



~ Laserfica Sages ~ Hidden Veils ~

Blood Cousins

by

Jeremiah Zimmerman



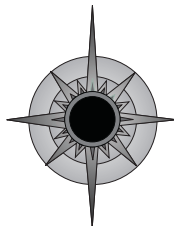
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~ ~ ~ *Creation of Laserfica* ~ ~ ~

As all creators of worlds go through, the evolution of Laserfica didn't spring into existence in an instant, not even seven days, weeks, months or years. In the early developments of Laserfica, JZ set its general size and basic aspects, deciding it would be larger than Terra Earth to allow for greater expansion of species, cultures, mythologies and more.

Drawing maps, creating cultures, filling history with events, and much, much more, grew the world to become a rich environment for people to explore. Interlacing Laserfica with Terra Earth allowed intriguing sharing of history and mythology, as well as plants and animals, even people. From that initial foundation, many aspects of the world continued to evolve over the years.

Relations with Terra Earth allowed for many interconnections, including Itharue becoming the roots of legends related to vampires, werewolves, mermaids, demons and such.

Even legendary folklore of elves, dwarves, gnomes and other fairy folk on Terra Earth come from interrelations with Laserfica, providing rich cultural blending. Though dragons don't make an appearance in *Blood Cousins*, they are mentioned and hold a long history within Laserfica and Terra Earth, going back scores of thousands of years.

The creation of Laserfica reflects how connected people are, no matter where they come from, or where they find themselves in the future. Let your imagination soar and grow, as you take journeys through lives of people, as well as worlds formed by the imagination of JZ and other creators of worlds.



~ *Additional Creations of JZ* ~

Possibly available when you read this.

Celestial Journeys: *Intrigue collection relating alternate histories and dimensions to the lives of those living within the grand multiverse.*

Deep Secrets: *Forerunner to Quest for Destiny, delving into inter-connected worlds of ettiens and legends.*

Quest for Destiny: *Following three years after Deep Secrets, delving into relations of Human Sapiens and Vampians, as well as their association throughout history and ettiens.*

Aurora's Dawn I & II: *Further developments related to Quest for Destiny, continuing the lives of those seeking deeper truths.*

~ ~ ~

Laserfica Sagas: *Epic novels taking place on a distant fantasy world.*

Tarrarian Plight: *A two-part fantasy saga intrigue of betrayal, honor, mystics, drakes, assassins and so much more.*

Route of Dissension: *Assassins, mages, drakes and foreign nations are guided to break the strength and tranquility of the Tarraria Empire, pulling many lives into chaos and dangers.*

Fractured Clans: *With the Tarrarian Empire in shambles, the world of Laserfica faces global conflict.*

~ ~ ~

Universal Tales: *An extensive in-person role-playing platform for mature and creative minds, having deep sources for Laserfica, inter-galactic civilizations, alternate timelines and much, much more.*

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Through the years of creating the writings, games and the fictitious multiverse, a number of people helped JZ with his ramblings and bewildering tangents.

***Zandra W.** endured many hours of speculations and concept building – often with blank stares.*

***Masu S.** helped in the early writings that came into being.*

***Mark N.** gave eager ears in the early advancement of the fictional worlds that became the root of many stories.*

***Bill E.** assisted this creator to overcome a shoddy education, giving JZ a clearer understanding of a flawed language – doing so despite the student’s stubbornness and obnoxious curiosity.*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

~ Introduction ~

Laserfica has a long history with Terra Earth, going back scores of thousands of years. Even before this novel was conceived, Laserfica was birthed as a role-playing environment, beginning its evolution near Omaha in the early-1980s. As Laserfica developed, unique cultures and long history within and beyond that world took shape. *Universal Tales* was birthed in the late-1980s, helping shape Laserfica, especially in with the nature of mystic qualities.

Before there was *Blood Cousins*, there was Tarrarian Plight. The Tarraria Empire began as an experimental culture, a social development through thought experiments, a term gained from Einstein. It was a way to place characters into settings for the evolution of a grander society; a society where JZ could test social views within the interactions of characters, bringing various concepts together. This also included those who would break the culture. Larivia and other nations were created to study any number of possibilities within cultures, and the world of Laserfica grew richer.

Larivia, the setting for *Blood Cousins*, became a unique culture, having qualities similar to medieval Europe. Setting layers within the culture—like nobility, temple clergy and gypsies—JZ set the environment for testing social viewpoints and tension related to various personalities JZ had seen in his life and travels.

The use of gypsies on Laserfica is not related to Romani culture of Terra Earth. The use is the broader perception of what many view as traveling entertainers and tinkerers, even a form of land pirates with all the colorful aspects. Romani see such views as insulting. These roving Laserfican communities—also viewed as rogues, thieves and prostitutes by most Larivians and other nations—hold to a separate customs and culture partially shaped through long connection both worlds possess.

Templars also evolved with the creation of Laserfica, Larivia and various regions, as a reference for *temple warriors*, having a differing history and cultures than Templars of Terra Earth.

As *gypsies* and *templars* have vague historical relations with concepts on Terra Earth, *Itharue* are further connected in ways few on Laserfica or Terra Earth could consider. Not even characters of *Deep Secrets* and *Quest for Destiny* understand the full historical relations, nor will characters of *Blood Cousins* be able to unravel the full nature of these mysteries. Wise readers could glean more from the interactions of these characters and books.

Mysteries of the universe are many, and paths to discover those mysteries are difficult. For those who take the more difficult paths to understand mysteries within the universe gain considerable satisfaction and personal reward. Sharing that knowledge and understanding in all forms allows us all to grow.

~ ~ ~ Enjoy the Journey ~ ~ ~

~ Laserfica Sagas: Hidden Veils ~

BLOOD COUSINS

by Jeremiah Zimmerman

“I never felt heat like this before,” Mitokh told his younger cousin, as they walked the mountain game trail up the slope, dark eyes watching for prey.

He held a simple short bow with an arrow notched. Secondborn of four, having entered the age of betrothal, Mitokh was lanky and quick. Perspiration beaded his medium-brown complexion, much like raindrops on cinnamon.

The boy would have preferred actual raindrops than losing precious moisture. Wavy, shiny, black hair hanging loose below shoulders kept occasional biting insects from his neck. Larivians were not a tall or full people, tending to be lean and agile like himself and the one he walked with. Mitokh was a tad shorter than most his age and even more so than foreigners he had seen at festivals.

Ikrae picked up a couple dry twigs, placing them in the sack he carried. “Grandfather said it hasn’t been like this for over thirty years, not since our fathers were young.” The boy was a year younger and an inch shorter, though destined to be taller than his friend at the rate he was growing. Longer hair flowed loose.

Younger, lighter eyes squinted towards the sky for any hint of clouds while a meteor streaked halfway across the sky before flashing out of existence, momentarily becoming as bright as the pair of Laserfican suns. Those suns – one orange, the other a bit smaller and yellow – were never far from the other; each in a waltz, passing in front of the other every day or two.

There were no clouds. Across the sky, the ever-present, thin, glittery, bow-like band stretched overhead from east to west, sparkling in a multitude of colors. As pretty as the *Souls of All People* was, clouds would be more welcoming.

The two boys continued climbing that narrow path along the steep incline of the squat, rugged mountain. Taller peaks were seen further in the range towards the east – only the tallest having

snowy caps. Wild goats often foraged along the trails, thriving on bushes under the scattering of stubby trees clinging to uneven rock facings. Mitokh would be thankful to the gods for one of those goats to take an arrow. However, none were in sight. The way was rugged, though the two boys always enjoyed the climb.

"The cave will be cooler," Mitokh assured himself. Perspiration moistened the back of his off-white tunic made of the same durable fabric as his leggings. "It always is."

That was the reason for the steep trek. The cousins had completed morning chores quickly so they could spend the hottest portion of the day out of the suns. The boys enjoyed the cave with its labyrinth of tunnels and cavernous chambers. One cavern had a small lake fed by icy cold water that emptied out a separate hole in the wall. They knew the stream—not much more than a fast-moving brook—spilled out as a spring near the base of the slopes south of them, feeding into the small local river. That was their second favorite chamber.

The heat was relentless and the pair arrived at the cave well over an hour after leaving the village. It took longer to reach their destination that day, having stopped at the river to take water and wet their clothes by laying in it. The fabric was mostly dry again and the two looked out over the winding valley nestled between lower mountains of the Harzthrem Range. They were not able to see their village from that vantage, though two other hamlets were viewable at a distance. As always, the boys were alone on the mountain. As far as either knew, they were the only ones who went to the cave – possibly the only who knew of its existence.

Three years earlier, Mitokh and Ikrae discovered the cave while hunting a rabbit with the simple bow. The young hunters lost track of the rabbit when it darted behind a large thorny bush. Mitokh told the younger cousin to crawl in and flush it out, while he stood ready with the notched arrow pulled back. Agreeing, Ikrae went down on all fours, crawling behind the broad shrub.

"There's a crack in the cliff back here," the younger announced. "I think the rabbit went in it."

Mitokh groaned, relaxing the pull. "I was hoping for rabbit tonight."

"I'm not going in there. It's deep and dark."

"Is it large enough to crawl through?"

"Both of us could together."

Mitokh looked above the tall bush. It was deceptive, but there

was a long crack reaching up quite a ways, possibly to the top. The crack diverged some three times their height up, as well as broadening behind the sturdy, twisted bush of thorns. Only from the right could one discern it as a crevice, and then only if they were looking closely for it.

Setting aside the bow and waist quiver containing six arrows at the base of the cliff, Mitokh slipped behind the bush, receiving several bleeding scratches for his effort. Layers of healthy branches, dead stocks and bulky roots told the elder there were several plants entwined to form the shrub, much like many around the valley.

The crack was broad behind the bush and Ikrae stood to one side, telling the elder, "It goes a few steps in then drops into a steep hole."

Mitokh passed his cousin.

"What about cougars?" Ikrae asked.

"I thought you were the smart one. The rabbit wouldn't go into a cougar's den."

"True, but I'm still not going after it, even without cougars. It's too dark in there."

Indeed, the crevice devoured light a short ways in. The hole was wide enough for each to crawl through comfortably side-by-side. Loose gravel and dusty soil covered the entry, spilling down the steep slope as they shifted closer. Cool air chimneyed up the crevice. Further in, the ground turned sandy with gravel. It was impossible to see more than a couple arm's length into the hole.

Ikrae followed, with both peering into blackness. The uneven floor sloped down some forty-five degrees. Mitokh moved further in, hoping his eyes would adjust. Dusty sand and gravel shifted. Sound reverberated off deeper walls, giving an impression of a large cavern.

"We'll come back with candles," Mitokh stated, scooting back into the light. "I really wanted that rabbit."

Two days after finding the cave, the boys returned and explored the passages.

Now, three years later, they looked forward to the damp coolness of their two favorite caverns. They reached the misshapen bush and stepped into the crevice, then crawled a ways into the hole. A large assortment of vegetable-fat tallow candles had been collected at a side notch, out of the weather. Most were soft wax in simple, dented copper cups. Setting the bow and quiver with the collection, Mitokh retrieved several candles handing them to

Ikrae, who placed them in the sack he had emptied of dry branches, twigs and grass onto a good-sized pile at another notch. Mitokh took the oil bag from his shoulder, filling two, squat, battered, tear-shaped, ceramic lamps.

With a worn flint and steel, the younger boy started a small fire in the pit they had a few feet inside the entrance. From the flames, they lit lamps. With one each, the pair moved into the broadening chamber where they could stand fully, then to a crevice tunnel further in. Ikrae also carried the sack. They knew the maze well, but always searched as though they were there the first time, often discovering something new. The cool air of the cave chilled them both.

"This feels great," Ikrae commented. His cousin and best friend agreed.

Neither saw signs of cougars or other predators. They never did and had stopped taking the bow with them. They also never found rabbits, figuring that other had scooted out for its own hole in the ground after the boys left. It was not a place for bats either.

It took several minutes to get to their favorite place – a high ceiling cavern crowded with long hanging spires. Below each spire were stubby, bumpy, mounds of stone, appearing as oozing wax frozen in time. Unless they lit at least a dozen candles scattered about, they were unable to see the peaked roof. Setting lamps on a couple stalagmites, they lit and placed five candles throughout the spacious chamber. Flickering light reflected off-beige stone stained in greens, yellows and orange. When it rained heavily, the room glistened with thousands of sparkles, reminding them of the *Souls of All People* high in the sky.

Both Mitokh and Ikrae sang in guttural tones of their native tongue. Their developing voices reverberated off hard stone, mixing in harmonizing qualities, giving their off-key singing an appealing sound. They moved around the cavern trying to create new harmonics.

In time, their voices grew tired and the two blew out candles. Letting them cool before returning them to the bag, they explored elsewhere with oil lamps. Eventually, they arrived at their second favorite place, deep underground.

"Mitokh. Come see this." Ikrae stood at the edge of the small lake, no more than a pond. "I've never seen it this low."

"There hasn't been rain for seventeen days," Mitokh stated, as he approached, looking at the water, its surface a mirror, "and

very little before that for weeks.”

The normal gentle rippling was not present. The fast flow from the far wall was absent and more of the crack in the wall to their right was seen. The water was lower by nearly half their height, leaving a stain along the rough wall, a continuation of the arching ceiling.

Mitokh peered to where the small stream would feed from the chamber towards his right. The ceiling also curved down into that alcove of the lake. Neither mouth of the watery pool could be reached dry – not even with the lower level. The light from their lamps barely reached either wall. In the dimness, the broad, arching, outflow crack reflecting off the mirror surface of the water created a black eye staring at them. It was unnerving to both.

Turning from the disquieting staring eye, the elder examined the far wall where the water usually filled the lake from. The small uneven hole that had always been underwater before, now curved above the surface some height of a forearm. They knew it existed, having swum to it and feeling the bumpy, slippery surface as far as their arm could reach. Now, they could see well into the mouth. Unlike the staring eye, this was a deep arching opening, appearing as a small round tunnel with the reflection on the water’s surface. Both could tell the opening continued beyond the lamp’s illumination. They always thought it was a horizontal crack beyond where they could feel, similar to where the water drained from the chamber.

Mitokh untied sandals, pushing them off, then stepped into the water. It wasn’t cold. They were never able to swim in the icy water for long. Now, it was comfortable.

“What are you doing?” asked the younger.

“I want to get a closer look,” Mitokh replied, wading across some couple dozen steps with the oil lamp. The water was up to his waist at the deepest portion near the mouth of the tunnel.

Ikrae watched from the edge. “Why?”

“We’ve never seen it. It looks like it goes quite a ways.”

“How far?”

Mitokh bent more to see around the bend. Water continued up the tunnel. There was no flow and the boy created the only disturbance on the surface, ripples radiating from him.

“Don’t know.”

Mitokh considered where the stream came out of the mountain. There was still flow coming from the spring, so this lake was not

the only source for what fed into the river. That meant there may be other caves to explore somewhere in the mountain, if they could get to them.

Excited at such possibilities, he crouched lower, allowing water to take most of his weight. The boy waddled into the tunnel curving towards the right, then left. The footing was uneven, though slippery smooth. In places, water was below his shoulders, while his head brushed the ceiling. At others, it touched the bottom of his nose and he had to hold the hand-size lamp high, flames licking stone.

"Come out of there," Ikrae called, having lost sight of his friend.

"It continues a ways further. I think—." Mitokh stumbled in a depression at a shallow portion of the passage. He pushed the lamp to the ceiling, as his head dipped below water. The ceiling was as smooth as the rest, having been worn for eons.

Resetting his footing, he resurfaced, hair streaking his face.

"Are you all right?" Ikrae asked.

Coughing out water, he wiped his face with his free hand. Brushing back hair, Mitokh replied, "I'm fine. I just stumbled. There's a hole."

Barely making out the faint glow off the tunnel's wall, Ikrae told the older, "I can't see you. How far are you?"

"I don't know. There's an opening."

"I can hardly hear you," Ikrae shouted. He couldn't discern the reply. The younger quickly shed his sandals, wading to the mouth. "Mitokh," he called in. There was no response. Louder, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. There's a big cavern back heeee—." Mitokh yelped the last.

"What is it?"

"I'm all right. There's a skeleton back here."

"Skeleton? What kind. What animal could get back there?"

"It's not an animal. It's a man. I think it's a man. There's armor on it."

"Armor?"

"Rusted," Mitokh added. "It's all rusted and rutted." The older boy climbed onto the broad ledge where it was high and dry, and always had been. That cavern was over twenty paces across, a misshapen half circle, with the stream at the straighter side. Where the stream entered was obvious, though still below

the waterline.

Mitokh held the lamp closer to the skeleton. It was crumpled against the far wall of the dry side. Remains of the leather and chain mail armor barely clung to bones. A pitted breastplate laid to one side of the deceased, well beyond use. The hilt of a sword peeked from the remains.

"What's going on?" came Ikrae's distant voice.

"I don't think you want to come back here. Not the way you feel about being underwater."

"I'm just worried. You should come out."

"I'm all right," Mitokh told the distant voice.

The elder reached for the hilt of the sword. It seemed untouched by age. The boy took hold. Pulling gently, bones shifted. He had never held a sword before – not a real one. He had seen them used at tournaments during festivals, though never so close. Both Mitokh and Ikrae had watched tournament fighting, presuming swords were heavy. When Mitokh pulled this one from the crumbling sheath, the blade felt lighter than expected. There was solid weight, but it wasn't heavy. It was a simple straight blade with a fuller, having faint script on the curved guard. Leather on the hilt crumbled away.

"Are you coming out?" Ikrae asked, feeling silly standing in the water at the mouth.

Mitokh examined the blade. It was in excellent condition. Even the crosshatch grip on the hilt where the leather fell from was unmarred. No other markings could be seen in the light of the small flame. A twinge of excitement surged. He called to the outflow tunnel. "I'll be out in a minute. I found a..."

The older boy stopped himself. He didn't wish to tell his cousin. Peasants were not allowed to possess weapons of war.

"You found what?"

Needing something to tell his friend, Mitokh scanned around the rock facing. Flickering flame of the lamp created shadows where the ceiling came down to form the wall. "I was looking to see how he got in here. I thought I found another tunnel, but it was just a shadow."

As much as it bothered him, Mitokh couldn't tell his friend what he held. No matter what trouble it might cause him, he wanted to keep it. If the Baron's men knew he had it, they would take it. He knew Ikrae wouldn't hold such a secret. Not this one. Keeping the cave to themselves was one thing. The Baron

wouldn't have them hung for it. However, to possess a sword would have the boy dangling from a rope. Mitokh didn't wish to hand it over. If Ikrae knew, he would tell his father. His father would then tell his brother, Mitokh's father, who would take the sword to the Magistrate. There would be questions and everyone would know about the cave.

Mitokh wouldn't tell Ikrae. It would be the first time he didn't tell his cousin something. The two had spent most of their free time together since they were six and five. Mitokh didn't like it, but the secret must be kept – at least for now. He laid the sword along the wall, closer to the water, though above the stains. He then waded out to Ikrae.

"A skeleton?" the younger asked in disbelief, as the other came into view. "This isn't some kind of joke or something?"

"Do you want me to bring the skull out?"

Shaking his head, "No. Did you figure out how he got back there?"

Giving the mouth he came out another look, "Through here I guess. He was there a long, long time."

"Did he live around here? Was he a traitor?"

"He wore armor. I guess he could have been a traitor."

"When was the last war?" the younger asked. "Grandfather talked of some he heard about. They were far from here and long ago."

"Our grandfather didn't see any of it." Still looking at the tunnel, Mitokh muttered, "At least none of us have to go fight in a war."

"I suppose it doesn't matter how he got back there. We should get home. I think we've been away too long. Father will be expecting me."

Mitokh turned from the tunnel mouth, reluctantly agreeing, "Yes – we should."

At the entrance of the cave, they stowed the collection, ensuring the fire was out. Retrieving the bow and quiver, they hiked down the sloped path. Some three-quarters of an hour later, the boys walked into the small village they called home – Anskrot. It was deep in the mountains that extended a ways into the Northern Plains. The village was surrounded by farms and fields divided by stone walls and patches of trees. Scattered about the core of the community were dwellings and workshops, mostly single-story structures of stone and heavy timber.

Ikrae's father worked leather for the Baron. The noble, with his Knights, protected the lands from Prilira and raiders who may come over the mountains or around the northern limits of Harzthrem Range. The boy's home, with the attached workshop, was closer to the edge of town on the side they came, a short ways from the small river.

Dropping acquired branches onto a pile along the wall, the younger told his friend, "I hope father doesn't have much for me to do. I'll come over when I'm done."

"I'm going to see Thumela after chores," Mitokh replied.

"If you get caught, her father will never let you two wed. He may kill you."

Mitokh smiled. "We won't be caught. Her father has no wits."

Ikrae shook his head, entering the small workshop. Boelskar—his father, a weathered version of the boy—was preparing hides for the saddler, who lived in the next village. The room had an unpleasant scent of fermented urine from a vat just beyond the back entry under the overhang where a couple hides soaked.

"It's about time you got back," the mature masle complained. "Do we have meat for all that time?"

"Sorry, father. The heat drove prey away. We'll try fishing tomorrow. The water is low, but there has to be fish."

"That would be helpful." Indicating an assortment of knives, scrapers and draw blades near a pedal-grinding wheel, "For now, those need sharpening."

"Yes, sir."

"When you're done with that, there are two other hides that need scraping."

Stifling any tone of complaint, "Yes, sir."

The boy went to work, as Mitokh reached his home at the outskirts of town, away from the river. He kept eyeing the mountain slope the village was shadowed by, thinking about the blade within. The older boy also had evening chores. His father—Hawek, darker from years in the sunlight—tended one of the Baron's cattle herds.

Even though it was hot, Mitokh hastily filled water troughs from the deep well, dumping some over his head, then placed hay into feed catches. Since the drought killed grazing fields, both required more attention.

"Son," the strong, toned man addressed the boy. "I need you

to help with one of the fence lines. A portion was pushed over."

"What about Eskoer?"

"He's rounding up a few cows that escaped through the gap they made."

Following his father, "They're trying to get to greener pastures."

"None of the pastures are green." With a sigh, his dark eyes scanning the blue, cloudless sky, "By Baslaesue, we need rain soon or we'll lose more of this herd." A pair of faint meteors arched across the southern sky.

Keeping Thumela in mind, Mitokh assisted his father with repairs. His thoughts also drifted to the sword. He shoved the memory away with a shake of his head.

"Are you all right, son?" the man asked, placing a heavy rock from one side of the stone fence, his son on the other side, helping rebuild the simple, thick barrier.

Wiping perspiration from his brow, "It's the heat. I'm fine."

The boy was not feeling fine inside. Uncertain of his new finding, he kept wondering about it. He didn't know what to do with the blade or how to wield one. He was certain it was not the same as mock swordplay he did with Ikrae and other boys in the village, swinging whittled sticks at each other, attempting to create welts. Even if he learned to handle a true blade, he could never let anyone know.

Later, when the two suns dropped close to the western horizon and the temperature began cooling, Mitokh went to a patch of woods bordering one of the farms and waited for Thumela, the only daughter of the farming family just beyond the woods. Her only brother died shortly after birth six years earlier, leaving Thumela the focus of her family. Mitokh and she had been meeting amongst tall boulders within the woods for nearly two years, having loved each other a year longer.

The woods were dimmer before Thumela arrived.

"Mother insisted I put more water out for the chickens," the girl told him, her complexion similar to Mitokh, having thick, wavy, black hair braided to her slender waist. Hips were narrow still, and taking after her mother, would remain so. Unlike her mother, Thumela's backside was full and round. Mitokh's attraction to that roundness was only third to her hair and large, dark eyes.

"Water is evaporating fast in this heat," the boy expressed, as he settled Thumela next to him on the blanket he had spread,

a woolen blanket they kept tucked nearby. The femella wore a simple dress laced up the back tight enough to push her modest bosom for a hint of cleavage.

"Even so, troughs were nearly full. They didn't need more water."

Mitokh kissed her lips to bring her mind towards him. She responded in kind, opening her mouth. The two forgot the heat as they enjoyed each other under the shaded trees. Loosening the lacing, the boy slipped fabric off Thumela's shoulders and arms, exposing the pair of modest bulges peaked with even more modest dark circular patches. After much kissing and caressing, Mitokh pulled her hemline up and she accepted his affection.

With passion eased, the couple cuddled, the femella draped on his chest. The pair enjoyed the cool, secluded shade, as the light faded more.

"It's starting to get dark," Thumela observed, sitting up, pulling the top of the dress back in place.

"I suppose," he responded, his tone as reluctant as the one he loved.

Rising and helping the other up, he retied the lacing. After folding and tucking the blanket amongst boulders, Mitokh walked her to the edge of the woods. He watched from the shadows while she skirted along the field to her home before going to his. Back at his own house, the boy ate the simple meal, then went to bed, his mind on the girl across the woods and the prize in the cavern.

* * *

Distant thunder rumbled through mountains. Wolves yapped, signaling to each other, as they hunted Mitokh. He held tightly to the sword, as he evaded the chase for hours. Leather and chain armor with the breastplate became heavy as he pressed on, not daring to rid the protection. Earlier, he had killed one of the wolves, injuring another. Protection of the armor kept him from dying before.

Men on horses—along with wolves—pursued Mitokh, firing arrows. Two struck the breastplate, deflecting away, though one dug low in his right side. Having pulled that arrow, stifling a cry, his evasion continued. Mountains grew steep and rugged and horsemen had to find another way up. Wolves with them were wary about getting close to the armed boy while following up the narrow path.

Scattering of clouds raced under three of the moons shining at various stages, the fullest of them more east. They provided ample light to escape by, if he could do something about his scent.

Mitokh ran on and the narrow trail wound higher along steep slopes. Nearing the crest at a broad ledge, the boy stumbled. He pushed up, standing on uneven ground. Six gray wolves advanced cautiously, spreading to the sides while growling, crowding the boy from the rocky cliff.

Setting for a defense at a bulge in the path, he saw a much larger, white-speckled, black wolf blocking his only escape – a way that skirted that rise, leading to another. Eyes locked and the wolf shifted to keep the boy from the rock facing. Mitokh sensed intellect behind the animal's gaze.

The boy shifted again, holding the sword firm and steady. He turned his back to the near-vertical drop, scanning beyond where predators advanced. The boy was trapped. He raised the hilt higher on his right, angled left. Anchoring his footing, the masle set himself for the inevitable fray. He hoped to push through the line and get along to the wall that continued up to the peak. Wary or not, wolves were ready to lunge from the sides, understanding the man's intent. Mitokh couldn't afford waiting, knowing those on horses would arrive soon from the wider stretch.

Sidestepping towards the larger wolf, a rock slipped out from under the boy's right foot and he stumbled. Before he could recover, the larger wolf leapt. Off-balanced and twisting, Mitokh swung the blade, missing his target. The animal landed close, its jowls having snapped near an arm. Backing from the beast, Mitokh's right heel bumped another rock and he fell back. There was nothing but air. He cleared the ledge, hurtling to his death.

Mitokh bolted up in the small, straw-filled mat held by a simple cot frame. Perspiration soaked his nightshirt. Looking around the tiny room he shared with his older brother, everything seemed normal. Five years Mitokh's senior, Eskoer slept soundly. Their father was unable to arrange marriage for the eldest sibling. The older brother was not liked by most of the villagers and had been intensely jealous of Mitokh's popularity with girls.

Sliding out of bed, Mitokh changed into his day clothes. Passing over sandals, he put on hard leather shoes with ties that wrapped around his ankles twice.

Cool night air came from the small open window. Checking

to ensure his brother slept soundly, the younger climbed out the window onto hard ground. He often sneaked out in the middle of the night, lately to see Thumela. This time though, his destination was further. He needed to move the sword before rains returned, rising the water level. First, he went to the shed and collected two worn burlap bags, stuffing them in another of better condition. Stringing the bow, looping the quiver on his belt, he walked quietly from the village.

On the way, he picked up bits of deadwood and grass, walking faster as he went. His heart pounded in his ear, the dream still fresh in his mind. He kept a wary eye to the sides of the trail, fearing wolves would return.

The clear sky only held two large and four smaller of the eleven moons, the fullest hanging high in the Laserfican sky, providing plenty of light. He looked to the clear expanse and the multitude of bright stars. Ends of the glittery ribbon-like band arched from each horizon into the heavens, presenting the broad nighttime gap high overhead. Those ends pointed towards each other, taking the shape of sharp writing tips of quill pens. Usually, the sight was comforting for the boy and gave means to judge evening hours. His family viewed the gap as souls coming down to the lands for a while to protect them. Their absence in the sky created the gap that raced across the heavens. He knew other people viewed the glittery band as souls awaiting judgment by the gods, even coming down to perform tasks in hopes for a better afterlife. Mitokh hoped those souls were nearby to protect him. If not, the notched arrow in his bow might.

In the shortest time he could recall, Mitokh reached the cave and quickly built a fire. The two boys had been there at night a few times, but never without the other. Mitokh added more wood for comfort. Heat felt good and he wondered how it could be so hot during the day and so much cooler at night.

With the bow slung to his back, he collected all the candles and both lamps from their place. He lit five candles around the inside of the entrance. The boys hadn't taken the bow in after their first few times exploring, but now, its pressure on his shoulder gave him modest comfort. Placing the rest of the candles in the bag, he set forth carrying it and both lamps with only one lit. He didn't detour on his way to the lake chamber, setting out candles along the way. The boy spaced them to ensure there was enough for his destination. Though he knew the tunnel well, he didn't want to

progress blindly.

Once at the pool of water, he lit the seven remaining candles and second lamp, setting them in a cluster on the cave floor. Laying the bow and quiver aside, Mitokh removed all his clothes. Adrenaline pumped hard, fending off any chill, as he stepped into the water. Wading back to the chamber with the skeleton, he took extra care not to fall into any depressions, especially the deeper one he stumbled in before. He again held the lamp near his head, just clearing the ceiling.

On the ledge, the bones and sword were as he remembered. Quickly, he crawled onto the dry stone, clutched the hilt, then returned to the water and waded out. As much as he wished to rush away from the chamber, his deeper self calmed his nerves. There would be no one to help, should he become injured.

He slowed, steadying his breathing with a whisper. "There's no one here."

Since he found it, Mitokh had considered where to hide the weapon that could get him hung. While dressing at the water's edge, he decided it should be under the loose gravelly sand at the entrance of the cave. On the way, Mitokh blew out each candle, carefully placing them in the bag.

At the entrance, he put everything down, adding more wood to the fire. The boy was chilled, still damp from the lake. He sat close to the flames until warm, staring at the weapon of war. With a deep breath, he curbed his excitement. He didn't know what worried him. No one would find the sword there, not even Ikrae. His younger cousin was less adventurous and would have no reason to go digging around the gravelly sand.

Mitokh brought the sword over to the right side of the fire, wrapping it in the two worn bags. With hands, he scooped a long, narrow trench as deep as the hilt was long. Carefully laying the weapon flat into place, the boy covered it, sweeping the area smooth.

Once buried, the boy replaced all the candles and lamps to their places. Extinguishing the fire, he began his trek home, feeling much better. The tension in him eased.

Back at the small dwelling where he was born, Mitokh crawled through the window. His brother had turned while he was away, though still slumbered. He removed the day clothes, slipping back into his nightshirt and crawled into bed. It didn't take long to fall peacefully asleep.

~ ~ ~

The following day, Mitokh told Ikrae about the dream, including the sword. "It was scary. I was soaked when I woke." He allowed his cousin to believe the weapon corroded with the armor.

"Wolves are not that aggressive and wouldn't hunt with men."

"I know. It was a dream. Seeing the skeleton must have caused it."

"Probably. Father has a lot for me to do. I think it will take all day. We won't be able to go fishing."

"Tomorrow then. Maybe it will be cooler."

"Hope so. We need to catch something. This drought is making garden pickings small and we haven't caught any game in days."

It was two days later before they were able to get to the river and do some fishing. They managed to catch three small trout, with two going to the larger family. It wasn't much, though it helped make the meals more pleasant.

Including that night, Mitokh's dreamt of the wolves four more times. Each time he woke, the boy was as soaked as the first. The fourth dream was longer, progressing like the others, though when he plummeted off the cliff, Mitokh landed on a dense, thorny bush, catching his fall. Heavy branches broke, saving him from certain death. Rolling off the bush to the cliffside, he crawled into the crevice. Armor helped lessen scratches, though some dug deep.

Mitokh remained still for some time, glad none of his bones had broken like the bush's branches. The arrow wound and scratches reminded him he still lived. The boy was able to hear horses clopping, then voices far above. The conversation traveled down the crack of the cliff.

One told another, "Your Grace. He fell over the edge. He must be dead."

"We shall be certain of that," replied another.

"It will take too long to get down the wider path. The suns will be up soon."

"Take three men with horses down the back way. The rest of us will go along the trail here. Once I see the body, we'll set camp."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Mitokh felt an urgency to hide. He found a hole and crawled in. Feeling along the floor and walls, he worked himself further into

the tunnels, unable to see anything. Eventually, he felt soothing water within a deep cavern. Exhausted, the boy drank, then fell asleep.

He was unsure how long he slept before waking to the sound of voices reverberating off hard stone. Fluttering yellow-orange glow began brightening the far tunnel. Soldiers were advancing into the chamber he was in. Mitokh stood to make a last stand, determined to kill as many as he could. Soldiers entered, spreading out, two archers on either side of the line.

"Kloersoe. You don't have to die here," one of the men told Mitokh, his voice recognized as *His Grace*. The position of torches prevented faces from being recognized, though it was clear he was heavier than those with him. "Tell us about the others and I shall let you live."

"I will not betray their confidence or my oath," Kloersoe declared.

"Your oath means nothing. Tell us. My patience has run thin a long time ago."

"Then come and kill me."

Men to the sides aimed arrows at the boy. Kloersoe jumped into the water, scrambling back. Arrows passed where he was. He pushed up against the back wall, feeling a hole in it. Bending, the boy retreated into the opening.

More arrows were fired. One buried in his left shoulder beyond the breastplate. They continued firing while he moved back. Other arrows cut into water or bounced off stone, or his breastplate. After the second bend in the passage, Kloersoe took hold of the arrow in him, pulling it out, letting it go. The man's scream amplified out the tunnel, echoing throughout the chamber. The arrow slowly floated from the tunnel. He backed further, finding that the tunnel fed into an open area.

"Go in and bring him to me," *His Grace* demanded. He was a stocky masle, a bit taller than the others, having dark hair with lighter complexion.

Short swords in hand, soldiers waded with their unit leader into the water. At the wall, one lowered enough to cautiously progress into the tunnel with another following.

Standing near the tunnel opening, eyes dilated, Kloersoe could see faint backlit shadows of the assailants advancing into view. As the first intruding soldier got to the threshold, Kloersoe thrust the

blade into his throat, driving it down into the chest. The screech from the dying man was horrific in the darkened stone chamber.

The other man retreated, pulling his comrade with him.

"He's got a good position. He can kill us before we can get beyond the threshold."

The lead commented, "He's blind back there. There's no light."

"He has what light we have. It appears to be enough. He doesn't need much."

"We can't see down here without it."

Standing a few paces back, the water to his waist, *His Grace* told the soldiers, "Go back there and root him out – all of you." Indicating the corpse, "Push him in front of you as a shield. I want Kloersoe dead. We'll find the others without him."

Nine swordsmen ventured into the watery tunnel, with the four archers remaining back on the dry edge. The first two who reached the inner chamber didn't live long, their corpse-shield doing nothing to save their lives. The third lived two strokes longer, gaining a strike at Kloersoe before he too met his demise.

The leader saw blood flowing from the tunnel. He also observed that the water was a tad higher. There was more screeching of the dying and other bodies floated out.

"The rest of you," *His Grace* addressed the men, noticing the same thing. "Come on out. There's no use." Only three of the nine who went in, came out alive. Even the living bled from wounds. As the living pulled dead onto the bank of the pond, *His Grace* called into the opening, "Kloersoe. The drought is over. You should come out." There was no response. "You're going to come out or drown."

Still, there was no response.

"What of his sword?" a soldier queried.

His Grace told him, "It can stay back there. Once he's dead. This will be done. The others will go into hiding or we'll end their lives as we find them. Back there, that sword will do no harm." Hollering into the tunnel, the masle goaded, "You hear that? This is over for you. Your death will end your dream of conquest."

There was still no response. The one standing in the pond could hear breathing and faint movement, telling him Kloersoe still lived. The men stepped from the water, staring at the opening. Hour by hour, they watched. Two archers went out for wood, setting a fire at the edge of the small pond, waiting.

Kloersoe ventured carefully along the tunnel. Closer to the outer mouth, he peered at those who had him trapped. Water continued to rise, forcing him back into the inner chamber. He saw that the chasers were not going to let him escape, nor were they going to lose more men to pry him out. While growing weaker, he considered his position, concluding that in a couple days, he might be able to chance swimming out. Even without light, he knew the water would be high by then and flowing faster. He would not be able to retreat into the sanctuary he found, once he left. Either way, he would not live.

"Better to die fighting than starve in here," Kloersoe muttered to the hard stone. "First, I need rest."

The man crawled higher on the hard, steep slope, finding the wall. Leaning against dry stone, he caught his breath. Unfastening the breastplate, he pushed it to his left. Each breath became shallower as he peered at where the opening for his escape was supposed to be. He couldn't see it. Everything was black. A few minutes passed and the man dozed, never to wake.

* * *

Chapter 2

Mitokh woke again with a chill. It was the seventh time he died in that cavern. The boy didn't understand the meaning of the dreams, nor why they were unchanging concerning a man he didn't know. He couldn't tell Ikrae he was still having nightmares about the soldier who died so many years before they were born, knowing his friend would think he was overreacting to the skeleton.

Bones of the deceased didn't bother Mitokh. The dreams did. He tried remembering if he ever met or heard of a man named Kloersoe. Mitokh couldn't recall ever encountering the name before and was not sure if the name was real or created for his nightmares. Anyone he could ask would wonder why he wanted to know, especially his grandfather, who was living at the time and may have heard something.

The boy sat in his bed, leaning against the timber-frame, stone wall, wondering why the dreams kept repeating. Each time he had it, the imagery became clearer and he recalled more. As a cool breeze blew into the room through the open window, Mitokh thought of specifics. The late evening within the nightmare was humid and he was able to count eighteen lightning strikes throughout the entire dream. He was certain there were many more.

When he was being chased, the sky was clear, except towards the west. When he fell, the sky was mostly overcast with thick thunderclouds. Only one eastern moon could be seen by the time he fell and it was fading rapidly. Rain started shortly before he plummeted on the thorny bush. Men chasing him did so without torches or lanterns until they were in the caverns. Wolves that hunted with the men were not in the cave and there were more men by the time they entered the cave – sixteen that were seen inside. The breastplate he wore was good quality and made of steel. The man addressed as *Your Grace* had a low, tonal voice that sounded foreign.

As the boy went over details from the dream, there was a flutter of bright, bluish light. A few seconds later, a long crackle of

thunder rumbled by, shaking his nerves. Carefully watching the window, unsure what he saw and heard was not from the dreams, he waited. There was another purplish-blue flash and a crack of thunder.

The younger brother sprung from the bed and dressed hastily, telling the one who slept nearby, "Eskoer. Get up. It's starting to rain."

"What?"

"Rain. I saw lightning. Listen. It's starting to rain."

When the brothers got outside, their father and mother were already there. Rain was becoming harder by the minute. A damp dusty scent filled the air.

Hawek, their father, was smiling, letting cool droplets splash his face. Like most Larivians, Hawek lacked facial hair and only the blacksmith was stronger in their village. Eskoer was becoming tall, like him. His second son took more after the mother's family, lagging in stature, though more agile.

Lightning streaked again across the sky.

"It's going to be a hard rain," Eskoer stated.

"It would seem so," Hawek agreed. "I hope not too hard. As dry as things are, fields will wash out."

Another bolt flashed, striking the ground some two miles distance, highlighting everything. Mitokh saw a strange man standing next to him. With a screech of fear, he jumped back, stepping away. The man wasn't there and the rumble rolled by.

"What's wrong?" the father asked, seeing his middle son's face turn pale.

"I saw.... There was...."

Eskoer roared with laughter.

"Lightning can be scary," Foereenya told the boys, her tone and eyes scolding the elder son. Mitokh's mother was slender, having lighter-brown complexion, her black hair loose down the back. All of them wore simple clothing, hers being a calf-length shift.

"It's not the lightning. I saw...." Mitokh looked around. "Nothing. It was a trick of my eyes."

"You just woke up," Hawek commented. "Things like that happen."

"It must be," Mitokh panted, as his younger brother and sister joined them.

The eldest sibling snickered and joked at each flash. Mitokh

ignored the harassment, thinking of what he saw, trying to see the man. He couldn't see him – nor recall what he looked like. They were all thoroughly drenched before returning inside.

Once dried, the family settled back to bed, though Mitokh's mind was far from settled.

* * *

Mitokh walked up to the small shrine with his family. The round gazebo had nine pillars of cream-colored stone atop three deep steps leading to an altar. Red ceramic tiles covered the roof. The shrine sat at the crest of a tall hill some mile from the road, a dedication to Baslaesue, the father of lesser deities. Most local villages and hamlets paid homage there.

Each nine days, Hawek drove his family by cart to pay tribute and thank the superior deity for their lives and good fortune. When Ikrae was younger, their families would go together, but after Boelskar's wife died in childbirth with their fetus daughter, Boelskar tended to go on other days – if he went at all. For the last few years, he went less frequently. Since his father didn't go as often, Ikrae often went with Mitokh.

Not this time. Mitokh didn't ask Ikrae to come along. Nightmares were distracting the older cousin and he didn't wish questions about his mood.

Mitokh slowly stepped up to the simple stone altar. On it sat a chiseled figure some two-thirds the boy's stature, portraying a kneeling, bearded man having feathered wings folded on his back. Sculpted hands rested on legs with palms up in a welcoming gesture. All stones of the shrine were weathered and pitted, and no one knew how long it had been there. On either side of the altar were tall, heavy, bronze oil lamps for people to light candles from. The lamps were filled in the morning and evening by local priests who came for their own prayers from the monastery on the next hill – a three-tier stone structure of the same stone as the shrine.

The boy's family was the only one present. Hawek set his candle on the flat area of the altar in front of the god's idol. Kneeling, the father projected his thoughts to the deity the sculpture represented. *We all thank you for the rains. I hope you see fit to bestow good health on my calves. With what the Baron has taken and the death of two cows from the drought; any loss of calves would displease my liege.* He went on in silent thought.

His wife knelt before her own candle at her husband's right. She gave similar thanks, then added as she always did of late, *I would hope good wives could be arranged for my older two boys, especially Eskoer.*

Before Mitokh lit the candle in his hand, he looked towards the mountain where the cave was. That crest was several miles away. Mitokh had not asked Baslaesue for anything since he was five. He saw no point. Nothing he had ever asked for came to be. Childhood frustrations continued a few years until he realized it was childish selfishness. When that occurred, he started praying like his father, thanking the supreme deity for what was provided, but not making requests. Now the boy had a request and Baslaesue may be the only one who could help.

Mitokh lit the candle, setting it on the altar to Eskoer's left, who had knelt next to his father. The youngest siblings were on their mother's side. Lowering to both knees, setting hands on the edge of the altar, Mitokh looked to the statue. *Baslaesue*, addressing the one it represented. *I beg you to rid me of these dreams. I don't understand why I have them and I don't know what to do to make them stop. I'm a simple son of a herdsman. If I was wrong for wanting to keep the sword, I'm sorry. If I'm to give the sword to the Magistrate, I shall."*

A sudden chill ran through the boy and the candle fluttered out. He shivered, looking around. No one noticed and his candle was the only one that became extinguished.

The boy rose, relit the candle and knelt again. A strong feeling pressed him, as he asked the deity, *Then, am I to keep the sword?* Nothing happened. Lowering his head. *I abide by the great will of Baslaesue, but I still beg of you to remove these nightmares.*

A few minutes later, the father rose, sniffing the air. Looking uneasily towards clouds clearing western mountains, he advised his family, "If everyone has finished giving thanks, we should be going."

Looking suspiciously at the candle, Mitokh blew out the wick and picked it up. Stepping off the shrine to the ground, *Do I believe what I felt?*

Mitokh was lost in thought as he strolled the mile to the cart, not noticing the breeze that started cooling them all. His eyes were barely aware of the trail in front of him, still uncertain what he felt at the shrine.

Arriving at the cart, untying reins of the draft horses from

a sturdy, straggly tree, his father checked the southwest sky, declaring, "We better hurry. It looks like another storm's coming fast."

"We needed rain for so long," Eskoer commented, as he climbed on the back of the small cart, nudging the youngest two further towards the front, "and now it doesn't want to stop."

On the way home, Hawek drove the horses with more urgency. Clouds sped across the sky faster and thicker. There was a rumble. The distant flash was unnoticed in the bright sunlight. Mitokh looked around, edgier than he knew he should be.

Eskoer noticed and chuckled. "See something?"

Mitokh gave a sour look, then ignored the mocking, startled looks his grinning brother made. His other siblings snickered at each motion and snide remark from the eldest.

The sky darkened, as the stormfront blocked the suns. Another bolt crackled nearby, this one noticed by each of them. They had four miles to travel before reaching their village when the sprinkling began. More flashes rippled, followed by intense crackling of thunder that rumbled across the landscape. The eldest sibling smirked at Mitokh each time.

"They're getting closer," Foereenya commented from the left of her husband.

"I can't push these horses any harder," Hawek explained. "I didn't expect the weather to change today, let alone this fast."

They rode on. The sky darkened more while the storm swept in, then the deluge began. Horses grew skittish and lurched at every flash and rumble.

"Eskoer, Mitokh," their father addressed. "Guide the horses."

"That will take longer," Foereenya complained, flinching at another, closer bolt.

Hawek reined the animals slower, allowing his boys to dismount. "These horses will kill themselves, if they're not controlled."

Both boys hopped from the back, trotting to the front. Mitokh took hold of the bridle of the left animal while his brother did the same for the other. Horses calmed as they walked. There were more strikes, though steady hands kept animals calmer. Everything became soaked. Rivulets flowed along the muddy road.

The village drew in sight, then there was another flash. Mitokh saw the same man from the other storm walking with him. The horse he held reared, bumping Mitokh to the side. The boy

stumbled, falling to the ground, striking the back of his head on a boulder near a tree. He heard his mother scream, as his vision grew heavy, then everything faded.

Foereenya leapt from the cart, crouching at her son lying in the mud while her husband and eldest son pulled animals to a stop. Hard rain splashed Mitokh's face and clothes. The boy stirred when she took hold.

"Thank the gods," the femella whispered.

Hearing the voice, Mitokh forced his eyes open and looked to his mother. She was blurry.

"I'm all right," he stated, willing himself up.

"Are you sure?" the woman asked, assisting her son to his feet. "That was a hard fall."

"I'm all right, mother," Mitokh told her, then lost strength in his legs, crumpling to the ground. Foereenya couldn't hold the sudden drop.

Hawek tossed reins to Eskoer, sliding off the cart to the road.

Seeing blood mix with mud under his head, the man gently lifted his son, carrying him to the back of the cart, laying him on the coarse boarding. He then removed his own tunic, covering what he could of the boy with it. Examining the head showed a two-inch long, deep gash behind the right ear.

"He breathes," Hawek announced. "He's a strong boy." To his eldest son, "Eskoer. Give me your top."

Still steadying horses, the older boy removed his tunic, tossing it to the youngest sibling, who passed it to their father. Flashes and rumblings continued spooking the animals. Without tearing the top, Hawek wrapped the skull. He assisted his wife up onto the cart to hold Mitokh. Together Hawek and Eskoer walked the horses to the village and their home.

* * *

"Kloersoe," a shifty-looking man addressed. Mitokh knew the man that stood with two others was a gypsy traveler. "You must go. We'll draw them away. That should give you time to escape."

Kloersoe was about to object, but knew the masle was correct. Mounting his horse, he rode hard, only slowing or stopping to give the steed rest and for both to take water.

Two days later, Kloersoe was ambushed while he and his horse drank at a mountain river. Though still turbulent in the rugged

terrain, the water was half what it would have been in other years. An arrow dug low into his right side, as two others deflected off the breastplate. He fell into the cold rushing water, tumbling along rocks, being pulled by swift currents. The arrow in him whipped about until the shaft snapped away when Kloersoe slammed fully against a boulder.

Sputtering water, stifling agonizing cries, the current carried him along. Struggling to stay at the surface, the chain mail and breastplate kept pulling him under. He gasped breaths as boulders bounced him up, coughing out water for a breath before being pulled under again.

Eventually, the man grasped a sturdy root. Clutching hard, the man hoisted himself to air, finding himself on the opposite bank. Near exhaustion and in pain, he hauled himself from the water, collapsing next to the thick tree that was the savior of his life. Not moving, the man panted, thankful the river's rush masked his breathing.

Once his breaths steadied, Kloersoe cautiously looked around with stifled groans. Foliage was thick with no trails. The head of the arrow was still in him. Building his determination, the man took hold of what remained of the shaft and pulled. Exhausted, the agony of his efforts was too much and he passed out.

Kloersoe didn't know how much time elapsed when he woke. It was still night and the canopy blocked the sky, though some moonlight filtered through. He still laid by the mountain river; chilled, in pain, bruised, battered, damp and fatigued. He felt the urgency to move. His horse was upstream somewhere on the other side with his meager supplies. Having nothing to wrap the wound, he considered his options. The area was rugged, though it wouldn't take much for the hunters to trace the river and locate the spot he occupied.

With his good hand pressing against rough bark of the trunk, Kloersoe pushed through bushes. He climbed over rocks and pulled around other trees. The going was hard, though in time he located a small trail. Hours later, he heard the wolves; climbed a goat trail; fell onto the thorny bush; and crawled into the cave to die.

~ ~ ~

Mitokh opened his eyes, seeing Thumela looking at him. A smile broadened across her oval face.

"Marry me," Mitokh told the concerned girl with a weak

voice.

The thin femella kissed his lips. "I would love to, though you have to arrange that with my father and our Baron."

"We're not subject to any Baron."

Perplexed, Thumela reminded him, "Of course we are. You have to petition him for marriage."

"Marriage?" the boy asked, his own sense of self returning. "You know how my father feels about yours." The memory from the strange man floated within him.

"Your mother likes my father enough. Have her convince your father. You may not have long. I think my father has a suitor asking for me."

"Why are we talking about this now – again?"

"You brought it up."

"I did?"

"You asked me to marry you again, just as you woke. That fall must have affected your mind."

He nodded. His head throbbed, recalling the statement. "It did." Mitokh started to sit up, swinging his feet out, then collapsed back on the bed mat, his legs dangling off the edge. The boy groaned softly, his arms laying limp.

Lifting his legs on the bed, the femella told the boy, "I'll get your mother. Ikrae will be glad to see you live."

"Live?"

"It's been two days since you hit your head. He was worried sick for you."

"Two days?" The realization and shock strained his mind and the dull pain at the back of his scalp flared to match the throbbing in the rest of his head. "Ohhh," a pitiful moan escaped.

Thumela departed. A short time later, Foereenya rushed to the bed, clutching her son. She kissed his cheeks repeatedly, tears wetting his face, as she resettled him properly. "You gave me such a fright. You slept so long, I feared you wouldn't wake."

Mitokh said nothing. The last time the boy said he was *all right* was two days earlier and that was his last memory, except for the dreams Baslaesue seemed fit to let continue. He weakly hugged his mother, kissing her damp cheek.

The rest of the day was spent resting with many of the villagers checking on him. Mitokh ate and took water. Ikrae came to visit as soon as he heard his cousin had awakened.

"You had a lot of people worried," the younger cousin stated.

"I knew you were too stubborn to die."

"That's not what I was told."

Knowing who would imply such a thing, Ikrae told his cousin, "Thumela doesn't know my thoughts. You don't look well."

"I don't feel well, but I'll be fine tomorrow."

"You better. The festival is just five days away."

"That's right. I forgot about it."

Shaking his head, Ikrae stated, "You're losing your mind, if you forgot about festival."

"I may be losing my mind."

* * * *

The *Festival of Adkoera* was a mid-summer celebration and market day was shifted from normal to coincide. Market day, held every nine days by baronial decree, was the only time people could sell or trade without a medallion from their liege.

Festival was the best time for trade and a time when families would bring their finest goods made throughout the year. Fees were collected by clerks of the Magistrate or Sheriff, allowing them to set up a stall, which was often just a blanket laid out on the ground to sell wares. Most of the time, several families would sell their things together, so only one fee would have to be paid. This also allowed everyone more time to enjoy the festival, with only one or two overseeing the stall at any time.

The day of this festival was warm with a scattering of clouds. Intense waves of thunderstorms had let up. Hawek and Boelskar joined three other families into a stall. Mitokh and Ikrae were given a few bronze coins to spend and they raced off. There was much to see. The town that held the local celebration stretched out over several hills, drawing people from all the surrounding communities. Even traveling gypsies were there, arriving with their elaborate, bulky, fully enclosed wagons as colorful as their attire. Each wagon seemed to be a wooden home on wheels.

It was the gypsies that Mitokh wished to see most. Ikrae and he always enjoyed the exotic people and they had the best jugglers, acrobats and storytellers. Above all, there were women dancers with loose gowns, scarves and jewelry, showing more of their ample curves than other women.

Mitokh had not thought much of the lifestyle and attire of these strange people before. Now though, he gave them more contemplation. Even the men wore necklaces, rings, bracelets and

occasionally earrings. Vibrant scarfs were used as belts, or tied around heads and arms, or a wrist. Crossover shirts, vests and loose leggings with elaborate patterns dizzied the mind. Any sort of coin purses, daggers or small items could be hidden and no one would be the wiser.

Dancers performed at the base of a sloped mound. Most of the boys went to gaze at gypsy women, but men had the closest view, dropping coins into hats carried by young children of the travelers.

Between shows, other entertainment continued and local men would talk closely with the strange women from the traveling *Company*. Some men would be drawn into wagons by women. Mitokh and Ikrae were quite aware of what went on inside and thought about what it would be like to entertain with such experienced women.

Mitokh watched performers, but was observing the rest of the gypsies. He looked for the man in his dreams, the one who told him to run.

Told Kloersoe to run, Mitokh corrected his memory.

"What are you looking for?" Ikrae asked.

"Huh?"

"We can't afford the women. Are you thinking of going with them?"

"I don't want to go."

"Some people do. I thought about it a few times."

"You've said that before. It's all just talk."

"What's wrong? Ever since you found that skeleton, you've not been yourself."

"I'm all right. I'm myself," Mitokh expressed with a forced grin, trying to act as he always did. "My head still hurts. That's all."

Ikrae wasn't accepting the facade. "You're definitely not yourself. It seems to be getting worse, especially after your fall."

"Let's go."

"The dance isn't done."

A few seconds later, the music concluded with a flair. Dancers twirled in a flurry with the conclusion, then dropped low in an exaggerated curtsy, bent to present long cleavage and bulging mounds under friendly smiling faces.

"It's over now," Mitokh declared. "Let's go."

"What's the rush?" the youngest queried, still ogling the

femellas, as they worked the audience, allowing men to push coins down the front of their bodices, even groping backsides.

Mitokh didn't know what rushed him. Something was making him uncomfortable and he wanted to be any place beyond there. The feeling came to him suddenly.

The boy looked around. His eyes gravitated to an old gypsy woman wearing three strands of beaded necklaces, silvery bracelets and layers of rusty-red, patterned skirts, bodice and a long vest. Silvery hair hung past hips interlaced with ribbons. She was talking to a younger man of the Company as elaborately attired as she was, lacking dangling earrings. Both scanned the audience, scrutinizing elderly men.

There was a commotion towards Mitokh's right and everyone looked to see.

The local Bishop from the Temple of Shemlifae walked nearby under a white canopy held by four husky pole-bearers. Three priests and two priestesses strolled with him. The clergy wore long white robes trimmed intricately in gold threading. Though dedicated to a lesser goddess of Shemlifae—granddaughter of Baslaesue and daughter of Varue, a deity who helps her mother shepherd the moons—the Temple held great sway and reverence in Larivia.

Instinctively, Mitokh sidestepped behind a large man, so not to be seen by the Bishop and his entourage. The old gypsy woman caught sight of the motion, giving the boy a perplexed examination.

"Let's go," Mitokh told his cousin. "I'm hungry. After we get something to eat, we'll go watch tournament fighting."

Ikrae looked suspicious, though food and drink sounded good. Mitokh quickly led the way, weaving through the crowd with the old woman losing track of them. Mitokh spent the rest of the day looking over his shoulder. Ikrae started getting nervous in response.

On the way back to their village, riding in the bed of the cart, Ikrae commented softly to his friend, "I don't know what you were expecting, but you didn't seem to be having fun."

"It's nothing. The gypsies bothered me for some reason."

Foereenya overheard, looking back to the pair. "Gypsies? What did those thieves do?"

"Nothing, mother," Mitokh replied.

Foereenya's brows queried Ikrae, who told her, "They seemed

fine to me, ma'am"

"You should avoid them. They're thieves and rogues, and not to be trusted. I know they're entertaining, but remember what I told you both about them. Watch the jugglers at a distance. Don't let any of them near you."

"Yes, ma'am," both boys responded together. "None were close to us."

Foereenya turned to her husband. "I saw Hamella."

"How did their farm fare?"

"Not well."

"With it dry for so long, then the storms, many crops were washed out."

"It's been hard on us all."

"Some worse than others. That family was having a hard time before the drought. Since Verdoe became a Paladin for the Temple, their family has been shorthanded – and now crops are crippled."

"We saw the Bishop," Ikrae stated. Mitokh's skin pebbled, as a chill rippled through him.

"I saw him, as well," Foereenya replied. More to the husband, she added, "He was here to perform the initiation ceremony for the sisterhood. That's why I saw Hamella. She was with a couple of the clergy. Huin is to be a priestess."

Hawek looked to his wife with raised brows. "Isn't she too young to be initiated? As far as I recall, I never heard of an initiate younger than eight. How old is Huin?"

"This is her sixth summer. She was born in the fall."

"Why select one so young? She's barely weaned from the breast."

"The ways of the Temple are their own. We were able to talk for a time as they passed through the bazaar."

"Hamella must be proud. Two of her children are now in service to Shemlifae."

"She is – mostly. There's a lot to do on the farm and now two of her four children are not there to help."

"Even so, the Baron will treat them better. He will not wish the Temple's displeasure. He may even release Fueblij and the rest of his family from serfdom and the land."

"Where would they go? What would they do? Baron Goershod has been good to them – and to us."

"The Baron's father wasn't," Hawek stated, both recalling when he petitioned the former Baron for marriage.

The couple remembered Baron Rilliok, Goershod's father. When marriage was arranged, Rilliok came to the village, taking lord's rights with Foereenya. He continued until she was with child. Shortly after the birth of the girl, the Baron returned and took the infant. They never saw her after that. Not being his, Hawek was fine with her departure.

"Baron Goershod is not like his father," Foereenya admitted.

"I know little of Goershod's sons, but we know how their grandfather was. It would be wise to accept free status, if offered before any of his sons become Baron and take after Rilliok."

"Freemen are not guaranteed a good life. They have no protections and many end up in prison for unpaid debts. If they can't get a medallion and open their own shop, they have to hope for employment. Will their employer be better than nobles? What's the difference? Better the security and protection of nobility."

Hawek wrinkled his brow. "Even considering what the Baron did to you?"

"Even then. It wasn't as bad as you think. It's his right. Many freewomen end up servicing those who would pay them. We do well here."

Mitokh and Ikrae knew what was discussed. That subject came up occasionally, though was cut short when it drifted too far for younger ears. Lately, Mitokh thought about it often. Baron Goershod may take lord's rights with Thumela, even to bear a child with her. The boy didn't know what would happen if the Baron discovered she wasn't virgin. Such a discovery would put the parentage of any births between them in question.

Hawek had other thoughts on his mind. He considered his wife's words. Over the years, he assumed she felt the same about what happened as he did. He never carried the discussion far, not wishing to upset his wife. Now he wondered if he should have talked with her earlier about her feelings.

What was done was done, the father thought, again pushing the matter from his mind, riding on in silence.

As they rode closer to Anskrot and the mountain where the skeleton laid entombed, Mitokh kept wondering about the gypsies and his growing fascination with them. He never thought much about them before, but now he felt a connection. The Bishop on the other hand produced fear. It was never that way before. The boy was raised to trust and revere the clergy. In contrast, gypsies were considered rogues, thieves and prostitutes. Now an inner,

inverted struggle took shape, distorting what he had believed to be true all his young life.

As the boy thought of gypsies, the gypsies thought of the boy.

"Are you sure?" the gypsy leader asked the old woman after she returned to the collection of wagons.

"I'm certain of it," Jotta stated, disappointed at not finding the boy around the festivities. In her sixties, the woman was the eldest among them and had practiced mystical arts since she was a young girl. "I felt Kloersoe. The boy had something to do with him."

"It's been so long," the leader told her. "If he was still alive, why not contact any of us before?"

Talnoer was a stocky man with dark eyes, a strong round chin and braided black hair highlighted with beads. He had lighter complexion than most, being only part Larivian.

"I don't know, but it was Kloersoe. I felt him. He was close and the boy knows where."

"Why not make contact?" he asked again.

"Possibly because of the Bishop."

"His Grace could be a problem. Do you know where the boy went?"

"I lost him. He's local – somewhere beyond this town."

"We can't go searching every hamlet and village. The Bishop won't tolerate it. The truce is uneasy as it is."

"I know. We can only hope when Kloersoe is ready, he'll contact us."

Talnoer looked around as packing continued. "He's close to your age. What could he offer after so much time?"

"He has knowledge. We need to get that before he dies."

"All right. I'll leave a couple people to search for the boy."

"That should do. I'll stay, as well," Jotta told the man. "Lumow and I both saw the boy."

"It will be too dangerous for you. Pintaen has the gift and is able to protect herself. She'll go with Lumow. You will come with us."

* * * *

Chapter 3

The boys were back at the cave. Four days had passed since the festival and more rain saturated the soil, filling streams and rivers. Fields and gardens grew greener, as did the landscape. The cavern lake was back to its normal level and Mitokh stared at the waterline along the far side, well above the tunnel.

"You can't go back there now," Ikrae remarked.

"I see that. I was wondering who the man was. Why did he die back there?"

"I don't know. It seems odd."

"Why didn't he go into the village for help?"

Ikrae shrugged. "If he was a traitor or enemy, he couldn't do that. Maybe he's from Atara or Prilira? I suppose we'll never know. Let's go sing."

Forcing his gaze from the wall, "Yes, let's do that."

"You're worrying me," Ikrae expressed again while walking from the lake.

"I'm all right. I have to petition the Baron for marriage. I'm worried he won't allow it."

"You should be more worried if he, or Thumela's father, discovers she's not a virgin."

"I'm worried about that, too. Maybe they won't. How often have you heard of Baron Goershod taking lord's rights?"

"Not as often as his father, though he has."

"I'll talk to my father about making arrangements."

"He doesn't like her or her family."

"I'll talk to my mother, then my father. My mother likes her."

"She wants you and your brother to be married. I think she likes all the girls"

"It would cost a lot to get Eskoer a wife. No one likes him and we don't have what it would take. My parents would never be able to afford a wife for him. The father of any eligible girl would ask too much. With Thumela's help, an arrangement could be made."

Ikrae didn't respond. The younger knew whatever plagued his friend went deeper than the girl. He observed his friend while

strolling through winding passages, wondering what occupied Mitokh's thoughts. His friend was distant.

Arriving at the *singing cavern*, Ikrae finally commented, "I hope you two can marry. Maybe it will straighten your mind."

"There's nothing wrong with my mind."

"Yes, there is. You're like a different person. You don't even talk the same."

"I don't? I don't feel different." Mitokh looked around the chamber while setting candles. It was a way to avoid his friend's eyes.

"You're different," Ikrae declared. "That's what's bothering me."

"Don't worry. I'm all right. I just have a few things on my mind."

"Something you haven't told me about?"

"No," Mitokh lied. "You know everything."

The older boy started a tone to shift away from the subject and Ikrae added a higher key. They sang for some time, then the two ran through the cave, chasing each other. Mitokh did everything they used to do, trying to appear normal. Ikrae was suspicious of that, though went along with it.

When they were ready to leave, Mitokh put out the fire at the cave's mouth while Ikrae stowed candles. After the older extinguished embers, he moved enough of the gravelly sand to uncover the fabric containing the sword, making sure it was still there and not some fabrication of his dreams. He stroked the coarse material to feel the hilt under it, then reburied it before Ikrae saw what he was doing, ensuring all was in order.

With a deep breath, Mitokh crawled around the bush. His cousin followed, then they descended the slope along the goat trail, heading to their homes.

Back at the village, Mitokh's mother had been crying. When she saw her son, Foereenya pulled him into her arms, telling the boy, "Your grandfather died."

"Grandfather Totek is dead?" Mitokh asked, his voice cracking.

Tears welled in her eyes more. "It was sudden. He collapsed and his heart gave out."

Though not of the same blood, she loved her husband's father as she did her own. Her own father died years earlier and Totek took up the role.

"We'll be burying him tomorrow," Foereenya told him. "Your father and brother are looking for the grave sapling."

Mitokh could only nod and hold his mother. The rest of the day was somber. Everyone went about their work in silence. Close to sunset, Mitokh, Ikrae and their families gathered at the home where their grandfather had lived alone. Totek's wife passed away before Mitokh was born. The grandfather's body laid on the bed as though asleep. Mitokh and Ikrae touched his skin to believe he was truly gone.

As Hawek and Boelskar wrapped the body in the shroud, Mitokh asked the stockier man, "Father. Could Ikrae and I help carry the litter?"

"You're getting old enough. Do as you're told."

"We will."

The men finished wrapping the body while Mitokh, Ikrae and the rest of the family and friends watched – most of the femellas in tears. Once finished, the grieving brothers backed a couple steps. Hawek—being the elder son of Totek—began the mourning rite of passage, a simple tribute spoken over the body to honor the commitment of the man to them, as well as family obligations toward the community. Others joined around the room.

"We're brought into life by our parents.

"We give reason for them to be proud.

"We honor our elders, as they teach us how to live.

"We listen to their wisdom with devotion while they're still with us.

"We live under the light of the heavens where their spirits now dwell.

"We labor to honor our parents under their heavenly light.

"We labor to honor the gods, as our parents had done before us.

"We live under the protection of our liege, as our parents had.

"We honor lords and ladies of the lands, as they protect us all.

"We honor our King, as those who came before us had.

"We live to honor the lives who come before us.

"We live to honor their passing."

Everyone in the room then stated together, "*We honor the passing of Totek and hold his memory close.*"

They all told stories about the life of the shrouded man and how he honored them all, and how much he would be missed. As the night progressed, they drank sweet beer and peasant wine, eating what was brought. A few at a time trickled to their own homes.

Before leaving, Mitokh looked at the covered form. He had wanted to ask his grandfather about the drought that occurred over thirty years earlier. He didn't wish to say why he wanted to know and his grandfather had ways of pulling hidden truths from people.

I suppose it's not important, the boy thought. *Goodbye, Grandfather.* Stepping away, he left with his parents and siblings towards their home. It took a while for the parents to settle their family to bed.

That night, Mitokh dreamt of a thick forest – denser, darker and greener than any patch of woods he had ever seen. Since he had never been beyond the winding mountain valley where he was born; broad trees, tall ferns and undergrowth appeared foreign to him. For a long time, he wandered narrow trails meandering through the ancient forest. Many of the trees were so broad, a couple dozen men would have trouble wrapping themselves around them, hand in hand. The walk was pleasant and he was comfortable.

"Greetings, my grandson," came a young man's voice.

Mitokh looked to the side of the winding trail. On a knobby root of an especially towering tree was a man in his thirties. The boy knew it was Totek. "Greetings, Grandfather. We all miss you."

"I know," the man responded, hopping from the root with more vitality than Mitokh had ever seen from the masle. "I have to go soon, but you need to meet a few people first."

"Who?"

"Come with me."

The man led Mitokh off the trail, into the trees. It seemed a mile trek through the bed of ferns before they came to another man sitting on an old fallen trunk taller above ground than the man sitting on it. Much of the dead tree had been buried over the

years. The log was rotten, having moss, ferns, fungi and saplings growing from it.

Following his grandfather, Mitokh walked on a younger log that had fallen across the other at an angle. The grandson examined the stranger; a man of modest stature, quite toned and muscular. His black hair was tied back and he wore gypsy attire. Though appearing Larivian, he felt foreign as all gypsies were.

"This is Kloersoe," Totek introduced.

Mitokh knew it was and stared at the man that sat on the rotting log. Kloersoe smiled at the youngest for some time. The young boy wondered why things were taking so long, if his grandfather was in a hurry.

Eventually, Kloersoe broke the silence with a soft tone. "Glad to meet you finally. I know you have questions and you're confused about things that are occurring. I'm sorry for it all, though it is important – very important. We don't have time for explanations. Your grandfather has to go soon."

There's that time constraint again, yet none of them seem to be in a rush.

Kloersoe continued, "While he's here, I need you to meet a couple friends. My friends will help you."

"Help me do what?"

"Finish what I began. They will help eliminate an evil infesting Larivia and nobility through the clergy."

The man swung his legs to the far side of the log, sliding off. Heading away, he gestured for Mitokh to follow.

The boy's grandfather jumped gracefully onto the ancient log, then off the far side. "Come, come," he beckoned the boy. "We don't have long. I'm being pulled."

Mitokh hopped on the older log, feeling a tingle. He knew he was on the threshold of a life decision. He looked behind him, towards his old life. He only saw the forest, but he knew his childhood and life as a peasant was there.

Totek was about to say something to the boy when Kloersoe placed a hand on his shoulder, telling him, "He has to make the choice himself."

"You don't have time," Totek replied in a hushed whisper.

"I have time; you don't. I'm here until it's done."

"You won't be able to do this after I'm gone."

"Then I'll do it another way."

"And if he decides not to come?"

"I'll have to wait longer. Maybe his cousin will do it. You could introduce me before you get pulled away."

"Either would be a good choice."

Mitokh listened to the conversation. In ways, it reflected his own thoughts. The task at hand confused him. He knew nothing of it, yet felt the growing need to leave his past behind in search of something he knew nothing about.

The forest was quiet and the boy didn't know what the future held for him. The unbalanced flow of time continued; a hasty, sluggish passage. He knew his past had nothing he wanted, except Thumela. The presence of Totek allowed the youngest to talk with Kloersoe; something that would not be possible once the grandfather was pulled away.

The boy turned towards the two men who waited. Answers to why the dreams nagged him were with them. He needed answers – answers he would have to gain without his friend. He hopped down on the far side.

Kloersoe led the way, followed by the pair. A short distance later, the three approached two gypsies sitting at a small campfire within a stony crevice; a man and woman. The pair talked quietly in the secluded patch of woods seeming more familiar to Mitokh, yet not known to be in the valley.

"This is Lumow and Pintaen," Kloersoe told the boy, indicating the pair.

Lumow looked to those standing nearby, nodding to Kloersoe. He was tall and slender, having a thin face with a goatee, and was dressed in common clothing of gypsies. Pintaen gave Kloersoe a smile. She also wore common gypsy attire and was a petite, deceptively fragile-looking femella.

"I have to go," Totek told them all. To his grandson, "Mitokh. You're a man now – a good man. I know you will do what needs to be done." He hugged his grandson then walked further into the alien forest.

"Grandfather. I don't know what to do." There was no reaction. Mitokh wasn't sure if he was heard. Totek walked around a tree beyond sight.

The forest grew darker, as suns set. Kloersoe turned to Mitokh. "Remember Lumow and Pintaen. Accept their help. You will need it. Finish what I began." The forest darkened and went black.

As Mitokh had done so many times since the strange dreams began, he woke with a chill, perspiration beading his brow. This

time he called out, "Grandfather."

Eskoer woke from his brother's outcry. Realizing what was yelled, the elder remarked, "He's dead. Go back to sleep."

Mitokh wanted to say something about his sibling's coarse attitude, though declined. The younger knew nothing could be said that would change him, so Mitokh leaned against the hard stone, thinking about the dream. In a strange way, he felt his old life was over. All he wanted to bring along to his new life was Thumela. He thought of Ikrae. His cousin and childhood friend had no place in his future. He knew that to be true, only feeling a small twang of regret. Eventually, Mitokh slipped back to sleep.

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Morning came with light sprinkles. His nighttime realization gave him no comfort and he didn't know how to proceed. As he went through morning chores and meal, he discovered there was no new life awaiting him. There was only the valley for him. He was a herder's son and the sense of a new maturity was as strange as his dreams.

By the time the funeral procession began its slow walk through the village, collecting people as it went, suns were high, hot and dry, having burned clouds away. Mitokh and his father held the front of the litter while Ikrae and his father were at the back, with friends at far corners. Burial grounds were near a patch of woods well away from the village. Litter bearers led the procession through an old wrought-iron gate bracketed by rough stone walls some chest high. Eskoer carried a sapling bush collected that morning, a plant Totek liked a lot and considered his favorite. The wall was only at a portion of the front boundary for the cemetery with graves extending beyond and back.

The graveyard was an expanse of bushes with a scattering of trees. Paths branched amongst foliage. Most bushes closer to the gate were quite old, having grown tall and full. Some had died, sprouting younger bushes in their place. Only relations of the Magistrate were buried close to the wall. Mitokh's grandfather would be laid at the far side, well away from the gate.

As the stream of people walked selected paths, a man was seen on horseback observing them from the rise of an adjacent hill. Only a few features of the man could be made at that distance. When Mitokh noticed the masle, he stumbled, catching his footing.

"Are you all right?" Boelskar asked.

"I'm fine, father," Mitokh responded while observing the man from his latest dream. That masle wore a simple traveling outfit.

Eyes met and the boy knew the stranger saw what he came for. Without a gesture, the gypsy turned his horse away, casually riding the mount down the hill, then along the road. Mitokh scanned the area for the woman who was also in the dream. He didn't see her.

The rider was out of sight when the procession arrived at an oblong hole in the ground. The local priest – wearing a gold-trimmed, white cassock robe – stood at the head of the grave. The two cousins and their fathers stepped to the foot of the hole nearly as deep as the shoulder height of a man. Two coiled ropes laid to one side on a mound of soil. Villagers encircled the five, close family and friends more to the center, many setting stones at their feet.

The priest crossed his arms over his chest, closed fists towards shoulders. He softly spoke sacred phrases not understood by the others. "*Iffikona Othinish Veothinshee parithae....*"

After a couple minutes, he concluded the phrases, then reached down, scooping a handful of dirt. Holding it over the pit, "With earthly soil as the womb, gods of our heavens created man and woman, breathing life into both. Those who are gathered here know Totek to be a good man. We all know his service to the gods will be looked on with favor, as his liege had." He dropped the soil into the grave, recrossing forearms.

The act signaled Hawek, Boelskar, Mitokh and Ikrae to slip the pair of ropes under the body on the litter and the four lifted the shrouded form. They walked it over the hole, lowering the deceased while the priest chanted more sacred words. Once down, ropes were pulled by the elders, with the younger releasing their ends. After another minute, the priest concluded the chant, lowering his arms, joining his hands in front of him.

Each at the gathering, starting with Boelskar, gave brief comments to the deceased, then shoveled one scoop of dirt into the grave.

Mitokh was fifth, after his father, uncle, mother and older brother. He told the shrouded body in a low tone, "I don't understand my future, though I hope to make you proud."

Ikrae caught the cousin's eyes with his, as to say, *You're definitely different*. Mitokh dropped the soil beside the body in the pit, not wishing to bury it. He then stepped back, letting his younger

brother take the shovel, who had no words as he scooped a bit of soil into the grave.

Ikrae moved around to be next, telling his grandfather after receiving the shovel, "I'm going to miss your stories." He then shoveled soil into the grave.

Indicating how much Totek was liked, the grave was completely covered before anyone placed a fourth shovel scoop into it. Little was said after the first round.

Once fully buried, leaving a depression at the center, Mitokh's father turned to his eldest son, taking the sapling bush handed to him. The man set the plant in the depression, scooping and patting soil around it with affection. Stones were handed to him by others and he set them around the bush.

Rising, he told the buried relation, "Rest well, father."

After the burial, the congregation gathered in the village square. The priest performed brief ceremonies to bless villagers, warding away ailments and evil spirits that may have been the cause of the man's death. Concerned villagers knelt before him and the clergyman set hands on foreheads while others touched his arms. He repeatedly spoke the sacred words of, "*Shoshae levellae voshinith invee.*"

Several, including Mitokh and Ikrae, were not concerned about ailments and just watched. The elder cousin did think of spirits.

After concluding more personal rites, the priest announced, "I must go now. I have pressing business." Locals bowed heads, as he walked to his horse brought from stables.

Mitokh felt uneasy while watching the clergyman mount his horse. As the man settled into the saddle, the white speckled, black mare grew skittish, rearing up. The priest reined in hard, holding tight. The animal turned and landed on all fours, facing the center of the square where Mitokh still watched from. Mitokh gave a courteous bow and the man rode away.

Ikrae cocked his head to the serious-looking friend. Before he could comment about the behavior, his father tapped Mitokh's shoulder, telling the son, "We have work to do. You can catch up with Ikrae later – assuming you get the work done."

"Yes, father."

Mitokh was fine with that, trotting to catch up with Foereenya, as she walked home. "Mother," the boy addressed. "I would like to talk to you about Thumela."

"What about her?"

"I wish to marry Thumela, but father doesn't like her."

"She's a nice girl. It's not her he dislikes. It's her father."

"I thought father didn't like Thumela either. Why doesn't he like her father?"

"It goes back to before you were born – before I married him. It's not important now."

"Maybe you can convince father to petition for marriage."

"I would like to see one of my boys wedded. It doesn't seem possible for Eskoer."

"No one likes him."

"Don't talk badly of your brother."

"Sorry."

"I'll discuss Thumela with your father. Maybe this will settle the animosity between them."

"Thank you."

Later that day, Mitokh went into the pasture to tend cows. He knew if the gypsy masle from his dream was still around the village, he would contact him there, where there was no one nearby.

As suspected, the man came from those woods on foot. Mitokh walked to the taller man while looking around for the woman who was also in the dream. "Welcome, Lumow," the younger greeted. "Where's Pintaen?"

The familiar nature of the greeting and question startled the mature masle, who looked as though a trap was closing on him. Not seeing immediate danger, he told the boy with a suspicious, inquisitive tone, "She's in the woods."

"Please, lead the way."

"All right. Come along." Lumow led the boy into the rugged canopy.

Mitokh thought about Ikrae's comment about not sounding like himself. *You may be right at that. I don't feel the same.* An odd maturity fluttered in spurts.

The villager wanted answers and the man he followed was the only person outside his dreams that may be able to provide them. Having the gypsy walking before him gave the boy chills. It confirmed the dreams were more than his imagination.

A short ways into the woods, Pintaen was found leaning against a tree munching a handful of wild berries. Four horses were tethered within sight, saddles laying near them. They were well away from where Mitokh would meet with Thumela.

"I see you found him," the petite woman commented.

"I'm not certain who found who."

"Really? And how's that?"

"He was waiting just beyond the woods. He knows our names."

"He does, does he?" Turning to Mitokh, who listened intensely. He had questions, but the two made him nervous. Examining the boy, the femella asked, "How did you know who we were?"

"Kloersoe told me," Mitokh answered, his nervousness obvious.

"Where is Kloersoe?" Pintaen asked.

"So that's really his name. I thought it was all a dream until I saw Lumow."

"A dream?" the woman asked, perplexed.

Mitokh looked uneasily between the two gypsies. "I've been having nightmares about the day Kloersoe died."

"Died?" Lumow asked. "Kloersoe's dead?"

"You thought he was alive?" Mitokh asked.

"We thought you were hiding him." The man looked to Pintaen "Does he speak the truth?"

"Of course I'm speaking the truth," Mitokh stated, indignant about the implication from strangers.

Ignoring Mitokh's attitude, she nodded. "He is – and the two are bonded in some way."

"Bonded?" Lumow asked. "The Bishop will probably be here in a couple days."

The mention of the Bishop brought shivers through the boy. "Why would the Bishop come here?"

"We believe your priest recognized me," Lumow explained. "That couldn't be helped. We do have to be away before he returns with the Bishop."

"Before you leave, can you tell me how to get rid of these nightmares?"

"You're coming with us."

"I know Kloersoe wants me to, but I don't think I can."

Pintaen finished the last berry. "The Bishop is coming to find out why we're here. When he does, he'll find out about the bond you and Kloersoe have. When that happens, he'll have you quietly executed. There would be an accident."

"Because you saw me?"

"Because Kloersoe is connected to you."

"Why kill me? If you're gone, how will he know?"

"He will know." Considering the villager more, the femella told him, "Unfortunately, we won't be able to prevent that. He'll keep asking until he knows why we came here. Our Company knew of Kloersoe. The Bishop knows of Kloersoe, as well. His Grace will find you just as we did. That will happen, even if we were never here."

Chill still rippling, "Why would he care about a soldier who died so long ago?"

"Kloersoe has knowledge we need. The Bishop wants to know what he knows and prevent others from gaining that knowledge. People Kloersoe had contact with will be in danger. It would be simpler for His Grace to end the source. That means you."

"I know nothing of what Kloersoe knows. I wasn't even born when he died."

"The Bishop will assume you know something. We shouldn't talk about this here. Know that if the Bishop finds out what Kloersoe knew, many more will die beyond you."

"How can the bond you speak of be removed?"

"I don't know."

Lumow told the woman, "Jotta should be able to cut it free."

"Possibly."

"I can't just go," Mitokh declared. "I'm going to be married."

"If you stay, you won't live long enough to be married."

"Why would the Bishop do that? I won't be able to tell him anything."

"He won't kill you at first," Lumow told the youngest. "He'll try to get knowledge out of you before that, whether you have it or not. He has effective, painful ways of extracting what he wants. Once he's certain you gave him everything you could, you'll have that accident, putting you out of your misery."

"It's not you he'd be interested in," Pintaen added. "You're connected to Kloersoe in some way. The Bishop will get the information through you. You can't stay here."

Mitokh thought hard about his predicament, looking around the trees. The Bishop frightened him for some reason and he wished to flee. "I want to take Thumela," he finally expressed.

"She's the one you're to marry?"

"Well, the arrangement hasn't been done yet, but we're hoping it will be."

"Will she come without questions – and without telling someone?"

"I think so. If she knows we can be together, I'm sure she will. We may not be able to get married here, especially if the Baron takes first rights."

"I see," Pintaen replied. "I hope she comes along then."

"I'll talk to her tonight. I won't be able to see her until later. I have chores left to do. Tomorrow, we'll be ready to go."

Lumow told him, "Make sure you're ready. With or without that girl, we have to go. The sooner the better."

Pintaen added, "Make sure no one else finds out, and be careful what you tell Thumela."

"I will."

After the boy was out of sight, the femella told Lumow, "I don't like waiting around this place. I'm certain he won't tell anyone, but too many saw us already."

"That was unavoidable. We had to find him. That meant people would see us at times. I wish Kloersoe was alive."

"That would have been simpler. As it is, it would be better to take the boy now and go."

"Even I can feel he wouldn't just go with us."

"We can't let the Bishop get ahold of him."

"No, we can't."

Mitokh returned to the pasture to finish tending cattle. He thought of the pair in the woods as he set about evening chores. The boy was becoming excited. He knew that if he could convince Thumela to go with him, they would be happy and safe. They had been living in fear since the first time they were intimate.

How am I going to convince her? He thought. She knows nothing. Does she trust me that much? He looked to the sky and the celestial ribbon of souls while a meteor sailed fully across the sky. Clusters of heavy clouds floated by. Baslaesue. Please let her come with me and save her from her father and Baron.

* * *

Thumela's father woke with a chill. His wife stirred uneasily next to him. The dream he woke from was disturbing. In it, he had been plowing the field when he heard laughter. It sounded like his daughter taunting him. He walked into the barn, finding a young man running out the opposite side, playfully chasing Thumela, who skipped away – her loose, black hair bouncing. Noslae ran after the young, unclad man and daughter, but the two were faster.

When he caught up to them in the field, the couple was in passionate embrace on a haystack. Thumela looked into her father's eyes, giggling as the lover pressed into her. All the father was able to see of the seducer was the back, his black hair clinging to light-brown complexion.

The dream was fresh as Noslae glared at the rough ceiling. Timbers held heavy planks of the loft. Moonlight beamed on his face through the open window beyond the foot of the bed. He swung his feet off, sitting up.

"What's wrong?" the man's wife asked.

"I'm checking on our daughter. I had a dream that may be telling me something I only suspected deep down."

"Suspected what?"

"I think she may be... having indiscretions."

"Our daughter? She's a good girl."

"I'm beginning to have doubts," he told her, slipping from the nook of a room. He still wore his nightshirt.

His wife shifted off the bed, as well. Together they climbed the crude, solid stepladder into the loft that served as their daughter's bedroom. Both were attired in simple, long nightshirts.

"Mother, father," the girl addressed. "What's wrong?"

The man pulled back covers and sat next to Thumela. "Your mother's going to check a few things."

"What?" the girl asked, as her mother pulled the blanket the remainder of the way down.

Light from outside was inadequate to see the eyes of her parents clearly. Thumela's mother pushed the girl's nightshirt up to her slender waist.

"What are you doing?" Thumela cried, pushing the hem back down.

Grasping his daughter's wrists, Noslae forced arms to her chest, holding the femella in place. "Let your mother check."

"No," Thumela stated defiantly while struggling.

Pressing slender legs together, twisting her hips, Thumela pushed her knees to the timber wall. She felt her mother take hold of her thighs, forcing them apart. Thumela continued struggling, but her mother was strong. With her father holding her flat on her back, she was unable to prevent the intrusion. Thumela felt her mother probe into her, sniffing the cool air.

"Oh dear, you're right," the mother told her husband. "It's been a couple days, but still obvious."

As the woman released the girl's legs, pulling the hem down, the father held her arms tighter to her chest, pressing his daughter down hard. "Who did this to you?" he asked.

"No one."

"Don't lie to me. Who did this?"

"Mother. Make him stop."

Tears streaked the woman's face. "Tell your father, dear. Who did this to you?"

"No one," the girl insisted, tears welling.

Her father's tone was as harsh as she could recall. "The gods help you, if you don't tell me. I'll beat the name from you."

"Please," Thumela wept. "I love him."

"Who!" the man yelled.

"I'm not telling you."

Noslae held her wrists with his left hand, backhanding Thumela's face with the right. "You will tell me."

Thumela cried out a screech, then steadied her voice. "No." She struggled harder.

He struck her again. She remained silent. Another strike.

"Tell us, baby," the mother told the daughter.

Thumela saw her father's hand rise again. "Mitokh," she wept, her voice weak, cracking.

"Hawek's son?" her father asked. Her eyes told him the truth of it. "I should have known." Noslae released his daughter and stood, ducking below low angled ceiling beams. He ranted while pacing the tiny space. "His son is just like him. Hawek defiled my sister. Now, his son does the same to my only daughter. May the heavenly gods strike misfortune on that entire family." He turned to the girl, who held her knees to her chest, clutching the blanket around her. "Are you still bleeding?"

"Yes, father. I'm not pregnant."

"At least that," he responded, then climbed down the steep steps, telling his wife, "Keep her here."

"Where are you going?"

"To talk to Hawek about his son."

"Please don't," Thumela pleaded.

"He has to," the mother explained. "You've been violated."

"No, I haven't. I love him."

"Don't let her leave," Noslae reminded his wife from the bottom of the stairs. He changed clothes and left the house.

Shortly before Noslae stepped from his home, Mitokh had

entered the woods on his way to talk to the girl he wanted to marry. He now knew he was leaving the valley of his birth and hoped Thumela would go with him. The boy couldn't speak with her earlier and had waited until he knew her parents would be fast asleep. He had snuck to her house before, crawling up the back of the home to the loft window, helping her out and down. Now, he had to make arrangements so she would be ready at first light.

As Mitokh walked through the woods, he heard movement and grumbling ahead of him. He stopped. A man cursed under his breath, as he tromped along the trail.

Suddenly, the boy was pulled from the path. He was hushed into silence by a small, firm hand covering his mouth. Mitokh could barely see a slender dagger being held at his chest by an otherwise delicate femella hand.

The cursing father walked past. Mitokh was able to pick out words while he was close. "...that boy. What was he thinking? Why would he violate my daughter? The Magistrate will have him flogged, then hanged for this violation. That's if the Baron doesn't do worse to him. That father of his will hang, as well. Curse that entire family. Nothing the Baron will do is enough for what that miscreant had...." The man walked beyond earshot and out of sight.

Pintaen released Mitokh, whispering, "He would have killed you, if he found you out here."

"I have to warn my father."

"That man won't be able to harm your father. We can't delay further. We have to go."

"I have to talk to Thumela. She has to come with me."

"It's too late for that. If she comes with us now, your Baron will send men after us all."

"I can't leave her."

"That will be the best thing to do."

"But—."

"Listen. If she goes, your liege will send soldiers. The Bishop knows we're in the area. If your girl goes with us, they will assume we had something to do with you both. Should you leave – alone – it will appear you ran for your life. That would be the truth, for the Magistrate of this village and Baron will certainly hang you for what you two have been doing."

"We love each other."

"That emotion has caused a multitude of problems for a

great many people and will make matters worse for you both. Leave without her. Her father will blame you for everything that happened between you two. Leaving will save her life. You know she could be hanged alongside you, if you continue this testimony of love."

Mitokh was given a few seconds to think. He looked up and down the trail, then told the woman, "I'm going to say goodbye."

"You won't be able to. She won't be alone. Trust me. You need to walk away from this."

"Trust you? I don't know you."

"You have little choice."

He remembered the dream and what Kloersoe said about the two gypsies – and that his grandfather told him to trust Kloersoe. The boy wasn't sure what he could trust – or who.

Should I trust that dream and these people? the boy thought. Seeing that his presence in the village would make matters worse, he decided he would have to leave – and that meant trusting these people for now. "All right. I'll go without her. I need to collect a few things."

"From your home? You know you can't go to your home while that man is there."

"I can't just go like this."

"Yes, you can. We'll provide anything you need when we catch up with the Company."

There wasn't much more to be said. Pintaen guided the boy to the edge of the woods where Lumow held four horses.

Seeing the boy's eyes querying the extra saddled mounts, Pintaen told him, "We were expecting to find Kloersoe with you. Jotta knew you were with Kloersoe and both probably needed horses. I suppose he's with you, though doesn't need a horse."

The boy nodded, then mounted, telling the others, "There's something I do have to get."

"*We need to go,*" Lumow stated firmly. "We've delayed far too long as it is."

"I'm aware of what you two said. It's in the mountains. It's Kloersoe's sword."

"The sword's around here?" Lumow asked.

Mitokh felt excitement from the masle. "It's in the cave where Kloersoe died."

"Show us."

As the three rode from the village, Thumela's father arrived at Hawek's abode, pounding on the door repeatedly. After the fourth set of thunderous thumps, Hawek opened it.

"Noslae?" Mitokh's father queried, his eyes still holding sleep. He wore leggings slipped on hastily. "What do you want at this hour?"

"Your son violated my daughter."

"*Eskoer did what?*" Hawek snapped at the man while his wife came from the back room, pulling a robe around her otherwise unclad slender form.

"Not Eskoer," Noslae corrected. "Mitokh. Mitokh defiled my daughter. I had thought since your wife came and talked to me about marriage, that you knew about—."

Hawek turned to his wife. "You talked to him about Mitokh and Thumela?"

"I was going to discuss it with you before, but I thought I should ask Noslae and see if he would even consider the proposition. He wanted time to think about it. There was no reason to discuss the matter with you until he decided."

"You know how I feel about him and his family."

"*Feel about my family?*" Noslae rebutted. "Damn you for thinking low of me and my family considering what you – and now your son – had done."

"That's enough," Hawek barked at the masle.

"I don't think so. I have no sons and only one daughter – and your boy tarnished her. Is nothing sacred to you or your family?"

"Be quiet. I'm trying to sort this out with my wife."

"Never mind your wife. Get Mitokh out here and have him explain what he did."

"Noslae. If you don't shut up, you'll have more problems than my son."

"Shall we see what the Magistrate thinks about all this?"

"Noslae," Foereenya addressed. "I know you two have ill will, but we need to—."

"It's beyond ill will, ma'am."

"All right, hostility. Know that if you bring the Magistrate into this feud of yours, your daughter will suffer along with our son."

That stopped Noslae from further ranting. He was so upset with Hawek and Mitokh, he hadn't considered the consequences to his daughter. He was upset with his daughter, as well; though didn't wish harm to befall Thumela.

Hawek saw the thought process within the man. "Now that you're not going to speak to the Magistrate, we can talk peacefully."

"Your wife has a clear head. I will never say that about you. I will speak with her."

"You will speak with me," Hawek objected.

"I will only speak with *you* in the presence of the Magistrate."

"Please," Foereenya told them both, as she stepped between them. "Don't do this. None of us wish the Magistrate's attention, so let's calm down. Noslæ. I still wish for Thumela and Mitokh to marry."

"It's too late for that."

"Hear me out. As you said; you don't have sons. In time, the land granted to you will be taken by the Baron and given to another. Mitokh will tend fields when you're unable to. We have three sons. I would like our firstborn to be wedded before Mitokh, but it's Thumela and Mitokh who have a relationship."

"The same kind of relationship Yertna and your husband had."

Hawek declared, "My relationship with Yertna was honest affection. Your father had no reason to deny my marriage to her."

"Considering what you did to her," Noslæ stated, "he had every right."

"I did nothing to harm her."

"You defiled her, as Mitokh has done to my daughter."

"Yertna was virgin."

"Yes," Noslæ replied, "she was virginal in the Baron's eyes when he took his rights, but if he knew what you two were doing, he would have had you hung. She was not pure. The only reason I never said anything was that she would have suffered along with you." The man took a breath, glaring at Hawek as he continued. "I know you kept violating her after her marriage. How long? Did it continue until her death? I cannot fathom why she loved you."

Hawek gave a dark look to the man, though before he could say anything, his wife injected. "Mitokh and Thumela love each other. Will you ruin their happiness because of my husband?"

"Love?" Noslæ snipped with a sneer. "Your son could not restrain himself. He's just like his father. How you tolerated Hawek's infidelity is beyond me."

"My relation with my husband is none of your concern."

"Your son's relation with my daughter *is* my concern. She's no

longer virgin. Something has to be done."

"I can't do anything about that. We'll just have to hope the Baron doesn't—."

"Hope?"

"*Yes – hope,*" Foereenya snapped back. "Our son has a greater chance of the Baron's retribution."

"As it should be."

"Father," Eskoer addressed from behind Hawek. "Mitokh is gone."

"*What?*" all three at the door erupted in unison, looking to him.

"He's not here."

"Damn the boy," Noslae snapped while turning. He darted towards his home.

* * *

Chapter 4

“Don’t harm my son,” Hawek warned the fleeing man hustling away in the moonlight. “If any harm comes to Mitokh, you’ll regret it.” He turned to his eldest boy, telling him, “Get dressed.” Hawek then went to finish dressing.

Fooreenya redressed, as well, telling the youngest two children, “Stay in the house. Don’t talk to anyone.” Her spouse and eldest son were out of sight by the time she left the abode.

When Hawek reached Noslae’s home, Thumela’s mother answered the door. “I have to speak with your husband.”

“He went back out.”

“Where did he go?”

“I don’t know. He came back looking for Mitokh. When he didn’t find him here, he stormed off again. He’s very angry.”

“Thumela,” Hawek called into the house. “Where did Mitokh go?”

“Leave her alone!” the mother shouted.

“I don’t know,” Thumela replied, climbing down the steps from the loft.

“Go back to bed,” her mother commanded. The girl scowled, though complied, as the mother told Hawek, “You should go.”

“If my son comes here for any reason, tell him to go straight home.”

With that, Hawek and Eskoer began searching the village and surrounding area. Wishing to keep the issue private, they did so quietly. Fooreenya joined them.

~ ~ ~

As the search for Mitokh continued, Hawek’s second born and pair of gypsies arrived at the cave entrance. The boy slipped behind the bush, unburying the sword by feel, unable to see much in the scant moonlight. Shifting back out, the younger held it crossways to the man who had been examining the bush and deceptive crevice.

“There’s no sheath for it,” Mitokh told him. “The one that was with it rotted.”

"We'll make another."

The man took the hilt of the hand-and-a-half sword, holding it away from those with him. Checking to see that it was straight, he turned it first to one side, then the other. The sword was perfect, the design simple. There were subtle etchings of swirling, waves and dots on the guard in a language he didn't recognize.

"I don't know how to use it," Mitokh admitted, watching the man carefully.

"We'll teach you."

"I'm a herder. You should have it."

Lumow shook his head. "I would like to, but the task is yours to fulfill."

"What task?" The younger didn't want to face his dreams or what was told to him in them.

Before Lumow could say anything, Pintaen interrupted. "I want to see where Kloersoe is, then we have to be going." She was looking behind the bush, deeper into the tunnel – the passage was as black as ever.

"We can't get to the skeleton anymore," Mitokh explained. "The tunnel is blocked by the higher water now."

"We don't have time, anyway," Lumow added.

"I wish to see it," the woman insisted.

Sensing she had need, Lumow nodded. "All right." He turned to Mitokh, handing the sword back. "Wrap this in the cloth and please show us the lake."

Mitokh rewrapped the blade. Slipping behind the bush, he set the sword to one side on the sand. After lighting the fire, he lit two lamps. Handing one to Lumow, the boy guided the gypsies into the depths of the cave.

Arriving at the edge of the tiny lake, Mitokh told the others, pointing to the far wall, "The tunnel is under the water, over there."

Pintaen took the lamp from Lumow, holding it high, examining the distant rough surface for several seconds. She then told the masles, "We can go now."

As the femella kept the lamp high while walking towards the exit of the cavern, Mitokh looked from the lake to her, then to Lumow. "That's all she's going to do?"

"That's all she needs to do for now," the man stated, following the woman.

"What was that about?" Mitokh asked, catching up.

"It's her way."

"What's her way?"

"You'll have to ask her, though I doubt she will tell you until she knows you better."

Mitokh wasn't ready to ask his suspicions. He didn't know how to approach the femella about her mysterious manner, so he queried the masle about something he could comprehend. "What task is mine that I need that sword for?"

"I suppose you should know some of it sooner than later," Lumow replied, ducking below a low portion of the jagged ceiling. "It started before I was born. Kloersoe found a secret kept within the clergy."

"What secret?"

"Pintaen and I don't know. He told very few. Whatever it was, it almost started a war."

"Kloersoe started a war?"

"It didn't escalate to open warfare, though many died as a result of what he learned."

"I never heard of it."

"Of course not. It happened before either of us was born and it's not discussed openly. There are a lot of secrets people want to keep hidden. Talnoer and Jotta may tell you more once we get to the Company."

Several minutes later, the three reached the entrance. Lumow told Mitokh, "Place everything as it was, though keep the sword." He then looked to the woman. "Can you cleanse the area?"

"The energies are cluttered, though until we arrived, the boys were the only ones who had entered these caverns for a very long time, possibly our lifetime."

"Do what you can."

Mitokh kept glancing to the woman while he set about ensuring all seemed normal at the entrance. Her eyes were closed and she breathed slowly.

"What is she doing?" the youngest finally whispered to Lumow. "What do you mean by *cleanse the area*?"

"She's removing imprints of our visit that may be lingering."

"That should do it," Pintaen declared, opening her eyes.

The boy blurted his suspicion, "You're a witch. *Gypsy women are witches.*"

With an alluring smile, she admitted, "Some are – others are not. Some men are witches, as well."

"We can talk as we ride," Lumow stated, slipping around the thorn bush, receiving more scratches. Once through, he asked the young masle, "How did you find this cave?"

"Chasing a rabbit."

Strolling down the trail, sword in hand, Mitokh thought of what Lumow said about his task. He felt an urgent need to do what Kloersoe had begun, a drive brewing deep within him. He finally asked the gypsies, "Who can help me do this task? I don't know what to do."

Pintaen responded, "Jotta may be able to answer that. We were sent to find Kloersoe and bring him to her. Maybe she can tell us more when she sees you."

"I hope so," Mitokh replied softly, "but I don't want to start a war."

"None of us do," Lumow expressed, "though we may have no choice."

* * *

"Gone where?" Ikrae asked Foereenya when he discovered Mitokh had been missing for hours.

Foereenya's eyes were red and she fought off more tears. "We don't know. Hawek and Eskoer are still looking. We searched all night, but couldn't find him. Noslae came to our home early in the evening. He argued with your uncle. That's when we found out Mitokh was gone."

"What were they arguing about?" He could think of only one conclusion.

The femella confirmed his suspicion. "Thumela."

"Mitokh wants to marry her."

"I know. I talked to her father yesterday."

"That started the argument?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I'll help look for him," Ikrae told her, then rushed away.

He went straight for the cave. The boy knew if Mitokh went anywhere to hide, it would be there. When he arrived, he could smell the fresh smoke from the pit and it was still warm.

"Mitokh," he called down the tunnel. "I'm alone." There was no answer. "It's all right. No one is with me." There was still no answer.

Ikrae built a fire, lit a lamp and went searching through passages and caverns. As a habit, he placed several candles along

the way. He checked each area several times, but there was no Mitokh. Back at the front, he left candles and lamp at the inside nook. He had been certain he would find his friend there.

Quickly extinguishing the fire, he crawled from the damp cavern. Wondering where his cousin could have gone from there, he went to the edge, scrutinizing the rough terrain stretched before him. Suns rose higher while the boy looked out over the valley, considering his friend's mood.

"Mitokh," he called with no response beyond his voice echoing. Repeated calls only brought his own voice in return.

Perplexed, Ikrae went to where the stream spilled from the ground, a place where berries grew plentiful. He then went along every trail and stream the two knew, calling for his friend. All along, he expected to find Mitokh fishing or hunting. He didn't.

Suns began arching lower. Returning to the village, Ikrae went to Thumela's home. Seeing bruising on her cheek, the masle chose not to ask about them.

"Has Mitokh talked to you this morning?" he asked the girl.

He didn't think Mitokh had, but was running low on options. The girl's parents let them converse on the front stoop. Ikrae knew her mother listened from within, hoping to gain news. Noslae went about his chores as though everything was normal.

"I haven't talked with him since the night before last," Thumela admitted. Her eyes expressed the statement was true. "I couldn't see him yesterday – except at the funeral. He was busy – and so was I."

Knowing they couldn't speak freely, he stepped off the stoop, saying, "We'll find him."

~ ~ ~

While the boy searched the countryside, four temple elite soldiers rode horses into the village. Squires, servants and three packhorses were with them. The bannerette soldier held the personal standard for Bishop Shroevoch, displaying a gold tree over a red bar angled from the upper left to the lower right on a green field. People in the square bowed their heads.

"A stranger was here yesterday," the lead Templar declared to the group of locals.

"Yes, my lord," responded one of the villagers, keeping his head low. "We were burying old man Totek. We only saw him briefly before he rode away. He's not been seen since, my lord."

"Which way did he go?"

"To the east, my lord." The man pointed without raising his head.

The rider nodded, turning his horse that way. His companions followed. Outside the village, the Templars asked other people of the stranger, receiving similar responses. The holy warriors of the Temple rode east.

~ ~ ~

Suns set and Mitokh was still unaccounted for.

"Sorry, son," Boelskar told Ikrae. "We don't know where else to look."

"I looked everywhere, as well," the boy replied. He wanted to cry, but knew better than do so in front of his father. "What about Noslae?"

"What of him?"

"He was arguing with Hawek about Mitokh marrying Thumela."

"There's much more to their quarrel than that."

"Could he have done something to Mitokh?"

"I don't believe so. No matter the problems from their past, I don't think Noslae is capable of harming Mitokh."

Ikrae was not convinced. He said nothing, not wishing to explain what he knew or how long he knew it. That night, he thought about Noslae. In the morning, the boy completed chores quickly, then took a shovel, entering the woods between Mitokh and Thumela's homes. He expected to find a freshly disturbed patch of ground. He saw traces of people, but nothing that would have been a recent grave. At the far edge of the woods adjoining a field for cattle, he found prints of shod horses. He scanned the field beyond the trees, thinking about the Templars he heard of, the ones asking about the stranger.

"*What's going on?*" he muttered to the air, then continued his search.

Ikrae reached the edge of the woods on Noslae's side. He stared at the field, examining each row of stunted crops. With rains they've been getting, it was hard to determine if any of the edges were freshly dug. He looked plants over carefully, seeing if any were turned oddly. He dismissed the notion of digging around the field and garden, knowing Noslae wouldn't allow it.

He looked around other areas until dark.

Each day, Ikrae went out looking. Each day, he returned with no answers. On the fifth day, he gave up. The village was not

large and he had been over it several times. On that fifth day, he saw Thumela and talked with her. The boy had been avoiding his friend's lover since the first day. He had little control of his own feelings and didn't need the additional emotional outbursts from Mitokh's girl. When he saw her that day, he was ready.

Thumela quietly cried while they sat on the stone boundary of the field near her house. Bruises were fading, though still obvious. "Where is he?" she asked the boy. "What could have happened to him?"

"I don't know," Ikrae admitted, feeling uncomfortable about his suspicions.

"You know him best. If anyone knows something, it would be you."

"I wish I did."

"You do know something. I can see you do."

"I have a thought."

"What is it? Tell me."

"I can't. You won't believe me."

"Why not? What could it be that I wouldn't believe?" There was no answer. "Tell me – please."

"I don't think I should."

"Why not?" Not getting an answer, "Whether I believe you or not, you should tell me."

He looked at the girl, knowing how much she loved Mitokh. "Promise that you won't be upset at me for thinking this."

"I promise. Now, tell me." Tears slowed and her voice became angry. "I need to know."

"I think your father killed him." He saw her eyes grow dark. "You promised not to be mad at me."

"I'm not. Why would my father kill Mitokh?"

"Because of you two."

Seeing awareness in his eyes, "I should have known you knew. How many others know?"

"No one before now. How your parents didn't know earlier is beyond me. Mitokh thought your father was stupid."

"*My father is stupid.* Mother told me he had a dream. I knew Fooreenya talked to him about us being married. It must have caused the dream. He acted funny during dinner." The girl went silent for a while. She felt Ikrae's eyes on her while she stared at the ground. Finally, she swallowed, needing to talk to someone. "The night...." The girl cleared her throat. "The night Mitokh

disappeared, my mother and father checked me. That's how they found out."

"That's why Uncle Hawek and your father were arguing."

"Father was furious. If he found Mitokh.... I think he could have... killed him." She wiped her eyes with a sleeve. "When father finally got home from looking for Mitokh, he kept cursing about your uncle."

"I tried to find a grave. If he buried him somewhere, I don't know where."

"Father doesn't think he'll return. He thinks Mitokh ran far from here to get away from the Magistrate. Maybe we should talk to the Magistrate."

"Tell him what; that your father may have killed Mitokh? He won't believe us. Everyone now knows what happened between you and Mitokh. Even if the Magistrate believed us, he'll say Mitokh deserved it."

Thumela shed more tears. "You're right. I hope he did run away. At least, if he did, I can hope he'll be back for me. But, where did he go?"

"I don't know."

* * *

"They're looking for us," Pintaen told her two traveling companions.

The boy and gypsies were prone on the ground, looking over the crest of a large hill from under branches of a contorted bush. Their mounts were tied to a tree down the hill, behind them.

On the road beyond their vantage, they saw four Templars with nine attendants on mounts. They led three packhorses. The bannerette soldier displayed the local Bishop's colors as they rode along the broad gravel way out of the mountains – a thoroughfare from Prilira meandering east to west.

It had been six days since the pair of gypsies left Anskrot with Mitokh. The three rode at an easy, steady pace. Pintaen was aware the Bishop had been trailing them, though didn't wish to appear rushed to locals who may tell those pursuers. In the more populated area they traveled, more people were seen along the road – many with carts.

A few minutes before the Templar soldiers came within sight, the three left the road, moving behind the hill.

"Where's the Bishop?" Lumow asked the femella while observing from the crest.

"I don't know. I thought he was with those following us and not just his Templars."

"Can you sense for him? Maybe he's close by."

"If I try and he's close, His Grace will know where we are."

The petite femella examined those soldiers, as they continued along the packed gravel road. The three held breaths when the column reached the area gypsies left the path.

The Templars continued on their way.

"We'll ride overland for a while," Lumow declared, then waited for the clergymen to be well beyond sight.

Some half-hour later, they scooted down to their horses. Soon, they were on their way.

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After two more days, the two gypsies with a bewildered villager in tow, caught sight of the nomadic caravan. There were nine wagons in line with collections of riders on horseback, as well as others walking in groups, some quite young. The parade was as colorful as at the festival.

Lumow rode the other two towards the first wagon, a small home on oversized wheels, pulled by eight hefty draft horses. He spoke to Talnoer when he pulled up alongside.

"This is Mitokh. Pintaen senses Kloersoë is bonded to him."

"Where is Kloersoë?" the stocky leader asked, dark eyes glancing at the boy. His black hair was still braided with beads.

"Dead, unfortunately. It seems he died long ago near a village called Anskrot."

"And this boy is bonded to his essence?"

"It seems so," Pintaen responded.

Talnoer handed reins to a nearly mature adolescent boy sitting on the bench at his right – a boy much like the leader. The elder climbed down, hopping to the ground. The masle's light complexion told Mitokh the leader came from beyond Larivia.

"Welcome to the Medanlu Company, Mitokh," the leader greeted, as the newcomer and two traveling companions dismounted.

"Thank you, sir," Mitokh replied.

The youngest marveled at the wagons while they rolled by slowly. Mitokh had never seen them that close. He knew those wagons were large, but not to this extent. Mitokh felt dwarfed

in comparison. Wheels were as tall as he was and sturdy enough to easily handle rugged terrain. Heavy axles hooked to the high frame supported the home with cross-rigging and leaf springs. Counter-stress mechanisms allowed independent rocking and twisting, easing the ride. Bouncing was restrained by sinew ropes and leather air baffles similar to those found on forges.

Painted wooden sides extended up to enclose a functional home, having arching roofs tall enough to stand in. Each wagon was broad, enabling them to tilt on inclines that would topple the cart his family had. Besides being painted with vibrant hues, colorful ribbons flapped in the breeze.

The day was warm with fluffy clouds drifting across the sky. Many of the gypsies walked alongside wagons. Other horses, as well as goats and cows, were tethered to the backs of each rolling home. None of the people seemed to be in a hurry and Mitokh didn't receive more than curious glances as they passed.

When the sixth wagon approached, Talnoer instructed, "Pintaen, Mitokh. Come with me." As the rear of the wagon came to the three, the leader grabbed hold, hopping on the broad back ledge. He opened the door centered on the rear of the wagon.

Pintaen handed Lumow reins for her horse, then leapt up gracefully and went in. Lumow took reins from Mitokh, nodding for him to go. The boy trotted to the ledge, crawling on.

Inside, a pungent, herbal scent nearly overwhelmed Mitokh. That interior was dark and it took several seconds for his eyes to adjust to the dim light filtering through four small curtained windows, two on either side, as well as one on the door. Decorative ceramic and wooden containers hung from macramé holders swaying with the motion. Each held a multitude of items. Netted-shelves held other decorative boxes, jars, plates and all manner of objects. Most everything was unfamiliar to the youngest and the ceiling-roof arched down at the long side walls.

"Jotta? Are you awake?" Talnoer asked.

"I am," the old woman responded from behind a maroon patterned drape partitioning the interior front third of the home. She sat up in the bed, pulling the drape aside to view the three.

"This is Mitokh," Talnoer introduced.

The woman looked intently at the boy, then instructed, "Sit down," indicating a cushioned bench along the right-side wall, close to the bed. Mitokh did so. "Where is Kloersoe?" Jotta asked.

Mitokh hesitated, considering the elder femella. Pintaen answered, "He died some time ago. His spirit is bound to this boy."

Jotta nodded. "That explains what I sensed." She told Mitokh, "Give me your hand."

Slowly Mitokh reached out his right hand, trembling a bit. The woman grasped it with her left, turning his palm up. Setting her other palm to his, she closed her eyes for a while.

When Jotta opened her eyes again, releasing his hand, she commented, "I do sense Kloersoe. For reasons of his own, this boy is to do his work."

Mitokh shook his head. "I don't wish to."

"I feel your reluctance," Jotta stated.

"Could you break that... that... that... that *bond* Pintaen keeps talking about?"

"I could, though I will not."

"Why not? You have to free me from the nightmares."

"I do not. Kloersoe is able to convey his life to you. We have to finish what was started and you're joined with him."

"Why can't someone else do that? I want the nightmares to stop. That's why I'm here."

"There's more to your presence than that."

"No there isn't," Mitokh stated firmly.

The woman knew he didn't mean it and the boy knew her thoughts on the matter. Jotta just smiled at him – a friendly, comforting smile. Mitokh didn't know why, but he felt akin to these people. Ever since he found the skeleton, the village of his birth grew less his home. Even with those growing feelings, he still had ties to Anskrot – ties not easily released. There were also the dreams he didn't wish to have and his love for Thumela.

"I'm going to have some tea," the elderly femella told him. "Would you like some?"

The boy wanted to say no, but was needing something to drink. "All right."

The old woman stood and retrieved a ceramic cup. Scooping a brew from a hanging pot having hot stones and a ladle, she handed the cup to the boy. Retrieving another cup, Jotta filled it. He noticed the other two were not offered any and they sat across from the boy on another bench, under a high netted shelf.

Holding the cup in both hands to steady his nervousness, the

youngest asked, "If Kloersoe is going to... to do whatever he has to do, couldn't he tell you what has to be done and let me go?"

"It would take years to do that, more than I have left. I'm sorry, but you will be with us a while."

"I have to get back to Thumela. I was not planning to stay away this long." He then sipped the pungent warm drink.

"Who's Thumela?"

Pintaen explained, "She's a girl in the village where we found Mitokh. He may want to get her from Anskrot, though that will become a problem for him and us alike." The younger woman detailed what she knew of the situation.

The old lady advised the boy, "You don't want to bring her into this. She'll be safer there."

"I don't think so. Her father was mad enough to kill."

The old woman looked to Pintaen, who agreed, "Her father was angry enough to end the life of this boy, but he will not harm the girl."

"You can't know that," Mitokh claimed.

"She can," Jotta countered. "You have work to do, and Thumela is not part of it. We have to get you settled." The woman turned to Talnoer before Mitokh could object further, asking, "How long until we set camp?"

"A few miles. There's a lake I would like to get to."

"That will be nice. For now, I need to rest." Turning back to Mitokh, Jotta added, "When we set camp, I want to hear about those nightmares you've been experiencing. Ride with us. In time, you will understand more about what you have to do."

"Why me?"

"I think it's because you were the only one who saw Kloersoe's remains. The bonding took place at that time. No one was with you?"

"Ikrae is the only other one who knows of the skeleton."

"He didn't see the remains. You did. That was why you bonded. I should rest now. We'll have time later for a few questions. I don't know how much I can answer, but I will try."

Talnoer rose from the comfortable bench. He took empty cups from the two, setting them in a handy basket for cleaning, then ushered Mitokh out.

Swinging off the back, the leader told Mitokh, "Come ride with me."

The youngest looked to Pintaen. Her eyes motioned for him to go with Talnoer.

The boy crawled off the ledge, walking with the leader towards the front of the parade. Confusion befuddled his mind, preventing coherent questions and the one he walked with offered no conversation. They kept a pace faster than wagons. Finally reaching the first rolling home, the villager climbed up after Talnoer, placing him left of the leader, who took reins from his son sitting on the other side.

As they rode along the countryside, the caravan passed a scattering of hamlets and villages. Hills became more stunted and views across the landscape broadened. Stretches of woods were scattered in all directions, some with collections of towering, misshapen boulders. Mitokh was raised his entire life in the mountains and had never seen such open space. He heard stories about what was beyond the valley of his birth, but could not comprehend the true expanse. Part of him was uneasy with the vastness. Mostly, he was exhilarated. He was also glad to be out of the saddle. The boy was not used to riding horseback and his backside was raw.

For a while, Mitokh was content at watching the scenery. They followed the road along the Soemaru River that flowed from the mountains near his home. Each stream they passed fed into it, growing the river to the width even these wagons would not be able to cross.

Eventually, Mitokh asked Talnoer, "Have you ever met Kloersoe?"

"Once, when I was very young."

"Do you believe his spirit is still around and haunting me?"

"I do, though I wouldn't call it haunting."

"He's not creating nightmares for you."

With a slight chuckle, Talnoer replied, "No, he's not."

That sparked the two to talk about dreams and everything the boy knew of them. Mitokh was aware he would be repeating it all to Jotta, but it helped to discuss them. The boy was bewildered by how easily the man believed what was said – events that happened when Talnoer was young.

The gypsy leader seemed disappointed that there was nothing in the dreams about what Kloersoe did before the chase. "That was all he revealed to you?"

"So far. I haven't had dreams since I left home. None that I think was caused by him. I know he's present in the ones I do have."

"It will help if you consider this your home."

"I'll be going back to Anskrot soon, won't I?"

"With what you told me, do you think you should?"

Mitokh wanted to say yes, though reluctantly told the mature masle, "I don't know."

Later, a good-sized lake came into view. The lake was the broadest by far than any Mitokh had ever seen. Clumps of woods with boulders were at the shore.

"Wow," Mitokh toned. "That's enormous."

"That's Lake Arikuewa. It's quite small compared to Bakhue."

"I have always wanted to see Lake Bakhue," Mitokh admitted.

"You will."

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