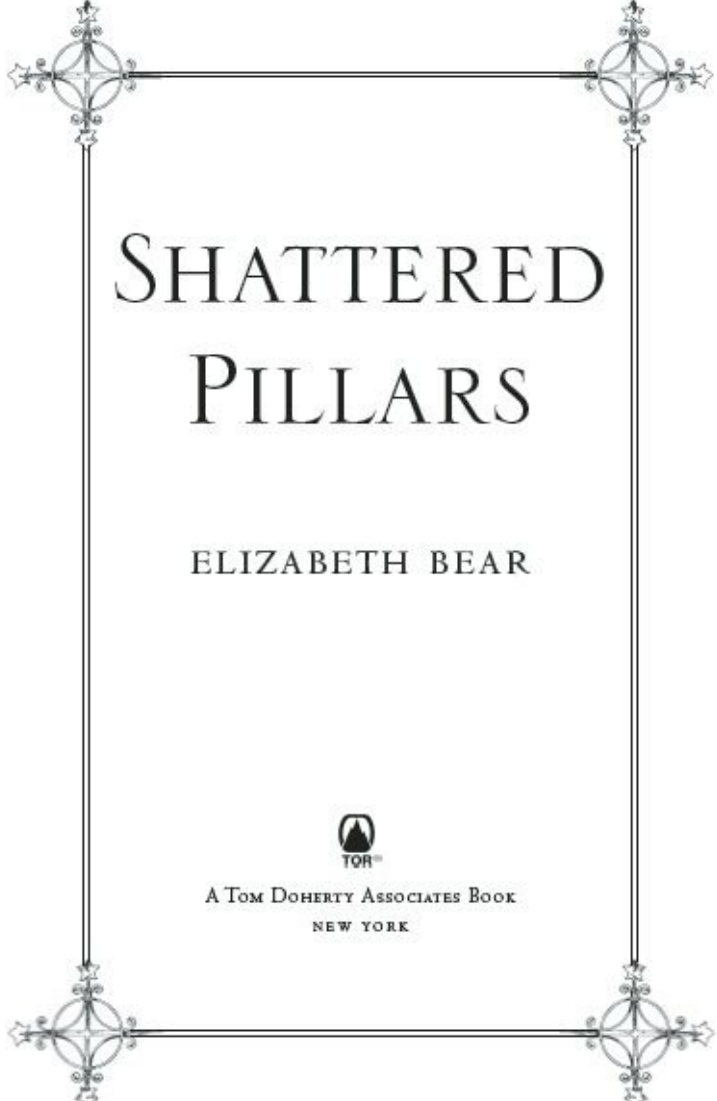




ELIZABETH BEAR

SHATTERED
PILLARS



SHATTERED PILLARS

ELIZABETH BEAR



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
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For Robin David and Lillian Mai Evans





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KHAGANATE

QARASH

mother River
Range of GHOSTS
SALT DESERT
STEPPES
Red Stone River
The SKY
Tsarephetai
Tsaretai
Rasan Empire
Rasa
Song

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The desert writhed with poison life. A rustling carpet surrounded Edene on every side. Barbed tails curving over scuttling carapaces that were patterned sand-colored or stone-colored, glossy or dull, russet or taupe or black or brown.

Tireless, escorted by scorpions, she walked through day and night, through the hazy scent of baked stone. Light and darkness had no meaning to what Edene had become. Unpunctuated by sleep, the days joined seamlessly. She could not have said how many had passed when a sunset found her, light-footed and easy, climbing a rocky trail leading into a valley that cut a low sweep of hills. Mountains rose before her, one tier beyond another. She did not recognize the range, but they could not stop her.

Always east. She must move east.

There were ruins here, the remnants of a stone-and-daub house huddled like a mud wasp's nest against a great boulder. This was the first sign of habitation that Edene had seen breaking the desolate Rahazeen outlands since she escaped Ala-Din, the rocky cliff-top fortress of the cult of Nameless assassins. Only her wits and the magic of the hammered green-gold ring weighting her left hand had won her free.

Edene paused, contemplating the winding path before her, the slumped carcass of the little house so alien in this landscape. The hills must be wetter than the plateau she had just walked across: their green line against the evening sky was softened like a man's ill-shaven cheek by a thorny fuzz of shrubs.

Dust turned the sunset yellow behind those hills—east, still east. She was not out of Rahazeen territory yet. But perhaps if she walked the night through, the sun would rise in the same place come morning, and she would know by the changing skies that she was one nation closer to home.

She pressed a hand against her belly. The babe had quickened savagely since she fled Ala-Din, and now she endured a spate of blows that felt like dried rice fire-puffing inside her. It did not pass swiftly, but she was growing accustomed to the child's ferocity.

While she waited out the assault, her eye fell again on the tumbledown lodging. Curiosity drew her off her eastward path for the first time. The hut's walls were standing and roof collapsed, as if someone had carefully stepped in the center. She wondered who had lived here, and a few moments of explore would cost her little in light of the length of the journey still before her.

Her escort of scorpions broke away from her footfalls. A scurrying wave crested and crept, lapping the bottoms of stone walls and mounting crumbling mortar to whisper over the sills of deep, narrow windows. The hut had no remaining door, but a cracked stone lintel still bridged a narrow gap. Edene turned to pass beneath it—

And drew up short.

Within the hut velvet blackness puddled; without lay blue, quiet gloaming. Framed within the doorway outlined against that interior darkness, stood an inhuman creature as gray-blue as the twilight hour and as velvety as the dark. It had a long face with a wrinkled muzzle, mobile ears that focused on her brightly, and the huge soft eyes of a night predator. Even in the evening's shadow, its pupils had contracted to pinpricks in the green-gold watered silk of its irises.

"Mistress of Secrets," it said, in a language that hurt her ears but that she nevertheless understood.

despite never having heard it before. A thick tongue showed behind chipped, yellowed fangs. “Far w
have traveled to find you. I am Besha Ghul. I have come to bring you home to old Erem.”

“Erem?” She’d heard of the dead empire, as who had not? But it lay beyond the Western Ocean an
the Uthman Caliphate—and no ruined city could serve her now, when she needed to win home to h
clan, to her people, and to the father of her child.

For the whole duration of her captivity, she had restrained herself from brooding on Temur—wher
he was, if he was safe. If he was seeking her, as she suspected he must be. But now she was free, an
the itch to return to him was the only fire close to as strong as the curling certainty that had risen
her since she escaped Ala-Din: that she would go home to the steppe and arise a queen.

“Erem,” said the Besha Ghul, its ears flicking to and fro. “You wear its ring upon your finger
Mistress of Secrets, Lady of Ruins, Queen of the Broken Places. You walk half within its veil already
It is deep time; its nights and twilights speed like quicksilver to hurry you through the shallow days
this insubstantial modern world. You have more time than the world, my Queen.”

She considered that. She considered the blur of days—had they been days at all, then? Nights? C
something else, some shape of time passing that her experience had not yet prepared her for?

“You call me by many titles,” Edene said. “But I am not those things. I am Tsareg Edene, not you
Queen of Ruins.”

Besha Ghul bowed low from the hips, legs bent back to counterbalance arms and torso that swe
the dust. Edene saw gray hide stretched gaunt over the shadows between ribs, in bony buttocks. It ha
no tail.

“You wear the Green Ring,” it said, voice muffled by the dust.

Edene glanced down at the plain green-gold band upon her finger. “Rise,” she said, recollectin
some of the gravitas of the matriarch of her clan. “And explain yourself.”

Besha Ghul straightened up as if the depth of its bow were no inconvenience, brushing a litt
yellow dust from its jowls with clawed fingertips. “You wear the Green Ring,” it repeated, as
reciting a refrain. “The beasts of the desert that crawl and sting are yours to command. Yours is th
domain of what is broken and what lies in ruins. Yours is jurisdiction over secrets and mysteries an
those things intentionally forgotten.”

“I see,” said Edene. And perhaps she did: in response to Besha Ghul’s words, the ring on her han
burned with a wintry chill. It seemed desperately heavy. The babe kicked and kicked again.

Besha Ghul smiled once more, or at least skinned back its flews. “It is I who am charged to tea
you how to wield these things. To teach you the power you must employ, when you are Queen. Wi
you come to Erem with me and meet your army?”

“If I am your Queen,” Edene said, “then I would have you guide me to my consort.”

Besha Ghul smiled, gray soft lips drawing back from dry yellow teeth meant for tearing fles
“First you must be crowned, your majesty. Erem is real. It is the true empire, and all khans and king
and caliphs that follow it are insignificant before its memory. How much more insignificant shall the
be before its rebirth? When you wear its crown, Lady of Ruins, all the world will bow before you.”

When I am Queen. She pictured Temur at her side. Her clan safe. Her child in her arms. Mares an
cattle grazing peacefully to the horizon.

Edene felt strong and certain. Her mouth curved in a beneficent smile. She said, “I will come wi
you to Erem.”

* * *

Mukhtar ai-Idoj, al-Sepehr of the Nameless sect of the Rahazeen, knelt in contemplation before

plain, unornamented human skull. Paper-dry and brown with age, it lay upon a low table in a room whose every wall was serried with unlit lamps. The skull reflected in the table's gilt and red-enameled surface as if it lay mirrored on blood.

Other than being relict of a dead man, it seemed quite ordinary and inoffensive in the dim evening light.

It was the skull of Danupati, the ancient warrior-emperor of the Lizard Folk. To al-Sepehr's honest *otherwise* senses, it reeked of the ancient knotworks of curse that bound it—and bound every land over which Danupati, once God-Emperor, had held sway.

Al-Sepehr had lowered his indigo veil, letting the night air cool his face. He was not praying. As the high priest of the Nameless and a priest of the Scholar-God, he did not pray to idols, to relics, or to ancestors. He prayed by preserving knowledge, for that was his God's glory—and his own. Nor was he incanting, precisely, for he had no intention of casting spells with the essence of the dead emperor.

He was contemplating, that was all. Allowing the possibilities of the future to fill up the room, his mind, his awareness.

Al-Sepehr was now a man of middle years, his eyesight not so keen as it once had been, and his joints ached from contact with the hard stone floor. He could have fetched a rug—or had one of his wives or servants fetch it—but for the time discomfort suited him. If he meant to watch the night through and give this dead man a proper vigil, the pain would help him stay awake.

Privation kept a man hardened.

The sun finished setting while he watched the skull, his hands folded, his eyes blinking only slowly. Shadows spilled from the corners of the room. The brass lamps—each tidy beside the next, handles and wicks militarily aligned—at first gleamed dully, then lost their luster as darkness grew absolute. The room should have reeked of lamp fuel—or the herbs steeped in oil to sweeten it—but instead smelled dusty, dry. The lamps stood empty.

Al-Sepehr reached out one hand—the left one—and laid it on the crown of Danupati's skull as if gentling a child. He could see nothing, but he knew exactly the distance and the reach of his arm.

“So, ancient king,” he murmured. “Where is the war you vowed would greet any attempt to move your bones?”

Silence followed, long and thin, until it was broken by the papery, powdery whir of insect wings. Not one or two, but thousands, filling the air with the scent of dust and mustiness: the flutter of ten thousand butterflies, then silence as they settled.

Swiftly but individually, the empty brass lamps in their ranks lit themselves, revealing in their own increasing light that each wick was briefly touched by a butterfly before each butterfly vanished in fire. A ripple of light and warmth ran around the room. A ripple that expanded outward, through al-Sepehr, through the walls of the chamber, through the wide rooms of the world.

* * *

There was no coolness in the predawn dark to which Temur awakened. He lay in yet another unfamiliar sort of bed—he'd learned so much about how the foreigners slept on this journey! This one was a mattress on the floor stuffed firmly with what, by its spring, might be bats of wool. The coverlet was cotton, woven with an open hand, but even that was too warm on such a night and he'd kicked it away.

The air was warm too, if not still. It moved softly beyond the stone-latticed window. The stone walls re-radiated the heat of the day, and the leaves in the garden beyond rustled. A whisper of light fell inside, from the foreign stars and from the city beyond the garden walls: enough that his dark

adapted eyes could pick out the curve of warm flesh in the darkness, the line of shadow below shoulder blade, dark and sharp as if drawn with a pen.

A woman lay in the bed beside him, her hair drifting across his arm, starlight pooled in the cup of her palm. He knew he should have felt frustration, impatience with the slow grindings of Uthman's politeness in this foreign city of Asitaneh when another woman for whom he cared needed his help—but it was hard, at just this instant, after so much fear and exhaustion, to do more than lie in the dark and fill himself with the scent of the person he rested beside.

In the morning, he thought. I will make my grandfather help me find Edene. In the morning. We can have this one night.

The woman breathed softly—but not with the slow regularity of one asleep. As he lifted his head, he could see the gloss of light across dark irises.

“Samarkar,” he breathed.

“You felt it?” she asked, speculation altering the contours of her face as it had when he admitted sometimes dreaming true.

He shook his head. “I was asleep.”

“I wasn’t.” The Wizard Samarkar turned in the covers, and that starlight spilled from her hand, running across the bed to thin and vanish. The room was darker than before; now he could see her only as a dim outline of greater darkness against the night. He heard the faint consternation in her voice but she made herself say, “I wanted to remember this.”

He might be younger than she, but he wasn’t so young he couldn’t read all the pain of her loveless marriage and early widowhood in her words. He opened his mouth to soothe her and shut it again. Given everything they were hunting—the lord of the Rahazeen cult called the Nameless, Temur’s stolen lover, vengeance for his slaughtered brother and hers—and everything that was hunting them—his uncle, her surviving brother, assorted murder cults, the dread memory of an ancient sorcerer—he could not promise much.

“I’m at your side,” he said at last. “And I will remain there so long as fate permits. Sleep; there will be other nights to remember.”

She kissed him in answer, a foreign custom for which he was developing a taste. Then she pulled back and said, “I think I shall not be sleeping in any case. Something cold and chill has passed across the world this night; I think I would have felt it even in my dreams.”

“Cold and chill? Something sorcerous?”

“Only as your blood vow in Tsarepheth was sorcerous.” Her shape moved against lesser darkness and she stood. Her hair swept his face again, full of the scent of the sea. “A true word from a man or woman of power has the strength to change the world, so the sages say. If you did not feel it, what wakened you?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps just your breathing—” He cast from side to side, listening in the night. “No,” he said. “Wait. No birds.”

She cocked her head, a hand to her ear. But Temur did not need the confirmation. There *were* birds heralding the first paling of sky before an incipient sun—but not outside the window. Birds in the city. But no birds in the garden.

Silently, Temur found his feet. Samarkar slid into a pair of breeches she’d discarded. Temur grasped his knife, which was laid against a bolster beside his bed—on Samarkar’s side, but he had not been planning to share the couch when he retired.

He pulled on his clout, holding his knife between his teeth. She struggled into a tunic and found her own knife—a much shorter, square-pommeled one, meant for chores and not fighting. All Rasar

seemed to carry the like. "Follow me," she said.

He did without hesitation. Samarkar had grown to adulthood in the terraced cities of Rasa and Song. She could find her way around a permanent dwelling place as Temur could not. But *he* could guide them across a steppe that would seem featureless to the uninitiated.

Barefoot, padding on blood-hot stone, she brought them to a door beside which paced one of the household guards, broad-shouldered and stocky beneath a robe of dark browns that blended into the shadows.

"Hail," she said.

The guard must have heard them coming, because he turned quietly in the gloom. Temur could only tell that his hand rested on the hilt of his scimitar by the outline of his silhouette.

"Who passes?" he asked in the Uthman language.

Temur's use of it was still raw, but he managed to say, "The guests of Ato Tesefahun," without choking on his tongue.

"To what purpose do you creep in the dark?" Though the guard's tone was suspicious, no scrape of steel on sheath revealed him to have loosened his sword.

"Someone's in the garden," Samarkar said. "We thought we'd go and see who."

Her sarcasm—Temur could see the raised eyebrows and one-sided smile that went with it in his mind, if not through the dark—seemed to ease the guard. "I shall raise the alarm—"

"Wait," said Temur. "Just wait a moment, is all, and watch us from the door."

He stepped up to it, allowing the guard to check suspiciously through the peephole before pulling the door aside. The guard kept it chained at top and bottom, so Temur and Samarkar had to sidle through a narrow gap to pass one by one into the garden.

Outside, the starlight less filtered, Temur's eyesight showed him a stark world of blues and silvers outlined in shadows that could have been cut from black silk. The graded paths of the courtyard seemed treacherously uneven, the plantations along their edges shrouds of vegetation over some bottomless pitfall. Temur's breath came fast and light, his hands cold with anticipation and his head whirring like a chariot wheel. A motion beyond the screen of pomegranates caught Temur's gaze; pale light sliding on pale cloth. He watched for a moment, some of the anticipatory tension falling out of his shoulders and the weight from off his heart.

It was Brother Hsiung, the sworn-to-silence monk of Song. He stood in a clear patch of the central court, practicing the strikes and parries of his weaponless war form, moving with a fluidity no less impressive for the force with which he threw each kick or punch.

He must have heard Temur's or Samarkar's tread upon the path as they approached, though because he let his hands fall to his sides and his flurrying feet rest on the gravel.

"What woke you?" Samarkar asked as they came up behind him.

Temur knew she wasn't really expecting an answer, not until they were inside and Hsiung could reach ink and paper. But Brother Hsiung turned, light on his feet for all the bulk of his barrel body, and Temur—hardened to war and death since his eighth summer—took a quick step back.

The monk's eyes blazed poison-bright as green glass held before a fire. The flickering light caught Temur's and Samarkar's shadows out long behind them, like coils of rope unreeling.

"Well," Temur said, in his own language. "That's not a good sign."

* * *

Brother Hsiung held up his hands as Samarkar stepped forward. She heard the crunch of footsteps behind them—the door guard coming at a run—but she reached out to Brother Hsiung as if there were

no hurry in the world. Her own hands were blurred by a dim azure glow as she—reflexively—called her power. Hsiung backed away slowly, head shaking, holding eye contact the entire time. He did not seem ensorcelled—well, no, of *course* he seemed ensorcelled, Samarkar corrected herself—but he seemed in control of his faculties. So she paused where she was and lowered her hands to her sides, sweeping Temur and the guard back with the left one as it fell.

It was eerie to hold Hsiung's gaze while his eyes crawled with radiance, but she did it, watching for a glance or an expression that might offer a clue to what he wished of her. Brilliant green sparks chased one another through the space between his iris and the surface of his eye—a membrane that should have been transparent but by daylight would show the blue clouds of incipient blindness. Samarkar could see them now, lit from beneath. Her stomach tossed, her long muscles weak with fear. She thought it ought to subside when she reminded herself that she was a trained Wizard of Tsarepheth, who should be observing this both as sorcery and natural history.

Perhaps it ought to—but it didn't. It didn't matter; she forced herself to focus anyway.

She was leaning forward for a better look when Temur, beside her, caught her hand.

She squeezed his fingers and did not let him draw her back. "Wait."

The man-at-arms brought up a lantern from within the door. Samarkar did not see how he lit it, but it gleamed suddenly, flaring and then dimming, casting a natural light across the scene.

"Go," Samarkar said. "If you must raise the alarm, pray do it quietly. But above all, I bid you bring the master of this house."

He hesitated; she did not turn to see if he obeyed. She still had the voice and manner of a princess of Rasa. The man-at-arms left the lantern on a plinth and ran.

From the edge of her eye she saw Temur shift his weight, but he hesitated—dagger in his hand, to be sure, and balanced on the balls of his feet—but not yet stepping forward. She released his hand. From the way his head tilted, she understood that he would have given her a grateful glance for not fouling his line of attack, except no mortal power could have shifted his eyes from the monk.

Brother Hsiung stepped back into the courtyard, claiming his space. He resettled into his stance—balanced, fluid—and began to move again. Simple forms, meditations, building rapidly to more complicated and focused ones. Samarkar, who had practiced with him across the wastes of salt and sand, watched for a moment or two.

Then she walked forward, onto the flags of the open court, and faced him. She thought Temur would reach for her. Perhaps he did, but if so he paused before his hand made contact and let her pass unimpeded.

The early forms were easy. Samarkar kept pace at first. She thought she understood what Hsiung was doing—using the forms to control whatever sorcery raged beneath his skin—and she was determined to mirror his concentration. To offer him support.

That green light behind his eyes twisted and flickered, but they did focus on her briefly before his expression turned inward again. Sweat collected on his brow, first a skin of it and then beads, rivulets. It splashed from his nose and spiked his eyelashes, and still they moved in echoes.

He soon outstripped her skill and continued—at first ever more elaborate, then deceptively simple and with snakelike speed. But she paced him, falling into her own routines—a silent ally, if nothing else. And she watched his eyes.

The lines of concentration on his forehead smoothed as he found his rhythm, to be replaced by serenity. The crawling fire that burned within his irises began to dim, until it was like looking at the last veil of flame surrounding a red-hot coal before it gutters to an ember. He continued, hands stroking the air with conviction and certainty now, feet moving fluidly from one stance to the next.

She had lost her focus on Temur and only with the dimming of the glow infecting Brother Hsiung did she become aware that the lamp still burned over her shoulder.

Samarkar might not have known when the light died entirely, except the crawling shadows died too. Hsiung did not cease, however, until his forms were complete—and so Samarkar perforce kept pace with him. Their martial dance was a spell, now, and she would not risk breaking it.

Eventually he came to rest, facing Samarkar, his broad chest rising and falling slowly, but strong enough to be visible in the firelight. His hands hung relaxed at his thighs. His clothing hung too, saturated and worn and sweat-soaked, clinging to his skin. He bowed his head to her, and when he raised it again his eyes were wide and brown and faintly cloudy.

A male voice—full and controlled, worn smooth by years—spoke over Samarkar’s shoulder in tones of mild surprise and satisfaction. “Edifying. Perhaps we should take this inside, where the tea is waiting.”

Ato Tesefahun, Temur’s grandfather and their host, had arrived.

Ato Tesefahun—*Grandfather*, as Temur was still trying to learn to think of him—was a small, spare man whose brown skin bore a scatter of even darker spots across both cheeks. He dismissed the man-at-arms back to his post and led the remaining three into a house that now glowed with the light of dozens of lamps. Having closed the door, he gestured them to seats on jewel-colored cushions arrayed around a low tea table. He provided a robe to cover Temur's near nudity. Temur was glad to slip the cool cotton on and settle himself cobbler-fashion on the tiled floor. He glanced around the room as he adjusted the cushion under his hips. It was a fighter's impulse—assets and liabilities—which he smiled slightly to recognize in himself.

This was a large chamber, red-walled in stone and clay like most houses in Asitaneh. But in this house the stone was worked with every contrivance of the mason's art. A counter-relief of vine motifs wriggled up alongside each of the many narrow windows, intaglio flowers picked out in pigments so brilliant as to be visible even by lamplight. The room held little furniture—just a second low table in addition to the one around which Ato Tesefahun seated them. It bore a laden tea tray and four glasses. Ato Tesefahun fetched those himself and brought them back.

The black-and-red enamel of the tray was protected from the heat by a folded towel. Steam coiled from the chased silver pot as Ato Tesefahun lifted and poured through a long spout into each glass. His motion drew Temur's attention to the small roll of paper and the brush and the well of western-style ink beside it, but Ato Tesefahun made no gesture toward them when he set the pot down again and served the tea.

Only having done so did he seat himself beside Samarkar, with some fussing of old joints and drawing out of his striped kaftan to make room for his knees. For a moment, Temur was struck by the incongruity of it—the four of them, all sleep-mazed and half-dressed, their hair uncombed, preparing to sip tea. Ato Tesefahun raised his glass, and so did they all.

The tea was minty and sweet. It did a great deal to return Temur to calm wakefulness from his state of high alert.

No one spoke except for pleasantries until the first round of tea was drunk and the glasses refilled. Although their earlier conversation—nearly yesterday, now—had been marked by a stunning adherence to the social niceties and very little actual business, Temur was not yet accustomed to the stately procession of events demanded by Uthman polite custom. But on pain of being seen as a barbarian by his grandfather, he watched the old man's hands and face and waited for his cues. He watched Samarkar too, with his peripheral vision, aware that her court manners were second to none.

Hsiung drank his tea in predictable silence.

Finally, Ato Tesefahun turned his glass around with his fingertips and looked from each of them to the next. His impression of quiet expectation emboldened Temur, but Samarkar must have been biding her time, because she spoke first. "Has anyone seen Hrahima, I wonder?"

That was Uthman politeness too, that indirectness.

Ato Tesefahun refilled the tea. "Who can keep a cat in at night?"

But he winked, leading Temur to understand that the Cho-tse scout might be on some mission for

the old man. When Tesefahun smiled, his strong, worn teeth were revealed. They had bands of brown and amber color like tortoiseshell; Temur's mother's teeth had been similarly stained, and he had never seen it otherwise.

Temur shivered with unaccustomed nostalgia. To shake it off, he leaned into the table, his hands in his lap, the edge pressing his arms. Ato Tesefahun met his regard for a moment before looking away and nodding.

"Perhaps," he said, "it is time to address the issue of the Nameless after all. Although I fear that at this point, it's bound to ruin all our breakfasts."

"One meal or another." Samarkar looked drawn from their long journey, her bones showing too strongly through the fine flesh of her face. Temur wondered if he'd ever see her face round and plump as a ripe fruit. "That was not a Rahazeen spell."

Ato Tesefahun, a wizard in his own right, though of a different tradition than Samarkar's, shook his head. "No."

"What was it?"

With uncharacteristic directness, he turned to Hsiung, who sat—hands folded—and gave them all a face as deceptionless as an egg.

"You have read from a book of Erem," Ato Tesefahun said in the language of Song. "It is the reason you are going blind, Brother Hsiung, is it not?"

Hsiung's air of relaxation seemed not all that different from his air of deliberate readiness—until one saw him shift states suddenly. He pulled his hands into his chest, steeping the fingers together. Slowly, twice, he nodded.

Samarkar began, "How did you know—" but Ato Tesefahun's raised, tipped hand made her rein herself in.

He said, "Is it the reason you took a vow of silence?"

Again, the nod, although this time with a head tilt that Temur took to mean *somewhat, but not exactly*. It was accompanied by an incremental softening of Hsiung's shoulders, as if he began to shed down some load.

Temur wondered what—in a book—might lead to such a vow.

Ato Tesefahun poured tea again, and each of them drank it—even Hsiung, though Temur could see his hands shaking as he raised the glass to his mouth. He swallowed, or Temur presumed he did. In the lamplight, there was no chance of seeing that bull's neck ripple.

"Was it the glass book?" asked Temur's grandfather.

No, said Hsiung's gesture.

"Not the Black Book of Erem?" said Ato Tesefahun.

Again, the headshake. Whatever the Black Book of Erem might be or might presage, Temur almost feared to know, because the relief that softened Ato Tesefahun's face was powerfully unmistakable. "A minor text, then. That's a small mercy."

He poured more tea, sipped, and continued. "What we witnessed tonight was an effect of the rekindling of some deep magic of old Erem."

Temur felt Samarkar sit straighter. "Danupati," she said, her knuckles whitening, fingers pinkening as she knotted her hands together.

Ato Tesefahun tipped his head, suspicious as an old wolf. "Pray," he said. "Continue."

"We would have told you last night," Samarkar said. "But—"

But for Uthman custom inviolable as law that said a guest must not speak of evil things before night had passed. It was Ato Tesefahun himself who had kept the conversation to trivialities and

diverted any attempt to redirect it. He could scarcely complain now.

He just nodded, and wound his right hand in a spooling motion.

Samarkar looked at Temur. "It's your story."

Even if he was not the sort to have a lot of comfort in telling it. He breathed in once and sighed out again. Slowly, in spare but precise detail—recounting the story as he once would have reported the outcome of a raid to his now-dead brother Qulan—Temur told Ato Tesefahun how he had been barricaded into Danupati's tomb by a rebel faction among the People of the Dragon Banner, and how he had discovered while there that the tomb had been desecrated.

Remembering now, Temur felt the chill fear that had crushed him then rising once more. *You survived it*, he told himself. *It cannot hurt you now.*

When he had finished—with Samarkar and his bay mare, Bansh, riding to his rescue, and the following attack by the Nameless Rahazeen—he paused and waited for Ato Tesefahun to refill his glass. The teapot was empty, however, and so Temur's grandfather pulled a woven silken cord that hung beside the door.

Temur heard the chime of a distant bell.

When Ato Tesefahun turned back, the lines of concern on his forehead had graven themselves even deeper. "I think," he said, "given the timing of the assault, we have to assume that al-Sephehr is in possession of the skull of Danupati. And that possibly what we felt, what caused Brother Hsiung's reaction"—he bowed slightly, and Brother Hsiung returned the courtesy—"was al-Sephehr calling upon the legacy of Danupati's curse. For Danupati conquered Erem, and knew well its powers ... and the powers of Erem are a sort of contagion—"

"Like plague?" Temur asked, thinking of Hsiung's stories of the far east and how sickness might be sweeping west along the Celadon Highway even now.

"War," Samarkar said. "That is Danupati's curse, anyway."

Ato Tesefahun kissed the air like a grandmother. "The two are not ... mutually exclusive."

"There's more," Temur said, but was interrupted by the scrape of slippers in the corridor.

He bent his head, studying his knuckles while a servant whisked the old tea tray away—with the unused ink and paper, as Hsiung had not required them—and supplied a new one. In addition to tea, this one contained pastries—some laced with jam, some jellied rosewater—the smell of which made Temur's stomach grumble anxiously.

Ato Tesefahun waved the servant away and slid a plate of pastries in front of Samarkar. As he served Hsiung and Temur, he said, "Continue."

"There is a woman I care about," Temur said. "She was captured by the Nameless, stolen away by the blood ghosts they command. Her name is Tsareg Edene, and I have reason to believe that she is still alive and captive."

Ato Tesefahun, who had just placed a fragment of pastry in his mouth, chewed thoughtfully. Temur took the opportunity to eat as well. He and Hsiung and Samarkar had not yet recovered from the privation of their long journey. Flakes crumbled in his mouth, releasing richness, the sweetness of glaze, the pungency of rose petals.

He imagined the pastry was good; the truth was, he was too hungry to have noticed if it wasn't.

Ato Tesefahun rinsed his mouth with tea and swallowed. "They will have taken her to Ala-Din," he said. "If they wish to hold her securely ... they call it the Rock. And the Rock has never been taken. Not even by the Khagan, your grandfather."

My other grandfather, Temur thought. He said, "How do I get there?"

"Getting *there* is the easy part," said Tesefahun. "Getting *in* will be trickier."

“I see,” said Samarkar. “So how shall we get in, then?”

Ato Tesefahun showed his brown teeth in a narrow grin. “~~Magic, Wizard Samarkar. Magic shall see~~
you within. The magic of *architecture*.”

In the Red-and-White Citadel of Tsarepheth, in the Rasan imperial second city of the same ancient name, the Wizard Hong leaned aching hands on time-smoothed white stone battlements, his head fallen below his shoulders. His exhaustion weighed on him like old heartbreak, like everything and everyone he had left behind when he fled Song. When he found the strength to lift his face, his gaze fell down the long misty river valley toward the summer palace of the Bstangpo—the Emperor Songtsan, forty-second of that name.

And perhaps, Hong-la thought, the last to bear it—given the plague that had come to Tsarepheth. Not from the west, through the Range of Ghosts and the Steles of the Sky along the Celadon Highway—for that fabled route was all but closed with the civil war that had raged between would-be Khagan of the Qersnyk people of the steppe—but from the east, overland from Song and through the capital Rasa.

It was like no plague that Hong-la—who had once been a bondsman in the southern principality and who was now a surgeon deemed skillful even among those legendary healers, the Wizards of Tsarepheth—had seen before. The news riding in advance of the illness had called it the Black Bloat and some of the symptoms were similar. But Black Bloat it was not.

Whether it *killed* like the Black Bloat still remained to be seen.

Hong-la stroked the sun-warmed stone, feeling its age and substance with the layered awareness of a trained wizard. Generations of master stonemasons and master wizards had devoted their lives to the construction of the Citadel. They had built it from the exhumed bones of the earth, its foundations intertwined deep with those of the mountains whose flanks it bridged. And all the strength of the lives and knowledge and intention, and all the strength of those mountains, was still set in its blocks. That was strength a wizard could use.

In addition, the sacred river Tsarethi forged through channels beneath the Citadel, its stream bearing the blessings wrought by wizards down through all of Rasa—and several other kingdoms—until it reached the sea. This close to its headwaters, the Tsarethi still ran with distinct currents: some warm from the sulfurous hot springs that trickled from the roots of the volcano called the Cold Fire, some frigid with ice melt from the heights of the Steles of the Sky. There was power in that too—both in the sources and the mingling.

Hong-la opened himself to the stone and let the strength it contained trickle into the emptiness of his exhaustion. It started with a fingertip tickle, the sensation of running one's hands across a boar's bristle brush. The feeling of pins and needles crept up his fingers joint by joint, pushing the bone-tire ache before it so a band of soreness ringed his wrists, then his forearms, then his upper arms. Behind the pain and the tingling came fresh strength, vitality, a sense of new life as seductive as water to a man worked dry.

It wanted to be a cataract, a wall of energy that could have slammed the Wizard Hong up against the walls of himself, splashed him aside and crushed him under its roil. To tap the reserves of the Citadel was not a thing done lightly: Tsarepheth's was an antique and weighty strength, and sipping its flow was not unlike dipping into the flood with a drinking goblet without being swept away.

Hong-la constricted the eager push of energy to a thread and let the new strength push his elongated frame upright. His black wizard's coat was limp with too-long wearing, stained with sweat and worn things. It hung on his already spare, square frame with new space against the ribs and underarms. The jade-paneled wizard's collar had worn galls on his clavicles. His hands no longer ached with exhaustion, because the counterfeit strength of his borrowed vitality concealed it, but the skin was raw and peeling from constant bathing in antiseptic chemicals, which had begun to bleach out the cloth on his rolled-up sleeves. He knew he stank of those antiseptics, and also of old sweat and sickrooms, and he wished he had time to adjourn to the bathing chambers below and come back to his patients with a fresh body and fresh will.

Like sleep, it would have to wait.

His hands wanted to clench, to clutch at the wall and keep the flow of energy coming until it burned him like a blown-up bladder. It was so *good* simply not to be tired that it took all a wizard's discipline to control the desire for more. The power, given its own devices, would use him as a conduit: he would blaze with it, burn like a candle, and it would flood through him to equalize from the great storage cell of the Citadel into the cold mountain air beyond. He'd incandesce before he died.

He pulled his hands away. The borrowed strength filled him like rough wine. He stepped back from the battlement, and as he turned—

He startled. A small man stood there, skinny rather than slender, perhaps half Hong-la's weight, even haggard as the surgeon had become. A gray moustache trailed down sunken cheeks to brush the chest of the old man's plain black cotton coat. Though it was worn shiny at the elbows, it could not disguise his air of authority. Yet he had waited for Hong-la with silent patience.

"Yongten-la," the Wizard Hong said, bowing carefully. The strength buzzing in him made him dizzy.

The master of Hong-la's order needed no pretensions, no marks of ceremony to set him apart. Among those with the wit to recognize it, his learning cloaked him in all the majesty he could desire—and to those who could not recognize the truth of what he was, greatest wizard among the Wizards of Tsarepheth, it was just as well he pass unremarked.

Now he studied Hong-la's countenance, and Hong-la knew what he saw: the too-bright eyes of recharged exhaustion, the healthy color like an ink wash over sallow fatigue, the cropped hair grown long enough to stick out in sweaty spikes around his ears and nape. Completing his inspection, Yongten-la frowned, but he nodded. "You'll do."

"I'd better," Hong-la replied. "You didn't run for me yourself because you were out of novices."

It got a tired smile, at least. Yongten-la turned; Hong-la fell in step beside him.

"You were on your way back to the wards?"

Hong-la inclined his head. "Will you accompany me, Old Master?"

"If it will not be an inconvenience," said the Wizard Yongten, exactly as if he were merely someone's curious uncle.

Whatever sound escaped Hong-la, it must have reflected his incredulity, because Yongten-la's smile widened and grew crooked. "Very well," Yongten-la said. "We will offer what comfort we can."

"It won't be long now," Hong-la said. "Unless we discover something miraculous."

They descended.

The great stairways of the Citadel were dished from the passage of thousands of feet and hundreds of years. The steps cupped Hong-la's feet through the flexible soles of his split boots—he'd never gotten used to the Rasan toe-box, and so he had his shoes made specially in the eastern style—and the steps made him feel he was walking in the grasp of hard, unyielding hands.

The plague wards were not within the Citadel itself but under canopies at its base, where the water of the wild Tsarethi would carry the taint of illness away and pound it against stones like soiled linen until the currents licked it clean. Hong-la and Yongten-la paused by the entrance, where a row of newly arrived patients rested on litters, awaiting triage. The wizards allowed the novices staffing the makeshift gates to drape them in protective canvas coats that could be boiled when they were shed and to wrap their feet in linen pouches. It wasn't enough, Hong-la knew, but it was better than taking no precautions at all. What puzzled him was that quarantine and isolation seemed to be having no effect in slowing the spread of the plague. It was as if it actually *were* carried on the fog, or by evil spirits in the night air, as any superstitious merchant or noble might insist.

The disease that sickened the plague patients in these pavilioned wards always followed the same course, and the wizards who tended them were keeping them separated by its stage of progress. The outer wards—where most of the triage patients would soon be admitted, the worst-affected having already been found by the litter crews and brought into quarantine—were full of people well enough to sit up, whose breath rasped and wheezed through constricted air passages and whose bodies burned hot with the fervor of their life force fighting the pestilence.

They were tended by novices and a few of the less experienced wizards, but Hong-la made a point of moving among them as well—feeling the foreheads and palpating the auras of men and women in the first stages of the disease. It was possible—even likely—that if a clue toward successful treatment could be found, it might be found in those not yet sick unto death.

In this ward the novices had made an effort to separate tradesmen and minor nobility—anyone, even a prince, who sought the care of the wizards must come into quarantine—but there was still a certain amount of interpersonal friction. The patients felt well enough to squabble: here a prostitute who did not think she should be bedded beside a slave woman, here a farmer's wife looked upon with scorn by the wife of a cobbler.

Hong-la and Yongten-la moved from pallet to pallet, crouching to examine the patients and rising up again. Hong-la found nothing new: in this early stage, the sick showed signs of weakening life processes—but something else, something contradictory. Over their chests, front and back, the aura of strength and health grew slowly stronger. Stronger, but blacker, so that Hong-la wondered if it was the life processes of the *infection* that made his fingertips tingle.

He'd tried drawing off that excess before, and the patients he'd attempted it with had rapidly worsened and begun to choke like asthmatics. So he did not attempt that now but instead stood a little bent almost double to bring his head close to Yongten-la's for a private consultation.

"It feels like a curse, not an illness," said Yongten-la against his ear. "Something that draws the life processes of the patient to feed itself. I'd say it was worth looking inside, but ... I have not your skill in surgery."

"If it were the abdomen, and not the heart and lungs, I would look for a volunteer to let me open them," said Hong-la. He had neutered enough female wizards in his life to be confident in poking around inside a living human belly. Surgery on the pump and bellows that sustained immediate life, however—

He shook his head.

"We are waiting for someone to die," said Yongten-la.

No treatment had worked—not magic, not herbs, not fungus. Not the arts of manipulation of the life force at which the Wizards of Tsarepheth excelled.

Hong-la said, "We are waiting to perform an autopsy, yes."

They stepped apart a hand's breadth, moving toward the inner ward now.

“There’s a minor blessing of this illness,” Yongten-la said bitterly, his voice still far too low to carry. “It’s forced the Bstangpo to seek reconciliation.”

Hong-la was too tired to pretend shock at his master’s ruthlessness. The Bstangpo—the Emperor Songtsan—was not best pleased that the Citadel had chosen to protect the Wizard Samarkar—his sister, once-princess—when she had spirited away Payma, an imperial wife pregnant with the child of the emperor’s younger brother Tsansong, who was to be executed for treason. But Songtsan could not manage an outbreak on this scale without the wizards and their healing skills.

He had not so much come to them cap in hand as offered, magnanimously, not to arrest the Citadel’s litter-bearing novices and healing wizards on sight if they ventured out into the city to tend the sick and enforce quarantine. It was a first step, and Hong-la knew that a warming trend in political relations was easier to maintain once established than to create from scratch.

The air grew gray and chill. The sun was setting, and wizard-lit globes were brought from within the Citadel and hung about the pavilions by robed, hurrying servants. Hong-la was still contemplating what he might have said in response to Yongten-la when a novice—masked in gauze and gowned in that same boiled canvas—staggered up, clumsy in her linen foot shields. “Hong-la,” she said, bowing low.

Hong-la could see the thrust against her mask as she pushed out her tongue in a sign of respect. He would have to break her of that; it was unsafe when confronted with contagion. But even with the power of the Citadel humming numbingly in his fingertips, he was too tired to remonstrate with her now. She cast her eyes at Yongten-la’s feet but managed to restrain herself and address Hong-la here in his area of expertise, despite the daunting presence of the master.

That was good. It showed discipline.

“Wizard Hong,” she said. “Come, hurry. The tinker Pemba is—”

She hesitated.

“Dying?” Hong-la suggested.

“I did not presume to know his fate,” said the novice, whose name was Sengemo. Her eyes stayed determinedly fixed on the ground between the wizards. “But Master—I would hurry.”

“Lead us,” Hong-la said.

Hong-la suspected that Pemba had brought the illness to Tsarepheth with him. A traveling tradesman, he had been the very first person in the city to sicken; it seemed entirely too tidy that he should also be the first to pass. But that was this disease in all ways—unnaturally tidy, unnatural uniform in its course and speed of progression.

The Wizards Hong and Yongten chased the hurrying novice as she wound through the wards of sicker women and men. These patients were not well enough to fuss overmuch about whom they had been set beside—or even notice—and merchants lay beside beggars, all whistling each breath out as through reeds. Their arms and legs were swaddled, their chests bared to ease the painful heat that grew within. Some were dosed with poppy; some had chosen instead to bear the agony, or were far enough gone in delirium that wizards had made the difficult decision to husband scarce resources for those who would benefit more.

Black and violet shadows grew between their ribs, beneath the breasts of the women and across the pectoral muscles of the men. Hong-la thought that bruising was a sign of internal bleeding, perhaps the rupture or dissolution of the lung tissue. Once it began, the faces of the victims grew yellow-gray beneath the varied pigments of their skins, their lips and nail beds the color tale-tellers called blue, which was in truth a horrid bruised purple-gray. That fetid life process burned strongly near the hearts of these patients, while their own strength ebbed from their limbs and minds like that of a man who

drowns.

The victims grew worse and worse, the course of the disease more and more advanced, until the wizards and their guiding novice reached the bedside of Pemba the tinker. Another wizard—Anil-la—who was young but skilled—had crouched there, one hand laid flat on Pemba’s sweat-slicked crown. A cup and pipette were set nearby: someone had been trickling honey water into the sick man’s mouth.

Hong-la hunkered beside Anil-la. The patient’s breath—or breathlessness—had moved beyond wheezing and into a teakettle whistle like nothing the wizard and surgeon had heard before. Pemba’s chest rose and fell like a bellows. When Hong-la laid a hand against his nostrils, he could feel the suck and push of air in the spaces between his fingers with each desperate gasp.

But the air he was finally moving seemed to do Pemba no good: his lips gleamed the color of pewter; his protruding tongue was like rotten meat. Hong-la pinched Pemba’s fingertips and poked his gums. Where Hong-la had pressed they whitened and stayed pale. Pemba’s lids lay nigh close. Through the clotted lashes, Hong-la saw dull slits of eye. When he drew a lid back with his thumb, though, a tremor shook Pemba’s body, and his pupil contracted like a flinch. He was conscious, but too weak for want of air to curl a finger or blink an eye.

That moved Hong-la to more pity than anything else.

“Poppy,” he said, and Anil-la reached for a vial at his belt. He added a drop or two of tincture to that cup and stirred with the pipette. When he held the pipette over Pemba’s mouth and let the water flow in, it trickled back out the corners.

“Rub the tincture on his gums,” Hong-la said. The blood was flowing so poorly—Pemba’s pulse thready and so fast Hong-la could not count the individual heartbeats—it still might have no effect. But Hong-la could imagine, too vividly, the patient’s panic and distress and utter helplessness. He could not do nothing.

And so Hong-la told himself until, with the sound of cracking cartilage, Pemba’s breath stopped—just stopped, though Hong-la could see the contraction of his abdomen as his diaphragm struggled—and his throat began to swell.

Even the Wizard Yongten, standing aside to give the surgeons room to practice, made a noise of dismay.

Black blood and crimson blood—threaded through slick, shiny mucous with stinking strands of yellow-green pus or phlegm—welled up Pemba’s windpipe and slid gelatinously from the corners of his mouth, bubbling from a slack jaw as Anil-la snatched his hands back. Pemba thrashed, his body arching from feet to shoulders, hips lifted and arms flung limp at his sides. His jaw gaped—now drooping, now, but thrust wide by the force of the matter welling from his mouth as if from some spring in the Song hells of Hong-la’s childhood stories. The stench of putrescence made Hong-la’s mouth water and his belly clench.

Hong-la would have recoiled—his muscles shivered with the desire to scramble back—but he had seen the foulness of burst appendixes and suppurating wounds. This was not so much worse.

Not so much.

He grasped Pemba’s jaw in his left hand, levered a wooden wedge from his belt into the hinge of his mouth and dug with frantic claws into the rising tide of slime. Ropes of mucus broke around his fingers, stretching and slick—until he brushed something hard and moving—*rattling*—in Pemba’s distended throat. He grabbed for it as he would grab the slick skull of a half-born child, trying to find a place to hook a fingertip—

It slid into his palms. Black, glistening. Draped in membranous webs of mucus and blood and stinking phlegm. A jointed, chitinous thing that blinked slime-veiled eyes and snapped ragged need-

teeth at Hong-la's face.

~~He should have held it. He should have grasped its ankles and swung it against the tentpole, against a nearby stone. He should have crushed its skull, the glaring yellow eyes it turned on him, and dissected the remains.~~

He recoiled, tumbling backward. It kicked off from his palms, needlepoint talons pinpricking his hands—and launched itself into the air and was gone.

What welled from the sides of Pemba's wedged jaw now was clean blood, thick and dark from lack of air. As Hong-la rolled to his knees, holding his pus-smearred hands wide, he watched the tide step to a trickle, then fail.

Mercifully, Pemba was dead when the second demonspawn followed its clutchmate into the sky.

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