

Chapter Three

For, at the beginning, comes the end

*“That we may dwell in their light, forever...”
~Padiran Litany of Faith*

Seated in her chair in the Council meeting chamber, Z’han did her best to look interested in the myriad reports and concerns brought before her. She tried giving herself over to the majesty of the chamber. Getting lost in the grandeur of its size, its circular shape wherein half of the wall was a series of large, glassless windows at which stood pairs of the Host in ceremonial armor, providing a panoramic view of P’d Z’nr’l.

The rest of the wall was hung with 10 thousand-year-old tapestries depicting the history of the how the Thir saved the Padira from extinction. Teaching them everything from architecture to basic medicine and basket weaving. Their colors still as bright as when they were originally woven.

As much as she loved this room, it did nothing to alleviate her sense of ennui. Z’han wondered if after 800 years of being Azkil, her father died not so much from the ravages of old age, but sheer boredom.

Smiling inwardly, Z'han could just imagine Z'Mad sitting there; Quarter after quarter, year after year, the decades and then centuries blending. His chair, centermost in a semi circle of 21, K'lon in her armor on his left (She was now in her first decade of her position-At 450, the youngest of her clan to hold it), and Oscar on his far right. Those steady blue eyes studying, following every move. Taking in every twitch, every nuance.

Hazarding a glance in his direction, Z'han could see why this man was her father's closest friend-Though Oscar was 750 years younger. They were both men of great personal power and magnetism. Both men who did not tolerate idiocy or brook weakness in others.

Yet, it was Z'han and not Oscar who viewed the exceptionally shy Shn'dav as he timidly rose from his seat with disdain. As he hesitated, struggling for just the right words to say, Z'han made a point of studying the tapestries on the wall. Allowing her mind to wander, Z'han gave a slight jump as K'lon lightly touched her arm. Blushing slightly, Z'han found herself grateful that no one bothered to comment on her rudeness.

Looking closer at Shn'dav, Z'han noted that he was not an unattractive man. Short, for a Thiran-Just barely a meter and a half in height, Z'han recalled hearing her father once say that Shn'dav was the most Padiran of the Gods. Yet his features were pleasant enough: Clear green eyes, fair, shoulder-length hair with just a slight curl to it and a sweet mouth. Looking at him from beneath her lashes, Z'han let her gaze travel down to note that while Shn'dav's physical attributes were not quite as impressive as Pa'ar's-Or Tro's for that matter, there was still something sizeable enough to be viewed with a degree of pleasure. Z'han shifted slightly in her chair as she wondered what level of sexual skills the Architect possessed and whether Pa'ar ever let him take the dominant role in their lovemaking. It was only after K'lon tapped her once more on the arm that Z'han realized she had been staring at Shn'dav's crotch

and that he, along with the rest of the Council were all too painfully aware of that fact as well.

The already red faced Shn'dav cringed as a loud sucking noise alerted everyone to Pa'ar who sat a few seats to Z'han's left. His green eyes alight and sucking that damned talisman of his, it was all too apparent to everyone that he was mocking Shn'dav and herself.

Z'han looked around only to see the faces of her fellow Council Members registering everything from pity to disgust- Even Tro was clearly displeased with her, and the look in Oscar's eyes told her she'd failed yet once again.

Bristling from the non-verbal chastisement, Z'han rose to her feet. Think of her what they will, she was still Azkil here. A fact that she was determined no one should forget.

"Thank you, My Lord Shn'dav for those words.... Do you have anything else to say?"

Looking down at his feet, wishing himself anywhere but there, Shn'dav's voice was just barely above a whisper when he finally spoke.

"N...no....M...m... My Lady...I"

Seizing the opportunity, Pa'ar rose from his chair.

"Then perhaps **now** would be a good time to take your seat."

Z'han turned and faced Pa'ar. The very nerve of him! Z'han knew she had acted foolishly, but this was unacceptable.

"Thank you, My Lord Pa'ar. But.... Perhaps as you are **not** Azkil, it would do you well to remember that it is **my** place to lead these proceedings?"

She took a small taste of pleasure in seeing Pa'ar pull back ever so slightly. As much as she disliked this responsibility, Z'han was unwilling to relinquish it-At least, not to the likes of him.

Shn'dav merely dropped into his seat next to Pa'ar, grateful that everyone's attention was no longer on him.

Drawing herself up to her full height, Z'han gracefully took her seat and spoke in what she hoped was a tone both regal and commanding.

"Well then...I believe that concludes our meeting for this quarter-Or, is there some **new** matter which needs to be brought to this council's attention?"

Z'han's heart sank as Oscar inclined his head signaling his desire to speak. She was Azkil now, not some child in need of endless lectures on duty and protocol. Which is why, in accordance with Council protocol as was her duty, she acknowledged him.

"You have some issue for discussion My Lord Oscar?"

Rising from his chair, Oscar studied his former student. He'd taught this girl, guided her education from the moment she could speak. Everything she knew about her people, their ancestry and the position she now possessed she learned from him.

Scanning the faces of his fellow council members, he realized that apart from Naj, Z'ni, Pa'ar and a few others, he'd taught these people everything they knew. He was responsible for giving them the information on which the very fabric of their society and their rule of Padir and its people were based on. A fabric which he knew he must now not only rend, but utterly destroy if he were to free them.

Looking from one council member to another, Oscar could not help but feel sorry for them.

"My Lady Z'han, most august and noble Council. I stand before you now to address a grave situation."

Z'han stifled a yawn as she suspected this was about to be yet another long and boring lecture.

"Namely, the great wrong we have done Padir and her people.

Wrong done to Padir? Z'han suddenly felt as if the ground beneath her feet had begun to tilt ever so slightly. Something was

amiss. Something Z'han instinctively knew would never be right again.

Observing her, Oscar waited for the whispering among the Council to simmer down before continuing.

"For far too long we have treated this world and those who live on it as if they were ours by right."

While Z'han and the rest sat in stunned silence-Was this really Oscar the Elder speaking? Pa'ar shot out of his seat, advancing on Oscar like a beast attacking its prey.

"As Gods, **we** are indeed free to do **whatever** we wish!"

Sidestepping Pa'ar with amazing agility, Oscar set his focus on Z'han who was slowly beginning to look like the lost child she was.

"True, **Gods** are free to do as they please... We, however, are...not...Gods.

No sooner had the words left his lips, Oscar took a step back as Council Members leapt from their seats, arguing for or against him.

With a snap of her fingers, Rh'zhn, K'lon's second in command began to pound his spear upon the floor. The other Thiran Host quickly taking up his lead until the sound rang out like thunder.

Once the Council Members had quieted down and retaken their seats, Z'han began to feel all eyes on her. As she rose from her chair to address them, she realized the anger she expressed was as much at them for needing her to manage the situation as she was at herself for letting things get out of hand. Most importantly, she was furious at Oscar for starting this to begin with.

"My Lord Oscar is a senior member of this Council, and no matter how **strongly** we may disagree with his views, we shall all show him the proper respect as befits his rank!"

Turning on Oscar, Z'han took a moment to calm herself in an effort to at least appear to have regained control. She knew Oscar was testing her. This time, Z'han promised herself,

she would not fail. After all, there was a difference between being unwilling to rule and being incapable of doing so.

“My Lord, are we not the children of the Elder Gods? Those who defied Heaven itself to come down and save the Padira from extinction?”

Unfortunately for Z’han, her old instructor was as always, several steps ahead of her.

“Why do you rule as Azkil Z’han?”

Z’han took a step back, confused. While she understood the question itself, she had no idea as to why it was asked.

“Because...I inherited this position from my father...Just as he inherited it from his father....”

Pulling herself straight, Z’han felt her sense of place and purpose return as she continued.

“A **tradition** My Lord that goes back to N’ria, the first Azkil.”

Oscal raised his hand, silencing her. How typical of her, to fall back on what she’d been taught since infancy. As he finished the verse the girl had been reciting, Oscal could not keep the disdain from his voice.

“Who did come down from heaven and set us upon the path of glory-So sayeth the Litany...You have learned your lessons well Z’han, but you have failed to answer my question.”

Z’han could feel the heat rising in her cheeks as she nervously began fingering her father’s ring which she’d had resized to fit her finger, yet still felt too large and cumbersome for her slender hand.

“Because it is my responsibility, my **right** to do so!”

Z’han fought to keep herself steady as Oscal regarded her coolly. Those blue eyes boring into her as he delivered yet another blow to her self-esteem.

Is it Z’han.... Is it really?

With no immediate answer, Z’han said a prayer of thanks as Pa’ar stepped between them, taking up the argument with his older brother.

“The Lady Z’han rules us because it is **her** right to do so...We rule the Padira because it is **our** right to do so.”

As soon as she’d heard K’lon clear her throat and watch as she motioned with her sword for Pa’ar to take his seat, Z’han became aware she’d made another mistake. As Pa’ar reluctantly took his seat, Z’han took a step forward and looked her old instructor squarely in the eye.

Oscal was as domineering now as he’d been when she was a child. Except now, Z’han was no longer a little girl learning lessons and Oscal was now standing on the very edge of heresy.

“Since the time of our forbearers has not each generation of Thir worked to ensure that the Padira maintain a peaceful existence, free from the ravages of hunger, disease and war? My Lord, it was you who taught me the Litany...How then, can you now say that there is no truth in those teachings?”

Oscal breathed an inward sigh of relief. Finally, they were getting to the questions that mattered.

“None of what I’ve taught you is true.”

Ignoring the rest of the Council as members began whispering frantically amongst themselves; Oscal stared deeply into Z’han’s frightened blue eyes. She was at war with herself and her training and there was nothing he could do but give her the truth and hope she would know in her heart what to do with it.

He pitied her. He pitied all his people. The Litany had, after generations of refinement locked them into a state of being that while it secured their power here, had also served to rob them of their identity as a people-**Their** heritage.

“**Blasphemer!** I shall personally see to it you pay the ultimate penalty for your treachery!”

Oscal ignored Pa’ar’s outburst as he jumped from his seat. Held back by K’lon, however, Pa’ar was no threat. Oscal then calmly turned and addressed Z’han directly.

“We need to leave this world and its people to find their own destiny-our true destiny as well.”

“Their destiny is to serve us, and our destiny is to rule!”

Pa’ar glared at K’lon as she placed an elegant ebon hand on the hilt of her sword. Sulking, he took his seat nonetheless.

Taking Z’han by the arm, Oscar pulled the girl to the side as if they were merely having a private conversation.

“I know this is confusing, but what I now tell you is the truth.”

Pa’ar snorted derisively as Z’han pulled away. Looking at her former teacher, she felt as if she were seeing him for the first time.

“How can you be so certain that what you now claim to be the truth is so?”

Oscar smiled. Finally, the question that mattered most.

“Because the Voice of Heaven has declared it so.”

And, with that, the world as Z’han knew it slowly went on its way to what she knew, no matter how the day turned out, would be a bitter end.