

*THE REQUIEM OF KATZE BRENNER*  
KATRINA A. TEMPLETON

university of new dublin press 5627

THE REQUIEM OF KATZE BRENNER  
©2004 by Katrina A. Templeton

HISTORIAN'S NOTE TO THE REQUIEM  
©2004 by S. Malacypse Breen

This edition ©5627 by University of New Dublin Press

Design and layout by S. Malacypse Breen

First edition, first printing  
December 2004 / January 5627

University of New Dublin  
New Dublin, Avalon 61 Ursae Majoris  
<http://fnord.sandwich.net/>

The Brenner Clan Network Portal:  
<http://www.retstak.org/>

The Jihad to Destroy Barney Fiction Archive:  
<http://www.jihad.net/>

## Historian's Note:

The following text is a loosely-fictionalized account of events which occurred to the matriarch of the Brenner clan sometime during the late 20th Century. The story, which purports to explain the origins of Tjarlin Brenner's unique abilities — as demonstrated in the events of the Lyran War — has been handed down in oral tradition in the clan itself since the mid 21st Century.

This is the first time that the story has been written down and published in any format, electronic or physical, outside the clan. The University of New Dublin received permission to record the tale in 5612 from the then-current family leader, Aeryn Brenner, but it was only now that the Archaeology department has had the available resources to compile all of the oral histories into a single file. The version in this volume is considered the most accurate version both by the University and the Brenners themselves. Other versions, each with their own unique variants, are collected in the second volume of this printing.

The story of Tjarlin Brenner is a very compelling one in and of itself, and it gives us an intriguing narrative describing (in part) Terran society at the turn of the Third Millennium and that of First Millennium Marrakethian society. The wealth of social detail found in the story gives us a glimpse at an extradimensional civilization that has since grown apart from Humanity. For this alone, the University is glad to present for consideration and study this bit of ancient lore from the beginnings of our history.

Dr. Minerva L. Weatheral  
Asimov Chair of Archaeology  
University of New Dublin, Avalon, 61 Ursae Majoris  
October 21, 5626

# *Contents*

|                                   |    |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| BEGINNING AGAIN.....              | 5  |
| THE GREEN HILLS OF MARRAKETH..... | 11 |
| LOST IN THE WILDERNESS.....       | 18 |
| THE AWAKENING.....                | 27 |
| THE RECKONING.....                | 36 |

*“Requiem: 1. A mass said or sung for the repose of a departed soul.  
2 a: a solemn chant (as a dirge) for the repose of the dead  
b: something that resembles such a solemn chant  
3. Rest; quiet; peace. [Obs.]”*

—from Webster’s Dictionary

*“You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water.”*

—T.S. Eliot, *“The Waste Land”*

## ***Beginning Again***

*“Walk with me, I’ve done this by myself  
I can’t go faster than I am right now  
And I have never felt so lonely...”*

—Harvester, *“Kahiltna Strip”*

It was a rainy afternoon in Berkeley, surprising for the middle of summer. Summers were normally foggy and dreary in Berkeley, but a freak storm had come in off the Pacific, cleansing the dirty streets and sending merchants on Telegraph scattering for shelter.

In an apartment on Haste Street, a figure looked down upon the wet street. She took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes, wondering offhand why her prescription lenses were so blurry.

She looked around the apartment, just right for two people, and thought of the events of the past month. A simple month ago, she’d lived here with her best friend in the world. Although she’d known the plain truth, it hadn’t seemed to matter much. After all, her friends, her family, her whole complete life had taken place here.

But then, she’d been forcibly returned to Marraketh, and the horrors that were there. It had turned out to be a game of kill or be killed, and for the first time in her life, she’d killed.

But now she felt extremely guilty for doing what needed to be done.

She wandered across the living room to the hallway, and looked inside Josh’s room. The sign was still there, and the door propped slightly open. Katze pushed the door open a little further and looked into his room.

It still looked much the same as it did before, except this time she felt no fear in disobeying the sign. Josh was dead, shot in the back with a crossbow bolt. With this thought, she entered the room, feeling as if she was entering a shrine for the dead.

She looked around the room, at the video equipment in the corner. She finally understood why. In the second corner sat Josh’s computer, flicked on, with the flying toasters happily progressing from one corner of the monitor to another. She jiggled the mouse, and found there a letter.

As she read the letter, she realized how deeply Josh had been caught in between two great forces. On one side had been obligation, and on the other had been friendship. He had forsaken one for the other, in a dungeon several dimensions from the place where she was standing. *He was always my friend first...if I’d just been honest with him*, she thought. The thought grieved her.

She took a picture off the wall above his bed. It was a photo one of their friends had snapped at Sober Grad, and then framed for Josh. Katze had a similar picture, shot later that night, that had the two of them in a mock swordfight with Nerf swords somebody had brought to Sober Grad. But Josh’s photo caught the two of them just smiling for the camera, best friends forever.

She looked at the two innocent faces, and just could not stop the tears from coming. She sat there on Josh’s bed for a rather long period of time, holding the framed photograph, with tears dripping down her face. Her heart cried out for the friendship destroyed.

The earth continued spinning and meandering its way around the sun, baseball games continued to be played, and picnics continued to invite ants. But for one girl in Berkeley, grief was the only emotion there was.

The grief over Josh's death turned into a general malaise. Katze would rarely go outside, relying on Greg Wu to go get groceries and do other things for her while she moped around the apartment. She thought briefly of taking summer classes but couldn't muster the energy.

Greg took to living in the apartment with Katze, afraid that every moment he was away that she would do something risky and stupid. But Katze was not that depressed. Sure, she wasn't going anywhere or seeing anybody, but oftentimes Greg would come home to find piles of paper all scrawled all over, as if Katze was trying to make some sort of decision and couldn't fit all the possibilities in her head.

This combined with the occasional strange visitor (Greg thought of the loud screechy short one that seemed to pop in from nowhere) whom Katze would quickly escort back to her room, closing the door behind them, made him wonder what was going on. Combining this with the mysterious disappearance of Josh, Greg began to wonder if maybe Katze was on drugs. He didn't know how to go about voicing this suspicion to Katze, though.

One night after the short screechy one showed up again, Greg's curiosity won out over his respect for Katze's privacy. He took a water glass from the kitchen, cursing himself for not bringing some of his nifty electronic gadgets that did the same thing over to Katze's place. He crept up upon the door, and placed his glass to the wall, hoping for something that would explain Katze's malaise and weird activities.

The voices through the glass were hollow and scratchy, but he could tell the two apart. The lower voice was Katze's, so the higher pitched one must be her strange visitor.

"Oy, Katze," said the strange voice. "I wish you'd conk out of this. We could use you."

The voice he'd recognized as Katze gave out something that sounded like a sigh. "Remember how I used to whine about how useless I was? Hell, now I'm even more useless. I don't have any idea what I'm doing and I'm afraid my temper's gonna get the best of me and I'm gonna kill someone. I already killed Josh through my inaction, but I'd kill through action too. I don't know. Let me have the time."

"Katze! And how are you going to break out of this?"

"I don't know. I haven't been able to see that far. It's like those magic eight balls. 'Answer unclear.' I'm not sure when, or even if, I'm going to return to active duty."

"You are wallowing in your own self-piety."

"Self-pity. And sure I am. But I'm not sure what else to do."

"You know, it's not just VR that you need to be concerned about. The Grand Admiral has been hinting rather obtusely that your vacation needs to come to an end."

"Sigh. Try to hold him off for another month, willya? Another month, I should know what the hell is going on, and whether I can continue on within the Jihad. One more month. Please?"

"Okay, Katze. Good luck."

"Hey, I'll be alright in the long run, just in a bit of a funk." The door suddenly flung open, and Greg's eavesdropping device was pointed right about Katze's stomach.

"Your stomach sounds good. Nice and healthy," Greg said, as he attempted to hide the waterglass.

Katze looked at him oddly, and Greg feared for a moment that Katze's infamous temper would flare up at him. Then a smile cracked her face, and he saw her laughing for the first time in days. "My stomach sounds fine. This is what he says when I catch him eavesdropping." She laughed some more. "I knew you were there the whole time, Greg, and I'm about to explain some really weird things to you. Honest to god, it's the whole truth, though."

Greg blinked and pulled back out the water glass. "You're on drugs?" he said, hoping and praying he was wrong.

Katze snorted. "Of course not! Is that what you thought this whole time?"

Greg grinned a sheepish grin. "Yes."

"But I want you sitting down before I start telling you this story, as you're probably at first going to think that whom-ever thought this up had to be hitting the crack pretty hard. But I swear to you that this is 100% honest truth."

The two of them walked into the living room, where Greg took a seat on the couch. Katze pulled out a video tape, stuck it in the player, and stood behind him, remote in hand. She frowned, and then went in the kitchen and pulled two bottles of Jolt out of the fridge. "You're going to need this."

Greg frowned at the Jolt, and then looked back at the TV. What he saw upon the screen was an ordinary kids show. Sure, he and his friends bashed it all the time, but...

Katze hit the pause button. The scene froze with a great big purple dinosaur right on center screen. "This goes off in a second, I can't stand this. Josh had the tape lying around, makes for a bit of a good object lesson. This is Public Enemy Number One."

Greg had just taken a swig of his jolt when Katze said that. He immediately proceeded to spray it all over the coffee table, the television set, and himself. Once he got his throat clear, he howled, "Barney? A children's television character is

Public Enemy Number One? Have you completely lost it?"

Katze shook her head, and removed power from the television. "I wish it was that simple. Then everything could be explained in terms that I'm clinically insane and should go directly to the local looney bin. You may decide, once I'm done talking to you, that this is the best course of action. But I'll tell you now—" there was a slight pause, then Katze resumed speaking, "—there isn't a looney bin or jail cell in this world that'll hold me."

The first part of the speech came from behind him and to the left. The second part came from in front of him, and he blinked to see Katze standing casually next to the television set in front of him. "What the..."

"There isn't a place in your belief system for the unpredictable to happen?" Katze asked. Greg just sat there in near shock. "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' But this is going to explain a lot of weirdness, Greg. It was either this or break off my friendship with you, and I couldn't do that. So you'll have to hear me out, okay?"

"I was born, not as I've often claimed in the small town of Weaverville, but in Rhye, Marraketh, a few realities over from this one..."

"So, there are other universes," Greg said. "I mean, people have talked about it, but nobody's been able to prove it either way. And now you're telling me that not only do they exist and can hold habitable life, but that you're from one of these universes? I don't know, Katze. You're going to have to offer more credible evidence."

"What is credibility?" Katze shrugged. "What evidence can I offer you that would make you believe? This is something that you'll have to take on faith for once. Trust me, please?"

Greg looked at the earnestly pleading face of somebody who had been his friend since the first year of college, and relented. "This is strange, Katze. I'm being forced to change everything I once believed to be true, as well as most of my freshman physics classes. You know this, convincing me isn't going to be the easiest things."

"Alright, accept for a moment that I'm from Somewhere Else. Okay. Now, I've joined what might be considered a terrorist group. We like to think of ourselves as freedom fighters, and that's probably the most accurate way of thinking of us. We call ourselves the Jihad, and our primary task is that of defending the world against the Wyrms and his minions."

"Who's this Wyrms? Barney?"

"Yeah. Strange to think of a children's television character as an evil out to destroy us all, I know. I wish it hadn't come to that."

"Okay, Katze, this is a crazy story...I'm trusting you, that you're right, and God knows I'll never look at Barney in the same way again...but do you have any proof whatsoever of this? Something tangible? Please, Katze?"

Katze sighed. "No...I don't have much in the way of proof. It's not really a good idea to carry things that easily identify one as Jihaddi...except..." Katze unclipped a case off her belt, and slid what appeared to be a PDA out of it. With a quick motion, it was handed to him to look at it. Greg's jaw dropped. "Where did you get this, Katze?"

"JihadLinker. Standard issue to all Jihaddi."

Greg examined it. "We're nowhere close to being able to make things that small. We keep trying and hit failure...and you guys have managed to do it. Amazing. Hell...just amazing." He handed the Linker back to Katze, who folded it back up and put it away. "Alright, Katze. I know you don't lie to your closest friends, and I appreciate the honesty in knowing what's going on. Although this probably means that I get to spend the rest of my life glancing over shoulders and making sure nobody's following me."

"You know, Greg, if you want to join up, I've got contacts with the R&D labs that make stuff like the 'Linkers.'"

"No...I'd much rather try to make it on my own in the real world. I don't want to enter some world of cloak and dagger secrecy. I just have two final questions for you. One...where's Josh?"

Katze's face twisted in a sad expression. "Dead. Shot in the back with a crossbow bolt a couple of realities over from this one. As he was letting me out of a cell in which I was being held..." She looked at her shoes, and whispered, "He proved he was a friend to me..."

Greg nodded. There wasn't much else that could be said to that. "We have to go on, sometimes. Continue fighting. Continue breathing. Continue struggling for what we know is right. Katze, you need to go back to the Jihad, a cause is probably what you need right now."

"No, it isn't. I don't want to go back to that, not without knowing who I am and where I stand in this world."

"Which leads nicely into my next question. Why so much paper? Trying to make a decision on whether to leave or not?"

"Yeah. I don't know what to do anymore. Quit, and do what with my life? I guess I could help you, but I'd still have to watch my back every second of every day...or go back, and be changed by the whole bloody experience, and perhaps become so blinded with hate, I don't see what I've become. I can't let that happen!"

"You're neglecting a third option here, I think. What about going home?"

“Home in what sense?”

Greg thought about the question for a second. “Both senses, I guess. I was thinking Chico, because you’re going to want to see your dad, right? But I guess you ought to set yourself straight with your other home, too. You took another month. Take the time to see where you’re from, and maybe it’ll help you see where you’re going...at least, I hope so.”

“You’re right. Guess I’ll head onto Chico first, and then go onwards from there to Marraketh, and see what there is to see...” Katze looked up from her shoes. “And Greg?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for caring.”

The summer in Chico was like a blast furnace compared to the relative coolness of Berkeley. The land was dry and parched, and in the open, unirrigated fields, the starthistle and the dried foxtails reigned supreme.

A figure sat in a patch of shade, resting, listening only to a nearby lawn sprinkler being ran in the heat of the day. The sound of metal hitting metal *ka-CHINK ka-CHINK ka-CHINK* every time the sprinkler turned led the figure to contemplate how very silly humanity was.

Katze sighed. It was too easy to think of humanity as a them these days. And Dad hadn’t helped.

It had started well enough. David Brenner was delighted to see his daughter home for once. He immediately started preparing her favorite dinner, and asking how school went. Katze listened idly, until his dad found the one sore question. “How is Josh? I don’t see him with you, which surprises me.”

Katze’s memory flashed back to Josh crumpled upon the ground in a dungeon several dimensions over and she winced. Luckily for her, David’s back was to her. How was she going to tell her dad the truth? He was so depressingly normal. “He’s, uh...fine. He stayed in Berkeley to finish up some summer classes.”

David nodded and went back to working on dinner, mercifully sparing Katze the rest of the third degree. Katze quietly fretted to herself how she was going to handle this. David Brenner had been understanding of the interesting scrapes she got herself into as a kid, but she wasn’t sure he was going to understand this one.

But then again, he had met the two strangers that had turned out to be her real parents. Perhaps he’d have sympathy for her, if she reminded him. But then again, who knew?

She waited for an opportune time to bring it up to her father, but the time failed to present itself. She caught David giving her weird looks, as if she had grown an extra head or something. She finally asked him what was wrong with her.

“Nothing, nothing at all,” he hurriedly said. Then he took another look at her and blinked. “But there’s something missing and I can’t seem to place what it is.”

Katze grinned. “You might as well be asking how I can hear you, Dad.”

He looked confused and then stared straight at her. “Oh my...” He turned his head skyway. “Oh God, you know how I prayed and prayed, thank you for answering my prayers.”

Katze started to squirm a bit on the couch. Religion was an uncomfortable subject between her and David these days. Since she had gone away to college, he had fallen into an oddball group that believed the Rapture was imminent, and that devils actually resided inside people. Katze, on the other hand, had picked up on the Berkeley agnosticism, and didn’t hold much stance on religion.

She then thought of the experience she had in a dungeon several realities over. Where did the line get drawn? Was her father’s religious experience anything like the one she had? There was no other name for having four dead Marrakethians appear in your cell.

She grudgingly decided to let her dad have his beliefs, as she realized she could no longer call herself an agnostic. Granted, if she even dared to mention her beliefs to any normal — including the one in the chair across for her — she will have herself a one way ticket to the nearest looney bin. But she had to try to explain. He’d understand, or so she hoped he would.

Two days passed. Katze went to church with her father and sat in the pew watching the people as everybody else worshipped. She attempted to understand what was going on when people started screaming odd things and running around the sanctuary waving flags. Finally, she couldn’t take it anymore, and got up as Pastor Bill entered the sanctuary to cheers. She watched to see if anybody noticed, but all eyes were facing front on the new entrance. It bothered Katze quite a bit to see all these people — supposedly rational, thinking creatures — give in so easily to a smiling face and the so-called ‘Word of God.’

It was four or five hours later when David Brenner finally came out of the church. Katze had her nose buried in an Asimov novel she’d found in the local used bookstore, but she put it away as she saw her dad approaching the car.

He got in, put the keys in the ignition. “Well...”

“Well, what?”



“Why are you reading that trash?”

*Because it's not trash?* Katze thought, but decided not to vocalize it. “And what would you have me read?”

“Maybe if you read the Bible once in a while, you'd understand what was going on in there.”

“I understand perfectly well what was going on in there. And it's a shame that you've managed to turn yourselves into such an odd mockery of religion. I mean, it's church, not a Chicago Bulls home game.”

David nearly broke the key in the ignition. “You know, I'm tired of your lip. You seemed interested in going with me, and then you walk out before the sermon. I have never been so embarrassed to be your father in my life. I cannot believe you would do that to me. You, my only child, and you make a mockery of everything I believe in. Now believe me, miss, you'd better come clean about what you have done the past couple years in Berkeley or I'll throw you out of the house.”

Katze winced. It was one of those now or never moments. “Okay, but let's go home. I'd like to talk about this in private. Maybe a walk through the neighbor's orchard?” she offered, attempting to make a peace offering. Her dad loved to walk through the orchard.

David closed his eyes and nodded. “That will work.”

The rest of the ride home was cloaked in silence.

The trees swayed gently in the breeze as Katze and her dad walked down the neat rows of the neighbor's almond orchard. Katze gestured, and her father nodded. “You see, Dad, this is what I've been up to. I've gotten a job helping to fight the Ultimate Evil...”

“Satan?”

“Well, no, not really, but if it helps for you to understand that way, then, sure you can think of it that way. He takes on the guise of a children's television character — Barney, you know, the purple dinosaur?”

“Pastor Bill said that Barney was evil, because of all the magic and stuff.”

Katze groaned. This wasn't gonna go well. But she had to work with it. Maybe some of her old dad, the kind and understanding one was hidden somewhere under there. “Right. Well, basically, it goes like this, Dad. You remember the strangers that brought me to your doorstep? The ones you told me about when I turned sixteen?”

“Okay. I remember them. Odd people, they were...they spoke with a strange accent. Almost perfect English. They refused to tell me your name, though, he said, ‘Our name, dear sir, is Katze.’ The only place he bungled the language.”

“There was a reason for that, Dad. A reason I didn't understand at the time, but I do now. You see, the couple was from a place called Marraketh.”

“Marraketh. I've heard that name before.”

“You've probably heard of Marrakesh. A lot of people confuse the -th and the -sh sounds. Marrakesh is a city in Morocco. Marraketh, on the other hand...” Katze paused, not believing she was about to say this. “...is, ummm, a few dimensions over.”

“Pastor Bill said there is only this Earth.”

“Pastor Bill is wrong, Dad. I've been there, it's as real as here is. And that's where I'm from. The people you met were Tyrene and Horetia Katze, my real parents. I KNOW this sounds farfetched, Dad, but you met them.”

“I don't know if I can believe this.”

“I don't know how to...okay, actually, I do know how to prove it to you. Watch closely.” Katze concentrated with a nod and then blinked at the slightly different perspective in the orchard. “See?”

The look on David Brenner's face went from confused to panicked to angry. “DEEEEEEEEE-MON!”

“What....Dad! Listen! It's still me!”

“Demon, demon, begone from this body! Leave it, and leave my daughter alone!”

“Dad!”

“In the name of Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Savior, I command thee, Satan's minion, to leave now!”

“DAD! LISTEN TO ME! I'M NOT A DEMON!”

“You're a persistent one, demon. You will not tempt me. Leave!”

“Okay, fine, Dad, I'll leave! But I'm not...”

But David Brenner had turned his back on his only child and refused to acknowledge that Katze was even speaking to him anymore. Katze turned towards the house. “I'm getting my things. And then I'll leave.” She carefully attempted to keep her voice from breaking, but it cracked on the last word.

David's final words were said in an ice cold voice. “Begone, demon. You are no longer welcome in my house, even though you wear my daughter's body.”

The words struck Katze hard even in the shade. She'd been walking for nearly an hour now, as David refused to even give her a ride to the bus station. So she had begun the trek, mulling over those final words. What had she done wrong?

She got up from her spot in the shade, scowling at the sound of metal on metal. “Stupid humans,” she whispered, and

continued the trek towards the station.

As she was coming into the downtown area, a figure stepped out of a doorway. "Tjarlin," a simple voice spoke.

Katze turned. "Who dares address me by that name?"

The figure stepped more fully out in the sunlight. "I do."

Katze eyed the newcomer. Tall and lanky, clothed in an odd style. His tunic was grey, with what appeared to be rank patches on the sleeves, and his pants were dark. The hands held a knotted wooden staff, worn where his hands were gripping it. The face was calm and bland, and Katze was surprised that she recognized it. "Gary? What the hell are you doing in Chico?"

The figure smiled. "Come to pick you up. And the name is Grahm, not Gary. Grahm Valkurk, associate of Mikje Mrythen and member of the Guards. And a friend."

"But...I remember you as Gary."

"Part of the exile. Gary Wilkins worked much better as an alias in this crazy world. And you're right, I was your linguistics GSI in Berkeley."

"But why?"

"There are important things coming to pass in Marraketh."

"And this has some relevance to me?"

"Perhaps. That is what the debate has been raging about. Besides, there are some people who would like to see you again, and not as a prisoner. And not when they were under the spell of the Master."

Katze sighed. "I'm really not up to it right now."

"Indeed, I can tell you are world-weary. This is a difficult world, but they have done much better at fighting off the Master. You wish to stay here and not know your place? You are angry at this world. Perhaps it is best to leave it for a while. I can't claim Marraketh is a paradise, but it is your home."

Katze looked down at her feet. "And I need to figure out my past to see what the future holds."

Grahm nodded. Katze sighed, and spoke. "Alright, Grahm. How do we get there?"

"It is a simple matter, which you will probably master by the time it comes time for you to return to this world. But for this moment, I ask that you hang on to your things, because I'll have to do you and then me." Grahm leaned on his staff. "Ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

Grahm nodded. Katze closed her eyes, bracing against a memory. And sure enough, the ground dropped out from her and she squeezed her eyes tighter, hoping Grahm had everything right.

## ***The Green Hills of Marraketh***

*"Then I could believe that I'm bound to find  
A better life than I left behind."*

—Elvis Costello/Paddy Moloney, "Long Journey Home"

Remmick Merkin, the newly named Captain of the Guard, strode into the Grey Horse. He noticed the bartender flinching and preparing to pull out the proper permits. He put up a hand. "I'm here to partake of this fine establishment, not bust it. I'm still the Remmick you all know in the long days and weeks of the resistance. Now, Tarish," he pointed to the bartender, "put away those silly permits and get me a bottle of your finest ale."

The bartender quickly put his permits away and went to fill Remmick's order. Remmick sighed. He'd been named Captain of the Guard only a week ago, the second ever in Marraketh's history. The first had been Mikje Mrythen, who now sat on the throne of Marraketh as King Mikje the First. He hadn't wanted the job, but he'd had the fairly dangerous job of leading the Marraketh Resistance against the Master, and Mikje had wanted to reward him. Besides, who else should get it? Tyrene, who'd been under the Master's spell for twenty-eight years, or Graham, who was just too quiet, and hadn't been a part of the Guard for all that long before the Master's invasion?

A hand went up at a table. "Remmick!" called a voice. Remmick looked up to see who it was, and was greeted by the sight of Rene Ewerte, the librarian and archivist at the University of Rhye. Remmick forced the scowl off his face and went to join him.

Rene grinned and shook his hand when he got to the table. "Congratulations on your promotion."

"A promotion I didn't want."

"Mikje's footsteps a bit hard to follow? I don't blame you, I wouldn't want to be Captain of the Guard meself. Now, sit, sit...I know you ordered already, 'tis hard for the Captain himself to do anything without notice. Except at the Grey Horse. People here were conditioned by twenty-eight years of resistance work out of this very bar, and learn to ignore anything."

Remmick grinned at Rene's wordiness. He'd missed the librarian's constant chatter. "And how did the Chi-Lin officials put up with you for twenty-eight years?"

Rene tilted his head. "They had to. I was a refugee. Now, come, Remmick, you didn't come to talk plesantries. You called me here for a reason. What's up? I have a library to tend to, y'know."

"We'll have to wait for Tyrene and Graham. Tyrene is more important..."

"Then we must be discussing Tjarlin, no?"

"It is odd to use that name again after so many years."

"Indeed. It is hard to believe that it's been long enough for her to grow up. Hard to believe the Master was able to control Marraketh for that long." Rene sighed. "Nearly thirty years. What do we have to show for it?"

"If we're right, the Liberator."

Remmick and Rene both jumped. Sitting in a chair at the table was Graham Valkurk. Remmick shuddered involuntarily at his sudden appearance, and wondered exactly what Mikje had seen in him so long ago. Graham was the only one of the higherups in the Guard who hadn't seemed to age a bit in the twenty-eight intervening years. Both Remmick and Tyrene had streaks of grey in their hair, and Rene had lost a lot off the top. But Graham still looked like he was in his late twenties. *Damn Mikje for taking him on and not explaining to anyone why he was so weird.*

He started to respond to Graham, but Rene had beat him to it. "Perhaps. The evidence seems to match. But we really need Tyrene here to make the decision on whether to confirm it."

"Confirmation involves bringing the Liberator home, correct?"

"Graham, I really wish you wouldn't say that yet," said Remmick. "In fact, I order you not to say that where others can hear it."

Graham shrugged. "If you order me not to tell the whole truth, I will obey, sir. But I will not lie to myself. Speaking of which, you were waiting for Tyrene. He's here."

Remmick looked up to see the door to the Grey Horse go flying open and Tyrene Katze come flying through it. He carried a few books. Remmick watched him weave through the crowd. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "Mikje keeps his Court Philosopher busier than either Tarin or Warhm did."

"Busier than the Master did?" said Rene, winking.

"I don't know. I can't completely recall that period of my life. Too fuzzy and revolting."

"Thank Kyrell for Tjarlin," Graham said, without a hint of irony.

Tyrene grinned. "Thank Tirrasan. I'm the one that got her out in the first place."

"Yeah, yeah, but it got you a one way trip to enslavement."

“Do I look enslaved to you?”

“Thank Kyrell for Tjarlin.”

“Alright, you two, break it off.” Remmick looked at Tyrene and nodded. “Indeed, we’re here to discuss Tjarlin. For reasons you all understand, Tyrene placed his daughter outside the reach of the Master, who at that time was plaguing Marraketh for reasons unknown. Because of this, the liberation of Marraketh occurred at the prophesized time, that is, almost twenty-eight years to the date of the Master’s takeover.”

“Of all the things we call Marken Yuval, the one thing he wasn’t was a fool,” Rene pointed out. “Yes, he’s remembered as probably the greatest traitor Marraketh had before the master’s takeover...but his prophecies...just amazing.”

Tyrene nodded. “Mikje has always worried about what happened to Marken. I think it was because he was so accurate with his prophecies. I’ve been walking over them with a finetoothed comb with Rene since I know both where the Katze and the Mrythen families come from...”

“I told you she was the Liberator,” Graham said quietly.

“Well...the prophecies match fairly well. I mean, the prophecy calls for somebody who is half D’wani and half of the race of the Ancients; born as the Master strove to prove his breaking point...let me check the wording of this...” Rene dug through papers on the table. “Ah ha. Here we are. ‘Not of pure D’wani nor of the Eldest/ Mixing, taking on in equal parts both races finest/ The child be born in the time of the feast/ Under the looming shadow of the purple beast.’”

Tyrene blinked. “The time of the feast? Might that be the feast of the Joining? Tjarlin was born just before the height of the Joining. And well, I don’t think it’s a surprise that the Mrythens pride themselves on being pure D’wani...I’m sure you’ve all heard Mikje crow about it. He very nearly didn’t let me marry Horetia because I \*wasn’t\* D’wani.”

Graham nodded. “I take it that you are pure Kiratyu? Do the Katzes hail from the Rhye Republic?”

“My family can trace its origins back to Grem, the silent Ancient, and one of the three founders of the Rhye Republic. Good enough for you?”

“Yes...but that prophecy could fit a lot of people, couldn’t it?” Remmick asked.

“Not statistically likely,” said Tyrene. “There’s been a lot of inbreeding between the two races, especially since the death of Dewpoint. But it shouldn’t be too hard to determine. I mean, it should simply mean taking a look around the various feasts of the years in which the Master’s spectre haunted Marraketh.”

“The problem is, we don’t have records of the time,” Rene pointed out. “The last records we have are those right up until the burning of the Library. It all depends on how you define looming. For all we know, the Liberator was born in the middle of the years in which the Master ruled this land.”

“So all we have in arguments for Tjarlin Katze as the supposed Liberator are tenuous strands of prophecy?” Remmick asked.

Two heads at the table bobbed in agreement. Remmick looked at the one figure that was shaking his head no. “Graham...I won’t bother asking you to explain why you are convinced that Tjarlin is the Liberator. However, I am going to ask how you plan to prove it to a skeptic.”

“Very simply. The prophecy states that the Liberator will hold a debate with the gods on the edge of the feared sea. He or she will then make a report to the king and the court about the direction in which Marraketh should head under their watch. If Tjarlin Katze is the Liberator, she will find herself drawn to the sea, a sea that Marrakethians fear to the bottom of their souls. But she must find herself in Marraketh before she will be called to the sea. Besides, it is time that Tjarlin returned to Marraketh not as a prisoner, but as a citizen. To meet her father who gave her up for the love of his country. To meet the grandfather that kept the resistance alive elsewhere. And to meet old friends...” Graham pulled the cap off of his head, and made a slight bow towards Remmick, “...who once risked their life to make sure that a small piece of the Marraketh we loved would not vanish from the face of this green land.”

“Alright Graham, you win. Go fetch Tjarlin and return her home. And we shall see.”

Remmick then eyed the bottle of ale. “Meeting is over; anybody want some ale?”

The trip was less disorienting this time, Katze thought to herself, as she opened her eyes to a rock wall as opposed to the brick and mortar one she had been looking at prior to the hop. At least, this time, she hadn’t completely blacked out for the trip.

And it was quite a trip. It was only a few seconds, perhaps, but it felt at first like a fall through nothingness, almost like the times one dove into the water and found freezing cold water just below the surface, and it was all one could do to keep holding one’s breath. And just as that happened, there was a soft jolt and the realization that the trip was over, that this was Marraketh, and she was a citizen, not a prisoner.

Yet, there was a small tickle at the back of her mind that there was something wrong, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. She frowned.

There was a small *poof* and Graham appeared, still clutching his staff like a good luck charm. "I trust it went well?" he asked upon seeing her. "You're frowning. Is there anything wrong?"

Katze tried to ignore the tickle and smiled. "Everything's fine. This trip was a lot smoother than the last one."

"Good, good. There is much to do and much to see. If we hurry, we may still be able to catch Captain Merkin at the Grey Horse."

"Remmick?"

"Yes."

"Then, let's go!"

Graham nodded, and turned the corner. Katze followed him and looked up at the sign above the door. It was stained wood and rather new, with a picture of a horse running, and the words "The Grey Horse" stenciled carefully. Katze was awfully surprised to see the sign in English, and then looked again. It was in standard Marrakethian...so why had she mistook it for the wrong language? Weird things were going on here.

But Graham had not hesitated and had entered. Katze took a deep breath and pushed open the wood door, noticing the worn polished look of the thousands who must have entered before her. History was weighing on her shoulders in a way it never had on Earth — on Earth, history stayed out of the way, in the books, where it belonged.

The door pushed open, and she stepped in. It was as if the whole room had gone silent, and most of the faces turned to her. At a table in the back of the room, she spied Graham talking animatedly to a Remmick dressed uncomfortably in a jet black uniform with insignia she couldn't place and the armband of the Frontier Guard (in the right colors), a bald chipper man whom she had never met, and a face that looked eerily like the one she stared at in the mirror every morning. [If there was ever any denial that you're a Marrakethian, it's gone now,] she thought to herself, and made her way over to the table.

Graham smiled his quiet smile at her. "Tjarlin. I'd like to welcome you to the conspirator's table. You know Remmick, the cheerful guy is Rene Ewerte, curator of the Rhye University library, and that is your father, Tyrene Katze."

Tyrene stood and looked at her, and Katze got the eerie feeling of looking in a mirror again, as he studied her. And then he wrapped his arms around her, with a hug. "Tjarlin...Tjarlin...if only your mother were here to see you. I'm sure she would be as proud as I am."

Maybe she was home again. Just maybe.

It was hard to adjust to being back in Marraketh, and getting to know the father she didn't know she had. It was doubly tricky with the incident with David being so fresh in her mind. But Tyrene was nice enough to talk of the days before the beast, and all the destruction he had seen. And she was beginning to see the outlines of the old man who had once watched over her.

She finally got up enough nerve to ask him. He smiled, a quiet smile Katze recognized. "Indeed. Although it wasn't my doing. I watched you carefully, while the shell here went through the motions for the Master."

"And you weren't upset?"

"No, you did wonderful. I could never be upset with you. Especially since you've grown to resemble your mother."

"But I look like you. I swear, I felt I was looking in the mirror."

Tyrene walked over to a small trunk, and unlocked it. "I don't know why the Beast let me keep it. Maybe because it had no meaning to me any more." He pulled a small painting out of the trunk. Without a word, he passed it to Katze, and then turned her towards a mirror. Katze stared at the painting, and then at the mirror, and was shocked at the resemblance.

"Everybody always accused us of being brother and sister," Tyrene said quietly behind her. "But I think your slight resemblance falls more to your mother than to me. Your father is a humble philosopher and mathematician, your mother was a poet and a creator...and you are the product of that mix. You are already something special."

Katze continued staring into the mirror, seeing the pensive frown spread over his face. Something else was going on here, but she couldn't see where it was going. So to assuage him, she turned around, hugged him, and said, "Thank you, Father...for standing by me even when you couldn't."

The library windows sparkled in the mid-afternoon sun. Dust motes hovered in the air as Rene Ewerte deftly wove his way between them. He carefully picked up some books off tables where careless undergraduates had scattered them, and walked them to their proper shelves before continuing on with his first duty — helping a lost patron.

Katze, the lost patron, admired his loving touch of the books, and his deft handling. The detour to shelf the books had taken no time at all, and he had even managed to accumulate a couple books while he was weaving his way through the shelves. *A skill most Earth librarians would kill for*, Katze thought. *But then again, the best already have it.*

But Rene was muttering to himself again. "Lesse. I'm gonna let you into the vault, I've got a couple good books on Marrakethian mythology here, and of course, Marken Yuvall's *Prophecium* and Grem and Kyrill's letters on the unification,

and there's a few of Grem's books that probe a bit deeper into the Rhye Republic. I don't know how copies of them got to Chi-Lin, but I should be grateful they did."

Katze nodded and stared at a couple of the heavy books the librarian was juggling. She looked around the library as Rene juggled a few more books. Most of the shelves were bare, and the words of her father's prison journal weighed heavily on her mind. Rene added a couple more books to the pile, and looked at the book on the top. "Ahh, you know *Prophecium* is a best seller in Chi-Lin? Funny for a book that deals primarily with Marraketh."

He carried the books past a bored security guard and into a well lit and heavily armoured room. He set the books down at a study nook. "They say this is the study nook Tyrone Grehlich used," he said.

"Tyrone Grehlich?" Katze asked, confused.

"I'm sorry, I forgot you have no Marrakethian history background. The first king of Marraketh. You'll read more about him. Anyway, let me go through this stack of books. For starters..." He handed her a book. "A history of Marraketh. I'm rather proud of this one; I wrote it." He smiled. "It's the closest you're going to come to an overview of the subject, it was my project I chose when I first became a librarian here. Updated copy. The last chapter has to do with you and your merry band."

Katze nodded. *Damn, I don't know the history, and I already am history.*

Rene continued. "The next things that are good to read are this intro to the Marrakethian belief system. There's some pretty strange beliefs here, this should provide a decent explanation. And a lot of *Prophecium* depends on you being familiar with the primary figures..."

He started rattling on, and Katze held up a hand. "I'll find out when I read them. I know a bit about skimming, and I think I can skim just as well in Marrakethian as in English."

Rene grinned. "Indeed. I'll be here if you need anything from the vault or have any questions."

Katze nodded, and turned herself to the pile of books in front of her. As she flipped to the first page of Rene's book, she caught the librarian watching her. She turned back to the book, attempting to concentrate on this material.

Days passed at this pursuit, and the stack of books kept growing ever higher as Rene kept adding to them. Katze would eye *Prophecium* in envy, and turn to another book. For some reason, as much as she wanted to read it, she could not. It was a minor problem though. A much more horrifying thought was working its way into her mind as she investigated the Code of Ethics.

A frown crossed her face. Maybe it was a coincidence that the three major events in Marrakethian history shared a common date. But the tsunami had ripped through Dewpoint, and the Master had completed his takeover of Marraketh on the same day — the eve of the Feast of the Joining.

What was it about the feast of the Joining that was so important? And why were there two attempts to destroy Marraketh at what should be the happiest time — a celebration of its founding? What power was attempting to break Marraketh? The more she read, and talked it over with Rene, she found out two things. Gods were real here, and they liked to interfere with the plans of mortals. Interestingly enough, the only gods that really concerned themselves with Marraketh were the D'wani gods: Tirrasan, The Man Across the Sea, the Founder of the Race; and Kyrill Hrdek, greatest of the D'wani Empresses and She Who Will Rule Again. There was a second set of gods above these ones, but there was frightfully little about them. Luckily, they didn't seem to concern themselves with Marraketh much.

Interestingly enough, the Ancients had gods, but they didn't seem to interfere with their worshipers. Hero worship was often practiced by the ancients, and she smiled as she came across Yulin, Hyuke and Grem in her readings. But apparently the D'wani gods were real, if she was to believe the reports of them interfering at opportune times...and she couldn't shake her own religious experience. Going with the Berkeley Agnosticism was no longer an option.

And the conclusion she was coming about gods and the Code spooked even her.

Katze sat in the garden on the castle grounds, thinking about all the Marrakethian history she had absorbed in the last week. Most of it had been Rene's book, and Rene had taken an awful lot of time to explain to her the parts that became confusing. He also talked at length about Chi-Lin and what an interesting place it had been to live. Katze wasn't so sure at some of his descriptions if it was really all that nice of a place, but it was interesting to get both the Marrakethian and Chi-Linian histories.

She had been puzzled by some pieces of the history, though. Like, if it were true that the D'wani believed that Tirrasan controlled the sea, then why did they still continue to worship him despite the overwhelming evidence that their god had betrayed them? Katze was puzzled. She'd asked the question to Rene, who had thought about it for a second and then said "Faith is a mysterious thing."

She liked the balding librarian. He always knew the right book, he knew his way around his library, and he talked of its almost-destruction with pain written on his face. Anybody who felt as strongly about books as they did about people was a

friend of hers, Katze decided. The other thing she liked about him is that he agreed to call her simply Katze. Not the lady Katze, not Tjarlin, but Katze. Just as she got called at home. Him and Grahm were the only ones that had agreed to the request. Remmick still called her the lady Katze, and Tyrene and most other Marrakethians insisted on calling her Tjarlin.

She knew Tjarlin was her given name, at least in this land, but it annoyed her. It was always as if they were referring to somebody else. And with the whole thing about it being concealed for her until recently, it seemed that unrealistic expectations were attached to that name. Tjarlin Katze, daughter of Tyrene, descendant of the King himself...god, couldn't the people in this place get a life instead of being so concerned about one little action she had done?

Katze sighed. And it wasn't like anybody understood, either. Grahm muttered something about prophecy when she talked to him about it, but didn't care to explain; Rene at least listened sympathetically, but really couldn't figure out a solution; and Tyrene...

Her relationship with Tyrene had been interesting thus far, and that's all she wanted to think about that. The words David had screamed at her still rung in her ears, and she was afraid it was getting in the way. But she didn't know how to bring it up to him, afraid that any words may hurt his feelings.

"Is this seat taken?"

Katze looked up from all her thinking to see an older man standing next to the bench. Her first thought was "Professor Schmidt," but she then remembered that wasn't his real name. She then saw Remmick hovering in the background, and put two and two together. She smiled. "Not at all. You must be Mikje, but forgive me if I refer to you as Professor Schmidt."

"For fifteen Earth years I was referred to as that, so it will probably be answered. And you must be the infamous Tjarlin Mrythen Katze."

"Katze, please."

Mikje nodded. "Indeed. You are probably used to that name over this one. Just as I am used to being referred to as Captain, and not King."

Katze sat quietly. Mikje looked at her and continued. "Rene informs me that you are doing a lot of studying of Marrakethian history."

Katze nodded and looked at Remmick standing uncomfortably, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. She felt sorry for the guy. "Yeah. Trying to understand where I'm from, American history doesn't help me understand this place." She grinned at that response.

Mikje laughed. "And Rene is trying to get you to his level in two weeks or less?" Katze watched him, without taking his eyes off her, make a funny gesture in Remmick's direction. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Remmick leave. "Anyway, if you need any help, you know you can ask somebody who's seen a bunch of it."

"How did that happen, anyway?" Katze asked. "You living so long, I mean."

Mikje took his gaze off her and stared up at the sky. "I don't know. If I knew, I wouldn't have to defend myself from accusations I fell in league with Marken Yuvall." He glanced back in the direction where Remmick had been. "I didn't align myself with him. I only met him once in my life."

Katze looked at the pensive face and the sudden realization of what history can do to you. She flashed back to an entry she had come across in her research, a small notation at the end of Marraketh's population book. In careful print, the notation gave a string of numbers, which Katze presumed was the date, and then following that, "Tjarlin Mrythen Katze Rhyemu, Tyrene Kadan Katze Rhyemuyu ak Horetia Mrythen Katze Rhyemuyu d'wande ak kirat d'wan."

*My place is here, and his place is here. The exile he suffered willingly was the same one that I'm trying to come to grips with.* She looked into the face and saw the soft gray hair, the wrinkling face...and steel-blue eyes that had seen much in their years. "Indeed. You'll have to excuse me if I admit that name is only a name in the history books, and I don't really understand his great crime."

She watched a stormcloud of anger cross his face, and him struggle briefly to get it under control. He finally composed himself. "Marken Yuvall was a traitor. A rogue agent of K'lin who attempted to destroy the high-minded ideals of the Code of Ethics. It was lucky we were able to exile him when we did, or Marraketh would be no more than a province of barbarous, uncivilized K'lin. As it is, he nearly destroyed us."

Katze nodded. "And he believed in the legends surrounding Kyrill?"

"Yes. Everybody knows that the Old Man Across the Sea is the founder and protector of the D'wani Race. He came to the Takatyu as a god, and forgave the man who tried to kill him, and then molded that tribe into the D'wani, the chosen ones — his children. Kyrill was a genius, yes, but so was Grem. And they were both mortal. They're long dead. This 'she who will rule again' is just wishful thinking on the parts of traitors and fools!"

Katze tried not to frown and decided to keep her private musings from herself. But Mikje looked up. "Ahh, good Remmick. Thank you."

She followed his gaze to find Remmick pushing a wheelchair, probably salvaged from Earth by the way it clashed with

the rest of the decor. Stainless steel just didn't go with the whole medieval motif. She swept her eyes upward, to see who Mikje wanted her to meet, and found herself staring into a familiar pair of eyes. Her jaw dropped, and her gaze dropped to his hands, where she got a second shock — a bouquet of golden poppies.

"It isn't illegal to pick poppies in Marraketh. They're all over the place." said the man in the wheelchair.

Katze shook her head to clear it, and then gave the man in the wheelchair a huge hug. "Josh!" she said, in obvious pleasure. "You're not dead!"

"Thank your friends — the tall one with the weird eyes and the short one who carries a keyboard around. Did I mention you have odd friends? Anyway, they patched me up as best they could, and then a couple people found me and got me first class medical care back home. Which is where I'll be allowed to stay any day now."

Katze smiled. "Good, good. Your room is still open. And Greg was asking about you. He knows about this place."

"Really?"

The two fell so deeply into conversation, that they didn't notice Mikje and Remmick walking away together to leave the two of them alone.

"Rene?"

"Yes?"

Katze stabbed a finger in the Ledger of Marraketh. "Can you explain date formats to me?"

Rene walked behind her and stared at the entry. "What, trying to figure out your birthdate?"

Katze let a sheepish grin cross her face and nodded. Rene looked a little closer at the date. "Ahhh...hmmm, lets see here. The first seven numbers are the date, the second four are the time. You'll have to pardon us, we have crude methods here, and only record to the minute."

Katze nodded. "Even with the technological advances on Earth, they didn't bother to be that accurate."

Rene smiled. "The K'linmu do tend to be anal about accuracy, I noticed... anyway... that date is ten days into the month of Agamon in the year 534. The next month is D'Kta. It used to have another name, but since the Joining, the month has been D'Kta. Roughly translated it would be "Into One", but Kta is an ambiguous word in Marrakethian. The feast of the Joining occurs on the first day of D'Kta and continues through to the fifth day."

Katze nodded. Rene continued. "Agamon is a word that means Fracture. It is generally considered a bad month to go to war or complete a deal. Which is why the folks involved in the Joining held out until the first day of the new month. But the month has not only negative portents."

"Because, in D'wani, the word Agamon also means Journey."

"Indeed. In specific, the Journey from their homeland. Often used in the sense of Exile. The Ancients picked up the word to describe their disagreement with the tribe that would later become known as Chi-Lin. But an exile is filled with bitterness, disappointment, and hope. It is fitting the Master chose to scatter us to the wind on the last day of Agamon."

"And what day is it now?"

"It's the middle of the month of D'Kta. The...well, Remmick says you arrived on the tenth day of Agamon, which is your birthdate. I don't think that was coincidental...and it is on the eve of the Feast of the Joining. Roughly two weeks prior to it..."

Rene went silent. Katze watched him stand there, nearly stricken with what he had said. Finally he managed to choke out an "Excuse me," and left the situation.

Katze sat down at the table where she had been working and stared at the notation in the book. This was her past, this should have been her country, but by evil deeds she had her own personal agamon, her own exile. She quietly whispered, "I do not hope to hope again..." and reached out for the copy of *Prophecium*.

Only to have it snatched by another hand before she could grab it.

She looked up, annoyed. "I was gonna read...oh, hello, Grahm."

He stood there with the same bland look he'd always had, but with more motion in his eyes than Katze had seen before. "The answer lies in Dewpoint," he said.

"Dewpoint? But wasn't Dewpoint destroyed?"

"Yes and no. The city itself was destroyed. The warrens underneath the city were not. The waters receded before the flooding became a problem."

"But nobody lives in Dewpoint. What about the sea-fear?"

"The Society of Mages lives there. They do not have much contact with the sea, and they have learned how best to ignore it, or at least make it so the sea fears them as much as they fear the sea."

"Sounds interesting. There's not much in Rhye for me beyond these dusty books."

Grahm simply nodded. "There is much that awaits in Dewpoint. Besides, Kendren has requested your presence."



Katze stared at the shelf of books, ran her thoughts through the last two weeks. She moved her gaze to her hands, and the sight of chains on them ran through her head. She looked up at Graham. "The answer lies in Dewpoint, no?"

As Graham and Katze walked out of the library, Rene watched them, recalling a reference book on cults in Chi-Lin he had read while he was there, and he wondered why the name Graham used sounded so familiar. "It couldn't be..." he whispered, and pulled out a piece of paper upon which to write his colleague at the Chi-Lin library.

Rene ran into the small conference room. Mikje looked up from his discussion with Tyrene and Remmick, and eyed the librarian.

"I'm sorry," Rene said between gasps of breath. "I got a letter from Chi-Lin this afternoon, I've been trying to correlate it to the files I have. Has Katze left yet?"

"She left with Graham this afternoon. Shall I send a party after them?" Remmick said, pushing the chair out from under him.

"No time. Pray that Graham was right."

"What's going on, Rene?" Mikje asked.

"I got a letter from Chi-Lin, the librarian I worked for there. He and I spent a lot of time over the last twenty years going over the stuff from the vault. Anyway, I wrote him to find out what happened to Marken Yuvall..."

"And?" Mikje asked, looking suddenly very pale.

"He didn't die, Mikje. We've been believing all these years that he was dead, but he's not. It's...complicated. He told his followers that he will return with the Liberator in the advance guard for Kyrill. And then nobody knows what will happen to him. He will have been in place to lead the Liberator to the sea..."

Tyrene looked up from the paperwork he was examining. "Tjarlin said something about Graham and her going to Marsanyew. It was a passing comment, I didn't think much of it...but..."

Rene looked pained. "Then we'd better hope like hell that Katze is the Liberator of Marraketh, for if she is not, Tirrasan will wipe Marraketh off the map."

Mikje shook his head. "That's impossible. Atirrasan would do no such thing. He loves Marraketh."

"Dammit, Mikje, you've seen the truth before. You know damn well it will be one of your descendants. That's what I was correlating, I was looking for the transcript of Marken's arrest interrogation. The one in which he said, 'Somebody in this room will meet me when the Liberator returns. And he will be surprised.' I went through that interrogation record, Mikje. You are the only one that's still alive."

Remmick listened to the exchange of words between Mikje and Rene. "Rene...if you can't back that up, right now, I will have to arrest you and charge you with verbal assault of the King."

Rene slumped into a chair. "I cannot, Remmick. Not beyond the tenuous strands of prophecy and that arrest record." He reached into the bag, and handed it to Remmick. "The thing is, there was one other thing my friend from Chi-Lin sent me. It's their file on Marken Yuvall...aka Graham Valkurk."

Utter silence. Then Mikje exploded. "That's IMPOSSIBLE. I checked Graham's loyalty to Marraketh."

"The one thing Marken Yuvall never was was a fool. You know that, Mikje."

"He was a traitor. And Graham is no traitor."

"No. I do not think Graham was a traitor. Then again, I am not sure that Marken was all that much of one either. And you told me yourself about the magic Graham performed to expose Thalin."

"That doesn't prove anything. If I wanted to, I could prove Tjarlin herself was Marken Yuvall."

"No, you can't. Mikje, will you please get past your irrationality on this subject? Graham has not aged a lick in thirty years, Mikje! Look around you, is Tyrene still 35? Is Remmick still 38? Am I still 46? We've aged. Even you, who somehow have escaped most of the ravages of time, has obviously aged a bit. Unless you really did throw your hat in with Marken and are afraid of it being exposed after all these years."

"Remmick, arrest him."

Tyrene spoke. "Mikje, you're making a mistake."

"Shut up, Tyrene, before you get thrown in with him. Remmick, I gave you a direct order."

Rene stood and held out his arms for Remmick to put the chains on. "Indeed, Remmick, we must not ignore an order from His Royal Highness."

Mikje scowled. Rene smiled at him as Remmick started marching him out of the room. Rene spoke carefully, letting Mikje hear his words. "This is the choice you make, friend. The consolation, if you're wrong, we're only going to drown. Tirrasan will not fail a third time."

## ***Lost in the Wilderness***

*"You follow all the rules  
You swallow all the stories  
And every night you wish on a star  
Dreaming a day will come  
Trusting in allegories  
And every morning, boy, look where you are..."*

— "Lost In the Wilderness", Children of Eden

One voice spoke in the darkness. "It is said that Amon-Keth, the Creator of All, once spoke to J'Naith-Taral, the Rebel, the Prince of the Void. And Amon-Keth said, 'I am the Creator of All. I am the creator of you, and of the Void, and that the Void has not form has no consequence to me.'

"And J'Naith spoke, 'You are the creator of all. I acknowledge that. But you have been delerect in your duties. You have stopped creating. You have no plans! You want me to come back to You, and I will Not. I have free will, and I am happy as I am.'

"This angered Amon-Keth. He split the Void into a thousand thousand thousand parts and bid them to spring up Worlds. And the Worlds he created, he looked upon them and declared them Good.

"Then J'Naith laughed. He laughed long and hard. And finally he spoke. 'Amon, you have not rid the Creation of the Void. And now the Void is part of all the worlds you created. And your Creations will have the choice — to turn their face in awe of the Creator of All, and forward Your works or to turn their faces away and work in service of the Prince of the Void.'

And the Creator of All created Sadness, as his tears dripped in the awful choice he had give his creations. And he retreated to the quiet of one of his Worlds, and started the long task of turning eyes to the Glory of the Creation, with J'Naith's laughter ringing in his ears.

"We work in the service of Amon-Keth. But the choice must be made freely."

A hand lit the lamp, and the lamp lit an old man's face. In front of him, a young man knelt on his knees. The old man spoke, and it was the voice that had penetrated the darkness. "Saulin P'lan Tjalip, you have a choice. Do you have an answer to that choice?"

The young man spoke for the first time. "Yes. I do."

"And your choice?"

"I make the choice in the name of Amon-Keth, who created the Worlds and everything in them. I choose to work for the Creation, and I pledge to reduce the amount of the Void in my Life and in the Worlds. Though J'Naith-Taral will tempt me and attempt to force me to stray from this path, I will keep a steady hand, and be secure in the knowledge that Amon-Keth will forgive my transgressions as I forgive those overly influed by the Prince of the Void." The young man looked up. "And if I shall meet Amon-Keth ever, I will offer him my sword, my staff, my bow, and my faculties."

A rumble of voices conveyed assent to this speech, and two men walked out of the darkness, carrying a robe dyed light blue. The old man reached forward and unclipped the pin holding the young man's old robe together. "In the name of Amon-Keth, and in the name of the Society of Mages, I pronounce you, Saulin P'lan Tjalip, a novice in the Society of Mages."

Katze sat on top of the wagon working its way away from Rhye. It was a novel experience, traveling only as fast as a pair of draft horses would go as opposed to the speed of an automobile.

It had been a marvelous trip so far. Katze was seeing her native land for the first time, but found that she was amazed by the scenery. And the slow travel seemed to add some enchantment to the trip as well.

Grahm had been mostly preoccupied throughout the trip, but once they had left Rhye, he had handed Katze a simple wooden staff. When she had enquired what it was for, he smiled quietly and said, "Every good wizard needs a staff, no?"

She looked at the staff again and thought of that line. It was funny, considering she wasn't a wizard. The entire idea of being one of the lab techs' magical girls entertained her muchly. Yeah, she could do a few cool things with simple thoughts, but that was psychic ability, not magic. But then again, things had changed so much.

Besides, she'd tried to hand the staff back to Grahm with the explanation that she wasn't a magician the first time they had stopped after he had given it to her. Grahm was good at his quiet enigmatic smiles, and had said, "Time will tell. Besides, there's other reasons for a staff beyond magic, and I'm sure you'll find it handy." He had twirled his own staff, and

tripped Katze, who was starting to walk off.

Katze shook her head. She had been badly caught off guard by Graham's sudden use of his staff as an offensive weapon. In anger she had attempted to swing her staff like a baseball bat, and then had hesitated slightly through, suddenly fearing the turn of her own power against her. Graham used the hesitation to parry the swing with his staff.

The next thing he did was quite extraordinary. He had simply said, "Hit me."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't hurt me."

Katze had winced. Graham saw the wince, and had said quietly, "Katze, look. The shackles are off; you can hurt people now, and you won't hurt you. Remember, you killed Sid."

"I KNOW I killed Sid. Doesn't make me any less afraid."

"And now you see the second point of the staff. I am going to teach you how to fight on this vacation, so you'll have at least a little competency with the mage's three physical weapons. Of those three, the staff is both the most well known and the one that's hardest to kill with. Of course, it can be done, but it is by far harder than sticking somebody with a sword or shooting them with an arrow."

"Of course, the most difficult of all a wizard's weapons is spellcasting, but that is Kendren's job, and why we are going to Dewpoint."

And during the next few days, Graham started teaching Katze the basics of staff fighting. She found herself taking to the new discipline well, and it pleased her. She had taken to practicing the dodges and lunges every time the wagons stopped.

A voice broke through her thoughts. "Marsanyew ahead!"

From the little bit of history she'd gotten, Katze knew the Great Tsunami had traveled up the land almost all the way to Marsanyew. Everything beyond Marsanyew to the dreaded sea was considered wasteland, and supposedly nobody lived there except a few crazies who were unafraid of the Old Man Across the Sea's wrath. There were rumours that they didn't live under the Marrakethian Code of Ethics either.

The Code. Katze felt some anger wash over her thoughts. What had possessed Tyrone Grehnich to propose the god-damn things anyway? And what had possessed both the Ancients and the D'wani to agree to them? If they were needed, why had the worst things in either culture's memory happened since then?

Katze was pulled from these thoughts as they rounded the bend into Marsanyew. The town was huge, and bustling, and she couldn't understand why it would be so busy. Graham had said that a lot of Marrakethians considered the town cursed, having been touched by the tsunami that destroyed Dewpoint and most of the rest of the former D'wani Empire. But as she pondered this, she heard a roar growing louder and louder in her ears like she had never heard before. She looked frantically for the source of the sound, but couldn't find it.

Having no clue what was going on, she simply screamed, "GET DOWN!" and leapt from the wagon to hug the ground. She lay there, eyes closed and expecting the worst. She heard a siren blaring under the roar and the screams of people, and just grimaced.

The roar died away and something poked her in the back. Katze opened her eyes and rolled over to find Graham standing there with his staff. He was wearing his usual bland expression, but his eyes were betraying his confusion and anger at what just happened. "You're lucky that was a wagon and not a car," he finally said. "Why did you jump out for no reason?"

Katze blinked some more. "You didn't hear anything?"

Graham shook his head no. Katze got up out of the dirt, and rose. "There was a loud roar just now," she said, half in confusion and half in anger. "People were dying."

Graham blinked in sudden surprise. Katze had never recalled him doing that before. Finally he spoke. "Turn towards the city and tell me what you see."

Katze turned back in the direction of Marsanyew, expecting to see what she had just seen before. Instead, she saw a much smaller town, with lots of destroyed buildings around the edge furthest from where she was. Her jaw dropped. "It changed."

"It didn't change for us. I don't think it changed for you either, at least not physically."

"You think I saw some sort of vision or something?"

Graham nodded. "I think you saw the tsunami. Or would have, if you'd watched the city instead of nearly breaking your neck. I want you to keep in mind in the future that visions shouldn't hurt you."

Katze sighed. "Yes, I'll try."

The old man was writing when a knock came on the door. "Who is it?" he called.

"Graham Valkurk, recently arrived from Rhye," came the response.

The old man smiled. "Do come in, Graham, m'boy." Graham came into the room and took a seat, but fiddled with his staff instead of saying anything. The old man looked at him. "So, we hear you brought a fellow traveler."

Graham shook his head quietly. "She's a strange one, Kendren. I have no doubt that she is the one referred to in prophecy, but she doesn't seem to have a clue as to her real nature."

"Not yet, anyway."

"But I think she has some inkling. It was all that I could do to get the copy of Prophecium that Rene Ewerte, the head librarian at Rhye University, had given her away before she read anything..."

"I don't think her having read Prophecium would have been all that crucial to what is about to happen if you and I are right."

"She is the right one. I know it."

"Then she'll know what to do, or we'll all drown. In the meantime, we can prepare her for it. This is how we're going to handle that. In the morning, you will be her weapons instructor. You've already got a start on it. After the midday meal, I will be her magic instructor, and after supper, I will have Saulin teach her a better grasp on Marrakethian history and religion. You know he's studied it fairly recently, and it will be a feather in his cap."

"Yes, my teacher."

"I don't know who is the teacher and who is the student here, Graham. I just know that Amon-Keth has given us a difficult assignment. Because it is either we succeed here, or Marraketh will no longer exist, other than as a large bay of the Great Sea."

"And it all comes down to the choices of a girl who has spent maybe a month of her life here."

"Amon-Keth sees all. He created the tracks of the universe when we were only a speck of dust lying on the future of his worlds. He chose her for this assignment, just as He has chosen you and I to guide her."

"I just hope He knows what He's doing."

Kendren smiled sadly at Graham. "That's the part you'll have to take on faith, m'boy."

Katze looked around the warrens. "You guys *live* underground?"

The young brownhaired man unloading a cart stopped what he was doing and looked at her. "Yes, obviously."

"Well, I mean, yeah, we're here, but \*why\*?"

The young man sighed. "Have you not the sea fear?"

"Sea fear? I don't like the ocean, I think the damned thing's going to sneak up on me, but..."

"That's the sea fear. We live underground because the ocean is very close to us, and we do not wish to see it on a regular basis. Because we can ignore the fact that it's trying to sneak up on us if we can't see it. But this is the only place in Marraketh where we are free from prying eyes as to what we do."

"So...what if I was a member of the Frontier Guard?"

"You're not. First, we trust Graham Valkurk, because he knows who he is bringing here, because he is a wise man. Second, if you gave me any indication that you were, I could have this place on top of you in a minute."

"Alright, I get it. You think this place is safe."

"We believe so, yes." The boy turned to haul his box and then stopped. "I am Saulin Tjalip," he said, and extended his hand.

"I'm Katze Brenner," Katze replied..

"Kat-say Bren-hur?" Saulin repeated back. "Are you from K'Lin or something?"

Katze sighed. "No, it's a long crazy story. I'm as much a Marrakethian as you are, though."

"I have never heard of the last name Bren-hur, though. Is it one of the mountain province names?"

"No. Brenner's a name from elsewhere. My given name in this world is Tjarlin Katze. But I'm..."

She stopped when she saw the awed expression on Saulin's face. "You are Tjarlin Katze?" he whispered. "I have heard of you!"

Katze groaned. "Yeah, you and everybody else in this godforsaken place."

A number of expressions crossed Saulin's face until he finally said, "Amon-Keth has not forsaken this world."

Katze blinked. "Ummm...who the hell is Amon-Keth?"

Saulin glared at her. "For somebody who's talked about in such hushed tones, you are really dumb."

A voice came from the corridor. "Saulin."

Saulin swung around. When he realized who was standing there, he said, "That was inappropriate, my teacher, and I should not have said it."

Katze looked at who had entered the room. One was obviously Graham Valkurk, and the other was an old man. One of the debriefings she had sat through involved what Red Paladin and Brynhild had seen in their adventures in Marraketh, as

well as the name Graham had given her in Rhye. She decided it was a safe guess, and ventured, "I assume you're Kendren."

"Indeed. And you must be Katze." He turned to Saulin. "There are many things Marrakethians don't know in general, and Tjarlin has had maybe a month to even get a brief understanding of Marrakethian culture. I'm sure she could tell you about a culture you would find alien."

Saulin nodded his head. "Again, my teacher, I spoke before I thought. This was a mistake."

"Anyway, we came to find Katze, and let her know what we plan to do if she wouldn't mind. And I was looking for you, because I wanted you to join the ranks of the teachers."

Saulin's face radiated awe. "My teacher, I am only a novice, and I have only found my place in the Society fairly recently."

"Nevertheless, you've had Marrakethian history recently, and you've already got a question from your student about Amon-Keth."

Katze blinked. "You're going to let him teach me?"

Kendren turned to Katze. "Indeed. You are a Marrakethian, and you need to understand the culture you have been torn from. This is the plan. After the early meal, you will have weapons instruction with Graham until the midday meal, and after the midday meal, you will have magic instruction with me until the evening meal, and after the evening meal Saulin will be excused from his chores to teach you Marrakethian history and religion."

Katze looked at Saulin. Saulin very carefully avoided her gaze. "I know some Marrakethian history. That's all I've been doing for the last week or so."

Graham spoke up for the first time. "You've learned it from books. Saulin had to learn it orally. Besides, there's different traditions. But we'll let you out of it if you can answer your own question to Saulin."

Katze glared at him. "Fine. I'll defer to your wisdom. But that doesn't mean I'll have to like it."

Katze walked into the room where Graham had told her to meet him, and was greeted by a wooden sword being tossed at her. She grabbed it out of midair and assumed the stance she had been taught in her recruit training with TRES. Graham laughed. "I see somebody got to you before me on this one."

Katze laughed too. "Yeah, recruit training. They were baffled what to do with me because I could do some of the work, but couldn't do the sparring. They finally decided it was best to let me hit dummies, so I learned some things."

"But not how to spar with an actual opponent?"

"Theory, not practice. But you said last night theory doesn't matter much."

Graham lept in front of her. "Well, let's see how much theory you can apply to practice. En garde!"

And they were off, slashing at each other with two wooden swords, occasionally connecting, but most of the time dodging and lunging, parrying and riposting, and generally having a good time. Finally Graham called a halt to the mock-fight and said, "Not bad. I see you have managed to turn some of your theory into practice. There's a few things you might want to work on, but for the most part, I'm impressed."

"I'm not a mage," Katze protested.

"Sure you are. Every Marrakethian has the ability," Kendren responded. "It's just magery's a bit more subtle than what you're used to."

Katze frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, do me a favor. Port over to the other side of the room and back, paying attention to the process."

Katze did as she was told, willing herself to the right position and then willing herself back. And that was the word she used to describe it to Kendren. "I \*willed\* myself there and back."

"Right. You exerted your will, and did it. But what would happen if you tried asking?"

"Asking what?"

"Well, asking if the universe minded you being there instead of here."

Katze frowned again. It \*made\* sense, in some complex way, but it seemed so unnecessary and complicated to ask the universe if it would perhaps want to help, and she said as much to Kendren.

"What do you think a spell is?" he asked.

"I...I don't know."

"Couldn't it just be what I said, asking the universe if it would consider changing itself in some way to fit the needs of a mage?"

"It could, I suppose."

"That's magic."

"I think I get it." Katze sat back, pondering this interesting way of looking at the world and getting it to do your bid-

ding. “Ask and ye shall receive.”

“Pretty much. So ask the universe for me if it wouldn’t mind you being in that chair as opposed to this one.”

Katze frowned and started muttering words to the universe, falling neatly into a somewhat singsongy tone (which sounded really odd with the Marrakethian words she was uttering), begging the Universe’s attention and good tidings upon her desire to be in that chair instead of this one. She finished, sat there for a second, and then realized her view of the room had changed. “In the name of Kyrill and all that is holy...” she muttered.

Kendren smiled. “We like to believe that Amon-Keth hears the request and grants it, but you’re not far off. We think Kyrill belonged to His side. But you’re going to have to ask young Saulin about that, he would be the one who has to teach you that.”

Saulin looked up from his work. “Good evening, my student!”

Katze sighed. “Look, do we have to do it this way? Can’t you just be Saulin, and I be Katze, and we all be happy being who we are and not go with titles?”

“Well, other than the fact that you were Katze, I would have to be Tjalip.”

“Fine. Can we be Tjarlin and Saulin to one another?”

“Oh, that I would have no problem with.”

Katze sighed again. “That’s the point, though, Saulin. You want to know how long it’s been since I’ve known that my name is the one you want to call me? It’s been about a month.”

“So why do you want to be called by your paternal name and not your given name?”

“Because to me it \*isn’t\* my paternal name. Remember how I introduced myself? Where I’m from, my name is Katze Janice Brenner.”

“Jah-knees is a funky maternal name,” said Saulin.

“It’s not a maternal name, it’s a given name — although it happens to be the name of my dad’s dead wife. Ay, it’s complicated, Saulin. The point is, I would feel most comfortable if you please refer to me as Katze, even if you think it’s odd that I should be referred to by my paternal name. Because, to me, that’s the name I’m used to and have been going by for twenty-eight odd years, okay?”

“The world you come from is very complicated,” Saulin said. “But never you mind. If you want to be weird, and go by your paternal name, I will call you such. But for the record, I am Saulin.”

“I figured.” Katze stared at the rock ceiling of the room they were in, wondering what in the name of all that was holy led Kendren to assign this idiot as her teacher. Maybe it would have been better to stick with the teacher/student labels. Oh well, too late now. “So, you want to answer the first question I have on the table?”

“Who is Amon-Keth?”

“Yeah.”

Saulin smiled. “Amon-Keth is the creator of the universe and the source of everything holy.”

“Oh, great.” Katze sighed again, and tried a different track. “Why is he important to my understanding of Marrakethian history?”

“Besides the fact that He created Marraketh and set us all upon our tasks?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Ahhh...well, it is like this. Amon-Keth set the universe in motion, and first created beings like himself who might take part in his Creation. Of these, the first and the fairest was J’Naith. After J’Naith came M’kan and Aktali and Geron, and these four served as Great Council to the Creator.

“But J’Naith was not happy with simply being the First Creation, the First and Fairest, the apple in Amon-Keth’s eye, and he began plotting ways in which he could take over the Creation. There was no way to take the Creation without taking on M’kan and Aktali and Geron, all of whom, though they were not the First, still were on par with him.

“None of them would join in his rebellion, so J’Naith fled to the Void where Creation didn’t exist and took the title of Taral, the Rebel. Once he was in the Void, he tried to Create, but found that the power he had been given to help was not strong enough to change this place, so he set about strengthening the Void, and then one day, he tempted Amon-Keth with the Void, which he had declared his Princedom.

“Although M’kan and Aktali together tried to convince Amon-Keth to leave J’Naith alone in his loneliness and deception — Aktali supposedly said, ‘He is chained in that Void, he cannot affect the Creation’ — J’Naith’s taunts that Amon-Keth had stopped Creating weighed heavy on Amon-Keth’s soul, and in Anger, he turned the Void into Worlds, thus releasing J’Naith into the Creation once again.

“And since then, every created thing has to make the choice for whom they are working — to restore the Creation to its original beauty, or to bring more Rebellion in the world. And it is not a sure thing, J’Naith could win it all if there are

none found willing to fight for the Creation.”

Katze blinked at this long recitation of what sounded like myth. “It’s the age old battle of Good vs. Evil,” she mused. “But that still doesn’t explain how any of this has to do with Marraketh.”

“It is pretty simple. Marraketh is one of the battlegrounds of this War, and J’Naith very nearly won. In fact, he has not lost yet, but...” Saulin looked at Katze suddenly, and stopped speaking at all.

“Saulin?” Katze asked, not at all sure of the expression on his face.

Saulin said, quietly, “I think that is all for tonight.” Before Katze could say anything, he fled the room.

“That’s odd,” Katze muttered to herself.

The days went by, and Katze found herself living a life in which she never believed she’d feel comfortable. Graham had been just as good as teaching swordplay as he had been with teaching her how to use the staff, and it made her happy that her TRES officer’s sword might have slightly more use than decorating her office.

Kendren had been calm and kind, and she was starting to get the hang of a new and more subtle way of interacting with the universe that wasn’t so wearing as bruteforcing the whole thing. That amazed her nearly as much as the way she was taking to her weaponry training. It was as if part of her brain had been in neutral, just waiting to absorb all this and absorb it quickly, and it somewhat awed her.

Saulin, though...Katze sighed as she thought of him. The two hadn’t hit it off well, and that first night of teaching when they sparred about names and it had ended with Saulin fleeing from the room. In future nights, he was much more cautious, and took less questions from Katze, as if her questions from that night had been what had set him off. It was truly odd, and when she asked Kendren about Saulin’s oddness, she got back “Saulin is young, and he is still learning himself.”

She sighed, and turned her attention back on the midday meal. Somehow, today, she had found a table all to herself, which was nice because it gave her some time to be alone with her thoughts, which was a luxury she hadn’t had in a while. The only other time she really had without anybody talking to her was bedtime, but that was for sleeping. The insomnia that plagued Katze from time to time had been completely nonexistent on this trip.

Somebody sat across from her. Katze looked up, only to see Saulin there. “Oh, hi,” she said, not completely sure what to make of his presence.

“I think I owe you an apology,” Saulin said.

“Why?” Katze was surprised at those words, Saulin had never struck her as the type who would be apologetic.

“I thought I would be good at teaching and I am not,” Saulin said. “I am about to ask my teacher if he feels whether it would be wiser if I no longer taught you.”

Katze looked at Saulin in surprise. “Why would you do that?”

“You seem like you don’t care what I have to say, and I fear that I antagonized you from the very beginning.”

Saulin sat there with such a look of distress that Katze, despite not liking Saulin that much, felt as if she had to do something to make him feel better. “No, you’re doing fine. I’d like it if you’d let me ask more questions, but...”

“Are you \*serious\*?” Saulin said, his distressed look being replaced with one of awe and wonder he had when Kendren had directed him to teach her in the first place. “You are so patient and kind with me!”

Katze winced, realizing she’d just set herself up with another bunch of lessons on Marrakethian history from Saulin. Oh well, it couldn’t be helped, and she would suffer through it if it meant that Saulin might just let her ask questions again. She still wondered what had set him off that night.

But no matter, lunch was almost over, and she had more lessons to attend. She handed her bowl to the washer and fled for the classroom in which she had her lessons in, only to find Graham there waiting for her. “Where’s Kendren?” she asked.

“Important business, and I had something I needed to show you. Come with me.”

He grasped her hand and before she knew it, they were standing somewhere very familiar to Katze. “Graham...this is the Eucalyptus Grove! We’re in Berkeley!”

Graham nodded. “Come, let us find somewhere to sit. I want you to feel this world.”

“Feel this world?”

“Yes. In order to make the transit between worlds, you have to know both of them. So, we’ll start on Earth. And what better place than the part of Earth you know best?” Graham smiled. “Besides, I liked Berkeley. It was a good town.”

The two walked eastward up the hill towards the Campanille. Katze looked around, but summer traffic was always lighter than normal campus traffic, and she didn’t see anybody she knew. It felt nice, for once, to be semi-anonymous in a crowd.

They took seats on the steps just under the Campanille, looking out towards the Golden Gate. Katze watched the scenery passing and said, “It’s funny. I know there’s ocean out beyond the bridge, and that even the Bay’s technically ocean,

but it doesn't bother me that badly."

"But when you're at the beach, it strikes horribly?"

"Yeah. I have to find high ground and keep an eye on it.

"The sea fear. All Marrakethians have it. Comes from the days when Tirrasan sent the ocean to destroy us."

Katze nodded, and tried to keep concentrated on feeling the world. It was odd thinking of it at this level, trying to make the world part of oneself so that one could always use it as a marker. All this for a world she had known for a very long time, the world she would have called her own even half a year ago. The thought made her feel rather lonely, and she wondered how Mal and Ari were holding up without her.

Grahm spoke, quietly. "It is a beautiful world."

"I've always liked it," Katze said. "Spend summers hiking in redwood groves and some days basking in the sun in Berkeley, and it's kinda hard not to. You really ought to see Colorado, too. I love California, but Colorado's up there too. The Rockies make the Sierras look small."

"Someday you'll have to show me," Grahm said. "It sounds rather nice."

A light breeze played with their hair and neither person spoke for a very long time. Finally, Grahm looked at his watch. "We probably ought to be heading back," he said. "Have to do it on the other end as well, and then you'll probably be clear enough to start making the hops on your own."

Katze nodded. "That was something else. I'd forgotten how much this world feels like home to me."

Grahm smiled. "Tis only natural, it was home." He grabbed her hand, and just like that, they were back in the classroom they'd started in. "I want you to do the same here, but you can probably work on it and other things. It might be good to do it while you're trying to concentrate on Saulin's teachings."

Katze smiled. "Probably. Oh well, he's going to let me ask more questions, which should make that exercise slightly more tolerable."

Grahm laughed. "Indeed. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

The next morning dawned bright and clear as Katze wandered along the corridor to find Grahm. Today, she found Grahm firing arrows at a bale of hay. "Archery!" she said, grinning.

Grahm looked up. "Yep. The third physical weapon of the Society of Mages. Here's the nice thing, though." He beckoned Katze over to a table. "This bow is the longbow type that is most commonly used in Marraketh," he said, as he picked up a curved piece of wood and a string. "I want you to get the hang of this one, but..." He picked up the bow he had been shooting with. "...there are always innovations. This is a compound bow, and it helps with accuracy, and it's also nice because the pulleys make it easier to keep the bow drawn back. One of the nice things about technology marching forward."

Katze giggled. "Earth is good for something!" she said.

Grahm smiled in return. "Yes. And if you're planning on staying there, I'd actually recommend a compound bow. They're just easier to use. But I want you to have some familiarity with a longbow, so let's start with that one."

Katze picked up the longbow off the table. Grahm handed her an arrow, and Katze took it. It felt like instinct to place it between her fingers and nock it into the string on the back of the bow. Things from high school physical education classes dribbled out of her memory, and she assumed the stance that she recalled and drew back the string, and then released.

The string thwapped her arm. "Augh!" Katze cried, and then looked up at Grahm, who was watching the target with some expression of disbelief.

He looked at the arrow quivering in the bullseye and quietly said, "How did you do that?"

"I don't know. I screwed something up, it shouldn't have..."

Grahm frowned. "I think I know what happened. Tell me, have you ever fired a gun?"

"A couple times. Once I ended up with a bullet in my foot, but that was very clearly the effects of the name spell. Josh was shocked to lift his foot and find a bullet underneath it."

"Okay, have you ever fired a gun when you've aimed at a non-person target?"

"In recruit training. After the trainer picked himself off the ground to dodge the randomly flying bullet, he decided that it was best not to have me do any more of that."

"Here's what I think is happening. Some Marrakethians have this ability, some don't, and it appears you're one of those who do. If you're concentrating on a target, your mind seems to want to help the arrows find it."

"I didn't think any such thing!" Katze protested. "I was too busy yelping from where the string hit me!"

"Well, it's not exactly a conscious effort. And you're going to do it with any ranged weapon, which is why guns are such a problem. You see, there's some effective size restraints to the aiming. Arrows aren't hard, they're just about the right size. But bullets are too small — you nudge them, and they get out of alignment, and you nudge them back in, and pretty soon they're flying in odd patterns throughout the room. And the effect is worsened by the amount of things you have flying in



the air.”

“In other words, I don’t ever want to fire a gun where there’s anybody who might be a friendly in the place.”

“You probably don’t ever want to fire a gun ever, honestly, because there’s always a friendly in the room. Unless you like getting shot.”

“No thanks, it was bad enough taking a bullet in the foot.”

Grahm laughed. “Right. Stick to the bow, it’s a much better weapon, and it will be scary enough in your possession. Now, let’s try to fix the problem that caused you to get whacked with the string...”

And the archery lesson proceeded, and at the end of the morning, Grahm presented Katze with the longbow. “You’re not bad with it.”

“Thanks,” Katze said. “I think I’m going to pick up a compound bow when I’m back Earthside too. From what I remember, they’re just slightly more fluid.”

“Right, but now you can use either type. Or a recurve bow, for that matter, which is the third type. But have a Mar-rakethian standard longbow. Your heritage, remember?”

Katze laughed. “Right.”

It was another morning in the warrens of the Society of Mages. Somebody banged on Katze’s door and called, “Morning meal in five!”

Katze yawned and stretched, feeling somewhat odd that morning, as if she could do anything. It was as if something in her had loosened, and she was somehow connected to the universe in a fashion she had never noticed before. She looked around the room and noted everything was in much sharper definition than normal, and some objects seemed to have a somewhat unearthly glow to them. She frowned and put on her glasses.

It wasn’t though they were doing much this morning, and Katze realized suddenly that it was because she had been seeing quite clearly without them. That fact seemed awfully odd — she’d been severely nearsighted for as long as she could remember, and she shouldn’t have been able to see that clearly without her glasses. She took them off, frowned again, and then put them back on simply because she was used to wearing them, and who knew when this effect would wear off. Strangely, the prescription lenses weren’t skewing her vision either.

She looked at herself in the mirror, and didn’t notice anything different. Her hair was still that dirty blonde it had always been, her eyes the same blue-grey, the face was the same one that always stared back at her from the mirror. But there was something different she wasn’t placing. She frowned at her reflection, put on her Cal hat and the brown cape Kendren had been insisting she wear, and then went out for breakfast.

At breakfast, she managed to score the corner table where she could watch the rest of the Society without being bothered. Even some people seemed brighter than others — good quiet Grahm nearly hurt to look at, he was so bright, but others she knew were rather brilliant as well. Even young Saulin was one of the brighter folks in the room. And by looking at people, she got some idea how they fit in the social structure of the Society.

She tried to ignore the odd feelings this gave her. It couldn’t be anything important, it was just things acting up and it would eventually go away. Or at least she hoped, she wasn’t sure she could tolerate this level of intensity for days at a time.

She wandered through the day in an odd sort of focus and not-focus, not really paying attention to what she was doing, but somehow managing to get it right anyway. It was really hard to spar with Grahm if she was really paying attention, him being so bright, but if she put it out of her head, she did fairly well at besting him. Grahm either didn’t notice or didn’t say anything about how distant she was being, which was not like him, but Katze was too off in her own thoughts to really concern herself with this.

Kendren’s magic lessons seemed just as easy as sparring with Grahm, something she could do without really paying attention. Kendren wasn’t as close to being as bright as Grahm, but there was still something there that she could see that she hadn’t before. There was that feeling that Kendren had an important piece to play in the future, and he just simply had not played it yet. And his faith was strong. That was something Katze found odd, too, being able to judge levels of faith at a simple glance.

She stopped by her room and stared at herself again in the mirror on the way to Saulin’s room for her evening lesson, but still found no difference in the reflection that stared back at her. She shook her head, said out loud, “Hmmm, still apperantly me,” and laughed before heading back out.

Saulin was already waiting. He smiled when he saw her. “Good evening, Katze!” he called.

“Evening, Saulin,” she said back. How suprising she’d thought of this young man as an idiot as she could tell now that he really wasn’t. Silly of them to get into a fight on the first day over something as silly as \*names\*.

“You look as if you’ve just met Amon-Keth along the road,” he said. “Speaking of which, do you know what to do in that situation?”

“No, tell me.”

“Well, you offer him your blade, your staff, your bow, and your faculties. Actually lay the weapons at his feet if at all possible. If you do it right, and he believes in your sincerity, he just might bless you. And that would be the most wonderful thing.”

Katze smiled. “I hope someday you meet him, Saulin.”

“I hope so too,” he said, smiling broadly. “So what’s on the lesson plan for today?”

Katze blinked for a second, and found herself asking, “On the first day, you said J’Naith could still gain control of Marraketh. What did you mean?”

“He has to tempt the Liberator, the Saviour of Marraketh,” Saulin said. “And if the Liberator fails that test, then all of Marraketh will be lost to Amon-Keth. It is a pretty hefty responsibility. It is one that I am happy I do not have to do.”

“So, Saulin, who is this Liberator?” Katze asked.

Saulin looked around. “We don’t know,” he whispered quietly.

“Do you have any suspicions?”

“...yeah. We do.”

“Who, Saulin?” Katze asked, with more force than she really expected.

Saulin stared at her, quivering in his shoes. “You fit all the prophecy,” he whispered. “But I wasn’t supposed to let you know that.”

Katze looked at him, long and hard. Finally she let out a deep breath, “Now it all makes sense. Your panic that first night. Why you and Graham and Kendren have felt as if you’re working against a deadline in trying to teach me all this stuff. Because I have a job to do.” She stared up at the dirtpacked ceiling, trying to contain herself. “Because it’s not enough for me to simply have been Katze Brenner in the first place!”

Saulin backed against a wall, “Uh...I think you were Tjarlin Katze before that.”

Katze glared at him. “We’re not having this argument again.”

Saulin shook his head. “I wasn’t trying to have the argument again, but I’m just pointing out the facts to you. You were... you \*are\* ...first and foremost a Marrakethian. A very special one, apparently. I wouldn’t want to have to face down J’Naith-Taral, not even with Amon-Keth on my side.”

Katze stared at him some more. Saulin attempted to actually hide in the wall, but failed. “Please don’t be angry with me,” he cried. “Please! I was just trying to do my job!”

She frowned and thought some more. “I don’t know what to say, except that I find myself rather tired right now, Saulin. Do you mind if I excuse myself for the night?”

Saulin shook his head, and waved at the door. Katze looked at his stricken face, and finally said, “I’m sorry, Saulin. I didn’t want this.”

And she left the room.

Saulin ran into Kendren’s office. “Master Kendren! Master Kendren!”

“Yes, Saulin?” Kendren asked. “Excuse me, Graham,” he said to the other person in the room.

Saulin took a deep breath. “Master Kendren, my teacher, I just screwed up horribly. I told Tjarlin the truth.”

Kendren looked at him. Graham finally spoke up. “That means it’ll be any time now. I am sure she’s the one, the way she’s been picking up things.”

Kendren nodded. “May Amon-Keth give her the strength to make it through this.”

Saulin looked from one to the other. “I did no wrong?”

“The truth would have come out eventually, Saulin,” Graham said. “If it wasn’t you, it would have been one of us. Where is she now?”

“Retired to her room for the night,” Saulin said. “She felt tired.”

“Tonight then, most likely,” Kendren said, and the three of them stood in silence, hoping that the one they’d put so much effort into would pull a good showing. All of their survival depended upon it.

# The Awakening

*“And the sand-castle virtues are all swept away  
in the tidal destruction  
the moral melee.  
The elastic retreat rings the close of play  
as the last wave uncovers the newfangled way.  
But your new shoes are worn at the heels  
and your suntan does rapidly peel  
and your wise men don’t know how it feels  
to be thick as a brick.”*

—Jethro Tull, “Thick as a Brick”

*The sea is down.*

Katze Brenner tumbled out of bed in an explosion of bedclothes. “Who said that?” she said, looking around the small room, straining to see if there was anybody there.

*The sea is down.*

“Yeah, yeah, you said that. Who are you?” Katze groped for a match in the darkness.

*Your destiny.*

“My destiny, huh?” Katze had managed to find a match, and struck it, bringing some light to the dark room. She looked around, baffled, as it was only the tiny room the Society of Mages had assigned her, with a rough hewn plank bed, a rudely carved dresser, and dirt walls. The light also reflected off a mirror in the corner. Katze shrugged, and lit the oil lamp sitting on the dresser. With a satisfying “Fffst,” it caught, and flooded the room with light.

Nobody was there.

Katze dimmed the light and frowned. The room was empty, yet somebody had spoke. Or had somebody? Wondering if it had been a dream, she started to climb back into bed.

*This is your choice. Do what you know you must do, or go back to sleep. One way leads to the truth, the other leads to death and destruction. It is your choice. He comes to find you, you had better be ready to meet him.*

“I don’t understand. Who is coming? Where is he coming?”

*The sea is down. Marraketh may never be the same...*

*“The horses stamping — their warm breath clouding  
in the sharp and frosty morning of the day.  
And the poet lifts his pen while the soldier sheaths his sword.  
And the youngest of the family is moving with authority.  
Building castles by the sea, he dares the tardy tide to wash them all  
aside.”*

Katze closed the door to the warrens of the Society of Mages. She held up her lantern to see where she was going in the darkened tunnels when she heard the voice from her room speak again. *There is no time to act like a scared Marrakethian. You know what to do, do it!*

“But I don’t know what to do! I came back here to understand who I was!”

*You know. Deep down inside of you, you know the truth, and you hide from it.*

“Is this one of the stupid puzzles, like my name?”

*If you insist. Now hurry it up if you’re going live by the code of Ethics. But it will be too late if you do.*

With the mention of the Codes, Katze stopped dead in her tracks. “Oh no.” she whispered. “No. He’s tried two times to destroy this land, and I’ll be damned if I’ll let him do it a third time.”

And anybody left observing would have seen Katze blink out of existence from that spot.

Meanwhile, on the beach, there was a soft \*pfwat\* as feet suddenly hit the sand. Katze blinked at her settings, and tried to fight the urge to find the highest ground and turn towards the sea. Her face twisted in contortions as she looked up. What she saw shocked her. The ruins of Dewpoint were to the left, but they weren’t ruins anymore.

Her mouth dropped open in awe. Had she managed to transport herself back in time to the time when Dewpoint

ruled this piece of the world? Had she managed to turn the tide back, and save Dewpoint? Then the futility of what she had seen occurred as she realized she could see the shadows of the ruins sticking through the illusion. Such hope was not to be, Dewpoint remained the same for eternity, the ruins stressing what defiance meant.

“Oh Marraketh, my Marraketh, how could thou be so ignorant!” she breathed, and the voice echoed in her ears, *Watch and behold.*

A roar echoed in her ears and Katze fought the urge to turn around and stare at the darkened sea. Yet it seemed almost as day, as she heard the whine of ancient sirens. Dropping to her knees in the sand, she watched as the roar grew ever louder in her ears. She wanted desperately to hide her face in the sand than see Dewpoint’s destruction.

The roar reached its highest point, and Katze could only stare numbly as the wave collapsed upon Dewpoint, and it seemed as if the city gave one last desperate dying scream as the sea claimed it for itself. Or was that her own scream? It was hard to tell anymore, as she collapsed to the sand, alone with her grief and agony.

She lay on the sand for she knew not how long, but when she got back up, the moon seemed be locked in the same position it was when she had appeared on the sand, giving everything a blue tint, except the sea. The sea still looked a deep threatening black. She walked towards it, stopping where the sand became damp with the earlier tide. Here she sat, digging into the sand, frantically building something.

For hours she worked, as if she was a man possessed, until the creation she had barely pictured when she started was finished. Katze looked upon it, an amazingly accurate rendition of Dewpoint before its destruction, including a small sand lighthouse at the edge of the bay, the one she could look up and see from where she was at. It had amazingly survived the destruction of the tsunami, and the intervening years. With a glance down at her sand sculpted lighthouse, she eyed an army running from a illusory dragon, and four small figures fleeing towards Dewpoint later. And she simply stared at everything, as she could see thousands of years of history echoed through the sand. Sand horses raced through the city, and she could see the steam coming off their snouts.

And the tide was coming in.

She looked. Lying on the sand next to the city carved in its thousand million grains of sand was a longsword. She had never seen anything like it before anywhere, Marrakethian swords were built for function, not for beauty, but this was plain beautiful. She picked it up, admiring the shiny blue-grey sheen of the blade, attempting to read the old script carved into it and failing miserably. The hilt was black, with more of that same odd blue-grey metal that made up the blade that she had never seen before, and a brilliant green stone was set into the hilt. But yet, grasping it, it seemed to have been built for her. The weight was perfect, the grip fit like a glove, and it seemed...just awesome. Something was happening here that she failed to grasp, but she figured it would make itself known soon enough.

She got the sudden instinct to sheath it, and looking down saw herself dressed not in the jeans and T-shirt that she had been wearing before, but a brown robe made out of the predominant fabric in Marraketh. A belt fastened to her waist held a simple scabbard for the sword. The only thing that hadn’t been touched was her glasses and her Birkenstock sandals, and she wondered what strange things were going on here.

In the warrens, Kendren stumbled out of bed and began scrawling. He was surprised to see himself writing without any light, or really any input from the rest of his body at all. He yelled for help.

Katze carefully put the sword away, and stared at the sea. The moon had crept downward in the sky, and the tide nibbled at the lighthouse. Katze frowned, and then before she knew what was happening, she picked up a handful of sand and threw at the sea, screaming, “NO! NO! I will NOT allow you to destroy Dewpoint again! I WILL NOT allow you destroy Marraketh again! You will show yourself and you will explain yourself, or it shall be my job to make you face me, and explain how YOU betrayed your own worshipers! Come out and face me, for I am the one who has and will save Marraketh from its own demise. I am the Liberator, the one forseen to usher in the Second Reign of Kyrill Hrdek, and to return Marraketh to its past glories, the one who brings the word of the Creator to a land which needs it, and you WILL come out and face me for that reason alone!”

*“The innocent young master — thoughts moving ever faster —  
has formed the plan to change the man he seems.  
And the poet sheaths his pen while the soldier lifts his sword.  
And the oldest of the family is moving with authority.  
Coming from across the sea, he challenges the son who puts him to the  
run.”*

The sea roared in anger as the sand pelted it. Katze fought the urge to flee to higher ground as the sea rose up to drown her. She put her hand on the hilt of the blade and attempted to keep her voice from betraying her hidden fear. “Drowning

me isn't going to end your problems."

The wave roared straight up. "Drowning Marraketh won't wipe your sins from the world, either," Katze said, slightly peeved. "It'll just add to the pile. And the Takatyu no longer exist. Well, they do, as my ancestors, but destroying Marraketh doesn't clear the sin of changing the Takatyu into the D'wani."

"They wanted it."

Katze looked at the man who emerged from the wave. Surprisingly, for being called the Old Man Across the Sea, his preferred appearance was that of a young man, tall and thin, with long blonde hair and blue eyes. His clothes were obviously made of seaweed. He reminded Katze of a much more cold Robinson Crusoe. He quietly repeated, "They wanted it."

"After you performed a miracle," Katze said.

"What? Healed myself? They still had a choice."

"When a god appears who can obviously destroy you appears, is it really a fair choice?"

"Ah, you are a tricky one, Liberator."

"You can call me Katze. And I'm no more trickier than you, Old Man."

"If we're getting informal, you can call me Tirrasan. This sea is mine. What is yours, Kat-say?"

"Among others, the D'wani are mine."

The ocean roared in anger. "The D'WANI are MINE! They are mine by their very name — the Tirrasanyu D'wani. The Children of the Sea God! Mine!"

"Who convinced you that it was in the best interest to destroy what is yours? For when you launched a tsunami at your children, you forfeited your right to claim them as yours. They now are mine, as their Liberator."

"I..."

"And who convinced you to send the Wyrms to enslave them all? Who convinced you that was in the best interests of your children?"

"I..."

"And WHO CONVINCED YOU that drowning them now would wipe your sins from the UNIVERSE?!" Katze roared. "It is too late! You cannot destroy them now, they are no longer yours to destroy!"

Tirrasan roared angrily and shoved the ocean at Katze. Katze pulled her sword and stood her ground, as much as she wanted to flee. If drowning is what it took, then she would do it. The wave broke over her head, but instead of being pounded by the weight of all the water, everything stayed dry, as if the wave had never existed in the first place. Katze stood there, blade in the ready position, watching a very normal ocean and a humbled Tirrasan on his knees in the sand. "M'liege," Tirrasan muttered.

"No," Katze said. "To your feet. I am not your liege."

Tirrasan rose, and Katze saw him for the first time taking on his title of the Old Man. Katze actually, oddly, felt some pity for the guy. She looked at him. "You who were once so proud of the D'wani, why did you forsake them?"

"They turned their back on who they were. They agreed to the Codes. They forfeited everything they loved for what? To join with the Kiratyu? Who weren't even their worthies?"

"The Kiratyu suffered as much for their part in the Joining."

"Yes, but the Kiratyu were not my people."

"They became your people when they joined with the D'wani."

Tirrasan stared at the sand. "I have no answer for that," he finally said. "I was angry, and in my rage, my anger got the best of me, and I wanted to wipe their stain from this land. And I tried to sit on this rage, but somebody found me, and he told me that was the best thing I could do."

"Who?" Katze asked. "Who convinced you that this was the proper thing to do?"

A third voice, that sounded very British to Katze's ears, answered the question. "I believe that would be me."

*"What do you do when  
the old man's gone — do you want to be him? And  
your real self sings the song.  
Do you want to free him?  
No one to help you get up steam —  
and the whirlpool turns you 'way off-beam."*

Katze turned to face the new voice, her sword still in ready position. There, walking down the beach towards her and Tirrasan was a figure, dressed rather as if he'd just stepped out of a board meeting. He wore a black business suit, with a blue tie, and he tipped his bowler hat to her as he stopped. His shoes were the shiniest black Katze had ever seen. He smiled

cheerfully. "My business card," he said, and handed a card to Katze.

Katze took the card in the hand that wasn't holding the sword and frowned as she read it. "J'Naith Taral, First and the Fairest, Prince of the Void," she spoke. "With offices in several dimensions. I didn't realize extradimensional entities needed business cards."

Tirrasan looked at the new arrival and fell to his knees again. "Master! Master, I have failed you!"

J'Naith smiled. "I'm a very busy man, the job keeps me traveling, and people always want to know where to find me if they want to make a deal. Business cards work well." He glared at Tirrasan, and sighed. "So bloody hard to get proper help these days too."

Katze stared at J'Naith. "You're not what I expected."

J'Naith smiled, and straightened his clerical collar. Katze blinked as J'Naith seemed to utterly switch costume in a millisecond. "You were expecting hellfire and damnation and pitchforks, were you?" he said in that same oddly-British accent. "That's so passe! It's all about the business of saving souls."

"That seems ... well, an odd line of work for you to be in."

"The work of the Lord is never done!" J'Naith smiled, showing off a row of pearly white teeth. "You see, we're on the same side here."

Katze blinked. "What do you mean, the same side?"

"Who said anything about there being sides?" J'Naith asked, this time in the form of an Asian man in Buddhist robes, but with the same voice he had been using throughout the whole performance. Katze found the accent stranger coming from this form than the prior two. "We are all in this together, searching for enlightenment and nirvana."

Katze was baffled by this and just stared at him. "You want to just pick one form and stick to it?" she finally said, not bothering to deflect his last assertion.

J'Naith grinned and flicked through what appeared to be a longshoreman, an Army general, and a schoolteacher before he returned to his business suit and bowler hat. "So what say you to taking his job?" he asked, pointing to Tirrasan still prostrate on the dirt.

"To be honest, I don't particularly like the ocean, and I've got other more interesting things to do yet," Katze said. "Besides, he'll never fall in your trap again."

"Me? Trap somebody? You insult me. I never trap, I make deals. They're all agreed to, and I make sure I have the proper paperwork." J'Naith presented a rolled scroll out of nowhere. "They always get something out of the deal, in Tirrasan's case here, it was permission to recreate the D'wani once he wiped the slate clean. He failed at that job, so I get my pound of flesh."

Tirrasan cried out, "Spare me, Master! I tried!"

J'Naith stared in disgust at the prostrate form. "No, you are forfeit to me when you failed for the last time." He looked up at Katze. "Come with me, I have something to show you. No tempting, I promise." Before she could protest, he took her hand, smiled, and the world swirled around them.

Next thing Katze knew, they were sitting on the wall overlooking Rhye. J'Naith smiled again, showing all his teeth. "Now that we don't have that annoying Tirrasan around anymore, let's do proper introductions, shall we? I'll start. You, my friend, have many names, one for this land, and one for the place you grew up. And someday, my friend, you will even combine them!"

Katze stared at J'Naith. "The name I choose to use is my business. You will stay out of it."

J'Naith puckered his face up in a pout, and then returned with his teeth-showing grin. "I shall. So which do you prefer, Liberator of Marraketh? Oh, I know this one. You prefer the name you've been called. You're so used to Katze that you can't get over the fact that it's not really your name!"

Katze growled. "Knock it off, now. The name I choose to be called is the name I will be called by, whether it is my real name or not. And besides, I hope we can't be seen up here. It's broad daylight."

"Oh no, don't worry about that. Metaphysics is so much fun. Nobody will see us up here, not even if they're *looking*," J'Naith crowed. "Which leads me into my next question. If the King were to die, his crown would go to his next living relative. His only living relative. The one who *\*is\** Tjarlin Mrythen Katze, as much as she wishes to deny to the universe that that is her name!" J'Naith laughed at his joke, and Katze glared at him. "The point is, it wouldn't be hard to push the King to his death, and then the crown would be yours!"

"I don't want it, and I have never wanted it," Katze said. "You forget, J'Naith, I was raised somewhere where we take our anti-monarchy tendencies seriously. The fact that Marraketh has a king is regrettable, yes, and I would have passed on the crown if it had come to me legitimately, so offering to remove Mikje and make me queen won't work. I don't want it."

J'Naith sobered, and appeared in his clerical collar again, as opposed to his bowler hat. "None of the kingdoms of the world appeal to you?" he asked.

“None, J’Naith. I’m not a ruler,” Katze said quietly.

“Interesting. You are quite the trickster, Liberator.” J’Naith thought for a second and then said, “I know!” He spread his arms out to encompass the whole reach of Marraketh. “Marraketh, K’lin, the entirety of the seventh dimension, free of the tears that Tirrasan put into it when he tried to destroy the D’wani! All yours, to do with as you see fit. You don’t have to rule, just keep the place running smoothly, maybe accept a few prayers...not strenuous work. You could even walk amongst the people, perhaps play your silly games in the other dimension...” He trailed off, waiting for her to decide.

Katze thought. Free of the stains that Tirrasan had put on the place. Free of the Wyrms. Free of twenty-eight years of domination and humiliation. Free of the sea fear. It was tempting, but...” As much as that would be nice, I don’t think it would work. While it would be nice to fix the tears that Tirrasan put into this world, he had your help putting them there, J’Naith. The Wyrms, I’m sure, is your doing. I don’t know what you will ask me to do if I accept your kind offer, so I will have to reject it.”

J’Naith frowned. He switched into a form that resembled Monty Hall wanting to make a deal, with the awful suit, and spoke once more. “That’s thrice I was sure I had you, and thrice you have rejected my offers. But I have an offer that you cannot refuse!”

“We’ll see. What is it?”

“Not only this dimension, but the one that you spend all your time playing in. You can have them both. I’ll remove the influence of the one you call the Wyrms and his allies, and you can make the world a better place, and can do favours for those you call your friends. Of course, if you choose this option, they’re not going to remember you, and they’re just going to think of the gods twisting things in their favour as a string of extraordinary good luck, but you’ll still know who does it. And who knows, maybe you can change those humans for the better. The planet would become such a better place with you making all the calls...”

Katze thought. The old tired planet she’d grown to know as home could really use somebody to look after it, and being the benevolent dictator had some appeal to it. And god only knew that humanity themselves could use a patron saint with all the trouble they got into...the offer was tempting. She thought of her friends — Greg and Josh, Ari and Mal, Aris, Cal, some of the rest of the VR crew...hell, even some folks at TRES. Some of them could use the streak of good luck coming their way...

J’Naith produced a scroll. “Let’s make a deal!” he cried.

Katze frowned at him and thought a bit more. How many of her friends would be there if there had been no Jihad to call them there in the first place? There was a good number of them, and of the rest that she thought were from Earth in the first place, she had no idea what to make of what their lives would have been like if she accepted this offer. “Let’s not,” she said quietly. “No deal.”

J’Naith dropped the scroll he was about to get her to sign. “What do you mean, no deal?” he asked, sounding as dangerous as she had ever heard him.

“No deal. Taking this offer would be quite the coup, but I don’t want the responsibility, and I don’t want to ponder what my friends would be or where they would be if the Jihad never came to pass. And even though *they* wouldn’t know the difference, I would, and I would always wonder if I’d made the right choice. Besides, the damage, again, is mostly your fault. So, I’m afraid I will respectfully have to decline this offer as well.”

He glared at her and returned to his business suit and bowler hat. “Altruism.” J’Naith shuddered, and then looked at her again, “What *would* you want?”

The best thing she could do in this situation was keep her mouth shut, but Katze’s thoughts escaped faster than her common sense could reel them in. “To have my dad welcome me into his house and love me despite what I am and not think I am a demon,” she said quietly.

The smile returned. “What an interesting request. I’ll confess it’s not something I would have considered obvious upon meeting you.” J’Naith fetched the scroll he dropped, shook it out and offered it once again to Katze. “One small signature, and I can make that reality.”

Katze took the scroll and stared at it. To erase that bad memory, all she had to do was sign this piece of paper. All she had to do. It would be so very easy. But what would she give up for one minor change? “I want to know what you get out of this deal,” she said suddenly.

“I want Marraketh,” J’Naith said. “And the only way I can get that is through you.”

Katze sat there for a bit longer, contemplating the scroll and the words. “Would you like a pen?” J’Naith said, and offered her an ink pen from his suit pocket. Katze took it numbly, thinking. On the one hand, reconciliation with the man she’d been raised by. On the other, a homeland she barely knew. She uncapped the pen.

J’Naith smiled the largest grin he ever had as he watched the last thing standing in between him and a possession prepare to sign. “Go ahead, go ahead,” he murmured, trying to speed up the process.

Katze frowned one last time, weighing the decision. And then her thoughts focused on the people in Marraketh, all who had been so kind to her over these last two weeks — Remmick and Rene and Grahm and Kendren and Saulin ... and even Tyrene, the man who gave the things that mattered most to him so that she could even contemplate doing what she was about to do. She capped the pen and handed it back to J'Naith. "I can't," was the only justification she could make for this one.

J'Naith screamed, "You can't deny me! I am the First! I am the Fairest! I can give you your deepest desires! I can give you what you want!"

"Begone, J'Naith. You had your chance to take this world, and you failed. I am still here, and I have rejected your offers to make me king four times over, and I even rejected your chance to trick me by giving me what I most want. But you cannot, because what I most want isn't in your abilities. Begone, this land belongs to the one who Created you, and not to you."

J'Naith screamed long and hard and then disappeared into nothing. Katze found herself on her knees in the sand where she has started the night's trip into the surreal, only to find the ocean turning orange from the sun rising. Tirrasan still lay in the sand himself, sobbing.

A hand touched her shoulder. "Well done."

*"The legends (worded in the ancient tribal hymn) lie cradled  
in the seagull's call.  
And all the promises they made are ground beneath the sadist's fall.  
The poet and the wise man stand behind the gun,  
and signal for the crack of dawn.  
Light the sun."*

Grahm Valkurk had sat awake all night, next to the scrying pool, watching. He had made many plans, some of them set in motion ages ago, and many of them were coming to fruition tonight. Tonight, if all went well, his ancient enemy would be handed several blows, enough to loosen his grasp upon this place. But it all had to go well.

He touched the water in the pool and watched the ripples spread across, forming images of people sleeping in their wake and shook his head. So much depended on one person. So much depended on one person and the decisions they would make and he was afraid it would all go wrong. He hated those moments in which destiny and free will collided, and nobody knew for sure how it would turn out — not even him. It would all come down to one person — one he trusted, but he had seen J'Naith twist even those he trusted to the path of darkness — to make the right decision.

He whispered a few words in the darkness, and the pool changed images for him. He watched, quietly for a few minutes, and whispered one word — "Now."

The image changed and he watched. "She is yours," he whispered to some unknown presence, and just watched the scene play out, smiling to himself.

Time went by as Grahm watched the night continue to move forward. Suddenly, he heard yelling coming from the living quarters of the Warren. He whispered a few words to the pool, and the scene changed, to the room of his old friend Kendren, who found his right hand completely obsessed with scrawling. It was enough to distract him, Grahm thought, and he touched the water of the scrying pool again. "It is time, Kendren, time to awaken to who you are. It is time to return to Rhye."

He whispered again, and the pool showed him a split image of the two people he was most interested in. He waved his hand at the scene taking place out on the beach, and smiled. That will do, the rest of that was all in her hands for how it would play out — "Be strong," he muttered — and now it was just to take Kendren's shock from him. He turned towards the scrying pool again, where he found Saulin as the first on the scene...

Saulin burst into the room, swinging a lamp, "Master Kendren! Are you alright?" he asked before his eyes had registered what was in the room. He glanced around the room, and was somehow able to not drop his lamp despite his surprise.

His master and teacher, Kendren was sitting there frantically scrawling into a book. Well, his right hand was frantically scrawling, but the rest of him seemed rather involved in this pursuit. That wasn't the part that surprised Saulin, though, it was the fact that his teacher, a man whom he had simply thought of as "old" his whole life, looked younger than he did. "Amon-Keth walks among us!" Saulin whispered.

Kendren stared strangely at his student, just as his hand dropped the pen he contained. "What in the name of Kyrill are you going on about, Saulin?"

Saulin blinked, put his lamp down on Kendren's desk, and gestured Kendren at the mirror. Kendren turned and stared at himself. "N'kanyu tiri, Marken, you weren't lying," he said quietly.

"Who's Marken?" Saulin asked, puzzled. Strange things were going on here, and he had his suspicions. An idea started



to form in his head that he wasn't sure he liked.

"An old friend," Kendren replied, still staring at his reflection.

Saulin nodded, and picked up his own lamp. "I need to check on something, Master Kendren." He fled out of Kendren's room, finding desperately that he had to check on his own student. Something was very wrong here, and Saulin felt as if he was getting in over his head.

He found the room he was looking for. He knocked, but got no answer from inside the room. Saulin took a deep breath and pushed open the door. "Katze?" he called quietly, wondering if she hadn't heard the knock.

There was nobody in the room. The bed was unmade and the lamp was missing, as if somebody had fled the room in a hurry. But oddly enough, there was a pile of clothes neatly folded on the desk, of the strange type Katze wore, topped off with that odd blue head covering she wore around. He stared at it, knowing she never went \*anywhere\* without it. Strange things were afoot here.

He looked around the room. In the corner was a staff, and propped up on the wall next to it was a longbow and quiver. Saulin thought it odd that his student didn't have a blade, but maybe Katze was special in some way. There was a knapsack in another corner, and looking into it, Saulin saw a couple books written in an alphabet he couldn't read.

A figure darkened the doorway. "Saulin."

Saulin spun, looked up at the figure, and let his jaw fall for a second before his wits caught up with him. "My Lord," he said quietly. "You do exist."

"Of course, I exist." The voice was bemused, even though Saulin couldn't see his face.

Saulin sunk to his knees. "Forgive me, my Lord, my weapons are all in my room, so I cannot let You have them. But I offer You me, my Lord — the sword I possess, the staff that I control, the bow which flings my arrows where they are needed to smite the infidel. But most of all, I offer You my faculties, which have allowed me to make a free and reasoned choice for You."

The figure stood there for a long time, contemplating. "I believe you are sincere, Saulin Tjalip, but it is your help I need at this moment. Prepare a wagon for Rhye, to go just after the dawn has broken. And bring those weapons you have offered Me with you. You may have use for them."

And as quickly as the figure had appeared, he left, leaving Saulin shaking but jubilant. He rose to his feet, and headed for his room. There was a job to be done.

As he walked past Kendren's door, he saw an older man, who had bearings much like Graham Valkurk, tending to Kendren. The two obviously knew one another, but Saulin had more important things to worry about.

*"Let me tell you the tales of your life of  
your love and the cut of the knife  
the tireless oppression  
the wisdom instilled  
the desire to kill or be killed."*

Katze rose from the sand and turned to see who had spoken to her. It was a man, dressed somewhat like a monk, and Katze remembered meeting him once before. "Yrulin," she said.

Yrulin nodded. "And Hyuke and Grem and Kyrill," he said, as they appeared around him one by one. "Welcome home, Tjarlin."

For once, Katze wasn't irritated by the use of her given name. It fit, for the first time since she'd known it was hers. For the first time since she'd found out who she really was, she felt comfortable with that identity.

The four of them looked out over the sea, nobody saying anything. The first rays of the morning sunlight streamed from behind them, casting long shadows over the beach and the ocean. Katze thought that was strange, that metaphysical creatures would cast shadow, but she decided to ignore it. It had been a weird night.

She broke from the group that surrounded her, and walked to where Tirrasan was sobbing in the sand. Quietly, she knelt next to him. "There is a future without J'Naith," she said quietly.

"It's all ruined," Tirrasan sobbed. "All of it, my last chance to restore the D'wani, all gone. All because of you."

Katze frowned. "Because of me? Because I wouldn't let you drown Marraketh?"

Tirrasan suddenly rose, and Katze followed him up, drawing her sword. "Because you were born!" he screamed angrily at her. "You were born, and you ARE NOT D'WANI!"

Katze blinked at him, trying to understand his rant. Tirrasan angrily continued. "The Mrythens were \*nothing\*. Nothing, until I chose them. They were farmers. Mryth is like Keth, only where Keth has the implication of land, Mryth had the implication of dirt. Dirt diggers, that's all they were, they would have been nothing!"

“The Mrythens were farmers. Interesting. But what does this have to do with me?” Katze was still confused as to what this had to do with anything.

“I chose them. I chose them, seduced the farmer’s wife, and a son was born. And instead of taking on the family farm, he went to Rhye and became a soldier, and there he met his wife. And they had a son, and then there was much rejoicing when their son had a daughter. And I was happy, for that daughter’s first child, who was going to be a girl, I knew...because that one would have been the new Empress of the D’wani. But the damned Kiratyu thwarted me again!”

Katze frowned for a second. “N’kanyu tiri,” she muttered, “that was the plan all along.” She looked up. “And Mikje has no clue that he’s the son of the sea god, does he?”

“No. But if your father hadn’t fallen head over heels in love with your mother, then my plans would have succeeded. I tried so hard to break them apart, I tried to get Mikje to not allow the marriage, but it was too late. And as predicted, their first child was a girl, but she was a half-breed. You. You keep ruining things for me. And since they gave me a half-breed for my plans, I reacted in anger, and with J’Naith’s encouragement, I thrust Marraketh under the spell of the beast. I made sure that both your parents would not escape for their crime against me, and I would have made you pay too — if your stupid father hadn’t thought faster than me and put you out of my reach!”

Katze tried very carefully to keep her calm, but the events with J’Naith flashed back in her head. All the torment her father had gone through to put her in the position to make that choice earlier was directly due to the two of them. She glared at Tirrasan, trying desperately to keep her raging anger in check, and wished like hell he hadn’t managed to succeed in eternally tormenting Tyrene by allowing him to fall under the spell of the Master and allowing his wife to have been killed. She carefully said, “You lose. Game over.”

“Oh, but I’ve not lost yet. My son still rules Marraketh.”

Katze tried desperately to keep her anger from overflowing. “You would have drowned them all if I hadn’t stopped you. Including your son!”

“Oh no, miracles are quite capable of happening. You would have died, and that father of yours, but Mikje would have survived, to usher in the glorious new age of the D’wani.” Tirrasan smirked. “They still might. You can’t kill your family — and Mikje is your great-grandfather, as much as you hate to acknowledge it.”

Katze dropped her sword into the ready position nearly instinctively as Tirrasan materialized a blade from nowhere. “But now,” he said quietly, “it is time to destroy you, the half-breed who insists on ruining everything I do. Unlike you mortals, I know not to let family ties get in my way.”

He lashed out with his sword, which reminded Katze of a long stinger, and she parried the blow, spinning out of his reach. “This is stupid, Tirrasan, stop and I’ll let you live.”

Tirrasan looked at her, eyes burning brightly with a manic glee, and came forward towards her. “I win or I die. Either way, he shall be paid.” He swung again at her, his sword hissing through the dawn air, and Katze dodged to the left to avoid the tip of his blade.

She stepped back a couple more steps, circled slightly towards him and said simply, “If you insist.” Tirrasan, thinking she was leaving him an opening, swung his blade in a backhanded swing, as if he was swinging a tennis racket. Katze quickly stepped into the swing and brought her sword up to parry his, knocking his sword off the trajectory of his blow. Quickly, before he could respond, she used the moment she had to bring her blade down into his chest to end the whole farce.

The expression on Tirrasan’s face slid from manic glee to shock as he realized what had happened and he dropped his sword onto the sand. Katze freed her blade from where it was impaled, and stood there quietly, waiting for anything to be said.

Tirrasan stood there for a moment, blinking, before he finally said, in a half-whisper to where only Katze could hear, “Even gods must sometimes fall.” He wheezed for a second, coughed up a bit of blood, and collapsed to the sand. He coughed again and then lay still.

Katze knelt next to him, closed his eyes, and whispered, “Rest in peace, Tirrasan.” She stepped back, cleaned the blood from her sword, and sheathed it quietly, and then turned to where the others were watching.

She recognized the four who had met her earlier, but the only one of the other four she recognized was Saulin. What was he doing out here, she wondered. The other two were a young man and an older greying man who looked somewhat like Grahm. The last person, a woman, gave Katze the eerie feeling of looking in a mirror, much like she’d had with Tyrene, and for the first time that morning she was truly surprised.

Kyrill stepped forward. “Tjarlin, my dear Liberator, I want you to meet somebody.” She nodded towards the other woman present in their group of eight. “Your mother.”

Katze stood there in disbelief. “How?”

The older man she didn’t recognize smiled, and Katze recognized the smile. “Grahm.” She looked closer at the younger man. “Kendren. It has truly been a night of miracles, hasn’t it?”

Grahm smiled and said, "Technically, I was Grahm, but am no longer. You know me from your history studies as Marken Yuvall. And most of these are your miracles. You may not have noticed, but your greatest wish was not the one you expressed to J'Naith. When you could have legitimately had anything you wanted, without regard to consequence, you chose, instead, to make your father's suffering for his world to not have been in vain, and that is why your mother is here."

And for the first time since she had started the whole ordeal that night, Katze began to cry.

# *The Reckoning*

*“Somewhere in a burst of glory  
Sound becomes a song  
I’m bound to tell a story  
That’s where I belong.”*

—Paul Simon, “That’s Where I Belong”

Mikje Mrythen walked down the halls of the castle, whistling a cheerful tune. Today was the year anniversary of when he had left his parents’ farm and had come to Rhye to join the king’s army. And now he served his king ably and well, and had been named Corporal Mrythen just a few days prior.

Most of his duties were constabulary in nature, patrolling the castle or the streets of Rhye, and this suited the young man just fine. As much as he was a D’wani and proud of that, he was finding that he was falling in love with the chief city of the Kiratyu, the capital city of his nation. He wondered if he would have been happier in Dewpoint at its heyday, but it wasn’t a question because Dewpoint was long dead from the tsunami.

He turned the corner and ran into the head of his unit, Lieutenant Dyan Akshul. Akshul took one look at him and said, “Where have you been, Corporal? They’re bringing in Marken Yuvall for questioning over the kidnapping of the King’s son, and I wanted you down there to watch the interrogation. Can’t have too much a show of force, can we?”

“No, sir, especially not against scum like Marken, sir,” Mikje responded. The kidnapping of King Takal’s youngest son, Kendren, had been the news in Rhye for the last few days. Nobody was sure who had done it, but Mikje had suspected Marken and his cult of would-be Code-breaking Kyrill worshipers, and had despised him from the beginning.

Mikje ran down to the interrogation room, and took a chair along the wall. He found himself sitting next to Corporal Rikul Kadan, his partner during the first few months. Kadan, despite being one of those damned Kiratyu, was by all accounts a good man, and Mikje had come to think of him as a honorary D’wani. “How goes, Rikul?” Mikje asked.

“It goes, Mikje. I hear a rumour we get to see the great Captain Shukal pull his interrogation magic on Yuvall. Shukal doesn’t need guards, we’re just here to watch the show.”

And sure enough, Captain Shukal walked in just after Rikul had finished saying that. He smiled at everybody present in the room and spoke. “Alright. This is an interrogation, everybody present is mainly as a show of force. I doubt we’ll actually need any of you, but since this is Marken Yuvall, I am glad you are all here. Please do not speak, though, because any time you distract him, it makes us less likely to get the information we need to know, and right now, we need to make sure Prince Kendren is safe.”

The guards nodded, and Shukal sat at a table and waved to the guard nearest the door to tell him that he was ready for the prisoner. The guard poked his head out and a minute later, two guards walked in escorting an older man with his hands chained up. They seated him in a chair across from Shukal. The two looked at each other for a while, Shukal studying his prisoner and Marken looking somewhat bemused at the whole process. “Name and occupation?” Shukal finally asked.

“Marken Rukshuf Yuvall Marsanyewmu, and I am a travelling missionary,” Marken replied. “And a prophet of some note,” he added after thinking for a second.

“A prophet?” Shukal stared at him. “A seer? What’s going to happen here, Marken, if you can see the future?”

“It is going to be a fruitless interrogation session, my friend. Nothing will come of it in the end.”

Shukal smiled, a cold, cruel smile. “Perhaps. What do you know of Kendren’s disappearance?”

Marken returned the smile, only his was much warmer. “Is it a kidnapping if he went of his own free will?”

Shukal raised his eyebrows. “So you admit you kidnapped Prince Kendren.”

“I admit nothing,” Marken said. “I merely asked what the definitions of the crime was, for it is no secret on the streets of Rhye that the constables are looking for Kendren’s kidnappers. And I believe the question of free will is important to the definition.”

Mikje couldn’t believe that Shukal was letting the prisoner get away with this impertinence. Shukal surprised him, though. “I care not about free will or lack thereof. I am looking for the kidnappers of my prince, and I don’t care if those kidnappers forcibly took him from his room in this castle or simply convinced him that running away was in his best interests. Kendren is the son of the King.”

Marken sat back in his chair. “The younger son. The eldest takes the throne, and I’m honestly surprised that King Takal cares this much for his youngest son that he would throw all of Marraketh into a panic looking for a boy that probably came up with the idea on his own to run away.”

Shukal looked shocked. “Slandering the king, on top of kidnapping charges. You just feel like racking them up, don’t

you, Marken?”

“Is it slander if it’s the truth? Takal thinks if he puts me away, it will destroy the agitation against the Codes. I confess to say that is not the truth, the movement will continue whether I am at its head or not.”

Shukal wrote some words on a page. “I will get you locked up, Marken, whether it is the last thing I do or not.”

Marken smiled. “In the end, you will banish me to K’lin. Because you can’t pin a thing on me, Shukal. In fact, my dear friend, you will try, and I’ll spend a few days in the dungeon over it. But in the end, it will be you rotting in the dungeons and me walking free.”

Shukal rose from his seat and towered over Marken. “Is that a threat, sir?”

Marken smiled back up at him. “It depends. Does the name Rukal Thalif mean anything to you?”

Shukal sat back down in his seat, only to watch Marken rise from his seat, the chains that had bound him curling around his ankles, happily unattached to anything. “Well, Captain? Does it?”

“You can’t prove anything,” Shukal muttered. Then with a gesture, Shukal said, “Stop him.”

The guards seated around the room rose as one, all of them drawing their swords. Marken smiled again, a genuinely warm smile. “I don’t think any of your guards is going to lay a hand on me, Captain Shukal. I believe I am in control of this interrogation session, so let me indulge in a bit of my favorite activity.”

Mikje tried to lunge forward and take out this traitor who had managed to turn the tables on the great Captain Shukal, the best interrogator in the Marraketh Army, but found that his shoes would not move. This made him even angrier, which made him disobey Shukal’s orders from earlier. “You’re a traitor, Marken. A traitor! You would throw this land to those who would destroy it.”

Marken smiled a bit more and walked over in front of Mikje and Rikal. “You two are bound together strongly,” he said as a start. Mikje tried to stab him when he was so close, but found he couldn’t move any of his muscles. Marken simply smiled at him. “You two are bound not only by your moments together in the past, but your moments together in the future. One day, the Kadan clan and the Mrythen clan will come together and become as one. And the mixing of that blood will end up saving Marraketh.”

He nodded at Rikal, who just collapsed back into his seat. “Ah, Mikje,” Marken said, staring him directly in the face. “And you shall be there to see it. I shall return, Mikje, to bring Marraketh one step closer to the society it could be. Your code of ethics and etiquette that you all hold so dear is what is choking and destroying Marraketh, and it will be at least a hundred years before it shall be broken, but before the hold is broken, you and I will meet again.”

He smiled. “And this you shall know, because you will age much slower than your peers, so that fifty years from now, you will still only look thirty, and one hundred years from now, you shall only look sixty. And you will not remember this conversation, Mikje, my friend, because I want you confused as to why you are living so long.”

“It’s being recorded,” Mikje said, in defiance.

Marken smiled. “No, Mikje, my friend, this is not. It will when I return to the center of the room again. You will remember this when the time comes, and not a moment before.” Marken smiled. “And at that moment, you will know what happened to Kendren too.”

Mikje blinked, and Marken walked back out to the center of the room. Mikje frowned. Marken was going to make prophecy, and that always made his head hurt. He glanced over to the recorder, who was shocked as well, but had scribbled down that Marken was about to indulge in prophecy. He wondered why Rikal had sat down, though, they were supposed to be protecting Captain Shukal, even if they couldn’t move.

“Captain Shukal,” Marken addressed the interrogator. “I am here to push things in place for the Liberator of Marraketh. Bad things will befall your lands in the future, but there will be hope as well, for at their darkest, there will be a dawn. I am writing a whole book on the prophecies of the Liberator, but I feel like mentioning one important fact. Somebody in this room will meet me when the Liberator returns. And he will be surprised.”

Captain Shukal looked down at the table, shaking his head. The recorder noted the words. Mikje wondered who that person would be.

Katze cried. Part of her tears were disappointment that there would be no reconciliation with David, part of them joy that she had a mother for the first time in her life, and the joy in which she knew Tyrene would greet Horetia when they returned to Rhye. But part of it simply tears over what had occurred that night — between saying no to J’Naith and then being used as the instrument of his taking Tirrasan’s pound of flesh.

Halfway through, she felt a quiet embrace. “My dear Tjarlin,” the person hugging her said, “I wish for all the world I could have seen you grow up, and I am sure Tyrene wishes the same thing. We did what we had to do, though, to make sure you were safe and well, and we paid for it. But you turned out beautiful and wonderful, and I am so proud of you.”

Katze looked up, face stained with tears, into the gentle face of her mother, and found the tears returning. She had

never realized what it meant to not have one — she'd never thought of it, having been raised by David alone, but found that there was a part of her that had ached at not having one. "Mother...", she said, and found herself burying her face in her mother's shoulder, and crying some more, like a little kid who had been lost and now was found.

Nobody said anything for a long time, it seemed as if all the people who had witnessed the scene understood just what power they were seeing here, but finally Marken said, quietly, "Katze, it's time we need to be heading back to Rhye. There is one more problem to deal with before Marraketh can be truly free."

Katze pulled herself away from her mother, smiled bravely, and nodded. "Mikje, right?"

"Yes," Marken said. "It is time I returned to him and you have a part to play in that. Besides, we need to reunite your father and your mother. Anyway, I want you to go to your room, and grab your things, for I don't think you're coming back here."

Katze nodded, hugged her mother once more, and looked back on the night's scuffles. The sea was munching on her sculpture of Dewpoint, but it wasn't the same malevolent sea she had fought against earlier — poor Tirrasan. Katze was finding herself not liking it much again, and decided to get off the beach before the urge to find high ground consumed her once again.

Mikje awoke, screaming.

He blinked, trying to figure out where he was, and it took a few moments before he realized he was in his bedroom in the castle in Rhye, and that the skulking terror he had just dreamt of wasn't true. The first rays of a dawn crept into his room, and he got out of bed, and looked to the west, into the shadow and darkness that the sun would soon obliterate.

"Gods can't die, silly," he said to himself. The dream he'd had seemed especially vivid, though, and he wasn't quite sure of how real things were this early in the morning. But it was silly that he dreamed of Atirrasan's death at the hands of his great-granddaughter. Gods can't die. It was simply a law of nature — certain things were immutable. Atirrasan was as forever as the Rasan Tjathe, the sea that bordered Marraketh.

The door burst open, and four or five guards came clustering in, followed by Remmick, who had obviously just gotten out of bed himself at the yelling, based on the fact that he was still in his pajamas. Mikje continued to look out the window, ignoring them. One of the soldiers asked, "M'liege, are you alright?"

"Yes, yes. If you will all leave, it's fine. I just had a nightmare." They all left, except Remmick.

"A nightmare?" Remmick asked. "What kind of nightmare?"

Mikje continued looking out the window to the west before finally speaking. "I dreamed that Tjarlin, whom you know, slayed Atirrasan."

"Any idea why?" Remmick asked. "It seems rather out of character for the lady Katze, does it not?"

Mikje sighed. "You can call her Tjarlin, Remmick. She's as much a Mrythen as she is a Katze. And I don't know why she would do such a thing, but I don't think it was literal. You can't kill a god."

"I hate to suggest it," Remmick said, "but is it possible that Rene was right, and the lady, err, Tjarlin is what he claims? What Graham was claiming all along?"

"That my great-granddaughter is the Liberator of Marraketh? The very thought is laughable, Remmick! Atirrasan is the protector of the D'wani, and thus the protector of all of Marraketh. This Liberator myth is the folly of Marken Yuvall — one of his dreams. There is no such thing, it was made up by the liar and the traitor himself."

Remmick nodded. "So what do you think the dream means?" he asked, carefully.

"I don't know," Mikje said. "I don't know if I like the portents that such a dream seems to imply. Especially when I looked away, and thought I saw Rikul Kadan watching as well, with a smile on his face."

"Rikul Kadan?"

"A friend of mine a long time ago, Remmick. You'd not know him."

"Any relation to Tyrene?"

"Tyrene's a Kadan?"

Remmick nodded. "His maternal family."

Mikje blinked. "That's right. That's why I let him marry Horetia in the end, because he was a Kadan. Even though he was one of the damned Kiratyu."

"As a mix between the Kiratyu and the D'wani, like most of Marraketh, I'm not able to comment," Remmick said. The two men looked at one another, until Mikje blinked again. "Is there something wrong?"

"Remmick, I want you to release Rene for long enough to bring me that interrogation record he was babbling on about."

"That's a strange request. May I ask why?"

"My memory seems to be playing tricks on me." Mikje shrugged. "It's probably just nothing, but I want to see how

well my memory remembers that day. Because I could have sworn I remembered Marken saying something about Rikul and me having a connection in the future as well as the past.”

Rene Ewerte, Head Librarian at the University of Rhye and currently serving time in the dungeons of Marraketh, looked up at Remmick. “He wants *what*?”

Remmick, dressed in his uniform, sighed. Not only at the spot Mikje was putting him in, but since it looked like Rene might not want to cooperate after all. “He wants the interrogation record of Marken Yuvall. He wants to check his memory with it.”

“I told him what was in that record, and he threw me in jail over it!” Rene responded. “And I’m not getting that record from him until I’m convinced that he’ll let me go back to my library!”

Remmick looked at Rene through the bars. “I’d love nothing more than for you to go back to your library, Rene. But I’m not the king. I am willing to try to talk him into letting you go if you’ll do this.”

Rene nodded. “Why does he care now, Remmick? He obviously didn’t when he threw me in here. What’s changed?”

“You didn’t hear this from me,” Remmick said. “Mikje had a dream that disturbed him.”

“Oh?” Rene asked. “Dare I ask what could perturb the unflappable Mikje?”

Remmick looked at the librarian, and pulled out the keys. He unlocked the door and stepped into the cell. “We didn’t drown.”

Rene stared at him. “We didn’t drown? What are you on about, Remmick?”

“Remember what you told Mikje that got you thrown in here?”

“N’kanyu tiri!” Rene looked surprised. “I...you mean, she *actually* was?”

Remmick nodded. “Mikje dreamed of Tirrasan’s death — at the hands of Tjarlin. It’s made him want to see the interrogation record. I fear the end is nigh.”

“The end is nigh for Mikje, I think. The rest of us are going to be just fine.”

“I hope you’re right, Rene.” Remmick stepped back through the cell door. “Now, come on. Let’s find that interrogation record, and I’ll find a way for you to avoid going back in the dungeon.”

“Fair enough, my friend.” Rene smiled quietly and Remmick wondered what the librarian was thinking.

The two walked out of the dungeon and through the hallways, where they ran into the third member of their conspiracy still in Rhye. Tyrene looked at the two of them. “What is Rene doing out of the dungeon? Did Mikje finally come to his senses?”

“Have you ever known Mikje to come to his senses?” Rene said bitterly. “He wants the interrogation record of Marken Yuvall.”

“I have that,” Tyrene said. “You left it on the table when you got arrested, I picked it up to keep it safe.”

“Well, wouldn’t it figure. You didn’t have to let me out, but because Mikje wanted something he thought I had...”

“Hush, Rene,” Tyrene said. “You don’t want to end up back in the dungeon again. Anyway, I was curious, as my great-grandfather used to always tell stories about his policework in Rhye, and he mentioned the interrogation of Marken Yuvall — with sadness, he mentioned his old friend was changed by the experience, and they grew apart after that. I was trying to see what happened and I don’t understand!”

Remmick smiled quietly. “You might ask the old friend, Tyrene.”

Tyrene blinked. “He’s still alive?” He frowned. “There is no way that somebody could live that long...” He trailed off, realizing what he was saying. “Mikje. How could I be so stupid?”

“You’re not stupid, Tyrene, but yeah. He was your great-grandfather’s partner, once upon a time. And something happened in that interrogation room.” Remmick frowned. “But what could have happened?”

Rene spoke up. “Making it even more interesting, Remmick, is that there isn’t any mention of Mikje in that record other than in the list of ‘soldiers present’.”

Remmick frowned. “Nothing about Mikje and somebody else having a connection in the future?”

“Nothing that I saw,” Tyrene said, and Rene nodded his agreement.

“Odd,” Remmick said quietly. “Tyrene, get that record from wherever you stashed it, and I’ll meet you in the Great Hall.”

Mikje turned over the last page of the interrogation record and frowned. Remmick and Tyrene looked at one another and waited for him to speak.

“This isn’t what I remember at all,” Mikje said. “I know he said something to Rikul and me, but it isn’t here!”

“Would it not have been put in the record?” Remmick asked. Tyrene frowned. Rene would know the answer, but Rene

had steadfastly refused to see Mikje. Not that Tyrene could blame him, the last time the two had seen each other, it was when Mikje put Rene in the dungeon for telling the truth.

Mikje sighed. "They recorded everything. Everything. But I don't say a word in here. And I know I said something."

Tyrene looked around at the walls, half paying attention to Mikje's sputters. He frowned. The pictures had been rearranged since he was last here, as the Panel of History Yet to Come had reappeared, shifting out the liberation scene with all the other pictures. He frowned, as he realized the old panel of Tirrasan creating the D'wani was missing.

"That's odd," he said. Mikje and Remmick both looked at him.

"What's odd, Tyrene?" Mikje asked him.

"The picture of Tirrasan creating the D'wani is missing — and the blank panel is back."

Mikje blinked and both him and Remmick looked over where said panel belonged. Sure enough, there was a picture of Kyrill leading the D'wani in its place, and all the rest of the panels had been shifted slightly. The look on his face, Tyrene noted, looked as if he'd seen a ghost.

Remmick, on the other hand, started to investigate the new panel. "It's not blank," he pronounced. "It looks like somebody's been drawing on it."

"Drawing? Drawing what?" Mikje said, his voice barely containing the shake in it.

Tyrene had walked over and was standing next to Remmick frowning at the sketching. "Remmick?" he finally said. "Is it me, or does the girl with the blade resemble Tjarlin?"

Remmick nodded. Tyrene continued. "Where did she get a sword?"

Mikje sunk back into the throne. "No, it...you can't kill a god. You can't..."

Tyrene sighed. "Marken Yuvall might just have been right after all, Mikje."

The storm clouds that came with the mention of that name appeared across Mikje's face. He leapt to his feet so he could turn around and stare daggers at Tyrene. "You don't really mean that, do you, Tyrene?"

Tyrene closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I say what I mean, Mikje, and I'm staring at the evidence in front of my eyes. To ask me to discard that because you can't stand the thought that Marken was right and the Codes are hurting us..."

"The water glass," Remmick said suddenly. Tyrene looked at him, and Remmick smiled. "It was something I noticed when the...err, Tjarlin was Sid's prisoner. She woke her fellow prisoner by dumping a glass of water on him...from across the hall. The thing that amazed me, though, was how straight and steady it was held. I can't do that, Mikje, even though my position in the Guard exempts me from some of the codes. I don't even know if you can."

Mikje collapsed back in his throne, and said, in that tone of voice one uses when one is about to explode in anger and is trying to contain it, "Both of you had better get out of here before I have half a mind to walk you both down to the dungeon myself."

There came a pounding at the door. Tyrene looked up from the book he was reading. He had been under house arrest the last few days — Mikje hadn't been happy with his and Remmick's remarks about Marken, apparently. Having nothing else to do, he'd taken to reading late into the night.

But why hadn't the soldiers stopped anybody who was banging at the door? House arrest meant that visitors were closely monitored, and they were usually escorted in by the soldiers. Not that he'd had very many guests anyway, Remmick was under house arrest as well, and Rene had been put back in his cell.

He opened the door, only to find his daughter standing there. She seemed different, though, in bearing and demeanor than what he had seen her last. Much more self-assured. And — n'kanyu tiri, the picture'd been right — she wore a sword. Something really strange was going on here, and he didn't have a clue.

But not a word of this did he breathe. "Tjarlin," he said simply.

She nodded. "Father," and then added a smile. "I have a surprise for you."

He frowned at her, and she stepped through the doorway and to the side, revealing the person behind her. Tyrene stood there staring in sudden shock. It could not be! It just could not be! It had to be a ghost!

A voice came from his side, where Tjarlin was. "Miracles are capable of occurring," she said quietly.

Tyrene still stared in disbelief. "Horetia?" he finally said.

The figure in the doorway smiled, and Tyrene was sure. This was his wife, the woman he'd fallen in love with and married. This was Tjarlin's mother. And by some miracle, by some matter of luck, some god had smiled upon him and reunited his small family, all three of them. After all he had given up and sacrificed to assure that Marraketh would survive the Beast, the universe had returned the two things most important to him — his wife and his only child.

He looked at Tjarlin and then at Horetia, and then started to cry with the wonderfulness of what was happening to him. A second later, he found himself being hugged by both his daughter and his wife, and at that moment, Tyrene figured



himself to be the luckiest man in Marraketh.

When the hug broke apart, Tyrene blinked to see an older man standing in his doorway, smiling himself. Tjarlin returned the smile, and then said to him, "Father, I'd like you to meet Marken Yuwall."

Tyrene blinked. "You're *really* full of surprises tonight, Tjarlin. So this is the man who is Mikje's bane."

His daughter smiled. "One more, then, Father." She nodded at the door, and a younger man stepped through. "This would be Kendren Grehlich."

"Tjarlin," Tyrene said, fearing the answer to what he was about to ask, "what has happened here?"

His daughter grinned and it was Marken who answered. "Didn't we spend quite a while debating that question, Tyrene? You and me and Rene and Remmick, over pints at the Grey Horse? Well, you and Remmick and Rene did, I had no doubts from the beginning."

Tyrene frowned. "It was Graham who was in on those...you're telling me that Mikje's Bane has been one of his best soldiers? And that you were so sure Tjarlin was the Liberator because you had made the prophecies. I..." Tyrene thought for a second. "So what was Mikje talking about when he mentioned that Rikul and him would be tied in the future?"

This time it was Tjarlin who spoke up. "That would be me." She smiled again. "Mrythen and Kadan, no?"

Marken nodded. "Exactly. The pieces all fall together."

And Tyrene just stared. "Alright. I want to know everything. Starting with the soldiers at my door, and why they never noticed you coming in..."

"Mostly a bit of magic," Marken said, just as a fifth figure came in from outside. "And Saulin here checked to make sure there wasn't any more of them."

"They're all sleeping peacefully," Saulin reported. "And the warding spells are set. It's safe."

And the seven of them fell into a conversation that spanned the night and yet none of them were tired, for there was still work to be done.

The door to the room Mikje was in swung open suddenly. Mikje looked up, startled at the sudden movement as a tall figure swept into the room, with a confidence and majesty he had rarely seen. "Grandfather, we need to talk."

Mikje blinked before realizing the figure was Tjarlin, his great-granddaughter. She, the last time they'd spoke, had been dressed in clothes befitting the universe she normally ran around in, and had to remember not to call him Professor Schmidt. But now...

She stood there, staring at him, waiting for a response, but Mikje found he couldn't make one. This time she had called him by the family relation they shared, and it struck him at just how much Tjarlin resembled her mother. And the only thing that was out of place in her garb were the spectacles she wore, which were much more modern than anything Marraketh could produce at the moment. Somebody had even gone to the trouble of finding her a cape, which was clasped shut with the sigil of her father's clan. He found himself oddly disappointed she had chosen to use his sigil as opposed to that of her mother's clan — his clan.

He nodded. "And what do I owe the honor of this unexpected visit, Tjarlin?" he said, expecting her to wince. But she didn't change expression or anything, and Mikje started to wonder just what had happened to her, and he also started to wonder where the guards were.

"First of all," she said, "that is my name. I may use others, in other places, but that is the name I was given at my birth. Second, your soldiers are sleeping. And third, I believe I stated why I came here — we need to talk."

Mikje stared at his granddaughter. "What has happened to you?"

"I am what I am, Grandfather." She smiled. "Anyway, shall we walk? The gardens would be better conducted for talking than this stuffed up room."

He blinked, and then nodded. "Alright. I still don't understand, though. What do you want with your old grandfather?"

They walked down the hall out of his room. Tjarlin took a deep breath and finally said, "Why didn't you come to the castle the night Sid and the Beast took over Marraketh?"

Mikje blinked at the question out of nowhere. Tjarlin continued. "You were the Captain of the Guard. It would have been your responsibility to be there a night when court was being held. You would have been able to take out Sid. Why weren't you there?"

Mikje found he had no answer to the question that made any sense. "I had a feeling. A feeling that I needed to be elsewhere. It was the right decision in the end, I think, somebody needed to coordinate the resistance."

"But you didn't even do that, Grandfather, you fled first to K'lin and then to Earth. The resistance was mainly Remmick's doing, Grandfather. He's the one that laid his life on the line every day for his cause. What were you doing?"

"You know what I was doing, Tjarlin, I was your linguistics professor, if you recall."

“Yes. I am aware of that. But the point is, you were not here. You were not in Marraketh, nor did you even stick around K’lin. You went to Earth.”

“So did you, Tjarlin.”

“I did not have a choice, Grandfather.”

Mikje hesitated for a second, as they had reached the door to the gardens. “All’s well that ends well. Why do you care? Sid is dead; the Beast is gone. Marraketh thrives. Why does something that happened twenty-eight years ago matter now?”

His granddaughter looked at him and just shook her head. “Your family means that little to you, Grandfather?”

He looked at her and tried to remember just how long ago it had been that she had been born. “No, twenty-eight years ago...you wouldn’t have been born yet...you’re eighteen, aren’t you?”

“On Earth, Grandfather, yes. Marrakethian years are shorter.”

He stared at her and wondered how he had forgotten that. Had he gotten used to the long Earth year when he’d been there? Tjarlin looked at him. “I was born in 534, Grandfather. And it’s 562 now.”

Mikje just shook his head. “There was no stopping Sid and the Beast. If I had been there, I would have been killed. You know that.”

“Like my mother was?”

Mikje winced. “This isn’t fair, Tjarlin. You’re asking hard questions that I’m not sure there’s any good answers to.”

Tjarlin opened the door out onto the garden. “I wasn’t intending on being fair. I was intending on holding you accountable for your decisions. And the decision you made to not be present the night Sid and the Beast took over might have just been responsible for the death of Warhm Grehnic — and the death of my mother, the brainwashing of my father, and my exile.”

They walked out, Mikje near frustration at the lines of this questioning. “I had an exile too, Tjarlin.”

“But your exile was self-chosen, Grandfather! And the whole time you were on Earth, you \*knew\* you were a Marrakethian. You knew it wasn’t home. I didn’t know — think about it, Grandfather, to when you were twenty-eight! What were you doing at twenty-eight? Now imagine if you were told at that point that you weren’t what you’d always thought you were?”

Mikje thought back over the years to when he was that young. They turned a corner in the garden and Mikje looked down the row they were walking down. The timing of Tjarlin’s question matched with the figure standing at the end of the row jarred something loose in his head.

At twenty-eight, he was a guard and a constable in the King’s Army, and one day he’d been chosen to help guard the interrogation of Marken Yuvall, that most notorious criminal. At twenty-eight, Marken had told him that he would be around to see his mythical Liberator return. Now it was time to give Marken a piece of his mind.

He started to move forward, only to hear the sound of somebody drawing a sword, and one being placed in his path. He stopped and stared at the blade — the same one that Tjarlin had wielded in his dream where she had killed Atirrasan. He followed it up to see who it was wielded by, and found himself again looking into his granddaughter’s face.

They stood there, staring at one another, until Tjarlin finally said, “I am your ‘mythical’ Liberator.”

Mikje stepped backwards another step, shaking his head. “No, no...it can’t be. It can’t be. It’s not allowed.”

“There are higher authorities than you, Grandfather. Now, we are going to approach Marken, and we are not going to hurt him.”

Mikje, in stunned silence, let his granddaughter guide him ever closer to his worst enemy. He remembered now, he remembered that Marken had told him he would live to see the Liberator of Marraketh. He never expected Marken to be right, and he definitely never expected that it would be his own descendant. Or at least he hadn’t until now. The mixing of Kadan and Mrythen...no wonder he’d been willing to let Tyrene marry Horetia.

“So we meet again, Mikje.” There was no animosity in Marken’s voice, no hatred, just a tolerant pity. Mikje stared up at the man whom he’d hated for so very long, and found that he couldn’t bring himself to hate anymore. He had lost.

“You said I’d know where Kendren went,” Mikje said. “And I know now that you weren’t making it up when you said the Liberator would return. But is Atirrasan really dead?”

Marken smiled. “In a moment, you will know where Kendren went. And I think the latter question is better addressed to Tjarlin.”

Mikje looked at his granddaughter. She looked down at the ground, and then back at him. “Yes. It became him or me, and since he was partially responsible for all this pain, I had to. He was going to flood Marraketh again if I did not.

“His plan, Grandfather, was to reseed the D’wani race, much in the way he had created it in the first place. And he did. He seduced a farmer’s wife, and the farmer was convinced the child that came out of Tirrasan’s illicit relationship was his son. And that son was you, Grandfather. And that’s why you didn’t go to court that evening — the feeling you had was

Tirrasan warning you away. And you didn't tell Horetia, because Tirrasan wanted to punish her and Tyrene for falling in love. Because Horetia's firstborn was supposed to have been pure D'wani — the resurgent Empress, the recreation of the once proud D'wani.

"Unfortunately for his plans, I was a halfbreed, and he was going to destroy us and start over again. You'd have survived again, another miracle."

Mikje stood there, looking at his granddaughter, horrified. He then looked up at Marken. "I didn't know!" he cried, and fell to his knees in grief. "I wanted the D'wani to find their former glory, but not at the expense of my family. And I thought of Rikul as a D'wani! And when his grandson asked for my granddaughter's hand, I let him. I didn't want the Kiratyu wiped from Marraketh...I didn't..."

Marken looked at the man collapsed at his feet and shook his head. "Arise, Mikje."

Mikje got shakily to his feet and looked around, just as Tyrene and Remmick stepped out of the dark shadows. Mikje stared at the both of them. "Aren't you supposed to be under house arrest?"

In answer to that question, the two of them made room for a third, and Rene popped out of the shadows. Mikje stared. Remmick spoke. "What was our crime?"

Mikje looked pleadingly at Tjarlin, but she just bowed her head and said nothing. Marken said, quietly, "Three good men, and you had them thrown in jail for suggesting I was anything other than a traitor and a fool."

It was Tyrene's turn to speak. "Mikje, was Grahm Valkurk a traitor and a fool?"

"No. He was a good soldier, if a bit unorthodox."

Tjarlin spoke again. "Grandfather, I would like you to meet Grahm Valkurk," she said, pointing to Marken.

Mikje nearly dropped to his knees again. "Grahm? Good quiet Grahm? The Grahm who exposed Thalin's treachery? That Grahm was..."

"That Grahm was me," Marken said. "Am I really such a traitor and a fool?"

Mikje looked up. "No. I don't want to admit it, but no. You're not."

Marken nodded. "In that case. Kendren?"

Kendren stepped out of the shadows next to Marken. Marken spoke again. "Mikje, if I may present to you Kendren Hrdek Grehlich."

"Kendren still lives? What happened?" Mikje said, shocked. "He disappeared when I was a young man, and I am no longer young!"

"I ran away," Kendren said, "and was found by Marken's group. They kept me hid, because there was no future for me at the castle — I was punished when I tried to use my talents, and I wasn't very good at the things they encouraged me to do. And when Marken said the future would need me, I figured I would give it a shot. So I gained some time to practice my talents and teach others, because I didn't expect Marken to do what he has done."

"Your talents are against the Codes?" Mikje asked.

Kendren nodded. "And the Codes are unnatural, Marrakethians were born to be magic users."

"The Codes are the only thing that makes it possible for the D'wani and the Kiratyu to live together!" Mikje exclaimed.

"Your granddaughter seems to live fine without them," Kendren pointed out. "And she is both D'wani and Kiratyu. The societies are not so incompatible that they would collapse at the first use of magic. Tyrone Grehlich, my esteemed ancestor, had that one very wrong."

Mikje glared at Marken. "This is tell Mikje he's wrong day, isn't it? Well, I'm not going to put up with it anymore. I am the King, still, despite this usurper. And you, Marken, you aren't a fool, but you damned well are still a traitor. Guards! GUARDS!"

The castle stayed silent and still. Mikje looked around. "What have you all done? What enchantments have you put on this place?"

"I told you," Tjarlin said. "The guards are asleep. And nothing will wake them."

"Don't kill me," Mikje said, for the first time finding that Tjarlin — or what Tjarlin had become — was scaring him. "Let me live, please? Don't kill me? I just..."

"I was never going to kill you. None of us were. We're just here to show you the truth." Tjarlin looked at her grandfather, and then realized she still had her sword drawn. She put it away, and smiled. "Besides...Rene?"

Rene stepped forward, with a piece of paper. He started to read. "I, Mikje D'nek Mrythen Talikmu, the Captain of the Remote Frontier Guard of the Marrakethian Army, and as the highest ranking Court official in Marraketh, do hereby decree that, absent any claimant to the throne by members of the Hrdek Grehlich clan, the title of King shall fall to the highest ranking Court officer in an effort to return Marraketh to some stability after the reign of Lord Protector Sid Harldcast and the Beast. Dated this 20th day of Agamon in the year 562 after the Joining."

Mikje stared. He'd forgotten that he'd signed that piece of paper, and here was a claimant to the throne that was of the Hrdek Grehnych line. He really had no out here. He turned to each of them, searching their faces for any hope of renegeing on his word. Finding none, he said, "I will call an abdication ceremony first thing in the morning. And after I have abdicated, I think I will go home to the farm that my father left me." He looked at Tjarlin. "It'll someday be yours, you're my only living relative."

Tjarlin smiled. "That's not quite true, Grandfather."

And a figure stepped out from the far end of the row. Mikje had noted how much Tjarlin had resembled her mother, but he never imagined he'd have the chance to actually see the two of them together. "Horetia. How did you survive?"

"A miracle, Grandfather Mikje," she said.

And Mikje stared at Tjarlin. Tjarlin just simply smiled back.

Katze stood next to Kendren. He had asked her to escort him when Mikje handed the crown over at his abdication ceremony. It had even been more surprising when he'd asked her just to wear the simple garments that she had worn the night in the garden with Mikje as opposed to Marrakethian finery. Katze was greatly pleased with this, because it meant she wouldn't have to get dressed up in fine dress clothes, and Marrakethian high fashion for women was worse than that of Earth.

He had insisted she wear the sword — "it's the indicator of your office" he had said — but Katze found she didn't mind that either. It was true, she had a special role to play here, and it really didn't bother her as much as she expected it to. She wasn't going to spend all her time in Marraketh, but enough to both make sure the country was heading in the right direction and that the Wyrms weren't coming back. Never again, she decided. Never again would he be allowed to destroy Marraketh.

She suspected it was also to make sure Mikje kept his promises — he'd been near scared of her since that night in the garden, between his begging her not to kill him, and the look of shock and awe on his face when her mother had shown up. She still wasn't quite sure if she was pleased with this development or not, but if it helped today, she could take it.

Because nothing must spoil this day, for it was the day in which Marraketh took its first step on a glorious future. Katze didn't quite know how she knew that, but she knew it anyway, and was going to make sure that they took that first step.

The doors opened, and the two of them strode into the throne room, Kendren smiling and Katze just thinking about how different this was from the last time she was in here. The pictures on the wall always made her smile, this time even more so because the Wyrms weren't drawn in all the panels.

They came to a stop on the map of Marraketh laid in the floor, this time on top of Dewpoint as opposed to Rhye, and Katze smiled at the contrast in that. She stood there next to Kendren as Mikje rose from the throne, took the crown off his own head, and said, "I, Mikje D'nek Mrythen Talikmu, do abdicate the throne of Marraketh." He then handed the crown to Remmick, who was standing next to him.

It was much to Katze's surprise to find that Remmick brought the crown to her. It was even more of a shock when Kendren kneeled, and she placed the crown on his head, saying words that she somehow knew, even though she'd never practiced. "I, Tjarlin Mrythen Katze Rhyemu, in my capacity as the Liberator of Marraketh, do crown Kendren Hrdek Grehnych King of Marraketh. Arise, my king."

Kendren rose, and Katze immediately knelt to him. The rest of the room followed in the gesture towards their king, and Kendren broke out in a grin. Katze suddenly realized that the kneeling was probably not necessary from her, but it had seemed right at the time.

After the ceremony, though, she disappeared out to the river, just beyond the city walls, to watch the current flow by and do a bit of thinking. It was much to her surprise, however that she found Marken sitting right there, as if he was waiting for her.

Katze and Marken leaned against the city wall, watching the slow and stately drift of the Kyrill river. Katze attempted to skip a few stones on the mostly smooth surface, while Marken just sat there soaking up the sun. He finally said, "A job well done all the way around. Things are returning to what they once were in Marraketh."

Katze nodded, not feeling like saying much of anything. The last few days had been somewhat a blur, and she wasn't sure of this odd feeling of power she was picking up off the universe. Marken spoke again. "And you, my friend, did the best job of all."

"Thank you," Katze responded, preferring to keep to the short and simple.

"What are your plans now?" he asked.

"I'll probably go back to Earth. They could use the help in fighting the Wyrms, and, well, Marraketh is liberated, there's not much left for me to do here."

"Have you thought about coming home?" Marken asked.

The question didn't make any sense to Katze. Wasn't Marraketh home; wasn't that the point of all of this? She started to say, "Home? But I am..." and then trailed off, thinking of something Saulin had said, about the Creator walking among us all. She took another look at Marken and realized that she truly was staring at the Creator of All, and unsheathed her sword. She lay it on the ground, and was about to call her staff and her bow to her when Marken laughed gently.

"No, Katze," he said. "You don't need to take the oath, you already did, a long time ago. Put your sword away."

Katze returned her blade to its scabbard. "What do you mean? I don't recall doing such a thing."

"When I want a job done right, I send a trusted lieutenant to make sure it is done right." Marken smiled at the thought, and then added, "Although I suppose it is cheating to make prophecy when you can see the trails of the future."

Katze hadn't managed to get past the trusted lieutenant part. "Err?" she asked in confusion, not liking where the thought led. It had taken so damned long to learn to deal with the whole 'you're not human, you're a Marrakethian', and now it looked as though the apple cart was about to be tipped. Again. "Trusted lieutenant?"

Marken smiled again. "I shouldn't expect you to remember any of what I'm telling you, some things have to be left behind. But you do need to know a few things if you want to stay."

"Stay? You mean I might not have a choice?"

"You're an Aspect."

"What in the name of Kyrrill?" Katze was afraid to know the answer. The world was just about to go collapsing around her again.

Marken smiled that quiet little smile again. "Marken Yuvall is an Aspect of Me," he said. "Born mortal, but infused with the spark of a god, which is Me. The body is flesh and blood and will die, but the spark lives on as part of something greater.

"The same goes for you. The spirit that animates the body is a piece of a god — if you recall Saulin's lessons, one of the Three who were created after J'Naith. In the mythos you're familiar with, archangels seem to come to mind."

"Which one?" Katze asked.

Marken shook his head. "Best for you not to know right now, you'll remember in time. Anyway, aspects are often used for having somebody in the right place at the right time, or sometimes for punishment. There's always a few interesting lessons to be learned by living within the restraints of a mortal body. But this wasn't punishment, I should say, it was more a case of the right place at the right time."

Katze shook her head, trying to get this all to fit with everything else. It just about figured, didn't it. All this just to be content with herself, only to find that the whole goddamn mess was like an onion.

Marken looked at her. "You're not happy about this. I wouldn't mention it, but that I had to stop pushing the Source back from you to get you through the night you faced J'Naith. Part of me is surprised that he didn't recognize the real you through this guise, you were shining pretty brightly towards the end of it."

Katze blinked. "You mean, that's how come I was able to see without my glasses?"

Marken nodded. "Exactly. The Source is, well, a source of great power, and it does interesting things to those who would use it. But it has a way of pulling those who would use it back to their true natures. And thus, if you want to stay here, you're going to have to do your own pushing back. The Source doesn't take kindly to those who want to shirk the responsibility. It thinks you should have."

"I think I'll still take my chances. There's a War to be fought," Katze said, smiling a bit.

"There is. Good luck. And if you need me, I'll be around."

Katze sat and watched as Marken disappeared into nothing, established some boundaries in her head with the tickling little bit that Marken had called the Source, and walked back into town. There were a few people to say goodbye to before she went back to Earth.

Katze opened the door from her room, calling out loudly, "I'm home!"

When she stepped out into the hallway, she found Josh and Greg, both there waiting for her. Greg said, "Hey, look what the cat drug in one day."

Josh, still in his wheelchair, smiled up at her. "They said it'll heal. Maybe only another couple months in the chair, and they'll be able to start physical therapy. Not bad for a dead man."

Katze smiled. "So it looks like everybody's doing well."

Greg looked at her. "How'd my suggestion work?" he asked.

Katze sighed. "Well, your original suggestion of 'Go to Chico' didn't work out all that well." She shook her head and sighed. "It's a long complicated story. Short of it, Dad didn't think all that highly of who I am. I'd hate to see his reaction to what I found out in Marraketh."

Greg raised his eyebrow. Josh said, "The Liberator myth turned out to be true after all, didn't it?"

Katze blinked. "How'd you know about that?"

Josh smiled. "It was Sid's biggest worry in dealing with you. That the Liberator myth would turn out to be true, and that you'd be it."

Katze stared at him. Josh continued. "I didn't think you were because of the gunshot incident, but then, when I found out that you'd killed Sid, I started to wonder."

Greg looked at the both of them, baffled. "You mean Josh is one of whatever the hell you are, Katze?"

"Yeah," Katze said. "Josh and I are both Marrakethians."

Greg laughed. "I get pulled deeper and deeper down the rabbit hole!"

"Anyway," Katze said, attempting to pull the discussion back on track, "I ran into Grahm Valkurk — remember Gary Wilkins, our GSI for linguistics, Josh? That's Grahm. — and from there we went to Marraketh. Lesse. Did a lot of reading of history, ran into Josh there, and ended up taking a trip out of Rhye and discovering that I was, indeed, what Josh suspected. That, and Greg, I know this is going to drive you nuts, but I guess I'm a mage too."

"Oh come on, now, Kats, now you're just pulling my leg."

Katze didn't respond directly to Greg but began mumbling in Marrakethian instead. Josh frowned at first, not quite catching what Katze was saying, but grinning as he caught onto what she was doing. Katze finished muttering and opened her right fist for Greg to see the small flickering light contained there. "Very basic illumination spell," she said.

Greg blinked. "Okay, Katze, anybody tell you that you were weird?"

Katze dismissed the spell and smiled. "I'll take it as a compliment coming from the unflappable Greg Wu."

Greg smiled back. "I missed you too, Katze. And in some ways, it's nice to see the old Katze back."

Katze shook her head. "No, Greg. Not the old Katze. Not the one you knew freshman year, that Katze is gone and won't be coming back. But I'm okay with that, and I think, in time, you'll be okay with it too."

Josh grinned. "So...how about we all go raid somewhere in town for dinner?"

And they all wandered off into the Berkeley evening, three friends united.

Mal and Ari were having another meeting to discuss the running of the Verthandic Rangers, a process which needed to be checked up on every once in a while. Normally, there would be a third person in the room helping with this job, but that wasn't the case right now, which left an empty chair where that third person would have been. Both Mal and Ari were trying their best to ignore that third chair, and both quietly wondered what the hell Katze was up to and whether she'd ever come back to take that chair.

So it was much to their surprise when, halfway through one of these meetings, somebody walked into the room, took that empty seat, and asked quietly, "Have I missed anything important?"

They both turned and looked. Katze sat there, a grin upon her face. "I think I'm back," she said. "And there's a War to be fought, so I guess I'll still be around."

Ari leaped out of her chair at the sight of her best friend, and proceeded to hug Katze. Katze hugged Ari back. Mal, not given to such displays, and not really being as close to Katze as Ari was, just stayed in his chair, finally saying, "Welcome back, kid."

"So how'd it go?" Ari asked. "You seem happier than when I last saw you, when you weren't sure if you were going to come back."

"Well..." Katze said. "It didn't start out well. Dad didn't take kindly to my trying to tell him who I was. It ended up..." Katze trailed off, surprised at how much it still hurt to say what she was about to say, "...well, Dad's gotten into this Christian church that believes devils are real and take over souls, and he thinks I've been taken over by one of these demons. And before I knew what was going on, I was told I was no longer welcome at his house." She blinked, trying to keep the tears out of her eyes. "It was stupid of me to tell him who I was, but I thought he'd understand...he understood the weirdness in taking me in the first place."

Was that a glint of anger in Mal's eyes? Katze couldn't be sure, and didn't want to take the chance of checking; Mal scared her in some ways even though they'd been working together for a while now. Ari just shook her head. "Well, what else happened?"

And Katze told the whole tale of what had happened in Marraketh, including what Marken had said to her by the riverside at the end of her adventures. The two of them looked at her rather oddly, but Mal recovered first. "Archangel Katze," he said, smiling.

Katze just shook her head. "Yeah, it's kinda funny, but no jokes around everybody else, okay? I'd like to not have to worry about having this one get around; it's bad enough being the Jihaddi who got kidnapped."

That got a chuckle from Mal and a laugh from Ari, and the three of them settled back down to discuss the current state of the Rangers. Katze was surprised to realize that she actually missed this sort of meeting, and the normality of it compared

nicely to her last month or so.

Katze aimed carefully at the center of the target in the bale of hay, and fired a shot. Bullseye. She'd talked Mal into letting her take a corner of the vehicle pool for archery practice, and it felt kinda nice to be able to have a place to practice. Besides, it got her out of her office every once in a while.

She went to retrieve her arrows, and decided it was time to practice trick shots. You never knew when you were going to have to rely on firing an arrow from a strange direction, or around a corner, or while in the middle of 'porting.

So that's how Katze came to be firing from the top of a stack of boxes on the far side of the motor pool. While she was always careful to check and make sure the area was clear before firing, sometimes she got so concentrated on making her shot that she didn't notice when somebody entered the range.

And that's what happened this time. Katze fired the shot, and then realized that somebody was going to step right in the way of the arrow. Hurriedly, she reached out for it and pulled it to a halt just in time for the person to look up and see an arrow floating in midair, not going anywhere, awfully close to her head.

Katze climbed down from the stack of boxes, making very sure to keep the brakes held on the arrow, and ran over. "Sorry!" she called. "Wasn't aiming at you!"

The other person poked warily at the arrow, just as Katze came up on it. She grabbed it with her hand and released the brakes, only to find it didn't go anywhere. Katze nodded, relieved that if she'd messed up on holding the brake, the arrow would have just fallen to the ground. She stuck the arrow back in her quiver and looked up at the person she very nearly took out.

"You're Katze, aren't you?" the other person asked.

Katze nodded. "Yep, that's me."

"Thought so. I was in on the rescue team."

Katze frowned. She'd been helping Ari out with Explorations ever since she'd returned to the Jihad, but it had only been a few days since she'd gotten the gig, and she was still frantically trying to remember everybody's names. "You're... Commander Merquoni, no?"

"Yeah."

The two of them looked at each other, both trying to figure out what to say, until Katze grinned and said, "Well, can I make up for nearly shooting you with an arrow in some way?"

"Uhhh, sure."

"I dunno. How about dinner in Berkeley or something? It'd be a change from eating here."

Aris blinked. "That could work. Hey, you hang out around the Bay Area too?"

Katze nodded. "Live and attempt to go to school at Berkeley. Not that that's been happening much..."

"You a Giants fan?"

"Are you kidding? I grew up on Giants baseball."

"We could go to a game sometime."

"Yes, why not?"

And the two wandered out of the garage chattering about the Giants' chance to take the Series this year. For you see, Jihaddi — even those who find they're odd by the standards of Jihaddi — can have mundane interests and even attempt to live a mostly mundane life.

Even Katze.

*"These days I feel a change  
All the patterns rearranged  
Though I can't explain  
I know I'm not afraid  
Now I realize  
All good things can be supplied..."*

—Great Big Sea, "Shines Right Through Me"