



The Queen of the Mountain Kingdom

Peter C Whitaker

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Acknowledgements

For my son, Oliver, who laid down the challenge
And in Memory of
Dave Moody
Larger than life in almost every way
also
My Wife Donna
The Origin of All Good Things in Life

Chapter One

Marklin Dal desperately desired for the streets to be steeped in shadow, but they were not. The starlight alone did not drive the darkness away, but an invention of the city's architects. From where he crouched he could see the several luminescent teardrops suspended on curved arms that reached out from the walls of the buildings. Over almost every door and at every corner they overhung the flagstones of the streets. As the light faded the curious lamps grew brighter. Of their own accord, they would dim again when dawn returned. Although the luminescence never became as vibrant as daylight it made the streets somewhat safer to walk during the darker hours. It also made hiding in the shadows all that more difficult to achieve.

"How fare you?" He asked in a quiet voice.

Like her younger brother, Heren had been busy catching her breath again.

"There is no cause for you to worry."

"Has your malady passed?"

Heren frowned in the darkness that enveloped them, a small patch that he had discovered in a sea of soft light. She did not want to be reminded of her sudden infirmity.

"It passed quickly!"

"If I had known that you were ill I would never have taken you to the Sacred Cave."

"I was not ill!"

"Perhaps not before we left but most certainly afterwards, when you came into the vicinity of the Localis. You had a seizure of some sort."

"I don't know what happened to me in there, Marklin, but I feel well enough now."

"Really?"

"I have kept pace with you through the streets of the city have I not?"

"Yes, Heren, you have. I doubt that you could have done so in your woman's clothes though?"

She smiled. It was really quite invigorating to be dressed as a young man. Heren was wearing a cotton shirt closed by a neck-tie, overlain with a waistcoat and topped with a dark coat sporting long tails but cut shorter at the front. Trousers were tucked into tall boots. Her long dark hair was fastened by a velvet bow, a fashion favoured by the younger men of Oroson. They had both foregone the wearing of hats. The popular style of the day was the tall hat and it was not well suited to the exploration of caves. These were Marklin's spare clothes of course.

"Home is not so far," Heren assured him in a strained voice. "We can retire

behind the walls of our house and bar the door. We will be safe.”

“Yes, not too far now,” he replied with a forced smile.

“You are still worried?”

“Yes, Heren, I am. I may be only a junior associate scholar at the Academe, but I have never read anything that suggested that the Old Ones could become so angry.”

“You have read far more than I have.”

“Perhaps you lack my passion for the subject of the Old Ones?”

“I never seem to have the time for reading that you do, brother. I have chores to do around the house, remember?”

“Of course I do.” He smiled. “We should go home now.”

“Is it safe?”

“I think so.”

“What about the Constabulary?”

“What about them?”

“If you think that we are still pursued should we not go to the nearest street post and seek their help?”

“Perhaps, if you were not dressed like a man. I think that we would have a fine time explaining what a good woman of Orosion was doing out at this time of night in that kind of attire. It would ruin father’s good name!” He used levity to hide his fear. The constables carried truncheons and flintlock pistols, more than sufficient for dealing with human transgressors of the city’s civic code, but he feared that their pursuer was not necessarily human.

“We will go now.”

Something howled in the night.

“What was that?!” Heren demanded.

“A dog.”

“It didn’t sound like any dog I’ve ever heard!” She remained unconvinced. Her brother shared her foreboding. Although the howl most definitely had a likeness to that of a hunting hound there had been a tortured air to it as well, as if the one who had called out was experiencing an unimaginable and tortuous pain.

“We are nearly home, let’s go.” Heren was glad to hear him speak such words.

The Dals lived as a family in the south-western area of Cirrius, a district known as Fremor. It was not exactly the poorest area in the city, but it was far from being the most prosperous either. To approach their residence meant going downhill a little and that leant some speed to their progress. Together, they traversed the long road that wound down towards their humble shop, under which they lived in a very modest set of apartments. The building fronted the street and during normal hours it would be open to

the public. There was a modest courtyard on the left of the shop, closed by a large set of wooden gates through which, during trading hours, carts and customers entered and left. It was through here that they normally gained access to their living quarters.

Marklin inserted a key to open the small postern gate, which was inset into the right hand of the two larger pair of gates. He thought he heard a low, heavy breathing from further up the street behind them. Somewhere back there, deep lungs drew in another breath and then exhaled a threatening growl. His head snapped round quickly. He studied a patch of darkness back there, a spot not covered by the light of the lanterns. He could see two yellow pin points of light in the island of gloom. He judged them to be some five feet above the ground. The owner of those orbs inhaled again and returned yet another growl. This one was louder and longer than any previous utterance. He could see nothing else of their pursuer, however. It was as if it exuded the darkness that surrounded it. Those dim lights might indicate its eyes, a mere suggestion of such perhaps, but they were preternatural enough. They terrified him.

“What is it?” Heren asked as she stepped through the gate that he held open for her. Her voice acted like a check on his fear. Marklin was spurred by instinct to protect his sister.

“The thing that chased us from the cave, it has followed us here.” He answered without looking at her. His eyes were full of terror. He could not show Heren how much fear he now felt.

“Inside, quickly!” She urged, tugging at his arm.

Marklin followed her willingly into the courtyard, shutting and locking the postern gate behind them. It was clear to him now that the hunter had not been loosed merely to chase them from the vicinity of the Localis, it had pursued them with a darker intent. It suddenly occurred to the young man that their tracker had purposefully held back from closing on its quarry. They had unwittingly led it to their destination; their home. The family house was indeed no longer safe for him, his father, or his sister.

“Heren, quickly, hide in the cart!”

“Hide?”

“Yes, with all speed.” She hesitated, looking at him quizzically. “Do as I say!” He demanded of her, his voice strained by the effort to both remain quiet and yet also to force her to do as he bid.

“We should retire inside!”

“It’s too late for that. Hide yourself. Trust me!” He roughly pushed her away from him; there was no time to be gentle. The heavy, guttural, breathing sounded once again, hungry, insistent, and closer.

The young woman was caught in two minds. She had been unconsciously

aware of her brother's growing fear and it had infected her also. Heren glanced at Marklin and realised for the very first time that her brother was genuinely terrified. Suddenly, she wanted to stand beside him. Heren felt that she should prove that she could conquer her fear also. She was torn by doubt, however.

“Go now, hide, and remember what I taught you. Use the magick. Form the Concealment Cloak over yourself. Believe yourself to be hidden and our pursuer will not find you in your concealment. It must not find you!”

Again, he pushed her roughly in the direction of the cart. At another time she might have chided him forcefully for his manhandling of her, but this was not that moment. Instead, she did as he asked and climbed into the cart that carried their family name on its side. The state of the paintwork proclaimed their less than successful merchant business. The cart was empty, but for a couple of large wooden storage boxes waiting to be used. Once she was laid down on the boards, Marklin spread a wind-sheet over her, trying to make it look as natural as possible, and then walked back to face the gate.

The growling had stopped. The heavy breathing had also. For a moment, Marklin dared to hope that the danger had passed, but there was nothing reassuring about the silence out there now. Instead, the quiet of the late night seemed even more ominous. He knew instinctively that the creature was still haunting the gate and only wondered why it delayed the attack that he believed to be imminent. Neither the wooden portal itself nor the high wall represented any real kind of obstacle to it, or so he presumed.

Reaching into the deep pocket on his topcoat Marklin withdrew a small flintlock pistol. The weapon was loaded, having been prepared before they had set out on their nocturnal adventure. He had not really believed that there would have been any need for the gun, but it had seemed sensible to have some form of protection, even if it was only for show, as he had told himself. They were out and about in the darkest hours, after all, and good women did not normally walk the streets of a night. It was one of the many limitations placed upon females by the society of Orosion. At the feel of the weapon in his hand, Marklin was momentarily reassured. He added a little more powder to the pan. It was probably a pointless gesture, he thought, but he hoped that if this encounter did indeed become violent, then he might be able to distract the thing at least. The flash and bang of gunpowder might divert his attacker to the point that it would forget about his sister altogether. As if drawing the weapon were the cue it waited for the thing stepped forward from the dark shadows that naturally cloaked the gate. One moment there had been an empty, somber void, the next a creature of roughly human form stood before him. In cold fascination Marklin ran his

eyes over the corrupt vision but doing so only increased the terror that gripped him. It stood on two legs, perhaps five feet tall, but it seemed to be hunched over as if its spine were twisted. It was dressed like a poor man in large, heavy boots, torn trousers, and an open shirt that revealed a broad but deformed chest. The clothing was dirty and in need of repair. Through the tears in the fabric, Marklin believed that he could see open wounds beneath. From those gashes a dark blood flowed freely. No hair resided on top of the dome like skull. The face was a mask of perpetual agony, contorted and rendered by a suffering that no living person could surely survive. The eyes, however, were the worst feature to behold. There were no pupils, nor irises, so that it gave the impression of the thing being blind and yet Marklin knew that it could see him very well. The orbs glowed, a sick yellow in the darkness. They were not human eyes.

“Stand thee back!” The young man commanded in as firm a voice as he could muster. He levelled the pistol with a surprisingly steady hand. “You have no call to be in this place. Return from whence you came!”

The eyes dipped towards the cold stones of the cobbled yard but then began to rise. They came to a height that was equal with Marklin’s but did not stop. He wondered for a moment if they were levitating but then he saw the two unseeing orbs dip again, as if the creature had been stretching upwards, reached its apex, and then dropped into a more comfortable stance. Those eyes now seemed to be some seven foot from the ground. Twisted lips parted as if it were trying to speak, but all that issued forth was a snarling growl better suited to a beast than a man.

“I give fair warning, you are an intruder here. The law is on my side. I will defend myself with violence if you provoke me to it!” Marklin’s voice wavered despite his intent to at least seem to be unafraid.

Heren had done what her brother had asked of her. Lying on the bed of the cart she had called upon her limited knowledge of magick. There were no spells to master, no incantations to remember. Magick did not work that way. For one who understood the true nature of the universe the exercise of the will, allied to the imagination, was sufficient. That was the sum total of her knowledge of the theory of magick. However, she could do what her brother asked of her, she could form over herself a Concealment Cloak. Intuitively, she knew how to hide herself from the view of others. How this was achieved, beyond the words of theory, she did not know. Marklin said that she had a natural gift for magick. Her brother was the only person in her life who had ever encouraged her to be more than what society expected of a young woman.

Hearing his voice now Heren squirmed her way between the empty boxes in the cart and dared to raise the dust sheet up just behind the driver’s seat.

She almost gasped when she saw the creature that confronted her brother. She managed to stifle herself with one hand clasped over her mouth. The thing contorted suddenly as if it were experiencing a seizure. It gathered itself into a ball and rocked ungracefully on its thick legs. Slowly it began to rise again and then took an unsteady step forward. As it did so it spoke.

“Give back that which you have taken from us?” A heavy, guttural voice issued into the night.

“I took nothing from you!”

“You broke into our house, thief, and took that which does not belong to you.” The head twisted on its long neck, the mouth snapping at the words that it spoke, as if speaking were a trial to it.

“The Cave of the Localis is open to those of us who are members of the Academe.”

“Wrong! It is ours, it belongs to us. All of this city we gave to you taking only the cave for ourselves. Your greed knows no bounds.”

“I, like others of the Academe, hunger only for knowledge.”

“And it is knowledge that you took from us.”

“One cannot steal another man’s knowledge. It is there to be shared by those who would find it out.”

“Wrong again! It is our knowledge. We earned it in the course of five millennia. We learnt it. We do not share it willingly with the likes of you. Where is the other one, the female in the guise of a male?” The head snapped upwards and it searched the night air as if for a scent.

“I am not the first of my kind to set his eyes upon the Localis, just as you are not the first of your people to walk the streets of this city. It is not given that you should deny to others what you claim for yourselves.”

“The other one? I will not ask again!” Its voice trailed off into a growl.

“Only the men of Cirrius quest for knowledge. Women are not capable, nor are they indulged in that pursuit.”

“It seemed like a woman?”

“Your ignorance defeats you. I say again, women are not capable of acquiring such knowledge.”

Inside the cart Heren fumed a little at her brother’s words but not at him. She understood, all too well, that he was trying to protect her and would say anything to achieve that end. In one respect he was not lying, the women of Orosion were given very little in the way of education.

“There was another.”

“Gone, in a different direction. You followed me too closely and did not see them depart. You missed their trail in the night. They are lost to you now.”

“There was another.”

“And now it is time for you to go.”

“I will not go until I know for certain that the knowledge that you stole is dead inside you!”

The report of the flintlock pistol sounded unnaturally loud within the confines of the small courtyard. If the creature felt the impact of the lead ball it did not betray the fact. This did not surprise Marklin; he had had no real faith in the man-made weapon. Almost contemptuously he threw it to the ground and raised his hands as if he were about to ward off a physical attack.

From beneath the dust-cover, Heren tried to get a better view of what was happening. By turning her head slowly, so as not to betray her presence, the concealment cloak only worked if she did not move too much, Heren could see her brother and, then turning back again to the left, she could bring the creature into view. The vision chilled her blood.

“You would attempt to use our magick against us?” It asked in its unnatural voice.

The thing lumbered closer.

Marklin took a step backwards. “I will defend myself!” He insisted. “I have studied the knowledge of your ways for many years now.”

“In this you are but a child. Your people have barely existed in comparison to us. For over five thousand years have we resided on the Holy Mountain.”

“True, you are the Old People and we are the New People, but we are people all the same. You may have retreated into the mountain and you have done us no service in cutting all ties to the outside world, but we are your inheritors.”

“NEVER!” The creature spoke with a loud invective. Marklin’s words seemed to have provoked it.

It stepped forward and swung its right hand at him. Marklin ducked under the balled fist, feeling the air disturbed by its passing. It rustled his hair. Although it walked on staggering limbs the creature moved with both a determined speed and an indomitable strength. Clutching fingers reached out to grasp its prey as it lumbered forward, threatening to bear Marklin down to the cobbled floor. He got the impression that it wanted to trample him underfoot. The young man did not fall, however. He cowered before the onslaught, but that was an inclination that was more instinctive than conscious. Having dropped the ineffectual gun, he had raised his hands before him, not to ward off the attack with an equally ineffectual defensive posture, but to bring into play the one thing that might save him this night; his magick.

Where the beast struck with its heavy fists a multitude of silver-white sparks appeared in the cold night air. It attacked with such rapidity that to

Heren's covert view it seemed that a protective dome, described by the sparks themselves, had formed around her brother. She knew all too well what the truth was, however. Marklin was indeed using the knowledge of the Old People to defend himself with. A dome of energy now surrounded him. An invisible barrier made visible only by contact. It was proving impenetrable to the creature's mightiest blows.

As suddenly as it had started the attack ceased. The creature retreated. Parts of its body were seemingly absorbed once more into the shadows of the gate to which it now returned. The beast did not pant. Its sightless eyes looked forward, but not at its foe. In every respect it assumed the character of a statue, unmoving and unconscious.

"This will avail you not." The voice that spoke was not perverted by the creature's larynx. It took Heren a moment to realise that the beast itself was not actually the source of the words themselves.

"And neither will your golem!" Marklin asserted.

He stepped back a pace or two, putting a safe distance between himself and the now inert creature. He was still cautious.

"Mayhap."

As Heren watched from her hiding place a new figure appeared at the side of the attacker. It was more graceful in proportion with sharp, angular features. Its skin was black but not like that of the peoples of the south, those who resided in the hot and dark continent, burnt by a tropical sun. This was the shiny blackness of obsidian stone in appearance. The being that now stepped out of the shadows looked to be made of that darkest rock. It was both beautiful and fearful at the same time.

"Begone!"

In response to the command the awful man-like thing began to emanate a dirty purple light. The body of the golem seemed to expand and where the skin was stretched too far it broke and allowed the purple light to escape. This occurred first in only one or two places but then grew in number until the form of the horror could no longer be seen. For a moment there existed in its place only a pall of brilliant light. Then, with a thunderclap, that too was gone.

"You have courage. Others of your kind have lost their minds just at the sight of my golem." The Old One spoke with a tone that was as cold as the stone from which it seemed to be made.

"That creature is but a thing from our folk tales. It never existed but in the shadows of the night when my ancestors gathered around the hearth and told stories to frighten each other."

"You are a people filled with fear."

"A man of reason does not fear such tricks."

“And you would be a man of reason?”

“I am.”

“Then your reason must inform you that you are lost. Why prolong the agony?”

“Why seek my death in the first place?”

“You transgressed and must pay the price.”

“I am not aware of any transgression. I only wished to see the Localis once again.”

“That is forbidden to the likes of you. Your ignorance of our decree is no defence. You are ignorant of so much.” It sounded contemptuous.

“It seems to me that you wish to hide something.”

“Does it?”

“The Old People allowed members of the Academe access to the Localis in days gone by, since the time of transition when you ceded this city and this kingdom to us. The Pantean then did not have the form that you show to me now; this is something new. Something designed to confuse us, I suspect. There is also something in the cave that you do not want us to see and I do not think that it is the Localis itself. What has changed within your people?”

“Enough!”

The Pantean quickly threw up a hand. A faint white light formed barely a foot from Marklin. It was round in shape, suggestive of a shield. It countered a dirty purple miasma that emanated from his new adversary. Neither substance appeared to have any real mass, seeming more like vapour, but when they touched each other, Marklin staggered back a step as if subjected to a great physical force and there was a sudden electric crack in the air. That same air was charged now with energy and it reminded him of how it felt just before lightning speared the sky and thunder rolled down the mountain prior to a storm breaking.

The young man’s face became a mask of concentration. A bead of sweat broke out on his forehead as he leaned forward, pushing back physically against the purple energy that was being directed towards him. He had never fought like this before. No one in the whole of Cirrius had ever experienced anything quite like this, he believed.

The obsidian creature moved its head to one side, sharply, and then pushed out again with its hands. The result was both remarkable and painful. Marklin was lifted from his feet and flung against the stone wall of the shop behind him. As his hands dropped his shield disappeared and the purple energy seemed to hit him with an irresistible force. He gasped at the pain that was inflicted but he did not fall from the stonework. Instead, he was suspended there against the pull of gravity, raised several feet above the

cobbles. The coils of purple vapour ensnared him with tendrils of energy that crackled and flashed with intensity, each occurrence sending a shock through his body. The purple snakes were full of torturous vitality. “Like a child you know not what you do or what powers you awaken.” The Pantean stepped closer.

Heren attempted to change her position so as bring her brother into view again, but he was held too high up on the wall.

“Like a child you must be chided.”

Marklin did not reply. He had been winded by the impact of his body on the cold wall. His head was ringing from its collision with the unyielding stonework behind him. Multiple shocks coursed through his frame making him spasm involuntarily.

“Snap, snap, snap, went the bones, just like twigs broken for kindling.”

Its fingers contracted a little and the purple haze snared around the man’s forearms and then they were suddenly and terribly bent at unnatural angles. The sound of Marklin’s bones breaking was drowned out only by the screams that followed. Not one wail, however, but several, as the purple vapours undulated over his body. In a slow succession his upper-arms were broken, first one side and then the other. As if held within the coils of a host of serpents each finger was entwined and fractured. Every bone between knuckle and fingertip. One at a time. Doing the same again between wrist and knuckles. Next the purple serpents slithered to his legs and repeated the process beginning with his toes. Each crack of bone accompanied by another scream. Another plea for mercy. Another moment of rasping breath followed by another snap and another scream of agony. When every bone in each foot had been ruined the purple trails moved on up to his lower legs, his knees, and then his thighs. At that point Marklin appeared to lose consciousness, a blessed release perhaps.

His torturer would have none of it, however. By some art unknown to the New People of Oroson it brought him back from his escape. Marklin’s eyes flashed open and he moaned in his dismay. The purple snakes caressed his damaged body and he screamed once more. Heren cried silently. The next sound was akin to that of a great branch being sundered. Marklin’s pelvis was shattered. Then, as if it were trying to craft a tune out of his piteous cries, each one of the man’s ribs was crushed in time to an infernal melody. The song of misery included his collar bones and his shoulder blades also, ending only with the sternum. Throughout all of this torture not a single fatal injury was inflicted. The young man still lived, racked by unimaginable pain.

Heren was held captive by both fear and shock. She no longer watched but lay curled into a ball on the dusty boards of the cart. Her eyes were clamped

shut and her slim hands covered her ears, but she could still hear her brother's cries of anguish. He was begging to die now, but it seemed that she was the only one who could hear him. The Pantean was immune to his pleas.

With a sudden sweeping movement of its hands the torturer flung Marklin to the hard, cobbled floor of the courtyard. It strode on legs of living stone, stopping only when it stood over him. Its black eyes looked down with contempt at the broken young man laid at its cold feet. Still living. Still breathing. Still enduring a terrible pain.

"Fool!" It spat at him. "Better that you had accepted your fate at the hand of my golem. A quick and painless death you would have enjoyed then."

It waited as if expecting a response but all that came from Marklin's lips was a weak and sorrowful moan. The Pantean gestured with one hand and the purple vapour caressed all of Marklin's body again, eliciting from each broken bone one more scream of agony. It grinned at its work.

"This will be the fate of all of your kind. We come now, after our sleep of a thousand years, to reclaim what is and always was ours; the Holy Mountain. The others will not help you. They have gone into the void. We, the Neiliri, remain and we will take back our birth-right. You will be as dust!"

As the right hand rose slowly the mineral fingers closed into a fist. Marklin Dal's skull appeared to be subjected to tremendous crushing forces. Purple tendrils wrapped themselves around the bones of his face, bringing terrible pressure to bear, shattering the protection afforded to his brain by the thick bones of the human skull. His head collapsed under the irresistible pressure. The best that could be said was that this action, as inhuman as it seemed, brought, at last, a merciful end to the young man's suffering.

And then the Pantean was gone.

Only Heren remained. Unmoving and still hidden under the cart's dust-sheet. Frozen by what she had witnessed and incapable of resisting the fear, the shock, and the terror that held her almost as close as the vice that had crushed her brother's skull.

Only Heren remained.

Chapter Two

Risdun Hak was well aware that his clothing attracted attention. He was late of the Marine Infantry Volunteer Brigade, a mercenary force, raised and cashiered as necessary by the Republic of Palonia. His jacket was a shade of aquamarine and carried the rank of a lieutenant. He might have appeared a little old to hold such a junior rank, but the people of Oroson were ignorant of Palonian military insignia. No one had yet asked him what the crown above an anchor, overlaid by two rifles, represented. His trousers were dark blue and tucked into tall leather boots. He did not wear a hat simply because he had lost the one issued to him in far Palonia on his journey to the Holy Mountain. He had walked through the same doors yesterday, and every day previously for three weeks, dressed exactly the same and yet still his appearance became the subject of conversation. They talked about him, not to him.

The reception room was long and narrow. At one end the tall entrance doors, through which Hak had ambled, along with at least a hundred other desperate fellows, were situated. The floor beneath his booted feet was made of polished oak. Along one side of the room a series of tall and narrow windows ran, giving a view of the pleasant garden that was immediately adjacent. Portraits of notable past kings of Oroson hung on the opposite wall to the windows. Each portrait was housed in a frame that mirrored the window with which it was aligned. The architect had cleverly interposed three sets of doors, spread down the length of the room, within the arrangement of windows, each giving access to the garden, and each set looking almost identical to the casements that they accompanied. The doors stood open to allow fresh air to circulate around the reception room and, possibly, as an invitation to the waiting throng to take a step outside. No one took advantage of the unspoken encouragement, however. They were all waiting, like Risdun Hak, in the hope of hearing their name being called this day.

Initially, Hak had wandered around the room admiring the portraits. Each one was accompanied by an engraved brass plate that informed the interested observer of the personage depicted, the date of the subject's birth and death, and the name of the artist who had been commissioned to paint the composition. He stopped first at the portrait of King Pareb Nills, the founder of the current dynasty. The artist had chosen to work his composition in an idealistic fashion. King Pareb Nills had ascended the newly established throne in the sixth year of the founding of the current Kingdom of Oroson, a little over one thousand years ago. As there were no surviving likenesses of King Pareb Nills from those early days some artistic

licence had been employed. This king was inevitably tall and determined looking. He wore a suit of armour that, to Hak's professional eye, appeared entirely impractical for the battlefield, but then it was intended to impart the man's regal stature and ability to defend his people. He enjoyed studying the painting even with its creative liberties.

The following paintings were mostly of men of whom Risdun Hak knew little. He appreciated the different styles in which they had been realised, however. The earlier likenesses tended towards the ideal, but the later ones were more realistic. Of these the painting of King Pareb Vitor, the 'Mad King' of popular legend and recent history, held his attention the longest. In this composition King Pareb Vitor looked as grand as his ancestors, but the artist had dared to capture a hint of the insanity that afflicted both the monarch and, through him, the kingdom for over twenty years. The painter had done this in the depiction of the king's cruel eyes, the upturn of the mouth that gave it a sneering expression, and the whiteness of the knuckles of the right hand that grasped the handle of a knife. It had been daring of the artist to include a knife as it was the weapon of the common thug. A regal sword remained in its scabbard that hung from the king's golden belt. The sword was the badge of the nobility and this king had been far from noble. King Pareb Vitor had enacted bloody purges against almost every class of subject that had lived under his rule. Where other members of the Pareb dynasty were remembered for acts of courage, or wise decisions, or enactments that benefited the many rather than the privileged few, Vitor had become a caricature villain used to frighten children into good behaviour, or to vilify public figures. In truth, he had done much to bring to ruin the honour of the kingdom and lost the confidence of the allies of Oroson.

Inevitably, the current King of the Mountain, King Pareb Ferdin, hung but a pace or two away from his older brother. He looked little like his sibling. King Ferdin appeared small of stature and was dressed in normal court clothes without a hint of martial dominance about him. Indeed, his face looked intelligent and the presence of books and maps in the background suggested that this particular member of the Pareb dynasty was more of a philosopher than a soldier. It certainly seemed to Hak's critical eye that the artist had been given far more leeway in the depiction of his patron than any of his predecessors had. He judged the resulting composition much more favourably. He hoped to like the subject of the painting just as much. Having reminded himself of the kingdom's most recent history and appreciated all the finer points of the reception room also, Risdun Hak now wandered aimlessly amongst the gathering of his fellow appellants. They talked quietly to anyone that they either knew or felt confident enough to

commence a conversation with. He was not one of those people. Eventually, Hak found himself almost at the centre of the long thin room with the gallery of tall windows behind him. Somehow, he had located a lone and vacant chair. There were many other such items of furniture but all of them were now in use. His experience convinced him that his wait would be lengthy and not likely to result in an actual audience. As recovering his family's birthright was the sole reason for him being there, Risdun Hak chose to spend yet another long day in waiting to have his name called, he decided to do it with some degree of comfort and so sat down.

The chair was not a particularly fine piece of furniture. It had been heavily used. The seat was growing threadbare, the gilt was scuffed, and naked wood could be seen in places, but it sufficed. His hope that he might hear his family name being called on this day could prove to be in vain, but his father had begged him to do so, even upon his deathbed. For now, there was enough coin in his purse so that he could afford to indulge himself in this pursuit. Like many another soldier, Risdun Hak had learnt the value of taking whatever opportunity for rest fate bestowed upon him and so folded his arms, closed his eyes, and relaxed with every expectation of being disturbed at some point in the very near future. Whether it would be to quit the palace or to speak about his claim was the only thing to be decided, or so he thought.

"I say, fellow, you are sat in my companion's seat!" An affected voice rudely announced.

"What?!" Hak replied brusquely.

He squinted at the man now stood before him. The stranger had announced his presence in a very uncivil manner by kicking the mercenary's booted foot. The accoster had dark hair and a handsome face but cold eyes.

"Are you deaf as well as uncouth? I said that you are sat in my friend's seat!" He spoke with an air of disinterest.

At first glance the speaker appeared to be well dressed, but after a moment's observation, Hak concluded that he was being addressed by an impoverished gentleman of little standing. His coat had once been fine, but his shirt had been repaired, his trousers were too well worn, and his shoes were scuffed. The one thing that did stand out about him, however, was the good quality sword hanging at his left hip, housed in a scabbard decorated with silver fastenings.

"Am I?"

"Yes, and he would be very pleased if you would vacate it this instant."

"Would he?"

Hak looked at the tall man who stood silently behind the talker. The companion appeared to be something of a brute, heavy set, and dressed in

gentleman's clothes that had also clearly seen better days. He did not carry a sword, but, Hak believed that he saw a bulge in the man's waistband, discreetly hidden by his long but threadbare coat, that suggested a firearm.

"Yes, he would. My, but you are being most tiresome, aren't you?"

"Am I?" Risdun folded his arms over his chest again and looked at the two of them without evincing any concern whatsoever.

"You do repeat yourself, don't you know?!"

"Do I?"

The expression on the other's face changed from one of mock-indifference to a sudden flash of anger. He appraised his seated opponent critically and even though he did not recognise the exotic uniform that he wore he knew that the recumbent figure was not some popinjay made up to look like a soldier. Momentarily, he considered giving up on this mark, but then he counselled himself that this man was clearly alone, probably unknown, and that there was a purse of moderate size hanging from his sash that was overlain with a leather belt. The sword the fellow wore appeared to be more of a tool than a thing of beauty, but it would be worth something in one of the many shops that traded in second-hand artefacts all the same. Besides, the man's manner was beginning to grate.

"You are starting to annoy me, fellow, and before you speak let me counsel you, I am not a man to be trifled with."

"I expect not, however, this seat was vacant when I chanced upon it and I mean to occupy it until either my name is called, or we are invited to quit the palace at the end of the afternoon."

"And what is that?"

"The end of the afternoon is called the evening where I hail from."

"Your name, fool! A gentleman should know who it is that insults him so."

"Mayhap, a gentleman should, but you are not such."

"You do insult me?!"

"No matter what I do or do not say you will take it as an insult, for that is your play, is it not?"

"Of what do you babble now?"

"You are a chancer. You and your oaf haunt this room looking for marks that seem easy enough to you when it comes to the separating of them from their coin. You open a conversation with a chosen unfortunate, feign an insult, such as my sitting in this vacant chair that is not, and never was, reserved for your silent companion. You then offer to take the matter outside, like a gentleman, but your intent is not to settle a matter of honour. What you intend is to rob your mark of any valuables that they may have upon their person. I suspect that you would resort to using the silent oaf's muscle if necessary, or the pistol hidden under his coat if absolutely

required. Now, have I found my mark?”

“You dare to suggest that a gentleman, such as myself, is but a thief? Sir, you do me the gravest indignity!”

“Only with the truth. My name is Risdun Hak. I have been long absent from the mountain, but I am returned now to claim my family’s estate, lost under the reign of King Vitor. That is all the history that you will get from me.”

“I want nothing more!”

“But you do want a fight, don’t you? So, as you seem committed to a duel, may I have your name at least?”

“I am the Honourable Alsus Bar, your servant and, I fear, your doom.” He bowed in a perfunctory manner. His eyes never left Risdun Hak.

“Far too dramatic, Alsus Bar. Excessively so. In the theatre they would call it melodramatic. Have you ever been to the theatre? I have, but then I can afford it. Yes, they would think your performance melodramatic and the critics would slaughter you, if you don’t mind my saying. Of course, I do not care if you do mind anyway. I take it that you know how to use that foil at your side?”

“Of course.”

“Schooled at a fencing academy, no doubt?”

“Yes, were you?”

“Yes, but not formally. I learnt my lessons on the field of battle.”

“Really?”

“Indeed. May I ask, have you ever killed a man, Alsus?”

“Of course.”

Hak believed him. There was no hesitation in his response, no blush in his cheeks, and his eyes never wavered.

“Then you know that it is a messy business, isn’t it? Fighting is not permitted within the grounds of the palace, you know? It is permissible for a gentleman to wear a sword of course, but the secretion of weapons, such as your friend hiding that flintlock, is generally frowned upon. Also, duelling is circumscribed within public precincts as it is deemed to lead to a disturbance of the peace.”

“There are still places of seclusion where gentlemen can meet to resolve their differences.”

“Quite, and that silent fellow intends to be your second, no doubt.”

“A gentleman usually favours the use of a second.”

“And if your opponent cannot furnish one the two of you would overpower him and rob him, is that it?”

“On your feet, scoundrel!” Bar hissed, his face beginning to turn red.

Alsus Bar was a man of average height but possessed of a good physique. Nevertheless, he found himself looking up into Hak’s weathered face when

the other gave in to his request to rise from the chair. Risdun Hak had led a life of often intense physical activity for a little over forty years and it showed. He was both tall and strongly built. His skin was burnt by the southern sun, such as that which scorched the Kingdom of Apidacea.

“Where?” Hak demanded to know.

“Mark me, this is no longer a game, I will kill you.”

“Then it is proper that I bring my second with me, to assist your fellow in wrapping you in a shroud.”

“You think to frighten me?” Alsus Bar’s face had changed colour again, growing white, but not from fear. Rather it was inspired by a destructive anger that he clearly needed to vent.

“Bar, you flatter yourself. You are nothing to me, but I know that your assumed sensibilities have been rubbed sore and that you will now dog my heels until you have your presumed satisfaction, no matter what else I do or say. I know your type so well. A true gentleman would acknowledge that nothing untoward has passed between us, but you are too keen to be seemingly what you are not and, therefore, cannot admit to the fact that we have nothing to quarrel over. Killing you, however, would heal your pain forever and save me from much future grief.”

“I should kill you now!” Bar hissed.

“Again, a gentleman would never countenance such a thing, not least because this is the Thalorian Palace in which we find ourselves. It was named after the god Thalor, once worshipped by our people before they settled on the Holy Mountain.”

“I will kill you!”

“Now it is you who are repeating yourself, and most tiresomely I must say.” Hak smiled without any warmth.

Bar’s right hand fell to the grip of his sword and, for the first time, his companion spoke, calling his name quietly, and resting a large, rough hand on his shoulder.

“Listen to your dog; he has more sense than you!” Hak goaded him.

With his eyes burning into his protagonist’s face Alsus Bar began to draw his sword, very slowly.

“RISDUN HAK!”

For a moment he did not respond, but then the name was called again.

“Here!” Hak called without taking his eyes from Alsus Bar.

A court attendant in an extravagant uniform walked over to them, all the while exuding a very disinterested attitude in a very professional manner.

He did not seem to notice that an altercation was unfolding before him, unlike many of the immediate spectators. They had withdrawn to at least a sword’s length, as if in expectation of weapons being unsheathed

imminently. Many were hoping that a fight would indeed break out and so interrupt the lethargy of waiting countless hours in an expectation routinely disappointed.

“Risdon Hak?” The court official repeated himself as if it were the dullest name that he had ever had to voice.

His back was ramrod straight and his eyes appeared to be studying the garden beyond the window rather than the man he was sent to discover.

“I am he.” Hak glanced at the attendant and then immediately returned his attention to his newly acquired enemy.

“You will follow. Your petition is to be answered.” The attendant turned and began to walk away.

“Another time, mayhap,” Risdon Hak suggested to Alsus Bar and then pushed past him as he followed in the wake of the official. He did not have to be told that two pairs of eyes were burning into the back of his neck.

“May I speak with you?”

Eiji Tunshi looked up from his cup of weak beer. He saw the one who presumed to intrude upon his solitary contemplation. “It’s just that I seldom see a black man here in Oroson.”

“Excuse me?” A note of irritation added a little bite to his tone.

“Oh, pardon me! Please, I meant no offence!” The young man insisted.

Eiji noticed that he had rounded shoulders and a rather open face. His eyes were made a little brighter by the spectacles that he wore.

“Mayhap, introductions might be proffered first?” Eiji suggested in a friendlier tone.

The interloper, who was a little under average height, looked rather embarrassed. “You are quite right, sir. Quite right indeed. Please, forgive my appalling manners.” Eiji smiled a little at the other’s obvious embarrassment.

“I am Madiki Jig. A junior lawyer and at your service.”

“And I am Eiji Tunshi, a soldier, and I am not sure of what service I can be to a lawyer?”

“Oh, this does not concern a legal matter,” he insisted, “just one of curiosity really.”

Madiki Jig remained exactly where he stood. His face was a little red and his eyes staring at a spot just above Tunshi’s head, up on the wall behind him.

“Do you want to sit down?”

“If it is acceptable to you, sir?”

“I am not unreceptive to a little conversation.” Madiki sat down but still seemed a little awkward. He had a small tankard of beer in one hand. “So,

what can I do for you?"

"I am sorry, sir, I did not mean to intrude, it is just that I have this overactive curiosity for things and people not normally associated with life on the mountain. I saw you the other day, sat in this very spot as it happens, and determined to make your acquaintance. I was, perhaps, a little hasty in doing so."

"Mayhap, but no damage has been done."

"Really? You are not offended with me?"

"No, I am not. I have but one friend in this city and he is busy elsewhere, so I do not have much to distract me."

"You are too kind." Madiki Jig smiled and relaxed a little.

"So, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Well, about yourself really, where are you from?"

"I am a native of Kilwa, far to the south."

"Kilwa eh? I have heard of that place."

"It is a mighty country amongst the land of the black-folk."

"I dare say so. May I ask, how did you end up this far north, and in the City in the Clouds at that?"

"I was taken against my parents' will as a child."

"Enslaved?!"

"Yes, there are peoples where I live who make money from capturing others of their kind and selling them into slavery. Usually, they prey on those they deem to be their enemies. Such was my fate. My father was an important man and there were people who wished him ill. They stole me to hurt him. After several years I ended up as a mercenary in the armies of this continent and that has been my trade ever since."

"You are a mercenary then? Fascinating! It explains that most curious costume that you are wearing."

"It is a trade open to those who have no other skills and it is one of the few that, generally speaking, disregards the colour of a person's skin over their ability to fight and to follow orders."

"Quite, I understand. Have you fought in many battles?"

"A few."

"And in many armies?"

"Again, a few, Apidacea, Borothimus, Konigsberg, and Palonia are the most notable I suppose. This costume that I am wearing hales from the latter."

"You have visited the City on the Sea?" Madiki looked suitably impressed.

"Yes, though they keep their mercenaries out of the city proper, normally. Only for certain festivals were we allowed to visit the city itself. We were garrisoned on one of the islands that ring Palonia to the south."

“I greatly desire to visit that city. They say it is a wonder to behold.”

“It is.” Eijii nodded his head in agreement. “How they built a city on the sea I do not know, but there are many buildings decorated with spires, domes, and towers. There are also many fine houses that border squares where the warm sun is cooled by broad trees and where the people dance when the festivals are held.”

“With doing service for such a city how did you tip up in Oroson?”

“Palonia, like other states, hires mercenaries when it needs them and then exiles them when it does not. My service was terminated, along with that of my friend, Risdun Hak.”

“Risdun Hak, that sounds like the name of an Orosonian?”

“He is, or so he tells me, a son of the mountain, as you people so quaintly put it.”

“Do you know his history?”

“Only what little he has told me, which is that his father was forced to leave the mountain during the reign of the Mad King.”

“Ah yes, many people were forced to flee or suffer that unfortunate monarch’s ill temper. A word to the wise, friend, people here do not like hearing King Pareb Vitor being referred to as the Mad King. His younger brother sits upon the throne this day and he too does not like to have it suggested that there is madness in his family.”

“Thank you for telling me. I know so little of your ways.”

“I would be happy to be of assistance to you in that respect!” Jig beamed.

“I would be grateful if you would. I am very aware that I am a stranger here in Oroson, both the mountain and the kingdom.”

“They are one and the same, my friend. One and the same.”

“The kingdom of Oroson covers the entire mountain?”

“And all of its spurs.”

“Spurs?”

“The tall escarpments that extend from the foot of the mountain and reach out over most of the continent of Artemia. In many places they widen out into plateaus where the other towns and villages of Oroson reside.”

“So, they are the ridges that I have often seen when travelling in the lands below?”

“Yes.”

“They rise so tall.”

“Yes, the lowest inhabited plateau is only at a height of some two hundred feet. You can find the town of Liraby there. The sides of the spur are almost sheer, impossible to climb they say. Of course, there is a gate below Liraby that allows for the passage of caravans and travellers and the like from one side of the spur to the other. Communication and commerce flow through

the Gates of Orosion.”

“We passed through a set of those gates on our way here from Palonia. I was struck by how massive they are. It must have been a work of great undertaking?”

“I imagine it was, but,” Madiki Jig paused. His expression suggested that he was about to tell a guilty secret. “It was not we who built the gates.”

“You mean the Kingdom of Orosion?”

“No, not exactly. The Kingdom of Orosion most certainly did build the gates, but it was known as Pantea then, after the people who first resided here some five thousand years ago. They called themselves Panteans you see.”

“So, there was a Kingdom of Pantea first and then a Kingdom of Orosion next, which continues today?”

“Yes, quite right. You see, my people, we call ourselves the New People, arrived on the mountain about one thousand years ago. The Panteans, we refer to them as the Old People, were much in decline by then.”

“So, you took the kingdom from them?”

“Not took so much as received.”

“Excuse me?”

“As I said, the Old Ones were in decline. About two thousand years ago, after the third migration of many peoples from the east, and the beginnings of the Dark Ages, the Old Ones closed their gates to the outside world and receded into legend. When the New People found their way onto the mountain the Old People were happy to cede us everything, but their Sacred Cave.”

“Is that their holy place?”

“Very much, or so I believe. They gave us this beautiful city, built, like the gates, by an arcane craft. Cirrius is the highest city in the world. It stands at an elevation of ten thousand feet. Mount Orosion is also the tallest mountain in the world, it stands over thirty thousand feet!”

“It is an impressively large mountain.” Eiji could not help but smile at the other’s obvious pride in this homeland.

“It is a pity that you are here in the late summer, my friend, for at the end of autumn, and into the beginning of winter, the clouds descend from the peak and flow through the streets of the city like ethereal rivers. It is a very famous spectacle.”

“Perhaps I might still be here by then, my friend does not seem to be moving very fast in the completion of his business at the palace here in Cirrius.”

“Does your friend come to reclaim his family’s property then?”

“Yes, he said that his father possessed a title and an estate on the lower southern reaches of the mountain.”

“He will be disappointed, I fear. King Pareb Ferdin lies upon his sick bed and the government of the kingdom is suspended. The Royal Chamber, our first house of government, has retired. Its members have gone to either their town houses or their estates, the choice depending upon how kindly they look upon our monarch. The Merchant Chamber, the second house of government, is also in abeyance, as no bills can be presented for its consideration when the King is indisposed, and the Royal Chamber is not active. Representatives from both houses of government now form the Regent Council, but it does not possess the authority to settle such matters as property and titles lost under the reign of the previous king.”

“My friend can be quite determined when the mood takes him.”

“An admirable quality, I am sure, but I doubt that it will profit him at this time. Being a lawyer, I know how the court functions in respect of legal matters. Palace business, like government business, has largely been suspended as we await the outcome of the King’s ill health. It has caused quite an upset within the kingdom as King Pareb Ferdin has only one child, a princess, and so has failed to provide a legitimate heir to the throne.”

“Surely, the princess will take the crown then?”

“Princess Saran?” Madiki Jig looked astonished at the idea. “She is a woman!”

“I gathered so by her title, but excuse me, I do not understand, is there a reason as to why the princess cannot succeed her father?”

“Why yes, as I said, she’s a woman!”

“That has not stopped there being queens in other kingdoms.”

“The queens of kings, yes!”

“I have known of queens that have ruled in their own right.”

“But not here in Orosion. No woman can ascend to a position of authority here; it is against the sacred law!”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Since the time of the founding of the Church of Orosion, some five hundred years ago, women have been barred from public office. Princess Saran has a rank, but nothing more. As a woman she lacks a legal claim to the crown.”

“Because of her sex?”

“Yes.”

“How civilised of you people of Orosion.”

“Thank you!”

Eiji was about to point out that his comment had not been meant as a compliment but decided against it. He was painfully aware that he knew very little about the Kingdom of Orosion and he did not want to upset his new acquaintance.

“So, the kingdom is in a crisis of succession then?”

“Of a kind, yes, but there is Paremi Kun.”

“Who or what is that?”

“Duke Paremi Kun is the only surviving male heir to the Pareb dynasty. His ancestor was a half-brother to the first Pareb, King Pareb Nills. Although, under normal circumstances, the Paremi have never stood in line to the throne with any expectation, there always having been a male Pareb before them, in this instance he is the only legitimate male, of even distant Pareb relationship, and so the king bestowed upon him the title of Heir Presumptive. There was some debate, I remember, about that. The Paremi clan wanted to use the title of Heir Apparent, as that means that the holder cannot be replaced should a more direct heir be born, to the Princess for example, but as Princess Saran was only twelve at the time the King won the argument.”

“So, your king named this Duke Paremi Kun his heir then?”

“Yes, it was the only way that he could avoid re-marrying.”

“How do you force a king to remarry?”

“By insisting that he respect his obligation to provide a male heir.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Yes, the King is obligated to provide an heir to secure a smooth transition from his reign to the next. However, King Ferdin was never intended to be a ruling monarch and so, unfortunately, he fell in love with his wife. She was a duchess from Konigsberg, a place I am sure that you have heard of?”

“Yes, I have even been there.”

“Have you, how interesting. You must tell me more.”

“I will, but we haven’t finished the current conversation yet.”

“Oh yes, quite right. Duke Paremi Kun and the succession to the Throne of Oroson.”

“I have a question for you.”

“Please, ask away.”

“When you talk of the kings of Oroson each appears to have the first name of Pareb, is that the case with everyone here?”

“Oh my, no. Most definitely not. Only the members of noble houses use that convention. The Parebs are the first house, of course. The Paremis consider themselves the second. Then there is the House of Garet, perhaps the most powerful clan not connected by blood to the Royal Family. There are others, of course, but they are considered inferior and have their seats on the spurs of the Holy Mountain. Your friend, Risdun Hak, is not a noble, just like most of us, or at least only a minor noble, and his first and last name are, quite logically, just that.”

“I presume, then, that the House of Paremi pedigree is proven?”

“Well, yes of course. There are some who dispute the long standing Paremi claim, but they are mostly ignorant of the documentary evidence. The Paremi family has always existed on Oroson, alongside the Pareb dynasty, since the coming of us, the New People. They are both mentioned in the Articles of Transition of 4015, confirming the Pareb half-brother whose blood unites the two houses. The Articles are one of the many interesting documents that illustrate the history of our kingdom. They are housed in the library of the Academe. They alone lend legal weight to Duke Paremi Kun’s claim in many another nobleman’s eyes. So, you see, there are no other candidates to be considered. It is just that, with the passing of King Ferdin, the Pareb dynasty will come to an end after five hundred years and there is no other way of seeing it extended.”

“You could consider Princess Saran’s claim to the throne?”

“That might be thought of as a valid alternative elsewhere, in foreign parts perhaps, but the people here would not countenance it.”

“What a curious country you live in!”

“Ah, I take it from your tone that you do not approve?” The young man looked quite earnest.

“It is not a matter for me to approve or disapprove in really, I am a visitor here. I merely observe that, in other countries, such a constitutional crisis could and would be averted by an acknowledgement of the female claim to the crown, when and where necessary.”

“But women are not capable of holding positions of such responsibility. Home and family are where they belong.”

“You would not do well amongst the Tulwa people with that opinion, my friend.”

“The Tulwa people, who are they?”

“They live further south of Kilwa in a hard land of little forest and even less water. There, the women work, fight, and rule alongside their men-folk. No one would ever suggest the women of Tulwa are not capable of anything that a man can do. One of them would pierce your heart with her fighting spear for just thinking such a thing!” Eiji observed the other’s face as he spoke these words and was amused by the undisguised horror that he perceived there.

“Yes, well, I dare say things can be very different away from the foot of the mountain, but that is not how we do things here in Oroson. Women know their place here and it is exactly as God has decreed it to be, they exist but as a servant to man!”