though. She hadn’t come all this way to leave her friend to die at the first sign of trouble in Great Forks.

To be fair, Palym knew no one would blame her for leaving right now. If she ever returned home and told this story to Xiao’s parents, they would probably embrace her and thank her for doing as much as she already had to try to save their daughter. But Palym knew she’d never forgive herself for running away, despite that.

“All right!” she shouted up to Xiao. “I’m all right!”

Xiao hadn't hidden after all — she peered down at Palym over the landing's edge. Palym crowed in joyful surprise, and Xiao scuttled back again. "Come on!" Palym said, waving her arms. "Come on down, and we can still get out of here!"

Outside, there came another crack like a mountain splitting in half. It felt so close that Palym wondered how she managed to stay intact herself. She flung herself against the slope of debris and remained there for a time, forcing herself not to break down and cry.

In the relative silence of the moment — through the distant moans and whimpers, screams and crackling fires — she heard Xiao muttering. "No, no, no."

Xiao would be no help, not even to save her own life. Palym fought the urge to scream at her. Then she gave into it.

"Xiao! You cannot do this to us! We did not come here to die! We came here to live! And we can do this! We can survive this! If you come down from there right now! *Please!*"

She fell to her knees, clasped her hands together, and begged harder than she had ever begged any god for anything ever. "Please, Xiao? Please?"

Xiao kept saying, "No, no, no."

Palym crumpled to the ground, still on her knees. She couldn't reach Xiao, and her best and oldest friend was going to die. Unless Palym left right now, she was going to die too. She knew this in her heart.

The ground thrummed beneath her flesh once more, and she decided at once she wasn't going to let that happen. She might not be able to get Xiao to leave with her. That just meant Palym was going to have to lure the beast away from her friend.

Palym pushed herself to her feet and wiped away the blood that had once again started to drip down into her eyes. With her choice made, she felt different. Frightened and pained, yes, but also lighter. She'd left something behind, but she didn't have the time to figure out what it might have been.

She turned toward the missing wall and scrambled up to the edge of it, picking her way through the debris with speed that surprised her. When she reached the edge of the building, she looked out and took in the horrible destruction the monster had caused.

She did not, however, see the creature itself.

She spotted pieces of people strewn about like bloodied bits of broken dolls: limbs, heads, and other bits she didn't want to think about. Through the flames and smoke, she saw large tracts of sky that should have been blocked out by the buildings that had stood there that morning. She even saw a way out of the wreckage: a clear route to an open street that stretched out to the east, back toward the gate, back toward safety. Even back toward home.

Maybe the creature had disappeared. Maybe it had gone back to whatever hell it crawled out of. Maybe Palym could simply walk down that street and go home. And someday Xiao — who could climb down out of the crumpled building whenever she was ready — would find her there, and they would talk about this day in disbelief. They might even someday be able to laugh about it.

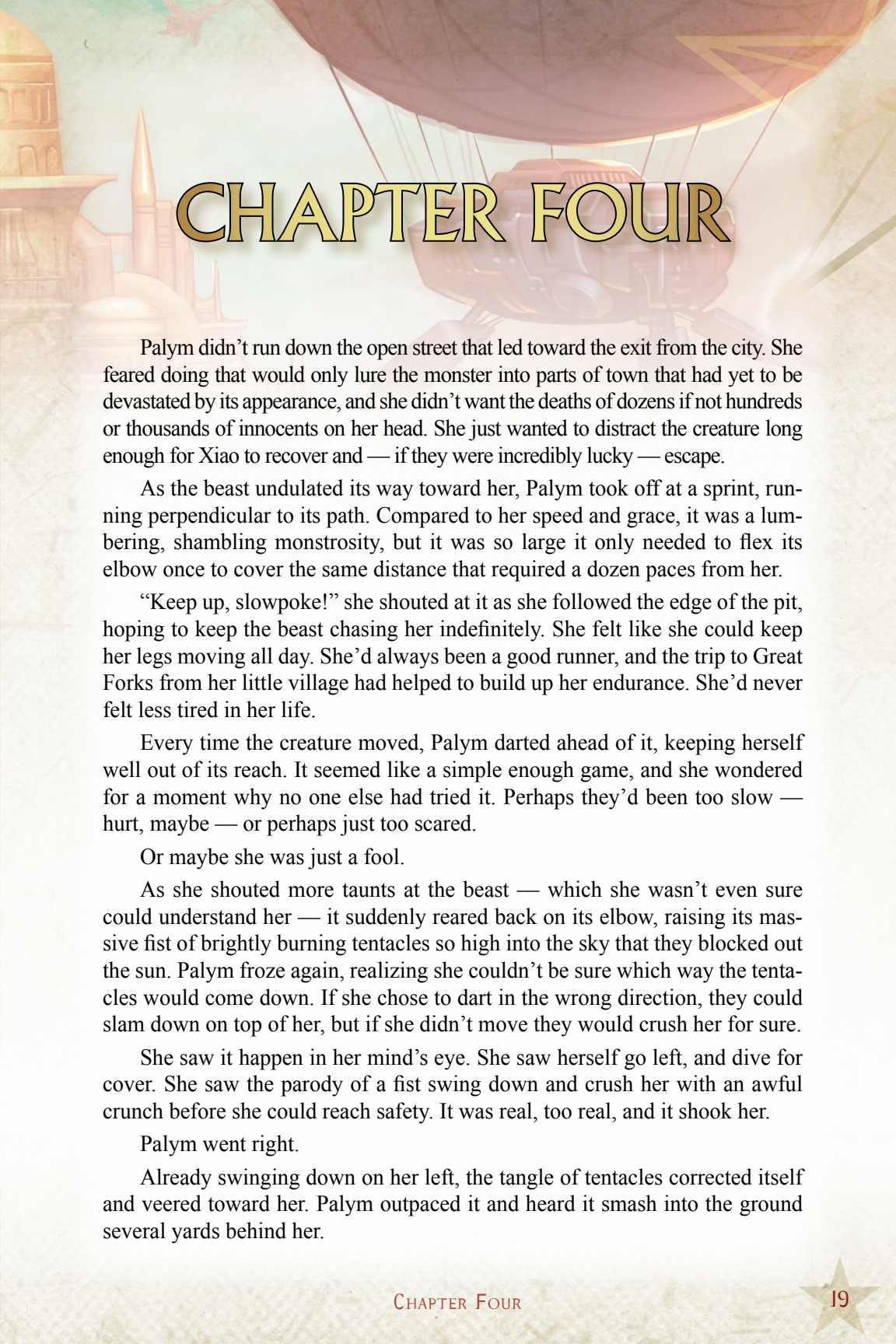
Palym could see it as clearly as if it had already happened. A tempting, alluring dream of a kinder future. She indulged it for a moment.

Then something behind her rumbled again, and Palym turned to see tentacles covered with glowing pustules squirming out of the fresh ruin of a building on the other side of the expanding pit. And she knew she couldn't leave.

“Hey!” Palym shouted at the monster and began to wave at it with both arms. “Hey, you! Over here!”

The tentacles turned toward her, their glowing bits focusing on her like eyes. For an instant, Palym froze like a rabbit in a wolf's hungry gaze. Then she ran.





CHAPTER FOUR

Palym didn't run down the open street that led toward the exit from the city. She feared doing that would only lure the monster into parts of town that had yet to be devastated by its appearance, and she didn't want the deaths of dozens if not hundreds or thousands of innocents on her head. She just wanted to distract the creature long enough for Xiao to recover and — if they were incredibly lucky — escape.

As the beast undulated its way toward her, Palym took off at a sprint, running perpendicular to its path. Compared to her speed and grace, it was a lumbering, shambling monstrosity, but it was so large it only needed to flex its elbow once to cover the same distance that required a dozen paces from her.

“Keep up, slowpoke!” she shouted at it as she followed the edge of the pit, hoping to keep the beast chasing her indefinitely. She felt like she could keep her legs moving all day. She'd always been a good runner, and the trip to Great Forks from her little village had helped to build up her endurance. She'd never felt less tired in her life.

Every time the creature moved, Palym darted ahead of it, keeping herself well out of its reach. It seemed like a simple enough game, and she wondered for a moment why no one else had tried it. Perhaps they'd been too slow — hurt, maybe — or perhaps just too scared.

Or maybe she was just a fool.

As she shouted more taunts at the beast — which she wasn't even sure could understand her — it suddenly reared back on its elbow, raising its massive fist of brightly burning tentacles so high into the sky that they blocked out the sun. Palym froze again, realizing she couldn't be sure which way the tentacles would come down. If she chose to dart in the wrong direction, they could slam down on top of her, but if she didn't move they would crush her for sure.

She saw it happen in her mind's eye. She saw herself go left, and dive for cover. She saw the parody of a fist swing down and crush her with an awful crunch before she could reach safety. It was real, too real, and it shook her.

Palym went right.

Already swinging down on her left, the tangle of tentacles corrected itself and veered toward her. Palym outpaced it and heard it smash into the ground several yards behind her.

The shockwave from the impact was still enough to knock Palym from her feet. She careened across the wreckage in the pit until she came to rest against an overturned, still-intact bathtub that had sat safely inside a nearby house not that long ago. She stayed there for a moment, catching her breath and clearing her head, wondering how long she had before the creature came after her again.

Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea after all.

That's when she heard a voice behind her and felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. She looked up and saw a beautiful woman in yellow silks leaning over her, her brow furrowed with concern. "Are you all right, child?"

Palym could only nod at her, astonished that anyone could be so poised in the face of such a stunning threat. She let the woman haul her to her feet, and she dusted herself off out of habit more than any concern for her appearance.

"You aren't supposed to be here," the woman said. She was thin and taut as a wire, and she wore the cleanest clothes Palym had ever seen. They practically sparkled with her every move. On top of that, she spoke with sharp clipped words, as if she was consciously slowing herself down to make sure that Palym could understand her.

"Are you?" It was a foolish question, but Palym couldn't help asking it.

Before the woman could answer with more than a half-smile, she was gone. She moved faster than Palym could believe, yellow sashes streaking behind her.

As Palym stared after the woman, the creature rose up once more, rearing back to strike again. This time, it splayed its tentacles wide, flinging them out like the petals of a deadly flower. In the center of them sat a single eye, and when it blinked, Palym saw that its eyelids were lined with large, jagged teeth.

Palym's feet fixed to the ground in terror. She wanted to move, but the sight of that horror looming above told her that moving was hopeless. There was no point in trying to escape. She was already dead, and it was only a matter of time before reality caught up with that.

She felt another pair of hands tugging on her this time, and she turned to see who they belonged to.

"Xiao?"

Her friend grabbed her and hauled her down hard and fast as the massive fist plummeted at them. As they went, Xiao lifted the dented bathtub Palym had landed against earlier and pulled it over them both.

The monster's fist smashed down into the bathtub and drove it into the rubble. Palym was sure the beast would have crushed them into jelly without Xiao's makeshift shield. As it was, they could barely breathe. Not just pressed against the earth and terrified, but also enveloped with the monster's stench. It stank like death on a hot day, and she gagged at the smell.

"We're not dead," Xiao said softly.

“Yet,” Palym said. She felt like they had been buried alive together in a steel-lined coffin. The monster’s blow had driven the edges of the tub deep into the debris below. “We need to get out of here. Now.”

She found an angle with her fingers and began digging until she could find the edge of the tub. From there, she and Xiao managed to leverage the edge up and over, exposing themselves once again to the sunlight.

They found themselves struggling to their feet in a crater the gigantic fist’s blow had created. The monster seemed to have forgotten about them for the moment, but there was no guarantee that blessing would last. Palym turned to look for the creature and realized that they were practically standing next to it.

Despite herself, she screamed. She’d finally had enough. Xiao began to scream with her, and that somehow made Palym feel better.

They were too close for the creature’s fist to slam down on them again, but it began to roll its way backward, so it could have another clean swing at them. As it did, a platoon of guards in steel armor appeared from the open side of a building and charged at the beast, their long, straight swords held high and ready to strike.

The monster seemed confused by the direct attack, and three of the guards managed to reach it and slash at it with their blades. Where their swords touched the creature’s superheated flesh, the metal melted and peeled away in glowing-hot strips that hissed as they fell to the ground.

The creature splayed its tentacles out again, and this time it loosed an ear-splitting roar. The soldiers cheered in triumph and set to slashing at the monster with renewed fury. Palym felt her heart rise with a fleeting hope that the city guard might triumph.

But the blows only seemed to harm the creature in the way that a hornet might harm an elephant. As much as they might hurt the beast, they posed no real threat to its life, unless the gods of Great Forks could add a thousand more soldiers. Yet no army seemed poised to strike. Just these brave few.

The monster reared back once more and brought its fist down squarely onto the soldiers. Two of them were crushed instantly and completely, while the others were cast aside like broken dolls. Several of them were tangled up in the creature’s tentacles, and they screamed as the creature drew them into its central maw.

A shadow fell over Palym, blotting out the sun, and she looked up, fearing that another incomprehensible creature had come to murder her. Instead, she saw something that resembled a gigantic egg floating in the air above her. An old man sat on a seat carved out of the front of it, holding his hands out and making gestures that seemed to be controlling it.

Palym stared up at the flying vehicle, for that’s what it clearly was, in astonishment. She had thought her day couldn’t get any stranger, and now this

hollowed-out egg — a flying rickshaw, she corrected herself — had appeared. It was apparently filled with strange yet fearless people, who stepped out of it one by one.

One of them, a woman dressed in crimson armor, shouted “Make way!” and leaped several stories down from the rickshaw, landing in the pit with grace and finesse. She drew a red-filigreed sword and raised it into the air, and a shimmering veil of red light swept around her.

The woman could only have been one of the Exalts: the chosen of the gods, heroes gifted a portion of their deity’s powers so they could stalk the earth and carry out divine will.

Palym had never seen such a person before, but she had heard of them countless times. Even in her distant village, people spun tales of the Exalted and their exploits, many of which wrapped up with little morals that explained what the heroes in them had learned — or at least what the listeners were supposed to have learned from them.

Palym had idly hoped that she might see one in Great Forks, although she’d never dreamed it would be under such horrible circumstances. She supposed that only terror of this sort of magnitude would call such heroes loudly enough for them to respond.

She gaped at the woman. Physically, she was the most powerful person Palym had ever seen: tall, strong, lithe as a panther — and likely as deadly. With her there, Palym could finally feel an inkling of hope.

Xiao clutched at Palym’s arm as the Exalt thundered past them, her blade held high. She seemed to be the epitome of power, and Palym wondered how anything could possibly stand against her martial might.

The woman yelled at the top of her lungs as she brought her sword down on the creature’s flank. Unlike the swords the Imperial Guard had employed, this blade did not melt at the touch of the monster’s superheated skin. It punched through the beast’s scaled flesh, and then its shaft instantly glowed a bright red. The Exalt roared as the blade singed her hands, and she recoiled from it, leaving it embedded in the wound.

The spark of hope that had found its way into Palym’s heart snuffed out before it could grow into a full-fledged flame.

The monster bucked in pain and flung the Exalt away to crash through the wall of a nearby building. Then it turned from the guards it had been devouring and fully toward the newcomer who’d hurt it.

The sword still jutted from the beast’s hide, and as the creature moved, the hilt swung toward Palym. She stared at the glowing weapon, then toward the Exalt staggering out of the rubble to face the beast, then glanced at Xiao.

“Don’t you dare,” said Xiao. That made up Palym’s mind for her.

Palym took a running leap and snagged the sword by the hilt. It scorched

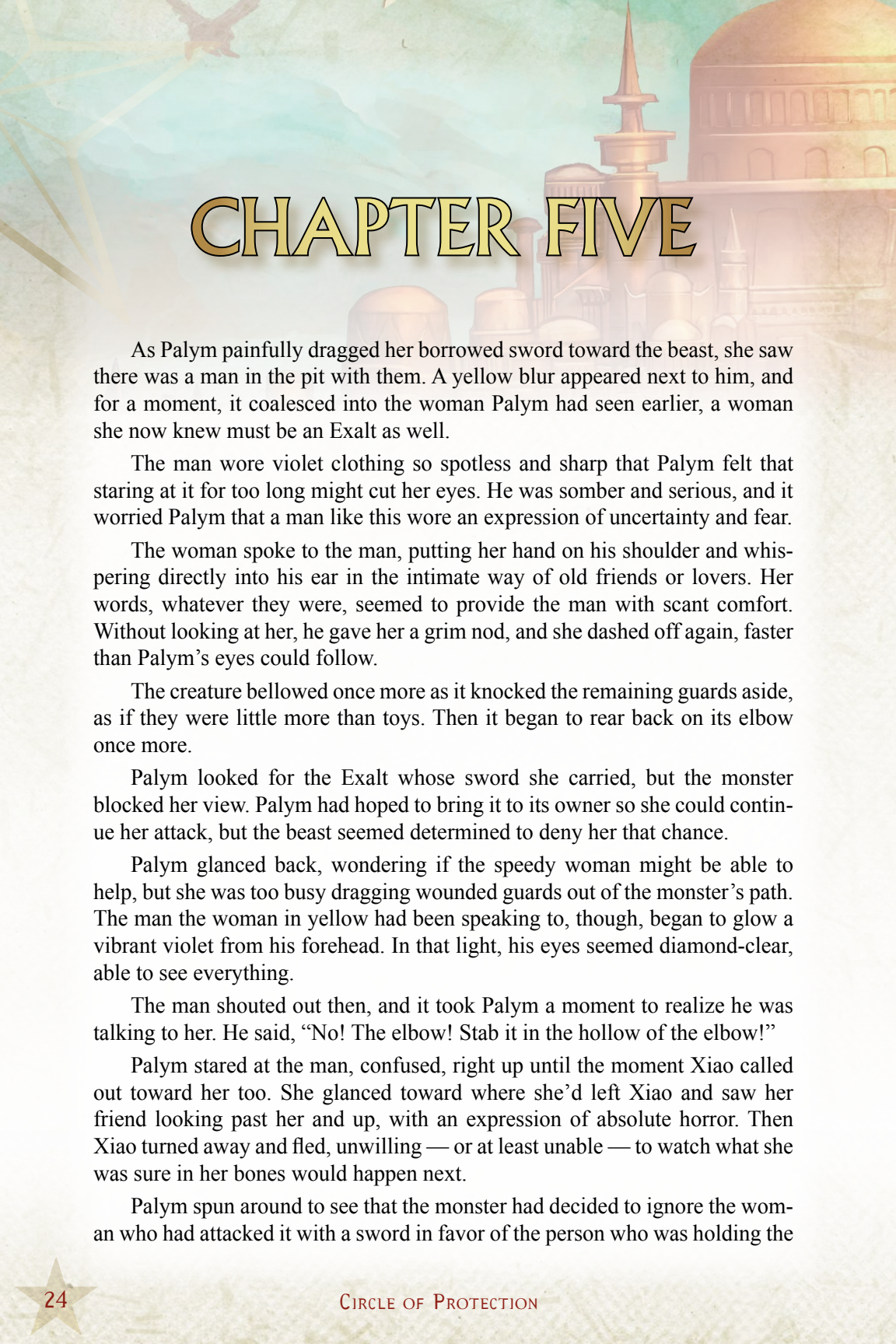
her hands, but she didn't let that stop her. She took it in both her hands, set both boots against the red-hot scales, and hauled back with all her might.

The blade sprang free, and Palym fell away from the monster, landing miraculously on the blackened soles of her smoldering boots. She held the blade up for a triumphant moment — until she realized just how heavy the weapon was in her singed hands.

She let it fall behind her, still barely within her grasp. She might not be able to brandish it like the Exalt had, but she could swing it when she had to — or so she hoped. She moved forward, toward the monster, dragging the end of the blade along the ground.

Palym didn't think that she could do any better than the Exalt had. After all, no god had blessed her with such power. But it was long past the time she could flee on foot, and she wasn't about to go down without a fight. With her hands screaming at her, Palym didn't notice the blade growing lighter in her grasp.





CHAPTER FIVE

As Palym painfully dragged her borrowed sword toward the beast, she saw there was a man in the pit with them. A yellow blur appeared next to him, and for a moment, it coalesced into the woman Palym had seen earlier, a woman she now knew must be an Exalt as well.

The man wore violet clothing so spotless and sharp that Palym felt that staring at it for too long might cut her eyes. He was somber and serious, and it worried Palym that a man like this wore an expression of uncertainty and fear.

The woman spoke to the man, putting her hand on his shoulder and whispering directly into his ear in the intimate way of old friends or lovers. Her words, whatever they were, seemed to provide the man with scant comfort. Without looking at her, he gave her a grim nod, and she dashed off again, faster than Palym's eyes could follow.

The creature bellowed once more as it knocked the remaining guards aside, as if they were little more than toys. Then it began to rear back on its elbow once more.

Palym looked for the Exalt whose sword she carried, but the monster blocked her view. Palym had hoped to bring it to its owner so she could continue her attack, but the beast seemed determined to deny her that chance.

Palym glanced back, wondering if the speedy woman might be able to help, but she was too busy dragging wounded guards out of the monster's path. The man the woman in yellow had been speaking to, though, began to glow a vibrant violet from his forehead. In that light, his eyes seemed diamond-clear, able to see everything.

The man shouted out then, and it took Palym a moment to realize he was talking to her. He said, "No! The elbow! Stab it in the hollow of the elbow!"

Palym stared at the man, confused, right up until the moment Xiao called out toward her too. She glanced toward where she'd left Xiao and saw her friend looking past her and up, with an expression of absolute horror. Then Xiao turned away and fled, unwilling — or at least unable — to watch what she was sure in her bones would happen next.

Palym spun around to see that the monster had decided to ignore the woman who had attacked it with a sword in favor of the person who was holding the

blade now: her. She gawked at the tentacled fist as it plummeted out of the sky at her, and she said a soft prayer to the gods that they would watch over Xiao better than they had her.

It was too late to run. Too late to wield that sword. Too late to do anything but die.

Palym didn't even see the woman in yellow coming at her.

The woman struck Palym with a stunning shove that knocked the blade from her hand and sent her flying. She saw the blade go skittering in one direction as she tumbled out of the beast's path in another.

The monster's tentacles just missed her. Some of them brushed so near her that their horrible heat scorched the skin of her arms and face. She had never felt so grateful in her life as she did right then at having been spared their terrible touch.

The woman who shoved her aside, though, had not been so lucky.

The beast's fist fell on the woman, and she disappeared inside the angry knot of its tentacles with a sickening squish. The creature seemed pleased with its prey, and rather than strike out again, it chewed on its latest victim with the vigor and noise of a starving dog.

The woman didn't have a chance to scream. Palym did that in her stead, screeching loud enough for any two people.

Now that the woman's sacrifice had given her a new chance at life, Palym vowed not to waste it. She cast about for some way to escape.

Xiao had fled and was nowhere to be seen. Palym prayed that Xiao had somehow managed to find safety and, if so, prayed further for a way to join her.

There was a cry from the violet-glowing Exalt who'd shouted out his advice to Palym a moment before, for all the good it had done her. He gaped at the scene before him in horror, stricken at the sight of the creature devouring the woman in yellow.

The thought of the woman filled Palym with a mixture of gratitude and guilt. She could never do enough to thank the woman for saving her life, and she clearly would never have the chance. It filled her with a new determination to survive the day though. If nothing else, she needed to ensure the woman's sacrifice had not been in vain.

Palym's briefly claimed sword — now cooled — had landed near the man, and he scooped it up into his hand with his foot. He weighed its heft in his hand and gave it a few deft swings to gauge its balance, as if it were as light as a normal sword. Then he stalked toward the beast like an executioner striding toward the chopping block.

The beast didn't focus on him, for this was the moment when the Exalt in scarlet armor clawed her way from the rubble that had held her. It paused its savaging of the woman in yellow and turned to face this returned threat. The glowing man took advantage of the distraction.

Rather than attacking the creature's tentacles in a certainly doomed effort to save the woman in yellow from the monster's maw, the man picked up his pace and charged toward the beast's middle instead. He angled straight at the creature's elbow, just as he had urged Palym to do. As he went, he calmly reversed his grip on the sword, holding its hilt upside down as he brought it high over his head.

The man remained silent, not giving voice to the tears rolling down his face, as he leaped into the air above the monster's middle and brought the blade plunging down. The tip of it stabbed cleanly through the creature's skin, right at the crease in its elbow. The man's momentum drove it further down, and he used his entire weight to bury it deep into the monster's mass.

The insane beast flared all its tentacles wide in its agony and bellowed a hellish cry as the man landed on his knees atop the thing's elbow. Either unharmed by its heat or uncaring of the damage it might do, the man wrenched the glowing blade about, twisting deeper into the creature's flesh like a sharpened corkscrew.

The monster flailed about in mortal pain, striving to strike out at something, anything, that might relieve its misery, but it missed any targets it could have found. It glanced off the side of a nearby building and straightened itself out. As the creature finally began to roll over to try to crush the source of its murder, the man yanked the blade loose and leaped free.

Thick, black blood spurted from the vicious wound, and the great beast shuddered and then flung itself about in the final throes of its death. A moment later, it slumped over as loose as a sack of drowned worms and fell still forever.

The man dropped the red-hot sword, and the woman it had belonged to weaved over and plucked it up after giving it a few moments to cool. She barely looked at the man, her face ruddy with grief and shame. She wiped the blade clean with a cloth and then returned it to the red scabbard on her back.

The man, whose violet clothes were now singed and spattered with black and red, staggered over to where the remains of the woman in yellow lay strewn across the debris at the bottom of the pit. There he fell to his knees next to her and picked up her body. He cradled what was left of her in his arms and began to weep.

The few survivors of the platoon of the city guard set about retrieving their dead. They all gave the monstrosity's corpse a wide berth. No one wanted to go near it, perhaps for fear that it would suddenly burst into action again.

To look at it, it seemed impossible that such a thing could even exist. Once Palym had seen it moving, though, it felt nearly as incredible that such a creature could die.

Palym cast about for Xiao but could not find her anywhere. She had run off in all the confusion. Palym couldn't blame her for that. She only wondered how they'd find each other again.

Palym would haunt the gate through which they'd entered, she told herself, and if that didn't work, she would send word home to their village to see if Xiao had returned there. She didn't want to believe that Xiao would run all the way back after the events of the day, but a part of her felt like doing exactly that, too. A bigger part of her wanted only to rest.

Instead, Palym staggered over to the man holding the woman in yellow and put her burned hand on his shoulder. She wanted to say something to console him in his grief. She didn't know either of them, but the woman had saved her life — had *sacrificed* herself for her.

"I'm sorry," she said to the man.

He looked up at her, and Palym wondered why he seemed so blurry all of a sudden. She wiped tears from her eyes that she hadn't realized she was crying. Then, as the rush of the battle drained from her, she felt her legs begin to wobble. She fell to her knees next to the man and wept openly with a combination of grief, shame, and relief.

Grief, for a woman she hadn't even known, as well as for all the countless others who had died during the monster's attack. Shame, that she hadn't been able to do more to save them — that the woman in yellow had given her life to save her. Relief, that the monster had been stopped and that she — and hopefully Xiao — had survived.

The man turned toward her, still cradling the remains of the woman in yellow in his arms. "It was not your fault," he said. "It was hers. She chose to give her life to save you."

Perhaps he said that to try to make Palym feel better about what had happened. If so, he failed.

Palym gazed at him with red-rimmed eyes and choked on her reply. The man had clearly loved this woman. He held her tightly, refusing to let her go, no matter how her form had been mangled.

Eventually, Palym managed to croak out a few words of gratitude. "How can I ever repay you?" she said.

The man grimaced at her clumsy attempt to make good on her debt to him. "It's impossible," he said as his lover's blood cooled on his skin. "You can't."

Palym lowered her eyes. Coming to Great Forks had been a mistake. She'd had her doubts about it all along, but she'd refused to give voice to them. She'd had a hard-enough time dealing with the recriminations of her parents. She hadn't wanted to risk considering her own.

Now, though, she had failed so quickly and thoroughly that there was only one option left open to her. She would have to turn around and leave the city with her tail between her legs. That would crush her spirit for sure, but perhaps the monster had already accomplished that.

Why had she ever left home?

Then the man cleared his throat and spoke to Palym again. “But you do owe her something for her sacrifice,” he said in an earnest voice. “Just one precious thing.”

“What is it?” Hope rose in Palym’s heart, warring with the dread the monster had plunged into it. Despite that, she knew that whatever the man asked of her, she would do it. She owed him — and the woman in yellow — at least that much. She owed them her life. “What?”

The man saw the sincerity in her face and gave her a grim half smile. The violet light wreathing him began to fade, so he appeared to be just a man again. “It is now your duty to make sure you were worth it.”

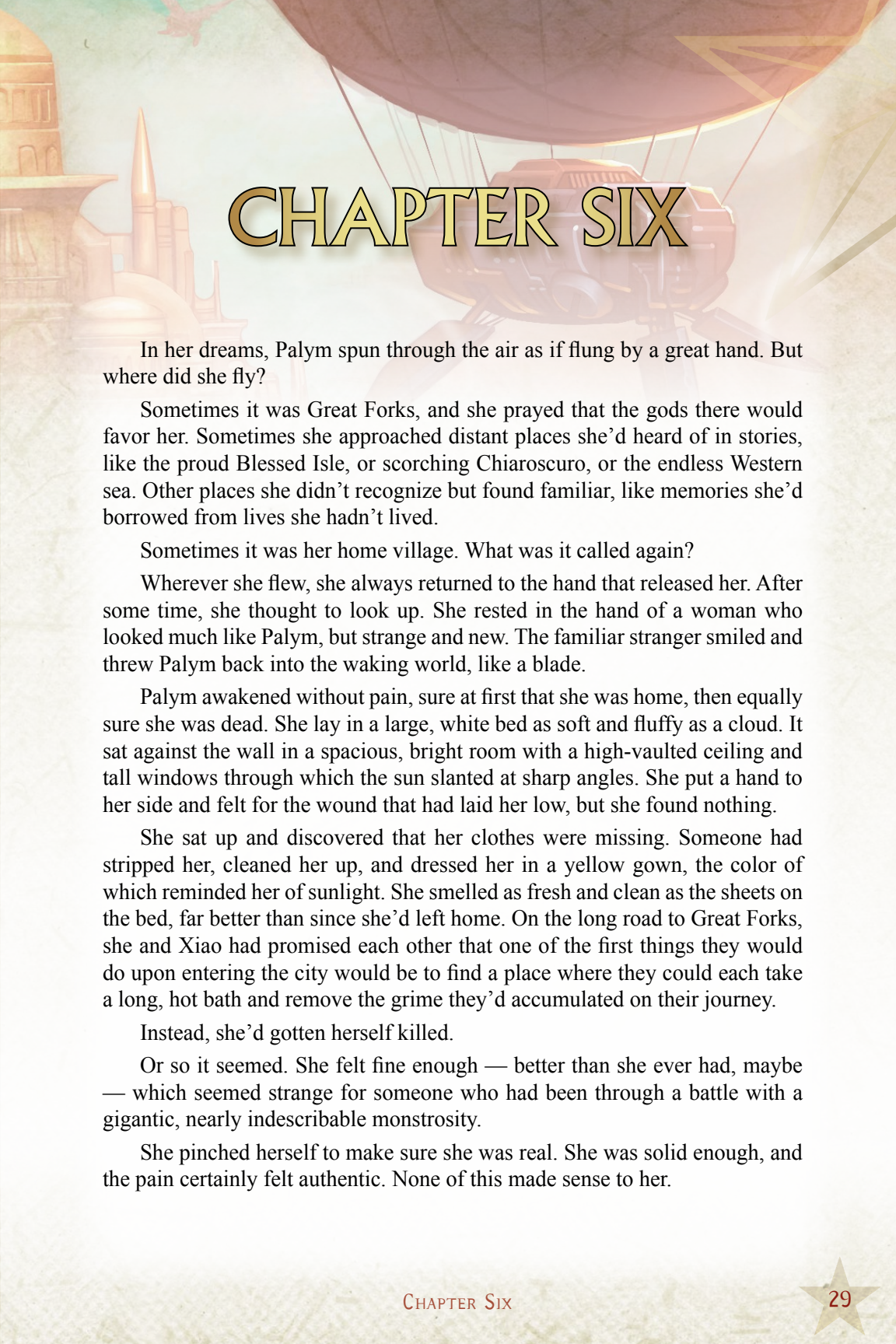
Palym nodded. Of course she would. She just needed for him to tell her *how*.

She opened her mouth to ask that very question, but no words came out. She realized then that something on her side was wet, and she put her hand to it to see what it was. It came away soaked with blood.

She stared at it, confused. Perhaps she hadn’t gotten away from the monster as cleanly as she had believed.

She turned to the man once again, but darkness took her before she could protest.





CHAPTER SIX

In her dreams, Palym spun through the air as if flung by a great hand. But where did she fly?

Sometimes it was Great Forks, and she prayed that the gods there would favor her. Sometimes she approached distant places she'd heard of in stories, like the proud Blessed Isle, or scorching Chiaroscuro, or the endless Western sea. Other places she didn't recognize but found familiar, like memories she'd borrowed from lives she hadn't lived.

Sometimes it was her home village. What was it called again?

Wherever she flew, she always returned to the hand that released her. After some time, she thought to look up. She rested in the hand of a woman who looked much like Palym, but strange and new. The familiar stranger smiled and threw Palym back into the waking world, like a blade.

Palym awakened without pain, sure at first that she was home, then equally sure she was dead. She lay in a large, white bed as soft and fluffy as a cloud. It sat against the wall in a spacious, bright room with a high-vaulted ceiling and tall windows through which the sun slanted at sharp angles. She put a hand to her side and felt for the wound that had laid her low, but she found nothing.

She sat up and discovered that her clothes were missing. Someone had stripped her, cleaned her up, and dressed her in a yellow gown, the color of which reminded her of sunlight. She smelled as fresh and clean as the sheets on the bed, far better than since she'd left home. On the long road to Great Forks, she and Xiao had promised each other that one of the first things they would do upon entering the city would be to find a place where they could each take a long, hot bath and remove the grime they'd accumulated on their journey.

Instead, she'd gotten herself killed.

Or so it seemed. She felt fine enough — better than she ever had, maybe — which seemed strange for someone who had been through a battle with a gigantic, nearly indescribable monstrosity.

She pinched herself to make sure she was real. She was solid enough, and the pain certainly felt authentic. None of this made sense to her.

She wondered about Xiao. Had she survived the attack? The last Palym had seen of her, she'd been alive. Of course, so had Palym, and she wasn't so certain about her status in that respect anymore.

Then the most beautiful man Palym had ever seen walked into the room. He was brawny, with a soft jawline and long, dark hair that framed his perfect face. He wore stylish clothes made of the finest blue silk, the color of the sky. They reminded Palym of bedroom sheets, she realized with a blush.

"Ah, you're awake," the handsome man said with a twinkle in his eyes. "So glad to see that. You've slept for a good while, but you've been through a lot. Takes time for people to recover from such a trying experience, after all."

"Where am I?" she blurted out, unable to contain her curiosity for more than a few seconds.

The man sat down on the edge of the bed and introduced himself. "You can call me Reverie," he said. "Or Reverie of Halcyon Plumage, if you want to get formal. And you're right where you need to be."

"And where is that?"

The man leaned back and spread his arms wide. "Why, Yu-Shan, of course." He inched toward her and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. "It's not nearly as spectacular and perfect as it once was, but that's the effect eternity has on us all. Present company excepted, of course."

Palym's eyes grew wide. She knew the name, and a more colloquial alternative: "We're in heaven? The home of the gods? Up in the sky?"

The man laughed at her awe. Though it made her self-conscious, it was a very charming laugh. "Heaven? Yes. Home of the gods? City of the gods, even. Up in the sky? It's far too heavy for that."

He sprawled across Palym's blanket-covered legs and made a sweeping gesture to include their surroundings. "No, no, if you want to understand Yu-Shan, think of a reflection of the Blessed Isle — oh, you've probably never been there, have you — and then imagine that it's all a great city filled with Creation's most powerful gods, and hidden away from mortal eyes."

Palym gaped at the man. "I can't imagine it."

"Truthfully, neither can I, and I live here."

"Are you a god?"

Reverie chuckled with what felt like forced amusement. "Certainly not. Unlike many of them, I don't spend my time lolling around in idleness or — which I'm not sure is any better — spending every waking moment huddled in the Jade Pleasure Dome where they either watch or play the Games of Divinity, a pleasure never granted to men and women of flesh and blood."

There was a pause as Reverie noticed he was ranting. He cleared his throat. “No, I’m actually still useful, you know. Someone has to be, and that duty has fallen to those like us.”

She gave him an uncertain look. “You mean... regular people?”

Reverie barked a sharp laugh. “Hardly.” He gave her a knowing grin, and she stared at him blankly.

Soon, a tiny gasp escaped from the man’s lips, and he said, “Ah! You don’t know! No one’s been in here to chat with you yet?”

“Know what?” Palym said, suddenly wary.

“You’re an Exalt!” he said. “Slim chance of getting invited to Yu-Shan if you’re not an Exalt or a god, after all.”

Palym felt grateful she was already sitting down, but Reverie was taking up most of the bed and suddenly she needed space. She kicked him a bit, and he sat up, allowing her to gather her legs closer to her, and her wits with them. She’d woken up in a strange bed and a beautiful stranger showed up to ingratiate himself with fanciful stories, and she now wondered why that had ever seemed sensible to her.

She squinted at the man with newfound suspicion. “Not me.” She clasped her knees more tightly to her chest and shook her head. “I’m not the Chosen of anyone.”

“I beg to differ. I saw how you stood up to that Exigent in Great Forks. You were amazing.”

Palym blushed, not from humility but shame. “You mean that monster? I didn’t do anything to stop it.”

“You gave Cutting Remark the time he needed to figure out how to defeat the beast.”

“And nearly got myself killed in the process.” She flashed back to the woman in yellow shoving her aside. “And that lady who sacrificed herself for me...”

Reverie gave her a solemn nod. “Our joyful Hummingbird, an Exalt of Mercury. She shall be missed — by Cutting Remark more than anyone else.”

Palym’s stomach fell. “She was...?”

He grimaced. “His wife, yes.”

Palym felt like she might be sick. She shoved her way past Reverie and out of her bed and set about looking for her own clothes. She hadn’t had much in the way of belongings, but she wanted to gather them before she left.

“We threw them away,” Reverie said as he realized what she was hunting for. “They were full of blood and holes. Your new clothes are so much nicer. I’m surprised you miss the old ones at all.”

Palym caught sight of herself in a mirror set in a corner of the room. She stopped and stared, transfixed for a moment. She looked fantastic: clean, healthy, and dressed in the finest clothing she'd ever seen. Someone had brushed out her hair and tied it back with a yellow ribbon, which she reached up and touched with an uncertain hand.

She didn't recognize herself, and she wondered if the mirror was responsible. She'd never owned one and never seen herself so clear, so perfect. It showed her a person who could have been a long-lost, prettier sister, someone she had never met before. She didn't feel gangly and awkward, but lean and powerful. It was only when she saw that the image's movements in the mirror moved in exact sync with her that she accepted it as her own reflection.

She glanced at Reverie and saw the amused glint in his eyes. "You really don't know just how breathtaking you are, do you?"

He moved toward her, and she jumped as if he'd bitten her. He froze and then took a respectful step back. "I'm sorry. You're still absorbing all this, aren't you?"

"I don't know what I'm doing," she said, her voice becoming shriller with each word. "I don't know anything at all!"

He took a careful step forward and put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "It's a lot to take in, I know, but it passes in time."

"How much time?"

Reverie thought about it for a moment. "I think it only took me a decade or three."

"Thirty years?" She gaped at him. He didn't look like he'd spent even that many years on the planet. "How old are you?"

"That's a rude question," he said with a devilish smile.

She crossed her arms. She wasn't about to let him weasel out of answering her. "I'm a rude girl."

"And perfectly so," he said with a chuckle. He rubbed his chin. "It's been a while since I added it up, to be honest. Something like a hundred years."

"That's impossible! You can't be that old..."

"What? No." He scoffed at her. "A hundred years since I added it up, I mean."

She narrowed her eyes at him and slipped out from under his hand. She glanced at the open window and began backing toward it. "Just how old are you?"

He shrugged. "Something like three hundred years old? Honestly, it all starts to blend together after the first century."

"You're kidding," she said, both horrified and mystified. "You should be dust."

“Champions of the gods don’t age much, my canary. One of the many benefits.”

Palym crossed her arms and hunched her shoulders. “Don’t call me that.”

“I’ll drop canary,” Reverie agreed, “but ‘champion of the gods’ isn’t debatable.”

She sighed, exasperated... but also curious. “Which gods?”

“The Five Maidens of Destiny.” He gestured toward the ceiling. “The stars who tell Creation’s fate. Which makes us Sidereal Exalts.” She furrowed her brow at him, and he let loose a deep sigh. “Sidereal. It means ‘having to do with stars.’ You don’t really know anything about any of this at all, do you? What kind of education do you have? Can you even read? If not, you’ll need to learn.”

Palym turned toward the window. “I need some air.”

She leaned over to put her hands on the window’s wide sill, and she saw the incredible city of Yu-Shan sprawled out before her. It seemed to go on forever in every direction, filled with sun-painted buildings that soared to great heights and darkened alleys that plummeted to unseen depths. Floating rickshaws — like the one that had carried those Exalts to Great Forks — zipped through the sky from every angle, moving in an orderly pattern she could barely discern. An enormous, many-masted ship soared overhead, with figures like ants swarming across its hull.

The sky itself seemed to shimmer, both like and unlike the colors she’d always known, above a great jade dome that rose high in the sky. The light of the sun, directly above it, illuminated all of the unimaginable city.

“It’s — it’s beautiful,” she said. The sight had stunned all other breath from her.

“In parts,” Reverie said grudgingly. “They really did give you a room with an excellent view. You can hardly see the slums at all.”

Palym looked, disbelieving, toward the shadowed parts of the city. She saw signs of ramshackle construction and neglected disrepair. “How can there be slums in Heaven?”

“Gods don’t age, you know,” said Reverie, with a hint of pity. “And worship is wealth. What do you think happens to the gods Creation forgets?”

Palym just wagged her head from side to side. Millions of gods, some of whom lived in poverty like beggars? Exalts who worked to serve them as part of some heavenly bureaucracy?

It wasn’t that it seemed unreal, she decided. It was almost *too* real. *Super-real*.

She threw up over the window sill. The drop there was so far that she never heard her vomit splat. A few moments later, though, someone down below shouted up at her in outrage.

She stared down at whoever it was, but they were so shrouded in darkness she couldn't see them. Reverie turned her around and led her back into the room. "That poor spirit. To be vomited upon from so high up. You'd rarely find a better metaphor for what it's like to live in the lowest parts of Yu-Shan," he said with a sardonic click of his tongue.

"So, you're one of these Sidereal Exalts too," Palym said after she'd wiped her mouth on a hand towel she found near her bed. "One of the most important people in heaven."

Reverie puffed out his chest with gentle pride. A light blue symbol glittered into life on his brow, as if showing off his identity. Beneath it, his eyes sparkled with brilliant blue flecks. "Among those of us who labor in the Celestial Bureaucracy — specifically as part of the Bureau of Destiny — we rank fairly high. We're not gods, but since we're favored by the Five Maidens, we have a good deal of sway here in Yu-Shan."

Palym gave him a confused sigh. "How did this happen to me?"

"Oh, you really are lost, aren't you?" He grimaced with sincere concern. "All of the Exalted — even those chosen by the Five Maidens — we all start out as mortals. But the Sidereal process is a slow one. Gradual. It takes days or weeks. Perhaps you fall out of love, or into it. Perhaps you march off to war, or you chase down a mystery."

"Maybe you leave home and you don't know why," Palym said, and realized she was caught.

"That's right," Reverie said with a nod. "And when the time comes to take responsibility, you step up and take the role you were always meant to fill. Who you are now. Who I am. Sidereal Exalts. Welcome to the club."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Reverie gave Palym precious little time to recover her wits before he insisted on bringing her back to his office. “You seem as good as new right now, and there’s no better time than the present, right?”

“I — I don’t know?” Palym said in a bit of a confused panic. “Is there? I don’t understand any of this.”

“You’re just new,” Reverie said as he escorted Palym out of her room and down a hallway. “Enjoy it while it lasts. Trust me. You’ll only get to see it all this way once.”

Palym realized as they moved that they were in a hospital, one more richly-appointed than anything she’d dared to imagine in Creation. Many-limbed nurses emerged to fuss over her, insisting that she needed more time to recover, but Reverie hustled Palym past them.

He stopped only to trade familiar-sounding greetings with a cow-headed surgeon. Palym wondered what ailments the gods might need a surgeon for, and what the difference was between a god of surgery and a surgeon who was a god, but whatever language the surgeon spoke, she didn’t speak or understand it. Oddly, she understood Reverie’s flirting perfectly well, even when he spoke in the surgeon’s tongue.

Palym tried to ask Reverie about at least one of these mysteries, but the man turned a corner and guided her out onto a massive balcony. Here sat the egg-shaped flying rickshaw that she’d seen back in the pit with the monster. She stopped and stared at it, and once Reverie noticed, he beckoned her forward.

“Officially, we can only use this in emergency situations,” he said to her as she approached it. “But I figured that bringing one of our number back from the hospital qualified.”

“Will you get in trouble for that?” she asked, not certain if he was risking himself for her convenience or for his own thrills.

“Probably not,” he said with a casual shrug. “Who has the time to chase down every Sidereal out for a joyride? As the passing of Hummingbird reminds us, life’s too short, even for the immortal.”

Palym remembered the old man who controlled the rickshaw in Great Forks and felt a rush of curiosity and excitement. “Can I fly it?”

"I'm sure you will, someday." Reverie held open the oval door on the side of the vessel, revealing plush seats within. "But there's a trick to it — namely, tricking it into thinking you're a god. For now, you should take the chance to sit back and see the sights of heaven instead."

Reverie climbed into the rickshaw's driver's seat, which was a bench carved into the front of the massive ovoid. There was a wide window behind him, though, through which Palym could still see and talk with him. "Comfortable enough?" he asked.

He didn't wait for a response before he thrust one hand upward. The rickshaw rose straight into the sky and then zipped off at a faster speed than Palym had ever known. The shift in momentum pressed her back into her suffocatingly soft seat cushions, and it took her a moment to adjust to it.

"You all right back there?" Reverie called to her. "I'm taking it slow, I know. I just want you to be able to look around as we go."

Palym shook her head at the idea that they were moving at less than top speed, but she didn't need another invitation. She scuttled forward on her hands and knees and pressed her nose up against the window on the right side of the rickshaw. The buildings on the ground below her zipped by at a thrilling pace. She spied rivers that seemed to float through the various levels of the structures below, and it wasn't until they swept past a wide waterfall in the center of one of them that she realized they were canals.

Scores of boats plied the canals, some of them even moving down the sparkling cataracts. "Looks beautiful, I know," Reverie said, tracking her gaze. "Travel by canal is a horrible pain though. You can only go in the direction the water's flowing, especially when it comes to those waterfalls. Generally speaking, those weren't built into the system either. The celestial engineering departments just made use of them after one canal or another collapsed, and you can imagine the horrors involved when that happened."

"I don't care how rotten you might think it is," Palym said in awe. "I don't want to ever have to leave this place."

"Who said you were leaving?"

"Wait." Palym moved toward the front of the rickshaw and stared out past Reverie. "Where are you taking me?"

"Home."

Palym's heart froze. "Back to my village?"

Reverie laughed at her horrified tone. "No, no, no. To the Bureau of Destiny. Where we work. Together."

She understood the man's words, but she couldn't figure out a way to make them make sense. "What are you saying?"

"As one of the Sidereal Exalted, you're assigned a job in the Celestial Bureaucracy. Cutting Remark himself requested from the Division of Journeys

that you be assigned to our project, believe it or not. I mean, given the circumstances, that's just stunning."

"What circumstances?"

"Well, you're meant to replace Hummingbird within our ranks."

Palym gasped. "The woman who saved my life?"

"The very one."

She tried to swallow but found her mouth had gone dry. "I could never."

"Of course you can. Cutting Remark is a champion of Saturn. He has a better sense for endings and transitions than anyone, and if he says you're to be a part of the Circle of Protection, then so you are."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Reverie turned around in his seat, apparently guiding the rickshaw without looking. "I keep forgetting how naive you must be about all this. It's absolutely charming."

"It sure doesn't feel like it to me."

"I suppose it wouldn't. Let me give you the Mercurial notes on this, by which I mean, short and fast."

"We're part of the Circle of Protection, a team of Sidereal Exalts charged with tracking down and dispatching misused Exigents. There are five of us, one for each of the Five Maidens of Destiny: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn."

"I, of course, am a champion of Venus, Maiden of Serenity, plus leisure, love, and harmony, which is why I'm so likeable."

"If you say so."

"And *you're* our new champion of Mercury, Maiden of Journeys, as well as adventure, persistence, and exploration, which is why you can't let me explain without interrupting."

"Sorry."

"Cutting Remark—"

"The man who killed the monster?"

"Correct. He's our champion of Saturn. Maiden of Endings, and death, change, and transformation. Anything pithy to add?"

"Was he born with the name Cutting Remark?"

"I believe it's a nickname that stuck, for reasons I think will be obvious. I also think you saw our hero of Mars — Maiden of Battles, plus conflict, force, and struggle — take on that horrible beast and fail miserably. She's still smarting over a mortal picking up her sword after getting thrown through a wall. Her name's Keahi."

The buildings in the distance grew closer with every moment, but Reverie showed no interest in turning back around. Palym didn't want to distract him

from his driving duties for another instant, but a new question sprang to her lips before she could silence it. “You said there were five Sidereal Exalts in the Circle of Protection. That’s only four.”

“You probably never saw the last member of our little band, but I’ll be sure to introduce you when we get to our offices. He was driving the rickshaw when you were hurt. He’s an old man, bitter as he is skinny, and not much fun at all. Zannen, the hero of Jupiter. Maiden of Secrets, including knowledge, concealment, and truth—”

“Thankyouverymuch,” Palym said as fast as she could, for the buildings looming before them were now blocking out the light emerging from the jade dome above. “Now can you please turn around and *drive*?”

Reverie swung back and gestured absentmindedly. The craft nosedived straight forward until it was in free fall, and Palym found herself floating in the middle of the carriage. For a moment, she couldn’t figure out what was making that horrible screaming sound, but then she realized it was her.

“Are you upset for some reason?” Reverie called back to her.

Palym fought the urge to claw her way forward through the front window of the rickshaw and toss the man out of his seat. She was pretty sure he was enjoying every second of her terror, but she restrained herself from attacking him, even if only because she thought that doing otherwise would ensure her death.

Reverie pulled up on the reins, and the flying rickshaw righted itself with a sharp swoop that shoved Palym to the passenger compartment’s floor. An instant later, the vehicle set down on solid ground somewhere, and the man tossed the reins to the side. He leaped down from his seat and threw open the door straight after.

“Welcome,” he said with a flourish and a bow, “to your new home, the offices of the Bureau of Destiny.”

Palym climbed out of the craft, not bothering to stand up first. She poured herself through the door and spilled out onto the pavement below, laughing, giddy with exhilaration. She hugged the ground until heaven stopped spinning beneath her, and when she was ready, Reverie reached down to help her to her feet.

She pushed him away, insisting on standing up on her own. As she did, she glanced around to discover that they were standing before a daunting, silent building, gray and unforgiving. As they got up close, she could see how the building’s walls and steps were worn by untold generations of use. The place smelled dusty, but it retained grandeur in its scale.

“Is this the Bureau of Destiny?” she asked. “The rest of Heaven seemed so bright.”

“This is part of it. The Violet Bier of Sorrows, closest to the hospital you were in. Home to the Division of Endings. All of the Divisions are connected to the Bureau’s central office, called the Most Perfect Lotus of Heavenly Designs.”

“How, by tunnels?”

“That would be too mundane. Come along, stay close, and you’ll see.”

Reverie led Palym in through a great open doorway, and the two of them walked for a time through draped halls. Even though the route was wide, Palym began to feel claustrophobic. Most doors they passed were closed, with hushed murmurs behind them, while others looked like they hadn’t been opened in a long time. The place didn’t just feel somber. It felt half-abandoned.

“Did the Circle do something to piss off the people in charge, to get stuck with a place this depressing?”

“The one ‘in charge’ is the Unconquered Sun, our Guarding Star and Divine Fire, the greatest of all the gods in Yu-Shan,” Reverie said. “And I doubt he knows we exist. And these aren’t our offices, but yes, we’ve annoyed our fair share of superiors.”

Reverie shifted course toward an open portal in a weathered gray wall. Palym let him guide her toward it. “What did you do?”

“Our jobs. What else?”

“I thought your job was to track down the misuse of something or other.” She couldn’t remember the exact word.

“Exigents. Yes, the Exigence is a boon granted to various gods by the Unconquered Sun, a way for even the least of the gods to pick champions of their own. Some gods employ these Exigents as a means of jumpstarting their base of followers once again, which could potentially lead to restoring them to their once-grand positions in the world.”

“Does that work?”

“Almost never,” Reverie said with a sarcastic grunt. “By the time you need an Exigent, you might not have enough power to survive choosing one. The boon of Exigence diminishes those gods who use it. That’s why not all the little gods use their boons. They like to trade them instead, barter them for other things they want or need.”

“Is that permitted?”

“Of course not. But they do it anyhow. That’s where we come in. It’s our job to keep track of all those loose boons that haven’t been cashed in yet and make sure that they’re properly used.”

“That sounds... complicated.”

“You have no idea,” said Reverie. “But you will.”

As they walked, the halls changed, becoming livelier and less hushed. Windows began to appear, and as Palym looked through them she realized they’d somehow ascended many stories without climbing any stairs: she could see Yu-Shan sprawling out before them. Reverie gestured toward the grand jade dome, visible in the distance.

“It’s the sort of problem you’d think the Unconquered Sun could fix in an instant if he wanted, right? He could just grant boons that they couldn’t pass on, but for some reason only he really understands it doesn’t work like that. Anyhow, as long as the gods — the greatest of them, at least — keep themselves distracted over there in the Jade Pleasure Dome, all the hard work of managing Yu-Shan falls to the bureaucrats. Which includes us.”

“What do they do in the dome?” Palym asked, entirely mystified.

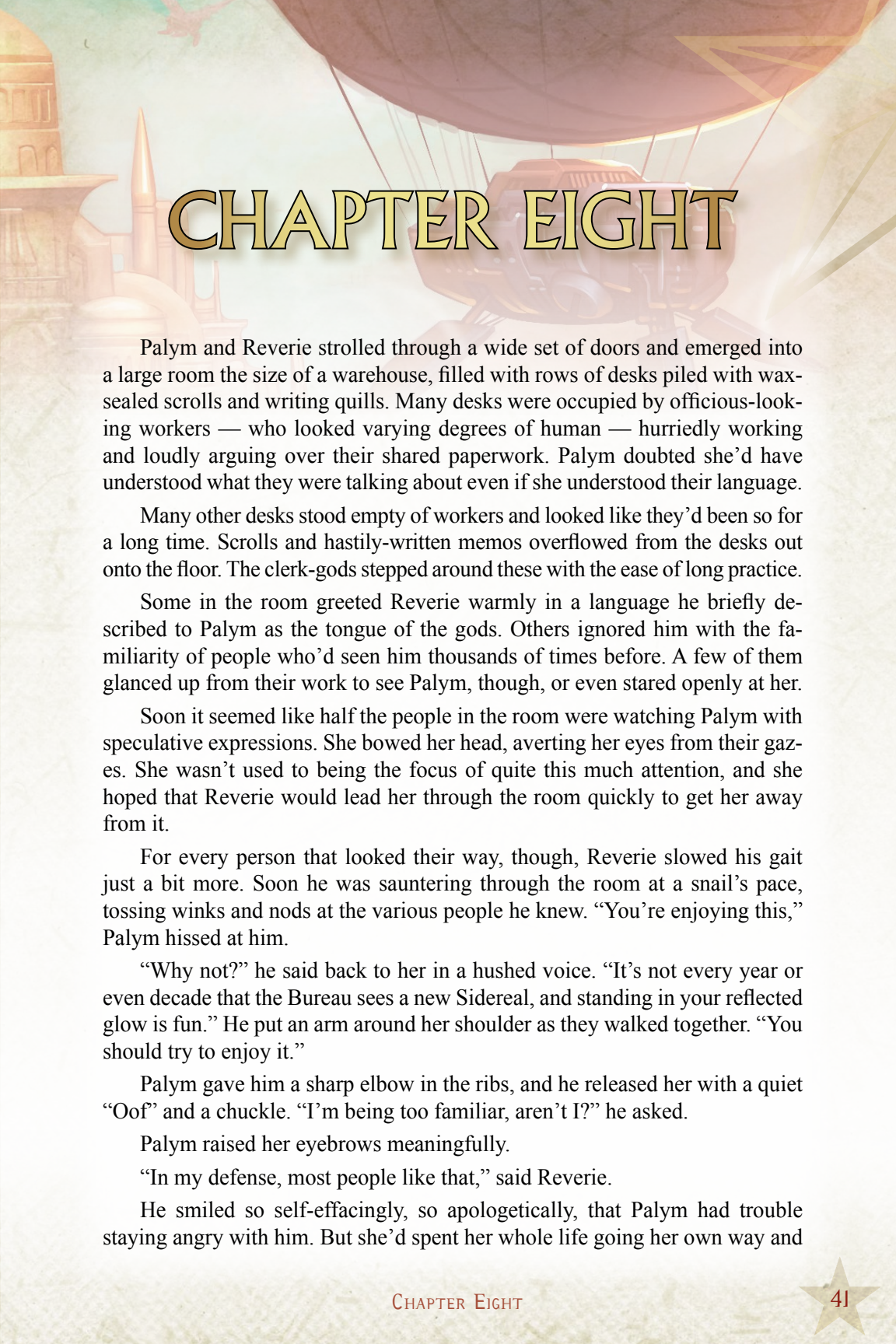
“They play the Games of Divinity. You can tell who’s winning by the color of the sky. Right now, when it’s shining bright? That means the Unconquered Sun has the upper hand. When it grows dark, that means Luna — our Silver Lady, whose names and faces are without number — or one of the Five Maidens has slipped ahead. You can tell which one by looking to see whose light shines the brightest.”

“And what does that mean to us?”

“As far as I can tell? About as much as we mean to them. So: nothing until it means everything. Still, it’s a matter of each of us playing our part in this grand drama, right? As long as we manage that, the wheels keep turning and Creation keeps moving forward.”

“What happens if the Sidereals stop doing their jobs? Would Creation lose its destiny?”

Reverie frowned in thought as he beckoned Palym onward, past a tasteful plaque, announcing their arrival at the Bureau of Destiny proper in a language Palym couldn’t read but found familiar. “No, no. The story would still play out. I just don’t think we’d like the ending.”



CHAPTER EIGHT

Palym and Reverie strolled through a wide set of doors and emerged into a large room the size of a warehouse, filled with rows of desks piled with wax-sealed scrolls and writing quills. Many desks were occupied by officious-looking workers — who looked varying degrees of human — hurriedly working and loudly arguing over their shared paperwork. Palym doubted she'd have understood what they were talking about even if she understood their language.

Many other desks stood empty of workers and looked like they'd been so for a long time. Scrolls and hastily-written memos overflowed from the desks out onto the floor. The clerk-gods stepped around these with the ease of long practice.

Some in the room greeted Reverie warmly in a language he briefly described to Palym as the tongue of the gods. Others ignored him with the familiarity of people who'd seen him thousands of times before. A few of them glanced up from their work to see Palym, though, or even stared openly at her.

Soon it seemed like half the people in the room were watching Palym with speculative expressions. She bowed her head, averting her eyes from their gazes. She wasn't used to being the focus of quite this much attention, and she hoped that Reverie would lead her through the room quickly to get her away from it.

For every person that looked their way, though, Reverie slowed his gait just a bit more. Soon he was sauntering through the room at a snail's pace, tossing winks and nods at the various people he knew. "You're enjoying this," Palym hissed at him.

"Why not?" he said back to her in a hushed voice. "It's not every year or even decade that the Bureau sees a new Sidereal, and standing in your reflected glow is fun." He put an arm around her shoulder as they walked together. "You should try to enjoy it."

Palym gave him a sharp elbow in the ribs, and he released her with a quiet "Oof" and a chuckle. "I'm being too familiar, aren't I?" he asked.

Palym raised her eyebrows meaningfully.

"In my defense, most people like that," said Reverie.

He smiled so self-effacingly, so apologetically, that Palym had trouble staying angry with him. But she'd spent her whole life going her own way and

being her own person, and by the gods she'd stay angry with him if she wanted. She felt a warm tingle on her forehead, and knew without a mirror that the symbol of Mercury had appeared there. She knew the symbol as if from dreams and felt god-granted power bolstering her will.

Palym lowered her eyebrows meaningfully.

Reverie's smile faltered, and he cleared his throat. "Now, Pal—"

He broke off as a tall, statuesque woman stepped into the back of the room and shouted at them. "Reverie!" she said. "We haven't got time for your damn showboating today. Move your fancy ass!"

Reverie grimaced at the people nearby, who were already turning away from him and Palym and pointedly getting back to their work. "Fun's over, I suppose. The taskmaster is here."

Palym didn't try to concoct a response. She was too busy heading toward the woman who'd burst in shouting at them. Palym recognized her from the battle against the monster in the pit.

The olive-skinned woman wore a loose, red outfit that allowed her to move freely in a fight, rather than the armor she'd worn previously. She still bore her sword in a scabbard strapped across her back. She moved and spoke like a soldier, someone with no time to waste on niceties and other frivolities. She had a special glare for Reverie that looked like it could burn the eyebrows off her face — and his — if she would simply let it.

"I can't believe you," she said as Reverie and Palym reached her, her tone as annoyed as her expression. "To come in here and parade a new recruit around like that! And before she's even had a chance to meet the others."

Reverie didn't seem perturbed in the least. "Keahi, my friend, I would love for you to meet Palym, our new coworker."

The woman scowled at Palym. "We already met. On the field of battle, no less."

Palym nodded. "I'm pleased to have the chance to know you under better circumstances."

The woman stared flatly at Palym. "When I met you, my friend was still alive."

Palym cringed at that, but Reverie intervened. "And Palym was but a mortal. How fortunate that she now can join us and take Hummingbird's place."

Keahi glared at Reverie. "We haven't even had her funeral yet, you jack-ass. Show some class."

"I wasn't aware the heavenly bureaucracy required a completed funeral before we could get on with our work. Is that a recent change in policy? Does it require documentation in triplicate?"

"You really are the coldest, most cynical Sidereal I've had the misfortune to meet. I can't imagine what Venus foresaw in you."

"I'm sorry about your friend," Palym blurted to Keahi, desperate to interrupt the argument.

"You damn well ought to be!" Keahi said, turning on Palym without pause. "If it wasn't for you, she might still be alive."

"Now, now," Reverie said. "You can hardly blame a mortal for making a poor life choice. That's what their existences are full of — and usually end with. It would be like expecting a dog to not bark."

"And now you have the nerve to try to replace her," Keahi said to Palym, ignoring Reverie's comments. "What gives you the right?"

Palym opened her mouth, but she had no reply to offer.

"Keahi," said Reverie, gently, calmly. Something about his tone stopped Keahi short, and she blinked hard, as if losing her train of thought. Reverie continued while he had an opening. "The poor girl just woke up. She didn't choose this. She doesn't even know what her new job is yet."

Keahi's jaw worked for a few moments. "You haven't told her?"

The man shrugged. "We spent the trip over here doing a little sightseeing instead. You do realize how few mortals have ever been in Yu-Shan before, don't you? No matter how amazing their destiny might be?" He put a hand on Palym's shoulder, then immediately took it back off. "She was absolutely stunned by it, weren't you?"

"That doesn't seem all that important," Palym said.

"Oh, but getting the proper start on your new life is the most important thing there is for a Chosen of Journeys. At least in my considered and experienced judgment." He put an open hand on his chest. "There's plenty of time for training in the days ahead. She should savor the moments she has before that begins, don't you think?"

"You're a fool," Keahi said to him.

He smiled at her. "I've never once denied that."

"Someday you might come to regret it."

"I've had a long, pleasurable life, and so far, I'm committed only to becoming more like myself every day."

"We don't have time for this." Keahi spun on her heel, and the few gods nearby who'd been listening in on the conversation darted back to their desks and pretended to have been absorbed in their work the entire time. The woman stormed off like she was leading a march, sure that Palym and Reverie would follow her. Palym fell in behind her without even thinking about any alternatives. Reverie followed a moment later with a resigned sigh.

"The others are in a foul mood," Keahi said over her shoulder.

"We are about to put a friend to rest," said Reverie.

"Which makes your utter lack of emotion about it that much more disturbing."

“My surface doesn’t reveal my depths,” Reverie said as they wound their way deeper and deeper into the building. “Haven’t you known me long enough to know that?”

“There have been times I thought you had a heart,” Keahi admitted, “but then you go and confirm the hollowness of your chest all over again.”

“Happy to keep you on your toes,” Reverie said. “As a Chosen of Battles, you must appreciate a bit of internal conflict. Or would you rather I showed you what you wanted to see?”

“Where are we going?” Palym asked. The others ignored her.

“Zannen has spent the entire morning snarling at our staff,” Keahi said. “Half of them have threatened to quit. Half of those actually carried through on their threats.”

“I’ll smooth things over,” Reverie said. “Perhaps over several bottles of wine this evening. I’ll have them all back at their desks tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll admit,” Keahi said to Palym, “Sometimes having an amoral flatterer among your ranks has its benefits.”

“You’d wound me with such characterizations if I didn’t fit them wholly,” he responded.

“Cutting Remark is, of course, a basket case. I’ve never seen him so shattered.”

“I’m so sorry,” Palym said. “I didn’t mean for anything —”

“Of course you didn’t *mean* it,” Keahi said. “But that didn’t keep it from happening. Nor does it mean you’re not responsible for it.”

Palym began to protest. “I never intended —”

“You’re not judged by your *intentions*,” Keahi said. “Your *actions* are all that count.”

“I tried to help!”

“And you utterly failed!” Keahi had started to walk faster, and Palym realized that she was having a hard time keeping up. If they moved any faster, she’d have to break into a flat-out run.

At that moment, she gave up. They were walking through an empty juncture between two weathered hallways, and she had had enough. She stopped right where she was and let the other two continue on without her.

They made it several yards on before they realized she was no longer with them. Once they did, Reverie spun about to return for her. Keahi remained where she was, her arms folded across her chest as she tapped her toe on the concrete floor in disgust.

“Come now,” Reverie said to her. “We shouldn’t keep the others waiting.” She refused to move. “How long was I out?”

He stopped, confused by the question. “What does that have to do this?”

“How long was I in that hospital?”

“Four days.”

She gestured with her chin toward wherever they were headed. “They waited four days without knowing when I was going to be awake. They can wait a little longer.”

“Yes, but now they know that you’re awake. Keeping them waiting for you is rude.”

“*Rude*? They aren’t my family. They aren’t my friends. I nearly died trying to help you people. You don’t have any say over what I do.” She folded her arms across her chest. “I can walk right out of here anytime I like.”

Keahi and Reverie stared at Palym with wide-open eyes. Then a smile began to curl at the edges of Reverie’s lips. Soon it blossomed into a wide grin and from there it exploded into a full-throated laugh.

“Oh, I like her. She’s going to be my new best friend.”

“Friends? I’ve known you for maybe an hour, and I can barely tolerate you.”

It was Keahi’s turn to laugh. Reverie arched his eyebrows at Palym and then looked away with his arms crossed. He was laughing no longer.

“And as for you,” Palym said, rounding on Keahi, “I understand how upset you must be, but it wasn’t my job to save an Exalt’s life! It was—”

“Mine,” said Keahi. “It was my duty. It was my failure.”

The three of them were silent for a while.

“Okay,” said Reverie eventually. “You’re a bastion of free will, Palym. But you are standing here in the heart of the Most Perfect Lotus, about to become a part of the Circle of Protection. We, along with the rest of the Bureau, are charged with maintaining the Loom of Fate.” He let his words sink in. “It’s not just a job, it’s a sacred trust. You were destined for this the moment you were born.”

“Mercury chose me, and I don’t see her here. Is she going to take it back if I don’t do what you say? Or are you just some bullies telling me what to do with *my* gifts?”

“She has a point,” Keahi said. “Maybe we should let her figure things out on her own.”

Reverie shook his head, determined not to budge. “No. We can make this work. Look, both of you, please trust me, as a Chosen of Serenity if not as a friend. The Circle may be broken, but it doesn’t need to stay that way.”

He bowed his head to Palym and spoke with a more patient tone. “With you, our Circle has all the Maidens represented. That’s important. With you, we can know where to go, and with Keahi we can know which conflicts really

matter. I know the proper time and place for peace, love, and — most importantly — relationships.”

He half turned and pointed past Keahi, in the direction they were heading. “Zannen is a champion of Jupiter, the Maiden of Secrets. But the one I’d really like you to meet is the man whose wife — Hummingbird, our prior champion of Mercury — died to save you.”

At the mention of the woman in yellow, who had darted in and out of her life so fast, Palym felt her resolve start to crumble. “And who is he, exactly?”

“Cutting Remark, a champion of Saturn, the Maiden of Endings. He knows when things should end and give way to something new. He also happens to be our expert on predicting the future.”

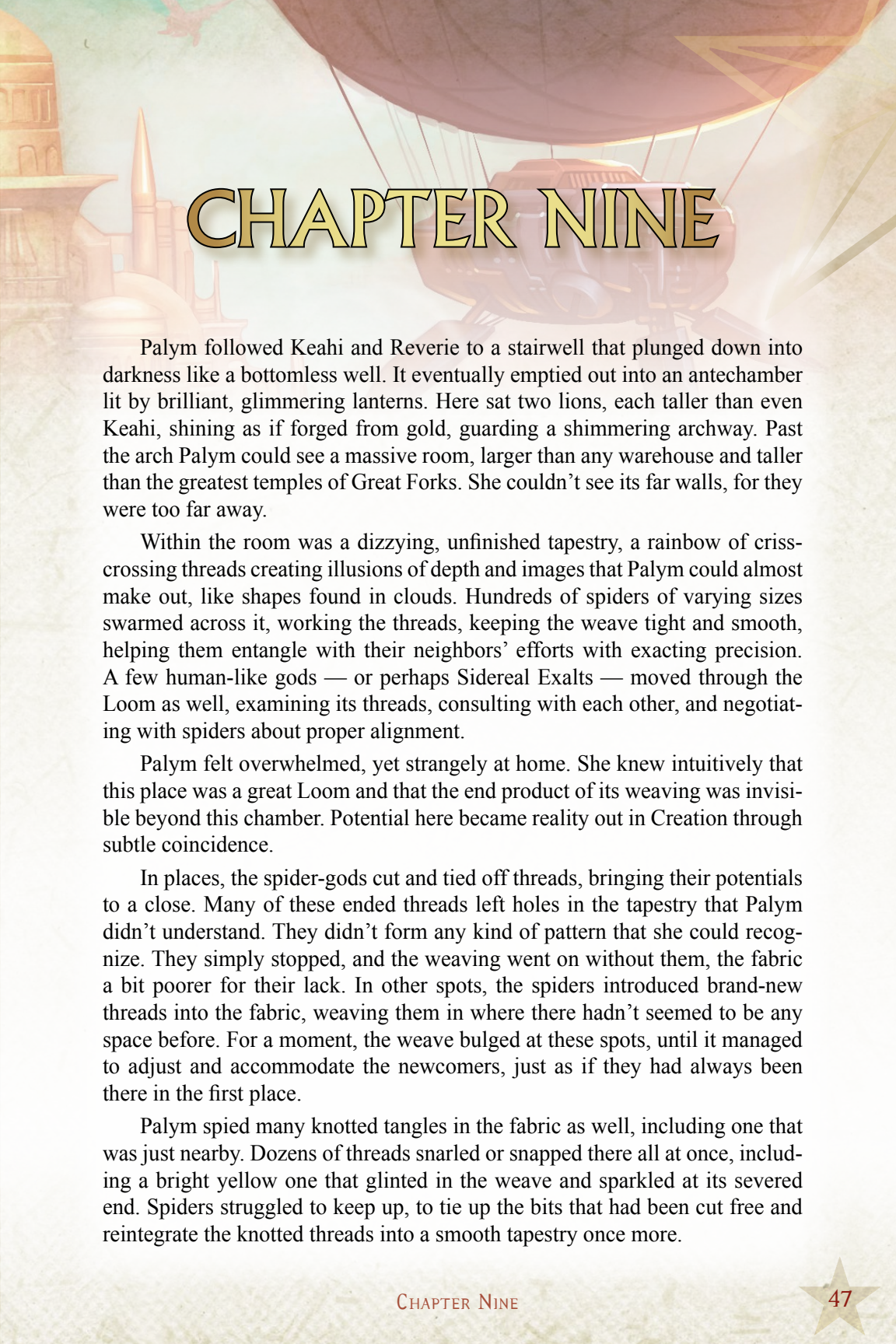
Palym dropped her arms, feeling sick. “And he just let his wife die like that?”

Reverie shook his head. “No. He didn’t see that coming. Which is always what scares a Sidereal like him most of all. You might be the solution to that.”

Palym scowled once more. “Because I happened to be there when a monster attacked?”

“Because I think you were meant to be there at our darkest moment. Because Mercury must have chosen you to start us on a new journey, just as we were ready to fall apart.” He reached out and offered his hand for her to take. “So, please come with us, and talk with him. You can help us get to the bottom of this.”

She didn’t take his hand, but she stepped up beside him. They began to move forward again, together.



CHAPTER NINE

Palym followed Keahi and Reverie to a stairwell that plunged down into darkness like a bottomless well. It eventually emptied out into an antechamber lit by brilliant, glimmering lanterns. Here sat two lions, each taller than even Keahi, shining as if forged from gold, guarding a shimmering archway. Past the arch Palym could see a massive room, larger than any warehouse and taller than the greatest temples of Great Forks. She couldn't see its far walls, for they were too far away.

Within the room was a dizzying, unfinished tapestry, a rainbow of crisscrossing threads creating illusions of depth and images that Palym could almost make out, like shapes found in clouds. Hundreds of spiders of varying sizes swarmed across it, working the threads, keeping the weave tight and smooth, helping them entangle with their neighbors' efforts with exacting precision. A few human-like gods — or perhaps Sidereal Exalts — moved through the Loom as well, examining its threads, consulting with each other, and negotiating with spiders about proper alignment.

Palym felt overwhelmed, yet strangely at home. She knew intuitively that this place was a great Loom and that the end product of its weaving was invisible beyond this chamber. Potential here became reality out in Creation through subtle coincidence.

In places, the spider-gods cut and tied off threads, bringing their potentials to a close. Many of these ended threads left holes in the tapestry that Palym didn't understand. They didn't form any kind of pattern that she could recognize. They simply stopped, and the weaving went on without them, the fabric a bit poorer for their lack. In other spots, the spiders introduced brand-new threads into the fabric, weaving them in where there hadn't seemed to be any space before. For a moment, the weave bulged at these spots, until it managed to adjust and accommodate the newcomers, just as if they had always been there in the first place.

Palym spied many knotted tangles in the fabric as well, including one that was just nearby. Dozens of threads snarled or snapped there all at once, including a bright yellow one that glinted in the weave and sparkled at its severed end. Spiders struggled to keep up, to tie up the bits that had been cut free and reintegrate the knotted threads into a smooth tapestry once more.

Several threads on the edge of the gap looked to be fraying away from the bulk of the fabric. The spiders had brought some of them together to lend them strength, but as Palym watched, a few of them finally snapped.

“It’s the Loom of Fate,” Reverie said in a soft voice, swollen with respect. “That particular snarl is what happened when the rogue Exigent appeared and slaughtered all those people in Great Forks.”

“Is it... is it going to be all right?” Palym asked. She moved closer into the room to get a better look at it, and the others trailed after her.

Reverie knew that she meant the fabric rather than the Loom itself, which seemed to be in proper working order for now. “It should be,” he said. “The pattern spiders labor over it night and day to ensure an acceptable destiny for Creation, and they’ve managed worse.”

“But they’ve had to manage worse far too often lately,” Keahi said. “You don’t lose that many people before their time and not have it affect the fabric.”

“It’s especially hard when you lose someone like Hummingbird,” Reverie said. “And not just on her friends and family. The threads of powerful Exalted are like steel wires. They provide a lot of support to the entire structure.”

“Is my thread in there?” Palym asked, her voice filled with awe. She peered at the Loom, but even though she’d entered the room, it was still too wide, too busy, and too covered with workers for her to see any individual thread well.

Reverie nodded and spent a few moments examining the snarl. He ran his fingers along nearby threads to help him find his way, before picking one. “Follow this thread with your eyes. Do you see that that other thread that crosses it, that’s vibrating? The one right there in the middle of that snarl?”

Palym squinted hard, and she spotted what Reverie was referring to. It looked like a regular thread. It was deeply interwoven in the knot, along with dozens of other threads. It started out a bright yellow, but by the time it reached the other side of the knot, it had transformed into a gleaming gold.

She stood in awe of it and tried to follow its forward path with her eyes. She wondered how long it was and whether she could determine when it might come to an end. “Was it always those colors?” she asked. “Or did it transform somehow after the incident with that monster?”

“Some theorize that the threads of the Exalted are metallic from the day of their birth,” Keahi said. “They’re supposedly covered with regular thread that’s removed once they become Exalted.”

“But others say that’s not true at all,” said Reverie. “They believe that any thread can become metallic at any point. That the potential to become Exalted lies within all of us.”

“Who’s right?” asked Palym.

“Cutting Remark would be the person to ask,” Keahi said. “He knows the Loom of Fate as well as anyone, aside from the pattern spiders. But he’s never seen fit to share the answer to that riddle with me.”

“Or anyone else,” Reverie reported.

“He’s barely talked to anyone at all since the death of Hummingbird.”

“How long were they married?” Palym asked, unsure she wanted to know the answer.

“Does anyone but the couple involved ever really keep track of those things?” Reverie said. “I can usually count the duration of my relationships by the number of days or weeks rather than years or decades, but I guarantee you, the memories last forever.”

“More like the number of hours,” Keahi scoffed at him. “You’re incredibly fickle.”

“It isn’t about how long you spend together. It’s about whether everyone involved gets what they want.”

Keahi ignored him to answer Burning Path’s question. “They’ve been together as long as I’ve known them, well over fifty years. They never needed anyone but each other.”

“Despite me offering my services in that department on several occasions,” Reverie said. “Their relationship was the most solid I’ve ever seen. Working in the Bureau together has ended more than one marriage over the centuries, let alone working in the same office.”

Keahi moved toward the exit, and the others followed her. “A team like ours travels often and on short notice, and we might be away from Yu-Shan for weeks or months at a time. Couples can only take so much of that before they crack and fall apart.”

“But working here didn’t do that to them?” Palym asked.

“They both believed in the work we do,” Keahi said. “They were willing to make sacrifices to get it done.”

Reverie regarded Palym with a warm look. “On top of that, they got to spend plenty of time together. They might have worked long hours in the Ebony Office — our little nickname for the Circle’s headquarters here in the Perfect Lotus — but they did so side by side. Otherwise, it can be lonely work. The gods know how that can drive a man to fill those hours.” He shot a meaningful look at Palym, who blushed at the implication.

Reverie certainly was handsome, but she couldn’t contemplate being with a man who was so much older than she was. He could have been an ancient ancestor of hers. She cringed inwardly at the thought.

“He doesn’t actually date children,” Keahi said, perhaps only to set her at ease. If so, it worked.

Reverie shrugged. “When you’re as old as I am, most of your partners seem like children — wait, no, that came out wrong. Forget I said anything.”

Keahi snickered at him, and Palym laughed as well, but she stopped short when she spotted something unusual on the Loom. She walked back toward it, keeping her eyes fixed on it as if drawn into a trance. Once Reverie stopped chiding Keahi for laughing at him, they noticed she had left their side, and they trailed after her.

When they caught up with her, they weren’t quite sure what had caught her eye. “Care to share your discovery with us?” Keahi said once her patience wore out, which took only a matter of seconds.

Palym nodded slowly, still trying to figure out exactly what she was looking at. “So, the metallic ones are those that belong to the Exalted?”

“Much of the time,” Keahi said. “There are many different types of Exalted, though, and the gods have their own threads that wind through the fabric of fate, too.”

“What about that one?” Palym said as she pointed at a spot near the snarl in the fabric, the one that the Exigent’s attack had caused. “The shiny purplish one.”

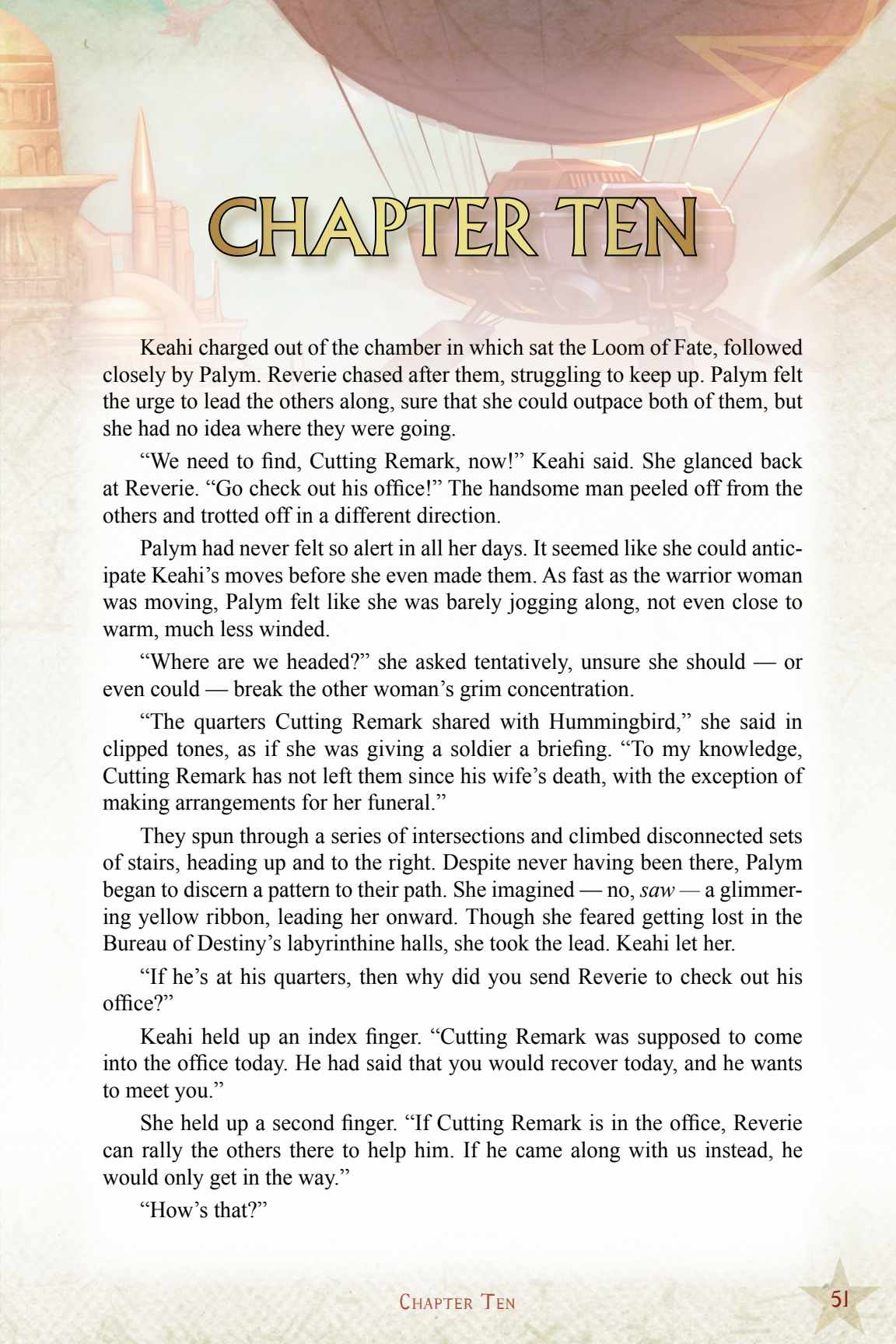
“Ah,” Reverie said. “That one belongs to Cutting Remark. Follow it back, and you can see how tightly it was intertwined with Hummingbird’s severed line.”

Palym blanched. “I was afraid of that.”

“Why?” asked Keahi. “What’s wrong?” She stretched like she wanted to reach for her sword, despite the lack of an apparent physical threat. She looked like it would make her feel better to heft the blade in her hands.

Palym pointed a bit farther down the length of the violet wire they were discussing. A pattern spider held it ready, gleaming fangs ready to cut it short.

“I’m not an expert, but it seems like Cutting Remark might not be long for this world...”



CHAPTER TEN

Keahi charged out of the chamber in which sat the Loom of Fate, followed closely by Palym. Reverie chased after them, struggling to keep up. Palym felt the urge to lead the others along, sure that she could outpace both of them, but she had no idea where they were going.

“We need to find, Cutting Remark, now!” Keahi said. She glanced back at Reverie. “Go check out his office!” The handsome man peeled off from the others and trotted off in a different direction.

Palym had never felt so alert in all her days. It seemed like she could anticipate Keahi’s moves before she even made them. As fast as the warrior woman was moving, Palym felt like she was barely jogging along, not even close to warm, much less winded.

“Where are we headed?” she asked tentatively, unsure she should — or even could — break the other woman’s grim concentration.

“The quarters Cutting Remark shared with Hummingbird,” she said in clipped tones, as if she was giving a soldier a briefing. “To my knowledge, Cutting Remark has not left them since his wife’s death, with the exception of making arrangements for her funeral.”

They spun through a series of intersections and climbed disconnected sets of stairs, heading up and to the right. Despite never having been there, Palym began to discern a pattern to their path. She imagined — no, *saw* — a glimmering yellow ribbon, leading her onward. Though she feared getting lost in the Bureau of Destiny’s labyrinthine halls, she took the lead. Keahi let her.

“If he’s at his quarters, then why did you send Reverie to check out his office?”

Keahi held up an index finger. “Cutting Remark was supposed to come into the office today. He had said that you would recover today, and he wants to meet you.”

She held up a second finger. “If Cutting Remark is in the office, Reverie can rally the others there to help him. If he came along with us instead, he would only get in the way.”

“How’s that?”

Keahi slowed to a trot as they approached an open courtyard filled with trimmed greenery and trails of raked stones. Across its sun-drenched stretch of well-tended garden sat a door of cut glass set into a bright wooden frame. It stood slightly ajar.

“Cutting Remark never liked Reverie much.” Keahi padded over to the door on silent feet and swung it open on well-oiled hinges. “Probably because Reverie kept making fun of them for being so monogamous.”

“How did Hummingbird feel about that?” Palym asked in a hushed tone as she followed Keahi into the home. She had never been in such a luxurious yet simple place. It was spotless, and every piece of furniture or decoration seemed to have been mindfully chosen for the personal and aesthetic benefit of the people who lived there. She couldn’t avoid the feeling they were invading someone’s privacy by the simple act of being there.

“She thought it was funny,” Keahi said quietly. “Which probably made it worse.”

Palym nearly laughed, but it died as she felt a sudden, ominous chill. Xiao used to call it the feeling of a ghost looking over her shoulder. Palym realized that she hadn’t thought about Xiao all day, then put that notion aside.

They moved without sound through the foyer and into the main room, which was wide and tall and filled with low chairs and cushions and couches. It felt welcoming and serene, with not a single thing out of place. It was almost too perfect to touch, yet Palym wanted to throw herself down on one of the couches and stay there forever.

Instead, she followed Keahi through the adjoining dining room and out a wide portal. They emerged into a private courtyard with a balcony that overlooked a wide vista with a clear view of the Jade Pleasure Dome in the distance.

A man sat lotus-style on a cushion near the edge of the balcony, his back to the glorious view behind him. He held a dagger in his lap, its tip pointed at his belly, and he seemed as if he had been contemplating the point of it for hours. He did not look up at the two women as they entered, but he spoke to them anyhow, as if their presence was obvious.

“No closer, please.” His voice warbled with sorrow as he shifted his grip on the knife. Palym peered at him and saw that he was the pale man who had killed the monster in the pit.

He was Cutting Remark.

Keahi froze in her tracks, and she held up an open hand to gesture for Palym to do the same. “You cannot do this,” she said to the man. “This is not what Hummingbird would want.”

The man allowed himself a bitter chuckle. “I think my wife is long past expressing any sort of desires. And I don’t plan to ask her ghost, if she’s left one.”

Keahi opened her mouth to protest, but Cutting Remark interrupted. “I’m well aware that she would have wanted me to carry on in her absence. We were married for over a century, and we lived dangerous lives, compared to most of the residents of Yu-Shan. Considering who we were and what we did, the topic came up more than once.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

Cutting Remark frowned at the blade. “If I was doing this, I would have already done it, long before you two arrived.”

“And yet you haven’t put down the knife.”

“No, I have not. Ending one’s life — especially one as long as mine — is not something that is undertaken lightly. And my mind is more clouded now than perhaps it has ever been.”

“What’s wrong?” Palym asked, without thinking about the consequences.

The man finally raised his head and spied the young woman there. A wry smile played on his lips. “This is exactly what I’m talking about,” he said. “I didn’t notice you were here.”

“You’re distracted by grief,” Keahi said, carefully. “As the champion of Saturn, you’re more in tune with death and loss than any of us, but the Loom of Fate is too great for even the Maidens to see everything coming.”

The man’s shoulders slumped. “No. I’ve been missing something else. I was supposed to be your eyes on the future, and I was taken off guard. I must have been blinded.”

“How could that be?” Keahi asked.

Cutting Remark’s eyes shined. “It must have been the Black Flag.”

“The Exigent?”

“Call it what it was,” he said, enunciating every word. “It wasn’t any ordinary Exigent, if such a word could ever be used to describe such things.” He scoffed. “Ordinary...”

“The Black Flag is only a theory, and a bad one at that. Just because some bureaucrat decided to put a black ribbon around the scrolls they send us doesn’t make that thing special.” Keahi tried to hide it, but Palym could see her getting angry.

“A Black Flag?” she asked.

“Exigents are boons handed down to minor gods by the Unconquered Sun, so they can create champions of their own, ones they don’t have the power to bring into being themselves. The gods have the choice to use them at the time and place they wish, but some of them hold on to them for future purposes rather than employing them right away. Sometimes they barter those boons with other gods for favors or things they’d prefer.”

“That’s what brought that monster into existence,” Palym said. “Why would the Unconquered Sun give out boons like that at all?”

“It’s not the Unconquered Sun’s fault,” Keahi said. “The ‘Black Flag’ theory, if we must call it that, is that other gods figured out how to pervert these boons. They take them, and they twist them, and that’s what produces monsters like that one.”

“Most Exigents are not nearly so mindlessly destructive,” added Cutting Remark. “These boons have gone through many different gods, each one of which has given them a horrible twist. If you trade something for a boon like that, it’s impossible to tell if it’s been tampered with until you activate it. And by then, it’s far too late to do anything about it.”

Palym flashed back to the creature that had nearly killed her and tried to imagine what gods might willingly make such a thing.

“So,” she said to Cutting Remark. “Why does fighting a Black Flag make you want to kill yourself?”

He stared down at the knife again, its glittering blade bared and ready. “I doubt that I’m actually going to kill myself. I’ve seen how I die, and this isn’t it. Maybe your presence is why I survive.”

It took Palym a moment to realize he was talking to her. “How’s that?” she said nervously, unsure she wanted to hear the answer he was edging up to.

“I’ve had a long life,” the man said softly. “And I’ve seen many horrible things. Too many things. There were times I wanted to put an end to it all before, but Hummingbird always stopped me.”

He looked up at Palym. “If she could stop me, then you might be able to stop me too.”

Palym gave the man a helpless shrug. She didn’t know how to respond. She wasn’t sure how he thought she could stop him from killing himself if he meant to do it, but she didn’t want to disabuse him of that notion if it somehow kept him alive.

“The funny part, though, is that I can’t tell,” Cutting Remark said with a chuckle. “Normally, I can see my own future just fine. I may know when I’m supposed to die, but I knew that about my wife, too. She wasn’t meant to pass for centuries, and then quietly, when she was ready.

“The Black Flag robbed her of that. And it robbed me. Not just of my wife, although of course that. But of my certainty.

“It’s a challenging thing to know when and how those you love will pass from this realm into the next. But I’d learned how to deal with that. In fact, I’d started to take some small comfort in knowing exactly how long I had with someone. How much time I had to make sure they knew how much they meant to me. To spend with them before they went.

“Now, though, the world is a mystery to me in a way it has not been since before I became Exalted. I don’t know that I can endure that again.”

The man looked at the two women, his cheeks tracked with the silent tears he’d let fall as he spoke.

Palym couldn’t help it. She took a step forward, hoping to comfort the tortured man. As she did so, she felt an awful, queasy sense of dread. The tapestry of destiny became clear to Palym for a brief moment, and she saw the undeniable truth of Cutting Remark’s death. It was so real, so undeniably true, that she leaped forward, no thought in her head other than that she needed to grab the knife.

She was already moving when Cutting Remark brought the blade down and in toward his heart. She moved faster than she’d ever thought possible, feeling almost weightless in her rush.

“No!” Keahi shouted. She was too caught off guard to stop either of them.

Palym took two steps forward and stabbed her hand down to grab Cutting Remark’s arm. She held it there like an iron rod, keeping him from plunging the knife into his chest.

Cutting Remark stopped there, the tip of the blade only an inch from his flesh. He looked up at Palym, who stood gaping down at him, entirely unsure just how she had managed to move that fast.

“I’m sorry,” he said, violet-flecked eyes full of remorse. “But now I see what must be done.”

With that, he separated his hands and flipped the knife up into the air. He caught it in his right hand and brought it stabbing down at Palym.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Palym staggered back and discovered that the man had stuck one of his legs out behind her. She tripped over it and fell backward, downed but out of range of his knife for the moment.

As she landed, the man darted out at her, stabbing down at her again. She put up her hands to fend off the knife and shouted at him in protest.

As fast as Palym could move, being on the ground with his leg still tangled in hers meant that she couldn't get out of the way of his strike in time. She braced herself for the blade jabbing into her, and she wondered if he was doing this just so he could kill himself when he was done with her.

Keahi's sword flashed out then and slipped between Palym and the incoming knife. It caught the knife at its hilt, stopping the strike cold.

Palym goggled at Cutting Remark. He cocked his head to the side and said, "You're just putting off the end."

He shoved himself backward, well out of the reach of Keahi's sword. She swiped at him with it anyhow, driving him farther back. He scrambled away until she had him pressed up against the railing that lined his balcony.

The man cocked back his arm and hurled the knife at Keahi's face. Taken off guard by his rapid change in tactics, Keahi had no time to parry it and simply ducked. But this was Cutting Remark's plan: Palym, just rising to her feet behind Keahi, found the blade whirling toward her. With no time to think, she simply snatched it out of the air.

Palym goggled in disbelief at the knife now resting in her hand. It had a familiar weight, like something she'd held before, or that she'd always held. Her surreal confusion was interrupted when Cutting Remark dove past Keahi, chopping at Palym with his hand. She brought his knife up between them to defend herself, for all the good it did her.

No matter where Palym put the knife — either to parry one of Cutting Remark's attacks or to slash at him with it herself — the man managed to avoid it. She wanted to find her footing and escape, but he was prepared for every move she made. It was like he could read her thoughts, although she suspected it was only because he was able to read fate — perhaps only a few moments ahead, but that seemed to be enough. She had never trained to be a warrior, and slash-

ing at an experienced fighter would have been bad enough. Only her strange familiarity with the knife's weight and heft allowed her to keep up at all.

Keahi joined in where she could, making it a three-way battle. Together, the two women forced Cutting Remark onto the defensive, but Palym wasn't used to the heat of battle. When he lunged for her past Keahi's guard, Palym reacted with instinct she didn't know she had. She threw the worst thing she could think of in that moment at Cutting Remark: not the knife, but the knife's killing destiny. The blade stayed in her hand, but the blade's shadow flew toward his heart.

Cutting Remark snatched the shadow out of the air by reflex and was surprised to find it wrestling with him, tugging toward his heart. He flung it aside and grabbed Palym, even as the shadow arced back around through the air. He grabbed her and nearly dove with her over the railing, but Keahi was there first.

She swung her sword one-handed, its tip whistling just over Cutting Remark's head, to knock the shadow-blade away again before it killed him. As she saved his life with one hand, she used the other to level a punch that sent the man sprawling and broke his hold on Palym. Before he could get back up, Keahi had the edge of her sword at his throat.

He looked like he was going to start sobbing. Palym hardly noticed for a moment, as she scrambled away from him and the railing. She saw the shadow-blade still whirling through the air, and she experimentally raised the knife in her hand. The weapon's destiny recognized its home and returned there, never having drawn blood. She stared at the knife for a few moments before she realized Keahi was lecturing Cutting Remark.

"What the hell has gotten into you?" Keahi demanded. "Don't you dare dishonor your wife's memory this way. Do you think she'd have wanted you to act like this?"

The man wiped his face and glared up at his old teammate. "You don't understand—"

Keahi pointed at Palym with her free hand. "I understand fine! Hummingbird gave her life to save this kid. The least you can do is respect that decision! There's only one solution to all this, and you know it — even if you're so obsessed with loss that you can't see a new chance at life."

The man pursed his lips and considered this for a moment. Palym saw the indecision in his eyes and understood that the tapestry of fate had presented him with the potential for two very different designs. She didn't know the right words to say, but she knew the right path. She focused on him, on the world she wanted, and willed him to try living one more time.

Yellow light flowed from Palym as she exerted her will upon fate. Cutting Remark looked into the light for a few moments, sighed, and reached out for a hand up from Palym. She hesitated for the briefest of moments before helping him to his feet.

“I planned all this as a test,” he said to her. “To teach you what you were capable of.”

“Sure you did,” Keahi said with scorn.

To her own surprise, Palym’s only response was to raise the knife she held and state, “I’m keeping this.” Maybe the other Sidereals thought she was being stubborn, or maybe they understood the connection she felt to the weapon. Either way, they didn’t argue or question it.

“To the office it is, then,” he said, awkwardly releasing her hand and striding for the door.

Keahi fell in behind him. After a long moment, Palym rushed to catch up with them. They moved without speaking and with a fierce purpose, despite the fact they’d all been scraped and bruised in their scuffle. Keahi and Palym shone with pale light, red and yellow like a sunset.

As they walked, the light faded, and Palym wondered exactly how she’d done any of that. Reverie had told her that she was a champion of Mercury, but she didn’t quite understand exactly what that meant. After all, it wasn’t like Mercury herself had stopped by for a visit while she’d been convalescing and handed her a letter that described her new abilities and responsibilities. In any case, she’d only been awake for a few hours, and she felt little more than lost and confused.

She wondered where Xiao was right now. Had she remained in the city, or had she decided to return home after having had such a terrible first day there? Did she think Palym was alive, or that the monster had killed her?

And how in the world was Palym going to be able to find her?

Cutting Remark led them through so many winding stairwells and passages that Palym felt sure he was trying to get them lost. At one point, they walked into a complex with a sign on the front of it that stated the building comprised “The Ebony Office,” as translated for Palym. That wasn’t nearly the end of their route, though. By the time they reached their destination, she knew that she couldn’t have found her way back to his place without a convoluted map.

They entered a waiting room that could generously have been called cozy. The sign above the entrance read “The Circle of Protection” in several languages. The room had far less ornamentation than anywhere else Palym had seen in Yu-Shan, but there was a human-looking assistant with dark coloring like a raccoon’s mask, sitting at a functional desk. She was short and thin and had a fierce look about her.

“He’s in a meeting,” she said as the trio walked in the door.

Neither Cutting Remark nor Keahi paid any attention to her at all. They just stormed straight past her and through the door at the other end of the room. She stood up at one point, as if she might try to stop them, but an impatient glare from Keahi put an immediate end to that plan.

The door opened onto a hallway lined by several other doors, all of which stood closed. Again, the others ignored everything else and strode straight for the door at the end of the hall, also closed. Cutting Remark threw it open and charged inside.

Two men sat at the long table in the room. One of them was Reverie, who had his feet up on the table and his hands tucked behind his head, and the other was a skinny, elderly man dressed all in jade green. He leaped to his feet as the others entered, an indignant look on his face.

“Where in the names of all the gods have you been?” he demanded, furious. As he scanned the faces of the people who’d barged into the room, though, his expression changed to one of amazement and concern. “And what in hell happened to you? I thought you just got *out* of the hospital. Should we take you all back to it?”

“This is Palym,” Cutting Remark said with a dismissive gesture toward her. “She’s a champion of Mercury who wasn’t destined to become one for at least a few years yet, but the Black Flag incident seems to have accelerated our timetable, at least in that regard.”

Then he gestured at the old man to introduce him to Palym. “That is a bitter, ancient bastard who should have given up the ghost long ago but who is too mean to do anything but hang on. His name is Zannen.”

“The champion of Jupiter?” Palym said. She grimaced at Cutting Remark, who was already plopping himself down in a chair like a petulant child, then turned to the old man. “I’m so sorry about meeting you like this.”

“Nonsense, child,” Zannen said in a precise and controlled tone. “Cutting Remark was a sharp-tongued jackass long before your great-grandparents were born. The loss of his lovely wife — with whom we all worked — has only served to emphasize that over the past few days.”

He motioned for her to take a seat at the oval table. He sat at one end of it, with Reverie at his right hand and Cutting Remark at his left. Keahi sat at the opposite end, as far from him and Cutting Remark as possible.

Palym took the seat between Reverie and Keahi. Keahi’s expression wasn’t exactly warm, and Reverie’s was a little too warm, but the only other open seat was next to Cutting Remark. Palym knew she wouldn’t be any more comfortable sitting next to a man who’d recently been trying to kill her.

“I’m glad you were all able to make it here today. Despite the loss of Hummingbird — actually *because* of it — we have a great deal of work ahead of us. I realize we all need some time to grieve, Cutting Remark most of all, but we cannot afford to let our team collapse in the meantime. Our work is too vital.”

“So you claim,” Cutting Remark said bitterly.

Zannen ignored him. “Has everyone met our new member?”

The rest of the Exalts nodded yes. Palym looked each of them in the eye in turn. Reverie gave her a warm yet somehow smug look. Zannen stared at her expectantly. Cutting Remark curled a lip at her. Keahi favored her with a grim nod of acknowledgement.

“Good,” Zannen said, clearly relieved to not have to engage in any further pleasantries. He focused once again on Palym. “Now, normally we would send someone of your age and relative lack of experience out for training. You would be assigned a mentor — a fellow champion of your Maiden — and you would come back to us in your own time, if even our paths were ever to cross again.”

“But that is not your fate,” Cutting Remark said flatly. “Our understanding of the immediate future may have been damaged with the confusion the Black Flag inflicted upon fate’s fabric, but I can still identify your thread. It’s woven up tightly with the rest of ours — even if we tried to separate and go our separate ways, Fate would probably conspire to pull us back together. Beyond that, I cannot currently say.”

“So, you’re to become one of us,” Reverie said with a wink. “You’ll train with us. We’ll become as close as friends can get.”

Palym suppressed an eye roll. “I don’t understand any of this,” she said, concentrating on Zannen as much as she could. “I just arrived in Great Forks from my village. I don’t know anything about gods and heroes other than that I should respect one and avoid the other.”

Reverie snickered. “Those gods *are* a repulsive lot.”

No one else laughed.

“We will do our best to bring you up to speed as quickly as possible,” Zannen said. “But we are under tremendous pressure at the moment. The creature you fought in Great Forks was the first confirmed sighting of an actual Black Flag, and it’s the job of the Circle of Protection — in other words, the five of us — to get to the bottom of it.”

“What’s the rush?” Keahi said. She glanced at Cutting Remark. “After all, we still have to pay our respects to our fallen.”

“Plans for that are already in place. The official services requested by the Division of Journeys will take place once the paperwork is done, but we cannot afford to lick our wounds in the meantime. To do so would be an affront to the very cause for which Hummingbird gave her life.”

Palym bowed her head, unable to look at Cutting Remark right then. While Hummingbird might have died for some lofty reason — some duty that Palym didn’t yet understand — the direct effect of that was that she’d been killed while saving Palym’s life. She owed Hummingbird, and maybe that meant honoring her sense of duty.

“I’m convinced this incident was caused by Solar Exalts,” Zannen continued. “Since their return from imprisonment, Creation has been in chaos. They won’t rest until they rule over us all, and as the Chosen of the Sun, they may believe they have some claim over Exigents.”

Keahi stared at the elderly man with piercing eyes. “Are you sure your accusation isn’t rooted in self-interest? Why would the mightiest of the Exalted need corrupted Exigents to do their dirty work?”

Zannen frowned and firmly shook his head. “Every bit of evidence I’ve seen so far points to Solar Exalts working with the lowliest of gods. They tamper with these boons to produce these horrific Exigents. If you want to prove me wrong, then by all means get out there and do so. Right now.”

“And how are we supposed to do that?” Cutting Remark asked.

“Since we don’t have any other confirmed cases of Black Flags out there, we have only one choice. I suggest we return to the scene of the crime.”



CHAPTER TWELVE

“When Zannen says *we*, he often means *you*,” Reverie said as he, Keahi, and Palym picked their way through the pit in which they had battled the Black Flag. As there was no pressing emergency this time, they hadn’t used the flying rickshaw. Instead, they had ridden Yu-Shan’s swift canals to reach a gate from Yu-Shan into Creation. The gate had been guarded by a pair of celestial lions, as the Loom of Fate had been.

The lions had ignored the Sidereals as they’d walked past, but Palym suspected that this would not have been the case if they’d presented any kind of danger to the Celestial City. The lions looked like they could have torn them all to pieces in an instant.

Once through the gate, they’d emerged in Creation and bought horses, including one for Palym, who was aghast at how casually the Circle spent silver. The other Sidereals assured her she’d be able to do the same once she started collecting her salary, but she was soon distracted from that consideration by appreciation of her fine new mare. With a little practice and focus, she found that she was able to bolster the horses’ speed and to find convenient overland routes that made their journey from the gate to Great Forks take very little time at all. The others emphasized to her the importance of doing so unobtrusively. However used to the Exalted the mortals of Great Forks might be, not every Exalt or god they met would be friendly.

None of the locals wanted to have much to do with the pit, and Palym could see why. The monster’s corpse still sat in the bottom of it, having not miraculously disappeared in a puff of smoke or dissolved into a pile of black goo after the creature expired. It had stunk while it was alive, but after a few days of rotting under a cloudless sky, it had become absolutely rank.

“Does becoming one of the Exalted come with a means of plugging our noses?” Palym asked as she gagged on the stench.

“I’ve smelled worse,” Keahi said dismissively.

“Yes,” Reverie said. “I recall when you discovered that pile of fogshark dung in the most incredibly awful way. You smelled much worse after that.”

“We’re here to figure out where that monster came from,” Keahi said. “Not trade war stories. Either help or shut up.”

It wasn't that hard to follow the path of the beast's rampage. It had cut a massive swath through the city that stretched several blocks. The damage diminished, becoming less and less as they followed it back. Perhaps the creature had grown as it had moved, or maybe it hadn't been angry enough or confident enough in its strength to thrash about at first. If so, it had gotten over such inhibitions by the time Palym had first laid eyes on it.

Palym couldn't help but think of Xiao as she saw the rampant destruction the monster had left in its wake. Someone had come to cart away the corpses of the people the creature had killed. Had Xiao been among them?

"What happened to my friend?" Palym asked Keahi.

"The young woman who was with you that day?" She shrugged. "I suppose she ran off as fast as she could. Wouldn't you?"

"I didn't," Palym said, letting her irritation with the situation show. "As you well know. She wouldn't have, either."

"I saw her," Reverie said. "She came up and asked about you as I scooped your body up and carried you into the rickshaw. She thought you were dead."

"You didn't tell her she was wrong?"

The man chuckled. "You were just a few inches from it."

"So why did you save me?" Palym asked, now confused. "Lots of people were hurt by the Black Flag that day. Why did you rescue *me*?"

Reverie hemmed and hawed, not wanting to give her a direct answer. Keahi finally couldn't take his prevarication any longer and blurted it out. "We knew you were in the process of Exalting. Cutting Remark noticed it."

"How could he tell?"

"Well, with Solar Exalts — which are the most powerful Exalted — it's pretty obvious. When faced with a heroic trial, you have an amazing transformation that changes you from your old self into the new. It's like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, but with far more fireworks."

"That's not what happened to me. Not unless I slept through it."

Keahi shook her head. "It's different with Sidereal Exalts. We normally transform over a longer period. It can take weeks or even months to become perfectly attuned with the Maiden who selects you as her champion."

"From what Cutting Remark told me while you were lying asleep in that hospital bed, he recognized you from his studies of the Loom of Fate. You were already destined to be Chosen by Mercury, but not for a long while yet," Reverie said. "Our battle with the Black Flag somehow sped up the process. Maybe something about their corrupted nature interfered with your destiny."

"Or maybe your Maiden decided it was an emergency," said Keahi. "She'd just lost Hummingbird right there, out of the blue. It's only natural she'd want to balance the scales."

Palym contemplated that for a moment as the trio of Exalts followed the path of ruin up the gradual slope the monster had formed as it went. “I’d like to find Xiao,” she said softly. “She deserves to know the truth.”

Reverie coughed at that. “Better to make a clean break with your past. Trust me. I’ve seen this happen countless times before. You’re excited by your new life and want to share it with the people from your old life, but honestly, you just can’t. You’re one of the Exalted now, and they’re not.

“That’s compounded by the fact you’re one of the Sidereal Exalted. Lots of the other Exalts still live here in Creation, after all, and because of that they interact with the regular humans a lot more often. But we live in Yu-Shan. We spend most of our time there, making sure the Celestial Bureaucracy — as corrupt and decadent as it is — doesn’t fall apart. That doesn’t leave us a lot of time for playing mortal games.”

“*Games?*” Palym sputtered. “Letting my oldest friend know I’m alive sounds like a game to you?”

Keahi sighed. “You’re very young, even in mortal terms. Trust us: It’s not going to go the way you hope. For right now, let’s concentrate on the job at hand.”

They reached the first building the monster had destroyed. It had a brick facade and stood four stories tall, but only one wall on the first floor had been blown out. The rest of the building still stood, although the people who had lived or worked there had abandoned it in favor of not being crushed to death if and when it finally finished collapsing.

“I suppose, for now,” Palym said, wavering a bit. “But when we’re done here I should at least see how Xiao’s doing.”

“Don’t do it,” Reverie said in what she was sure he meant to be a comforting voice.

Palym cocked her head at the man. “Is that supposed to be an order?”

Keahi laughed behind her hand at the young woman’s reaction.

“Of course not.” Reverie seemed embarrassed, although Palym couldn’t tell if it was because she’d stood up to him or because Keahi had laughed at her response. “The Circle of Protection doesn’t have a formal chain of command. None of us oversees the others on anything more than an informal basis.”

“Most of us defer to Zannen regarding many things,” Keahi explained. “If only because of his obvious seniority.”

“But he’s not Zannen.” Palym pointed at Reverie. “And this isn’t something immaterial. It’s important — to me, at least.”

“Fair points all around,” Keahi said as they crept carefully into the building, taking care not to disturb anything for fear that the entire place might come down around their ears. “But the fact is, he’s right. A clean cut with your old life is the easiest for all. Your friend already thinks you’re dead, right? What’s

the point in correcting her on that front? Just so you can cause her grief again once you announce you're an Exalt who now lives in heaven?"

"It doesn't seem right to let her think I'm dead."

"She probably doesn't even remember you."

Palym was shocked. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Reverie made a calming gesture. "Okay, look, I wanted to ease you into this, all right? You really can't just go back. Mortals tend to forget the Sidereal Exalted. We fade into the background, and eventually we're just that nameless soldier, or that one-night stand, or nobody at all. They might recognize you if you reintroduce yourself, or they might not."

Palym didn't know how to react or what to think. It wasn't just Xiao she was worried about now, of course, although she was Palym's most immediate concern. Would her parents forget her too — or her younger siblings? Was that better or worse than them thinking she was just dead?

It was too much to ponder, so she conjured up a version of herself that didn't have to worry about it. She imagined a Palym who could just focus on her duty: tracking down whatever it was that caused the monster that had taken away her old life to burst into being. She felt the strength of that thread of destiny and willed the new, dutiful Palym into reality.

"How does someone use a boon to create an Exigent?" she asked, clearer headed than before.

Reverie answered gladly. "Normally the god picks one of their most faithful followers, assuming they have any to speak of. They transform that person into their Exigent, which grants them certain abilities as that god's representative here in Creation."

"In the case of a Black Flag, though, it could be anyone," said Keahi. "The god who has control of the boon could, in theory, inflict it on any mortal, although it's easier to manage it with a worshipper, someone with a faithful connection to the god in question."

"So, do either of you know what we're looking for?" Palym said with a sigh. "Because I have no clue."

"I do," Reverie said with irritating confidence.

"And how's that?"

He pointed to a small pile of trash in one corner of the half-destroyed room they'd wound up in. "Because I found it."

They three of them moved closer and looked down at the ruins of what appeared to have once been a small shrine that had sat on top of a battered table. The table was now smashed to splinters, though, along with everything atop it.

Palym peered at it dubiously. The entire room, now that she'd gotten farther into it, stunk like incense and qat, a drug popular around Great Forks. "So,

someone who was living in this drug den went to pray to a god, and that turned them into that Black Flag?”

“Might have been the god of drug dens,” Reverie mused.

“I doubt it. She’s always struck me as very professional,” Keahi said dryly.

“Is there any way to tell which god was being worshipped here?” Palym asked, faintly surprised at how businesslike she could be.

Keahi picked through the remnants of the shrine with the tip of a knife, being careful not to touch any of it with her bare hands. “Not unless they wrote the god’s name on something,” she said. “There are literally countless gods beyond the several luminaries that everyone knows, and thousands with the power to create a Black Flag and survive the process.”

“And there don’t seem to be any labels left in this mess,” Reverie said as he peered all around the room. “That’s no surprise. The poor soul who got caught up in this clearly never said a prayer to the god of household organization.”

“We’re done here,” Keahi said as she turned to leave. Reverie followed her, and Palym brought up the rear, unsure of what they’d accomplished.

“Did any of that get us closer to figuring out what happened here?”

“Up to a point,” said Reverie.

“And how did that help?”

Reverie patted Palym’s shoulder as they left the ruins and started back toward where they’d left their horses. “Being part of the Circle of Protection isn’t a party. It involves actual work. We gather clues. We come up with theories. We test them against the evidence we find. It takes time. Sometimes too much time.”

“So, what do we do now?”

“We go home. And after that, your training intensifies.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Palym didn't know what to make of her chambers. They were simultaneously the best place she had ever called home and the worst.

She had her own suite of rooms just a short, convoluted walk away from the Ebony Office. While Reverie had remarked that they weren't in a wonderful part of town, she didn't know any better. They could have been in the most crime-ridden slum in Yu-Shan, and she wouldn't have been able to tell.

She'd grown up on a rice farm on the outskirts of her village, and her rooms here were each bigger than her family home. They didn't have as much sunlight as she was used to, but that seemed like a small price to pay to be able to live in heaven. At least she wasn't sharing a bedroom with three other people, and they had a bed for her here rather than a bamboo sleeping mat.

She had her own kitchen and dining room. A living room in which she could sit and read or someday entertain. On top of all that, she'd been assigned an assistant, a god resembling an older woman, named Qing.

The moment Palym entered her new home, Qing was waiting for her there to welcome her. Palym's first instinct had been to dismiss the woman, but when she'd seen Qing's face fall at that news, she had lost the nerve to carry through on it. She didn't particularly see why or how she needed an assistant, but on the other hand, she didn't want to put Qing out of work.

As the evening wore on, Palym noticed that the angle of the sunlight in the sky hadn't changed all day. "When does it get dark around here?" she asked after Qing had served her dinner.

The old woman had laughed at her ignorance, but in a kind way. "The light in the sky is determined not by the hour but by who happens to be winning in the Games of Divinity held in the Jade Pleasure Dome," she explained. "Often, the god in the lead is the Unconquered Sun, and at such times the light shines brightly. When Luna is winning, the sky darkens to reveal her in her current phase instead."

"How often does it get dark?"

Qing produced a sleep mask made of yellow silk and handed it to Palym. "Not often enough for newcomers, I'm afraid. Once you've been here long enough, you will get used to it."

Palym stared at the mask in her hands as Qing continued.

“When one of the Five Maidens takes the lead, it grows dark enough to see all the stars above, the winning Maiden brightest of all. This never lasts for long, though, and if it happens to be your particular Maiden who is in the lead, that’s usually a cause for celebration rather than sleep.”

“So if the sun doesn’t rise and set, how do we track the time?”

“The Golden Barque of the Heavens flies from one end of Yu-Shan to the other and back, every day, and we mark the hours by its passage. You must have seen it in the sky.”

“That huge ship, with all the sails?”

“That’s it. Have you not already visited it? It holds the offices of the Bureau of Destiny’s Division of Journeys, and those of the gods and Sidereal Exalted who serve Mercury’s agenda.”

“No,” said Palym, thoughtfully. She wondered if she’d have felt more at home in Yu-Shan if her education as an Exalt had begun there, rather than in the Ebony Office. “Not yet.”

She thanked Qing for the mask, crawled into bed, and tried to sleep. She was lying in a strange bed in a strange home far away from everyone she had ever known, including Xiao, and the sleep mask wasn’t doing her any good. She succeeded only briefly.

In her dreams, Palym fought against chains. They bound her wrists and her ankles, and no matter how strongly she threw herself, they held her firm. She struggled and raged against them until her body gave out.

She woke up after a couple of hours, feeling hardly rested, and slipped out of her bed to find something to eat in her kitchen. She had no idea what she might find in the pantry — or really if there was even a pantry — but she was hungry and bored enough to hunt for it. She didn’t want to bother Qing about something so foolish and so went looking on her own.

As she emerged from her bedroom into the living room, she heard a knock at her apartment’s front door. Even though it was light outside, Palym was pretty sure it was still “evening,” and she wondered if there might be an emergency. She opened the door and saw Reverie standing there in a nightgown, holding up a bottle of wine and two glasses. She repressed a sigh and let out a grunt that could have been a greeting instead.

“Good evening,” he said with a wide and easy smile. “I couldn’t sleep either.”

“What are you doing here so late?” she said, trying to keep from sounding annoyed. “This is my private residence, not the office.”

“Of course,” he said. “My own ‘private residence’ is just around the corner. The others prefer to live farther away, but I find it so much more convenient to be close to the offices of the Circle of Protection, don’t you?”

Palym folded her arms across her chest. "I have no idea. I'll have to let you know after I make the walk in that direction tomorrow morning for the first time."

"The wonderful thing about free time when you're a Sidereal is that there's always more work you could be doing," the man said as he raised the bottle. "Wine to help us sleep? If we say it was a team-building exercise, I can charge it to the Bureau as a business expense."

Palym had to admit that some light conversation and wine might help her nod off. And Reverie was fine enough to look at in his gown. But Palym gestured between Reverie, the wine, and herself. "As long as you realize that this isn't going anywhere."

"Not that I would complain if it did, but I'll accept the expertise of a Chosen of Journeys on what goes where." He paused as Palym snorted at his phrasing, then said, "I really just want to get to know you better."

Palym thought she heard loneliness in the man's voice, and it felt familiar. She opened the door and let him in. He found the couch, popped the cork from the bottle, and filled each of the glasses before him with the dark red wine.

Palym had not had much wine in her life, but she had enjoyed it the few times she'd sampled it. Her parents had only broken out bottles on special occasions. The idea that she could now have as much of it as she wanted whenever she wished had not occurred to her at all.

"I have many horrible and bitter things to say about the Celestial Bureaucracy," Reverie said as he held up a glass of wine for her to take. "But they do spoil the Sidereal Exalted."

That piqued Palym's curiosity, so she accepted the glass and sat down on the far end of the couch from Reverie. "How does that work?" she asked. "I mean, most of the people who live here in heaven are gods, right?"

He gave her an understanding nod. "There are millions of gods and not so many jobs to go around. Most of the lesser ones are happy to have any job at all, if only so that they can feel useful. The fun of being unemployed tends to wear off after a few centuries, and they need something to alleviate the boredom."

Palym shook her head. It was all still so strange. "Like Qing. Is she a god of household service, or was she something else?"

The idea that an actual god would be living in her private quarters as her servant still unnerved her. Part of her felt like she should go and throw herself at Qing's feet and beg for mercy, but she couldn't see how that would be the right thing to do. Qing had been so polite. So subservient.

"Does it matter?" Reverie said. "My assistant is the god of a genre of fiction no one has written for centuries. We give them a chance to do something with their lives other than contemplate their divine navels."

Palym felt weird thinking about gods' navels and quickly changed the subject. "Still, it doesn't seem right that gods would be serving us."

"Why not? We work with them all the time. The secretary in our office, the assistants who labor there, shuffling sheaves of papers and rolling up scrolls, even the people who bring us our lunch every day. Gods need to feel productive too."

"That just feels insane."

Reverie took a sip of his wine. Palym mirrored his action.

"When it comes to Exalts, there aren't so many of us in heaven," Reverie said. "Most of the Exalted live in Creation. There might be a hundred Sidereals at any given time, and we're rarely replaced as quickly as Hummingbird. We are more precious for our rarity, and it's only natural that we be treated as such."

Palym tried to wrap her head around that. She wasn't sure if it was the craziness of the idea or the wine in her belly that was making her head spin. "Still, we age and die eventually, and they do not. Doesn't that mean anything?"

"It means that we tend to plateau in middle management, and that we should enjoy the privileges we have while they last. You never know when they might be taken away."

Palym felt like she couldn't help but drink to that. Last month, she'd been a country girl living in her farming village. Now she was living in heaven with a god as her personal assistant. It all felt so ephemeral, like a dream, one that could evaporate like fog in the morning sun at any moment.

"How do you like it?" Reverie said as he gazed deeply into her eyes.

She stared back at him, feeling like she could drown in his sea-blue irises.

"The wine, I mean," he said after a long moment.

"Oh!" If Palym's glass had been full, she would have spilled it. "It's wonderful. And it's already sent my head spinning."

The man leaned in, curious, eyebrows raised suggestively. "With thoughts of what?"

"You, actually."

"Oh?" Reverie leaned closer.

"You must really miss Hummingbird."

Reverie's jaw dropped. "I... Oh?"

Palym gestured with the wine glass as she spoke. "You talk about her constantly, and you keep coming to spend time with me even though you have to know I don't feel that way about you. You've done more to try and educate me than anyone else here, and you get all protective whenever you think someone else is going to hurt my feelings. You act like you and I are already close."

Reverie set his glass down. "Maybe I just like a challenge."

“Is that what I am? A challenge?”

“In some ways. You’re new, attractive, exciting! And strong-willed.”

“If you want to be my friend, you can just ask, you know.”

Reverie pursed his lips thoughtfully and put the cork back in the bottle. “Maybe the wine’s getting to us both.”

“Maybe,” said Palym.

He stood and went to the open door, leaving the wine bottle behind. “Sleep well,” he called back as he left. “Tomorrow’s a big day.”

“I could do with a small day,” Palym muttered to herself as she shut the door behind him.

She turned around to clean up and found Qing there by the couch, already clearing the table. Palym suppressed the urge to scream and it came out as a hiccup instead.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said to Qing, but she was already too late.

“It’s my pleasure,” Qing said with a mysterious smile.

Palym put her hands on her hips. “How long were you...?”

“Watching?”

Palym nodded.

“Since your visitor arrived.”

“You don’t think watching my private conversations is creepy?”

“As your servant, I have a duty to anticipate your needs.”

Palym gave the woman a hard look. “You wanted to see how I would handle him.”

Qing started toward the kitchen, where she shelved the bottle of wine and put the glasses on a washing rack.

“How did I do?” asked Palym.

A sparkle shone in the god’s eye, and the edges of her lips curled up the slightest bit. “I’m sure that’s none of my business.”

Palym rolled her eyes at Qing. “I doubt very much there’s anything that goes on inside this place that’s not your business.”

“*You* are my business now, and I’m happy to say that business is good.”

Palym shook her head and turned to go back to bed, hoping that the wine she’d drunk would help her wander off to sleep. When she did, she dreamed again.

In her dreams, Palym fell, weakened by struggle against her chains. So she used them to lift herself up. And as she looked at them, she saw how old and worn they were. Without her, her chains had no purpose. So she took them in hand and carried them with her, and they didn’t slow her much at all.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Again!” Keahi commanded. She lunged at Palym with a wooden sword, and the younger woman failed to parry it. Keahi slapped her across the arm with the flat of the blade, leaving a bright-red mark on her skin.

“Ow!” Palym shouted in pain. “That’s enough!”

She threw down her sword and rubbed at the rising welt. “We’re just practicing. You don’t have to hit that hard!”

Keahi sneered at her in disappointment. “Is that what you’re going to tell a foe on the field of battle? ‘I’m new at this. Take it easy on me’?”

“If I thought it would work? Yes!” Palym knew she was being petulant, but she didn’t care. Despite the wine she still hadn’t gotten much sleep last night. And now she was tired, sweaty, and hurting on top of that.

As soon as Palym had located her desk, Keahi had dragged her out into this courtyard for her first lesson in the martial arts. She’d barely ever held a sword in her life, except when playing with her aunt’s blade as a child. She could keep from cutting herself with one, but that was about as far as her fighting style went.

Still, as a champion of Mercury, she was a faster learner than she’d ever been before, with reflexes few people could counter. But she didn’t really understand the gifts Mercury had given her, and most explanations about Sidereal destiny manipulation were so metaphorical they made her head hurt. Practically, in this moment, she couldn’t get through Keahi’s defenses, and she’d had a terrible time trying to defend herself from the woman’s attacks.

“You might be just fine against a bandit you met on a winding road somewhere in the wilder parts of Creation, like way off west in Abalone,” Keahi said. “But a real warrior would slice you to pieces. And Maidens forbid you might run into another Exalt — or even a god! Against them, you wouldn’t have a chance.”

“I’ve done just fine until now. Thank you very much!” Palym said in an ungrateful way.

“But you weren’t an Exalt until now. It’s one thing to be more powerful than anyone you’ve ever met when you come from a tiny farming village. It’s something else entirely to rise to the challenges you will find in the Imperial City, not to mention Yu-Shan.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Palym said. “How long did you have to be mentored into your position as an Exalt?”

“That’s not the point. We are different people living different lives in different times.”

“How long?”

“Four years.”

“And you expect me to master the skills I need in a matter of, what? Weeks? Days?”

Keahi shook her head. “I don’t expect that at all.”

“Then why are you pushing me so hard?”

Keahi repeated herself, enunciating every word. “I don’t expect that at all. Because you are a rotten student.”

“That’s not fair!”

“Which doesn’t mean it’s not true!”

“Are you planning to bring me into battle tomorrow?”

Keahi grimaced. “You are a member of the Circle of Protection, and you represent the Maiden of Mercury. There are no practice rounds for what we do. We go to work every day and try to make Creation a better place. The troubles that lie in wait out there in the world don’t give us a second chance because we’re new at our jobs!”

“I never *asked* for this job!” Palym screamed at the top of her lungs. “I don’t *want* it!”

Keahi flipped her wooden sword into the air and deftly caught it by its hilt as it came down. “So, that’s it then? You’re going to leave your duties behind, just like that? You think your Maiden will let you get away with that?”

“I have no idea! I haven’t met my Maiden yet. I don’t know if I ever will. Have you met yours?”

Keahi flinched at those words.

“Well?” Palym demanded. “Have you?”

“A few times,” Keahi said quietly. “Not often.”

This surprised Palym. “Then how do you know what she wants from you?”

“She sends notes.”

“And you just believe whatever you read?”

“That’s the nature of the Maidens,” Keahi said, setting her jaw against the implications of Palym’s words. “They grant us power so that we may serve them.”

“Then someone made a mistake. I’m not the sort to simply do what is written in a note. No matter who it’s supposed to be from.”

“There’s no mistake. Cutting Remark saw your thread in the Loom of Fate. He knew your destiny the moment he saw you in that pit.”

Palym scoffed at that. “The Black Flag snarled that part of the tapestry. You know what that means? My fate is a mess!” She threw her practice sword aside, and it went clattering across the courtyard.

“You should pick that up.”

“I’m done here.” She began to walk toward the exit that led back to her office.

Keahi thrust the blade of her practice sword into her path. “You’re right,” she said. “Our Circle’s fate is hard to read at the moment, but we can fix that. Just because the tapestry has a tangle doesn’t mean it’s completely senseless. Not by a long way. At least, not yet.”

“Mercury made a mistake with me.”

“Do you really believe that?”

Palym shuddered with frustration. “I don’t know what I believe anymore. Or who. I have a *god* as my personal assistant!”

“Pick. Up. Your. Sword.”

Palym stuck out her chin. “Or what?”

Keahi slapped her across the cheek with her wooden sword. Palym leaped back, yelping.

“Hey!”

“We are continuing your training, whether you like it or not.”

“Forget it. I’m leaving!”

“Where are you going to go? What are you going to do? Who are you going to tell? There is no justice in this world. No one is coming to your rescue. Not unless you stand up for yourself and make it happen.”

Palym glared at Keahi with eyes that burned with fury. “You have no right. We’ve been over this. When it comes to the Circle of Protection, I am your equal.”

“Ha! I may not be your superior, but there is no way in which you are my equal.” She brandished her blade before her. “Now, you either pick up that weapon and defend yourself or not. I’m going to attack you either way.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“One.”

“This isn’t right.”

“Two.”

“Dammit!”

Palym sprinted over to where she’d thrown her sword, and she scooped it up. She swung it around to defend herself just in time, blocking a vicious blow.

“That’s it!” Keahi said. “Defend yourself. No one else is going to do it for you!”

The warrior came at Palym hard, and the time for words was over. For a while, Palym managed to protect herself, keeping up with Keahi’s attacks by sheer reflex. It wasn’t long, though, until Keahi showed her that her raw ability wasn’t nearly enough.

Keahi feinted right and left, then struck to the right again. The double feint caught Palym flat-footed, and Keahi’s blade sang down and clipped Palym on the wrist. The blow knocked the blade from the younger fighter’s hand.

Palym began to curse and bent to retrieve her weapon. This time, though, Keahi didn’t give her a moment’s respite. Instead, she pressed her advantage, smacking Palym over and over with her blade until she had no choice but to retreat from the onslaught of blows. After the first few strikes landed, Palym beat a hasty retreat, doing her best to stay out of the range of Keahi’s reach.

Keahi stood guard over Palym’s weapon as Palym rubbed her bruised wrist. “Tell me, what is Essence?”

Palym blinked, not expecting a sudden lesson review of things she’d been trying to study. “It’s the power that flows through all things. It’s how we fuel our gifts, like oil in a lantern.”

“And like a lantern, the Exalted reveal their power through our Maidens’ symbols and shining animas as we burn our Essence. You’re not shining at all. Stop thinking like a mortal. What would a Sidereal do to get her weapon back?”

Palym circled Keahi as she thought. None of the tricks she’d learned so far — throwing her weapon’s shadow, pushing a person’s decision toward one destiny or another, and seeing the best path to a distant destination — were directly applicable here. When she felt for the future, she imagined only the hard smack of wood on her wrist.

But another part of her mind, the dreaming part, thought that in the grand scheme of all her life, a smack on her wrist was a small thing. The slings and arrows of misfortune weren’t impediments to a journey, but crucial parts of it. She was *going* to get her weapon back, and anything in the way was a secondary concern. She imagined picking up the chains of destiny that bound her and wrapping those chains around her like armor. Her brow lit up as she dove for the wooden sword at Keahi’s feet.

Keahi sighed and raised her weapon to strike downward. There she hesitated for a moment, struck by a sudden certainty that Palym’s desperate gambit would succeed. Keahi’s own hesitation made that certainty a reality, and Palym grabbed her weapon and rolled away so that Keahi just missed her.

From the ground, Palym swung wildly. But there was art to her artlessness, and with perfect timing and lightning-quick focus she did what she could hardly have done intentionally: She struck Keahi’s weapon out of her hands and into Keahi’s own face.

The blow knocked Keahi to the ground, but she didn't stay down. As she sprang to her feet, she wiped the blood from her split lip and glared at Palym with savage delight.

"That's it," she said. "Now you're getting it!"

Palym did her best to apologize to Keahi as she scrambled upright, but the other woman wasn't having any of it. She ignored her every word and proceeded to beat her bloody instead.

Palym tried to block as many of the blows as she could, but the punches were often precisely where her blade *wasn't*. Just when she thought she had finally discerned her opponent's rhythm, Keahi would shake it up again, and eventually she clocked Palym with a right to the eye that sent her to the ground with stars dancing in her vision.

When she could finally see again, Palym realized the fight was over. Keahi was standing over her with her hand out, not to hit her again but to help her to her feet.

"Much better," she said, as Palym reluctantly accepted her aid. "You keep that up, and we'll make a warrior out of you yet."

"I don't want to be a warrior," Palym said as she tested the tenderness of her eye. She had expected it to be blackened, but it wasn't actually that bad.

"Sometimes you have to be a warrior so you can survive long enough to not have to be one," Keahi said.

Keahi escorted Palym over to one of the benches that lined the courtyard's walls and sat her down. She returned a short while later with a wet sack filled with crushed ice. Palym held it against her eye to help reduce the swelling.

"How often do we have to do this?" Palym asked.

"Train?" Keahi took a drink from a bottle of water she produced from under the bench. "Almost every day."

She handed another bottle of water to Palym, who took it gratefully. "What days do we *not* have to train?"

Keahi chuckled. "Any day you get into an actual fight."

Palym took a long draw off the bottle. "Fair enough."

"Look," Keahi said. "I realize the training is hard, and there's nothing about any of this that's fair. Having been favored by one of the Five Maidens, though, is no picnic. It's great to have supernatural abilities, but you're expected to use them, hopefully for the greater good, at least in the eyes of the Maidens.

"And being a Sidereal Exalt is like having a target painted on your front and your back. It seems like everyone wants a piece of you, either because they're mad at your Maiden, or because they want to prove themselves, or because they don't understand the necessity of what we do. If you want to survive that, you need to be ready because, damn it all, the people trying to kill you certainly will be."

“You made your point.” Palym removed the ice pack from her eye for a moment, so she could look up at the other Exalt.

Keahi gave her an approving chuck on the shoulder. “Don’t worry that you’ll be cooped up here in Yu-Shan the entire time until your training is complete. Even at my level, you must keep training all the time, just to learn new techniques and to make sure you maintain your edge. No sword ever stayed sharp without a stone to whet against.”

“Do you think I’ll be sent out soon?”

“No reason why not. You can even continue your training on the road. I was in Abalone in Wavecrest not too long ago, and I found a master to train with while I was there. Anything you can do stay sharp. It all pays off in the end.”

“I thought the point was to avoid coming to an end,” Palym said with a dry chuckle.

Keahi laughed right along with her. “You know, kid, you might be all right.”



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Our staff has put together a list of locations at which other Black Flags may have arisen,” Zannen said to the other members of the Circle of Protection, who had once again assembled in their conference room. None of them were happy to be there, Palym included. She’d barely had a chance to clean up after her training with Keahi, and the bruises on her skin — and especially over her eye — were still fresh.

Reverie gave her a respectful nod of acknowledgement. Then he noticed her face and frowned. “First training session with Keahi? We’ve all been there.”

It comforted Palym a bit to know that Keahi hadn’t been any less hard on the others in the office. It felt like a rite of passage that all of them had been forced to undergo in order to prove themselves to be fit for their positions. Also, since the others had theoretically completed their combat training, that meant they were all much better at being in a fight than Palym. If she was going to do more field work with them, that could be a good thing.

Assistants darted in from the edges of the room, placing sheaves of paper in front of each of the Exalted. Qing was there among the others, excusing herself as she reached over Palym’s shoulder. It still bothered her to have anyone waiting on her. She supposed she might be able to get used to it with time, much in the way the others clearly had, but the idea that anyone — much less a god of any kind — would wait on her made her distinctly uncomfortable.

“Note that I said, ‘*may* have arisen.’” Zannen let those words sink in for a moment. “The creature we fought in Great Forks the other day is the first confirmed sighting of a Black Flag. Up until now, the only data we’ve had on such monsters have been wild theories and unsubstantiated rumors.”

“Not so wild and not entirely unsubstantiated,” Cutting Remark said. He had the look of a man who’d won an argument he’d never wanted to have in the first place.

“Be that as it may, now that we have incontrovertible proof that Black Flags do in fact exist, it behooves us to investigate those rumors more thoroughly.”

“I think you mean, ‘at all.’”

Zannen leveled a devastating glare at Cutting Remark, but he didn’t seem to notice it much less care.

“Why exactly are they called Black Flags?” Palym asked, more to prevent the two men from devolving into an argument than to get her question answered.

Reverie pointed to a scroll in the center of the table. It was tied with a ribbon of black silk. "There you go. That's how our subordinates mark the files of people they suspect might be rogue Exigents."

"It's a blasphemy," Zannen said, speaking as if the very idea left a foul taste in his mouth. "A perversion of a boon granted by the Unconquered Sun to lesser gods who should have accepted it gratefully and used it in the manner in which it was intended at the time it was given to them. Instead, they traded it away for favors from a series of others who stained it with their unintended possession of it until it became so untenable that its activation causes unprecedented harm."

"You believe that Black Flags are an accident?" Cutting Remark asked in disbelief. "That they simply happen when a boon passes through too many hands?"

"There is no evidence otherwise," Zannen responded. "The very idea that Black Flags come from illicitly traded boons is hard enough to digest, much less the notion that they might be intentionally fashioned."

Cutting Remark threw up his hands. "Unbelievable. I thought you had finally conceded that we're facing the greatest threat in the Circle of Protection's history, but you're treating it as if this latest incident was a single aberration."

"It's our job to oversee Exigents, and the trading of boons is forbidden. That's enough for us to proceed. I don't see the need to engage in any hyperbolic hysterics about how much of a threat this presents."

"You were there with us!" Cutting Remark stood up and slammed his hands on the table before him. "You saw that thing and the devastation it caused! The people it murdered! How dare you treat this like a minor curiosity?"

Zannen stood up slowly and narrowed his eyes at the man. He breathed in through his nose to calm himself. When he spoke, his words were quiet and respectful. Perhaps too much so. "You have suffered a horrible loss, old friend."

Cutting Remark leaned across the table at him. "Don't you *dare* try to paint me as unhinged because of what happened to my wife. She didn't die so that you could use that against me as an excuse to not do a damn thing about this. You always want to study the matter, to collect evidence about the incident, but you never want to actually do anything to prevent it!"

Zannen opened his mouth to respond, but Cutting Remark cut him off by turning on his heel and storming out of the room. As he left, he shouted behind him, "And don't you ever again call me 'friend!'"

The room fell silent for a moment in Cutting Remark's absence. Reverie leaned over and murmured to Palym, "He does this now and then. He'll be back."

Zannen took his seat once again and splayed his hands out on the table before him. He cleared his throat and then spoke.

"The fact is that we don't know enough facts. Yes, this creature destroyed a chunk of Great Forks and killed Hummingbird, but that doesn't mean we're facing a rash of Black Flags throughout Creation. Given that we failed to see this

tragedy coming, the best way for us to determine what the future holds is to look to the past.

"I propose that we visit a number of sites where we have reports of similar attacks happening. We can investigate them personally and see if we can dig up any clues as to what really happened. With luck, we should also be able to draw some connections among the incidents that will help us find if there's any pattern behind them. At the moment, they appear to be entirely random, but if that's not the case, that might point us toward finding a way to prevent more of these horrible disasters from happening again."

"This sounds an awful lot like work," Reverie said as he kicked back in his chair.

Zannen ignored the comment. "First, we'll head for Diamond Hearth, far in the north."

"Weren't we just there not so long ago?" Keahi said.

"This is why I thought we should put this at the top of our list. We're already familiar with the territory. Chances are good that anything that's changed drastically will stick out at us in a way that we might not notice in other places."

"There's also the danger that we might not spot something because we're too familiar with the place."

Zannen gestured toward Palym. "Fortunately, we have a fresh set of eyes to help us with that angle." He frowned. "Well, the circumstances are tragic, actually, but there's no reason we shouldn't take advantage of the edges that fate offers to us."

"Fate certainly works the other side of that equation hard enough against us," Reverie said.

Palym cleared her throat. The others all turned to look at her.

"I don't mean to be demanding, but could you go into a bit more depth? Where are we going? And why?"

Zannen favored her with a smile that was probably meant to be grandfatherly. "Of course, child," he said. "You're new to all this, and you're sure to have many questions. My apologies for not thinking of that."

The man steeped his fingers together and launched into an explanation that sounded more like a rehearsed lecture. "The Celestial Bureaucracy, which is what keeps Yu-Shan running along and taking care of the various gods, is divided into five bureaus: Seasons, Heaven, Humanity, Nature, and ours, Destiny. With all due respect to our peers, we are the only ones who actually get anything done.

"Inside the Bureau of Destiny, we have five divisions, each nominally headed by one of the Five Maidens. Those who are champions of any particular Maiden usually work in that division. You would, for instance, work for the Division of Journeys. As a champion of Jupiter, I would work in the Division of Secrets. Keahi would work in the Division of Battles. Reverie would work in the Division of Serenity. Cutting Remark would work in the Division of Endings."

"But none of us do."

“Clever girl! I’ll get to that in a moment. Inside each division, there are a few conventions — task groups, essentially — charged with executing certain programs or watching over other details. Most Sidereal Exalted wind up working within one of them.

“However, in some cases, there are objectives that don’t fall quite so neatly within the purview of one division or another. Sometimes there are even tasks that require the oversight of each of the Five Maidens. When that happens, we form a cross-divisional office that incorporates representatives of each of the concerned Maidens. That’s exactly what happened here, and we are known as the Circle of Protection, which resides inside the Ebony Office.

“We are charged with overseeing the godly boons that can create Exigents. We investigate their use and misuse. That’s something every Maiden wishes to have some input about. As such, we have five officers inside the Circle of Protection, each selected from one of the Five Maidens.”

Palym knew she had to interrupt the old man before he droned on for the entire day. “Yes, I get all that, but I don’t understand how we’re supposed to stop this. I mean, what happens if we find someone guilty of trading these boons. They’re a god, right? What can we do to them?”

Reverie put his shoes back on the floor and leaned forward to favor Palym with a laugh. “You haven’t had a lot of contact with gods in your life, have you?”

“I pray to them all the time.”

“Right,” said Keahi. “And I’m sure you made all the proper offerings to the gods you knew about, and probably to your family’s own household god too. And I’m sure you’re used to viewing them as untouchable. But most gods aren’t all that powerful, and we were chosen to represent and serve the interests of five of the greatest gods in heaven. If it comes down to it, even you could take down weaker gods in a fair fight.”

“And you should by no means fight fair,” added Reverie.

Palym shook her head in disbelief. “That’s a lot to get used to.”

Keahi grunted. “Gods are tough, but a length of steel through their bellies can gut them just as well as anyone else, and there are even ways to make them taste mortality.”

“We *generally* do not execute them, unless they leave us no choice,” said Zannen. “If we must, we arrest them and turn them over to the Bureau of Heaven to stand trial. As powerful as we are, we still are not gods ourselves.”

Reverie scratched his jaw. “And of course the Bureau of Heaven is never corrupt and *always* gives a fair and unbiased trial.”

“In any case, we leave for Diamond Hearth after lunch,” Zannen said, cutting short Reverie’s cynicism.

“What about Cutting Remark?” Palym asked.

“We’re leaving then, with or without him.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“I didn’t realize the world could get this cold,” Palym said as the Circle of Protection rode horses over a frozen landscape in the North of Creation. The others had found new mounts — in fact, Zannen simply pushed fate to have a horse wander by in the wilderness and meekly accept him as its rider — but Palym had kept the mare she’d so recently received. Palym had named her mount Blaze and found a stable for her with Qing’s assistance. The mare did her best to cope with the cold, and Palym felt happy that she’d listened to Reverie’s advice to dress in the warmest possible clothes for this trip.

When they’d still been inside Yu-Shan, she had wondered if the man hadn’t been playing a prank on her by getting her to overheat herself on this journey. Once they emerged into Creation, though, she realized she maybe should have taken his advice to heart even more. The land was covered in ice and snow, things she had rarely seen in her life, and only then at a vast distance, atop mountains that loomed against the horizon.

“It’s not so bad once you get used to it,” Reverie said. He and Keahi rode next to her while Zannen took the lead, consistently guiding them away from the worst of the snow. Cutting Remark had not rejoined them before they left.

Reverie seemed less focused on Palym today. She supposed he’d gotten the message the night before and was willing to give her more space. Or perhaps he just didn’t feel like he had as much to teach her now. He hadn’t become any less rude, but Palym actually preferred being treated like he treated everyone else.

The gate from Yu-Shan was fairly close to the city of Diamond Hearth, and it didn’t take them long to find it. They circled once around the city to — as Keahi put it — “give us the lay of the land.” The place looked comparatively free of the tremendous layers of snow that covered the surrounding lands, which seemed like they hadn’t seen a spring thaw for centuries, if ever.

“Diamond Hearth,” Keahi said as they zoomed around it. “Part of the Haslanti League, a loose confederation of northern cities. They might someday form an empire of their own if they could ever quit squabbling with each other.”

“Which is never going to happen,” Reverie said. “The squabbling is the only thing that keeps them warm enough to live. Fortunately, that seems to be an endless resource.”

“Why would anyone ever want to live here?” Palym asked as she shivered inside her furs.

“To get rich,” Keahi said. “People travel many miles to work the diamond mines deep beneath the snows.”

“Digging ice out from under the ice,” Reverie said. “At least the temperatures are tolerable underground. Imagine having to ply the White Sea instead. Fishers who fall out of their ships there are frozen solid before they can be pulled back up out of the waves.”

The Sidereals rode into a well-trodden plaza in the center of town, surrounded by stone buildings that seemed like they had been built an age ago. The city didn’t compare to the grandeur of Great Forks in Palym’s eyes, and its people were far less welcoming. They all wore thick furs to keep them warm, their faces tucked so far back into them that Palym couldn’t even see their eyes.

While the nearer buildings seemed sturdy enough, in the distance, Palym could see scores of hovels built from logs, and even wicker shanties. There was a hollowing out in one section of these, a place not too far from the center of town where it seemed that perhaps no one had ever built anything there. At first, Palym thought it might be a park, although it didn’t seem regularly shaped enough for that.

“That’s where it happened,” Zannen said as he dismounted. He apparently trusted his wild horse to stay put, and it did just that. Keahi, Reverie, and Palym all followed him but kept their horses near.

No longer sitting on Blaze’s warm back, Palym felt more of the cold. It was so bitter that she could feel it biting every bit of exposed flesh. The ends of her eyelashes began to freeze up, as did the tiny hairs in her nose. The sensation robbed her of breath.

“This is insane,” she said as she wrapped her furs around her more tightly. She would have screamed, but she was afraid to breathe in too deeply for fear of damaging her lungs.

“You’re not properly dressed for it,” Reverie said. “But you’ll get used to it. As one of the Sidereal Exalted, a little rough weather like this doesn’t offer you anything to fear.”

“It takes more than a little bit of snow to bring down a champion of the Five Maidens!” Keahi said as she bounded forth into the square.

A door to the biggest building in town opened, and a severe-looking woman stepped out of it, wearing a shimmering white cloak that must have provided more dignity than warmth. “What in the names of all the gods are you doing back here?” she said as she stormed up to them, a platoon of heavily armed soldiers wrapped in thick furs trailing behind her.

“Jeweled Sky!” Reverie said, inflecting her name with genuine-seeming warmth. “You remember us! How unexpected and wonderful.”

“That’s ‘Mayor Sky’ to you,” she said, her lips snarling with scorn. “Better yet, keep my name out of your lying mouth. You won’t ingratiate yourself to us again.”

“But you so enjoyed the party I threw the last time we met,” Reverie said, pretending to be hurt by the woman’s attitude. “Is there no chance for us to pick up where we left off?”

“Funny. Keep it up, and I’ll have you all arrested right now and executed in the morning.”

Keahi cocked a hip to the side and regarded the warriors arrayed behind the woman. “How many Exalted do you have on hand, exactly?”

The warriors raised weapons threateningly, but Palym could see the fear in their eyes. They were all mortal.

Mayor Sky held firm eye contact with Keahi for several moments before turning to Zannen. “What brings you here? Bear in mind that if I don’t like the answer, I’ll take my chances, regardless of how many of you there are.”

Zannen spoke as if no threats had been exchanged. “We heard you had a problem with an Exigent after we left.”

The woman barked a bitter laugh. “That’s like saying it’s a little chilly around here.” She stabbed a finger toward the open area Palym had noticed earlier. “That used to be a thriving part of town. One of your so-called Exigents burst from it, blazing so white-hot that it burned the entire neighborhood to ashes.”

Palym stared in that direction and realized what she’d missed before. The entire burned-out region had since been coated in a thick layer of snow, covering any evidence of the fire. The buildings that had been there were gone, and the region’s unrelenting winter had buried their ashes.

“We checked all the Exigents and boons in your city when we were here before,” Zannen said. “They were all clean.”

Mayor Sky gestured toward the pristine white plain. “You want to poke around in the ashes over there, be my guest. Just do your work and then leave! Within the hour.”

With that, she spun on her heel and marched back into the stately building from which she’d come. The warriors who’d come out with her stayed where they were, keeping a close eye on the Sidereal Exalts instead. Zannen had already started toward the icy area Mayor Sky had indicated.

Keahi smiled at the warriors and then turned her back on them, ignoring them. “You really know how to make friends, don’t you?” she said to Reverie as the man fell into step next to her.

“She’s just overreacting. I only married a member of her staff to spy on her. It wasn’t personal.”

“I’d be upset, too.”

“Really? Huh.”

Palym jogged to catch up with the others. She hated the way the warriors glared at them, but she didn’t see how she could make up for Reverie’s affront, not to mention whatever else the Circle might have done the last time they’d been there. Better that they did as Mayor Sky demanded instead.

Zannen slowed down as he reached the devastated area. Someone had left a bouquet of roses near the entrance, and the flowers had all frozen solid. As they moved past it, Palym wondered just how many people had died in this disaster. The snow crunched under her feet, exposing blackened ashes beneath, and she realized she was walking through their remains.

Keahi pointed up a gentle rise with his finger. “You can see the path of the destruction. It ended near here, but it started at the crest of that hill.”

“What are we looking for here?” Palym said. “I mean, just what does one of these boons look like anyhow?”

Zannen chuckled at her. “We’re not going to find such a boon here. If there was, in fact, such an item here, it would have been consumed by the creation of the Exigent that caused the destruction.”

“They often look like a totem of the god to whom the boon was originally given,” Reverie said. “Sometimes they’re plain. Other times they’re set in a globe of glass or amber, depending on the whims of the Unconquered Sun. Really, they can be anything, and they’re much more than that, of course. That’s just their physical representation.”

“So, if we can’t find the boon here to prove what happened, what are we looking for then?”

“First, we look for a shrine, something like what we found in Great Forks. That might have some clues for us.”

“And then?”

“Whatever else we can find.”

Impatient already, Palym dashed up the rise and tried not to ponder if the layer of buried ashes crunching under her feet had once been wood or flesh. When she reached the crest, she found a rectangle of low stones arranged in a way that could have once been a cellar of a small house. In one corner of the basement, the ground was deeper than in the others, so she crept over and began to poke around.

“We really should get you your own sword,” Keahi said as she came up from behind. She slung the blade from her back, still in its scabbard, and used it to stir the snow and ashes before them. “They’re useful in so many ways.”

“Knives are much better,” said Palym, chin upraised.

Palym wasn't so proud, though, that she wasn't willing to get down on her knees and get her hands dirty. When she touched the snow, the cold burned like fire for an instant. But she soon realized it didn't cut as deeply as it might have when she was still mortal. She was hardier now than she'd ever been before.

"Find anything?" Reverie asked. He stood a short way off, his hands on his hips, every inch the image of a man in charge of the situation. But he still managed to keep his hands clean.

Something clinked against the tip of Keahi's sword. She and Palym glanced at each other and then fell to using their hands to remove the snow in that part of the basement. They found a golden offering plate covered with ash. A perfectly circular hole had been melted through the center of it.

"There's your shrine," Reverie said. "Or what's left of it."

"Looks like evidence of a Black Flag to me," Keahi said.

"But perhaps not in the way that you think," Zannen called from the far side of the plain. He gestured for the others to join him back there.

The man had used his staff — which Palym had taken to be merely a walking stick, but which looked to be subtly reinforced with metal — to clear away some of the snow at the very end of the path of destruction. He'd uncovered a pair of blackened skeletons there, wrapped around each other as if in a morbid embrace. One set of bones seemed human, but the other couldn't be anything of the sort. They might once have belonged to a gigantic bird with massive, clawed legs that made it far too large to fly.

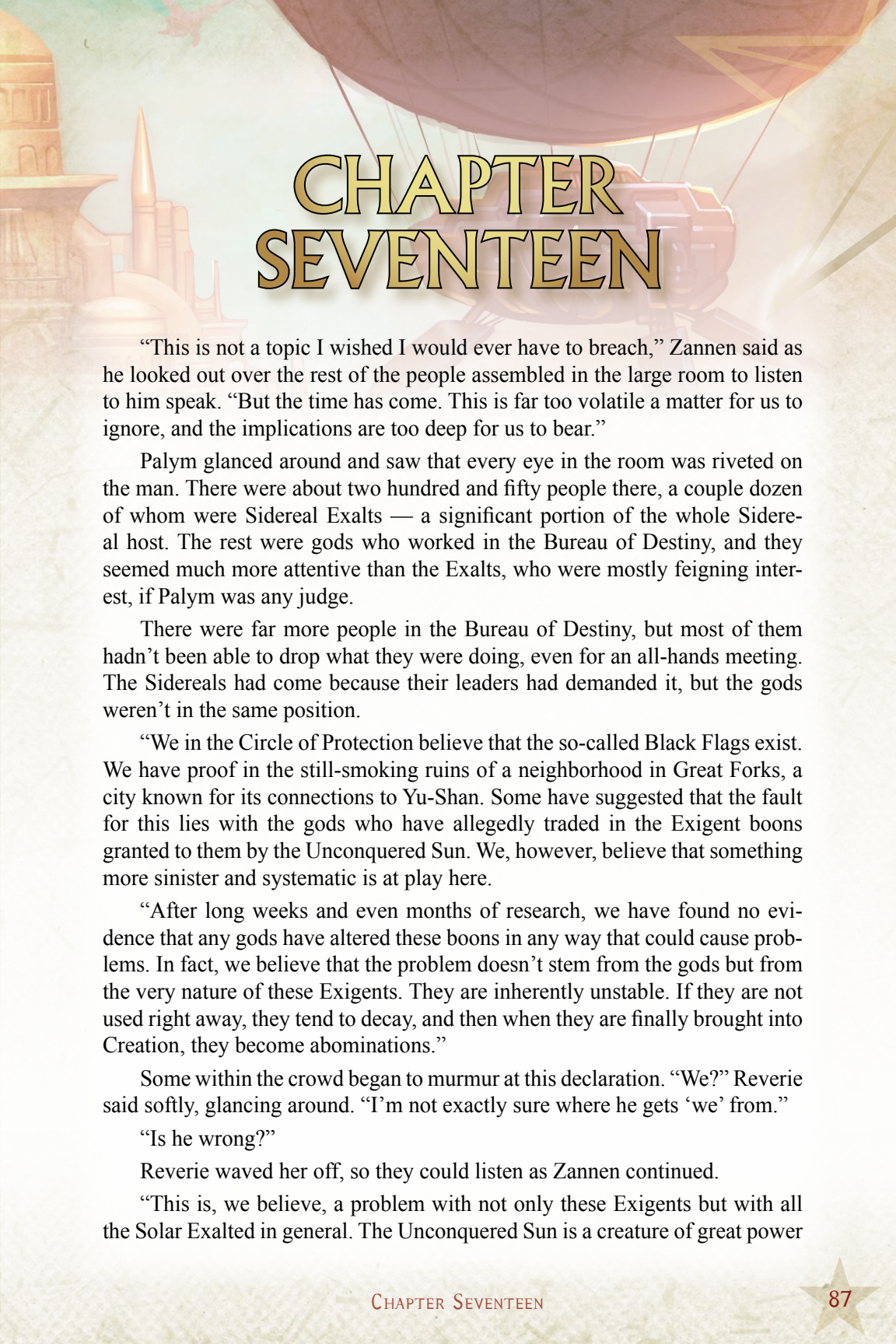
"You think the mayor doesn't know what happened here?" Zannen said, shaking his head. "We can't trust her. We can't trust anyone like her."

"Like who?" Palym said, confused.

"She's Exalted," Reverie said.

"Like us?"

"We're the chosen of the Five Maidens," Keahi said. "She was chosen by the Unconquered Sun."

The background of the page features a stylized, steampunk-inspired illustration. At the top, a large, reddish-brown airship with yellow accents and multiple ropes hangs in the sky. Below it, on the left, are the spires and domes of a city in shades of orange and yellow. The overall color palette is warm, with a hazy, atmospheric feel.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“This is not a topic I wished I would ever have to breach,” Zannen said as he looked out over the rest of the people assembled in the large room to listen to him speak. “But the time has come. This is far too volatile a matter for us to ignore, and the implications are too deep for us to bear.”

Palym glanced around and saw that every eye in the room was riveted on the man. There were about two hundred and fifty people there, a couple dozen of whom were Sidereal Exalts — a significant portion of the whole Sidereal host. The rest were gods who worked in the Bureau of Destiny, and they seemed much more attentive than the Exalts, who were mostly feigning interest, if Palym was any judge.

There were far more people in the Bureau of Destiny, but most of them hadn’t been able to drop what they were doing, even for an all-hands meeting. The Sidereals had come because their leaders had demanded it, but the gods weren’t in the same position.

“We in the Circle of Protection believe that the so-called Black Flags exist. We have proof in the still-smoking ruins of a neighborhood in Great Forks, a city known for its connections to Yu-Shan. Some have suggested that the fault for this lies with the gods who have allegedly traded in the Exigent boons granted to them by the Unconquered Sun. We, however, believe that something more sinister and systematic is at play here.

“After long weeks and even months of research, we have found no evidence that any gods have altered these boons in any way that could cause problems. In fact, we believe that the problem doesn’t stem from the gods but from the very nature of these Exigents. They are inherently unstable. If they are not used right away, they tend to decay, and then when they are finally brought into Creation, they become abominations.”

Some within the crowd began to murmur at this declaration. “We?” Reverie said softly, glancing around. “I’m not exactly sure where he gets ‘we’ from.”

“Is he wrong?”

Reverie waved her off, so they could listen as Zannen continued.

“This is, we believe, a problem with not only these Exigents but with all the Solar Exalted in general. The Unconquered Sun is a creature of great power

— perhaps too much power. He is the font of endless creation but also limitless destruction.

“The troubles that affect these Exigents are rooted in the nature of their birth, a nature they share with the Solars, who we all know are equally unstable. The fact that both Black Flags that we’ve found burned with an unquenchable inner heat is telling. We need to root out the Exigents and control them. We need to put a stop to their unregulated creation.

“But we cannot stop there. We need to band together to deal with the Solars’ resurgence as well. As we saw from the confusion the Black Flag in Great Forks caused, their existence makes it much more difficult for us to accurately read the Loom of Fate. Is our duty not important enough for us to work to save it?”

A smattering of applause went up around the auditorium. Palym craned her neck around to see many heads nodding along at Zannen’s words. More of the faces she saw, though, stared at the man with confusion or disapproval.

A bushy-bearded old man stood up then in the back of the auditorium, and the people there set to murmuring again. He was tall and thin, dressed in simple saffron robes covered with a grid of red thread, like lines one might find on a map. He had well-tanned skin and long white hair. Despite that, his back remained unbent, and his eyes were sharp and clear.

Keahi turned to see him and said, “Ooh.”

“What is the crowd saying?” Palym asked her. Palym had been learning the language of heaven fairly quickly, but she hadn’t mastered it yet. “Sounds like they’re mooing.”

“They’re saying his name: Ruvia. He’s the Captain of the Golden Barque, the head of the Division of Journeys.”

“Journeys?”

“Yes,” Reverie said with an ironic twinkle in his eyes. “*Your* division. That’s your boss.”

“That’s a very interesting claim you’ve made,” Ruvia said in a strong tenor. At least, if Palym was translating him correctly. “And also very dangerous. I’d like to see the evidence you have collected to back this up.”

Zannen nodded graciously behind the podium at which he stood. “My team — the Circle of Protection — is collating the data as we speak. I will have a copy of it made for you and forwarded to you at our earliest convenience.”

“See that you do,” Ruvia said. “I am well aware of the implications of what you’re saying, and I am sympathetic. The return of the Solar Exalted may threaten all our hard work. But I can tell you that it will take far more than a pattern of possibilities backed up by a slew of innuendo to shift the Bureau of Destiny’s policy against the entirety of the Solar Exalted. We’ve been down that road before, as you well know.”

“With success,” Zannen said. “Those actions kept both Yu-Shan and Creation safe and stable for centuries. Now, with the return of the Solars, chaos is at our door. With the Sidereal Fellowship itself at stake, we cannot afford to ignore the implications.”

Ruvia shrugged. “As long as all you have to offer are implications, I doubt very much that you will find the will to act among myself and my colleagues.”

“He’s talking about the heads of the other divisions,” Reverie said. “Yaogin, the God of Beautiful Dreams; Hu Dai Liang, the Shogun of the Crimson Banner; Nara-O of the Hundred Veils; and Wayang, the God of Silence.”

Palym peered around but did not see any sign of such people. While there were plenty of gods in the room, all seemed minor ones. None had as great an entourage as Ruvia.

“Then we shall have to endeavor to find proof,” Zannen said. “The Circle of Protection is committed to doing just that.”

With that, he took leave of the podium and the meeting hall. Other Side-reals took the opportunity to drag the meeting out with their own pet projects and an excessive amount of ceremony. Barely able to follow their speeches, Palym instead whispered to her teammates, “Where are the gods of the other divisions? I thought everyone was supposed to be here for this meeting?”

“Do you see Cutting Remark here?” Reverie said. “Not everyone showed up. Only those who were curious about what Zannen had to say.”

“Which was much of the Bureau,” Keahi pointed out. “The Circle of Protection has an important remit, and after the disaster in Great Forks, people are eager to learn what we’ve discovered.”

“It’s just too bad he had to turn it into yet another one of his rants against the Solars. Presenting all that without proof is just going to damage the Circle’s reputation, which is already fairly iffy.”

Keahi ruefully shook her head. “What disappoints me even more is how few of the Sidereal Exalted here didn’t seem to object to it. That way lies a horrible war.”

“I thought you liked to fight,” Palym said, only half kidding.

“When the cause is just and true. The eradication of other Exalts doesn’t qualify for that.”

Reverie changed the subject. “To answer your question, the other Division heads almost never show up to meetings. Yaogin — the god who leads Venus’ division — spends most of his time indulging himself and anyone nearby in pleasant dreams. He doesn’t care too much about his division, and he’d hardly show up to hear Zannen rant about unpleasant matters.”

Keahi joined in the explanations. “No one has actually ever seen the face of Nara-O. They might have been here, and it would have been impossible to tell. When they make official appearances, they show up wrapped in so many

veils of blue and gray silks that it's impossible to tell if there's even a person underneath them all.

"Wayang almost never shows up in public. He spends most of his time in his offices, which are always kept dark. Even on the brightest days, he's basically a shadow. The only part of him you can clearly see are his eyes, which glow a bright yellow, like twin lighthouses in the darkest night."

"What about your boss?" Palym asked Keahi. "I'd have thought that a god who loved war would be happy to hear Zannen talk about starting a fight with the Solars."

"That she probably would," Keahi admitted. "That's probably also why she stayed away. As a prominent supporter of the Bronze, Hu Dai Liang has been spoiling for a decisive solution to the Solar problem for some time. She just doesn't want to move until she's ready. Wise warriors only enter battles they know they can win."

The three of them stood and began walking back to the Ebony Office. Palym still wasn't familiar enough with the complexities of Yu-Shan, so she happily let them lead the way. "The Bronze?" she asked.

"Oh. Nobody's mentioned this to you yet?" Reverie said. He grimaced with distaste.

"We shouldn't bore her with such politics," Keahi said.

"Of course we should," Zannen said as he appeared from a side corridor and fell into step next to them. His face burned with the frustration and shame he felt from the rebuke that Ruvia had given him in front of so many of his peers. "She's involved in them just by being here. Whether she pays attention to them or not, they will affect the way she works, the whole of Yu-Shan, and perhaps even whether she lives or dies."

Without waiting for permission, Zannen launched into a new diatribe. "Many centuries ago, the Sidereals had a vision that one of three futures would come to pass. In one, the Solars — who had become corrupted beyond all redemption — would plunge the world into eternal darkness with their avarice. We all agreed that would be a poor fate for Creation, but we could not agree on which alternative we should pursue.

"If you believe the rumors, the original Gold Faction thought we could reform the Solars, and they set about trying to make that happen. The original Bronze Faction believed that it was too late for such half measures. Instead, we needed to tear out the problem by its roots. And so, we did. That's why we took down the Solar Exalts so long ago. If, as I said, you believe the rumors."

Palym gaped at the man. "We did what? How?"

"We didn't fight fair, supposedly," said Reverie, sounding bored. "It's said that we supported an uprising by their servants, the Dragon-Blooded, the Exalted of the Five Elemental Dragons. They did most of the hard work and reaped

most of the rewards, which is why the Dragon-Blooded rule the most powerful empire in all Creation to this day.”

“Should we be talking about this so blatantly?” hissed Keahi.

Zannen waved her concern aside. “There’s no evidence that we were involved in the Dragon-Blooded usurpation at all. If Palym were to tell anyone, two things would happen. First, every Sidereal would deny it.”

Palym shuddered in horror. “And second, they’d all try to kill me.”

Zannen grunted at that. “Don’t be silly. The *Solars* would kill you — and any of the rest of us they could, too. Many of them already suspect us, and plenty of them are eager for revenge whether we were responsible or not. Now that they’ve returned to Creation, somehow, they might be able to exact it, and a Sidereal who’s been cut out of the herd would be too tempting for them to resist.”

Palym tried to absorb all that. “So, you’re part of the modern Bronze Faction then,” she said to Zannen.

“I see no reason to label myself. I believe we should not let the Solars rise back to prominence. To do so puts all of Creation at risk, and that poses too serious a threat to allow that to happen.”

“What about the rest of the Circle?” she asked the others.

“I already said I’m not interested in wholesale extermination,” Keahi said.

“But?”

The woman squirmed a bit. “Our work’s too important to risk being vulnerable, and Solars are horrifyingly powerful. We should be prepared for the worst.”

Palym suppressed a shudder. “And you?” she asked Reverie.

“Murder is the first refuge of the least creative,” he said. “There’s always a better solution — until there’s not. We should always strive to find that solution until it’s clear there is no other.”

“Have we already reached that point?” Cutting Remark said as the others strode into the offices of the Circle of Protection. “Have you finally realized that the Black Flags are a threat?”

Palym and the others stopped there in the foyer to speak with the man. They hadn’t seen him since he’d stormed out of their meeting the other day.

“Clearly they are,” Zannen said. “But as we learned in Diamond Hearth, they’re not an issue caused by the gods but by the Solars.”

“Or so you claim,” said Reverie. He turned to Cutting Remark. “We’ve been tasked with finding more proof of that, or disproof. I don’t suppose our Chosen of Secrets has any leads or evidence he hasn’t shared yet that makes him so convinced of Solar involvement?”

Zannen just looked thoughtful. Reverie sighed in exasperation.

A ghost of a wry smile played on Cutting Remark's lips. "Unfortunately, we have another duty we must attend to first."

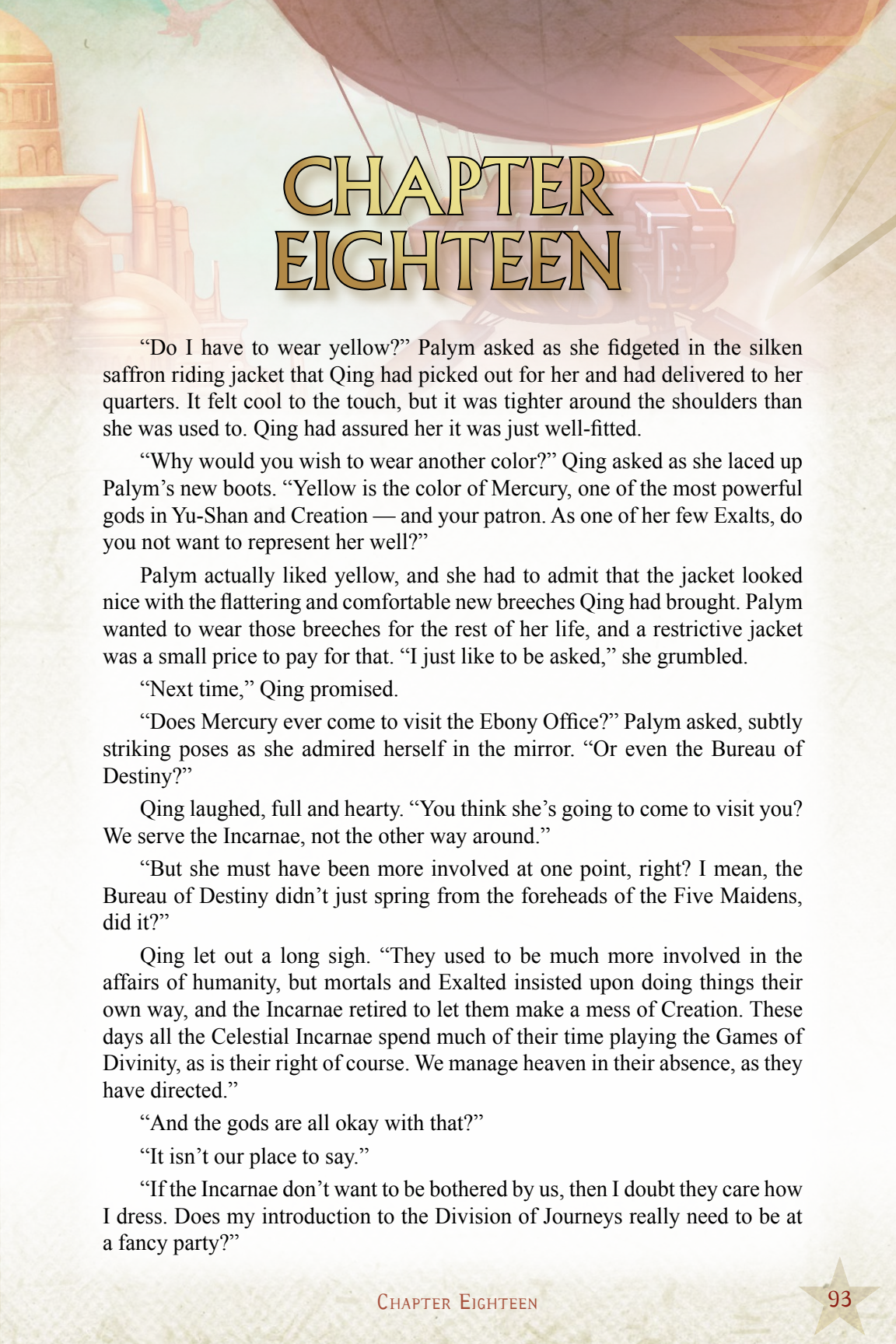
"You've finished the preparations for Hummingbird's memorial?" Keahi said. "I would be happy to sing a warrior's song at the services. She deserves it."

"She does," Cutting Remark said. "Before that, though, we need to introduce our new friend here to heavenly society."

Palym fixed him with a suspicious glare. "Just how are we supposed to do that, 'new friend?'"

"Put on your best finery," he said. "It's time for a visit to the Golden Barque."





CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Do I have to wear yellow?” Palym asked as she fidgeted in the silken saffron riding jacket that Qing had picked out for her and had delivered to her quarters. It felt cool to the touch, but it was tighter around the shoulders than she was used to. Qing had assured her it was just well-fitted.

“Why would you wish to wear another color?” Qing asked as she laced up Palym’s new boots. “Yellow is the color of Mercury, one of the most powerful gods in Yu-Shan and Creation — and your patron. As one of her few Exalts, do you not want to represent her well?”

Palym actually liked yellow, and she had to admit that the jacket looked nice with the flattering and comfortable new breeches Qing had brought. Palym wanted to wear those breeches for the rest of her life, and a restrictive jacket was a small price to pay for that. “I just like to be asked,” she grumbled.

“Next time,” Qing promised.

“Does Mercury ever come to visit the Ebony Office?” Palym asked, subtly striking poses as she admired herself in the mirror. “Or even the Bureau of Destiny?”

Qing laughed, full and hearty. “You think she’s going to come to visit you? We serve the Incarnae, not the other way around.”

“But she must have been more involved at one point, right? I mean, the Bureau of Destiny didn’t just spring from the foreheads of the Five Maidens, did it?”

Qing let out a long sigh. “They used to be much more involved in the affairs of humanity, but mortals and Exalted insisted upon doing things their own way, and the Incarnae retired to let them make a mess of Creation. These days all the Celestial Incarnae spend much of their time playing the Games of Divinity, as is their right of course. We manage heaven in their absence, as they have directed.”

“And the gods are all okay with that?”

“It isn’t our place to say.”

“If the Incarnae don’t want to be bothered by us, then I doubt they care how I dress. Does my introduction to the Division of Journeys really need to be at a fancy party?”

"You're a simple girl from a simple village, right? Or at least you like to think of yourself that way."

"Sure."

"Well you are simple no longer. You're one of a very few humans who serve in the Celestial Bureaucracy and claim rightful association with gods. One of your duties is to conduct yourself in a manner appropriate to your prestigious rank."

Palym frowned. "I never asked for this job."

"There are many who would kill to be in your position. Whether you knew before you were placed in it that it existed or not, you should be grateful that you fell into it. Fate has favored you."

"I guess so." Palym gazed out over the brightly lit roofs of Yu-Shan. She thought of the neighborhoods she'd dared not approach, where gods languished without employment or fancy apartments like hers. "I'm not sure it made the right choice."

Qing clucked her tongue as she finished up and patted Palym on the side. "It's not wise to question good fortune, no matter how it comes to you. If Fate hears you doubting it, it might not be so kind the next time around."

Palym thought that maybe old folks' wisdom didn't really apply to a Side-real. But instead of saying that, she thanked Qing for her help and then left her quarters to find Reverie waiting for her. He wore a formal blue gown the color of the clearest sky, trimmed with sashes that reminded her of a moonlit midnight. He bowed dramatically as she approached, and she snorted and bowed in return.

"You look good," he said as he fell into step beside her. "Do you know where we're going?"

"To the Golden Barque."

"And how are we going to get there?"

She stopped and arched her neck back as she shaded her eyes and looked up into heaven's shimmering sky. The ship soared away from them, into the distance. "I assume we're not going to walk."

"You assume incorrectly." Reverie gestured toward the street that they both used to walk to their office each day. "The Golden Barque of the Heavens is a part of the Bureau of Destiny, and all its offices are connected through the Most Perfect Lotus of Heavenly Designs. We need only walk down the right hall at the right time to find ourselves in the ship's innards."

"That's amazing," said Palym as they started down the street. "But it makes a weird sort of sense."

"Does it? I've never thought so."

"Sure. You can walk a hundred miles and end up back where you started, so why can't you explore somewhere you know and end up somewhere you've never

been?” Reverie didn’t know how to respond, so Palym continued. “Anyway, why didn’t anyone tell me sooner that I was going to be expected to attend a party?”

“There’s always a social gathering of some sort you could be attending,” said Reverie, back in familiar territory. “I once spent an entire year attending Yu-Shan’s many parties, soirees, and salons and building my collection of contacts. We have a round of social events in the Bureau of Destiny every few years, to ‘improve communication between the Divisions.’” He mimicked Zannen’s voice here, and Palym giggled. “The Golden Barque comes first, then we enjoy my Division’s pleasures, and then on down the line. It’s probably a waste of *my* time, but it will be good for you to introduce yourself.”

They soon reached the familiar entrance to the Ebony Office, where they found Zannen, Keahi, and Cutting Remark.

Every one of them was dressed in amazing finery that struck Palym as both beautiful and impractical. Keahi wore a suit of crimson armor that would have been the envy of any shogun in Creation. Cutting Remark wore robes that shone like the evening sky just after dusk and sparkled like they held all the constellations.

Even Zannen had dressed up for the occasion. His suit was the color of jade, and it wrapped around him from many different angles, including a scarf that covered much of his face. It left his eyes exposed, though, and those were unmistakably his.

“Are you ready?” Zannen asked, his voice slightly muffled.

“Of course she is,” Reverie said with a dramatic roll of his eyes. He patted her on her back. “Palym’s been educating me about different kinds of journeys. She’ll fit right in with her buttercup compatriots.”

Palym blushed, sure that Reverie’s praise was sarcastic. “Let’s just get this over with.”

She had never liked having to meet with authority figures. Not even when her parents had brought her to visit her grandparents. The teacher at her schoolhouse, the wise woman of their village, they’d all acted like they’d expected her to behave in a way that didn’t feel natural to her. She usually managed to put up a decent appearance at such times, but the effort always wore on her.

That was one of the reasons she’d left her village behind and come to Great Forks, now that she thought about it. She’d expected there would be authorities of one kind or another there — bosses, law enforcers, and so on — but she figured she could lean on the fact that she was new to town to ignore many of the niceties surrounding them. After all, she didn’t have anyone around who would be embarrassed by her.

Well, Xiao might have blushed at such things, but Palym had never let that bother her in the slightest. She wondered where Xiao might be now. What part of Great Forks might she be wandering around as Palym was being presented to the Division of Journeys?

That led her to ponder what Qing had said to her earlier. Fate had done a fine job of separating her from Xiao, someone with whom she'd long thought her future would be intertwined. Xiao had been one of her forever friends — perhaps the only one she'd ever have — and now Palym had no idea where Xiao was or what had happened to her.

The same was true of Xiao, of course. From her point of view, Palym had almost certainly died that day. More likely, she didn't even remember Palym.

Xiao would never have left home without Palym. Maybe she was lost and confused, or bullied into joining a gang, or poor on the streets. Palym couldn't bear the thought of that and internally committed to finding a way to check on her friend soon.

The Circle of Protection traveled through halls of slated marble, into corridors of stone and tinted glass, and finally into ribbed passageways of gold that groaned like some ancient beast. Stairs brought them up to the ship's deck, long and broad enough for a hundred or more copies of Palym's own modest home. Gods of countless shapes and shades filled out the deck, many standing upon the seemingly endless railings with no apparent fear of falling to the city below. Sail-or-clerks ran up and down the complex rigging, some to keep the ship on-course, others to bear golden trays heaped with fine food and drink for the guests.

A half-dozen celestial lions gazed stoically across the deck. Reverie grinned back at them and said to Palym, "This is little more than security theatrics. I've seen them ignore duels to the death."

"They might eat uninvited guests, though," Keahi said evenly. Palym patted her pockets, reassuring herself that she had her invitation.

A nearby scribe-god checked the Circle's names against her list and announced their arrivals one by one in a clear, bored tone, including a half-dozen titles or duties for each that they'd never discussed with Palym. Zannen withstood the announcement patiently, then left. Cutting Remark and Keahi were already striding in opposite directions before their names were done being announced. Reverie bowed and waved as if the party had been thrown for his benefit and gave Palym a good-luck wink before forcing himself into the nearest tight-knit social circle he could find.

Palym was announced last, with only "Chosen of Journeys and member of the Circle of Protection" to bolster her name. She soon felt abandoned and overwhelmed, surrounded by people who, as often as not, did not look much like people. Their eyes glowed. They had tentacles in place of arms. They were eating things they were holding with their prehensile tails. They had teeth like tiny blades.

Some looked entirely inhuman. Some were talking animals. Others resembled plants, even trees. A few others looked like inanimate objects given life and voice. Some proved much harder to look at, as if created in the same fashion as the Black Flag the Circle of Protection had fought — only smaller and less violent. They came in all shapes and sizes, from that of a single flea all the way up to a sky-blue-scaled dragon coiled around one of the great masts.

Trapdoors and portholes peppered the decks, each different and unique. Perhaps most of them opened into personal offices, but Palym couldn't help but imagine they were connected instead to far-flung locales. This ship was home to the Division of Journeys, and she had already traveled up into the sky by walking today. Who knew where she could go from there if she dared to explore?

After a while, the places and the people all blended together into a riotous mélange that Palym could no longer comprehend. There was simply too much of it for her to absorb all at once, compounded by the fact that their language was still fairly new to her. She focused on trying to find one of her Circlemates, one foot in front of the other. Her usual navigation skills failed her in this crowd, though, and she walked out of the crowd and straight into a person on its periphery.

Fortunately, the man caught her before she could knock them both to the ground. She began to apologize for her mistake, but when she looked up, she was face-to-face with Ruvia.

She gasped loudly enough that she almost felt compelled to follow it up with a scream. She would have done so if the look in the god's eyes hadn't been so quietly amused.

"Finding your way, Palym?" he asked as he set her solidly back on her feet.

"You — you know who I am?" Palym immediately felt in trouble.

"Of course. You're not just one of the Sidereal Exalted. You're under *my* direction. I approved your Circle's request for your immediate assignment to their ranks. They needed someone like you, with road dust on their boots."

"I'm so sorry." Now that it was sinking in who she had stumbled into, her face burned with shame. "I can't believe I'm so clumsy that I walked right into the Captain of the Golden Barque."

Ruvia snorted. "I'm also the God of Roads. I've had worse knocks." He gave her a wink and patted her on her shoulder. "Welcome to the team. I have high expectations of you."

"H-how do you know I'm worthy of that?" The words spilled from Palym's mouth before she could stop them.

Ruvia raised a bushy eyebrow. "I've known Mercury since before humans learned written language. She doesn't make mistakes. Just decisions the rest of us don't yet understand." He stroked his beard as he spoke. "You were supposed to be a little more mature before you reached us, according to my records, but the Chosen of Journeys don't shy away from a challenge, do they?"

"No!" Palym grinned. "No sir, we don't."

He chuckled at her and gave her a small wave of goodbye. "I have others to meet before I can get back to real work. But I imagine I'll see you again, and sometime soon."

"Let me know if you need me for anything, sir."

His face grew serious. "Oh, I will. Have no doubt of that, Palym."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

As Ruvia left her alone again, Palym glanced around for the others. She soon realized that all her compatriots were engrossed in conversation with gods from their own divisions. Everyone else at the party looked so confident, so perfectly in place, that Palym didn't want to interrupt them. Instead she thought about her boss.

Part of her felt dismayed that she hadn't gotten to speak with Ruvia for longer. She'd never stood in the presence of someone so important before, and it had left her next to tongue-tied. Now that they had parted, she found a flood of questions for him leaping to mind, things that she wished she had asked him when she'd had a chance and could now only kick herself about. What did he know about her destiny, and how much of it was hers to control? What role did he intend for her to play in the Circle of Protection? Did she have any choice at all?

Another part of her — perhaps a larger part — felt relieved that her initial audience with Ruvia was already over. She had been far more tense about encountering her boss than she had realized, and now that the meeting was complete, she wanted to collapse and sleep for a week. She just needed to make it back to her apartment, where she would be safe.

And yet it didn't feel like the right time to leave the party. So instead she wandered, noting familiar faces as she passed them by.

Reverie stood chatting smoothly with a dazed-looking young man whose simple and honest beauty put the Chosen of Serenity to shame. As irritating as Reverie could be, Palym had no problem appreciating the sight of them both side by side. By eavesdropping a little, she learned that the younger-looking man was called Yaogin the Fair — which made sense to her — and that he was a god and the head of the Division of Serenity. Other gods, and perhaps a few Sidereals, crowded out Reverie shortly afterward. Despite his age and experience, or perhaps because of it, Reverie seemed an outsider in his own division.

Keahi stood at attention before a woman even taller and more imposing than her — really, more imposing than even the nearby dragon. She wore elaborate blood-red armor and carried a spear from which flapped a martial pennant. A pair of wings rose from her back, large as her but shaped like those of a butterfly. They were as red as blood, except for the edges, which were trimmed

in the deepest black. This had to be Hu Dai Liang, who Palym had heard styled Lord General of the Division of Battles. Hu Dai Liang spoke dramatically and forcefully about the importance of maintaining stability in Creation, and even partygoers from other divisions appeared attentive to her declarations. Palym thought that Keahi looked as uncomfortable with the lecture as Palym herself would have been.

In contrast to the two warriors, Zannen had hunkered down next to what appeared to be a tower of shifting silk scarves and was speaking to it in hushed, confidential tones. Although Palym could not see the face of the person he was conversing with, she knew they had to be Nara-O of the Hundred Veils, head of the Division of Secrets. Palym wondered what Nara-O might look like under those veils, or what kind of person they might be, but the air of secrecy around them helped her resist the temptation to sneak up nearby and listen in. She also began to wonder if she really knew Zannen at all. She'd always considered him officious and bland, but he fit in with his division like a band of thieves.

At first, she couldn't find Cutting Remark. She wandered around for a while until she spotted him standing by himself in a darkened corner of a short alcove constructed entirely from carved obsidian. Though the light of the Unconquered Sun lit the golden deck with brilliant hues, those rays could not penetrate the darkness inside the alcove. The only lights Palym could see in there seemed to arise from two small orbs that were gazing at Cutting Remark. Then she realized she was staring into the eyes of Wayang, head of the Division of Endings. The god shifted his shadow-form almost imperceptibly, and Palym realized he was addressing her with some kind of sign language that she could understand with perfect clarity. "Greetings," he said without speaking, "and condolences."

Palym wasn't certain what he meant, but before she could ask, she made eye contact with Cutting Remark. His cool stare made her feel like an intruder, and she wondered if they had been talking about the loss of Hummingbird before she interrupted. Palym felt like she was probably the last person Cutting Remark wanted to see if that was the case, so she ducked away from his gaze.

She ended up finding a couch to sit on, to take a break from the crowds. She was joined shortly afterward by a god who resembled a heavyset man with a blue lotus gently shining at his throat. He was well-tanned, and he sighed with contentment at the opportunity for repose on the couch.

"You seem as thrilled about the crowd as I am," he said. Though he spoke in the tongue of the gods, he was slow and deliberate enough that Palym could understand him perfectly.

"Probably less. I think there are more people here than at the Great Forks city gate."

"And much stranger too, I would imagine, for someone caught fresh out of Creation."

Palym chuckled. "I'm not a fish. I'm Palym. Chosen of Journeys. I work with the Circle of Protection in the Ebony Office."

"I'm Odihna, Administrator of Fleeting Respite, Defender of the Long Deep Breath." When Palym failed to recognize his title, Odihna sighed. "I'm the god of vacations, assigned to the Division of Serenity."

"Oh, really? So if I want to take a vacation, are you the god to talk to?"

Odihna forced a chuckle, as if he'd heard that joke too often. "That would make sense, but no. It doesn't work like that. I work with my peers to determine what respites to weave into Creation's destiny through the Loom of Fate. I have authority to perform certain miracles as well, of course. If you'd like a night of uninterrupted sleep, I could arrange that."

Palym had to admit that sounded nice. "Can you do that for anyone who prays to you?"

"Theoretically. Particularly passionate worship sometimes cuts through the noise, but picking out individual prayers generally requires attention and time that I frankly don't have. Besides, the Bureau of Destiny has extensive regulations regarding appropriate responses to prayer. We want mortals to keep praying, of course, but we can't have them growing entitled."

Palym felt ill. She had been taught that the gods guided all things in Creation, and that a wise mortal would look for signs of divine intervention in everything. The gods might never respond overtly — and perhaps they were even capricious — but their secret wisdom was never hers to know. Now she was being told that gods barely noticed most prayer and that heavenly policy kept them from being too generous with their blessings.

Still, she made an effort to remain collected. "Do you have many worshippers?"

Odihna put his arms behind his head, and his smile faded. "I do all right for myself. In this time of unemployment — among even the gods — there are lots of idle hands out there. It's more comforting for them to imagine that it's just a vacation, rather than the rest of their lives. Worshipping me gives them something to do."

"I'd have thought you'd be happier about having so much prayer," Palym said.

"I'd be happiest of all to just do my job." Odihna fixed Palym with an intense gaze. "Not all gods are indolent and corrupt. Some of us think our actual work is more important than writing reports about it."

"I don't understand why Yu-Shan is like this," said Palym. "Can't the Incarnae fix this? Aren't they supposed to be powerful and wise?"

"I couldn't tell you," said the god, "I've never met them. They've been on 'sabbatical,' playing the Games of Divinity, for several thousand years."

Palym stood up abruptly from the couch and lurched toward the ship's railing. As when she'd first come to heaven, everything felt too real, too hopelessly mundane. Every time she thought there were greater forces at work, that her destiny ultimately made sense, she was reminded that nobody was really at the helm. Her fate was a cruel joke played on everyone around her, including the talented, beloved woman who gave her life for Palym's.

Palym leaned over the railing, but this time she didn't throw up. Instead she looked out and saw Yu-Shan as a bird might. From above, it looked vast and gorgeous, with new, brilliant details everywhere she looked. The Jade Pleasure Dome put it all to shame in scale and brilliance, casting no shadow because the sun was always directly above it.

As she leaned out, Palym noticed that she wasn't the only person to escape the party. A few gods walked along the Golden Barque's hull, casually chatting and ignoring the fact that they should be falling. Palym wondered if it was a miracle of theirs, or if the ship was responsible, and before she could think to stop herself, she clambered over the railing to find out. Her feet found solid purchase on the golden hull, and she laughed as she stood upright to see all of heaven turned on its side as she soared past. She looked around and saw miles of largely empty hull, and she began to run.

Doors, portholes, and supplemental masts dotted the massive hull, and Palym took a breathless delight in hopping and dodging these, as well as any gods she passed along the way. She shed yellow light as she ran with a joy she hadn't felt in ages. No, with *more* joy than that, for she was faster and lighter than ever. She turned against the heavy wind and fought it to reach the ship's prow for so long that she lost track of the time.

Palym was panting and stumbling along the ship's underside, Yu-Shan teetering overhead, when she reached the ship's end. She collapsed to her hands and knees, too physically exhausted to remember why she'd been running.

Palym didn't notice that she'd collapsed next to another woman already sitting there, until the other woman said, "You've arrived at one of my favorite spots."

Palym's gasps turned into a yelp, and she scrambled into a slightly more dignified sitting position. "Oh, sorry. I was just — I didn't mean to intrude."

The other woman looked human, with straw-colored hair and mud-splattered boots. She looked too ordinary to belong in Yu-Shan, which made Palym feel more at ease with her. Palym was just about to introduce herself when the other woman said, "Don't apologize. I'm about to leave."

The woman nearly stood, and Palym blurted, "Do you work for the Division of Journeys?"

The woman gave a half-smile, which Palym took as confirmation.

"Do you like it?" Palym asked.

The stranger gave the question a second's thought. "What would it mean if I did?"

"I..." Now it was Palym's turn to think. "It'd mean I could maybe learn to like it, too. Or at least get good at it."

"If you don't like the job, why are you still here?"

"I'm not sure if I like it or not. Because it doesn't seem like anyone else cares. The gods look at humans as just sources of prayer. And the other Sidereals are so jaded, or obsessed with their personal grudges. Maybe they used to care, but if I stay here long enough, I'm afraid I'll become like them."

"It happens more often than not," agreed the woman.

Palym felt horrified, then outraged. "I — is that all you have to say? You're not going to offer a comforting platitude or maybe even give me some advice?"

"Why would I do that?" asked the woman, as if mildly curious.

"Because it's the decent thing to do!"

"You think decency matters?" asked the woman.

"I guess I do!" shouted Palym, turning red.

"Then why are you working with people who don't remember how to be decent?"

Palym stopped short, at a loss for words. "I-I don't know. Don't they need me?"

"Do they know that?"

Palym tried to stutter out a response, overwhelmed by conflicting thoughts, but the other woman held up a hand to stall her. "It's time I left. It's been good meeting you, Palym."

"Wait," said Palym, as the other woman stood. "Who are you? Will I see you again?"

"If you keep your eyes open," said the straw-haired stranger. Then Palym blinked and was alone, as if there'd never been anyone else present.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“We’re going where?” Palym asked as the Circle rode a gondola along one of Yu-Shan’s high-speed canals.

“Yu-Shan’s Central Gate Plaza,” Cutting Remark said. While he had decided to accompany the rest of the Circle of Protection on this mission, his curt attitude made it clear that he wanted to have as little to do with the rest of them as possible. Palym wondered if Wayang had ordered him to get back to work with the rest of them when they’d visited the Golden Barque.

Either way, she wasn’t sure she was happy to have him along on the trip. She caught him staring at her every now and then, and he always turned away with a vicious grimace that he didn’t bother to hide. Despite that, she resolved to ignore him and act as professionally as possible.

“Which leads where?” she asked, hoping someone else would answer.

“The Imperial City, or close to it,” Reverie said. “The grandest city in all of Creation.”

“And the most dangerous, if we’re reckless.” Keahi scowled as she spoke. “It’s the capital of the Realm, the most powerful and militaristic empire in Creation. Its rulers are the Dragon-Blooded, Chosen of the Five Elemental Dragons. They hate and fear other Exalted, and there are a hundred or more of them for every Sidereal. It’s best that they don’t know we exist.”

Palym had heard of the place, of course. Though her village had been outside the empire’s reach, the exploits of the Dragon-Blooded were the stuff of legends. To hear people who’d been there tell it, the Imperial City was the center of all civilization. Her father used to tell her stories about it. There was no way she was leaving the rickshaw now.

“We have a report of a Black Flag there,” Zannen called from the back of the gondola, where he tended to the Circle’s horses. “We need to confirm what happened.”

“Endless destruction isn’t enough for you?” Reverie asked. “How about tremendous loss of life?”

“We have *reports*, and we all know how reliable such things can be. Even if the details turn out to be true, we need to investigate so we can determine the

actual causes behind the disaster, not just leap to unfounded conclusions like the public is often wont to do.”

The gondolier-god let them disembark near a plaza surrounded by twelve gates, dominated by the enormous Jade Pleasure Dome a few short miles away. Most of Yu-Shan’s gates were at the edges of the city, and Palym guessed that these central gates must all lead to the Blessed Isle in the center of Creation, home of the Realm.

As they approached the gate that would bring them near the Imperial City, the celestial lions stationed there recognized them and let them walk on through. Palym noticed that the lions were much more concerned about people coming into the places they were meant to protect than they were with people leaving them. Presumably, those who left were no longer a potential threat, right?

They walked through the gate into an obscure ruin hidden in beautiful, rolling countryside. They rode together along well-paved roads, passing peasants, wealthy carriages, and quiet processions of monks. Palym had heard that the Realm’s monks were fierce martial artists, and she kept her head down to avoid their attention. The others did the same, including Reverie.

In time, they approached the Imperial City. It was as grand and opulent as Palym had ever imagined, though nothing could compare to the overwhelming glory of Yu-Shan. Still, Palym felt a certain amount of pride as she looked up at the Imperial Palace, perched on a great three-legged platform above the city. Here was a place built by the Exalted, even if they were Exalted who might want her dead.

“Do we know where we’re heading?” Cutting Remark asked after they’d entered the city with false passports provided by Zannen.

“I think it’s pretty clear,” Keahi said, as they spied several construction crews at work. They labored to repair buildings apparently damaged by some great battle, with strange rust breaking open the earth. It looked like a giant had slashed through the city’s skin with an axe and left it scarred.

“This place looks familiar,” Cutting Remark said. “We’ve been here before.”

“Where haven’t we been?” Reverie said. “This little job of ours has dragged us all over Creation and back.”

“What happened here?” Palym said, unable to take her eyes off the remnants of the carnage.

“That’s what we’re about to find out,” Keahi said as she directed her mare past busy workers. The Circle of Protection members followed her down the length of the path of ruin. The strange rust followed the attack across all surfaces: metal, stone, and vegetation.

“How long ago did this happen?” Palym asked.

“About a week,” said Keahi. “Maybe more.”

“Why did we wait so long to investigate it?”

“The Dragon-Blooded were busy investigating the site themselves after destroying the beast,” Zannen said. “I thought it prudent to wait.”

“Is it safe now?”

Keahi laughed at the suggestion. “If it was safe, no one would have called for us.”

The five of them tried to remain unobtrusive as they examined the swath of destruction, which took them a quarter-mile from where they’d began.

“We were in this part of the city earlier in the year,” Cutting Remark said. “We were tracking a boon that had reportedly found its way into the hands of a mortal in this district.”

“I remember that,” Reverie said. “It turned out to be a false rumor. It had actually wound up in the grasp of Gri-Fel, the god of the Imperial City. Or at least he had it when we finally caught up with it.”

“Gods.” Keahi said the word not like a plea but a curse. “This monster got a quarter of the way across the city. Even though the Dragon-Blooded took it down, it must not have gone down easily.”

The shadows stretched longer as the Circle worked their way along the scar. Palym knew she could have forged ahead of the others on her own, but she didn’t know exactly what she was looking for. And though she had the power of an Exalt herself, she was terrified of accidentally revealing herself to the Dragon-Blooded.

Soon it became clear that the rust along the gash had poisoned nearby plant life and potentially water sources as well. Mortal soldiers had cordoned off areas where fires had burned poisoned plant-life and spread corrosive dust. Palym thought that well over a hundred people must have had to abandon their homes to stay healthy.

“At least in Diamond Hearth, the snow covered up all the wreckage,” she said aloud. “How is this ever going to heal here?”

“If you cannot handle something as trivial as this, then perhaps you should return to Yu-Shan,” Cutting Remark said, just as they finally came to the end of the destruction, the location where, it seemed, the troubles had begun. The destruction was near-total here, and less tightly patrolled because there was nothing left to protect.

“It’s not a weakness to express concern for the fate of the people who live in this part of Creation,” Reverie said, rising to Palym’s defense.

She wished he would have kept his mouth shut. She could tell that Cutting Remark was raw and on edge, looking for any excuse to start an argument. She wasn’t about to give him one, but apparently Reverie had no such reservations.

“You think I don’t care about the people of this land?” Cutting Remark said. “You’re absolutely right. They are nothing but leeches that benefit from the suffering of nations their Dragon-Blooded masters have conquered.”

"You don't mean that," Keahi said. Her tone betrayed the fact that she wasn't entirely sure about her declaration. Palym hoped she was right, but Cutting Remark seemed determined to dash all that.

"You're damn right I do. I've lived long enough to see the brutality that allows these people to prosper. Creation would be better off if these people hadn't been born at all. It's no surprise that someone decided to level a part of it."

That made even Zannen pause and turn to his longtime compatriot. "Come now," he said softly. "That's entirely uncharitable of you. We were all mortals once. Few of them have any choice in their fate."

Cutting Remark spun on the man. "You think I'm not aware of that? Of just how pointless their lives and deaths are? I know more about it than any of you!"

"Hold your tongue," Zannen said. "We just need to gather the evidence we'll find here, and we can leave. We'll have what we need to present our case against the Solars."

Cutting Remark pushed past him and starting ripping through the shattered place with his bare hands. "The Solars can all burn! They had nothing to do with this, and you know it. They don't have the brains to work up something like this. They don't have the contacts. The only ones who can twist one of these boons up in a way horrible enough to produce a Black Flag is a god!"

"We don't know that for sure," Zannen said as Cutting Remark kept tearing up piece after piece of the wreckage and throwing it aside. "And just because a god had to be involved doesn't mean the Solars weren't manipulating one."

Palym kept back, far out of range of the things Cutting Remark was flinging, or so she hoped. The man finally found something so heavy he had to yank at it with both hands. It didn't want to give.

"You see Solars behind every trouble in Creation, just like a Dragon-Blood would," Reverie said to Zannen. "We're investigators. Our job is to get to the truth, not to confirm our own prejudices. We should strive to keep an open mind, so we don't color our results."

"You want results, then help me move this damn wall!" Cutting Remark said.

Palym heard the husk of the building above them creak as the man hauled on the partially collapsed structure. "Are you sure that's such a good idea?" she asked quietly.

Cutting Remark spun on her, and for a moment she feared he might attack her, his eyes were full of such fire. "You do not have the right to question my judgment! You do not have the right to ask anything of me!"

Palym stepped back before the man's fury. As she did, Reverie came to her side to offer support.

“Take care,” he said to Cutting Remark. “She’s done nothing.”

“And that’s just the problem!” The man’s eyes went wild as he let himself fall into a long-suppressed rant. “She hasn’t done *anything*. She failed to save her friend. She failed to save herself. We had to jump in! And worst of all, *she failed to save my wife!*”

Palym felt Reverie’s hand on her back, an attempt to support her in the onslaught she faced. She shrugged it off and snarled in Cutting Remark’s face instead.

“I have had enough of this!” she shouted at the man. “How dare you decide to make me shoulder the burden of all your grief? I wasn’t trying to get anyone killed that day. Xiao and I got caught up with that horror entirely by accident and were only trying to help!”

Cutting Remark opened his mouth to respond, but Palym wouldn’t let him. She stepped toward him, stabbing a finger into his chest as she laid into him. “How am *I* to blame for the fact that anyone died that day? Much less one of the Chosen of the Five Maidens? You’re supposed to be some of the greatest heroes in all of Creation, right? It’s high time the whole lot of you started acting like it!”

She glared around, taking all the others into her accusations. “Hummingbird leaped in there, determined to save people, and she did. She not only saved Xiao and me but countless others she moved out of that monster’s way. The rest of you hung back to watch it, to study it, to try to understand it. She was the only one willing to risk her life to stop it!”

She leveled her gaze at each one of them in turn. “If there’s anyone to blame here for her death, it’s you. That’s what’s eating you all up inside.” She focused on Cutting Remark. “And you damn well know it.”

No one tried to answer her. Not one of them managed to meet her angry eyes.

“Forget you all,” Palym said as she began trudging her way back up out of the pit. “I quit.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Palym grumbled as she wandered through the streets of Great Forks. She and the rest of the Circle of Protection had returned to Yu-Shan in silence after Reverie and Keahi had uncovered the shrine buried behind the wall Cutting Remark had been trying to tear down. They'd found what they'd been looking for there: the remnants of a boon and perhaps some clues to the god or gods to which the shrine had been dedicated.

Palym no longer cared. She'd waited until they were back in the gate-ringed pavilion in Yu-Shan, and then she broke off from the Circle.

"I'd be happy to join you," Reverie said as she'd left the flying rickshaw. She'd ignored him, and he'd taken the hint. It wasn't that she hadn't appreciated the offer, but the last thing she'd wanted was company of any kind.

"Be careful," Keahi had said as the Circle boarded a gondola. Palym had decided to ignore those words too.

Palym had set her mind upon her destination — Great Forks — and threads of fate shone in yellow, illuminating her path. She had ridden her mare, Blaze, over busy streets and canal bridges. It had taken hours, moving at supernatural speeds and taking creative shortcuts, but Palym hadn't needed to be subtle or careful. She and Blaze found the gate she sought.

It was the middle of the night when she arrived in Great Forks. She'd become so accustomed to dealing with the irregular lighting in Yu-Shan that she'd almost forgotten what it was like to have to deal with the fall of darkness. Most of her time in heaven was brightly lit, with only a few short breaks when Luna or one of the Five Maidens had managed to squeak ahead in the Games of Divinity for a little bit. The fact that Yu-Shan was so bright most of the time told Palym how good the Unconquered Sun was at the Games of Divinity — or how rigged they were in his favor.

She walked through the streets of Great Forks, utterly lost. To her great surprise, no one accosted her, assaulted her, or tried to rob her. Over the years, the people of her village had told her many horrific stories of what happened to the people foolish enough to live in the big city.

The way she'd almost been killed by the Black Flag shortly after she arrived had originally seemed to confirm that fearmongering, but she didn't care

about that now. The monster's appearance had been a fluke, not something she could lay at the feet of the people who called Great Forks home. In fact, when she confessed to being lost and asked random strangers for directions to the site of the disaster, they uniformly were not only kind to her but warned her against going anywhere near the place. When she made her determination to find the area clear to them, they reluctantly pointed her in the right direction and wished her luck.

Eventually she found her way to the place where the Black Flag had laid waste to so much of the city, and to where it had killed Hummingbird. As she gazed into the pit, she realized that she couldn't lay the blame for that on the other members of the Circle of Protection either, any more than they could do so to her. It had all been a terrible tragedy, one that nobody had predicted.

If anyone was to blame, it would be whoever had twisted the Exigent and then allowed it to spring into existence in such a horrible way. Part of Palym wanted to believe that this had been a mistake. Who would have inflicted such misery on the world on purpose?

As Palym looked out over the site, she spotted a light flickering at the far end of the pit, and she decided to check it out. She couldn't think of a good reason for anything to be burning in such a place, but just in case a fire had somehow started down there, she wanted to put it out before it managed to spread. She sprinted down to the bottom of the pit, throwing caution to the wind.

Before she was chosen by Mercury, such a stunt might have afforded her an excellent chance to snap her neck. Now, though, she was able to race down the debris field as easily as if she was skipping down the lane that led from her family's farm to the center of her village.

When Palym reached the far end of the pit, she looked around for the area in which they'd found the shrine. It still stood dark, but the light she'd seen before was coming from a candle burning in the basement of the building next to it.

Palym crept over to the building, which was mostly intact. A door hung there, half off its hinges, and she could hear a voice murmuring behind it. No one responded to it, but it kept droning on.

Trying to be polite, Palym knocked on the door. The murmuring stopped at once, but no one inside moved.

Palym knocked again, and the light from the candle suddenly went out. She waited a moment longer and then knocked again.

"I know someone's in there," she said. "I'm not here to hurt you."

A flurry of movement came from inside the building, and an instant later, the door was flung open. Palym took a step back, unsure of the intentions of whoever was there. Fortunately, the person didn't attack. Instead, she held her candle out to see Palym better.

It was Xiao.

The young woman held her place for a few moments, uncertain and wary. "I know you... Don't I?"

Palym's heart skipped a beat. She knew that Sidereals tended to slip from mortal memory, but she couldn't help answering with a teasing grin, as if they'd never been apart. "Come on, of course you do!"

"*Palym*," said Xiao, as if everything suddenly made sense, and she stepped forward to wrap her old friend up in a strong embrace.

Palym returned it in kind. "Xiao!" she said. "I can't believe I found you!"

"It worked!" Xiao said as she pushed Palym back to arm's length to get a good look at her in the light of the half-moon that had risen in the sky. "It worked!"

Palym didn't understand what Xiao meant, but she was so pleased to have found Xiao that she couldn't help laughing anyway. "Where have you been?" she asked.

"Where have *I* been? I thought you were dead! I've been here searching for you every day since we first came here."

"For me? Really?"

Xiao paused, thinking the question through. "Yes. It had to have been for you. I thought for sure that monster had killed you, but I knew I could never go back home without some kind of proof. If I tried to tell your mother I never saw your body, she would have insisted on marching straight back here to search for you until the end of days. I held onto that, even when I felt alone."

As Xiao spoke, she sounded more certain of her story, as if remembering more about Palym after years apart. Palym listened in wonder. She had never imagined that she'd be thankful for Xiao's stubborn refusal to go anywhere without Palym pulling her along, but she was more grateful than she could express.

"I'm sorry," Palym said, grinning. "I've been busy. Very, very busy."

"Well, that's one of us, at least! I've been hunting for work in between searching for you, but I haven't landed anything. Seems that having a monster knock down a few blocks in your city makes people a little cautious about trusting outsiders."

"I suppose so!"

Xiao looked her up and down, astonished at what she saw. "But you, you look fantastic! Where have you been?"

Palym answered a little sheepishly and pointed up in the sky. "Heaven?"

Xiao did a double take at her. "You're not a spirit who's taken my friend's form, are you?" She poked Palym in the arm. "You're solid enough. Are you possessed?"

She giggled. “No, I — I became one of the Exalted. You know, a hero.”

Xiao’s eyes grew wide. “Are you kidding me?”

Palym gave her a solemn shake of her head. “Not one bit.”

She had no idea how Xiao would react to this. Would she be jealous? Angry? Wistful? Palym had had such a long day with the rest of the Circle of Protection that she feared the worst.

“That is so fantastic!” Xiao took Palym by the hands and began jumping up and down, face split by a wide grin. “Wow! I can’t believe it. What’s it like?”

“It’s hard to describe,” Palym said, considering the question. Ever since she’d awakened in Yu-Shan, she’d had more energy. She felt stronger, tougher, smarter, better. Her dreams were certainly more intense too. “But it’s wonderful.”

Xiao cocked her head and smiled. “Wow. Wow, wow, wow. That’s so great for you.” She seemed genuinely happy for Palym. She gestured with her candle for Palym to come into her humble room, and the candle blew out. “Damn. Hold on and let me light this.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Palym focused her will and found the Essence within her, ready to be breathed out into Creation. She let a spark of that Essence burn as the candle had, and it lit up the symbol of Mercury on her forehead. Bold yellow light flowed from Palym’s brow, illuminating the hovel.

“Gods be praised,” Xiao said. She stared at her shining friend with newfound respect. “How beautiful.”

“It’s just a little trick. Nothing to it.”

“So easy you could teach me to do it?”

“Well...”

They laughed, and Xiao led Palym over to a low mattress stuffed into one corner of the room. They each sat on one end of it. As she looked around, Palym saw a small figure next to it that resembled a large-bellied man lying fast asleep. It was probably the nicest thing in the place, which smelled of must and dust.

“You just moved in down here?” she asked as she sat down.

“The price was right,” Xiao said with a wry chuckle. “A few people tried to run me off, but that wasn’t because they owned the place or anything like that.” She leaned over and spoke confidentially. “They said it was for my own safety, but I think they were just jealous.”

“Have you been able to find anything to eat at least?”

“Oh!” Xiao leaped up and dashed for her knapsack, which sat crumbled in another corner of the room. “I’m such a rotten host. I didn’t offer you anything to eat or drink!”

Palym waved her off. “It’s okay,” she said. “I’m fine.”

Xiao seemed more relieved by that than she wanted to be. “To be fair, I don’t have much to offer you anyhow. But whatever I have is yours!”

“Thanks,” Palym said with a smile.

Xiao sat back down on the mattress, which sent up a small puff of dust. “So,” she said, “I don’t suppose they have any more openings up there?”

“For Exalted?” That was a question Palym barely knew how to answer. “I don’t think it works like that. They only brought me in because the monster killed someone and my Maiden — Mercury — she needed a replacement. Apparently, I was fated to become one of the Exalted, but not for a few more years.”

Xiao grunted. “I figured,” she said. “I always knew you were destined for greatness. Why do you think I decided to come to Great Forks with you?”

Palym pretended to be shocked. “I thought it was because we were best friends.”

“Oh, sure, that too.” They fell to laughing with each other.

Palym looked around the place. She knew she couldn’t leave Xiao there, not one more night. But she wasn’t sure what else she could do. If she tried to bring Xiao back to Yu-Shan with her, what would the rest of the Circle of Protection say?

She gazed at Xiao and realized that she’d didn’t care one bit about that. “Hey,” she said tentatively. “How would you like to sneak into heaven?”

Xiao’s face lit up like the holidays had come early. “Are you serious?”

“I have my own quarters up there, and there’s plenty of room. I don’t think they’ll have any jobs for you though. They don’t even have enough for the gods who live there.”

“You’re joking.”

She shook her head. “But it’s a wonderful place, and my assistant can help take care of you when I’m working.”

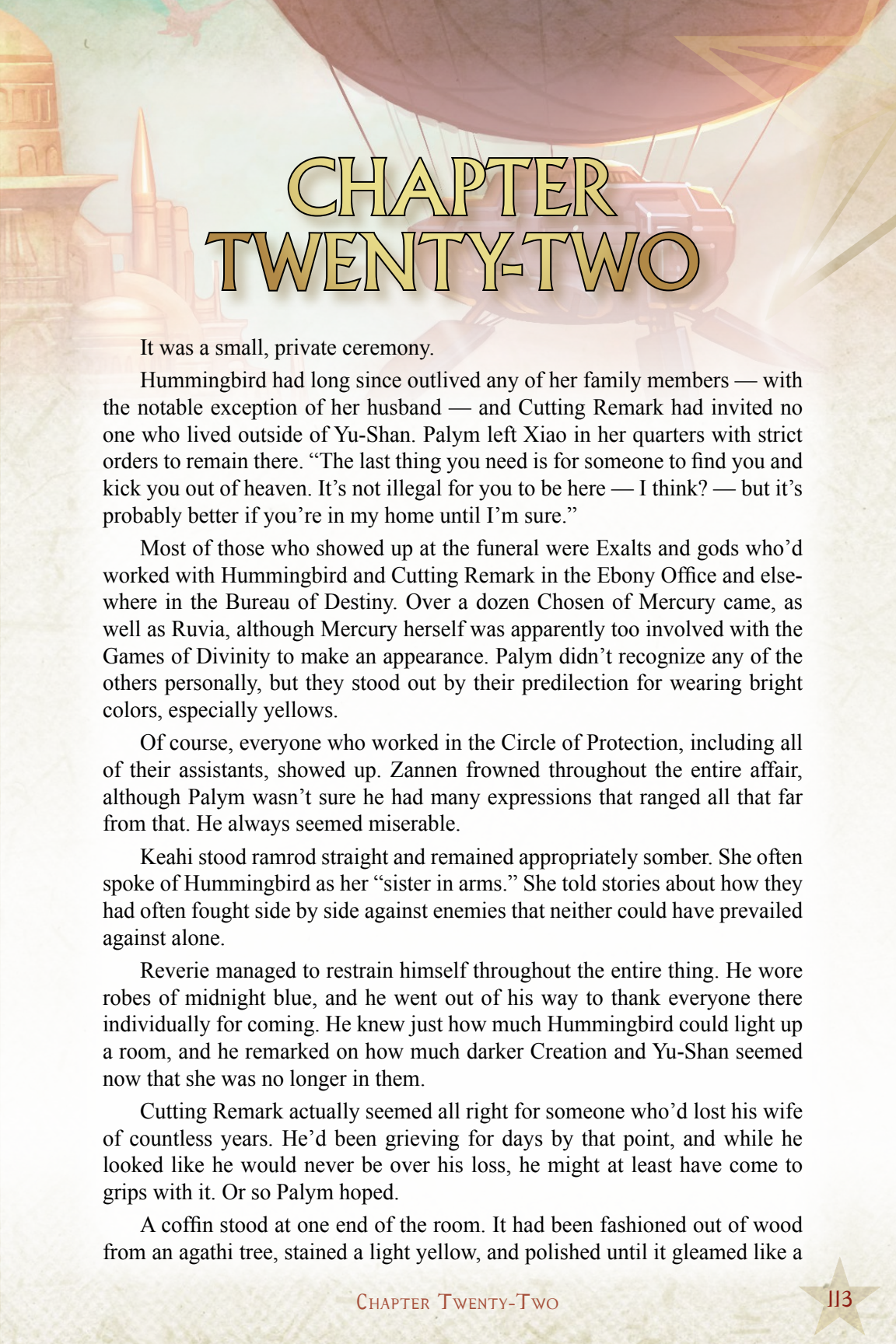
“Yes!” he said. “You had me the moment you said ‘assistant’ and ‘take care of you.’ Yes, yes, yes!”

“Are you sure?” she said in a mocking tone. “I don’t want you to rush into this.”

“Sign me up for a life among the gods! And the Exalts, or whatever you are now. It’s got to beat sleeping in this rickety hole!” Xiao leaped to her feet and set about gathering her things. This amounted to sweeping her little idol and cold candle into her backpack.

Palym glanced around again. “Really. I don’t want to take you away from this place. Not if you don’t want to.”

“Want?” Xiao said as she marched out the door ahead, leading the way for once. “More like *need*.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It was a small, private ceremony.

Hummingbird had long since outlived any of her family members — with the notable exception of her husband — and Cutting Remark had invited no one who lived outside of Yu-Shan. Palym left Xiao in her quarters with strict orders to remain there. “The last thing you need is for someone to find you and kick you out of heaven. It’s not illegal for you to be here — I think? — but it’s probably better if you’re in my home until I’m sure.”

Most of those who showed up at the funeral were Exalts and gods who’d worked with Hummingbird and Cutting Remark in the Ebony Office and elsewhere in the Bureau of Destiny. Over a dozen Chosen of Mercury came, as well as Ruvia, although Mercury herself was apparently too involved with the Games of Divinity to make an appearance. Palym didn’t recognize any of the others personally, but they stood out by their predilection for wearing bright colors, especially yellows.

Of course, everyone who worked in the Circle of Protection, including all of their assistants, showed up. Zannen frowned throughout the entire affair, although Palym wasn’t sure he had many expressions that ranged all that far from that. He always seemed miserable.

Keahi stood ramrod straight and remained appropriately somber. She often spoke of Hummingbird as her “sister in arms.” She told stories about how they had often fought side by side against enemies that neither could have prevailed against alone.

Reverie managed to restrain himself throughout the entire thing. He wore robes of midnight blue, and he went out of his way to thank everyone there individually for coming. He knew just how much Hummingbird could light up a room, and he remarked on how much darker Creation and Yu-Shan seemed now that she was no longer in them.

Cutting Remark actually seemed all right for someone who’d lost his wife of countless years. He’d been grieving for days by that point, and while he looked like he would never be over his loss, he might at least have come to grips with it. Or so Palym hoped.

A coffin stood at one end of the room. It had been fashioned out of wood from an agathi tree, stained a light yellow, and polished until it gleamed like a

mirror. It had no seams, much less a lid or any way to open it. It stood on a bare metal frame, which held it like a museum piece.

After everyone had gathered, Cutting Remark stood next to the coffin and spoke. "Thank you all for joining us today. We're gathered here not to mourn Hummingbird but to celebrate her life. As most of you know, she lived long and well, and she shined as bright as any star in the night sky.

"I had the honor and privilege of being her husband for over a hundred years. In Yu-Shan — a place in which longevity often leads to idleness and discontent — that seems to be some kind of record. But let me tell you, it was never a challenge.

"Perhaps it's because we both believed in our work. In helping our Maidens. In making Creation a better place. But we never tired of each other. Every day with her was a new delight. In the sky of my life, she outshone the sun.

"Those of you who shared her with me have my eternal gratitude. You know that she could, at times, be... the word is clearly 'mercurial.' But she was never unkind. She never failed to see not only the good in people but how they could become even better.

"She was the most amazing person I have ever known — and I have lived in Yu-Shan and traveled all over Creation. She was my favorite person in all of it, and I was blessed to spend as much time with her as I did."

He turned then to gaze at her coffin. He paused for a moment while he choked back a sob. When he spoke again, his voice was thick with emotion.

"I know I don't have any justification to complain. I had more time with you than I had any right to expect. We loved each other for a lifetime. I just — I thought we would have more."

He laid a hand on her coffin. "You deserved more."

Palym felt tears welling up in her own eyes. She hoped that she might someday find a love that would last as long and burn as bright as that between Cutting Remark and Hummingbird. Right now, though, she just wanted to get through the day without anyone accusing her of trying to take Hummingbird's place.

Of course, she had done just that, in the sense that she'd replaced her as one of the Chosen of Mercury. And that she'd joined the Circle of Protection. But she had never asked for either position. She'd been called, and she'd answered.

Not that she recalled being given a choice.

Cutting Remark opened the floor for others to say a few words about Hummingbird. A few people she didn't recognize, but who'd apparently known Hummingbird for untold years, stepped forward and said a few kind things about her.

Reverie told a funny story about a misunderstanding between him and Hummingbird that made everyone laugh. He continued. "I liked to call her the

Chosen,” he said. “Or rather, the Multiple Choice. Chosen by Mercury. Chosen by Cutting Remark. Chosen by fate.”

Everyone chuckled at him. “But she always challenged me on that. She wasn’t the sort to let a clever joke lie. If it was clever, that meant it was worth tangling with. ‘Chosen? Chosen for what?’ she always said.

“I always had a flip answer for her. Chosen for good. Chosen for fun. Chosen for dinner. She never accepted that, though. She wanted to know the real answer. The truth.”

He gazed at her coffin. “Now that’s one riddle I’m going to have to struggle with on my own.”

Keahi glorified her friend’s prowess in battle. “She darted about like a hummingbird, perhaps, but she stung like a scorpion. She always knew where everyone was in a fight. Who she had to take on first. Who she could ignore.”

Keahi shook her head. “I never thought she could be killed in a fight. She was like lightning out there. How do you kill lightning?”

Zannen said of her, “She always did what had to be done,” which was apparently the highest praise he could bestow upon anyone. “I admired her not only for her abilities but especially for her integrity. She never shirked her duties, and when there was something that needed doing, she was always the first to step forward to take it on.

“I suppose that’s what doomed her in the end. She saw what none of the rest of us could see: how dangerous that Black Flag really was. And she was willing to do whatever it took to put an end to it and save as many lives as possible in the process. Even if that meant losing her own.”

When those three were done, Cutting Remark asked if anyone else had something to share. Everyone glanced around at each other, but no one felt compelled to step forward. Cutting Remark gestured toward Palym then, and her heart froze.

“Would you like to say anything?” he asked.

Palym didn’t see how she could worm her way out of that. She stood up and cleared her throat and tried to find the words. A moment later, she spoke.

“Thank you,” she said. “I just want to say thank you so much to Hummingbird. I didn’t know her at all. I never even got to speak with her. But in her final moments, she affected me so much.

“She literally saved my life. She sacrificed herself so that I could live.

“I don’t know what she saw in me that she thought was worth paying such a heavy price. I don’t want to question her judgment, but...”

The others in the room chuckled at her. Even Cutting Remark, who looked at her with a strange fondness.

She steeled herself so that she could finish. “All I know is that I am going to spend the rest of my days doing my best to prove that she was right.”

With that, she sat back down and wiped her weepy eyes.

Cutting Remark allowed a moment for everyone to absorb that. Then he asked one last time. “Anyone else?”

The people in the room peered around. After a time, Ruvia stood and walked toward the coffin. Many in the room turned to give him greater attention.

“I’ll only take a moment,” the god said with a weary smile as he gazed out over the room. “I’m pleased to see so many friends here, including most of Mercury’s Chosen. I’m happy to see the support you’re showing your comrade as she leaves us.”

He turned toward the coffin and put his hand on it. “Few have ever earned as much of my respect as Hummingbird. She served Mercury with so much friendliness and alacrity, two qualities I believe Mercury prizes.

“I wish Hummingbird was with us still today. By our best estimates of fate, she should have remained with us for many more years, and it’s a cruel twist that she was taken from us so early. But we must not dwell on that.

“I like to think of the Tapestry as the map of Creation, and a map — as every traveler knows — is not reality. It’s only an approximation of it. Once you’ve mapped out everything, as it always seems the Bureau of Destiny is trying to manage, you run out of things to explore.

“But when a disaster like this comes along — and it *is* a disaster, make no mistake about that — there can be some good that comes with it. It has created a hole in our map. Think about that for a moment.

“Suddenly, there are new places to explore, new possibilities to contemplate, new things that might happen.

“New things can be terrifying, I know. Again, that’s why the Bureau of Destiny has gone to such amazing lengths to determine everything it can about Creation and Yu-Shan. But as members of the Division of Journeys, we are agents of change, no matter how terrifying they may be.

“While none of us would have wished for the world to change in this way, there’s part of me who wants to think of this as Hummingbird’s parting gift to us. To leave the world even more interesting than when she was in it. If she had to go, I like to think she would have chosen to depart like that.”

Ruvia patted the coffin. The other attendees stayed silent as he thought.

“I filed a request to send off Hummingbird with a truly special honor, and Mercury has approved. I’m going to bring Hummingbird up into the stars, where a light like hers can always shine. If you look up into the sky the next time you get a chance, and you see a brand-new one twinkling down at you, well, maybe that’s her.

“But maybe it’s not. Maybe it’s a star that’s always been there, and you just noticed it now for the first time ever.

“So, I’m not going to tell you where I’m going to put her. That would ruin the fun. Instead, I want you to scour the sky for her. I want you to think you’ve found her and then realize you’re wrong. And I want you to keep looking.

“It’s in the looking itself that you will truly find her.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“I need to apologize to you,” Cutting Remark said when Hummingbird’s wake was over. Everyone else had gone home one by one, leaving only Palym there. She had offered to help clean up, but Cutting Remark insisted there was a crew ready and waiting to take care of everything.

“With so many gods unemployed, we can’t go doing their jobs for them now, can we?” he said. “At least not here.”

They and the rest of the attendees had drunk many toasts to Hummingbird, enough so that Palym’s head was spinning. She had spent much of the wake apart from Cutting Remark, but as the evening wound down, she found she didn’t want to leave. It wasn’t just that she had Xiao waiting for her at home and wasn’t quite sure what to do with her yet.

For one, it was a wonderful gathering of amazing people, the kind that would have stunned her into silence a month before.

On top of that, she felt like she was finally starting to get to know her compatriots in the Circle of Protection. At the Ebony Office, on the job, everyone acted professionally, which meant they had their guard up. With the notable exception of Reverie, of course, whose guard involved seeming less professional.

At the wake, they’d been far more relaxed. More willing to chat about anything and everything. More able to reveal themselves.

Palym had enjoyed that. Reverie had seemed more at home with so many people around. Keahi hadn’t challenged her to a thumb-wrestling match much less a fight. Even Zannen had managed to chuckle at her.

Palym had mostly tried to give Cutting Remark his space though. He had so many people approaching him, offering their condolences, and sharing memories about Hummingbird with him. He didn’t need her interfering with that.

As she’d had more to drink, Palym had decided that she needed to sit down. She’d never had more than a glass of wine back in her village, except on the night of the farewell party her family had thrown for her and Xiao. She wasn’t used to being inebriated at all.

She thought she’d just set her head down to rest for a bit. She didn’t even realize everyone else had gone until Cutting Remark sat down next to her and cleared his throat.

She blushed hard at him as she realized that she was the last guest there at his wife's wake. "I'm so sorry," she said. "Actually, I've been wanting to say that to you all night, but about Hummingbird, not about myself. I suppose now I should say it again. I'm sorry."

He put his hand on the couch between them in a comforting gesture. "I think you've apologized enough already," he said. "I think she would have appreciated the fact that the woman who replaced her was the last to leave her wake. She always hated to leave a party, too."

He gazed off into the distance, probing his memories of her. "So many times, I would ask her to leave, and she would beg to stay. 'Just a little longer. The party's just getting started!' And you know what? She was always right. I was always glad we stuck around."

Palym could see the man's misery carved into the lines on his face. She knew the Exalted aged slowly, but she thought he'd grown much older in the very short time she'd known him. "You must miss her terribly."

She smacked herself in the face. "Of *course* you do! I'm so sorry. About me this time. I'm an idiot."

He laughed through his nose at her in a warm, kind way. "You're as sharp as a warrior's blade. And I appreciate your sentiment. It seems to be something the best Chosen of Mercury have in common."

"What's that?" She wasn't entirely sure what he meant.

"You wear your heart on your sleeve. You say what you mean, and you mean what you say." He marveled at her and the thoughts of his wife. "You don't know how much I miss exactly that trait right now."

"My parents always told me to be careful about that," Palym said, surprised he would be so positive with her about anything. "Especially when they heard I wanted to move to Great Forks. They worried people would use it to take advantage of me."

Cutting Remark gave her a knowing frown. "They weren't entirely wrong about that, I'm afraid. As you saw from the moment you entered the city, it can be dangerous."

Memories of the battle against the Black Flag pushed both of them into silence. A moment later, Cutting Remark continued.

"While there's little as dangerous to you as a monster like that, you really need to watch out for the subtler troubles a nature like yours can bring you. This is a problem that Hummingbird struggled with for her entire life. She loved widely, and — sometimes — she trusted too much.

"No one needs to warn you to stay away from gigantic monstrosities capable of knocking down entire buildings. Any sensible person can see them coming and run away from them."

Palym ducked her head. "I kind of moved toward it."

“I did say *sensible*,” he said with a dry chuckle. “But the real danger I think — not to your body, but to something far more important inside you, your soul — comes from the people who pretend to help you. Who pretend to be your allies. Or even your friends. And when they need to, they betray you, for whatever reason they like.

“It’s not that these are necessarily bad people, which is part of what makes them so hard to detect and avoid. They just have a different agenda than yours, and they’re willing to sacrifice you, or at least your happiness, for it. When it comes down to getting something they want, they don’t hesitate about that. They might even applaud themselves for it and tell you that you’re a fool for having trusted in them in the first place.”

He fell silent then, and she regarded him quietly.

“Did that happen to her often?”

“Well. When you think about the number of incidents compared to the years she lived, it didn’t happen very frequently. Still, it happened too often. Every time, she would come to me afterward and weep about the fact that she’d been betrayed and how much that hurt her.

“The funny part — by which I mean *odd*, as there wasn’t much actually humorous about it — is that she wasn’t usually all that angry about what the person had done. She was more frustrated with herself for not having seen through them before they did the hurtful thing.”

“What did she do about that?”

Cutting Remark shrugged. “She learned to live with it. She would keep her guard up as best she could, but the fact is that she preferred to be open and trusting and loving and friendly, even though she’d been hurt. She couldn’t bear to change herself just because she’d been burned before. She just learned to accept the fact that it would inevitably happen again.

“When you live as long as we do — did — things tend to recur in your life. It’s inevitable.”

“What did you do to these people?” Palym asked. “The ones who betrayed her?”

Cutting Remark sighed. “There’s not much to do in most cases. If they committed a crime, I could appeal to our superiors. But as beautiful as Yu-Shan might seem — or, at least, as beautiful as it once was — it’s run by a bureaucracy that’s become painfully corrupt.

“This kind of system rewards those who are untrustworthy, who are willing to sell out their compatriots. When their superiors care only about power and influence and not how best to *use* those things, there are few consequences for such people. The best you can do, sometimes, is cut them out of your lives. But that’s not always possible either. Or advisable.”

Palym stared at him, confused. “How so?”

"I have a number of friends I do not trust. I know that I cannot trust them, and I know what issues over which they cannot be trusted. I have seen them tested, and I have seen where they fail.

"They are actually better to have around me than people I don't know and have not yet tested. They are predictable. If they disappoint me over a point I know they cannot be trusted on, then I'm at fault. I might as well get angry at a dog for barking at strangers. It's what a dog does."

Palym sat back in her chair and narrowed her eyes at him. "Just who are you trying to warn me about?"

Cutting Remark seemed to find that amusing. He got up from the table to leave, and he gestured for her to do the same.

"Is there someone inside the Circle of Protection I need to worry about?" she pressed.

"How well do you know any of us?"

"You know the answer to that."

"Then you should worry about all of us. Me included. I could warn you about certain people within the Circle. Perhaps every one of them. Would you take those warnings seriously? Or would they simply color your attitude toward me?"

"Speak plainly," she said with a groan as she let him lead her to the exit and into the streets beyond. Her place wasn't too far away, but he seemed determined to ensure she made it to it safely. "I'm too tired and drunk to do this dance any longer."

"I could tell you my opinions, but you need to form your own. I tell you now, though, you shouldn't trust anyone — no one — until you've tested them on your own and seen how loyal they are to you."

"That's insane," Palym said. "How could anyone live that way?"

"That's exactly how Hummingbird felt."

"What do you mean? I can't trust anyone? Not my assistant Qing?"

"How well do you know her?"

"I'm new here! I don't know anyone! Do you mean I shouldn't even trust Ruvia?"

"Now you're starting to understand."

"That's just crazy. I can't live like that."

"Sure you can. My wife learned how to handle it."

"How long did it take her?"

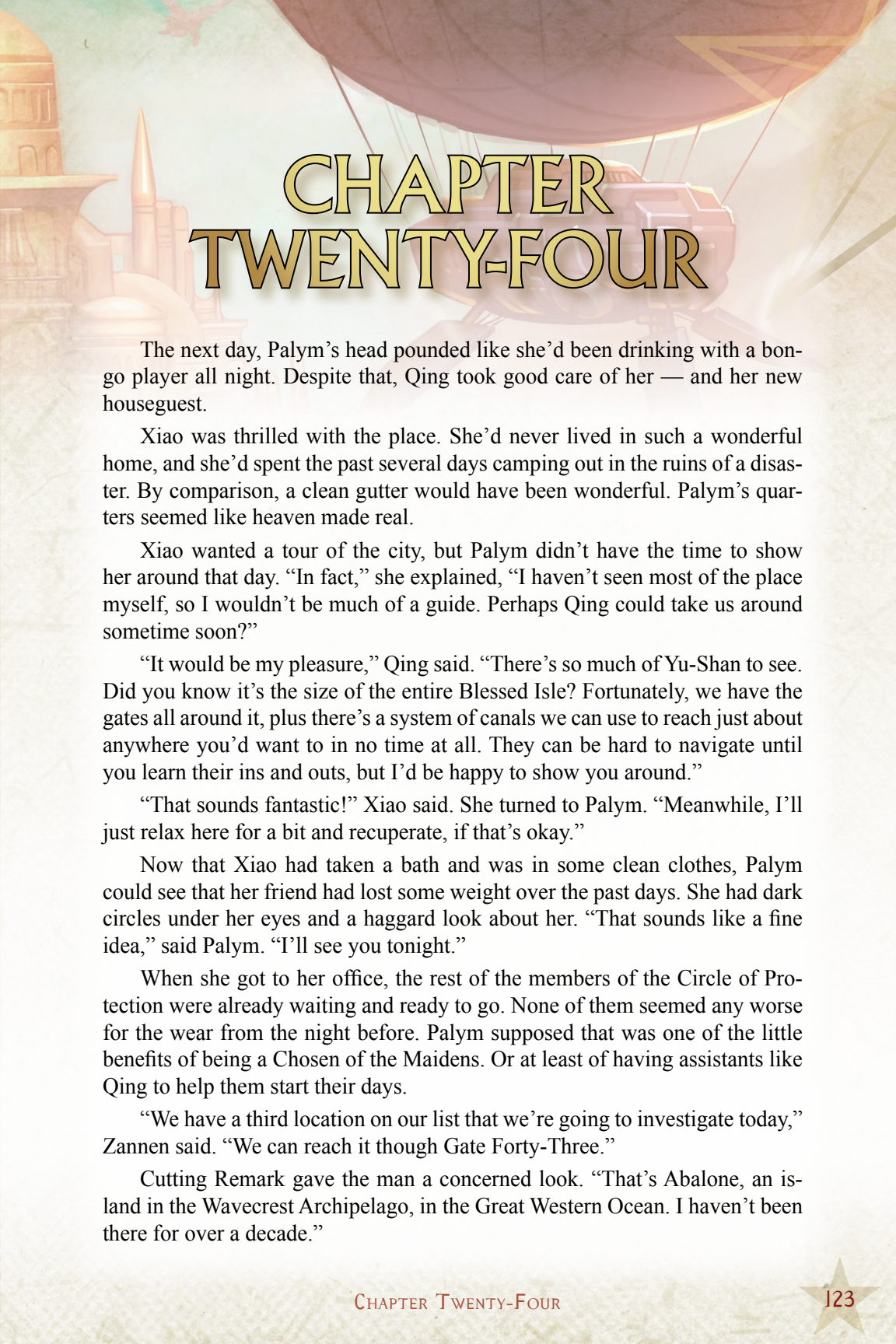
Cutting Remark wagged his head back and forth as he considered the question. "A hundred years?" He grunted. "Honestly, maybe she never really learned. But she tried. She never stopped trying."

He patted her on the back as they arrived in the courtyard outside of her quarters. “I don’t expect you to either. That’s the one thing she would have wanted from you. Well, two things. Be true to yourself, and don’t ever give up. You do that, and you’re going to be fine.”

Palym looked up at the man. At that moment, he reminded her of her grandfather. “I’ll do my best, but I don’t think I’ll ever be able to replace her.”

He squeezed her shoulder, and before he left he said, “Of course not. She was one of a kind. But so are you.”





CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The next day, Palym's head pounded like she'd been drinking with a bongo player all night. Despite that, Qing took good care of her — and her new houseguest.

Xiao was thrilled with the place. She'd never lived in such a wonderful home, and she'd spent the past several days camping out in the ruins of a disaster. By comparison, a clean gutter would have been wonderful. Palym's quarters seemed like heaven made real.

Xiao wanted a tour of the city, but Palym didn't have the time to show her around that day. "In fact," she explained, "I haven't seen most of the place myself, so I wouldn't be much of a guide. Perhaps Qing could take us around sometime soon?"

"It would be my pleasure," Qing said. "There's so much of Yu-Shan to see. Did you know it's the size of the entire Blessed Isle? Fortunately, we have the gates all around it, plus there's a system of canals we can use to reach just about anywhere you'd want to in no time at all. They can be hard to navigate until you learn their ins and outs, but I'd be happy to show you around."

"That sounds fantastic!" Xiao said. She turned to Palym. "Meanwhile, I'll just relax here for a bit and recuperate, if that's okay."

Now that Xiao had taken a bath and was in some clean clothes, Palym could see that her friend had lost some weight over the past days. She had dark circles under her eyes and a haggard look about her. "That sounds like a fine idea," said Palym. "I'll see you tonight."

When she got to her office, the rest of the members of the Circle of Protection were already waiting and ready to go. None of them seemed any worse for the wear from the night before. Palym supposed that was one of the little benefits of being a Chosen of the Maidens. Or at least of having assistants like Qing to help them start their days.

"We have a third location on our list that we're going to investigate today," Zannen said. "We can reach it though Gate Forty-Three."

Cutting Remark gave the man a concerned look. "That's Abalone, an island in the Wavecrest Archipelago, in the Great Western Ocean. I haven't been there for over a decade."

"I've never been there," Reverie said. "But I hear they have beautiful people."

"When they're not busy tossing them into their volcano to appease the volcano god," Keahi said.

"They do *not*!" Palym said in astonished disbelief. "Do they?"

"The god of Hamoji, the greatest of their volcanoes, is a hungry one."

"So hungry that he would eat his own people?"

"It's not the way most gods prefer to gauge the dedication of their followers, but there's one thing you know about the people of Abalone. They're *committed*."

The trip to the island was quicker than the others. They used their flying rickshaw to bring them to the proper gate, and the celestial lions waved them through. They walked through on foot and needed to travel only a few miles to reach their destination.

Abalone was a lush and gorgeous tropical island dotted with villages all along its extensive coast. Behind these stretched countless orchards, plantations, and farms. Beyond those towered several mountains, one of which was smoking. It let out a low rumble, audible from many miles away, and belched a cloud of burning rocks high into the air.

"Looks like they haven't fed Hamoji well enough," Keahi said. "At least not today."

Keahi seemed to know Abalone well. Palym remembered she'd mentioned coming to the place before, when they had started her combat training. She wondered if Keahi had been to the island since the swordsmanship training she'd spoken of.

"The Feathered One better get moving on feeding that damn thing," Keahi said. "Time to empty out the prisons."

"Why do you think Hamoji is so angry?" Palym said.

"It probably has something to do with that," Reverie said as he pointed downward.

Palym peered down and spotted what he had: a large gash in the land, expelling a billowing cloud of foul smoke. Unlike in the other locales they'd investigated, this damage seemed to be far away from the city. Instead, it slashed across a pineapple plantation, laying waste to dozens of rows of the plants for at least a hundred yards.

"That doesn't seem so bad compared to the others," Palym said. "I mean, a lot fewer people had to be hurt, right?"

"In the sense that probably only a handful of plantation workers were caught up in it, yes," Cutting Remark said. "But in the long term, this may do far more damage."

“Isn’t it better to lose a plantation than to have a chunk of a city destroyed?”

“Not if the destruction exposed a vein of lava,” Zannen said. “Smell the sulfur in the air? That would anger Hamoji, I imagine.”

“We could probably go ask him, if we went back and fetched the rickshaw,” Reverie said.

“Couldn’t we talk to him in Yu-Shan?” Palym asked.

“Hamoji is a Terrestrial god,” said Zannen. “He lives here in Creation, with the other gods tasked with caring for Creation’s physical needs. The Celestial gods who live in heaven oversee grander concepts and phenomena.”

“Many Terrestrials resent that they’re not important enough to live in Yu-Shan,” added Reverie, confidentially. “But Hamoji’s probably better off in Creation. He’s got thousands of worshippers across the Wavecrest Archipelago — and no need for a Celestial salary.”

As they hiked closer, Palym could feel the heat rising from the gash in the earth. A heavysset, dark-skinned man with long black hair strolled out of the plantation house to greet them. He had a wide and pleasant smile on his face, although Palym couldn’t help but think it seemed a bit forced. He gave them a greeting in a language that Palym didn’t understand, and Reverie stepped forward to greet him in return. After a minute of conversation, the man began to bow to them all.

Reverie reported to the others, “I’ve told him we’re Dragon-Blooded from the Blessed Isle, and we’re here to investigate what happened to his land. Everyone give me your hands, so I can help us understand each other.”

The Circle and the mortal landowner took Reverie’s hand, and he spent a few minutes reciting a ceremonial blessing for the prosperity of all present. It struck Palym as strangely similar to a marriage ceremony, but when it was done, they were all able to understand each other.

The man’s grin was broader and more nervous than before. “Well! It’s not every day that we get visitors from the Blessed Isle. I just wish it was under better circumstances. This incident has all but destroyed my crops for the year. I can’t get my workers back in the fields for fear that the ground will crumble further and reveal more of Hamoji’s burning blood!”

“He means magma,” Keahi explained to the rest of the Circle.

“Do you have any idea how it might have started?” asked Zannen.

The man shrugged. “I know exactly how it started. For all the good that will do anyone.”

The Exalts all exchanged glances at each other. Palym felt hope leap in her heart. They might finally be getting somewhere.

“Please explain, sir,” Cutting Remark said.

“My name is Kawalme.” The man gestured proudly. “This is our plantation. My wives and daughters mostly run it, while my sons and I bring our fruits into town to sell them.

“One of my wives is not so happy here. She is my second wife, and you know how those middle ones get. Not the first, so she doesn’t have the longest history with me, and no longer the newest. She just feels left out.”

While Palym sympathized with Kawalme’s wife, she wondered if the woman would say the same thing as her husband about why she wasn’t happy.

“Anyhow,” he glanced at Keahi, and gave her a go-ahead gesture. “Why don’t you tell them?”

Keahi scoffed at the man. “Why should I know?”

“Weren’t you here just a few weeks ago?” The man cocked his head at her. “I could have sworn I saw her chatting with you.”

Keahi shook her head, seemingly mystified. “I haven’t been out this way in years.”

Kawalme waved off the topic. “I must be confusing you with someone else. Anyhow, my wife, Wimakay, she was feeling neglected. She prayed to Hamoji, of course, but it seems he was too busy to pay attention to her troubles. So she tried other gods, any gods who she thought might listen to her.

“She had a shrine set up in one of the old workhouses on the edge of our main pineapple field.” He gestured toward a small, whitewashed building, the front of which had been blown out and blackened by fire. “She worshipped many gods, hoping that one of them would finally be able to produce a solution to her problems.”

He flushed a bit. “I have to admit. I wasn’t as good as a husband as I should have been to her. I thought she was going through a phase and I just needed to give her enough time to work it through. Maybe if I’d been paying more attention to her, it wouldn’t have happened.”

He grew solemn then and silent.

Palym wanted to ask him what had gone wrong, but Cutting Remark waved her off with a waggle of a finger. She let the man recover before he continued.

“I didn’t see her, but one of my daughters did — my eldest with her. She said her mother came back from the city with a package under her arm and went into the workhouse. I don’t know what she had. Another idol, maybe.

“Soon after, though, the workhouse — it just exploded! At first, I thought Hamoji was erupting, but it was so much louder than it had ever been before. While my wives checked on our children, I raced out here to see what had happened.

“A gigantic serpent slithered out of the workhouse, its skin covered with razor-sharp scales. I don’t know how it all fit in there. It seemed like it must have been growing out of the workhouse itself. Or out of a pit beneath it!

"I watched as it oozed out of there and into my fields, tearing them apart and digging deeper into the earth, until Hamoji's blood rose to the surface. It's a good thing pineapples don't burn so well, or the entire plantation might have caught! It just kept going and going and carving its way deeper and deeper until it drowned in the hot blood."

"So it's dead? Can we see it?" Cutting Remark pointed toward the long glowing strip resting in the bottom of the long, wide ditch.

"I hope it's dead." Kawalme said, and shivered. "Just before it went still, it reared way back up into the sky and screamed something horrible. My family in Abalone proper said they could hear it all the way over there, miles away.

"I had gotten out in front of it, hoping to find some way to stop it. Anything at all. I just couldn't let it ruin everything my wives and I have built here, you know? I tried throwing water on it. I tried hitting it with a sword. I shouted at it. Nothing worked!

"Eventually, I got in front of it and fell on my knees. I prayed to the creature itself, begging it to spare my home."

"Did you think it was a god?" Zannen peered at the man as if he was the oddest thing he'd ever seen.

Kawalme shrugged. "I don't know. I had just run out of things to try. I begged it in the names of my entire family, all my wives and children. As I was shouting out their names, that's when the thing reared back into the air, like a serpent about to strike. I thought it was going to kill me!

"Instead, it dove straight into the earth. Its head came down on a huge rock, and it shook so violently, I thought we were having an earthquake. It dove straight into the ground and stayed there steaming until Hamoji's blood cooled into stone. I haven't tried to do anything to it since then."

Reverie gave the man a nudge in the ribs. "Come on, nothing?"

The man blushed. "Well, I threw a few shovelfuls of dirt on it, trying to bury it. But when I heard Hamoji rumbling in the distance, I decided it was best to leave it alone."

"Did you tell anyone else about this?" Keahi asked.

Kawalme scuffed the ground with the tip of his shoe. "I think my neighbors must have noticed."

"But did you inform the local authorities? In Abalone?"

The man shook his head. "Maybe I should have, I know, but the monster proves that the gods are angry with me for my neglect. I trusted you foreigners with the truth, but how many here would be ready to sacrifice me to Hamoji if they knew how much I'd angered the gods?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The entire trip back to Yu-Shan, Palym mulled over what had happened. “What are we looking for?” she said out loud. “Are we just wandering around the farthest-flung parts of Creation and finding the worst-hit places, so we can gape at them like ghouls?”

Cutting Remark shook his head. “We’re looking for patterns. Things that can point us toward answers.”

Keahi, who had seemed tired most of the trip, grumbled. “Are we even sure what the questions are anymore? Other than why we’re doing this?”

“We’re looking for what is causing the Black Flags,” Cutting Remark said.

“We already know how they happen,” Reverie said.

“The mechanism behind which a boon can be twisted so that a resulting Exigent transforms into a destructive aberration is relatively understood,” Cutting Remark acknowledged. “What we don’t know is who or what, if anything, is behind the transformations. In other words, is the development of a Black Flag something that just happens after a boon has passed through the clutches of too many gods, for whatever value we wish to assign to ‘too many’? Or is it something that is being inflicted upon those boons purposefully, with the intent of transforming them from expressions of the Unconquered Sun’s power and favor into echoes of our worst nightmares?”

“I do so wish you would speak plainly,” Keahi said.

“Is someone causing these Black Flags to arise on purpose?” Cutting Remark spoke slowly and with the clearest diction he could manage. “And if so, what is their ultimate intent?”

Palym rubbed her eyes. “After traveling to three corners of the world, have we gotten any closer to figuring that out?”

They entered the gate that led back to Yu-Shan. The celestial lions watched them as they walked through, staring at them each in turn. By this time, Palym knew that this was little more than a formality, but it still felt like the creatures could peer straight into her soul.

The only time she’d worried about them was when she’d brought Xiao back to Yu-Shan with her. At first, they’d been reluctant to let her through, but when she’d insisted and formally declared Xiao to be her guest, they’d

finally relented. That had relieved her a great deal, as she didn't imagine she could fight such powerful creatures. The only alternative she would have had at that point would have been to return to Great Forks with Xiao, though, and she hadn't relished the idea of shivering together on that ruined mattress in the basement of that shattered building.

"We've proved that the Black Flags are a real phenomenon," Zannen responded once they were in Yu-Shan.

"After Hummingbird's death, I didn't think that was a question any longer," Palym said. She didn't want to reopen that wound for Cutting Remark, especially so soon after the woman's wake, but she didn't see a way of avoiding the topic.

"The question was never about what happened but why," Zannen said. "All sorts of monsters have cropped up in Creation over the centuries. We had to prove that this one was due to a twisted boon. And that we did.

"In fact, that's the one thing we've managed to establish as a commonality with all three of the places we've visited since then. That's four data points, each of which proved that the Black Flag was created by some unwitting person praying at a shrine just before they were transformed into a monster.

"Now, it's not certain that they each had a boon with them when it happened, but the circumstantial evidence would strongly lead any reasonable observer to allow this as a distinct possibility. People praying to gods don't usually morph into horrifying creatures for no reason at all."

"Unless they're somehow starting to do just that," Keahi said, sardonically. "In which case, we're all screwed."

Cutting Remark ignored her. "So, if we assume a twisted boon was involved in each of these incidents, the question then becomes this: Where did these boons come from?"

"Have we come to any conclusions there?" Reverie said as the flying rickshaw zipped toward the Ebony Office.

"Assuming that it's not just random — which is still a possibility, but not a very interesting one, and not one we can do anything about — if there's someone behind all this, they must be very well traveled. They've been to the Diamond Hearth, the Imperial City, Great Forks, and Abalone, all within a matter of weeks."

"You don't necessarily know that's true," Keahi said. "One person could have managed that over the course of a year — or years, even. If they somehow set the boons to be granted at roughly the same time, they could even make it look like they were in several places at once."

"Or it could be that we're not looking for a single person," Reverie said. "It could be a vast organization with operatives in separate parts of Creation. A well-coordinated group of people could pull something off like that, too."

Palym put her spinning head in her hands. “It doesn’t sound like we’re getting anywhere with this.”

“You’re new to this sort of thing,” Cutting Remark said. “The right way to tackle an investigation like this is to rely on some common-sense assumptions. Only after you eliminate them should you worry about the least-likely cases on the edge. Chances are good that one person — or a small group of people — planted the twisted boons. Chances are also good that they did so recently rather than trying to set this sort of thing up over years or decades.”

“But who could do something like that?”

“It would have to be someone who can move around Creation fast. For most people, getting to all three of those points would require months of travel. Perhaps as one of the Chosen of Mercury you could ask your fellows if they have any ideas about who could have managed it.”

“Don’t assume we’re looking for a regular person,” Keahi said. “Anyone with access to Yu-Shan could have managed it the same way we did. They wouldn’t have even needed the flying rickshaw. Using the city’s canals, you can get around the whole of Creation in a matter of hours.”

“That includes any god, any Sidereal Exalt, and anyone else who happens to live there,” Reverie said. “That’s a lot of people.”

“The celestial lions have excellent memories,” Cutting Remark said. “We can present them with a list of the places where we’ve confirmed Black Flag activity and cross reference that with their recollections of people traveling to those places.”

“That’s going to take a while,” Zannen said as they scudded over the roofs of Yu-Shan, growing closer to the Ebony Office. “We’ll have to interview the celestial lions at each gate.”

“Or we can get permission from the Unconquered Sun to have one lion from each of the four gates we’ve confirmed so far get together and compare notes,” Palym said. “If we can manage that, it shouldn’t take long at all.”

Zannen laughed out loud at her ignorance, and she blushed in embarrassment and frustration. “What’s wrong with my idea?” she demanded.

Cutting Remark cleared his throat. “It’s a fine idea—”

Zannen cut him off with a sharp laugh, like a blade through bamboo. “The Unconquered Sun isn’t going to give us an audience to discuss a problem he has yet to even acknowledge exists.”

“We don’t have to go all the way up to the top of the Celestial Bureaucracy,” Cutting Remark continued, glaring at Zannen. “Though the lions are technically answerable to the Unconquered Sun, the Bureau of Heaven directs them in his absence. Their supervisor, Silver Barrister, generally cooperates with investigations.”

“He’ll probably be glad to have something to do,” Reverie said with a grin. “It’s not like the lions need much in the way of management. They require no

food, drink, or rest, and they know their orders cold. If I ever want to retire, I'm stealing his job."

"Let's focus," said Cutting Remark, with a tone that said he was losing patience. "We should be able file our request and have the lions manage this for us relatively quickly."

"How long is 'relatively quickly'?" Palym asked.

Cutting Remark sucked at his teeth. "The Celestial Bureaucracy is not known for its alacrity. It could be a matter of weeks. Maybe months."

"Ha!" Zannen said again. "You know better than that. Try *years*. The Bureau of Heaven hates the Circle of Protection, given how many of them we've already arrested for illegal boon-trading. Even if Silver Barrister wants to help, his superiors will obstruct the process."

"Why don't we just ask them?" Palym said, honestly confused.

"As the man said, we first have to file a request!"

"No, not the bureaucrats," Palym said. "The celestial lions. Why don't we just go and ask them?"

"They not going to leave their posts just because we ask them," Zannen said.

"Why not?"

"There's one thing celestial lions don't do, and that's leave their posts."

"Are you sure? Maybe they rotate among the various gates to keep themselves fresh?"

The old man scoffed at her. "Magical guardians don't need to keep fresh."

"So what's the harm in asking them?"

Zannen shrugged as he brought the rickshaw in for a landing in the courtyard outside of the Ebony Office. "I'm not in the habit of wasting my time so profusely, but if you want to chase that wild dog all around Yu-Shan — during your spare time, of course — you are more than welcome to do so."

"I wasn't aware that I needed your permission," Palym said as she disembarked from the craft.

Zannen immediately recognized that she was challenging his authority over her, and he gave her an approving inclination of his head. "Technically, you don't, but tradition dictates that we respect each other's time when it comes to portions of our job that require our mutual attendance."

"Who decides what's required? You?"

The man gave her a deferential shrug that was intended to be anything but. "We usually recognize each other's wisdom. That wisdom often comes with experience."

"Which I lack, of course."

Keahi put a respectful hand on her shoulder. “That’s something that comes with time.”

“Which moves like a glacier when it comes to Yu-Shan.” She shrugged off Keahi’s hand and squared off against her and the others. “You all may have lived here long enough that you no longer understand the urgency of life, at least for those in Creation. They don’t have months, years, or decades to wait. Whoever’s behind these Black Flags isn’t going to wait either. If we don’t put a stop to this now, more people are certain to die.”

She let her words hang in the air, daring any of the others to gainsay her.

“We can’t let that happen. That’s not only neglecting our responsibilities but also ignoring the danger to everyone — including us.”

Zannen stared down his nose at her. “Are you accusing us of being delinquent in our duties?”

Palym sensed the man was setting a rhetorical trap for her, but she refused to leap into it. “I’m saying that perhaps you four have been living in Yu-Shan for too long if you don’t see the urgency of this. Every time one of those Black Flags goes off, it’s like a natural disaster wherever it lands. Scores of people died in Great Forks. Maybe hundreds. We can’t let that happen again.”

Zannen folded his hands across his chest. Reverie and Keahi edged away from him, no longer sure they wanted to be associated with what he was about to say.

“You cannot be telling me that the troubles of Creation are the equivalent of troubles in heaven.”

Palym took the bait, swallowed it, and spat it back in the man’s face. “You cannot be telling me that the lives of regular people don’t matter! We might be Exalted, but we’re not gods. We’re all still human. And laugh at me if you want, I don’t care if we’re saving gods, humans, or Exalts. We should be striving to save them *all* — and as fast as we can!”

Zannen snickered at Palym’s unworldliness, but Cutting Remark stood next to her, joining her side. “She’s right. We can’t let what happened to Hummingbird happen to anyone else, Exalted or not.”

Zannen opened his mouth to issue a sharp retort, but he froze when he saw Reverie and Keahi nodding at Cutting Remark’s statement. Zannen paused and assessed the situation before speaking again.

“You’re correct,” he said in a semblance of humility that Palym felt lacked authenticity. “We don’t have to let people die, and we damn well shouldn’t. However, we serve the Celestial Bureaucracy, first and foremost. As such, our job — the stated purpose of the Circle of Protection — is to enforce the rules surrounding the use of Exigent boons. Nothing less.”

“But nothing stops us from doing *more* than that, right?” Palym said. “So, let’s not just do our jobs. Let’s do them well.”

Zannen surveyed the looks in the eyes of his compatriots, and he saw they uniformly supported Palym's sentiment. He let out a defeated sigh and put up his hands in a sign of surrender. "All right," he said. "You're right. For the sake of Hummingbird — *and* all the others who have died due to this rash of Black Flags — we shall attack this problem with all due speed and intent."

He surveyed the sky, which rarely changed, and he wiped his weary brow. "But I'm an old man who's just gotten back home after a long journey. So, I would like to embark on this cause with our newly forged determination tomorrow. Please?"

Palym held her breath until the others nodded their assent. Then Zannen turned about and headed for his quarters. The rest of them decided to do the same.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

When Palym returned to her quarters, she found Xiao and Qing waiting for her, eager for news of her day. Qing hadn't shown too much interest in Palym's duties up until now, but after spending a full day with Xiao lazing around the place, she clearly felt like she'd been cooped up with a new puppy and hungered for some adult conversation.

"We think we figured out a way to discover who's behind the Black Flags," Palym reported. "We just need to find a way to interview the celestial lions, or to have them compare notes with each other. Either way, it seems like it's just a matter of time now. And hopefully not much of it."

"That's wonderful," Qing said in the same tone that Palym's grandmother used when Palym had announced to her that she'd gotten praised by the village teacher. She was proud of the results, even if she didn't understand all the work that had gone into getting them.

Although Palym had missed dinner, Qing fixed her a quick meal, and Palym set to it with hungry abandon. The entire time she ate, Xiao peppered her with questions about what she'd been doing all day. While Xiao was happy to no longer be roaming the ruins in Great Forks, Palym could tell she was bored stuck in these quarters. She hung on Palym's every word about the outside world.

"I'll take you on a tour of the city soon," she said. "Actually, we'll have Qing take us both. I haven't seen enough of it myself yet."

"I can't wait!" Xiao's eyes sparkled with ideas of what Yu-Shan must be like. From the parts of the Celestial City that Palym had seen, she knew Xiao was in for more than a little disappointment. While it was the most amazing place Palym had ever been, it was still just a city filled with people of all kinds. It had amazing, stunning vistas filled with impossible structures, but its gutters still were filled with trash and there were neighborhoods not safe for a mortal to visit.

"It's going to be a while yet, I'm afraid," she told Xiao. "We're getting close to a solution to this gigantic problem at work."

"And that's more important than hanging out in heaven with your best friend?" Xiao gave her an insincere pout.

Palym laughed and chucked Xiao in the arm. “We’re close to figuring out what’s been causing monsters to appear in cities around Creation, like the one that nearly killed us in Great Forks. Stopping more of those from happening is maybe a bit more important right now.”

“All right,” Xiao said with a dramatic, exasperated sigh. “But don’t expect me to wait forever.”

Just then, there was a knock at Palym’s door. The idea that she might have a visitor mystified her for a moment. She didn’t know anyone outside of work. She had seen a few neighbors in passing, but they generally had no interest in her.

She got up to answer the door, but Qing beat her to it. Keahi stood revealed in the frame.

“Come in!” Qing said to the Chosen of Mars. “We get so few visitors.”

Keahi strode straight up to Palym and said, “Good, I got here first.”

Palym showed her guest into the main room. “Was there a race?”

Keahi shook her head, uncertain and frustrated. She threw herself down onto a couch and put her head in her hands. “I’m just... I know that... Zannen and I had a discussion, and he’s on his way over here to confront you about it.”

“Confront me?” That piqued Palym’s curiosity. She spotted Xiao peering in at them from the adjoining dining room. Palym gave her a subtle wave to stay out of sight until this was finished. “But I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Nor have I.” Keahi wrung her hands together. “But Zannen thinks I have.”

Palym narrowed her eyes at the Exalted warrior. “Is this about Abalone? You know, when we were there, I remembered that you’d told me that you’d been there not too long ago, but when that man said he recognized you, you denied it.”

Keahi glanced at her like a cornered animal. “You sound like he already got to you.”

Palym frowned. “I’m not accusing anyone of anything; I’m just asking you a question. Why would you lie about something like that?”

“It’s none of your business — or anyone else’s. That’s for me and me alone.”

Palym wasn’t sure how to respond to that. “Okay. Then what’s Zannen coming over here for?”

“I don’t...” She trailed off into a deep frown.

“Oh, she knows,” Zannen said as he stormed into Palym’s quarters without so much as a knock on the door. “She knows all too well what this is about.”

“I did *not* plant those twisted boons!” Keahi said as she shot to her feet. “How long have you known me? How *dare* you accuse me of that?”

“The evidence shows—”

“The evidence shows *nothing*! It shows that I’ve been to three places where the Black Flags happened. We’ve all been to three of those locations. Together, even!”

Zannen spoke in a cold, clinical tone, intentionally standing in stark contrast to Keahi’s aggressive heat. “And if we only knew of those three locations, I would have good cause to suspect all of us of having been involved.” He half turned to Palym. “With the exception of you, of course, who just joined us, and Hummingbird, whose fate has put her both beyond recriminations and above reproach.”

“I don’t see you pointing any fingers at yourself!” Keahi said.

Zannen put a hand on his own chest. “I’ve never been to Abalone. Neither has Cutting Remark or Reverie, in the last decade. Only you.”

Keahi stepped forward, her sword hand flexing as she did. “Just because I’ve been there doesn’t mean I committed this heinous crime!”

“But you lied about it,” Palym said in a quiet voice.

Every other set of eyes in the home turned toward her. This time when she spoke, her voice was stronger. “You just admitted that you’ve been there. You told me earlier that it was so. But when that man asked you about having been there, you lied to him. Why would you do that?”

Zannen gave Keahi a smug smile and folded his arms across his chest. “If you’re innocent, what reason do you have to hide your actions?”

“You’re a Chosen of Secrets! You know there are many reasons to keep things to yourself.”

“And I have long experience sifting good reasons from bad ones. By your own admission, you’ve been to all four places where the Black Flags have wrought havoc. How many other people in this entire world can make that claim?”

“At least one other! The person who’s actually guilty of spreading those damn boons all over the place.”

“Wait.” Palym put a hand up toward each of her Circlemates. “Just because the rest of the Circle of Protection has been eliminated doesn’t mean that Keahi is guilty of such a horrible crime.”

“Thank you!”

Zannen wasn’t impressed. “It just means she’s been lying to us about her actions. Which calls into question her motivations.”

“Which are none of your damn business,” said Keahi, steaming.

“Perhaps not before, but they are now.”

“Have we questioned the celestial lions?” Palym said, knowing full well that they couldn’t have possibly had the time to manage such a task. “It might be that they could clear this up right away. There could be several people who have been to all four places in the past year.”

“But none of them have been lying directly to the Circle of Protection,” Zannen said. “Have they?”

“But none of them are members of the Circle, either,” Palym said.

She recognized that the circumstances looked bad for Keahi. She just couldn’t believe that she’d had anything to do with the Black Flags. On the other hand, she had to admit that she didn’t know any of the people in Yu-Shan all that well, with the notable exception of Xiao, who was only there as her guest.

Still, she didn’t want to never be able to trust anyone. What kind of way would that be to live? But wasn’t that exactly what Cutting Remark had offered her as counsel?

In her village, she’d known who she could trust and who she could not, but living in Yu-Shan, so far away from everyone she’d ever known, made her feel very alone. Once again, she felt grateful that she’d managed not only to find Xiao but to bring her along.

“Don’t we owe Keahi the benefit of the doubt?” Palym asked.

“Weren’t you just the one arguing for swift justice for Hummingbird and all the others who were killed by the Black Flags?” Zannen said in disbelief. “I bring you a prime suspect, and all you can do is try to poke holes in my logic. Logic that you yourself actually proposed to me.”

“Did you always suspect it might be one of us?” Keahi demanded.

Zannen worked his jaw as he glared at Keahi, his face filled with rue. “I hoped it wouldn’t be so, but it made the most sense. How many others have the means to travel like we do? And the excuse to do so that our duties provide us? Still, I’ve prayed to each and every one of the Five Maidens that the traitor — the terrorist — wouldn’t be one of our own.”

“You are either faithless or a fool,” Keahi shouted at the man. “And either way, you are no friend of mine!”

Zannen gave her a sad shake of his head. “You don’t know now much this hurts me. To lose Hummingbird like that, and now to find you so dishonest? And to think what Cutting Remark is going to do when he discovers the truth? It’s horrifying even to contemplate.”

Keahi reached up over her shoulder to grab the hilt of her blade and drew it. The magical weapon seemed to glimmer eagerly in the sunlight streaming through Palym’s window. “You shall not fill his head with such lies!”

Zannen stepped backward, well out of the reach of Keahi’s sword. “How dare you threaten me with violence! After all that you’ve done, to sink so low as this?”

“This?” Keahi brandished her blade before her. “This is just a warning. If I wanted to hurt you, you’d have already found yourself impaled on the end of it!”

Palym wasn't sure why Zannen was so shocked. If he honestly thought that Keahi had set the Black Flags in motion, she'd already killed scores of people, hundreds even. Killing everyone standing with her in the room right now would only be a small addition to that.

Palym stepped between the two, putting a hand out toward each of them. "Please!" she said. "No fighting. Not here in my home!"

Keahi recoiled from Palym, as if she was horrified at what she'd almost done. "If I was so evil, don't you think I would have cut you down where you stand?"

With that, she turned and fled. She sprinted straight for the tall doors that let out onto the balcony off the side of Palym's living room, and when she got to the railing she dove over it.

"Stop her!" Zannen shouted.

He was too slow to catch up with the woman, but Palym was not. She reached the railing just an instant after Keahi did, and she watched the warrior vault over it.

The balcony looked out over the canals of Yu-Shan, but there was a staggering drop between her quarters and them. Keahi tumbled down, down, down, slowing her descent by grabbing onto other railings, balconies, and outcroppings as she went, sometimes with her hand and other times with the flat of her sword.

Eventually, she ran out of things she could smack, hook, or grab. At the last moment, she landed against a cantilevered shelf that jutted out over the river, rolling with the impact. Still, the blow cracked the shelf at its base, and it began to give way.

Rather than scrambling backward to safety, Keahi charged for the end of the shelf. As she reached it, she sprang forward, kicking off from it like it was a diving platform. It collapsed behind her and toppled into the darkness below.

Keahi, meanwhile, sheathed her blade in midair and then executed an amazing leap into the nearest canal. She soared through the air as if invisible hands held her aloft, then landed perfectly on a gondola at the moment it zoomed by.

"Follow her!" Zannen shouted at Palym. "You're the Chosen of Mercury, Maiden of Journeys! You can't let her get away from you. Follow her!"

Palym watched Keahi shrink in her vision as the gondola swiftly took her away. "You might be right about her," she said to Zannen, "but I don't think I could make a jump like that."

"Are you a coward?" he shouted in disbelief.

The comment stung Palym, but only just a bit. She laughed out loud. "You would have me risk my life to capture the woman who taught me how to fight. She, meanwhile, is running to keep her life. In a race with those stakes, who do you think is bound to win?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"I cannot believe that Keahi has betrayed us," Cutting Remark said as he sat in his chair in the conference room in the offices of the Circle of Protection. He had blanched as pale as a ghost when Zannen had made the announcement to him and Reverie, who had answered his call for an emergency meeting that evening.

"It's a shock to all of us," Zannen said. "To me as much as anyone. None of us want it to be true, and I keep hoping there's some sort of decent explanation for her actions. The fact that she fled from Palym's quarters rather than defend herself, though, speaks volumes."

"The evidence against her is pretty thin," Reverie said. "It's just a record of her travels, correct?"

"A record that matches up with the placement of the Black Flags that we've managed to confirm so far. That's not a trivial thing."

"No, but it's hardly everything, either. Others might have made the same trips. In fact, the three of us took most of those trips with her, as I recall."

Zannen grimaced as he leaned forward in his chair. "Look, I am as shocked and distressed about this as anyone. I don't want it to be true. But the fact that she fled from us rather than stand and defend herself... I don't see how we can get around that."

Cutting Remark tapped his finger against the tabletop. "So, what do we do now? What's our next step?"

"I've already contacted Hu Dai Liang," Zannen said. "I sent a message detailing our suspicions and Keahi's actions. I'm still waiting for a response."

"Suspensions without proof won't merit a quick response," Cutting Remark said. "You won't hear back from her for days at least."

"Will the Division of Battles send someone to replace Keahi?" Palym said. She wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer to that.

Reverie shook his head. "Not right away. This is a special force, and you don't know how hard it is to get new people assigned to one of these. There aren't many Sidereal Exalts, and they're all assigned to other jobs at the moment."

"This is, in fact, why you were given Hummingbird's job," Cutting Remark explained with more than a tinge of melancholy. "Her death formed a huge hole for us, and you were the only one available to fill it."

“There’s no one to fill this hole,” Zannen said. “Especially not until Keahi is captured and asked to answer for her crimes. Until then, Cutting Remark is correct — we can’t expect any help from the Division of Battles. An investigation into one of their own will be quite an embarrassment to them.”

“So, we need to either bring her in — or clear her name,” Palym said, not certain how her second suggestion would go over. She looked at each of the others in turn.

Zannen had clearly already made up his mind about Keahi. Reverie, on the other hand, perked up at the idea that there might still be a shot at redemption for her. Cutting Remark was too much in shock to show his mind either way.

Zannen gave her a doubtful shrug. “If you can find a way to make that happen, I would love to see it. Either way, though, she is going to have to find a way to explain her actions. Given the circumstances, I don’t know if pursuing that course is a wise use of our time and resources.”

“I’ll do it,” Reverie said abruptly. “I don’t care how much of a waste of time it might be.”

Zannen looked him square in the eyes. “Are you sure your Maiden would approve of that decision?”

“I don’t care,” Reverie said with a reckless grin. “I’m the Chosen of Venus. *She* chose *me*, not the other way around.”

“But we can’t let such a crusade get in the way of our vital duties. Now that we know that Keahi was behind the placement of the twisted boons, we need to hunt down any others she may have scattered about Creation.”

“That seems like an awfully tall order,” Cutting Remark said as he tried to shake off how stunned he felt. “We’ve been through many gates over the past year. Even if that’s what we’re limiting our searches to, it’ll take forever.”

“We should start with our most recent visits and work our way backward,” Zannen said. “That gives us the best chance of finding something.”

“But the older ones might be the ones most likely to go off first,” Palym said.

“Boons don’t ripen like fruit. It doesn’t matter how long they’ve been sitting around. They’re equally likely to be put into use no matter when they were deployed, as far as we know. However, mortals are unlikely to remember Keahi, except in places she visited recently. We should start with those.”

“You go ahead and plan it however you want,” Reverie said. “Just don’t wait around for me to join you.”

Zannen glared at the man. “You can’t just ignore the consensus of the Circle of Protection and go off on your own. We work together because that’s part of our mandate. Otherwise, why should there be a Circle of Protection at all?”

“That’s an excellent question,” Reverie said as he stood up. “One we should address immediately. Or would, if we didn’t — as you so rightly pointed out — have more pressing issues at hand.”

Cutting Remark looked up at his friend in disbelief. "So you're just going to walk away from this?"

"Walk. Saunter. Stroll. In the end, they all beat running away from this disaster, which is what it probably deserves, don't you think?" He edged toward the door.

"But... we're doing important work here. Vital work. The things we do save lives."

"I don't disagree with you about that, but there's something rotten going on here. And I'm not entirely convinced that Keahi's at the core of it. Have you ever known her to do anything like this?"

Zannen leveled a cold glare at the man. "How well do any of us really know each other? Even in a Circle like ours, Sidereal Exalted are all so busy with our own important projects. We just don't see that much of each other."

"I'll bet you sometimes miss those pre-Circle days," Reverie said in an ambiguous tone. "For myself, I prefer to mix things up a little bit. Surrounding yourself with the same people for decades becomes... tedious."

Zannen pushed himself to his feet. "You abandon us, and you're destroying this Circle you claim to love so much."

Reverie gave him a noncommittal grunt and glanced at the others. "No matter who's at fault for that, I don't think you can lay the blame at my feet."

With that, he slipped out the door and disappeared. Zannen made to go after him, much as he'd urged Palym to chase down Keahi, but Cutting Remark stopped him with a hand on his arm. "He needs time. We all do."

Zannen threw himself back down in his chair. "That's the one thing we don't have. We should be out there hunting down Keahi right now. What if she's out there activating more of those twisted boons while we sit around here and bicker about all this utter nonsense? Do you know how many more people could die?"

"More likely she's simply on the run right now," Cutting Remark said. "Did you ask to have the celestial lions stop her if she tries to leave?"

Zannen shot him an indignant glare, as if the man were treating him like a child. "Of course! That was the first thing I did after leaving Palym's quarters."

"Then there's no way she's getting out of Yu-Shan."

"Unless she was able to do so before I spoke with the lions."

"Did you ask them if she'd departed?"

Zannen simply narrowed his eyes at Cutting Remark, who patiently awaited a reply. Cutting Remark cracked first.

"Then you know that she's still here."

"The lions aren't always that attentive or particular."

Cutting Remark chuckled at that. "If you believe that, then you've fallen into exactly the kind of lackadaisical attitude about them that they want you to have."

Zannen gave an irritated wave of his hand. “For the sake of stopping this silliness, let’s say she’s stuck here inside Yu-Shan. Doesn’t that mean we should be searching for her harder? Just imagine if she set off a Black Flag here in heaven!”

Palym gasped at the thought. “Has that ever happened?”

Cutting Remark put up a hand to calm her fears. “Not once. Not too many people here pray to anyone but the Incarnae. Even among the few mortals who live in heaven, the thrill of living among the gods wears off quickly.”

Palym had to admit to herself that she’d not prayed nearly as much to any gods since she’d become one of the Chosen of the Five Maidens. Having Qing for an assistant made her feel very odd about it, especially when it came to such lesser gods. Still, it wasn’t an easy habit to break. When faced with any problem, her first instincts were often to turn toward prayer.

“What do you want me to do?” Palym said. As the junior member of the team, she was willing to take direction from the others — up to a point.

“Since Reverie has offered to work to clear Keahi’s name, I think the rest of us should concentrate on finding her. Why don’t you and your assistant go through her office and her quarters for any leads you can find.”

“Are you sure it’s wise to invade her privacy like that?”

“Having fled, she’s given up any such rights. If she cares to object, she can show up to face us.”

“What about me?” Cutting Remark said. Palym could hear an unusual strain in his voice.

“You’ve known her for decades, longer than any of us,” Zannen said. “Go and interview her friends, compatriots, and assistants. Go all the way up to Mars herself if you must.”

“No.” Cutting Remark shook his head. “I mean, what about me? Our threads in the Tapestry of Fate are still snarled. I would read her destiny, but it’s still frustratingly difficult to discern.”

“Do you mean the snarl from the Black Flag’s attack on Great Forks?” Palym asked. “Hasn’t it been repaired yet?” She was, she realized, woefully clueless about such things. She and Cutting Remark had avoided each other for so long that she’d gotten no hands-on experience with reading or managing the Loom. Or perhaps she’d been putting it off for more mundane reasons. She liked to have some room for surprises in her life.

“No, and that’s just it. It *should* have been smoothed out by now. The pattern spiders are working much more slowly than I would have thought. Something — or someone — must be slowing down the process. Perhaps hidden from our awareness of destiny.”

“Who could do that?”

“Any member of the Bureau of Destiny,” said Zannen. “Perhaps even a Sidereal.” He came around and put a hand on Cutting Remark’s shoulder. “We

should investigate it. I'll look into the idea that someone is tampering with the Tapestry from behind some sort of concealment."

"And for my part?"

Zannen sighed. "You have had the worst of weeks and have suffered the most unimaginable loss. If you're doubting your ability to read destiny — which is entirely understandable — the best thing for you would be to get some rest. Recover. Recuperate. Be well."

Cutting Remark squirmed in his seat. "But there's so much to be done. Whatever happens to me, I can't let Hummingbird's death be in vain."

"Think of what she would want you to do. Would she wish to see you work yourself into a ghost of your normal self? Or would she want you to take care of yourself? To heal?"

Cutting Remark bowed his head and gave a defeated nod. "All right," he said. "I'll go home. I'll go to sleep. But tomorrow, I'm going to be right back at work again."

Zannen chuckled, something Palym didn't remember ever seeing him do before. He was generally so serious, even humorless. The laughter made him seem a lot more human. "I've always appreciated your work ethic. Just promise to sleep in," he said to Cutting Remark. "I don't want to see you in the office before lunch."

Satisfied that Cutting Remark would be all right, Palym got up to leave. "How about you?" Cutting Remark said to her. "This is a horrible thing for you to have to come into. It would have been so much better — so much easier — for you to have become one of the Exalted in your own due time. Instead, you've been tossed into the deep end of the canal."

Palym appreciated the kind thought. Truth be told, she knew she was in way over her head, and it was all she could do to keep from drowning in everything surging at her. But she wasn't about to bring down this bereaved man with thoughts about her troubles.

She opened her mouth to speak, and the lights went out.

Actually, that wasn't quite true. Lamps and shining residences across Yu-Shan soon leaped to life. It was the light shining from above that had gone out.

"Would you look at that?" Cutting Remark said. "The Unconquered Sun must have finally slipped up again."

Palym dashed to the nearest window and stuck her head out. Up there in the sky, a reddish star shone the brightest, and she knew instantly that it belonged to Mars.

She half turned to announce this, and she found the two men standing next to her, peering up into the sky too. "Well," Cutting Remark said as he marveled at the dominant star. "If that's not an omen, I don't know what else might be."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“This feels wrong,” Palym said as Keahi’s assistant, Lao, ushered the Chosen of Mercury into his employer’s quarters.

“When was the last time she was here?” Palym asked Lao, a god with the head of some sharp-toothed fish she didn’t recognize, and the wiry build of an old man. He bore scars on every inch of his exposed skin, and Palym wondered if he was, perhaps, Keahi’s favorite sparring partner. If so, Palym was glad that she had not come there to fight him.

“She never returned home last night,” Lao said. “That often happens, though, when her Maiden has gained a lead in the Games. She and the other Chosen of Mars like to gather and celebrate such fortuitous times when they get the chance.”

“So, you weren’t surprised when she wasn’t here this morning?”

Lao shrugged. “She is one of the Sidereal Exalted. If the problems she faces are beyond her, they are far beyond me.”

“Zannen believes she’s behind the Black Flags that have been cropping up all over Creation.”

Lao grunted. “He is a bitter, old fool. She has never been anything but loyal to her Maiden and to Yu-Shan. What would it gain her to further such destruction?”

Palym couldn’t answer that. “Do you mind if I poke around?”

Lao looked straight into her eyes. “If Zannen was asking that question, I would mind, but Keahi has nothing to fear from you.”

“How can you be so sure?”

The man gave her a razor-sharp grin. “I watched the two of you sparring. You are many things — and have the potential to be much, much more — but you are not her enemy.”

Palym wasn’t exactly sure how she felt about that, but she took advantage of the intimidating god’s kindness to do her job.

Keahi’s place was larger than Palym’s, although it was situated much farther away from the Ebony Office. She’d had it far longer than Palym had lived in hers, of course — probably long before the founding of the Circle of Protection.

It sat on the top of a building, with wide vistas stretching around it on all sides. Each of the balconies was lined with sharpened spears that jutted out to keep anyone from sneaking up into the place from below. Birds sat on them peacefully, though, watching the streets below them for prey.

As old as Keahi was, Palym would have expected the entire place to be stacked with mementoes of her many battles, the craft of many years of life accumulated all around her. Instead, the woman had kept her belongings to a minimum. She had more things scattered about her quarters than Palym — who'd brought with her nothing more than the clothes on her back — but not by much.

That said, what was there focused on one thing: war. A set of long, curved blades loomed over the fireplace. Shields hung on every wall in every room, differing in style, size, and color. A suit of crimson armor stood in one corner of the main room, gazing over the entire place like a living guard. Palym wondered if it might somehow spring to life and challenge her for invading its master's domain.

There were several rooms in the place: a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, and a pantry, as well as three bedrooms, a home office, a tea room, and a training room large enough to hold sparring matches inside. It let out onto a common patio also stocked with gear for practicing various martial arts.

It was light outside again, which meant the Maiden of Mars had lost her edge and the Unconquered Sun was once again ascendant. From what Palym could tell, the nights in Yu-Shan never seemed to last for long. She had to admit, though, that she'd enjoyed being able to go to sleep the night before in a darkness that didn't require her to wear a mask over her eyes.

She poked her nose into each room first, just to get a sense of the layout of the place and to make sure that Keahi wasn't somehow hiding in her own home. While that would have made Palym's job a lot easier, she was relieved to be able to prove that the woman was not there. Once she had established that, she dug in for real.

Palym went from room to room, looking for some sort of clue to where Keahi could have gone, and why she might have been working to plant those Black Flags. Lao followed her about, always at a respectful distance, as if he did not wish to interfere with her but also wanted to be available should she have any questions.

"Do you know what you're looking for?" Lao said at one point.

Palym shook her head. "I'm not even sure I'll know what it is if I find it."

"But you keep looking anyhow."

"That's the job," she said. "It's also the only hope I have to do any good with it."

"What kind of good are you trying to do?"

That got Palym's attention. She turned to face Lao. "What do you mean?"

"I believe you when you say you want to do good. But there are many kinds of good, and they come in many different shapes. Are you trying to do

good for Keahi? Or for the Circle of Protection? Or for Yu-Shan? Or Creation instead?"

"Are they all mutually exclusive?"

"Not always, no. Sometimes. But they often conflict with each other to one degree or another. At such times, you must decide which good is a higher priority for you. Is Keahi's freedom more important than her life? Is the survival of people in Yu-Shan more important than that of people in Creation?"

Palym pondered that for a moment. "I — I don't know. That's not enough to go on."

"Correct. Every situation is different, and none of these comparisons has meaning without the proper context. Don't let others tell you otherwise."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Nothing," the hoary man said with an innocent shrug. "I'm just trying to help you get a handle on your priorities. Once you understand those, everything else you're looking for should become much clearer."

Palym gave him a doubtful look, but she decided to play along anyhow. "My first priority has to be the protection of the lives of people, no matter where they are. If others are threatening that, then their needs are less important, even if they are friends."

"I see. Then what are you hoping to do here?"

Palym glanced around, still uncertain, searching. "I want to see if Keahi had anything to do with all those people dying. I'd much rather she didn't, but if she did, then I want to find her and stop her from doing it again."

"And how are you going to do that?"

It struck Palym then that she was going about this all wrong. She'd been searching Keahi's home when she really needed to be rooting through her past — and she was staring at the one person who could help her with that best.

"Have you seen any sign that Keahi was working with boons granted to lesser gods by the Unconquered Sun?"

The man smiled at her, sensing that she was finally taking the initiative to make progress. "Of course I have. That's the whole reason for the formation of the Circle of Protection, is it not? That's her job."

"But did she have anything to do with them outside of that?"

"Not that I ever saw."

"She traveled around a lot with the Circle of Protection."

Lao narrowed his eyes at her, a half-smile still on his pale lips. "Is that a question?"

"Do you know where she went?"

"I don't have a journal in which I recorded all of her destinations, if that's what you're asking."

Palym arched an eyebrow at the man. "Do you know where she went?"

"Of course I do. I helped her prepare for every one of those trips, and I was here when she came home from them as well. I may not have written then down." He tapped the side of his head. "But my mind's sharp enough."

"Excellent. Do you know if she ever went to Abalone?"

Lao stared at her for a long moment.

"It's an island on the far west side of Creation," she said. "It's —"

"I know where it is. And *what* it is." He clicked his teeth for a moment before he continued. "She has been there. Many times. Probably more times than she's been to any other place in the world."

"Why is that?"

The old man cocked his head at her. "Because that's where she's from. Originally, I mean."

That put Palym back on her heels. "What? From Abalone?"

"It was a long time ago as mortals measure it. A dozen generations? But yes, that's where she was born."

"So she goes back there? All the time? What for?"

Having just left her own home, Palym could understand missing your family, but she hadn't yet had the urge to travel back to see them. A pang of guilt struck her as she realized that she now had the means to visit them at will. She wasn't quite sure what was stopping her.

Perhaps it was the fact that she hadn't been gone all that long. To return so quickly would seem like a bit of a defeat under normal circumstances. Of course, her circumstances were anything but normal.

Part of it, she realized, was that she didn't know how she could explain to her family everything that had happened to her. Would they be proud? Horrified? Would they want to move to Yu-Shan with her? Could they?

Was there any sort of limit on such things? She'd sneaked Xiao in. Could she do the same with the rest of her family? Or was that simply pushing her luck too much?

Would they even still remember her?

These were questions she didn't have time to contemplate right now — or so she told herself — but she knew she would have to address them eventually. In the meantime, she needed to concentrate on the job at hand.

"She likes to visit her descendants," Lao said.

"Her what?"

Lao frowned at her as if she was a particularly dumb student. “She had a baby before she became one of the Chosen of Mars. Afraid that the life of one of the Sidereal Exalted wasn’t safe for a child, she left the boy with his father, who raised him on his own.

“That boy, believe it or not, had children of his own. Several generations later, those offspring have spread throughout the island and into other parts of Creation, although many of them still live and work in the same lands that Keahi once called home.”

“Oh, gods...” It suddenly made sense to Palym. “Keahi... Is she the great-grandmother of a man named Kawalme?”

Lao burst into a grin. “Now you get it. She doesn’t reveal herself when she returns there. Imagine, if you will, how strange it would be to see several generations of your family be born, live, and die while you continue on?

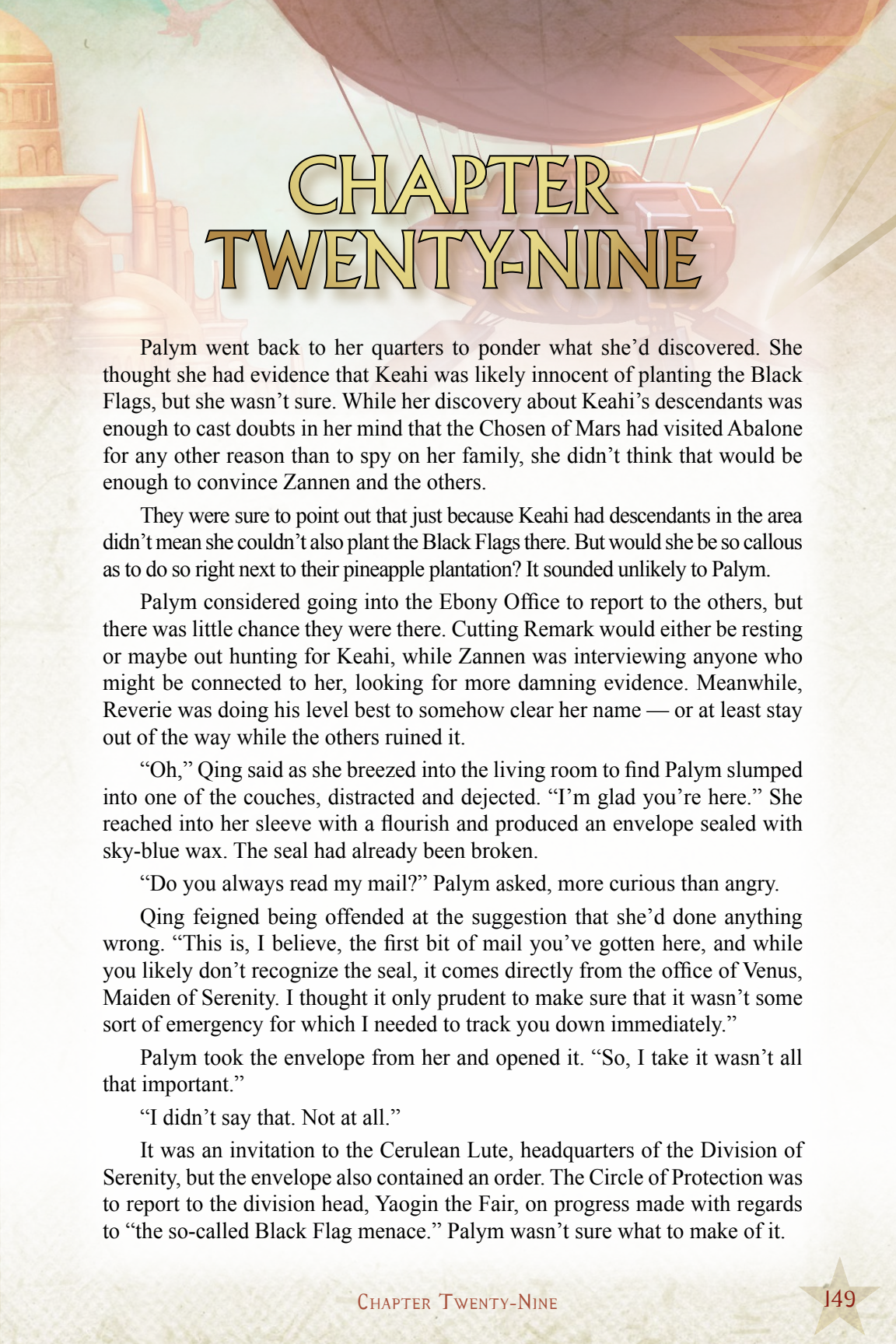
“When she speaks of them, it’s always with a strange mixture of regret and pride. Of course, if she had not become one of the Sidereal Exalted, she would never have had the chance to see so many of those generations. Everyone she knew when she was a young woman has been dead now for generations.

“But she always insists on going back. It’s a bit of torture she can’t refuse herself. It brings her some sense of purpose, I think, to know that her offspring are still out there in Creation. After living in Yu-Shan for so long, it can be hard to remember the mortals who you left behind, but Keahi never forgets them. As she often tells me, those are the people she continues to work for, long after everyone she knows up in heaven seems worthless.”

Palym scratched her head as she thought about this for a long moment. “Did anyone else know about this? About her regular trips to Abalone?”

Lao gave her a helpless shrug. “I doubt it. She tends to keep such things to herself. I know, of course, but I prefer to respect her privacy in such matters and don’t like to gossip with the other assistants. That’s why she’s kept me around in my job for so long.

“But she’s lived and worked here a long time. Someone else probably knows. I just couldn’t tell you who.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Palym went back to her quarters to ponder what she'd discovered. She thought she had evidence that Keahi was likely innocent of planting the Black Flags, but she wasn't sure. While her discovery about Keahi's descendants was enough to cast doubts in her mind that the Chosen of Mars had visited Abalone for any other reason than to spy on her family, she didn't think that would be enough to convince Zannen and the others.

They were sure to point out that just because Keahi had descendants in the area didn't mean she couldn't also plant the Black Flags there. But would she be so callous as to do so right next to their pineapple plantation? It sounded unlikely to Palym.

Palym considered going into the Ebony Office to report to the others, but there was little chance they were there. Cutting Remark would either be resting or maybe out hunting for Keahi, while Zannen was interviewing anyone who might be connected to her, looking for more damning evidence. Meanwhile, Reverie was doing his level best to somehow clear her name — or at least stay out of the way while the others ruined it.

"Oh," Qing said as she breezed into the living room to find Palym slumped into one of the couches, distracted and dejected. "I'm glad you're here." She reached into her sleeve with a flourish and produced an envelope sealed with sky-blue wax. The seal had already been broken.

"Do you always read my mail?" Palym asked, more curious than angry.

Qing feigned being offended at the suggestion that she'd done anything wrong. "This is, I believe, the first bit of mail you've gotten here, and while you likely don't recognize the seal, it comes directly from the office of Venus, Maiden of Serenity. I thought it only prudent to make sure that it wasn't some sort of emergency for which I needed to track you down immediately."

Palym took the envelope from her and opened it. "So, I take it wasn't all that important."

"I didn't say that. Not at all."

It was an invitation to the Cerulean Lute, headquarters of the Division of Serenity, but the envelope also contained an order. The Circle of Protection was to report to the division head, Yaogin the Fair, on progress made with regards to "the so-called Black Flag menace." Palym wasn't sure what to make of it.

“Do you know if any of the others received this?” she asked Qing.

“All of them did.”

“And how would you know something like that?”

Qing chuckled. “You Exalts are all the same. You think we assistants don’t chat among ourselves? With the kind of work you all do and the way you can’t seem to talk straight with each other, we *have* to.”

Palym blushed at that, although she wasn’t sure if she was embarrassed because Qing was right about her or because she didn’t want to be painted with the same brush that tainted the others. Either way, she didn’t like it.

“It also says I should feel free to bring along a guest.” Palym pointed this out to Qing. “Is that usual?”

Qing adopted a suspicious twist to her lips and peered at the writing while Palym pointed at it. “No. It’s not unheard of, though. I wonder who requested it?” She looked at Palym with hope welling in her eyes. “Who do you think you might bring?”

“Oh!” Palym slapped herself on the forehead. “I know who I can bring: Xiao! She’s been stuck here for days.”

Qing’s face fell just a little bit, and Palym leaped up to apologize. “I’m so sorry, Qing! I’d be happy to take you, but I’ve basically ignored Xiao since I brought her to heaven...” She glanced around, just a little bit confused. “By the way, where is she?”

Qing made a resigned face. “Lounging on the balcony, right where she always is.”

“I hope you can forgive me?” Palym said to her. Qing sighed and nodded her head, and Palym grinned at her and then dashed out to the balcony.

She found Xiao out there, lying on a line of cushions dragged from somewhere else in Palym’s quarters. Xiao looked like she’d not bathed since she’d first arrived, and she was gazing at a little icon held in her hands. When she saw Palym, Xiao stuffed it into her pocket and sat up.

“You’re home early!” she said with a wide smile. “Thank you!”

Palym was a little chagrined. “Is it that big of a deal?”

“I’m so *bored*. Qing is nice enough, but she’s kind of strange to talk to. I mean, she’s a god, *and* she’s your servant.”

“Assistant.”

“Whatever,” Xiao said with a dismissive wave. “I just can’t wrap my head around it. I mean, somewhere, there are people who pray to her — or at least used to — and yet her day job is to follow you around and help you out. Doesn’t that bother you at all?”

“The last part does,” Palym confessed as she sat down facing Xiao. “I’m not used to having an assistant. The idea that anyone might have to do what I tell them to is kind of odd, you know?”

“Sounds like a great thing to me!” Xiao’s smile said she had no idea what she was talking about — and that she was well aware of it. “Nobody ever listens to me. Well, except you. Sometimes?”

Palym paused for a beat. “I’m sorry. Were you saying something?”

Xiao laughed at her, and for a moment, it felt like it was just the two of them again, out on the road to Great Forks. She’d loved those days, as much of a challenge as they’d been. After they’d reached their destination, that’s when everything seemed to have gotten so strange, and not the least because they’d been parted.

She supposed the fact that she’d enjoyed the journey itself so much was one of the reasons that Mercury, Maiden of Journeys, had made her one of her Chosen. Of all the Maidens, Mercury really did seem to fit her temperament.

“So,” Palym said. “I have something that should alleviate your boredom.”

Xiao’s eyes lit up. “What is it? A trip down the canals? A bit of sparring? Or — ooh! — a shadow play put on by the gods?”

Palym leaned back and held up the envelope. “In here is an invitation for two to a party hosted by the Division of Serenity, which is responsible for managing destinies of peace, joy, and love throughout Creation. I’d bet they throw the best parties in heaven.”

“You have to be joking,” Xiao said, her eyes growing wider. “That’s absolutely amazing!”

“Just wait,” Palym said. “There’ll be more gods and wonders than you’ll know what to do with! And if we’re not having too much fun, maybe you and I can sneak out to get back on the Golden Barque — you know, that ship you see flying overhead every day.”

“No. That’s impossible.” Xiao stared at her in awe. “Isn’t it?”

Palym threw her arms wide to take in everything around them. “Isn’t all this impossible? What’s a few more impossible things at this point?”

“If you say so!” Xiao giggled at her. “This is going to be the best day ever!”

Palym couldn’t help but laugh along. Up until that point, she hadn’t been sure exactly how the meeting in the Cerulean Lute might go, but now she knew one thing at least. She and Xiao were going to have a fantastic time.

“You can’t go up there like that,” Qing said from inside Palym’s quarters.

“I have the outfit that I wore last time,” Palym said. “Do I need a new one every time I socialize?”

“It wouldn’t hurt,” Qing said. “But I wasn’t talking to you.”

“Me?” Xiao said. She seemed surprised that Qing would bother talking with her at all. She looked down at herself and her torn and filthy clothing. “These are the best clothes I own.”

“Those are the *only* clothes you own,” Qing said. “If you’re going to remain here in Yu-Shan — and especially if you’re going on a sanctioned visit to the Cerulean Lute — you need to invest in some better clothes.”

“Hey, can’t the gods see everything? Don’t they already know me for who I am? How do you think I’m going to fool them by wearing some fancy clothes?”

“You’re a fool,” Qing said. “The gods don’t care about you. You just don’t want them thinking you’re disrespecting them by not bothering to at least try to dress decently.”

“Is that *really* necessary?” Xiao asked.

“What did you do back in Creation any time you think you might have angered a god?”

Xiao winced. “I did my best to make it up to them straight away. Prayers for sure, and an offering if I could afford it.”

“How much worse do you think you can offend them when they can actually see you?”

Xiao swallowed hard. “I see your point.”

Palym realized what Xiao’s main issue really was. “I’d be happy to pay for the clothes,” she said.

Xiao started to protest, but Palym put a finger to Xiao’s lips to shut her down. “I have a job, and you don’t. And you’re coming with me as my date. It’s the least I can do.”

“Your *date*?” Xiao gave her a silly smile. “Well, why didn’t you just say so?” She turned to Qing. “Let’s go shopping!”

Qing rolled her eyes at Xiao. “I will take your measurements, and then I will contact an appropriate tailor.”

“Do we really have time to have clothes made for her?” Palym asked.

Qing snorted at her. “When the tailors are gods, they can work miracles.”

She pulled a measuring tape out of her sleeve, had Xiao stand up, and set to work. A few moments later, she bustled out of Palym’s quarters, promising she would return with both dinner and fresh clothes for Xiao in plenty of time.

When Qing was gone, Xiao turned to Palym. “So.” She gestured with her eyebrows toward the golden ship in the sky. “What’s it like, going to all these amazing places?”

“Stunning and boring all at the same time. I’ve seen things I could barely imagine, but after a while, it all tends to blend together into a gigantic, busy mural nobody can possibly take in all at once. Soon after that, it just becomes your new normal.”

“So, just like when we first got to Great Forks then?”

Palym laughed. “Yeah, pretty much.”

Xiao marveled at her for a long moment, enough to make Palym squirm a little bit. “What?” she finally asked.

“Were you serious about this being a date?”

“Not at the moment I said it.” She let out a nervous laugh. “Why? Should I have been?”

Xiao gave a slow shrug. “I suppose that’s up to you, isn’t it?”

“And you don’t have any say at all in the matter.”

Xiao raised her eyebrows. “Have I ever?”

Palym laughed again. “I have no idea even how I should take that.”

“Take it however you like.”

Palym reached out and put her hand on Xiao’s. Xiao looked up at her and repeated, “However you like.”

Palym giggled at herself and gently withdrew her hand. “One of my co-workers has gone rogue, and the others are either trying to hunt her down or rescue her. I’m supposed to report to the division head on all that tonight.”

“That’s — um — crazy,” Xiao said.

“So, for tonight at least, can I just focus on that?”

“Of course,” Xiao said, with just the slightest hint of disappointment. “However you want to handle it. Just as long as you bring me along for the ride.”



CHAPTER THIRTY

“So,” Palym said as they boarded a private boat moored at the canal closest to her quarters. “What’s that icon I see you fondling all the time?”

The canals formed a network that covered the whole of Yu-Shan, and each of them featured two lanes. The silver side was for slower traffic and was usually clogged with people trying to get from one place to another within the Celestial City. The gold side was for important people who had passes that allowed them to travel faster and with far fewer obstacles. Palym probably could have wrangled herself one of those passes, but she hadn’t needed one until now.

No one had come to pick her up at her place, and when she and Xiao had walked over to the Ebony Offices, none of her compatriots had been there either. The flying rickshaw had also disappeared. So, she and Xiao had decided to take the scenic route.

“I can’t wait to see more of the city,” Xiao said as they sat down, and the boat lurched forward all on its own, seemingly aware of where they wanted to go. “It’s so stunning!”

Palym peered around them at the tall buildings lining the canal. Proximity to the canal seemed to be one of the defining factors of wealth or power within the city. The nicest places were closest to the transportation. The farther you moved away, the rattier the places became, until you found yourself in lands covered by orchards and ranches. There were some truly impressive estates mixed in among those, but Palym hadn’t had the opportunity to visit any of them yet.

“It is, but you’re avoiding my question,” she said to Xiao. “Why?”

Xiao blushed and stuck her hand into her pocket. “I just didn’t.... It’s a private thing, you know?”

“I thought we shared everything,” Palym said. “Don’t best friends do that?”

Xiao nodded. “I — I didn’t start doing this until I thought I’d lost you.”

Palym put a hand on Xiao’s shoulder. “It’s all right. Whatever it is — *who*ever it is — I’m sure it’s fine.”

Xiao fished the idol out of her pocket and presented it. It was a rotund little man, reclining and relaxed, with a lotus at his throat. It took her a moment to recognize who it represented. “This is Odihna!”

“You know him?” Xiao seemed both impressed and surprised. “I would have thought someone as industrious as you would never have run across him.”

“Hey, I have my relaxed moments too.”

Xiao chortled at that. “When?”

“Well, I’m sure I will eventually.” Palym looked at her. “You’ve been praying to him?”

“Just a bit. When you were missing — and I thought you were dead — I didn’t have a lot going on. I couldn’t find a job, and I had nothing but the ruins I was poking through, looking for you... or your body. I got bored.”

“What do you pray to Odihna for, anyhow? More idleness?”

Xiao shook her head. “Well, some people might. I mostly prayed for a relief from boredom — but not too much — if you know what I mean. A little idleness is good for you. That’s where we get art and stories and fun.”

“But too much is where we get wasted time. Wasted lives.”

“I’m a long way from that yet,” Xiao said, just a little defensively. “And now that we found each other, I’m a lot less bored, too!” She gazed out at the city as they passed through it. “This is just so incredible...”

Palym had to agree with her. “I’ve seen so little of it so far myself. I just want to spend weeks — months, even — exploring it all. And then I want to explore all of Creation!”

Palym turned toward Xiao. “Did you know that Yu-Shan has the exact same geography as the Blessed Isle back in Creation? The island that holds the Imperial Mountain at the center of Creation?”

“That’s hundreds of miles!” Xiao said, shocked. “It would take a lifetime to explore. Several lifetimes!”

Palym fell silent at the thought of that. If all went well with her — if nothing happened to her the way it did to Hummingbird — she actually had several lifetimes to look forward to. Xiao, on the other hand, did not.

“Well, I hope we get the chance to start on that,” Xiao said, misreading Palym’s quietude. “And soon.”

“Me too.”

They rode in silence for a while and watched the people all around them. Many of them seemed human — or close — but others were much stranger. They looked like animals and terrain, weapons and vegetation, buildings and monsters.

“Are many of them headed to the Cerulean Lute?” Xiao asked.

Palym shrugged. “Not the ones going in the other direction, I suspect.”

“Beyond those?”

“Probably not. The canals are always full of traffic. People have lots of places to be in Yu-Shan, and there are millions of gods here. Few of them are likely to be headed to the same party, even if they could get in.”

“Do we need money to get in?”

“Normally, yeah. Qing told me that the Cerulean Lute is the premier pleasure-house in heaven, but we’re invited tonight because I work for the Bureau of Destiny. It’s technically a business event.”

“Is that where you can play these Games of Divinity I’ve heard about?”

“No, those take place in the Jade Pleasure Dome, in the center of the city. The Incarnae only invite the most powerful and influential to play, and never Exalted. The Games have gone on since before we were born and will keep going long after we die.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or not.”

“Wait until you’ve met a few more gods,” Palym said. “Especially the most powerful ones. You’ll be glad they have something to keep them occupied. Far better than having them meddling in the affairs of mortals in their spare time.”

“You really think so?” Xiao squinted at her. “You haven’t been here all that long. It didn’t take much to get you jaded.”

Palym thought about that for a moment. “You remember when we were young, and we thought our parents knew everything? They took care of us and watched out for us and kept us clothed, fed, and warm?”

“Of course.”

“But as we grew older, we saw that they make mistakes. They got angry. They did petty things sometimes. Stupid ones, even.”

“Don’t we all?”

“That’s the point. I’m not raging about our parents being human. Of course they are! We all are, and most of us are just trying to get by and do the best we can by the people we love.”

She leaned in close. “The gods are no better than that. They’re both better and worse. They have the power do more good *and* more evil. But in the end, they’re just like humans. Only more so.”

Xiao peered at her, confused. “You sound, well, not exactly angry.”

Palym shook her head. “More like disappointed. But at the same time, relieved. It’s kind of freeing to realize you live in a world in which everyone is just as flawed as you. Even the Exalted.”

“Just as long as they don’t tear it apart, I suppose.”

Palym thought of the Black Flag that had nearly killed them both. “It’s rarely dull, at least.”

Xiao sighed. “There are many days when I could use a bit more dull in my life, I think. But not today.”

They rode in silence together a while longer, and Palym could sense they were growing closer and closer to their destination with every passing minute. Her sense for travel had become finely-tuned, and she was sure she’d recognize

the Cerulean Lute despite never having been there. Then she grunted in frustration as she saw warning signs along their route.

“Looks like there’s construction or an accident up ahead. The canal’s blocked off.” The boat was already slowing to allow the two humans to disembark.

“How are we going to get there now?” Xiao asked, as they stepped out onto a nearby road crowded with gods grumbling about their own interrupted journeys. She leaned against a docking post, arms folded.

Palym shaded her eyes against the constant noon sunlight and tried to look for a useful detour, but she couldn’t manage it. “I don’t know.” She glanced around. “But I’ll find out.”

Palym concentrated on their destination, and the threads of fate’s tapestry played out across her vision. She picked through the many routes available, and her eyes were drawn up into the sky. Squinting into the light, she gasped to see Cutting Remark flying overhead. Rather than riding inside the flying rickshaw, though, he surfed on top of a fluffy white cloud. He seemed lost in thought and did not see them caught in the foot traffic below.

Palym knew that she’d found her perfect route. Without thinking for an instant, she began waving and shouting at her compatriot above. Xiao jumped up to join her, and their shouting together only succeeded in disturbing the horse-spirits pulling a nearby carriage. They both laughed and scurried away from the scolding god riding in the carriage.

Palym looked back up at Cutting Remark. Their first plan hadn’t worked, but Palym thought there was a chance that Cutting Remark might look down at just the right moment, in just the right time, to see them. She found the thread of that possibility and reinforced it with the Essence within her until it became reality. Mercury’s yellow symbol lit up on her forehead as she exerted her power.

High above them, Cutting Remark glanced down, then looked again as he realized who was waving up at him from the street below. He gave them a tentative wave. Then the cloud he was on began to descend in a broad spiral.

Palym stopped waving her arms as Cutting Remark reached them, and she spotted a wistful smile on his face. “For just an instant, when I spotted you and your yellow anima, I was reminded of Hummingbird. Thank you for that.”

“We’re on our way to the Cerulean Lute, but the canal’s blocked off,” Palym said. She still wasn’t entirely comfortable with comparisons to the man’s dead wife and was happy to have another subject to broach. “How else can we get there from here?”

“I suppose you might rent a rickshaw, but I see several high-ranking gods already waiting impatiently, so it might take a while. I wouldn’t really recommend walking, however.”

“How are you doing that?” Xiao asked Cutting Remark, fascinated. She pointed at the cloud the man was still standing on. It had brought the edge of a chill with it, but it shined in the sun, white and fluffy as fresh-picked cotton. It hovered just a few feet over the road, where few of the gods paid it any attention.

“It’s simple sorcery. Any Sidereal Exalt — and many of the gods — can manage it. It takes a special training, but someday Palym should be able to handle it as well, if she’s interested in learning.”

Palym stared at the cloud from one end to the other. “Once I can do that, I don’t know if you’ll ever get me off one.”

“They’re convenient, for sure,” Cutting Remark said. “Although they’re a little slow by Yu-Shan’s travel standards. I’ve seen you ride your horse much faster, Palym. Hummingbird loved to travel by cloud though.”

“Once we get back to the office, I’m going to have to insist on lessons.”

Cutting Remark chuckled at that. “In the meantime, it’ll take you hours to reach the Cerulean Lute on foot. I would offer you and your guest here a ride, but the cloud’s only big enough for two to stand on.”

“Palym will just have to carry me,” said Xiao in a joking tone.

“If you insist!” Palym reached down and scooped up Xiao, who let out a surprised laugh. Palym had acted without thinking, but she was surprised to realize just how easy it really was to carry the stockier woman. Mercury’s blessings and Keahi’s training had done wonders for her strength.

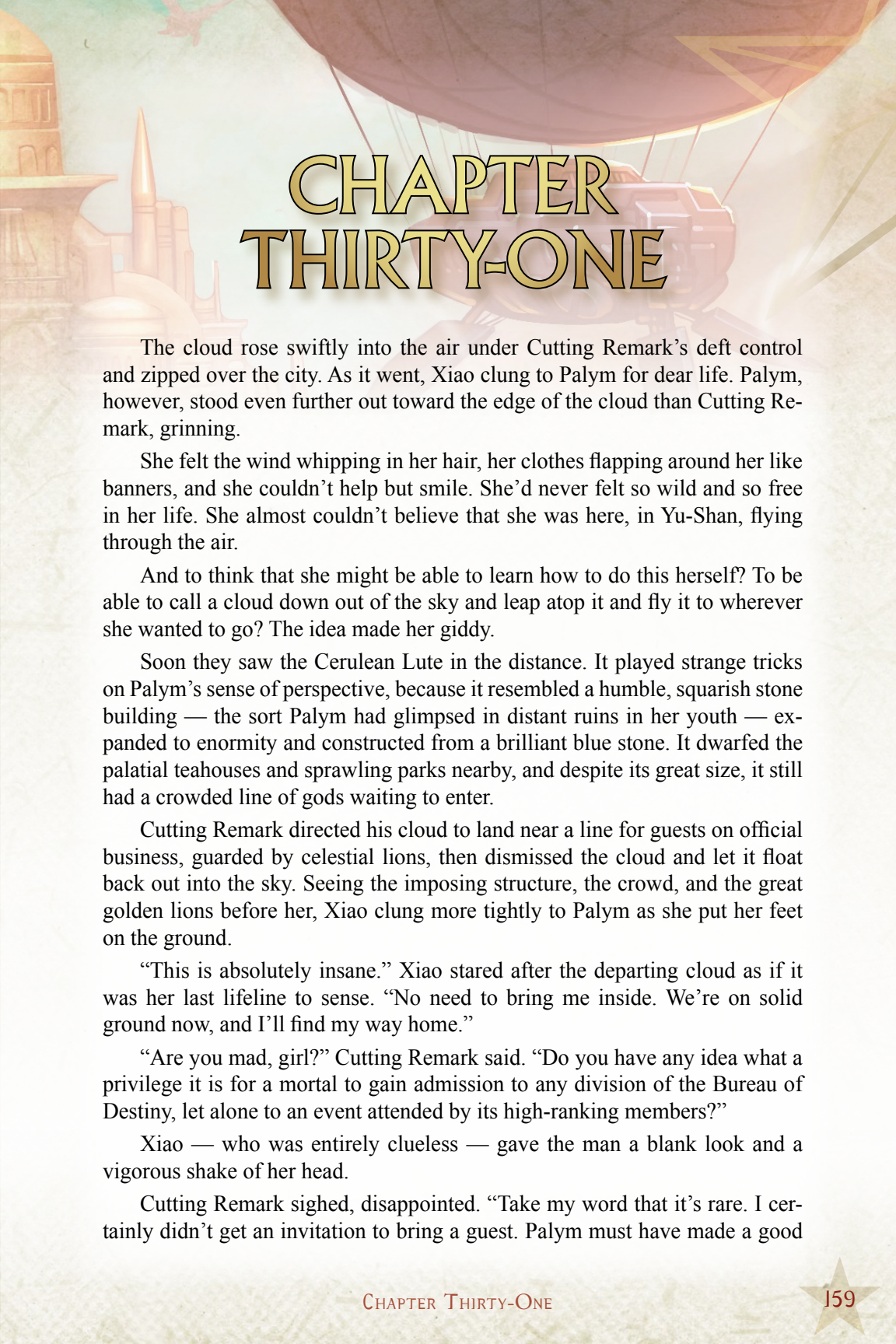
She was less surprised to realize that Xiao seemed perfectly at ease being carried. Palym felt she’d just set a dangerous precedent.

Cutting Remark shrugged. “It’ll be tight, but we’ll manage. Just step carefully. You’ll find that it’s fairly solid all around, but the edges can be a little loose.”

Palym leaped up onto the cloud, and it held her and Xiao just fine. She probed it with her boot for a moment, getting a sense of how it traveled. “It’s like walking on a bed,” she said.

Xiao clung tightly to Palym, looking down as the cloud began to rise. “This is just a little insane,” she said with palpable awe.

“Yes,” Palym agreed. “But in the most wonderful way.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The cloud rose swiftly into the air under Cutting Remark's deft control and zipped over the city. As it went, Xiao clung to Palym for dear life. Palym, however, stood even further out toward the edge of the cloud than Cutting Remark, grinning.

She felt the wind whipping in her hair, her clothes flapping around her like banners, and she couldn't help but smile. She'd never felt so wild and so free in her life. She almost couldn't believe that she was here, in Yu-Shan, flying through the air.

And to think that she might be able to learn how to do this herself? To be able to call a cloud down out of the sky and leap atop it and fly it to wherever she wanted to go? The idea made her giddy.

Soon they saw the Cerulean Lute in the distance. It played strange tricks on Palym's sense of perspective, because it resembled a humble, squarish stone building — the sort Palym had glimpsed in distant ruins in her youth — expanded to enormity and constructed from a brilliant blue stone. It dwarfed the palatial teahouses and sprawling parks nearby, and despite its great size, it still had a crowded line of gods waiting to enter.

Cutting Remark directed his cloud to land near a line for guests on official business, guarded by celestial lions, then dismissed the cloud and let it float back out into the sky. Seeing the imposing structure, the crowd, and the great golden lions before her, Xiao clung more tightly to Palym as she put her feet on the ground.

"This is absolutely insane." Xiao stared after the departing cloud as if it was her last lifeline to sense. "No need to bring me inside. We're on solid ground now, and I'll find my way home."

"Are you mad, girl?" Cutting Remark said. "Do you have any idea what a privilege it is for a mortal to gain admission to any division of the Bureau of Destiny, let alone to an event attended by its high-ranking members?"

Xiao — who was entirely clueless — gave the man a blank look and a vigorous shake of her head.

Cutting Remark sighed, disappointed. "Take my word that it's rare. I certainly didn't get an invitation to bring a guest. Palym must have made a good

impression on someone in her division, or in the Division of Serenity, to get such a consideration.”

“Maybe it has to do with the fact that Xiao has been my traveling companion for so much of my life,” Palym said, setting Xiao back on her feet. “After all, Mercury is the Maiden of Journeys, and she has a soft spot for fellow travelers.”

“True,” Cutting Remark said with a sage nod. “Though I’d be surprised if Mercury got involved so directly.” He put a stabilizing hand on Xiao’s shoulder as she found her balance once more. “You may leave if you like, but take it from someone who can see the future, you will never have an offer like this again.”

Xiao swallowed hard, then looked over to Palym and nodded. “I can’t pass up an opportunity like this, right?”

“No,” Palym said firmly. “You can’t.”

With that, she took Xiao by the hand, and they walked through the great open doorway of the Cerulean Lute. Cutting Remark strolled after them.

Inside, the dazzling sight of the dome’s interior stunned the normally jocular Xiao into utter silence. This was Palym’s first time here too, and she understood how her friend felt. She was relatively used to crowds of strange gods now, but the building’s interior was a maze of lavish decorations and lovingly crafted architecture, filled with various sweet-smelling hazes. Where the Golden Barque had been built for workers to move in and out freely, the Cerulean Lute was as much private resort as it was office space. Silken ropes cordoned off paying pleasure-seekers from great rooms where members of the Bureau of Destiny could meet and socialize.

The overall experience was disorienting. At least when Palym had first attended a similar event, she’d been in the company of her fellow members of the Circle of Protection. The other bureaucrats had treated her like an equal, at least in terms of being one of the Sidereal Exalted, if not in actual measures of experience. She’d eventually felt relatively comfortable, if not exactly at home.

The fact that Xiao wasn’t one of the Exalted — just a regular mortal — must have made everything that much stranger to her. While Palym could learn to absorb and understand the events of the party, to Xiao, it had to be completely overwhelming. Xiao would never have an inkling of the power most of the creatures inside the dome had, and Palym thought that must have made her feel small and powerless.

Xiao clutched Palym’s hand as they ascended the floors, past exotically dressed partygoers and detailed murals of Creation’s greatest romances and armistices. Palym could feel Xiao shivering, not out of fear but from the flood of information. What dazzled Palym was simply too much for Xiao.

“This. Is. Insane,” Xiao breathed as they found the main meeting space and wandered the perimeter. She was momentarily engrossed by the band of gods playing beautiful music atop a great stage. “Wait. Don’t you have to be somewhere? I thought you were summoned here for a reason.”

Palym nodded. "Yes, but I don't see the others yet."

"The others?"

"Zannen and Reverie."

"Are you sure they're coming?"

"I have no control over such things. I can only do what I'm supposed to do and hope that others manage the same for themselves."

"That's a remarkably mature way to look at it."

"That's what you learn when you're the oldest of six children," Palym said with a wry chuckle.

"Are you sure though? I mean, what if one of your superiors is looking for you and can't find you? Aren't they going to be furious? Wouldn't that be horribly bad?"

Palym pointed out Yaogin the Fair, who appeared to be deeply involved in a drinking game with several other gods. He didn't appear to be winning, unless getting drunk was the goal.

"Yaogin's not my superior, but he's the one I'm supposed to report to tonight, and he looks like he's occupied. Besides which, I'm sure he's been told I'm here. He's the head of the Division of Serenity, and I imagine he's more aware of everything happening here than he appears. If he needs me, he'll send someone for me."

"How can you be so cavalier about being at the beck and call of such an important god?" Xiao gaped at her, astonished. "Aren't you terrified of him?"

Palym pondered that question for a moment. Intoxicated or not, Yaogin could certainly influence her career for a very long time. "In one way, yes, of course I am. In another, though, why would I be? I'm one of Mercury's Chosen, right? She literally chose me as one of her favorites.

"I'm one of a few people in all of Creation that have that honor at the moment. I don't have any idea if I'm worthy of that, sure, but at a certain point, I have to be willing to trust her judgment on that issue more than I trust my own. So far, the rest of the Bureau of Destiny seems to expect me to just run with it, so that's what I'll do."

"You were always so brave. I can see why she chose you."

"Now you're just flattering me."

"Is it working?"

"A little."

They both laughed at that. Then Xiao's eyes grew wide. "By all the gods!" she said. "Do you see who that is?"

Palym turned, but couldn't tell what Xiao was looking at for sure. She couldn't pick any one amazing thing out from all the other things going on in the background.

Xiao fished the little icon out of her pocket and held it up in front of Palym's face. "It's him!" he said. "*It's him!*"

"Ah!" Palym peered right past the icon and spotted the spirit it was supposed to represent. In real life, Odihna seemed a lot less serene and more human than the representation Xiao carried around, though the throat-lotus was recognizable. Palym recalled that he had an intensity about him that made the prospect of talking with him again unappealing, at least to her.

She turned away, hoping she could gloss over this particular god despite Xiao's fascination with him. "Yeah, there sure are a lot of gods around here. Did you see Hu Dai Liang over there? She's the one with huge butterfly wings. I'm not sure if she can actually fly with her heavy armor, though."

Odihna spotted Xiao gaping at him, though, and beckoned for them to come over. "Hey!" he said with a wide smile full of half-chewed food. "Palym! So good to see you again! Bring your friend Xiao over here and introduce us!" He even spoke in Palym's and Xiao's native tongue.

Xiao actually squealed. "I can't believe it! He knows my name! Did you tell him about me?"

Palym favored Xiao with a tight, controlled smile. "Sorry, but I don't think you came up."

"That's even more amazing!" Xiao half-followed, half-shoved Palym toward Odihna and spoke in a stage whisper as they got closer. "He must know me because I've been praying to him!"

"Hello, hello, hello!" Odihna hauled himself to his feet and offered them each a languorous hand, which they shook in turn. Palym tried to subtly wipe the sweat off her palm afterward, but Xiao looked like she might never wash her hand again.

"I can't believe it's you!" Xiao said. "I'm so honored to meet you!"

"Listen to her," Odihna said to Palym with a confidential grin. "Never met a god before, I take it."

"Not one of the important ones!" Xiao said. "Not like you!"

Odihna chortled at Xiao's flattery. "I like this one!" he said to Palym. "You should bring her around more often!"

Palym smiled politely. "I got permission to bring a guest to this party, so I guess that's up to whoever writes the invitations."

"Imagine that. Sounds like destiny to me." Odihna gestured to the group of gods sitting at his table, reviewing a calendar of health and bountiful harvests while sharing a hookah. "It's not every day we get to meet one of our worshippers up here in Yu-Shan, much less in the Cerulean Lute. I'm reminded of Yaogin the Fair himself, so beloved by Venus that she plucked him from a mortal life in Creation and gave him the gift of divinity, many centuries ago."

"I don't think I'm ready for all that," Xiao said, laughing. "I'd settle for the gift of some divine food."

"Now that I can help you with."

As the two laughed with each other, Palym spotted a flash of red in the distance, in the same section of the building, but higher up. She squinted at it and fought down a gasp of surprise when she recognized who it was: Keahi.

Had the Chosen of Mars been hiding out here in the Cerulean Lute the entire time? It made some sick kind of sense. People came and went from the place constantly, and who would look for her here?

Did that mean she had permission from someone in the Division of Serenity? Would this wind up escalating into a conflict among the divisions of the Bureau of Destiny?

Either way, Palym didn't want to draw attention to Keahi. At least not yet. "We have to go," she said quietly to Xiao, who practically wilted at the suggestion.

"Already?"

"Hey, don't worry about that," Odihna said to Xiao. "You need to dance with the one who brought you. I understand that. You get a chance, though, come on back around this way and say hi before you take off."

"I'd be delighted," Xiao said with a hopeful smile.

"Meanwhile, I got something for you. Hold on just a moment." He turned and slipped into the crowd.

"Do we really have to go right now?" Xiao said to Palym.

Palym gave a firm nod. "This is not optional. If we get a chance, honestly, I promise I'll bring you back around, but we're here on business, not pleasure, and I just spotted a pressing bit of business."

Xiao threw up her hands in surrender. "Okay. It's like Odihna says, I guess."

Palym couldn't help but smile. "You're going to be saying that for the rest of your life now, aren't you?"

Xiao nodded. "You need to dance with the one who brought you!"

"But not quite yet!" Odihna said as he returned to view. He had a small scroll in his hand, tightly bound with a thin black ribbon and a sloppy wax seal. "This is for you."

"What is it?" Xiao said, peering down through the center of it.

"Just something to help spice up a dull moment for you. Open it the next time you're bored and start to think of me."

Xiao grinned so hard that Palym wondered if her face might split in half. "Thank you," she said to Odihna. "Thank you so much! I'll treasure this forever."

“I hope not!” Odihna said with a snort. “A mortal can go their whole life promising to take a vacation and never do it, even when they have the opportunity. Gifts are much the same. They’re much better when they’re used.”

Palym had been gritting her teeth, waiting to chase down Keahi, and she took that opportunity to haul Xiao away quickly. Palym shouted an apology over Xiao’s protests, but she didn’t feel too sorry. Xiao never knew when it was time to get going.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Keahi didn't see them coming. Palym hid behind Xiao as they walked up the stairs to the balcony where she'd seen Keahi, banking on the chance that the Chosen of Mars wouldn't recognize the mortal woman. When they reached Keahi, she was flipping through a sheaf of papers and cursing loudly and lustfully about their contents.

Xiao stopped right next to Keahi, and Palym came around to stand beside her. They stood there for a moment, waiting for the woman to notice them. When she did, rather than being startled and throwing all her papers into the air, as Palym had feared might happen, she lanced them both through with a steely glare.

"It's about time you got here," she said. "I never thought I'd have to wait so long."

"You're *waiting* for us?" Xiao looked at Palym askance. "Aren't you supposed to be arresting her or something?"

"Or something, it is," said Keahi. "I don't think I've been formally accused of anything."

Xiao turned to Palym. "So, do you order her to present herself for investigation or something?"

Palym winced at the idea. Keahi favored her with a tight, humorless smile. "For your own sake, please don't try."

"Zannen might try to order you around, but I'm not him," Palym said. "We're equals within the Circle. That's why it's a *Circle* and not a department, division, bureau, or whatever. I don't answer to Zannen, and as far as I'm concerned, you've done nothing wrong."

"That's a refreshing take," Keahi said. "What illuminated your way of thinking?"

"Zannen sent me to search your quarters."

Keahi grunted dubiously at that. "Better than having him ransack the place personally, I'm sure." She squinted at Palym. "But there's nothing there to pin any of this on me. Or at least there wasn't when I was last there."

"No. What I discovered cleared you. At least in my mind."

Keahi grimaced and gave her a knowing nod. "Lao always did have loose lips."

"Why didn't you explain yourself back at the offices?"

"Would it have mattered? To Zannen, at least? He was ready to hang me up by my thumbs the first chance he saw."

"That's not true," Palym said. "He was just doing what we've all been doing: trying to figure out what's behind the Black Flags so we can stop them."

"That's what you and I have been doing. That's what Cutting Remark and Reverie have been doing. That's even what Hummingbird was doing, and she paid the ultimate price for it."

"What are you saying?"

She grimaced. "That's not what Zannen was doing."

Palym gaped at the woman, who produced a thick file filled with mismatched papers and thrust it into Palym's hands.

"Don't believe me?" Keahi said. "Look!"

Palym stared at the papers for a moment, unsure how to proceed. Xiao spotted an empty bench nearby and steered her to it. Keahi followed them over, her hands on her hips as she glared down at them.

Palym opened the file and began to spread the papers inside of it over the bench. She felt grateful that the Cerulean Lute insulated them from the elements, even as mild as they usually were in Yu-Shan. Otherwise, she would have worried that a stray gust of wind might have picked the papers up and carried them away.

Keahi didn't say a word. She just stood there and loomed over Palym and Xiao, tapping her foot with an impatient beat. Palym worried that she might need some guidance from the woman to figure everything out, but the papers turned out to be clearly labeled and relatively easy to decipher, even with Palym's short experience the language of the gods.

According to what she read, there were many more locations where evidence of Black Flags had been found. They were scattered all around Creation, at almost regular intervals. Dozens of people had been killed at each such appearance. Most of the reports were couched to make it seem like the attack had been by some kind of monster, and that's all they seemed like if you looked at them one at a time. It was only when you strung them all together that they began to form a pattern.

"This is incredible," Palym said. "I had no idea this had become such a problem."

"If you look at them by their dates, it becomes even more enlightening," Keahi said. "The first ones are fairly small scale, and they ramp up from there. The one in Great Forks was by far the worst."

“So far,” Palym said. “I don’t see an end to this pattern.”

Keahi leaned over her and finessed a map out of the center of the stack of papers. “That’s because you’re not familiar enough with the celestial gates that lead from Yu-Shan to Creation. If you were, you’d notice something.”

The map showed where each of the celestial gates sat in Creation. After staring at it for a while, Palym began shuffling through the reports again and matching them up with the gates. “So far, every one of the Black Flag incidents — if that’s what these are — happened within a few miles of a celestial gate.”

“It’s true of all of them,” Keahi said. “Every one.”

“That’s not just because we only get reports from people who live near gates, is it?”

“A fair question, but no. The Bureau of Destiny regularly gets reports filed from all across Creation, even from the most remote parts. If there had been Black Flag incidents elsewhere, I might have expected them to take longer to reach us — but not *that* long.”

Palym looked up at her, peering into her eyes. “Have you been to all these locations?”

“No. I’m a warrior. I go where I’m ordered, where I’m called. But I don’t travel through all of Creation for the sheer fun of it. But you’re not asking me that really. You want to know if I could have laid twisted boons in each of those areas, waiting for them to cause a Black Flag.”

“Correct.”

“Not on my own. In theory and for the sake of argument, I could have managed it, I suppose, with help, but even that would have been challenging.

“Only Sidereal Exalts travel through Yu-Shan and Creation that much, and there aren’t that many of us. I would have needed to gather at least three others into my conspiracy, and probably such a plan would have required many more.”

Palym let that sink in. Keahi was a brilliant strategic planner from all reports — as she would expect from one of the Chosen of Mars — but Palym didn’t see how the woman would have been able to keep such a vast and destructive conspiracy so secret. It wasn’t impossible, of course. Just extremely unlikely.

“Could anyone else have managed it?” Palym said.

“According to the reports in that file, two people could have managed it, each on their own. The first was Hummingbird.”

“That makes sense!” Xiao said. “I mean, she was one of the Chosen of Mercury, right? The Maiden of Journeys? I’ll bet no one traveled as much as she did.”

Palym’s stomach flipped, and she gaped at Keahi. “You can’t be saying she’s behind this?”

The woman shrugged. "If she was, she miscalculated badly."

"And she did so to save my life! That's hardly the act of someone callous enough to create monsters."

"Agreed."

"Then who's the other?"

Keahi gestured toward the file, and Palym set to it again. She went through the lists, one after the other, until she realized that one name kept coming up over and over. She double-checked it against the lists again, and she soon saw that it wasn't just that the name cropped up regularly. It appeared every single time.

"Zannen," she said. "It's Zannen."

Xiao let out a low whistle. "That man has been hard at work if he's been keeping up with Hummingbird."

Palym stared up at Keahi, shocked. "This is exactly what he accused you of, but with only four locations investigated. There are *dozens* here."

The warrior gave her a grim nod. "If you check the dates of the visits by members of the Circle of Protection to the outbreaks of possible Black Flag events, you might notice one other horrifying thing."

Palym sighed as she stared at the papers strewn about the bench. "Can't you just tell me?"

Xiao leaned in and nodded. "I think by this point, she's ready to just believe you."

"At the start, it seems that Zannen was following Hummingbird around. Whenever she went someplace, he went there shortly afterward."

"So, he could plant a Black Flag... and then make it seem like she'd done it."

"Presumably. Toward the end, though — in the past few weeks — you can see that Hummingbird had started to circle around back to the same places once more. After the Black Flag events had occurred."

Palym clapped a hand over her mouth. "She'd started to figure it out."

"Wow," Xiao said. "You think he had something to do with her death? I mean, it's awful fortunate for him that she died before she could tell anyone what she'd discovered, don't you think?"

"I don't know," Keahi said. "I was there that day, and I didn't see Zannen putting Hummingbird in harm's way. She did that entirely on her own. That's just the kind of person she was."

"But Zannen knew that, didn't he?" Palym said as she stuffed the papers back into the file. She felt her blood rushing to her face. "He knew that she was exactly the kind of selfless hero who would be willing to sacrifice herself to save a couple of young villagers, new to the city, who were too stupid to get out of the way."

"You cannot blame yourself for that. If Zannen was using you—"

“Of course I can. We didn’t have to be there. We didn’t have to fall for that.”

Xiao reached out and put a comforting hand on Palym’s shoulder. “Hey, I was there too. We didn’t fall for anything, unless you count charging in to help other people as being fooled. If so, I know I can count on you being played like that every damn time.”

Palym wasn’t exactly sure how or why that made her feel better, but it did. She stood up and turned to Keahi.

“All right. Now that we know this, what’s next?”

Keahi turned down the aisle, toward the stage. “Every member of the Circle of Protection has been summoned here tonight.”

“We came with Cutting Remark,” Palym said.

“On a cloud!” Xiao interjected.

“That leaves just Reverie and Zannen.”

“Oh, I’m right here,” a voice said from the stairway behind Palym.



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Palym, Keahi, and Xiao all turned to meet the speaker, ready for a fight. Keahi's blade appeared in her hand faster than even Palym's eyes could follow. They squared off next to each other, ready for whatever might come at them.

Reverie emerged from the stairway below them, grinning at them all. Palym and Xiao immediately relaxed at the sight of him.

"How long have you been there?" Keahi demanded to know, still brandishing her blade.

Reverie grinned, pleased with himself. "In this building? Most of the day. I helped plan this party, you know. I spotted you as soon as you came in, and kept an eye on you by pretending to be one of the servers. That red armor's hard to miss, even in as motley a group as this."

"And you didn't try to grab her right away?" Xiao asked.

"Even if 'grabbing' Keahi had been a smart idea, I've always believed in her innocence," Reverie said. "At least when it comes to the Black Flags. We in the Circle of Protection have all done, ah, extraordinary things at one point or another, right?"

"Of course," said Keahi. "But those were necessities in service to the Bureau of Destiny. This crime, however, is beyond the pale."

"In any case," Reverie said. "I thought I would simply observe my good friend here — in case someone less understanding found her and decided to take action against her."

That made Palym shiver. "So you were watching us to see if I believed her or not? And what would you have done if I'd thought she was lying to me? Or if I hadn't bothered to give her a chance to explain herself?"

Reverie produced a dramatic shrug, as if the idea hadn't even occurred to him. "Let's just be glad we shall never have to find out."

Palym glanced about. Finally, she spotted one of the two men she was looking for, and she pointed straight at him. "Cutting Remark is down near the stage, waiting to speak with Wayang. That accounts for all of us but Zannen."

"We need to find him," Keahi said. "Now."

“He’s a cunning one,” Reverie said. “If he knows we’re on to him, he’s sure to have a plan to turn the tables against us. You don’t last long as a Chosen of Jupiter without that capacity.”

“Then we better find him first,” Keahi said.

“If we do, what then?” Palym said.

Keahi set her jaw. “We take him down, fast, before he can open his lying mouth.”

Palym peered down toward the stage again. “We might already be too late.”

She pointed out what she had seen: Zannen was in a deep conversation with a pair of celestial lions near a wide stage in the center of the room. The lions broke off conversation with him and began to prowl through the guests.

“What do you think they’re doing?” Xiao asked.

“Looking for me, I imagine,” Keahi said. “If Reverie spotted me so easily, Zannen might have co-conspirators who told him I was here.”

“If a lion tries to apprehend you and you fight back, this whole situation will go sideways,” Reverie said. “We need to convince them Zannen’s playing them before they go on the attack. Even one celestial lion is deadly, and if we resist arrest, they’ll call for reinforcements.”

Palym turned to Xiao. “You need to get out of sight, now.”

“Wait,” Xiao said. “Is there some kind of problem with my invitation?”

“Those two men are extremely dangerous, and Zannen knows how much I care about you—”

“Aw, that’s sweet,” Xiao said with a bashful smile.

“And they won’t hesitate to use that against me. You need to hide so I can do my job and concentrate on taking them down, rather than on protecting you.”

Xiao looked her in the eyes and frowned. “You really know how to make a girl feel less than useful, you know?”

“I’m sorry about that,” Palym said. “I really am, but I think it’s much more important that you remain alive right now, don’t you?”

Xiao leaned in and kissed Palym on the cheek. “I love you, too,” she said softly. “Now go get that bastard.”

Palym stood there, stunned for a moment. Then she returned Xiao’s kiss, this time full on the lips. “We’ll discuss all this tonight,” she said as she turned and sprinted away. She didn’t look back.

Halfway down the aisle, Palym spotted the lions looking in her direction. Cutting Remark had seen her and was pointing her out to them. Of course, he knew she was there. He’d given her a ride to the Cerulean Lute, after all.

She glanced around and saw that Reverie and Keahi had already disappeared into the crowd. She had no idea where they had gone, and she hoped that Cutting Remark and Zannen didn't either.

Meanwhile, she was caught. She considered turning and trying to flee, but as fast as she was, she wasn't sure she could get away from two Sidereal Exalts who had already spied her.

But they didn't know she knew about Zannen's betrayal. Not yet, at least.

She gave them a friendly wave without breaking stride and continued down the aisle. They moved to meet her at the edge of the stage, and a moment later, she joined them there.

"Have you seen Keahi?" she asked them straight off.

The directness of her question set Zannen back. He blinked at her. "She's here?"

"I would think so. Wouldn't you?"

Cutting Remark began scanning the crowd for signs of the Exalted's face. "It would be a clever hiding place. And it would explain why we haven't been able to find her until now."

"Where's your friend?" Zannen asked.

"Xiao wandered off." Palym gestured toward some nebulous part of the crowd she didn't even bother to look at. "Seems that socializing with gods isn't all that much fun if you're a mortal and don't speak their language at all."

"You're not worried about her?"

Palym was terrified for Xiao, but she didn't want Zannen to know that. "What kind of trouble can she get into around here?"

The moment the words left her lips, Palym realized how hopelessly naive they seemed. Xiao was the only mortal in the massive place. The number of ways she could get into in trouble was uncountable.

"You shouldn't try to lie to a Chosen of the Maiden of Secrets," Zannen said with a wolfish smile. "You don't have the knack for it."

"There she is." Cutting Remark pointed toward the upper story in the direction from which Palym had come.

Palym glanced back and saw Xiao hadn't done much to hide herself. Maybe Xiao hadn't been able to find an open spot in which she could wedge herself. Maybe she was just too stunned by everything to try. Or maybe she was just excited to finally have a chance to check out the scroll Odihna had given her.

"Leave her alone." Palym stood between Zannen and the stairway, blocking his way up.

"Why so defensive?" the man said to her. His voice dripped with concern she knew to be false. "Have you done something wrong?"

Cutting Remark stared at her, waiting for her to respond. She leveled a long finger at Zannen and said, "He's the one behind the Black Flags."

Zannen put a hand to his chest and pretended to be shocked at the accusation. “How dare you? Who got to you? Who poisoned your mind against me? Was it Keahi? Or did Reverie whisper some comforting fantasy about the supposed nobility of our Chosen of Battles?”

“They showed me the facts. They had the files you’ve been trying to hide from everyone. The ones that show where you’ve been traveling over the past year.” She glanced at Cutting Remark. “The ones that show he was shadowing Hummingbird all around Creation.”

Cutting Remark glared at Zannen. “Is any of what she says true?”

Zannen scoffed at them both, and he screwed up his face as if he’d just bitten into something bitter. He seemed to be about to launch into a ferocious defense which would have no doubt included vicious attacks against Palym’s character.

Instead, he just slumped forward a bit and relaxed. “Of course it is,” he said with a wide-armed shrug.

Cutting Remark recoiled from the man in horror. “What? What have you done?” he said in a whisper. Then he found his voice. He drew in a deep breath and shouted at the man at the top of his lungs. “*What have you done?*”

Zannen danced a few steps back from Cutting Remark and Palym, wagging a finger at each of them. “Ah-ah-ah! That would be telling! I’m the Chosen of the Maiden of Secrets, and we don’t give away such things so easily.”

Cutting Remark stalked toward the man, who retreated through the parting crowd. “You set up those Black Flags? All *four* of them?”

“Four?” Zannen cackled. “You should chat with your young friend there. I’m sure she could enlighten you. Those four are just the most recent. There were so many more.”

Cutting Remark goggled at the man in horror. He had cornered Zannen against the side of the stage. Zannen had no place to run, but he didn’t seem to feel like he needed to.

“You caused the deaths of countless people,” Cutting Remark said. “You — My wife is dead because of you.”

“Indirectly.” Zannen raised a finger to correct the comment. “It’s not like I attacked her with a blade. I just used her own heroism against her.” He leered at Palym. “It’s not all that hard when you have such good bait.”

“You’re going to pay for this,” Cutting Remark said. His hands had already begun to glow a deep, violent purple.

“Really?” Zannen said, with a dismissively casual wave. “And exactly who is going to hand me the bill?”

Cutting Remark readied a glowing fist, intent on smashing in Zannen’s face, then froze. Cutting Remark’s gaze lowered cautiously, and when Palym

followed his eyes, she saw the glint of a near-invisible thread against Cutting Remark's throat.

Zannen's open hand curled slightly, and the thread cut a razor-thin line in Cutting Remark's flesh. "You'll have to plan much farther ahead to stop me," said Zannen. "I've been in heaven a long, long time, and I've mastered techniques you've only heard of in rumor and legend."

Cutting Remark snarled. "*I have* heard of martial artists who learn to spin Essence into thread, like pattern spiders. It must be costly for you. I wonder whether your power will give out before my determination." He ducked the deadly thread, then lunged for the old man with a crushing grip.

Zannen merely shifted one finger, and Cutting Remark fell to his knees, his arm bound painfully by looped threads. By the time Cutting Remark stopped struggling against them, panting, Zannen wasn't even breathing heavily, and everyone in the area was gawking at them.

"You've always overestimated your skill and underestimated mine, because I look old," Zannen said. "Determination is fine, but it's nothing against a deft touch developed over centuries."

Palym felt stuck, a mere observer, until she felt a sudden premonition of dread. As bad as things were for Cutting Remark, they were about to get worse for everyone. She just didn't know how yet. "What is your plan here?" she asked Zannen directly. "What are you trying to do?"

The man flashed a smile at her. "Show the truth. The heavenly bureaucracy has gone far astray. It's grown decadent. Corrupt. Those who prize their work are hamstrung by the greedy and nepotistic." He gestured at Yaogin, still deeply intoxicated, surrounded by gods who seemed more amused than concerned about a showdown between Sidereals. "It needs a good cleaning out."

"Gods," Palym said.

"Exactly the problem," Zannen said. "But I have a solution for that."

"We need to inform the other division heads," Palym said to Cutting Remark. "We need to let them deal with him."

"They're right there!" Zannen chortled. "Tell them! Tell them right now!"

Palym stared at the man. He so clearly wanted influential gods brought to him that it had to be a ploy. She didn't understand the nature of his plot, but that didn't mean she was about to lead anyone into it — gods or not.

"What have you done?" she asked him, mystified.

"Me?" Zannen chuckled. "I haven't done anything. I just lay out the bait. It's the others who trigger the traps."

Palym felt her stomach fall through the floor below her. "Gods, you have one in here, don't you?"

“Ah, the ingenue from the sticks has finally figured it out, hasn’t she? My money was always on you, you know. The others in our so-called Circle of Protection, they’re already in too deep. Too inside the problem to see the solution. But you, you’re so fresh. So ready.”

Palym spun about and scanned the crowd. “Who has it?” she asked aloud. “The boon? Who did you give it...?”

Then she realized what the answer had to be.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Palym stared back up at the upper level, and she saw Xiao sitting there, still poorly hidden. Xiao had the little scroll in her hands — the one Odihna had given her — and she had already broken the sloppy wax seal on it. Now she was untying the little black ribbon from around it.

Palym started running toward Xiao without even realizing it, her feet carrying her away from Zannen. Cutting Remark would have to figure out how to deal with him. Justice would have to come later. Now all she cared about was getting that scroll out of Xiao's hands.

She was too late, of course. Before she'd started running, she'd already been too late.

That was why Zannen had confessed to them. That's why he'd toyed with Cutting Remark. He'd wanted to make sure that he had their full and undivided attention for as long as it took. Right up until the point at which Xiao opened that scroll.

Palym was taking the steps two at a time, all the way up to the upper level. As she went, she screamed at Xiao to stop, as loudly as she could manage. The noise of the crowd drowned her out.

Gods flinched away from her, seeing the fiery determination in her eyes. The ones standing in the aisle parted before her like cockroaches scattering before a light. But it didn't matter.

She was still too late.

Xiao slipped the ribbon from the scroll, and it unfurled in her hand.

Her eyes riveted to whatever it was that was etched on the page. Palym kept screaming at her, calling her name over and over again, but Xiao could not look away.

As Xiao stared at the words in the scroll, her body began to grow. It seemed as if she were gaining weight right before Palym's eyes. Within an instant, Xiao had doubled in size, and she kept going.

Xiao began to scream at the page herself, something unintelligible, perhaps in an ancient tongue that had long vanished from Creation's face. Her scream increased in volume and pitch until it was so loud and sharp that the partygoers nearby flinched in pain. They finally realized that something was

horribly wrong, and started to edge away from Xiao. When it became clear that wouldn't be nearly enough, they turned and fled.

The gods began shoving against each other, trying to get away. It wasn't long until the pushing became trampling and the rush turned into a riot.

The entire time, Xiao's voice grew louder until it became too much for anything human to produce. At that point, her throat shredded, and it began to spout beastlike screeches filtered through burbling blood.

Palym reached Xiao then and clutched her close. "Xiao!" she said, but Xiao could not respond — at least not in any way Palym could understand.

The idea that it was too late for her to do anything to help her friend pierced Palym's heart. She wanted nothing more than to fall to her knees with Xiao in her arms and try to comfort her, but Xiao's transformation was not yet complete.

Reverie appeared next to them, out of breath. "You need to get her out of here!" he shouted.

"It's Xiao!" Palym said, as if that explained everything. Fat, hot tears rolled down her face as the growing mound of flesh Xiao had become squirmed in her blood-slicked arms.

"That doesn't matter!" Reverie said as he moved to Xiao's other side to help carry her. "You saw what that Black Flag did in Great Forks! Imagine what one could do here!"

There had been so much destruction. So many lives lost. "Can gods die?" She was struck by how much she didn't know, how much she hadn't thought to ask until it mattered the most.

"This is no time to ponder the philosophical ramifications!" Cutting Remark said as he joined them. "Short answer: yes. Reverie is right! We must remove her. Now!"

Palym nodded wordlessly and began heading for the nearest window, which was all the way across the great room. The others did their best to help, but she did most of the lifting. She hardly noticed the burden, because as a Chosen of Journeys she was focused on the inescapable certainty that they weren't going to make it.

Before they got halfway to their destination, the thing that had once been Xiao had doubled in size again. She was just too large for them to manage him any longer. Her formless flesh slipped through their hands, and they had to leap out of her way as she began to slide down the steps of the aisle, leaving a bloody slick behind him.

"We need to kill her," Cutting Remark said.

"It's Xiao!" Palym screamed. She knew she was wrong. She knew the young woman she'd loved was already gone, but she still couldn't imagine hurting her. The idea of putting an end to Xiao, even in this state, instinctively appalled her.

“It’s her time,” Cutting Remark said, with cold certainty.

Reverie restrained Palym while Cutting Remark drew a blade from his pocket and held it before him. She stopped resisting and watched as the blade grew from a pocket knife into a full-fledged sword, long and thin but so sharp that it seemed to slice the air it stabbed through.

Cutting Remark was good with a blade, Palym knew. She’d watched him put an end to the Black Flag in Great Forks. As the Chosen of the Maiden of Endings, he was more familiar than any of them with death, and when and how to administer it.

Palym clutched at Reverie as Cutting Remark charged the creature, taking preternatural care not to slip on the blood-slicked steps. He seemed like a dancer for a moment, and then like a prowling leopard, ready to pounce.

As he reached the creature, he bounded forward and leaped into the air, his blade reversed in his hands so that he could bring it stabbing downward with all his strength and weight. As he did so, though, the creature — which had continued to grow at an accelerating rate, stretching against its own skin like an overstuffed sausage ready to burst — finally exploded. Or so it seemed.

In fact, a mass of appendages burst from the chest of the monster that had once been Xiao. These proceeded to split the beast open from one end to the other, splaying out a long line of tentacles that punched out like spikes from the hide of a monstrous pufferfish. They lanced through everyone within several yards who was unfortunate enough to have not fled.

People screamed in horror and pain. A god whose flesh was the color of a golden beach bled sand from her wounds as she limped away. A fox-faced god who had taken several spikes through its chest hung there on their tips, dead and soaking the spikes with blood like any mortal would. One particularly slow plant-like god who had been too close to the monster when it transformed was ripped to shreds, raining bits of itself down on everyone within range.

Cutting Remark avoided the worst of these fates. He managed to slash out at the spikes coming at him, using an underhanded cut, and that sliced the vicious tips off most of them. A few of them caught him in the legs, though, piercing his flesh.

The rest of Cutting Remark landed on the blunted spikes, which turned into squirming tentacles once again. These wrapped themselves around him as best they could, and they began to squeeze.

Cutting Remark slashed around with his blade as hard as he could manage, but some of the tentacles immobilized his wrist. Others tried to strip the weapon from him.

Palym shouted. “We need to save—”

“It’s too late!” Reverie said, cutting her off. “Your friend is already gone!”

“Not her! Cutting Remark!”

"I'll handle this!" Keahi said, stepping out of the panicking crowd. She drew the blade from the scabbard on her back and charged straight into the mess that had been made of Xiao.

She brandished her blade in front of her and slashed at the tentacles, but the ones closest to her blocked her attacks, becoming as strong as steel. She weaved back and forth, looking for an opening, but the tentacles wouldn't allow her one. No matter which way she went, they toughened themselves up in front of her.

Keahi bellowed in rage and began hacking away at the creature with a fury that Palym had never seen. In all their many sparring matches, the warrior had always seemed so restrained, so controlled. Now she had been reduced to a snarling berserker who lusted for nothing more than the blood of her foes.

"Don't kill her," Palym wanted to shout, but she knew better. Still, she couldn't bring herself to attack the thing that had once been Xiao. If she had to be put down like a rabid dog, Palym hoped it could be by someone else's hand.

She edged closer to the monster, though, hoping she could be of some help. Reverie came with her, clutching her jacket as if to keep her from leaving him behind.

"What do we do?" Palym asked him.

"What *can* we do?" Reverie asked. "This is why a Black Flag is such a terror. Their Essence is so warped and confused that it spirals out of control. All the power of the Exalted without the focus of a human mind."

"The Exalted! Where are the other Sidereals?"

"I think we're the only ones here," Reverie said. "The others' invitations must have gotten 'lost.'"

"You'd think the gods could do something."

The creature took that moment to begin to roll over. It lanced out with its spikes repeatedly as it went, pulsating them to the beat of an unseen drum. They stabbed out with every thrum, lancing through more and more gods as they went, and the flight that had already begun from that area transformed into a stampede.

"Most of these gods aren't warriors," Reverie said. "But the ones with the power to help are too important to risk. They're being evacuated first. The weakest gods are the ones left behind."

Stunned at that notion, Palym peered past the destruction below her to see that Reverie was right. Celestial lions that could have been helping the Circle of Protection fight the monster were instead fending off the panicking crowd so more important gods could escape danger. Among the other evacuees, Yaogin the Fair was being borne away above the crowd on a palanquin carried by other gods.

"You have to be joking," Palym said, utterly horrified at the callousness that even the head of the Division of Serenity seemed to show to the carnage happening less than a hundred yards away. "They really don't care about anyone. Not even their own kind."

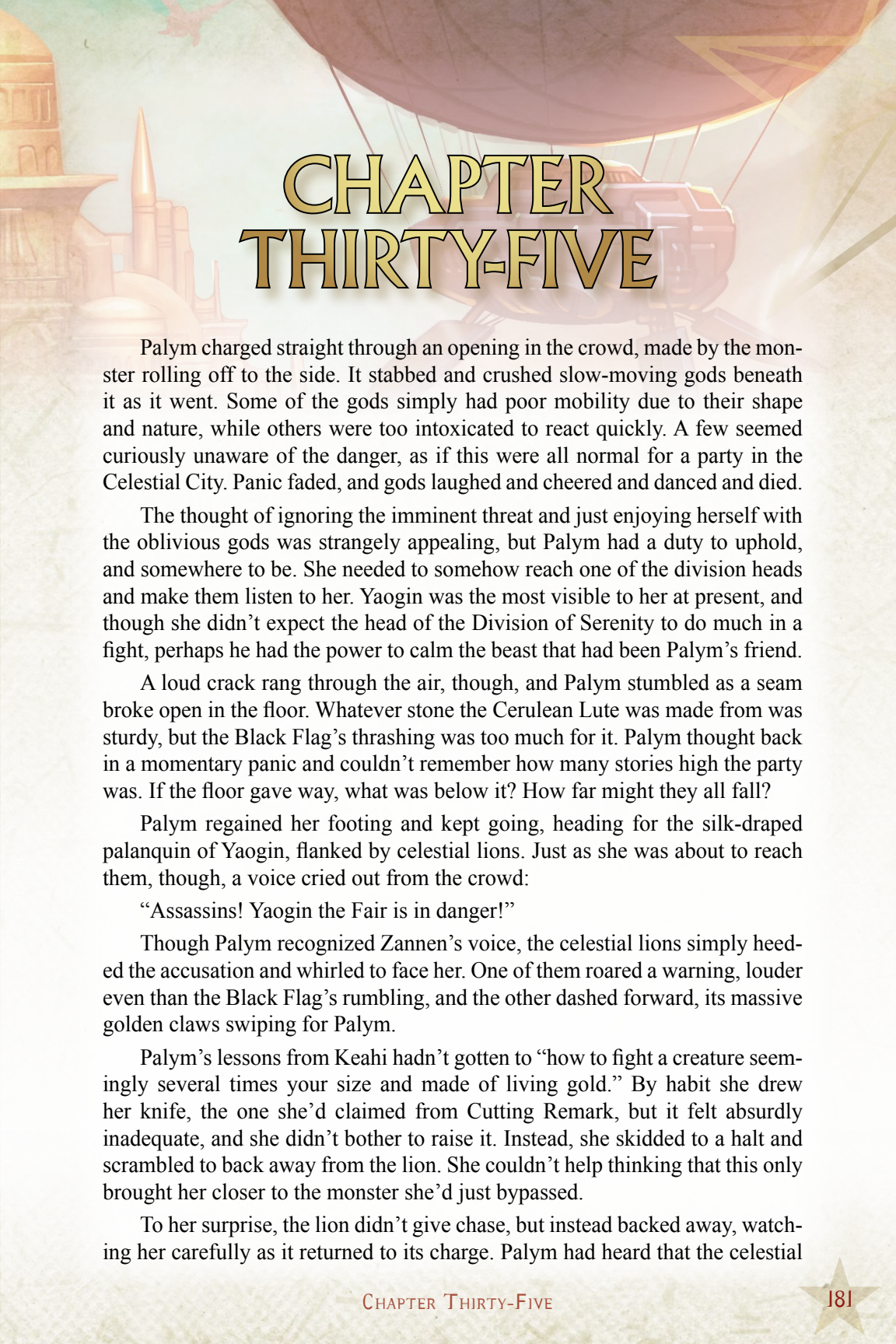
“It’s not that simple,” Reverie said. “You know how it’s hard to figure out what a household god wants? Even the one that’s in charge of the home you grew up in?”

“When everything’s right, it seems easy, but when something goes wrong, it’s almost impossible to tell why. You just keep praying and making offerings and changing things around until you stumble across something that makes the god happy again. Or you learn to live alongside it in misery — a misery that strangles you both.

“It’s even more like that with older gods. Their minds work in ways that wouldn’t make sense to mortals. They’ve been around longer than the oldest Exalted. Since before humans even existed, in some cases. They take such a long-term view of Yu-Shan and Creation that the events of a single day mean next to nothing to them.”

“That’s where they’re wrong,” Palym said. “The entirety of fate can turn on the events of a single moment, and they’re fools to ignore it. We need to get the division heads’ attention and force them to stop this, and we need to do that now!”





CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Palym charged straight through an opening in the crowd, made by the monster rolling off to the side. It stabbed and crushed slow-moving gods beneath it as it went. Some of the gods simply had poor mobility due to their shape and nature, while others were too intoxicated to react quickly. A few seemed curiously unaware of the danger, as if this were all normal for a party in the Celestial City. Panic faded, and gods laughed and cheered and danced and died.

The thought of ignoring the imminent threat and just enjoying herself with the oblivious gods was strangely appealing, but Palym had a duty to uphold, and somewhere to be. She needed to somehow reach one of the division heads and make them listen to her. Yaogin was the most visible to her at present, and though she didn't expect the head of the Division of Serenity to do much in a fight, perhaps he had the power to calm the beast that had been Palym's friend.

A loud crack rang through the air, though, and Palym stumbled as a seam broke open in the floor. Whatever stone the Cerulean Lute was made from was sturdy, but the Black Flag's thrashing was too much for it. Palym thought back in a momentary panic and couldn't remember how many stories high the party was. If the floor gave way, what was below it? How far might they all fall?

Palym regained her footing and kept going, heading for the silk-draped palanquin of Yaogin, flanked by celestial lions. Just as she was about to reach them, though, a voice cried out from the crowd:

"Assassins! Yaogin the Fair is in danger!"

Though Palym recognized Zannen's voice, the celestial lions simply heeded the accusation and whirled to face her. One of them roared a warning, louder even than the Black Flag's rumbling, and the other dashed forward, its massive golden claws swiping for Palym.

Palym's lessons from Keahi hadn't gotten to "how to fight a creature seemingly several times your size and made of living gold." By habit she drew her knife, the one she'd claimed from Cutting Remark, but it felt absurdly inadequate, and she didn't bother to raise it. Instead, she skidded to a halt and scrambled to back away from the lion. She couldn't help thinking that this only brought her closer to the monster she'd just bypassed.

To her surprise, the lion didn't give chase, but instead backed away, watching her carefully as it returned to its charge. Palym had heard that the celestial

lions were many things: fearless, stubborn, and able to sniff out lies. She'd never heard that they were quick to give up.

Then she saw one figure moving quickly through the crowd: a heavysset, human-looking god with a blue lotus at his throat.

Odihna.

At that moment, Palym finally made the connection. Odihna had given Xiao the scroll that contained the boon. The relative calm of the crowd must have been his doing as well. As a god with influence over vacations, he could make even a celestial lion shirk their duties, or at least perform them halfheartedly. He was in on Zannen's plot for some reason. She just had no idea why.

And he was heading for Yaogin.

Frustrated and furious at Odihna's betrayal of Xiao, Palym looked for some way to beat him to the palanquin. The nearest lion no longer chased her, but she was sure it would attack her if she approached, and the second lion still stood protectively by the palanquin. The palanquin itself had stopped moving, as the gods carrying it were slacking in their duties as well.

The frustration built up within Palym, as she saw cowardly gods slip past the partygoers still under Odihna's spell. She shouted out her anger at their complacency, then whirled as she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, beautiful," said Reverie, flashing a charming smile. "Would you like to dance—"

Palym slapped him as hard as she could.

Reverie reeled, hand to his jaw. "Oh, wow, ow. Okay, wrong time, I understand."

"Snap out of it!" Palym said, pointing toward the monster behind him, which had not been calmed by Odihna's magic at all. It slammed against the floor, causing more cracks to spider-web through the blue stone. "We have a job to do!"

Reverie blinked and looked around, eyes widening as he recalled the truth of the situation. "Oh. Right. Why was I so calm? Zannen must have done something to me."

"He's working with Odihna, Administrator of—"

"Fleeting Respite, yes. I see. They've crafted a destiny of complacency for the evening's festivities. Clever."

"What do we do about it?" demanded Palym, desperate.

Reverie closed his eyes. "Whatever damage they've done, I'll mend. This is no true peace, and a Chosen of Serenity may undo such warped designs."

Reverie shone with a soft blue light as he moved his hands through the air, reordering the tangled threads of fate. Palym felt clarity like a breath of fresh air. As the haze of complacency lifted, Palym realized that even she had

been affected by it. She felt sharp as a blade now, ready to take on a lion if she needed to.

A lion's roar, audible over the newly panicking crowd, made clear that this was, in fact, the case. She turned to see it charging toward her.

"Go," said Reverie, placing a hand on her back. "I've got the lions. Trust me."

Palym didn't see much choice, so she sprinted forward. She and the lion met in a moment, and its golden jaws closed on her very mortal-feeling body without hesitation. Palym had made a terrible mistake in trusting Reverie.

And then she was past the lion, uninjured and unimpeded. She remembered the jaws closing in on her like a dream, avoided by waking. Reverie had cheated her awful fate and undone it as if it never had been, and Palym grinned in relief. Shining with yellow light, she dashed forward faster than ever before, leaving the lion behind. Just one more lion stood between her and Yaogin's palanquin.

Then Palym heard the warbling roar of the Black Flag. She couldn't tell if it was angry, hungry, or suffering, but it redoubled its movements in response to the resurgent panic of the crowd and lunged across the room. Its tentacles slammed down and whipped around such that Palym had to duck and vault them to keep her footing. The monster grabbed the celestial lion and lifted it into the air, and Palym saw Odihna move with surprising deftness to reach Yaogin's palanquin.

Palym prayed to Mercury in that moment, hoping against all odds that she would find a way to Yaogin in time.

The floor cracked and crumbled, overwhelmed by the Black Flag's violence, and the monster roared as it fell through, clinging for purchase and finding none capable of holding it up. The monster began to slip through the growing hole and clung to anything and anyone available to help it avoid falling.

Palym couldn't help watching it for a few moments. It was getting bigger. Perhaps it had grown for each divine life it snuffed out. Who knew how large the monster who had once been Xiao could grow? Would it become big enough to squash everyone inside the place? Could it eventually threaten Yu-Shan itself?

"Xiao," Palym whispered. "What have they done to you?"

The monster reared up, and Palym wondered for a panicked moment if it had heard her. Monstrous tentacles grew from its flesh, intent on grabbing her and pulling her down with the beast. Palym desperately slashed at the tentacles with her dagger, fending them off, and the creature made a sound of pain or frustration. It redoubled its efforts, no longer intent on grabbing but on piercing with the tentacles' drill-like ends.

Palym let out an explosive breath as she swung her small dagger in an arc. She pulsed with yellow light as she forced her destiny to respect her will. Grateful for the training Keahi had forced upon her, she met each tentacle with her dagger, with perfect timing and just enough force that each overwhelming attack barely missed her flesh.

Palym could have run, she knew. She could have headed for one of the exits and left all this behind. But she wasn't about to abandon her duties. And even though Xiao had already been all but destroyed, she refused to abandon her friend. If nothing else, at this point, what remained of Xiao deserved a good death.

More of the tentacles lunged out at her, too many for her to deflect them all at once. She heard a shout, and she saw Cutting Remark attacking the beast from her left as Keahi charged in from the right. The two of them pressed the creature, trying to distract it from Palym, but no matter how hard they attacked it, it continued to flail against her with an uncountable number of tentacles.

Then Reverie appeared on the opposite side of the beast. He'd procured a cask of wine from one of the tables of the gods, and he'd stuffed a lit rag into it. With both hands and all his might, he hurled it high into the air.

It came crashing down on the monster, and the creature snared it with even more tentacles. These tore the cask apart, splashing the liquid inside it everywhere, and the burning rag set it all aflame.

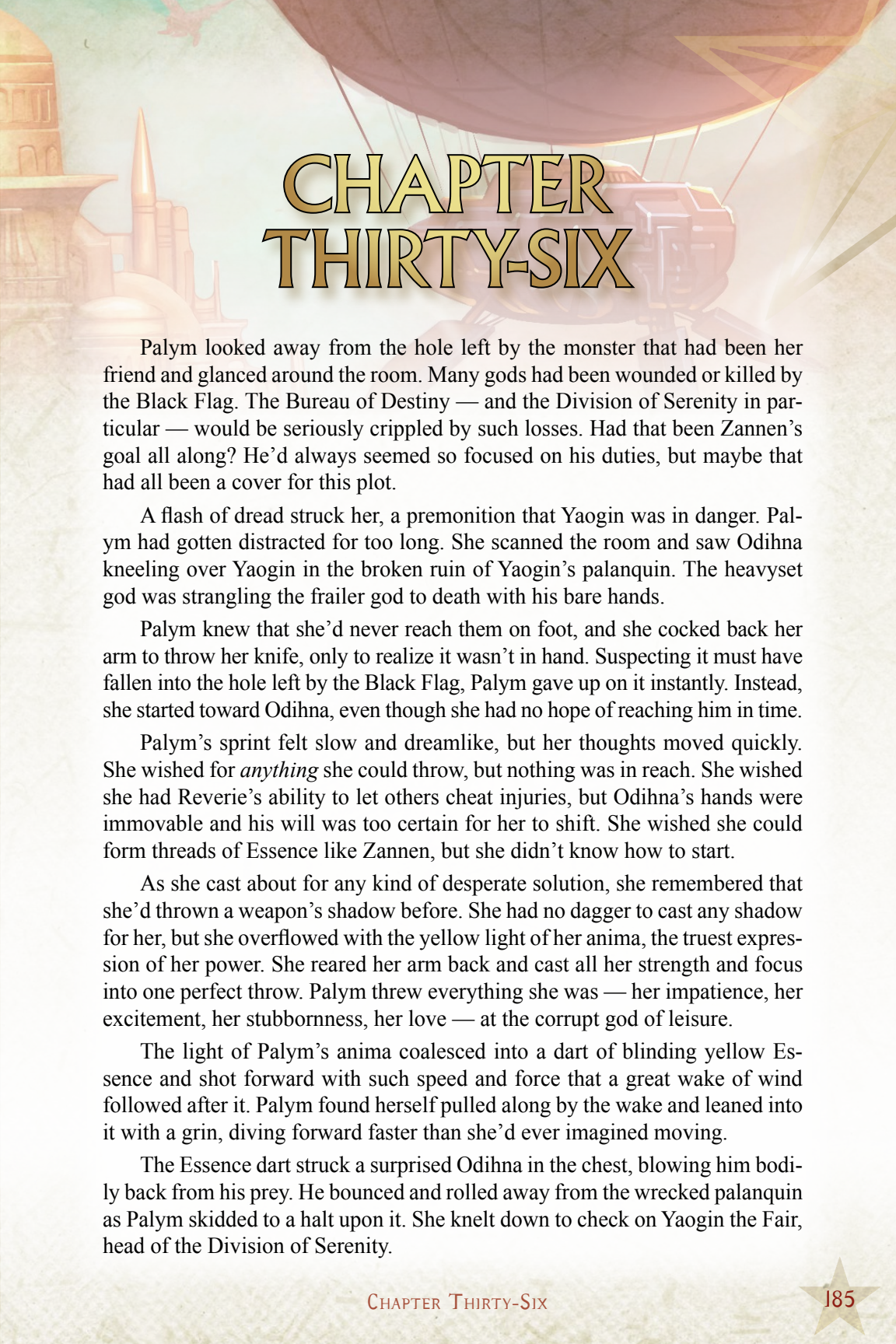
The creature screamed as it burned. The stink of crisping flesh was sickening, and Palym and the others recoiled as the monster drew all its tentacles in on itself in an effort to beat out the flames. It lost all purchase then and fell through the crumbling floor, taking several gods with it. They landed with a crash onto a distant floor far below, the impact so great it shook the building. The tremor knocked Palym from her feet and her dagger from her hand.

A moment later, Keahi helped her up with a smile. "Good form on your parries."

"Thanks." Palym looked at the hole in the floor and heard the monster roar below.

"We'll handle it," said Reverie. "Get Odihna. And find Zannen if you can."

He joined Cutting Remark and Keahi at the edge, and they dropped down into the hole together.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Palym looked away from the hole left by the monster that had been her friend and glanced around the room. Many gods had been wounded or killed by the Black Flag. The Bureau of Destiny — and the Division of Serenity in particular — would be seriously crippled by such losses. Had that been Zannen’s goal all along? He’d always seemed so focused on his duties, but maybe that had all been a cover for this plot.

A flash of dread struck her, a premonition that Yaogin was in danger. Palym had gotten distracted for too long. She scanned the room and saw Odihna kneeling over Yaogin in the broken ruin of Yaogin’s palanquin. The heavysset god was strangling the frailer god to death with his bare hands.

Palym knew that she’d never reach them on foot, and she cocked back her arm to throw her knife, only to realize it wasn’t in hand. Suspecting it must have fallen into the hole left by the Black Flag, Palym gave up on it instantly. Instead, she started toward Odihna, even though she had no hope of reaching him in time.

Palym’s sprint felt slow and dreamlike, but her thoughts moved quickly. She wished for *anything* she could throw, but nothing was in reach. She wished she had Reverie’s ability to let others cheat injuries, but Odihna’s hands were immovable and his will was too certain for her to shift. She wished she could form threads of Essence like Zannen, but she didn’t know how to start.

As she cast about for any kind of desperate solution, she remembered that she’d thrown a weapon’s shadow before. She had no dagger to cast any shadow for her, but she overflowed with the yellow light of her anima, the truest expression of her power. She reared her arm back and cast all her strength and focus into one perfect throw. Palym threw everything she was — her impatience, her excitement, her stubbornness, her love — at the corrupt god of leisure.

The light of Palym’s anima coalesced into a dart of blinding yellow Essence and shot forward with such speed and force that a great wake of wind followed after it. Palym found herself pulled along by the wake and leaned into it with a grin, diving forward faster than she’d ever imagined moving.

The Essence dart struck a surprised Odihna in the chest, blowing him bodily back from his prey. He bounced and rolled away from the wrecked palanquin as Palym skidded to a halt upon it. She knelt down to check on Yaogin the Fair, head of the Division of Serenity.

Palym hadn't looked at Yaogin too closely before, and his beauty was more enchanting now than it had been from afar. But it was undercut by the bruises on his neck and by his sudden, gasping sobs. As Yaogin clung to her, Palym had trouble thinking of him as a god who'd existed for thousands of years. He seemed like a man her age, young and scared and in over his head.

She held him as he sobbed.

"My ewer," he said, after a moment. "Please, my ewer."

Palym looked around and spotted a wide-mouthed jug of vivid blue stone, leaking some sweet-smelling beverage onto the floor. She picked it up and brought it to Yaogin, but instead of taking it from her, he held his mouth open. Palym poured the drink into his mouth, and he swallowed it desperately.

Yaogin sighed in relief then, and his head lolled to the side. Palym smiled as she saw Yaogin's bruises heal in an instant, then frowned as she realized that the healing draught had all but knocked him cold. She called his name, but he only stared at her blankly.

"The Lapis Ewer," Odihna said as he sat upright, a few yards away. Blood stained his fine clothes. The dart of Essence had vanished, but the wound Palym inflicted still gaped in his chest. He gritted his teeth as he explained: "His badge of office. It can heal any wound, cure nearly any poison or disease."

Palym scowled at Odihna and stood. She left Yaogin behind, walked over to Odihna with the ewer in one hand, and stood over the wounded god. She said, "I suppose it could heal you too."

Odihna started to laugh, but pain cut him short. "This won't kill me. Side-reals have a trick to killing gods, and I doubt you've been Exalted long enough to learn it. If you try, I'll eventually reform. Maybe I'll come back a little weaker, but I've already clawed my way up the ranks once. I can do it again."

"Maybe."

Palym wondered if the Lapis Ewer could heal the cuts she'd received from the Black Flag, but she didn't want to end up like Yaogin. Instead, she crouched in front of Odihna. "I don't know you that well, but I'm guessing the god of vacations isn't used to pain like this. Your assassination plot failed. Yaogin's safe, and I'm going after Zannen next. If you answer all my questions, maybe I'll give you the ewer."

Odihna hesitated, his eyes on the ewer. That hesitation was all Palym needed. Torn between choices, his destiny was in flux. Palym used another fraction of her remaining Essence to push his fate along the path she chose. The god let out a long sigh and nodded.

"Why kill Yaogin?" Palym demanded. "He seems harmless."

"That's the problem. The heavenly bureaucracy is ruthless, even in the Bureau of Destiny. Yaogin is thoroughly addicted to the Lapis Ewer — and whatever other drug he can find, for that matter. He's nothing more than a doc-

ile puppet for his greedy and corrupt lieutenants, and he's made those of us who work in the Division of Serenity a laughingstock."

The tubby god winced in pain before he continued. "He was born a human, never meant for this kind of life, for the decisions required of a god. A pretty face may earn Venus' love, but it's a poor qualification for upper management."

"So, you wanted to replace him yourself."

"No!" Palym gave Odihna a skeptical look, and he amended himself. "Oh, fine, if things worked out that way I wouldn't have *minded* taking his office. It was just far more likely that we'd take out Yaogin and a few of the others like him. I'd have gotten a modest promotion, and we'd be able to start fixing our broken system."

Palym felt sick at the idea that he had planned to murder another god for a "modest promotion," but she didn't let it distract her. "You said 'we.' You and Zannen and who else?"

"I don't know. Really, I don't. I didn't even know he was the orchestrator until you said so. He always stayed hidden or disguised, and he orchestrated the use of the Black Flags. He said that he and our other conspirators all wanted what I wanted: to clean house."

Palym swept the ewer around to show the devastation wrought to the Celestial Lute. "If this was your goal, why would you unleash monsters like this on innocent people back in Creation?"

"We... we had to test the process of making a Black Flag." Odihna closed his eyes, perhaps in shame, but just as likely in pain. "When the boon passes between gods, the final result is unpredictable. We needed to be sure that our ultimate Black Flag would be able to kill gods — and withstand attacks by any Sidereal Exalted who came to stop it."

Palym scowled. "And you needed to plant evidence that someone else was responsible for the Black Flags, so when you unleashed it, there would be someone else to blame."

Odihna opened his eyes and grunted. "If you say so. I've told you all I know."

"I don't think so." Palym's fist clenched tightly on the ewer's handle. "You knew I'd be here because you wrote my invitation, didn't you? Yaogin probably didn't know I existed, but *you* knew I had a guest — a *human* guest — I could bring because Xiao prayed to you."

"Please, there's nothing else. Give me what you promised. Ease my pain."

Palym looked into the ewer and breathed in its heady aroma. "One more question. Can the Lapis Ewer fix Xiao?"

Odihna clenched his fists and shook his head, impatient for relief. "It heals wounds and cures diseases and poisons. Your friend isn't hurt or sick. She's been given power. Wild, uncontrollable power. Nothing can undo what's been done. The only thing that will rob her of that power is death."

“All right,” said Palym. “A deal’s a deal.” She lifted the ewer and hit Odihna with it across the face as hard as she could.

The god collapsed heavily upon the cracked floor. Killing a god may have been tricky, but knocking one out seemed simple enough.

Palym examined the ewer for damage, but it seemed unharmed. She brought it back over to Yaogin and tried to shake him awake. He half-stirred and smiled at her vacantly.

“Yaogin. Sir. Please, I need your help.” She spoke without really expecting him to hear her, hand resting on his shoulder. “The other members of Odihna’s conspiracy are still out there, and I don’t know where to start looking for them. The rest of my Circle is fighting the monster that used to be my best friend, and any of them might be dead by now. Mercury chose me, but she doesn’t answer prayers. Believe me, I’ve tried.

“The way I see it, Venus chose *you*. That makes you like a Sidereal, and we Chosen need to help each other. So, please, if there’s anything you can do, *now would be the time.*”

As she spoke from her heart, Palym’s felt the threads of Yaogin’s destiny at her fingertips. She couldn’t force anything on him — couldn’t make him decide to wake up or pay attention. He had no motivation for her to redirect. All she could do was intertwine his fate with her own and maybe help him feel what she felt.

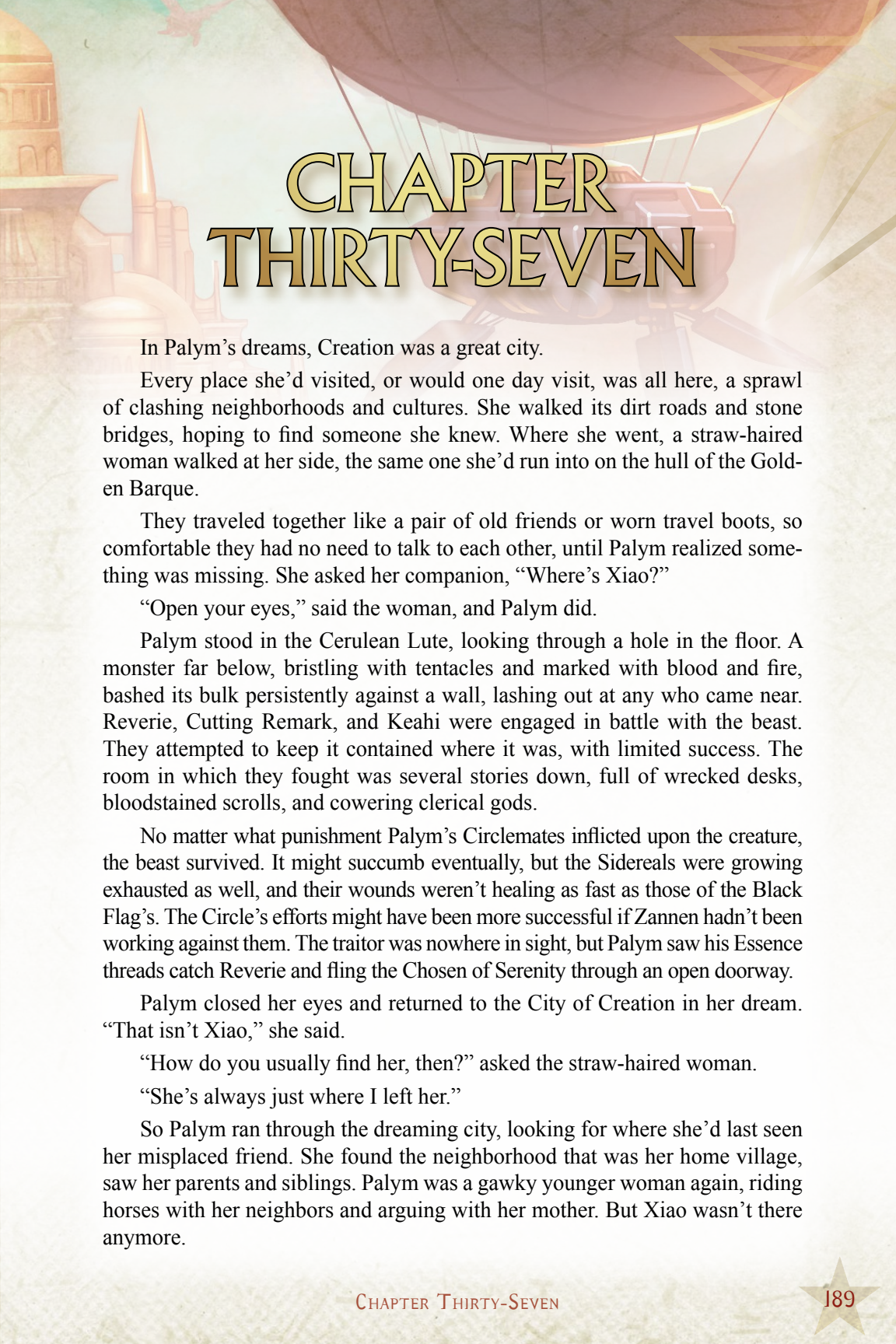
She thought of Xiao, and her heart was full and desperate.

Palym felt Yaogin’s fate resonate with hers, with the future her heart insisted upon. The god’s eyes focused, and he looked up at her confused, then chagrined. “Ah... sorry. I think you called my name?”

“Please, Yaogin,” said Palym. “My friend needs help, and I don’t know how to reach her.”

Yaogin didn’t sit up. Instead he reached out to touch Palym’s cheek. “Yes, of course. I... owe you, don’t I?” His fingers fell to the Lapis Ewer and Palym’s hands. “Let me do this then. I am the God of Beautiful Dreams. Drink from the ewer, and if your friend loves you as you do her, perhaps you’ll find each other.”

Although she wasn’t sure what that might mean, Palym took a long drink from the ewer without hesitation. The liquid tasted sweet and heady on her tongue, and the world swam around her with soaring emotion until Palym found herself somewhere else entirely.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

In Palym's dreams, Creation was a great city.

Every place she'd visited, or would one day visit, was all here, a sprawl of clashing neighborhoods and cultures. She walked its dirt roads and stone bridges, hoping to find someone she knew. Where she went, a straw-haired woman walked at her side, the same one she'd run into on the hull of the Golden Barque.

They traveled together like a pair of old friends or worn travel boots, so comfortable they had no need to talk to each other, until Palym realized something was missing. She asked her companion, "Where's Xiao?"

"Open your eyes," said the woman, and Palym did.

Palym stood in the Cerulean Lute, looking through a hole in the floor. A monster far below, bristling with tentacles and marked with blood and fire, bashed its bulk persistently against a wall, lashing out at any who came near. Reverie, Cutting Remark, and Keahi were engaged in battle with the beast. They attempted to keep it contained where it was, with limited success. The room in which they fought was several stories down, full of wrecked desks, bloodstained scrolls, and cowering clerical gods.

No matter what punishment Palym's Circlemates inflicted upon the creature, the beast survived. It might succumb eventually, but the Sidereals were growing exhausted as well, and their wounds weren't healing as fast as those of the Black Flag's. The Circle's efforts might have been more successful if Zannen hadn't been working against them. The traitor was nowhere in sight, but Palym saw his Essence threads catch Reverie and fling the Chosen of Serenity through an open doorway.

Palym closed her eyes and returned to the City of Creation in her dream. "That isn't Xiao," she said.

"How do you usually find her, then?" asked the straw-haired woman.

"She's always just where I left her."

So Palym ran through the dreaming city, looking for where she'd last seen her misplaced friend. She found the neighborhood that was her home village, saw her parents and siblings. Palym was a gawky younger woman again, riding horses with her neighbors and arguing with her mother. But Xiao wasn't there anymore.

Palym found the winding roads of Creation and searched among pilgrims and traders. She found the pool folks had told her was magic, where Palym and Xiao had each made secret wishes before they'd left home. Palym was fresh and excited for the journey to Great Forks, and she shared her wish immediately. But Xiao wasn't here to hear it.

Palym found Great Forks, and it was full of promise and ruin. The place sounded like screams and smelled like dust and smoke, and all its gods remained silent. Palym was a frightened mortal, running to find anyone she could help. She saw a shape like a great hand, and the thought that it might be Xiao scared her so much she opened her eyes.

Below, a blood-soaked Cutting Remark attempted to push past the Black Flag's deadly tentacles to find its heart and destroy it. He ignored wounds that would have killed a mortal, slashing at the thing's writhing flesh with ruthless efficiency.

Keahi guarded his back, and with a sweep of her long sword, she cut away the Essence threads that threatened him. Focusing her attention, she cut the air itself, and some strange magic of the blade sliced away concealment.

One of the clerks cowering from the beast was revealed to be Zannen, his disguise dissolving into wisps of green Essence. Before he could hide again, Keahi shouted and dashed toward him.

Palym knew that they needed her, that all her friends were in danger. She closed her eyes again.

In a candlelit hovel in Great Forks, Palym despaired. "I can't find Xiao anywhere!"

"Where would you look for Xiao if you were Xiao?" asked the straw-haired woman.

Palym narrowed her eyes at the woman. "Who are you?" she asked.

The woman favored her with a wise smile. "I think you already know the answer to that."

Palym nodded. That she did. And if Mercury herself was going to give her advice, then she was damn well going to take it. She thought about where she always found Xiao. It took her a long moment, but the answer came to her in a flash. She needed to stop looking where Xiao had been. It was time to look where she would be, and the answer to that was always the same.

Palym went to find herself.

Palym proved to be elusive prey, but she didn't give up. She chased herself through the dreaming city, and she ignored the false trails that said her prey was becoming someone new. Palym had grown, but the bootprints she left were still the same, and Xiao's were always nearby. Palym ran faster and faster until she saw herself in the distance. She strained, and reached, and brushed her own shoulder.

And when Palym felt a touch at her shoulder, where Xiao always was, where Xiao always had to be, she opened her eyes.

Palym felt the surrealness of the dream burn away as she looked down.

Palym saw that Keahi had Zannen on the defensive, but he proved to be near impossible to pin down, scuttling out of the warrior's reach at astonishing speeds. To make matters worse, he repeatedly sent his razor-sharp threads to strike down wounded gods nearby, and where he struck true, he ended their lives. This forced Keahi to spend most of her energy keeping him from killing others rather than pushing her attacks against him, and so far, the horrible strategy had proved successful.

At this point, however, Reverie returned to the battle. Though he appeared to have a broken arm, he charged into the large office with various gods of the Bureau of Destiny at his back, all roaring defiance at the Black Flag. Unarmed, Reverie pointed his soldiers toward Zannen, and the old man looked shocked at how suddenly and thoroughly outnumbered he was.

Meanwhile, the Black Flag had become quieter and more still. Cutting Remark backed off from the monster and took the opportunity to concentrate. He closed his eyes, and a violet glow enveloped him from head to toe. From there, it coalesced around his face and then his eyelids. When he opened his eyes again, they glowed as if they'd been lit from within.

"I see it!" he shouted. "The beast's weakness is mine!"

"Stop!" shouted Palym. She leaped downward, acting on instinct and the memory that Keahi had somehow survived a similar fall. It took a sickeningly long time for her to reach the others, and when she did, she hit the floor hard. Palym rolled to mitigate the fall, but she still felt something give way in her knee, and she let out a cry of pain.

Cutting Remark turned, surprised at the interruption. The distraction was nearly fatal for him, as the monster suddenly gained a second wind, rolling over and whipping at him with murderous slashes. He desperately twirled his sword to cut at the encroaching tentacles, but one scored a cruel gash along his sword arm, and the blade fell from his hand.

Cutting Remark stared at his wounded arm as if it were alien to him. By the time he looked back up, the monstrous tentacles had reached out to enfold him, leaving him nowhere to run. Palym didn't think he even tried.

But she tried very hard.

Her knee should have been screaming at her, bringing her to a halt, but with the lingering effects of the Lapis Ewer, Palym hardly felt the pain. She hardly even felt afraid as she sprinted toward Cutting Remark and threw her arms around him, spinning him so that she could shield him with her body — and with the fate she'd chosen for herself.

"Xiao!" she screamed, "Stop!"

The beast roared in response, deafening every ear and drawing every eye in the room. But stop it did.

Cutting Remark stared in amazement as the writhing tentacles kept their distance. The monster groaned and bucked, but it didn't reach out and shred them both to ribbons.

"You heard my voice before," shouted Palym. The pain and fear had caught up with her now, but they warred with hope and love. Her voice grew quieter as her confidence grew. "You weren't trying to kill people. You were trying to find me. Just like always."

The monster — Xiao — let out a rumbling moan, and Palym thought she sounded scared. Palym's eyes filled with tears, as her friend's situation became more real to her.

"No!" shouted Keahi, and Palym turned to see that Zannen had escaped while she was distracted. Since Keahi and Reverie's reinforcements had surrounded him, Zannen had run upward, climbing on threads of Essence like a spider. The Chosen of Battles leapt after him, rising several times higher than Palym could, but the old man scuttled just out of reach of her blade. By the time Palym let go of Cutting Remark and found her knife on the floor, Zannen had escaped through the hole in the ceiling.

Keahi cursed, but Reverie waved dismissively with his good arm. "Good riddance. Whatever his plan was, he failed, and he can't hide forever."

"I'm not sure about that last part," muttered Keahi.

"He might not have failed," warned Palym. "He had an accomplice, and Odihna says there were others, all wanting to get rid of their superiors."

"We need to check on the safety of all of the division heads," said Keahi.

"Yaogin was alive when I last saw him," said Palym, "so that leaves four others."

Keahi frowned in thought. "They should each have retreated to their division headquarters." She closed her eyes in concentration, and the red symbol of Mars flared to life on her forehead. "We'll have the most auspicious outcome if we split up. Reverie, go to the Forbidding Manse of Ivy and protect Nara-O. Everyone else, return to your own divisions."

Reverie grimaced. "I'm an odd choice to look after the head of the Division of Secrets, but fair enough. Still, are you sure we should send Palym anywhere injured and alone?"

Keahi waved him off. "You're injured worse, and she's proven herself. It's time to trust her." She looked to Palym expectantly. "Besides, Palym's not going to be alone, is she?"

Palym turned back to Xiao, who had stopped thrashing violently and now merely shuddered, her tentacles quivering like jelly. The gods in the room looked on her with horror. Palym couldn't blame them, but she was certain her friend remained intact inside the monster now.

Cutting Remark also gaped at Xiao. When Palym touched his shoulder, he shook his head in disbelief. “Could we have just talked with any of them all this time?”

“You would have needed something special, like my connection with Xiao.” Palym squeezed his shoulder to comfort him. “But next time, we’ll know to try.”

He leaned back to marvel at her. “You’ve earned it.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, confused. “Earned what?”

“Hummingbird’s sacrifice. If she could see the person you’ve become, she would be proud of the choice she made.”

Palym let out a breath, more than a little embarrassed. “Thanks, I think.”

Cutting Remark chuckled at her and favored her with a warm smile.

Palym stepped past him to face the mass of her transformed friend. “Xiao, can you hear me?” Tentacles writhed toward her, then recoiled, cautious. At least she didn’t seem to be in any pain — and her understandable panic at her transformation seemed to have subsided for now. Palym tried to smile. “Yeah, it’s me. Palym.”

She glanced about her at the destruction her friend had wrought. Intentionally or not, Xiao had slaughtered countless people. As gods, she supposed they might all ultimately survive the experience, but the mayhem still stole her breath away.

“Xiao,” she said in as steady a voice as she could muster. “It’s time for me to go. Will you come with me?”

Xiao groaned and rolled over, finding some semblance of a stable position. Palym thought she’d stopped growing. Was she actually shrinking now? With some work, Palym thought, Xiao might even fit through one of the doors.

Palym’s worried look morphed into a tentative smile. “Let’s race.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Palym ignored the twinge in her knee as she ran, though it resurfaced at every sharp corner and stairwell. Wreathed in the light of her anima, Palym was as fast as she'd ever been, and the same held true for Xiao. Though still a monstrous creature festooned with writhing tentacles, Xiao had clearly begun to master the strange undulating movements of her new body. Following the path laid out by Palym, and bathed in her blazing yellow anima as well, Xiao moved faster than she ever had as a mortal.

Palym only hoped her friend was aware enough inside that beast to appreciate the journey. There was no guarantee of what would happen to her once it was done.

"You and I get to visit the Golden Barque after all, Xiao," said Palym, trying to stay upbeat. "The different parts of the Bureau of Destiny are all connected, you see. You can travel from one end of Yu-Shan to the other in minutes by going down the right corridors. And you could get lost just as easily — if you didn't have me."

Palym concentrated on her destination, on the journey she wished to write into her personal destiny. It was more difficult to find the thread than she'd expected. Between fighting Xiao and Odihna — and exerting so much influence over others' destinies — Palym was feeling drained. Mercury's gifts had their limits, a fact even Palym couldn't navigate around.

But she hadn't hit them quite yet.

Palym refocused and found the yellow thread of her journey shining in her eyes down corridors just large enough to admit her beastly friend. Together the two of them found their way through winding halls from the welcoming azure of the Cerulean Lute into the weathered passages and sprawling colonnades at the center of the Most Perfect Lotus of Heavenly Designs, where the buildings housing the Ebony Office and the Loom of Fate could be found.

As big as the Cerulean Lute had been, it had only been one building. The Perfect Lotus was a sprawling maze of disjointed structures, and Palym progressed through them carefully, particularly since she had no plan to leave Xiao behind. Not now, and never again.

"I wish I had my horse," Palym couldn't help saying wistfully. As fast as she could move on foot, the connection between mount and rider resonated

strongly with journeys. The trick of making her mare move with incredible speed had come to Palym with little practice. She could have used that now, but she hadn't thought to bring a horse to a party. If Ruvia was already in danger, though, every moment counted.

To Palym's surprise, she felt a warm, powerful grip around her waist. She let out an alarmed squawk as Xiao lifted her into the air. For a moment, surrounded by monstrous death-dealing tentacles, Palym wanted to scream, but she silenced herself when she realized she felt no premonition of danger.

The tentacles holding Palym set her down, slowly and gently, on the flesh that passed for Xiao's back. Palym let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding and smiled. Xiao had been listening to her, thinking instead of panicking.

"I guess now it's your turn to carry me, Xiao," said Palym. "Let's ride."

Xiao shambled forward, and with the fading light of Palym's anima, they surpassed their prior pace with ease. Palym directed Xiao by voice at first and then by touch.

The two of them all but flew through the Perfect Lotus. New paths opened up to Palym's eyes as Xiao learned how to better control her new form. They squeezed through double-doors and climbed along the sides of buildings, divine functionaries scattering to get out of their way.

As they went, Palym felt Xiao's form become leaner and sleeker. She felt almost horse-like, now, though still too large. Palym didn't know what would come next, but she counted any control Xiao exerted over her body as another small victory.

Soon, they slipped through an ancient corridor and found themselves emerging onto the shining hull of the Golden Barque, upside down. Yu-Shan sprawled out above them, and Palym laughed.

She decided not to tell Xiao to look up, in case her friend still had a fear of heights. Instead she urged Xiao onward, and the creature galloped along the curved hull — a straight line with nothing to slow her down — until they found and vaulted over the ship's railing and onto its deck.

Palym took in the scene aboard the Barque and was relieved to see they'd arrived just in time. Ruvia stood surrounded by several gods of various shapes and natures, each armed and brandishing their weapons at him, but they all turned, momentarily distracted by the arrival of a Sidereal riding atop a mutated monster.

Ruvia took the opportunity to draw a great mallet from the bag held over his shoulder. In one smooth move, he swung it to strike one of the assassins across the skull.

"Go!" said Palym, as some of the conspirators converged on Ruvia while others turned to face the newcomers. At her order, Xiao rushed toward the fray.

The traitorous gods hardly knew what hit them. Xiao plowed through them with abandon, sloughing off their attacks. Though their weapons sometimes drew blood, her wounds healed in moments. Still, Xiao was outnumbered and much smaller than she had been, and the gods all had strange blessings of their own to call upon.

Several flew out of reach or ran up the masts of the Golden Barque. One spirit uncoiled into the shape of a pale blue dragon and latched its jaws onto Xiao, looking for something resembling a throat. In response, Xiao let loose a shriek that rattled every window in the ship.

Palym slid back from the dragon's strike and stepped onto its snout before slashing its eye with her knife. The dragon roared in pain, knocking Palym flying, but it also lost its own grip, allowing Xiao to summon her razor-sharp tentacles once more. The dragon's blood flowed icy cold across Xiao's flesh, and the two beasts rolled along the deck, grasping for advantage.

Before Palym could hit the deck, Ruvia reached out and caught her with one arm. He set her down so he could fend off an attacking bird-like god, and Palym put her back to his, her dagger raised.

Palym's heart hammered in her chest, and she struggled to keep her breathing controlled. She'd never been in a fight like this, where threats could come from every angle at once. She didn't know where to look or who to target. She felt sure she couldn't permanently kill any of the assassins, which might have been good for her conscience, but it also meant that they had little to fear from her. Her knife seemed very small.

"What are you waiting for?" asked Ruvia, as he noticed her hesitation. He tried to parry an incoming arrow, and it grazed his forearm. He growled in pain.

"I don't know what to do," said Palym, holding her dagger out in a way she hoped would scare off anyone thinking of charging at her.

"Don't you know how to throw that thing?"

"I only have the one!" she shouted in frustration.

The god grunted and kicked over a large bag sitting nearby, and more than a dozen knives clattered out onto the deck. Palym didn't stop to wonder how or why the God of Roads had so many weapons at hand. Instead she scooped up a handful of knives as Ruvia watched her back.

Palym scraped up what little of Mercury's power she had left within herself and used it to fling the shadow of one of the knives at a spirit flying by. She followed that up by hurling the actual knife at a bat-winged lion flapping past. A moment later she pushed herself to throw another shadow knife at an archer, and then a real one at a lizard-creature crawling overhead.

While the real knives often sailed wide, their shadows sought their prey relentlessly. Palym kept at it, and soon the air was full of knives both ephemeral and physical. With the assassins distracted, Ruvia went on the offensive, chas-

ing down enemy gods with mallet-blows that rang out over the wind whipping across the deck.

“Keep fighting if you want,” Palym shouted at the attackers. She had no power left, no influence over the tapestry of fate — just her throwing arm and her words. “The leader of your conspiracy was Zannen, a Chosen of Secrets, and he’s already given us all the information on your crimes. You’ve already lost!”

Overwhelmed by the cloud of daggers and Ruvia’s offense, the conspirators hesitated. This didn’t feel like a battle they were winning. A few were too stubborn or aggressive to listen, though, and one loosed another arrow at Palym.

Palym was sluggish and exhausted, and even a weak god had better aim than a mortal. Palym brought her dagger up in a desperate attempt to defend herself, as pointless as she knew it would be.

The arrow hit with the decisive sound of burying itself into meaty flesh, but Palym didn’t feel a bit of pain. A stocky woman had stepped in the arrow’s path and taken the arrow in the forearm instead, without flinching. As Palym watched, surprised, the woman reached up and yanked the arrow out of her arm, before dropping it to clatter on the deck.

“Get out of here!” Xiao shouted. “Now!”

After goggling at Palym’s friend for a moment, the assassins did just that. They scattered, each escaping into the myriad doors and portholes dotting the Golden Barque’s hull. As they vanished, Palym gladly allowed her knives’ shadows to return to their proper places rather than continue to chase fleeing gods.

Xiao turned, and Palym was thrilled to see that her friend had mostly recreated her old shape in the aftermath of her fight with the dragon, over whom she must have triumphed. Xiao’s skin had turned a different, more sallow shade, and her hair had been replaced with tentacles that writhed slightly in the wind. The wound in her arm was already healing, and...

“Are you *taller* than me now?” asked Palym, chagrined.

“Maybe a little,” said Xiao with a mischievous grin.

They both turned as Ruvia cleared his throat. He rested his mallet on his shoulder with one hand, and in the other he held up a long tunic. Palym choked a bit as she realized that all those transformations had shredded Xiao’s new clothing. Palym was gratified to see that Xiao could still blush, as the new Exigent quickly donned the tunic.

“Why do you have clothes that fit her?” Palym asked Ruvia. “And why did you have so many knives?”

“The God of Roads is prepared for any journey,” Ruvia said with a ready smile. “You never know what you may need, so I just pack everything.”

Xiao poked her head through the tunic's collar and frowned. "That makes no sense."

Palym laughed. "It must be a Division of Journeys thing, because it makes perfect sense to me."

Xiao shrugged and chuckled along. Palym enjoyed the sound, having feared that she'd ever hear it again.

A sudden chill shattered Palym's good mood, the pull of a dire future. Ruvia's future.

Palym saw the glint of a near-invisible thread as it looped over the god's head. She had no time to think, so she simply reached up and grabbed it. A moment later it pulled taut, and instead of cutting into Ruvia's throat, the razor-thin thread bit deeply into the flesh of Palym's hand.

Palym cried out in pain, but she didn't let go until Ruvia had ducked away to safety. The thread flew back, stained into visibility by Palym's blood.

With Ruvia out of the way, Palym spied Zannen standing there alone on the deck of the Golden Barque.



CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“I assumed you would already be on your way out of Yu-Shan,” Palym spat at Zannen.

“I am,” the Chosen of Secrets said, his hands folded behind his back. “The Golden Barque has many ways to travel hidden within it. But I couldn’t pass up this opportunity while I was passing through.”

Palym tried not to show her fear as Zannen spoke. The traitor was skilled enough to escape Keahi without injury, and he could attack Palym, Ruvia, and Xiao from a distance. Palym flexed her wounded hand, wincing at the pain. Her sparring lessons with Keahi had taught Palym that she healed faster than she had as a mortal, but her hand was still useless for now.

“What opportunity is that?” asked Ruvia as he stepped forward to confront the traitor. “To assassinate a god who’s never brought you harm?”

Zannen grunted dismissively. “You should know this isn’t personal, Ruvia. How many rivals have you sabotaged or even had quietly removed before they could threaten your position?”

Ruvia said nothing.

“You see?” Zannen asked Palym, “This is how the game is played, how it’s *been* played for thousands of years. I’ve just brought it into the open.”

Palym shook her head in disbelief. “This isn’t a game. You’re playing with people’s lives.”

“That’s why I was Chosen.” Zannen pointed to Palym. “It’s why you were Chosen as well. To make decisions for people who can’t or won’t. To wield people like tools that can build and demolish nations.”

Xiao stepped forward, hands balled in fists. The tentacles on her head writhed in anger. “I’m not a tool!”

Zannen took a step closer to see Xiao better. Xiao backed up nervously, to stand by Palym. Palym was relieved to see that her friend’s physical transformation hadn’t made her overaggressive, although a little more boldness might have been helpful at that moment.

“You were convenient, but apparently never mine to control,” said Zannen. “I underestimated Palym’s ingenuity.”

Palym slipped her uninjured hand into Xiao's. "You underestimated us both."

Zannen sneered. "The girl you loved is gone, you fool. That's a monster standing next to you, one bad mood away from another disastrous transformation. She's more weapon than woman now, more god than human."

Xiao squeezed Palym's hand tightly. Palym couldn't accept the traitor's words, but she remembered the gods killed in Xiao's rampage. She didn't know what to say.

But Ruvia did. "The Chosen of Secrets are meant to know the proper moment to reveal the truth, but you've never done that at all, have you? You make grand claims without providing any evidence at all. You unleash creatures of devastating power without truly understanding them. You accuse this Exigent of being more god than human, but how many centuries have you spent in heaven, learning to behave as your betters do?"

As the last word left his lips, Yu-Shan's light snuffed out. For a moment, Palym feared some trick from Zannen, but she soon realized that darkness had fallen over heaven. The sun had given way to the night sky, with the brilliant stars above more visible aboard the flying ship than Palym had ever seen them in Creation.

The brightest star in the sky was brilliant green. Jupiter's light cast an otherworldly tint upon her Chosen, and he seemed hardly surprised at all. He bared his teeth as he spoke, pronouncing his words like a curse.

"The truth I've realized, in all my centuries here, is that the gods have always feared us — the Sidereal Exalted — and rightly so. As Creation struggled to bear the power of hundreds of Solar Exalted, thousands of ravenous Dragon-Blooded, and countless inhuman Exigents, *we* have been the subtle knives that kept the world manageable. We few Sidereals are the true power in heaven and earth, destined to guide the heavenly bureaucracy if only we would seize it. Gods are venal and unreliable, and in desperate need of Sidereal management."

"You were Chosen by a god!" said Ruvia, with a tone of grave offense.

"I was Chosen by one of the Five Maidens," Zannen agreed, "who together decided that we would number fewer than any other Exalted. They must have foreseen that if there were more of us, we would be unstoppable.

"And then they hid with the other Incarnae in the Jade Pleasure Dome, where no Exalted may go. They've played their Games of Divinity for thousands of years to avoid facing us, their rightful replacements. Jupiter herself shines overhead because the Maiden of Secrets can't look away when her own greatest secret is revealed."

As Zannen pointed a slender finger up into the night, Palym couldn't help looking down, past the ship's railing.

As the night persisted, the Golden Barque slowly grew more brilliant. It shined a hopeful yellow upon Yu-Shan, and the city responded with its own

varied colors. There were a million or more gods down there, each with their own stories and duties, and even their own worshippers in Creation. Many — maybe most — took mortals for granted, Palym knew. Other gods had long ago paid for that hubris and been forgotten and relegated to heaven's slums.

Yu-Shan could still be beautiful, though, if you looked at it with fresh eyes.

Palym looked toward Zannen and glimpsed the arc of his destiny. She saw neither uncertainty nor compromise in him. He'd decided his fate and would force it upon her and anyone else who got in his way. He'd been willing to kill hundreds of people — mortal and divine — and if he wasn't stopped, he'd kill thousands more.

"By the authority of the Circle of Protection, you're under arrest, Zannen," said Palym. She released her grip on Xiao's hand and readied her knife.

Zannen's gaze dropped from the sky to Palym. "I should have known you wouldn't listen. Those who most need to see the truth close their eyes to it."

"My eyes are open. And I see Jupiter's light casting her judgment on you. Maybe she wanted you to spill your guts so I'd know how important it was to not let you escape."

Zannen glanced back up at the green star, and Palym charged.

As fast as Palym was, Zannen's hands were faster. The old Sidereal splayed his fingers out, and a thousand fine threads spread through the night, each sharp enough to cut flesh and fine enough to be nearly invisible. They formed a tangled and deadly web that quickly trapped Xiao and Ruvia, but if there was one thing Palym knew how to do well, it was find a path. She dove and twirled through the threads unharmed, maneuvering around Zannen rather than running straight toward him.

Though her anima had dimmed due to her exhaustion, it was still bright enough that she couldn't possibly hide from Zannen. She had one working hand and no more tricks to play with it, so she did the only thing she could think of and flung her dagger at Zannen's heart. The Chosen of Secrets caught the dagger between two fingers and casually tossed it over the ship's railing.

Zannen cackled at her attempt to harm him. "You shouldn't have—"

He was interrupted by a roar from Xiao, which caught him and Palym both by surprise. Palym saw that a clear path had been made through the dangerous web, and Xiao had chosen to take it. A gift from the God of Roads, no doubt, who followed a few steps behind Xiao.

Xiao had never really been a fighter, but she was much stronger now than she'd been as a mortal. As she charged him, Zannen slashed at her with the filaments from his fingers, but his efforts to fend her off proved fruitless. Xiao sustained cut after bloody cut, but she ignored the pain and slammed the old man against the deck.

"Give up already," she said with a scowl. "You can't kill me, and it's all your fault!"

Zannen quickly realized she was right, and he gave up trying to fight her. Instead, he slipped from her grasp and skittered on all fours along the deck until he was forced to dodge an overhead strike from Ruvia's mallet. As the hammer rang out against the golden hull, Zannen was already hopping up and over the ship's railing.

"He can run along the hull!" Palym reminded Xiao, prompting the Exigent to renew her chase rather than giving up. But Palym knew Xiao couldn't possibly keep up with the nimble old man, and Ruvia didn't seem especially built for speed either. With Zannen's head start, Palym wasn't sure even she could catch up to him in a footrace. So she didn't try.

Instead, Palym ducked into a nearby trapdoor and dropped into a cluttered office. The clerks who worked there fortunately weren't present to see her knock over their scrolls and inkwells in her mad dash to head Zannen off. Like the Cerulean Lute, the interior of the Golden Barque of the Heavens was a confusing maze filled with impossible shortcuts, but Palym was certain she could navigate it better than Zannen could follow a straight line.

As Palym ran, she snatched up things that might serve as useful weapons. She grabbed a large protractor from a planning committee's table, then exchanged it for a kitchen knife from one of the ship's galleys. In an office with several sea creatures stuffed and mounted on the walls, Palym spotted a harpoon with a rope fastened to the end. She silently thanked Mercury and as she plucked it from the wall without losing a single step.

Following the path of yellow light only she could see, Palym found a porthole that she was certain Zannen would soon cross over. She readied her harpoon and focused for a few moments in silence.

She thought of the Tapestry of Fate and of how all fortune — good and bad — could be found in it. Aligning herself with it was like riding a horse. If forced, it would fight her, but she could guide it gently so that her throw landed where she needed it to. As when she had fought Keahi, Palym found the perfect moment and heaved the harpoon.

It flew through the porthole just as Zannen stepped over the opening, and the harpoon stuck in his thigh. He let out a shout of horrified surprise and stumbled forward painfully.

She grasped for the rope attached to the harpoon, but it slithered through the porthole as Zannen leaped away from the ship's hull and out into the air, swinging from his threads of Essence. Palym stuck her head through the porthole, but she could only watch him arc out into the open sky, trailing rope behind him.

Then everything shifted. The ship let out great creaking sounds, and the city began to shift in Palym's view. She realized that Ruvia, Captain of the Golden Barque, had taken the wheel to help her, with incredibly good timing.

As the ship turned in the air, the rope attached to Zannen fluttered back toward Palym. She reached her good hand through the porthole and managed to snag the end of it, but she had no leverage with which to reel him in.

Then Xiao's big hand found the rope as well. She stood outside, horizontal on the hull from Palym's perspective, feet firmly planted. "Ready?" she shouted, taking the rope in both hands.

With Xiao stabilizing the rope, Palym coiled its end around her forearms and braced herself against the porthole with both feet. "Pull!" she shouted.

Together they heaved the Chosen of Secrets out of the air, shouting in protest as he went, until he slammed into the ship's golden hull. He didn't attempt to rise again.

Palym and Xiao both cheered and then laughed. They'd never done anything quite like this before, and they'd done it together. Xiao sat on the hull and looked down at where Palym's head poked out of the porthole.

"So was this a date or not?" Xiao asked.

Palym giggled in a mixture of relief and disbelief. "I don't even know if that's the right word. This was all so insane."

"Yes," Xiao agreed. "But in the best way."



CHAPTER FORTY

The next day, Palym didn't bother coming into the office. She woke up next to Xiao in her own quarters, in her own bed, and she was determined to enjoy it. If that meant someone would try to fire her from the Circle of Protection, so be it. She didn't give a damn.

Qing made them a bountiful breakfast, and they fell upon it with gusto. Palym hadn't realized how famished she'd been until she saw the food, but she ate everything Qing put in front of her and then fell back asleep again. She ached all over from the multiple fights she'd survived, and she told herself she needed her rest. In fact, she deserved it.

It wasn't until almost noon that Cutting Remark and Keahi came by. Palym hauled herself out of her bedroom to meet them, dressed only in a robe. They sat in her living room to chat and were soon joined by Xiao, wearing her old clothes that now fit her poorly.

"You weren't at the office," Cutting Remark said. When she started to protest his comment, he held up his hand to cut her off. "Good for you."

"How is Reverie?" Palym asked.

"He will live," Keahi said. "Zannen's web gave him a few more scars than before, but he's already trying to convince his nurses that they add character to his otherwise flawless features. At that, he will probably succeed."

"He always does," said Cutting Remark.

Palym hardly wanted to repeat the traitor's name, but she had to know. "And Zannen?"

Keahi frowned. "He'll live as well, at least until he's stood trial for his crimes. Which will probably take years. He'll be imprisoned until then, assuming the Bureau of Heaven can hold him."

Palym squirmed a little in her chair. "Did I make the right choice, arresting him? It might have been safer for us all if I'd killed him."

"The murder of another person is a terrible burden. A fellow Sidereal, even more so. It might have been more convenient for us, but I don't blame you for making the choice you did."

"We wouldn't have blamed you for killing him though," Cutting Remark added with some bitterness. "We had dozens of witnesses that saw Zannen

attacking us, and he admitted to arranging the death of my wife. Killing him would have been justified.”

“In fact,” Qing said from the other room, “I hear that many gods in the Bureau of Destiny would have been glad to hold him down for you.”

“You have a very sharp assistant there,” Cutting Remark said.

“Who is going to replace him in the Circle of Protection?” Palym said.

Keahi shrugged. “After the way Zannen tried to betray us all — including his own division — I believe Nara-O will be quick to assign another of Jupiter’s Chosen to join us.”

“You don’t think he’d hesitate to take someone away from their current job?”

“We garnered a good deal of attention yesterday,” Keahi said. “Everyone is going to be watching to ensure we wrap this up fast and well. As part of that, the Division of Secrets will want a fresh face on our team to make sure they don’t get shut out.”

“What else is there left to do?” Xiao asked. “I mean, you figured out who the traitors were, right? And you stopped them cold. Or has Odihna escaped already?”

The young woman shuddered at the thought. She was, as far as Palym knew, the only Black Flag to ever complete her transformation into a “normal” Exigent.

Palym couldn’t imagine how horrible it must have been to be transformed into such a monstrous creature. The pain must have been staggering. Xiao hadn’t wanted to talk about it at all. Every time Palym mentioned it, she fell silent and distant.

“Just because we stopped Zannen and Odihna’s plot doesn’t mean that we don’t have to mop up after them,” said Keahi. “There are still a number of twisted boons out there that Zannen left scattered about Creation. It’s going to take us a while to track all of them down, and we can’t waste any time.”

“Right,” Palym said. “Any one of them could be discovered and used by an innocent person any moment. And that’s the last thing we want to have happen.”

“Oh,” Xiao said, suddenly distant again. “Right.”

“We’re not going anywhere today though,” Cutting Remark said. “We’re all hurting — some of us more than others. We’ll take a well-deserved break and then get to work tomorrow.”

“That’s not nearly as much fun,” Xiao said.

“How do you mean?” asked Keahi.

“Well, we were playing hooky from work today,” Xiao said, glancing at Palym. “And now that it turns out that it’s been officially sanctioned, that kind of ruins it.”

Even Cutting Remark chuckled at that. “Take the day off tomorrow, too,” he said. “We won’t tell.”

Xiao narrowed her eyes at the man. “Are you sure that wouldn’t ruin tomorrow too?”

Keahi shook her head. “Cutting Remark and I will be working. You can continue your *fleeting respite* — assuming that’s what you want...”

Xiao’s eyes bulged at the reminder of Odihna’s title. “Forget it!” she said. “I think I’d like to come to work with Palym, too!”

Keahi blinked. “I hadn’t considered that. After an experience like last night’s, you want to keep working with us?”

“It’s either that or go back home to our village.” Xiao gestured at her sleeves, splitting at the seams, and at the tentacles on her head. “I could just tell my parents I had a growth spurt and a haircut.”

They all laughed out loud at that, even Xiao. Palym watched her, and for the first time she thought that, yes, Xiao might be able to find a way to fit in here, in Yu-Shan, this wondrous world filled with gods and the Exalted. She had no idea what Xiao’s true powers and nature might be, or even her lifespan, but she could stay with her for sure.

That comforted Palym more deeply than she had expected, and it wasn’t just on Xiao’s behalf. Since the moment she’d arrived here, she’d often felt like an outsider, someone who had arrived by accident. She’d wondered if she’d ever be able to feel like she belonged. Now she finally had a glimmer of how that might come true.

She leaned toward Cutting Remark then. “Tell me about the Bureau of Destiny,” she said. “How are they recovering from the attack?”

The man wobbled his head back and forth. “We’ve seen better days. All of the division heads survived the attack, but we haven’t caught all of the assassins, let alone any conspirators that stayed hidden. Trust is hard to come by right now.”

“How bad is it?”

“The various divisions are all blaming each other, and the Bureau of Heaven is calling for an investigation of negligence toward the public good. They might use this as an opportunity to exert more control over the Bureau of Destiny.”

“That sounds bad,” Xiao said.

“The Bureau of Destiny has the most subtle and widespread control over Creation, and Creation is where most prayer comes from,” Cutting Remark said. “If the Bureau of Heaven starts setting policy for us, they might exploit Creation to exert control over the prayer economy.”

Keahi grunted. “Imagine starting plagues or wars just to bolster or ruin the worship of individual gods.”

“At least the snarls in the Loom of Fate should soon be doing much better,” Cutting Remark said. “The pattern spiders never stopped working to repair the damage, but looking back it’s obvious that Zannen and his conspirators were sabotaging the spiders’ work to keep us in the dark. Even with destructive events like last night’s attack, we should see improvements over the coming weeks.”

“Of course, we want to stop any of that kind of damage we can,” Keahi said. “It’s not all about the fabric of fate but also the innocent lives a Black Flag incident tends to snuff out.”

“The fabric binds us all together,” Cutting Remark said. “It shows the pattern by which our lives become entangled.”

“But is that the reality or the metaphor?” Keahi asked in a way that told Palym this was an argument the two had engaged in countless times before.

“Is there a difference?” Cutting Remark asked rhetorically. “Perhaps for those trapped in Creation, but not here in Yu-Shan.”

“What happened to Ruvia?” Xiao asked out of the blue. “He helped me and Palym yesterday, but I never saw him again after that.”

“He’s doing well,” Keahi said. “He was hurt a bit in the battle too, but gods heal more quickly than mortals. Not as quickly as you do, I suppose, but still, they tend not to even have scars.”

“Well, that’s disappointing,” Palym said, a little more harshly than she would have liked.

Xiao stared at her. “You don’t want the head of your division to heal that well?”

She favored Xiao with a mirthless smile. “I was thinking more in terms of Odihna.”

The others all nodded in understanding. “You can take some comfort in the fact that he’s been denied the miraculous healing of the Lapis Ewer while he awaits trial,” Keahi said.

“And maybe you can find an opportunity to give him a similar beating at some point in the future,” Cutting Remark said. “Do it right, and you could pummel him mercilessly every year for the rest of time.”

Palym chuckled at that and put her hand on Xiao’s. “At that moment, I thought I’d lost you forever,” she said to her friend. “I don’t think I have the heart to beat him so badly anymore.”

“Just as long as he doesn’t give you another excuse,” Xiao said with a shiver as she remembered all she’d been through. “Let’s hope that never happens again.”

Cutting Remark pulled something from his pocket. “Speaking of Odihna, I believe one of you dropped this.” It was Xiao’s small, friendly-looking idol of Odihna.

Xiao stared at it as if it might bite Cutting Remark if he was too careless with it. “I — I can’t believe I was ever so stupid.”

“Odihna is a seductive one,” Keahi said, looking at the idol in disgust. “He whispers in your ear and says you deserve rest, but only to feed his own ambition.”

“He and Zannen both masqueraded as reformers,” Cutting Remark said. “But they were more callous and selfish than any of us. They viewed people as tools, not as individuals we’re responsible for protecting.”

Xiao carefully took the idol, keeping it at arm’s length in her outstretched hand, never taking her widened eyes off it. “I need to get rid of it,” she said. “Now.”

“Come with me,” Palym said as she leaped to her feet. She jogged to the balcony, followed by Xiao, who took each step as if the idol might explode at any movement. Keahi and Cutting Remark came after them, standing just behind them on the balcony.

“Take it,” Xiao said to Palym. “Throw it away.”

Palym stared straight at it for a moment. It was tempting, but she’d already had her chance to hurt Odihna.

“You need to do it,” she said. “Yourself.”

“What?” Xiao shuddered and almost dropped the idol. She closed her hand on it rather than let it fall, and she winced as her fingers wrapped around it, as if the touch of it burned her flesh.

“Get rid of him,” Palym said. “Cast him out of your life.”

Xiao looked at her closed fist uncertainly. “If you say so.”

“No.” Palym shook her head. “Not because I say so. Because you *want* to.”

Xiao glanced from her fist to Palym and saw the love in Palym’s eyes. That gave Xiao the strength she needed. Xiao cocked her arm back and let the idol fly.

It arced out over the nearby buildings and plunked down into the silver side of one of the canals, disappearing there beneath the mercurial surface. They stood there and watched the ripples it formed until they faded entirely away. Then they went back inside and enjoyed an idle afternoon without offering a single bit of it up to any god.

EXALTED

THIRD EDITION

CIRCLE OF PROTECTION

Palym thought she and her best friend Xiao were on an adventure. They had left their rural home in search of something greater, but neither could have anticipated the monster's attack their first day in the city. Before she knew it, Palym was swept into a world beyond her wildest imagination, the world of the Sidereal Exalted and Yu-Shan. Where will the road of this Chosen of Journeys take her? And what will become of Xiao, left behind in Creation? One thing is certain: Palym must forge her own path going forward, even if that means fighting back against the Celestial Bureaucracy itself!

