

DIAMOND EYES



BOOK I

THE MASTER RETURNS

3rd Edition June, 13, 2015

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Introduction: About the Cover



In the winter of 2013, Santosha Ma gave us all - her devotees -- a project which was to pick our five favorite pieces of her art, to take a picture of that image, the best job possible, and to write up the story about that image in terms of our lives in relationship to her. The cover art for this story was one of my picks.

In noticing the Master's art, one cannot help but remember such beautiful stories of the life shared with her. It is truly a unique kind of life in which beauty and above all else, enlightenment, *actual enlightenment* in her case, and a love of enlightenment in our own cases, is so wonderfully expressed, distilled and honored by her livingness and passion for art.

Santosha Ma is such an incredible artist. The words fail to describe it. I can only share with you how it moves me. Santosha Ma expresses the perfect story

of life, the perfect reality of it as she stands awake in it.

Thusly, she has always stressed that we must notice our lives, that we must sharpen our awareness of the beauty of it, the inherent divinity of it, to honor this life, cherish it, without need of a search for it, an assertion that we have separately mastered, and are somehow validated as well adjusted individuals, but rather that we are already happy, already God.

The story of the cover art for this book for me is that many years ago I was writing a series of short stories for Santosha Ma; really bad ones too. I remember her telling me that I had to just happily write really bad stories for awhile until I found out how to do it better.

Santosha Ma always encouraged creativity and she often pointed me in the direction of writing. She convinced me to risk failure, and so after writing some bad stories and some that were ...*meh...so so*, I wanted to do one that was more ambitious, something that honored her, told a story about her with a mythical backdrop, but that expressed my love for her and the excitement of being on this journey of coming to know her.

I struggled for months with this story, and felt like it was never going to take shape, but then Santosha Ma told me;

“I want it next month!”

She set the deadline and made me take it seriously. I think the deadline was August 14, 2004.

So much was going on that final week of pulling it all together to present to her. A dear friend of mine was giving birth to her wonderful child in the next room-- while in my room adjacent to that adventure, the birth of this story was nearly complete, the final lines of the story taking shape, all of this while I began a new relationship, and was looking for a new place to stay for awhile to be introduced to the next level of my sadhana by my guru.

So, despite all the sudden changes, I remember having to keep on it every day, writing page after page until finally I began to feel it come alive, *crowning* so to speak. I was out of the way now. Not to blame her for my poor spelling and grammar, but I began to feel that Santosha Ma was literally writing the manuscript, and laying out all the character archetypes, and it would all come together if only I promised to meet Her, and give Her all I had.

We sat in Santosha Ma's meditation room one evening in 2013, Santosha Ma asked me what was the difference between now and that time where my sadhana began.

"Then, I had lots of ideas about myself, and tried to will myself along. Now I'm only to be your devotee,"

"And you let Me be the Master?" She asked.

I nodded, grinning.

"It's much better that way."

We all laughed! It was true.

As it turned out, that is the central theme of *The Master Returns*; that is, giving the Divine Master the space to master you, to return, despite your ego's assertions and constantly throwing Her out!

The scope of the story was way beyond my actual understanding then, but she painted all the lines, trained me to see it, to fight for it, mastered me to hear and transcribe what the heart wanted to express through fiction.

Santosha Ma guided me through it, and when I made the same ego-frenzied mistakes of claiming ownership of it, wanting to go write the next great

big installment, she reminded me that in truth I was not yet mastered by Her sufficiently for the task — stubborn in my assertions that “I,” could determine the best time to begin.

I called the story, “The Master Returns,” a prequel of sorts for another installment for Diamond Eyes (*The Last Khoorlrhani Warrior*) I had in mind, and was unable to approach, and when I gave it to Santosha Ma I was so happy that she was pleased by it.

I stood next to her in her kitchen, shaking, trembling hands sweaty with anticipation. I really hoped she liked this one, because, man what a complete *on the edge, joyride* it was for me to write it. I hoped I hadn’t fooled myself again in unjustifiably thinking it was any good. Santosha Ma, who went by the name Freea then, put the book down on the counter, and then said to;

“So...OK pretty damned good. It’s about the dharma,” and then she placed the cover art on the counter before me. She then said, “Put this on the cover.”

I could have died after that moment. I was so happy. I loved that she chose this picture, because I purposely described the Master, Master Paen (Pi Yen), in the story as a man with a bald head.

Santosha ma shaved her head during those times and I could not help but want Paen to look like her. I really loved that Santosha Ma creatively engaged me by being Paen as Herself, as She Is precisely that one, the Master.

In our conversations throughout my time of living with her, she sometimes joked that she should have been born a man, that it was difficult being a woman. I knew that she joked mainly to poke fun at our male egos, but still I thought I'd make a play on the joke within the story by sort of describing Paen as she appeared. I could not help also to think of Paen as Adi Da, her guru, who I love tremendously.

The whole play just seemed to me like a yearned for collaborative gesture was sweetly answered by her by her putting that picture of herself down to represent its main character! Santosha Ma also said, "I particularly like what you wrote at the end,"

The end read, and this is **not a spoiler**, but rather what should have been placed in the beginning;

"Dedicated entirely to Freea, my Master, whose presence bathed me during the writing of this and moved me through my many limitations to reach the end. I love you insanely, Freea!!"

The play of writing this story really showed me how the divine truly lives us and plays us in sweet collaboration, attracting us to become more sensitive to Her and to know Her so intimately, so much so, that there is no more ego.

And so with that, this book is entirely dedicated to my beautiful guru, my beloved master Santosha Ma who has inspired me to write.

Diamond Eyes

Book I:

The Master Returns

This story is for God. It is her story, a timeless tale within timeless tales. Its ending is the beginning of the next, an endless stream of you and I as Her, pretending to be a you and an I. Her eyes, the suns and the moons, stare infinitely to worlds and the worlds beyond that are her beaded necklaces, her jeweled rings and bracelets. She, bright and pure, inhales stars and exhales our forms into the creation of her endless imagination for her entertainment, for our enlightenment within her grand and starry play. With a trick of the light, you are a reader, and I am a writer, and from the same heart of you and I, the story of her diamond eyes, revealing Herself and yet only really looking back at Herself, begins...

Chapter One: Ashuta, the Goddess of the Land

3rd Dynasty Arkaya, era of the Master's Return (4179 B.I.). As told by Stosh (Khoorlrhani archives).



Paen ¹traveled east, deep within the jungle to the Genian ridge, the highlands that separated the old lands of the Bantu, and Ki-Qui in the East, from the new kingdoms of Genia in the West. The Goddess of the wood and jungle lands was summoning him, and so he traveled, out of the thick and into the snow capped mountains, where she would appear to him in her human form. Paen rode on the back of Quanon, his white horned ²*mehra*, who was Paen's old friend and traveling companion of many years.

Once he arrived, Paen quieted his mind so that he might find Ashuta's subtle form, the goddess form of the jungles and forests, and all that lived within them. This form was *too* subtle for most to notice.

Mortal men could not remember the Goddess Ashuta, much less recognize her, and catch any kind of a glimpse of Her. Paen, however, noticed her form from an early age. Ashuta's image appeared to him in a waterfall when he was an adolescent. Her image never faded from his memory. He fell in love with her so deeply that everything reminded him of her. Paen recognized her face in the mountains, in the trees, the oceans, and everywhere. Her beauty was the face of all beings recognizing each other as

¹ Pi ·Yen

² A large horse with two large curled ram-like horns

the same *one*. He loved her as the central art of his life, and thusly he always remained in her divine domains.

Paen was like no other man of his time. He was the last of his kind, a man sensitive to the land, to the beings that dwelled within Ashuta's jungles. Paen drew no distinction from one life form to the next, but saw all as the expression of Ashuta's play within the jungle lands. It was this diamond of understanding, this submission to her where he was not of himself, entirely separate, but rather of ***Her Self*** entirely, that made Paen the *Master* in his life, in his human form within the forest which was only the goddess herself! With humor, Paen understood that Ashuta was his Master, and he loved her dearly. With *his* perfect love for her, he saw beyond the boundaries of his mortality and recognized himself as the Goddess Herself who was boundless, timeless, free, and happy beyond words!! Paen knew all beings as this same boundless and free energy — all seen through his diamond eyes and felt within his surrendered heart.

Finally, Paen steered Quanon by a nearby river. It gushed and roared with the deep flow of snowmelt. Paen followed it to where it bent into an enclosure of trees, over which Paen could see a large waterfall in the distance. Paen ducked his head beneath low

hanging branches as Quanon traversed along a wet and stony bank where Paen could eventually see the Goddess dancing in the mists within the waterfall. He dismounted and went to her. When he came near, she laughed and kissed him with mist and air. She smelled like lavender and offered him fruit. "It's so good to see you my love." She said. They sat for a moment gazing happily at one another.

Ashuta then told Paen: "The time now has come for you to pass on what I've shown you. You see me, Paen. Your love is pure and obvious, but a dark time is now upon the kingdom of men. The men of the forests can no longer recognize me as you do; not even in their dreams do they remember my name."

Paen's eyes widened with this news and his heart grew heavy in seeing such sadness come over his true love.

"They have busied themselves in foolish personal efforts, those of their greed and lust, and have cut themselves off from my love. They are lost, creating wars with one another in my many names."

Paen's eyes were like saucers. To hear such things!

“The advisors to the ³*Tahs* have turned away from the truth and now use my teaching for their own pursuits. If they are to continue, they will destroy themselves. Oh...I cannot bear that they live without knowing their true nature.”

“You, Paen, are the only link they have to me, the only bridge for them to cross, and now I must send you forward to teach them.”

Paen waited for her to begin her usual giggling. Surely she must be joking. *She must be playing a prank*, he thought, but no sign of a joke was to be seen.

“But... *what... how* shall I teach them?” Paen wondered.

“By showing them how to be *true* warriors. By teaching them what they want to learn the most, the art of power, of war.”

Confused, Paen frowned and shook his head. Ashuta sensed this, smiled a soft grin, and continued.

“You are to teach the Khoorlrhani what I’ve shown you, but through the art of combat.”

³ The Tah is the chief of either one of the great clans of Genia. The word is also the suffix added to the chief’s name as a show of respect. (Ex: Khoorlrhani-Tah, Myak- Tah). Tas is the female equivalent of Queen.

Paen laughed loudly, and slapped his knee. Now he knew she must be joking. This was just another one of her drawn out tricks. Paen said:

But Ashuta, how can I do this? I know nothing of these things, Master. I am not qualified to be a swords master for soldiers!

From Ashuta's extended arm, a clod of dirt was thrown into Paen's face. She sat on a moss-covered rock and wrapped herself in a beam of sunlight to dry off. She shot a hard glance at her shining friend, and said, "Oh my love such insane questions you ask, such stupid assumptions of limitation, for you know in your heart of hearts of this to be my play in which all that is required has already been given." And Paen spat mud out of his mouth and nodded. He knew this was true since everything, including his own body and mind, was of Her.

"This is the role I give you Paen," She giggled, "*Master Paen*," and she giggled more, "Master of all warriors!" she exploded, slapping her own knee, and Paen erupted in laughter as well. He then could not help himself from asking, "But Goddess, why show them the art of combat? This will only make them fiercer fighters, crueler and more destructive!"

Ashuta giggled again, and then tried to hold a more serious composure for dramatic effect, "It is the

natural plan, my bright bean! Your role is your duty. You are to offer completely what you have, what I've already given you, your mastery of the fighting arts, to serve their Tah.

Through dedication to the art of fighting, they will grow frustrated by its uselessness, frustrated by their own perception of limitation and begin to yearn for that *central art* form, which has produced your vision, your *diamond eyes*, has produced the mastery of your life and will serve as an example for them to follow. Once they yearn for *that*, for diamond eyes with which to see, they will once again be on the path of recognizing me, of recognizing themselves. "

"With you as their servant, they will exhaust their efforts of war more quickly and their attention will be restored, toward me, toward their original nature. You must teach them a great code of balance and severe discipline and hold them to you. They must do this in order to see their error. You must drive them hard, down the path they've already chosen."

And so *Master* Paen considered this, seeing the lines of the drama play out in his mind, for a long moment then said,

"I see, but so much bloodshed. Is there no other way?"

“Oh but it is a necessary lesson, for in order to see me; they must *love me*, only *me*, and want *me*, only *me*, with every fiber of their being. With that love, the heart opens, and then my form becomes obvious, standing within the arches of men’s hearts. Then a life truly has direction! The blood of all beings flows toward me, through me, my darling one, I heal all things. I restore it all; purify it for it is all my heart.”

“You must go forward. Tell everyone you meet, simply, that you *are* the master, and I will come forward within you, animating you, making the truth of your statement obvious to them.”

Paen nodded. He understood that as an agent of Ashuta he could not fail, but as a man cut off from her grace, he was a mere lump of formless clay. He knew to walk the line for her was his purpose in life, and that as a character in her plays his mission was to serve her.

“You must take great care in another most important task, Paen, to teach the children of the Tah in the southern land. They must all directly receive what I’ve shown you for among the terrible six of his sons, *the sixth* will prove to be most promising. That one is your greatest pupil; the one who could carry on your task should your form fade before the play is complete. This is what I command of you, my servant. Now, go.”

Paen bowed before the goddess. Her figure was clothed only by the greenness and blueness of the rivers and trees. Her beauty affected him and brought a smile to his face; However, Paen, though confident and obedient, felt his heart sink feeling that his days of peace within the embrace of Ashuta were over. Gone were the days of effortless abiding in her name. He must remember her, and this was his test.

As Paen left, he noticed two items by the shore of the river, protruding from the earth. One item was a curved scimitar that shone with a silvery brilliance that Paen had never seen before. Its handle was of tightly wrapped golden threads and of embedded turquoise stones and shells, and its blade was broad, sharp, and reflective. Paen's eyes widened as he marveled at the sight of it.

"I offer you this sword. I call it *Maburata*. It is my reflection. Take it with you. Let it serve as a reminder of your love for me, for with it, you will never miss your mark, and will always stand as an example for men." Ashuta said.

The second item was a scroll tied by a length of leather.

"This is for you to place into the hands of the Southern Tah's hands. This must be done only by

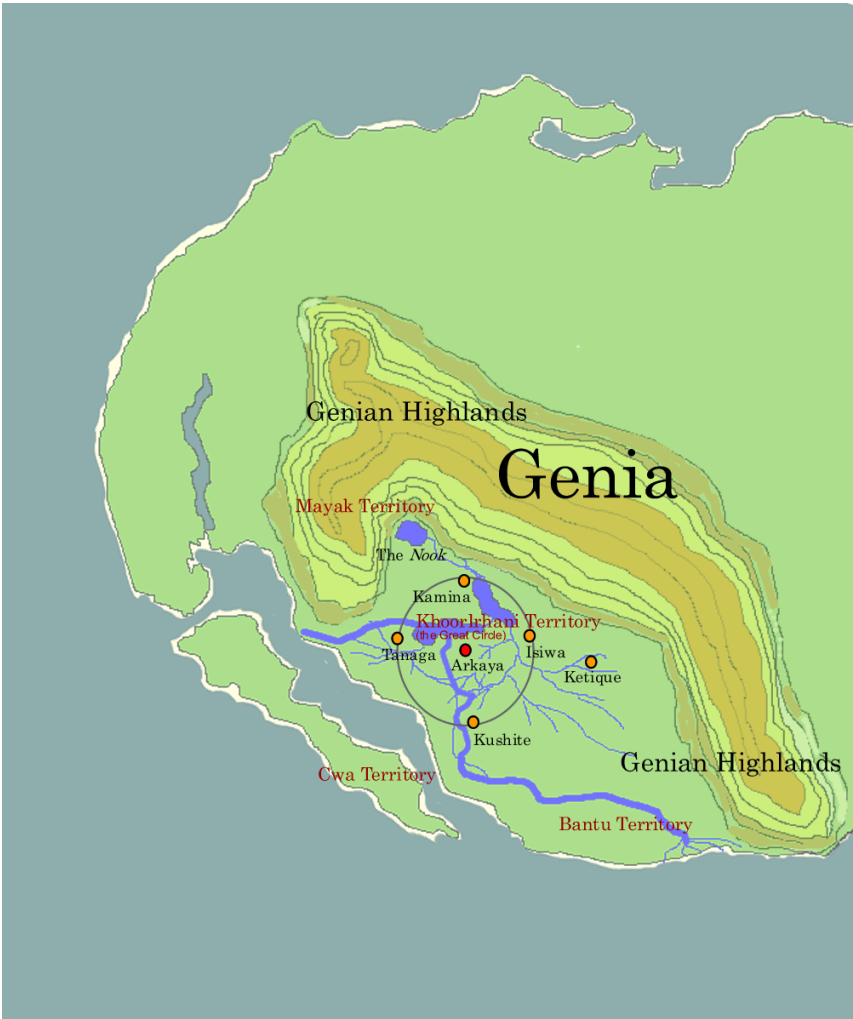
you and it must be given to him directly. Once his eyes look upon it, he will see himself. You will bring truth back to his land, for it is he who leads men into the darkness.”

Paen humbly accepted the Goddess’s gift, the scroll, and the terms. He considered the task at hand seriously and having understood, journeyed twelve days back to the western regions of Genia. He prepared himself to live in the towns of men.

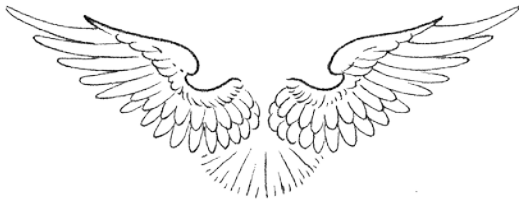
Paen had only a few belongings, the clothing he wore which was a beige and red kaftan drawn at the waist by a yellow sash, a worn pair of sandals strapped with leather midway around his thick shins, a pot for preparing tea, a large leather water bag, a large green cloak which served as his nightly bedding, and a small sack containing fishing hooks, a net, tea leaves, a small dull knife and a small iron pot for cooking.

Paen was not particularly tall. In fact, most men of the land were at least a head taller than him. His build was average. He was thin, but tough and lean from frequent climbing and hiking in the highlands and in the jungles, and his shoulders were slightly broad, which was good for the birds that often perched on them when he rode on his mehra. Paen’s head was almost perfectly round and bald, and his skin was a dark brown like most men in and

around Genia. He was however, if he ever encountered a traveler, often mistaken to be of the Cwa tribes from the lands beyond the southern ocean for he was hairless, had no beard, and took on a reddish tone when too long beneath the sun. A straight row of white teeth spanned his wide mouth as he smiled and rode his mehra under the sun. He did indeed have the features of a Cwa, but Paen had the heart of a mountain dweller, his lungs and heart powerful and efficient. Paen was of the lands less traveled, of turquoise skies full of cirrus and nimbus clouds, of yellow grasses against steep forever climbing hills, and of snow capped mountains and torrential rivers. His tribe was only nature itself, the *one great clan* which included all tribes.



Chapter Two: The Lord of Ketique



Paen traveled southwestward to the land of the southern Tah, to the land of Arkaya, the city state where the Khoorlrhani tribe flourished and ruled. The Khoorlrhani were a tall and proud race. They were brown skinned and broad featured, with powerful builds and hands. It was customary for their warriors to grow manes of twisted and gnarled dread-locks, and dye them a deep dark green with leaves from the jungle plants. They were the dominant tribe in Genia, who tamed the lands that surrounded them, and conquered the *lesser tribes*.

History, however, told of a time when there was only one tribe in Genia, and when Genia was merely the One Great Land.

The stories of old said that the first Tah was the man who first discovered fire, and having the awe of his brothers led the way for them all to survive the

night from the predators, the manju tigers, that preyed on them. It was said that because the Tah had the ability to create the light in the dead of night, the tigers-- assuming it to be the protection of the goddess-- stayed away from this new magic the Khoorlrhani king wielded. The Tah created the great Circle of Light, an illuminated ring of cooperation and community, and within it, the one tribe of men flourished, safe within its boundaries.

This Tah, many generations ago, had a wife, Nishta, and had two sons, Khoorlrhan, and Mayakti.

Khoorlrhan was his older and braver son whom the Tah took hunting with him every morning. He taught him everything, from how to create fire, to how to hunt for meat. Everything the Tah knew, all that the goddess sublimed his mind with, was passed on to Khoorlrhan, and the Tah told his son;

"You are my favorite son, and I am proud. When I am gone, you must protect the people, inspire them, love them, and keep the circle lit."

Khoorlrhan understood and promised to do as his father instructed.

"And you must teach everything you know to your sons, so that the tribe will become stronger, more intelligent. Should I be killed by a sickness, you shall become Tah. Should a tiger claim you in the

woods; your sons will step in line as Tah behind you. You must be honest above all things, for with honesty your circle will be strong.”

Khoorlrhan understood. Nearby, from where the two men fished, Mayakti, spied and heard. He was jealous of Khoorlrhan, and what he heard from his own father’s mouth struck him deeply in his heart. Never had such praises been directed toward him from the Tah, and never had such important duties ever been trusted to him. Mayakti ran into the forest and prayed to Ashuta that she sooth him, and ease his jealousy, for he loved his brother dearly and his father as well. He only wanted to understand.

The Goddess appearing to him as the great Sequoia told him.

“Men are not perfect. Your father loves you deeply, more deeply than can ever be expressed. I know this to be true for I know his heart as my own. His mistake is only to protect you as the youngest of his son’s, so that the tribal burden is less upon you. The eyes of men can only see so much, just as you have only seen so much of your father’s love.”

This helped Mayakti. His mind was eased. He thanked the goddess for her guidance and ventured back to the circle of light before sunset.

But still not satisfied, he said,

"Goddess, I want to be important just like my brother. I want to be his equal, not some child who is protected. Will you make me a warrior just as great as Khoorlrhan?"

Chuckling, the goddess said, "You do not know what it is that you are asking. The destiny of Khoorlrhan is not an easy one. It will be very difficult."

Mayakti's brow furled as he did not like this. He insisted, and finally the Ashuta agreed.

"It shall be done."

Mayakti, bowed and thanked the goddess for her kindness.

On the way, he saw a figure in the woods like none he had ever seen. It was a beautiful girl who glowed beneath the setting sun. She held the reins of her brown horned mehra as it drank from a nearby stream. Mayakti's eyes widened, stunned by the woman's incredible beauty. When she noticed Mayakti, the effect of his nubile form to her eyes was the same as orange sunset caught the hazel hues in Myakti's eyes. Her name was Urso, and she gazed at his open expression as they fell in love.

The Tah, happy to see his son smitten so, married Urso to Mayakti and a grand celebration was made for them. It was said that there was no woman more

beautiful than Urso. Her skin was the deep color of cinnamon, her eyes were bright and black like onyx, and she was curvaceous like the bowed rivers north of Arkaya. It was said that no man could take his eyes off of her, including Mayakti's brother, Khoorlrhan. It was said that Urso was a catch fit only for a Tah, and that the goddess must have created her from the dust and wind since no one knew *who* Urso was. Nowhere before had Urso's face, or the faces of her family been seen.

Bitter jealousy overcame Khoorlrhan, and he held it throughout out the years. Sensing this Mayakti asked.

"My beloved brother, what demon vexes you. Speak to me and we will defeat it together."

Feeling cheated by life, by the goddess, Khoorlrhan would not take his brothers hand. He only starred at him from his throne.

"My demons are my own. Leave me be."

Khoorlrhan became more and more secretive and an unnatural relationship, distant and cold, began to form between the brothers.

Mayakti, no longer trusting his brother, took his family to the edge of the circle in order to feel safer, not knowing what Khoorlrhan would do. After several years, the great circle of light was secretly

withdrawn, moved more tightly inward, leaving Mayakti's family on the outside where the tigers could hunt them.

Khoorlrhan had publicly decreed this be done in an effort to manage the lands more efficiently; however, he sent no messenger to his brother to let him know.

In trouble, Mayakti prayed to the Goddess.

"Oh Goddess, please help us!" He cried, "Each night a tiger carries off one of my children. I've been betrayed by my own brother. I will give you everything, my very heart, oh Goddess if you please protect my family."

And the Goddess, Ashuta, answered his prayer and opened his eyes so that he might know how fire was created.

"I accept your offer, young warrior. Follow my form and your prayer will be answered," her voice swelled in his heart.

Ashuta made his heart beat faster, made his footsteps swifter, and made his mind more powerful, concentrated, as she guided him through the stresses of his survival, making him a strong warrior.

Mayakti managed to fight the tigers off in the night single handedly. He grew to become powerful, alert, strong, swift, and fierce, more than any warrior ever seen. He painted his face with red lines, and tied feathers in his thick hair as a show of his own fierceness, his own braveness, his defiance of his brother's faulty assumptions that he would not survive.

"Do you see what I've become brother!!?" his voice howled in the night wind, waking Khoorlrhan from his sleep within the safe boundaries of the great Circle of Light.

Urso, his wife, bore Mayakti two sons Unat, and Creo, and two daughters, Marsit and Dudo, and they all learned what the Goddess had shown Mayakti.

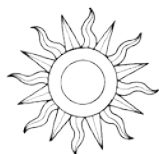
Creo and Unat captured wives from the Khoorlrhan clan, and their wives bore twelve sons, who captured more wives from the Khoorlrhan clan and these sons *also* learned what Ashuta had taught *Mayakti-Tah*.

In the untamed highlands, their life was hard, and they hunted to survive, while in the great Circle, the Khoorlrhani clan grew crops and herded cattle, their way as passed down solely to Khoorlrhan's sons. The great Circle of light then became divided, and

after many generations, there were now two tribes of Genia, the Khoorlrhani,



and the Mayak, the power of man now divided.



It was said that because of the great burden placed on Mayakti, he became so fierce, and his son's so fierce, that one Mayak warrior was worth five Khoorlrhani. Mayakti swore that Khoorlrhan would pay for his neglect of him, and for the lives of his dead children, and this oath was passed down from generation to generation as Mayak and Khoorlrhani fought to control the lands of northern valley, the "Nook".

It was at this time, the time of Paen, that the tribal wars raged on for its third century.

As Paen travelled, he would arrive to Arkaya in twelve days, four days sooner than planned, for Quanon, though an old mehra was still slow to tire and loved wandering the land with his friend. As they passed through the lower lands that Paen had

not seen in years, the life within the jungle all greeted them. Beetles, and fireflies whizzed by him dancing, and screaming in joy for the return of their old friend – the true Tah, the Master!

Paen acknowledged them all, laughing. No words were spoken for instead they all spoke the common language of recognition within their hearts. No color of feather or distant call went unnoticed or unanswered as Paen rode along. A large white smile stretched across the length of his dark root-brown face, as the light of the fireflies reflected off of his bald head. A scrub-jay landed on the tan and red shoulder of Paen's robe and squawked its good word and then flew off.

All creatures sang to him, and they all pestered him delightfully, more birds landing on his and Quanon's head, chattering, and updating them on hundreds-of-generations-long lineage of new hatchlings. Insects, crickets stroking their legs together, fireflies blinking, reported on their happy industries, and trees that were no longer saplings bowed at heart in remembrance of their old friend. Paen heard, saw, and touched them all. He loved them all, and he was kept in good company. A family of deer followed for awhile along-side them and then shortly afterward, along the other side, a manju tiger approached.

As it walked along side Quanon, its powerful shoulders shifted and its large paws pressed deeply within fallen leaves. Quanon, uncomfortable stirred.

The tiger roared, and the birds and the deer scattered away, frightened, but Paen held onto his reins, holding Quanon steadily. Shocked and irritated at Paen's lack of respect, the manju growled:

"Greetings oh *delicious* man of the jungle." She rasped her voice rough and ominous.

"Greetings, Tiaga, fierce sister." Paen said, glancing downward smiling at the large cat.

Thrown by this the tigers eyes widened with surprise, she paused, then said;

"Do you not know me, silly man?" Tiaga roared her large green eyes wide with wonder.

"Did I not call you by name, my sister?" Paen hummed.

This angered the huntress. Who was this man, that he should not be afraid of her? How dare he be so... *familiar!*

"Since you know my name, you *must* know of my clawed savagery. I *will* then have you and your mehra for dinner! I will lick the meat off of your bones."

Not running, which Paen knew would excite Tiaga's love of the hunt, Paen merely said:

"Thank you sister, but perhaps another time. The deer you scarred off, I think are much more in the mood for a game of hunter and hunted." Paen mused, and then again glanced downward and winked at the tiger.

She roared, insulted.

"YOU DARE TOY WITH ME?"

"Not at all fierce sister, efficient hunter of the jungle. I only wish to make your task of hunting easier. Why spend hours trying to strike fear into me, when you've already done such an exquisite, splendid, job in frightening all my friends, including the deer which I think have gone beyond the thick there." And Paen, knowing that all forms were only the goddess, but were still forms not knowing *themselves* in this way, was not afraid of Tiaga, the manju tiger and played his part as the master with humor.

Tiaga's green pupils contracted to vertical slits, and she looked over her shoulder. She saw the swaying of the low level branches and brush, saw the movement, and then the excitement for the chase took hold within her. She salivated, and swallowed.

"Over there, you say?" Tiaga gulped.

"I see their meaty haunches from here, old gal."

Paen narrowed his eyes and sucked his teeth as if to remark on how tasty they would be.

"Bah!" Tiaga said, "I will not even bother with your gristly form!" She said hurriedly while her eyes still stretched out to lock on her kill in the distant brush.

"Consider this a favor, *man*, but we will meet again and I shall not be so merciful." Tiaga growled and barreled into the thick in the direction of the deer.

And how was it that Tiaga could be swayed? Master Paen's love. Paen's love for the Goddess, was immeasurable. Neither land nor seascape could contain it. His heart was open completely and joyfully to recognize and love her. To him, there was nothing which did not mirror back the beautiful face of Ashuta to him. All creatures great and small, fierce and gentle, cunning and dull were the expression of Ashuta, and that was how he knew of himself to be, her reflection, an extension of her soft arms, a molecule within her makeup. His love for her was like an unquenchable thirst, and as he traveled in her realms he marveled at her art, drinking, tasting with his eyes, ears, skin, with his very soul. He feared no death, because to him there was no death, only the appearance of boundaries, the play of separate characters created by Ashuta. He knew his form to be a temporary vessel, but his

heart to be eternal, as is the heart of every being, because there is only one heart, one central place from which all things stem.

He heard the sounds of crickets, bees, birds, and of wolves, tigers, and bears, and he knew their rhythms. This is how he could see Tiaga, know himself as her brother, knowing her rhythms. Paen was moved by it all, every creature. He was them! He was moved by the sight of red and orange wild flowers over vast yellow clearings, the expanses of blue and purple skies over snow capped mountains. He felt and enjoyed the gentle breezes in the warm air. Every frequency of sight, sound and touch entered his being as Ashuta in her various forms loving him. All of this, everything, the fragrances of lavender, the hushed sounds of rivers in the green distance was Ashuta, and Paen could not do without her. He marveled and shook his head at himself, laughing at the idea that he once held-- his fear that his mission would move him away from her.

She is everywhere, he wept, smiling, and he thanked her, kissing her with his heart, for being all things!

After his third day of traveling, Paen came upon the first Khoorlrhani village, the town of Ketique. Quanon bobbed his head as he trotted along, his long ivory curled horns swaying from side to side. From where they were, on a yellow hillside, Paen

could see smoke rising out from the open dome tops of low mud and woven vine structures which were fenced in by a circular stockade.

"Yes. Finally my friend, but we are still a long way from Arkaya, the capital city." They traveled a narrow path that sloped downward into a thick green band of trees before the city gates.

As the shade consumed them, a ways into the thick, Paen noticed the calling sounds of men imitating birds, alarmed at his approach. The *ca-cawing* translated to, "Marauder!!," and Paen sensed that it was a call to archers hidden in towers somewhere within the Ketiqan thick. Paen pulled the reins of his steed, and Qanon halted. Paen dismounted the mehra and positioned himself in front of his friend, sitting cross-legged and waited. There were more calls within the trees, different tones. It was not long until a group of four men on the backs of large black and curled-horned mehras confronted him.

History told many a tale of how Mayak often raided the camps and villages of Khoorlrhani, taking what they wished by force and leaving burned shelters behind. Now, Khoorlrhani surrounded their cities and large stocks of food with fences and towers full of archers and swordsmen.

Having fought the fierce Mayak for two hundred years, Khoorlrhani were strong now, fierce protectors and wrathful in their vendetta against the northern tribes. No man entered the Khoorlrhani lands freely anymore, not even in the small outlying towns of Ketique.

The mehra-men pulled the reins of their steeds, and as they halted, the mehras kicked their hooves and sent dust into the air. The warriors were clad in deep burgundy leather vests, and wore wrought black steel helmets. On the leather bands around their biceps there was a distinct mark of two yellow eagle wings spread apart – the heraldic symbol for the lord of Ketique who was in service to the Tah of all Khoorlrhani.

As the warriors began circling Paen, their curved broadswords were drawn and pointed at him as he sat in the tall grass in front his friend Quanon.

"Who are you wanderer!" The leader of the men growled. His hair was twisted into thick gnarled and deep green locks that were drawn together through an opening on the top of his helmet, and the warriors black eyes peered through the rimmed eyelets. His leathered forearm was studded with iron circlets. Paen would not look at him. He whispered to Quanon reassuringly.

"I will not ask again!" The warrior barked, sending a chill through Quanon, making him snort.

Paen looked up at the mehra-man and smiled gently.

"I am the Master" He said. The mehra-men circled him, and they were not pleased by his response. The pounding of hooves were felt around Paen until the *captain* was again in front and center before Paen.

The large warrior laughed, sheathed his heavy sword and stepped down from the ornate saddle of his wildly decorated mehra. This man seemed puzzled by Paen, amused, but more importantly to Paen, disarmed. There was an edge to them all that was different to Paen. Their minds were complicated.

The Master could see how they cut off the flow of the divine, of Ashuta to them solely by the willful assertions of their ego. The lead man gazed at him, squinting, his dark eyes spying for danger, studying Paen, the whiteness of the warrior's teeth gnashing through a thick scruffy black beard. The man crouched before Paen.

"Are you Cwa, Bantu... eh....?" The man asked, wondering what other lowly tribe this vagabond must belong to. Paen bore neither of the distinct features of a Mayak, nor those of a Khoorlrhani. His

head was bald, burnt by the sun and his chin had no beard. If anything, the captain speculated, Paen might be a Canteez plainsman, though he was too short.

"Sir, I am a lone traveler, bound for Arkaya." Paen said.

"You will address Lord Dajaai as *lord*, not *sir*!" one of the warriors growled.

The Lord Dajaai's nostrils flared and his eyes widened at the mentioning of the capital city.

"What business do *you* have in Arkaya, field-mouse?" The Lord asked roughly.

"Perhaps he's to master Khoorlrhani-Tah's plows." Another of the warriors jeered, and the others laughed.

"Is that it, mouse," The Lord Dajaai growled, "Cannot find food? You've come to serve as a slave?" He laughed.

Paen picked a small flower from the tall grass and studied it. His expression became childlike as he thought of nothing but Ashuta. Despite the cruel energy of the men, all the fear left him.

"I... am the Master. My *business* is *mastery*." He said.

The warriors chuckled, but the Lord again grew stern.

"Master of what, buffoon?" He stabbed.

"Of *all* warriors." Paen said, looking directly into the eyes of this hellhound, and then going back to studying the blue flower.

In that slight observation, Paen knew this man. He knew by his observation that though Lord Dajai was a vulgar man, an enthusiastic killer, he was a man of his word, an honorable man of code, perhaps of contest and sport. Master Paen then knew what to do.

The warriors laughed at Paen's assertions, but somehow they were laughing at the Lord Dajai as well.

"Sounds to me, he means to challenge *you*, Lord Dajai!" Another of the warriors howled, his inflections indicating the praiseworthiness of Dajai's prowess as a swordsman.

"I would be *frightened*, if I were you Dajai," A second sneered and recklessly pulled his mehra around to stand on its back hooves. It nayed and snorted violently as the warrior's black and sheathed broadsword slapped the beast's side. The warrior was a much leaner and younger fighter of

them all. The youth was remarkably fit and full of energy.

"Perhaps *this one* would finally be of your undoing," he teased along familiar lines the others did not dare cross.

"Shut your hole, Minot, before I cut one into you!" Lord Dajaai growled.

Minot, the youth, chuckled, but in the playful manner of a comrade.

The laughter subsided and Dajaai looked penetratingly at Paen.

"You gamble your life vagabond." the Lord growled. Thick dreadlocks whipped the sides of his helmet as he threw them aside to visually take in this offensive oaf before him.

"I mean no offense, noble Lord. I merely speak the truth. I am only a servant to the Tah of Khoorlrhani men. He would be displeased should my journey to him be obstructed."

"I've heard nothing about Khoorlrhani-Tah needing the aid of... a *rodent* such as you."

"Where you would not for Khoorlrhani- Tah does not know of his needs quite yet?" Paen said.

The Lord Dajaai's eyebrows sank, not knowing how to take that, as he studied the curious character

before him. This man must be insane, he thought, no armor, no shield, no boots, and yet claiming to be the master of all warriors.

Lord Dajaaï then noticed the sword, *Maburata* wrapped by Paen's cloak and tied to Quanon's side, its hilt gleaming beneath the sun and yet it was not in this master's hand or even held to his back or waist like any other warrior. Paen was a puzzle to this man.

"You are a blacksmith then, an arms maker?" He grunted, questioning.

"I am the Master." Paen again said, smiling.

Still looking at the workmanship of *Maburata* and noting the relaxed composure of the traveler, curiosity consumed the Lord Dajaaï. He rose, drew his sword, and said.

"Show me this mastery of yours then."

"No." Paen said flatly.

The warrior laughed, and glanced at the other riders who began to dismount and laugh as well.

"Then just as I've suspected, you are a coward and a liar since you are afraid to fight me."

"He is mehra food, Lord Dajaaï. He has just met *his* master! Strike him down." Minot jeered as he approached the side of his Lord.

The Lord Dajaai sighed and huffed;

“Minot, must you always speak *so damned much*?”

Minot wore a leather vest and studded gauntlets, and he stood firmly in his boots as his lean arms and hands rose into the air to grasp and remove his helmet, exposing a dark and youthful face. He stood proudly by Dajaai.

“If you will not uncle, then allow me to correct this insult,” Said Minot.

Aroused by this, Dajaai raised his sword.

Paen then held a hand up to reason with the men.

“My defeat of you, Dajaai, will only insure my death at the hands of the *many* men you command, your archers in the trees, your legions of swordsmen, and *then* my master will never be served.” Paen said lifting his gaze, humbly.

The Lord snorted, and huffed. He cocked on eyebrow upward, looked at his men, then said:

“Prove to me you are the master, and you will have free passage within and throughout my village. I will have you and your mehra fed and then you may leave at will. On this you have my word.” Lord Dajaai said, stepping back. A wry gloating smile stretched over his face.

"He will go free... *if*, he can manage to defeat me," Dajaai confirmed to his men, chuckling, but serious. He intended to play a fair game, and his men were to oblige his will. He held his sword out, turned and pointed it at them each, and they each nodded in agreement. They understood.

"If he defeats you, I will kiss his feet, and become his servant." Minot spat.

"Minot," the Lord Dajaai commanded, "Ride back to have the archers stand down. They are to let this man pass if he...*defeats* me. This is my word, now go and tell them." The Lord of Ketique emphasized with a tone of voice that indicated his confidence that he would not be defeated, not in a million years by this little man.

Minot nodded, glared at Paen, replaced his helmet, and then mounted the back of his black mehra. It galloped into a narrow passageway of trees leading through the darkness that Paen intuited contained many many arrows pointed in his direction. Minot's voice was heard in the distance commanding the archers to comply with the Lord's orders.

An eyebrow arched on the face of the bear-warrior, Dajaai, who stood before Paen.

"Your sword... *master*," The Lord Dajaai jeered.

"I will not need it," Paen responded

"I only need to know when you are ready." Paen said, still seated in the grass in front of his mehra, still twirling the purple flower between thumb and index finger and still several paces away from Maburata.

The Lord of Ketique laughed, sighed and replied taking position,

"I am ready vagabond,"

And before the Lord Dajaai noticed him get up, Paen smacked Dajaai's elbow, locking it, and snatched the broadsword from the Lord of Ketique's own hands and turned the weapon back onto him.

Paen stood as a relaxed straight line behind the weapon, his wrist bent slightly to drop the tip of the blade lightly against the soft throat of the lord. Any movement would insure Dajaai's death, this was obvious to all.

Lord Dajaai was visibly shaken and frustrated by this as his men looked on. Anger consumed him as the master observed Dajaai. Paen's gaze seemed to reach deep into Dajaai. Paen could see that this outcome was not acceptable to the man, but he saw Dajaai's honor beyond the rusted confines of his bitterness.

"Defeated before you've begun, I know this is frustrating Lord Dajaai, but I am an honorable man

and wish no harm to you. I only hope that you will honor me by keeping your word, upholding the rules of this *friendly contest*. It is my mission to *only* serve your Tah."

Paen tested his own intuitions here, awaiting Dajaai's response. He saw the man's mind trying to find a way to escape, but he was cornered by principles Paen knew Dajaai would live by.

The Lord of Ketique swallowed a bitter lump, sighed and glanced at his men. Minot came riding back, the shock visible by his expression, his jaw hanging open, his mehra slowing to a halt. He gazed at his uncle with a probing stare, not understanding how this could be possible.

Seeing his nephew's shame, Dajaai cleared his throat, thought, then said, "I am not afraid to die, traveler."

"I can see this noble warrior, but believe that you *know* that this would not be the death suitable for you. You, I can see, would rather die in allegiance to the truth, and not against it." Paen spoke. His voice was calm and carried a regality that went unnoticed until now.

"I don't seek your death, only that you keep your word to me."

Minot noticed that in the traveler's free hand he still held the purple flower between two fingers, twirling it, toying with it.

Minot bit his own lip; his facial expression was that of confusion.

"What is this?" he rasped, dismounting.

"Can you not see for yourself?" one of the other warriors muttered.

Dajaai, and Paen seemed to be having a secret conversation with their eyes. In it, Dajaai understood the choice that had to be made. Of all of the enemies he battled, all of the Mayak raiders he faced, none of them compared to this man who had an uncanny purity about him.

Somehow Lord Dajaai knew that when Paen uttered the words, *'I am the master,'* he spoke more truth than Dajaai would *ever* hear in his lifetime. Dajaai's choice was to either accept the truth of this man's claim and live, or bitterly deny it and die a dishonorable death. His logic was soundly written all over his face, Paen observed. Paen liked this man.

Dajaai swallowed again, and then said, "You still have my word. You... have proven... me wrong... *master warrior.*"

And the master lowered the sword and returned the hilt to its owner. The Lord sheathed the weapon and bowed pensively, shocked, sobered and yet accepting. The vision of who Paen was became clear to him, right down to his sandals.

"Ahh good," Paen said, smiling "Then I will take you up on a meal for me and my friend, Quanon. We shall not stay long though, only a short rest."

As Paen turned to grab the reins of his mehra, Minot and the remaining two warriors attacked.

The lord shouted, "NO!"

With his back still turned, Paen heard the sound of three blades being thwarted by one, Dajaa's which moved like lightening in defense of the stranger, Paen to whom he had given his word. Now Paen knew that the lord was truly an honorable man. The lord of Ketique, having disciplined his men, brought Paen safely through the gates of his town.

Why could Paen move the way he did? How could he snatch the sword out from the hands of skilled Khoorlrhani lord, and move his heart toward an alliance? It was his never ending love of the goddess! In every moment, in every action, under every circumstance Paen, the master of the central art, the art of love, *loved* Ashuta, and with that love he could never step wrongly.

His heart was open wide, entirely to Her, and it was Her quickness, the quickness of the all pervading one that poured into him, quicksilver, enlivening his muscles and sensory and bringing a spark to his eye.

"I am Dajaai," The lord said, and from left to right he named all his warriors, a large circle of them sitting on cushions on a section of the clay floor within a large ⁴*dihj* that housed them. Dajaai explained that Ketique was a newer town, growing each month. They all ate a thick stew from wooden bowls. All of the warriors stared at Paen, the man who defeated the best among them without having to draw his own sword. The rumors already began to spread around the town, that perhaps Dajaai was getting too old, feeble, and perhaps mad.

"And this is my nephew Minot. He is a hot-head, a good Captain though." Dajaai, pointed to him. Minot coldly regarded Paen and resumed his eating.

"By whose standards was he deemed good?" The Master mumbled.

Dajaai pointed to others in the large house, non-warriors and named them. There were women in the *dihj* bringing food and water for the warriors to eat

⁴ A dug out type of shelter typical of the Khoorlrhani tribe, made of clay and wood and topped with a mud roof. Some types are made with stone.

and drink. Many were fully wrapped in white or beige garments held together by beige or yellow sashes. The more mature women had long manes some braided, some twisted.

The Khoorlrhani all varied in skin tones of brown and black. Their ears were decorated with large silver loops. Some of the girls wrapped their hair with patterned yellow and orange fabric while some beaded theirs.

The younger woman had short hair only, coarse tufts or wildly twisted, and wore wraps that exposed more of their legs and arms. Paen assumed they were not yet married but approaching the age for it. It was hot in the dihj and the air within it was thick with the smell of active bodies.

In a fire lit section of the dihj, Paen could see older women sitting next to pots that hung over a large hearth. The women tended to them from behind a partition of animal hides. There was a thick scent of dried herbs, and garlic that hung from the ceilings, and an occasional wafting of sage.

Many of those introduced to Paen were family to Dajaai in some manner, by blood or marriage. Most of the villagers of Ketique—as it was still a small garrison town-- were gathered in this one large dihj

to share meals and gossip or to hold court with the lord and his aides to whom Paen was introduced.

Much of the townsfolk's attention was tonight held on the circle of warriors and the traveler, whom everyone by now had heard of. Paen could hear an occasional whisper;

"Yes that's him over there, Yes," and they would point and look away if noticed by Minot who was terribly irritated by all of the talk. Young boys with sticks scampered by, fencing and imitating lord Dajaai and Minot, their heroes. Paen smiled at them in delight.

"I am Master Paen," he replied, "I have come from the easternmost part of the Genian Mountains, beyond the range of Kenamik to the Mountain once named By Her Bright Will."

There were many grunts and 'ahhs,' among the warriors, who recognized the names this untamed place described by Paen's words. Paen noticed a group of elderly men and women who entertained circles of young children with stories and taught them to play musical instruments at different sections of the dihj. Paen's face glowed happily in the firelight as he watched them.

"The children's tales say that Kenamik is where the Goddess of the forest *lives*." Lord Dajaai said. Many

of the warriors again grunted and chuckled in remembrance of such myths.

"She does live there." Paen said while sucking the meat off a bone.

"And she sent me." He chewed, and sucked his fingers.

Suddenly it grew quiet. Paen did not pay the silence much mind until he glanced up and saw that everyone was now staring at him with expressions of their cynicism on their faces. It became clear to him how much attention was on him, and so Master Paen brightened with a great loving expression in regard of them all.

Lord Dajaai chuckled embarrassed for Paen. *Surely the master is joking*, he thought. He looked to Paen to deliver the punch line of a joke, but none came. Paen resumed eating his meal.

Men and women all around the dihj exchanged uncomfortable stares, glances of patterned and narrow minds unwilling to move beyond their habitual lines of fear. As Dajaai felt the heat of judgment against him, he worried how he was seen, and measured his own self worth within this uncomfortable moment. He intuited the thoughts of others.

How could Dajaai be bested by this dreamer, this mad man?

What does it mean his being here?

Dajaai, is an old fool.

Finishing the stew in the silence, Paen placed the bowl in front of him. He smiled warmly at the woman who brought it to him and nodded gratefully.

Dajai's eyes widened with embarrassment. Was Paen trying to make a fool of him again, by not explaining himself and clearing Daajai of embarrassment? Was Dajaai by chance beaten by a crazy wanderer who lives in the realms of fairy tales?!

Sensing his discomfort, Paen cleared his throat and said, "The goddess is the *only* reality. She is saddened at your lack of attention, lack of regard. She is heartbroken that you've forgotten her, that you have relegated Her to *only* children's story's, your own story vacant of Her presence, to religious tales of hope and of getting pleased by Her, your participation in life vacant of the love she so has for you all."

Then the Master Paen clapped his hands together loudly and mockingly prayed, shouting;

Oh goddess I need this, oh goddess I need that! If you do this for me I'll be a better man!! Ah-hahahahah!" and he laughed. Nobody else was laughing. Paen crouched, and leaned forward and continued. He said,

"The Goddess, Ashuta, has sent me to show you the way back to her. The goddess is the *only* reality, and nothing that is, *can never not* be of her including your very selves. My knowing *mySelf* as Her heart is what makes me the Master, makes me quick, and makes me strong. Your *forgetting* this about *yourselves* is what causes your suffering, your discomforts as you judge the appearances before you, making them different from you, making them separate, making them a problem, making them an enemy to be at war with, to argue with."

The room was silent, and Dajaai glanced about the room. He cleared his throat.

"But, honorable Master Paen, it is the *Mayak* who attack *us* openly. They..."

"Because you share **nothing with them, and drive them away!**" Paen howled, interrupted and laughed, "You threw your brother out, left him out of the circle of cooperation! Of course he's mad at you!"

A smug expression of nobility came over Dajaa's face as he cleared his throat to explain the master as if he were a child.

"We are an *agricultural* society. We work our lands so that the empire grows strong."

Paen pressed his lips together tightly, considering the point. Several bodies moved into the room, captivated.

"Hmm. I see. You are indeed superior. So I suppose the Mayak should have understood that when the Khoorlrhani moved them deeper and deeper into the more barren lands. The Mayak should have accepted what you're telling me, I suppose. Maybe the Mayak should all be saying, *'I see it is an agricultural city state you are building my brother, ok let us Mayak move away, let you have what you want, this superior idea, this plan, and we will not ask for anything in return, not even a simple regard for our needs for survival on the land,'* Where is the true spirit of cooperation?"

"The Mayak are savages who waste the land!" a voice shouted.

Minot, disgusted by Paen's assertions, rose and left.

"The Khoorlrhani answer to no one!" a warrior shouted, "All of the lower tribes will bow to us before we are through! They will eat the bread

made from Khoorlrhani mills only after they have worked them and worked our fields!!!" and several shouts rose to follow.

"We owe them nothing but death!!" Others said.

"Who are you to say these things to Dajaai the great Eagle Lord!!"

"...cut off your head..."

"...Mayak dogs!!.."

The room was full of such shouting and outrage that Paen would not advocate Khoorlrhani self-righteousness. Still, he smiled warmly at the men as they beat their chests patriotically.

"It is okay." Paen said pressing his hands to the air.

"We do not have to agree,"

And it grew quiet as the men wanted to hear what this *master* had to say.

"You see?" he said, lifting his bowl again to taste the remaining broth, "We do not agree. It is okay," and it grew quiet, and calmer as Paen seemed to sooth their agitation.

"You see. We do not have to agree; ... and still, if you notice, we at least share a meal together." He smiled. The room was silent and all attention was on Paen.

“Master, Paen. We are reasonable men.” Dajaai said, “The Mayak do not want peace. They want to steal what we labor for with vendetta. They rob us of cattle, and take our women in the night. What are we to do when they are not willing to talk?” Lord Dajaai asked.

“We must do our duty. There is nothing more,” Paen replied,

“There is *great* personal offense on both sides of this fence of *old conflicts* you’ve built between you, but I tell you this; men follow leaders regardless of the personal for the sake of duty. They die by the commandment of the king, the Tah, and what an honor this should be for the Tah who *loves* the truth, serves the truth, trusts only in the truth for then they have an extension of themselves to love and share the sweetest recognition of heart, like sun onto the trees, and this recognition grows into a forest, a dense jungle of all abiding in Her.”

“The leaders must be honorable men, with open hearts. If what they are doing abides with the truth, then there is healing, if it does not abide then there is only confusion, and needless death. And what do you think is most true, most pure, the heart that created you, *lives* you, or the King that *commands* you? Does that king love the heart? Does he love the truth, or does he love something else?”

Lord Dajaai swallowed, and Paen knew he heard him. Paen felt a number of minds thinking about their Tah. The men were quiet, calmed by the timbre of Paen's voice. Paen looked over at Dajaai, his expression gentle and yet serious, loving, and yet fierce.

"The truth can be gentle like a breeze, quiet and clear, but it can also be violent like the manju roaring in the woods, like a thunder clap." Dajaai was caught in the gaze of Paen again. The room seemed to reel. Such attraction! His mind fought it, but his heart heard the message.

"And which version of the truth are you wanderer?" A voice called. Paen could not see him for a countless number of people, men and women, were pressed into the smoky and pungent room.

Paen smiled, and glanced at Maburata seated before him.

"That is for Khoorlrhani-Tah to decide."

There then was a great murmur of great offenses and then a shout.

"And what makes you think you'll leave here alive to press this decision upon our Tah!?" It was a callous voice in the distance.

"I have my faith in an honorable man." Paen said glancing at the Lord Dajaai.

"Thank you, for your hospitality." Paen said to Dajaai, "I and my friend Quanon, must go."

Chapter Three: The Master's First Pupil

Paen prepared Quanon and himself to travel further west. Having a belly full of stew, and having said all that he had to say, he disappeared from the company and quickly exited the gates of Ketique and walked back to the Jungle. He climbed onto his mehra's back, and intuitively slung Maburata to his own back. As he pulled the reins to steer Quanon, Paen noticed from within the encroachment of trees the sounds of several riders heading his way. They were thunderous in their urgent cadence as the dark mob of them appeared in the distance, spreading through green mists collecting between the tree trunks and giant buttress roots.

Quanon stirred, and snorted, and Paen answered him, "Yes, it is high time we left,"

But it was too late for Paen and his mehra were surrounded. At least fourteen fully armored Arkayan warriors on the backs of grey and black horned mehras, circled Paen. The group of riders appeared to be lead by Minot, Dajaai's nephew. He was silent, black pearls of eyes staring at Paen from

the eyelets of his flared iron helmet. On mehra back, Minot circled Paen from within the ring of riders. Paen was held, his mehra snorting and neying. As Minot recklessly pulled the reins, it trotted, circling, kicking.

Like Dajaai once did, Minot came around full circle, facing Paen who could see a burgeoning anger in this younger and more impulsive man. Paen wondered where Dajaai could be.

Shaking his head, Paen began to laugh. It was such a laugh that for a moment it sounded as though all the creatures in the forest joined in with Paen. Even a few of Minot's own men cracked a curious smile, beguiled by the Master.

"And what do you find funny about it being your day to die?" Minot sneered.

"My dear boy, you just have no humor; that is all!" Paen said, throwing his head back to laugh harder, and the crickets and mosquitoes buzzed, and birds cawed and clamored about, and the trees swayed as if some strange wind passed through.

"I mean, none of you do, really" he chuckled, gasped, and wiped a tiny joy tear from his eye.

He pointed at all of the warriors and imitated their individual versions of being too serious. Like frightened boys, they looked among themselves to

save face as the Master teased them and made faces at them. Who was this mad-man, they seemed to think. Minot said nothing. Paen sighed.

"So then, you wish to stare into the eyes of the whirlwind?" the master asked, his laughter subsiding,

"Only then will you know? Is that it?"

"I know that you will *never* get to see Arkaya in your life time, old man."

"Well then, let us get down to what you truly do and do not know, for I and my friend have much traveling to do" Paen said, a smile stretching across his face. He sat poised on the back of his mehra, only waiting.

Captain Minot drew his sword and his trained mehra at this silent command bucked, and bolted for Paen, who only remained still. Minot struck, hard and sure at Paen, who dodged, leaning swiftly to one side, and removed the sword from Minot's hand. With a remaining free hand, Paen pushed the warrior off of his steed. Minot flipped backward and fell to the ground with a thud.

Swinging one leg across the back of his white yellow-horned mehra, Paen dismounted Quanon, and observed his catch, the warrior's weapon. He was not impressed. Paen sensed an unavoidable

storm approaching. The air became electric. The hairs on his skin stood up poised, alert, excited. His eyebrows began to dance wildly over his large awake eyes.

"How can you fight me now... warrior?" Paen asked, walking toward Minot. Frustrated and embarrassed, Minot produced a dagger and lunged for Paen, who merely dodged again, swiftly, surgically removing the knife from Minot's hand by twisting his wrist. The large knife dropped to the soft ground and Paen kicked it up to the air and caught it by the handle. He turned his back on Minot.

"You cannot beat me, Captain. The tale of you and I is not written where you *beat* me."

"Are you an oracle? Do you claim to know the future?!" Minot grunted.

"I am that which the oracle consults, boy. There is no future, no past, only me." And Paen glanced around the circle to elicit a real response from the deadpan mob, and in failing to do so then tossed the dagger back to Minot who was still behind him.

"You are all simply angry and afraid because you cannot rewrite your private little chapter of a life to your satisfaction. And yet, look how you are all so afraid of change anyway!"

A bitter voice growled from behind him, the one the master had heard earlier inside the Eagle Lord's dijh and it now said;

"Will you not draw your sword and fight like a man?"

Just then thunder rolled throughout the jungle and creatures could be heard throughout the treetops in preparation. They all had to see Maburata!

Paen turned to see Minot on two feet, glaring at him, angry, bitter.

Paen now threw Minot his sword back to him.

"If you insist," Paen said, and he drew Maburata from its sheath. Silver light reflected from its surface, and illuminated the soft greenness of the jungle. It became stunningly quiet as fireflies gravitated toward and tried to enter Maburata's light. The on looking warriors were drawn to its brilliance.

Minot however was enraged, missed the spectacle and attacked. With his eyes closed, Paen, a straight line beneath her luminance, held Maburata high, and with every attempt by Minot to strike, Paen deflected every blow, cleanly, and swiftly, so swift that the Master returned to the pose of the straight line, holding the blade high, pointing it toward the moon, between each strike as if Minot moved in an

incredible slow motion, and then again Paen took Minot' weapon!

"Yaaaarghh!!!" Minot screamed. He slapped his own shoulders in offense.

"There! Now can you see that it does not matter, what you believe, what you think?" Paen asked.

Minot sulked, and his dissatisfaction was still so obvious that Paen again gave him his sword back to try again. Rain drops began to fall onto the giant leaves overhead and to the ground where the men circled one another.

Minot attacked, Paen moved, *clank, clank, clank*, and each time, he disarmed Minot in the most despicable and clever ways. And with a smile, Paen returned the weapons to his opponent. There were no bounds to the Master's cleverness.

"And now. Can you see silly boy, that it is not the sword that makes the true warrior? Try again!" he bellowed, his back turned to Minot, and the Master threw Minot's blade over his shoulder and into the air, and Minot was only too eager to catch and try again, with more heart, more determination, this time more elegantly applying every swordsman's trick he learned from his swords master, the Lord Dajaai. Minot swung with broad sword and a dagger simultaneously, two whirlwinds.

They fought, and the master teased him.

"There," *clank!*

"Yes!" *clank, clank, clank!*

"Good!" *clank!!*

"No, I shan't take it from you just yet!" *clank! Clank!*

"You tempt me, but we shall keep dancing!"

Minot became a wild machine, a killing menace, attacking with youthful quickness and recklessness. He was brave, and cunning, and clever, and the Master loved it. Then before Minot could ever get a satisfying advantage, the weapons were easily torn from him by Paen's quick fingers!

Minot bent over, panting. He removed his helmet to let a green mane of dread locks hang to the ground. He had given it his all, and Paen, not even breaking a sweat, was far from defeated. Minot's men stirred. How can this be? How could Minot not touch this man, let alone suffer the offense of having his weapons torn from him insultingly?

"Have you seen enough of the whirlwind?" Paen asked.

"I only see a clown who will not fight!" Minot rasped.

Paen sighed, and then groaned in feigned sympathy for the spoiled child before him.

"You are just too proud to see the truth here," and Paen sheathed his sword. The forest grew dim again. The lesson was over.

"Kill HIM!" Minot raged. The thunder rolled within the jungle.

Paen held a hand up and said, "Can no one here see the truth?" as the warriors dismounted, cautiously approaching him, stubborn, not yet convinced.

"Ah, I trust many of you see a haze of it, but still your heads are too hard."

The warriors withdrew their swords.

"Surely he cannot defeat the lot of us." One said, taking a brave few steps ahead of the others who were tightening the circle around the Master.

"I see. I must soften your heads then." The Master chuckled "I cannot empty all of your hands *enough*, and tear down your armor *enough* for you to see that I am only a device of the truth. I can only teach you tougher lessons."

"Get him!" Minot growled beneath the low, deep rumble of the storm.

Suddenly, there was a flash of lightening! The nineteen warriors were on Paen, who smiling wildly

and with eyes closed, was moved by Ashuta in a poetic dance that flowed, never stopping. His steps were flawless, and where the steps of his flawed opponents were made, Paen moved into graceful advantage, constantly. He pushed, pulled, twisted, punched, and tripped them with an unstoppable momentum that never shifted from his love for the Goddess. His capabilities were infinite, derived from her, the entire stream of them, flowing with the deepest connection of the perfectly open heart! She wrote the play of victories, played the tightly strung lute of his heart, and Paen acted according to the script, and danced willingly to the song!

Minot watched in begrudging disbelief as Paen demonstrated that no man could *ever* touch the Master. He appeared infinitely adaptable, and the whites of his upturned smile made him appear insane, drunk on his love for Ashuta. Paen was invisible to the warriors, unbridled, taking them all down gracefully. He was a whirlwind, and when the last man was left standing, Paen was again the straight line beneath the moon, one arm held straight to the sky, fingers a gentle fan, Maburata still sheathed along his back, and he held one foot slightly off of the ground like a dancer slowing with concluding music that unfortunately Minot could not hear.

The lone remaining warrior stared in awe, his mouth a gaping maw. He did not know whether to attack or drop to his knees.

"Destroy him!" Minot hissed.

The warrior, unmoved by this order, swallowed hard and looked at Paen who still stood like a crane, his arm swaying to the gentle breezes. The rest of the warriors were on the ground clutching their arms or knees, unable to fight any longer. Paen opened one eye and looked at the conflicted young warrior and said.

"It is you who chooses who, and what to serve, of what to stand for, live for, and die for."

The warrior then dropped to his knees, and bowed before his new master, Paen.

"You are the master warrior," the young warrior gushed. His heart could only tell the truth of it and his voice conveyed, cracking open like a dam by the forceful flow of heart expression.

Paen took the man's sword and said, "I will return this to you for your second lesson in Arkaya."

He then looked at Minot and said,

"And I'm sure that we will meet again, young warrior. Remember that one who commands men is not necessarily a great leader. Perhaps you might

have observed now that there *are* defeats that one *can* accept and yet remain a warrior at heart."

Minot glared at him, sulked, and said nothing.

Paen, noting Minot's bitter refusal then added,

"Wise men learn through their mistakes, the wiser through the mistakes of others. You, like the Tah, subject those you lead to such unnecessary suffering, proudly, stupidly with your feathers in your hair, and your studded shirts, beating your chests like silly apes. Hah! And look how poorly you measure up to the truth! Ah-hahahahahahaha!"

Quanon, sensing it was high time to leave, approached Paen who hopped up on his back. Paen observed Minot, an ember of resentment, clutching his sprained wrist.

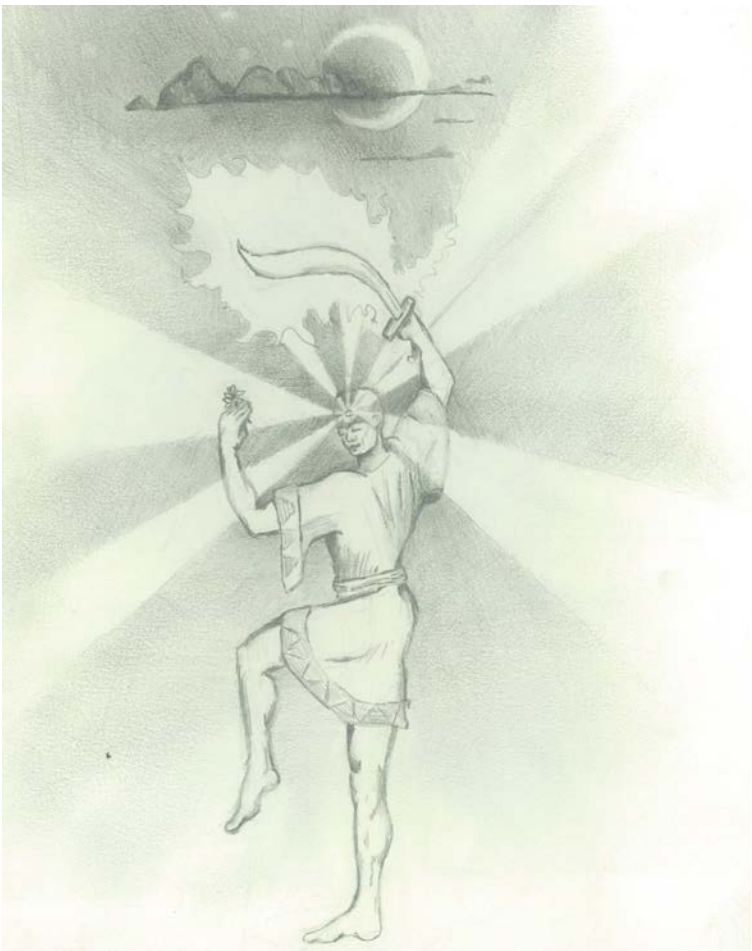
"You may hunt me, lad. You may spy me along my way, you may even find me as I head to your capital, but I sense that it will be quite a long and difficult road for you before you really ever *see* me."

"I see you devil, and I will have my day with you!"
Minot spat.

"Indeed," Paen said and disappeared in the mists of the jungle. He shouted back to Minot. "That much is for certain, and it will be of your undoing, for as the Tah will learn, so will you learn that the harder you

fight against that which is true..." And then there was an immense crash of thunder and the whitest flash of lightening.

"The *more* truth *must* obliterate you!" The rain poured down through the large overhanging leaves onto Minot and the warriors. Paen's voice echoed as he laughed loudly throughout the jungle.



Chapter Four: Paen's Breakfast

The next morning Paen fished by the Namne River. The current was strong and deafening. Paen sunned himself on a large moss covered stone, and listened to the rhythms of the water splashing against the many large and smooth rocks along Namne's windy path. The air was humid from last night's storm, and the sun was a welcomed visitor to Paen who wrapped himself in his cloak and sipped from a warm cup of tea in one hand while he held his fishing line in the other.

Soon there was tug from the line. He pulled, and fought it. It was a large catch by the feel of it. His eyes opened wide in surprise as he saw the red belly of a large salmon thrashing on the surface.

"Ha!" He cried, and Quanon, standing along the bank, snorted in agreement.

"Breakfast, Quanon!" Paen exclaimed as he tugged on the line, which grew more taut, more violent. It threatened to pull him in, but Paen was strict, serious, the *Master*.

Suddenly the fish dove into the current, and Paen found himself pulled onto his feet for a short moment, where he wrestled the line before he was

yanked into the air, and then finally pulled and dragged down stream.

"Damn!" he gurgled and swam as the torrential current had its way with him. What a predicament! He was wet again, but this time heading for the waterfall downstream.

Luckily he was washed up against an outcropping of rocks along the riverbank, and the *Master* was pushed gently to an embankment.

Quanon whinnied, laughing some twenty or so meters away, dry and happy, grazing, his horns shining in the morning sun. He was barely visible through the thick grasses that separated him and Paen.

Paen staggered back to his small camp. He rung his cloak out on the way and sighed.

"I've lost the hook, Quanon."

Quanon whinnied again, mercilessly poking fun at his friend.

"Careful, or I'll consider taking a liking to mehra-meat." Paen huffed and sat back on his rock, frustrated, and hungry.

"Well," He sighed, "I suppose breakfast is not on the schedule this morning."

Just then the river water swelled and an object was launched from out of it, and onto Paen's lap. It was the red belly salmon! He grabbed the flopping fish with his right hand. Another object flew, the Master's teacup, which he caught in the other hand. The hook was inside and rattling as he shook the cup.

The swelling of the river grew, throwing mists into the air through which the sun shone and projected the image of Asuta's face smiling brightly before Paen.

Surprised, Paen exclaimed,

"Goddess!! Oh! I should have known it was you."

"Of course, as it always is Me, my precious devotee! I can't have you going hungry on me so early in the drama, so this one's on, me."

Paen thanked Ashuta and began gutting the fish with his knife.

"And so how are we enjoying our new role as master swordsman?" The Goddess asked.

Paen gasped as he, like an excited child, could not wait to share his story with her. As he cooked his breakfast on a stick over an open flame, he blurted out every detail, frustrated by the limitation of words which could not rightly capture the picture of

the electric fluid events of last night. It was an exciting tale of how Paen could not fail, and how he could see the Tah's men, and that through Paen's love of Ashuta, sight of them was ever so clear.

"...and the more I loved you, the more of them I saw! The more they resisted you, the louder you spoke as action through me, and the more I yearned only for your voice of truth!" Paen, shook his head, chewed, and plucked thin fish bones from between his thick lips.

The goddess, enjoying the story held Her head on Her hands, Her elbows resting against the rocky bank as Her curved body extended as the flowing river behind her. Her skin was silvery and scaled, and a hue of red spotted Her chest and shoulders. A crown of peacock feathers sat atop Her head. She smiled gazing with large beautiful eyes at Paen as he rattled on, excited.

"...and now they cannot get me out of their minds," Paen said.

"I should say not! They're hooked. You've made yourself a bunch of new friends!!" The goddess joked.

"Well, I don't think their intentions were friendly at all. They are so closed minded!"

"Yes my naïve friend, but that's why you're to be with them. In time they will have no choice but to love you, because you will be seen as the only real unwavering example. Men desire this example so much, despite their initial protest."

Paen could catch momentary glimpses of Ashuta's plan, but the details seemed to at will drift from him as if stored on a higher, subtler shelf within Ashuta's domain. Paen could not completely understand, but he accepted Her words, and was only happy to do his service to Her. They were quiet for a moment, gazing at one another, and at the reflections of themselves in the river, in the mountains and the trees. Paen's mind rested, and all of his puzzling of *how* the goddess's plans added up faded away.

"Remember. It's all mine dear-heart! Love me always, *then*, and only *then*, does it become yours. Only then do the lines of distinction fade, and we become one."

Chapter Five: *Arkaya and The Tah of the Khoorlrhani*



The Tah of the Khoorlrhani tribe was not a happy man. He was fearful, and paranoid. Within the capital city of Arkaya from where he ruled, he sat alone gazing into the bent horizon, which was visible from where he sat. He sat, sagging, spent. He was not happy by any means. His chair, which held him *high*, high enough so that as he peered through the large opening of his throne room, and gazed beyond the silks that laced its edges, did not comfort him as he viewed the entire expanse of his great kingdom. There were purple, and honey colored squares, large fields etched by tan lines setting one massive crop distinctly from another, and there were tiny figures, he could see, working in the fields, *his* fields, on *his* land which stretched for miles before they were engulfed by a narrow violet

band which represented the distant and great depths of the jungle. Arkaya, in the zenith of its current might, his greatest achievement, stretched out before his eyes, and it failed him. The Tah sighed as his arms hung over the rests of his chair. His eyes wandered the distance, grasping for anything that could console him, and put his heavy heart at ease.

The Tah's throne room was massive, a large wide rectangular room that was built on top of a large hill that looked over much of the valley settled by the Khoorlrhani. The floor was edged by large redwood planks, smooth and lacquered and several matching posts supported the low ceiling. Multi-colored tiles were set into the clay floor and grouped in a manner so that there were two rows of squared sections framed by the smooth wood. Rich incense burned in the room along with many candles in golden holders.

Fine fabrics were draped along the walls, rich in reds and greens and yellows, and animal skin rugs lay on the floor at all the king's resting areas, a bear skin in front of his ivory bench, a cheetah skin before his jade chair, several fox skins before his golden chair, and a large skin of the manju tiger before his throne which he sat at now. On his depressed and wrinkled hands, there were rings on each finger, each one having its own stone, turquoise, onyx,

emerald, ruby, and then a diamond on his index finger. The chair he sat in was made from the oldest tree in the jungle known to his people, and it was carved with intricate designs by woodworkers whose services could only be bought by a king.

Around his ankles were thick ringlets of gold encrusted with diamonds and pearls, and the silk shimmering threads of his thick ornate skirts were golden, green and crimson all woven into elaborate zigzag patterns. On the top of his head sat his crown, a thick band of gold with a large ruby embedded into the front. His mane of dread-locked hair was drawn upward, on top of his head and it was held together by another ring of diamond encrusted gold. Two large eagle feathers hung from the back of his crown, and rested on the Tah's shoulders. All these things decorated him, and yet the Tah was not happy. His growing empire, the envy of rival tribes, was known all across the land of Genia. Exploration across the southern seas brought trade (foreign steel weapons, oils, spices and silks for rich Khoorlrhani wood, gold, diamonds and food – grain, corn, yams, and melons) and created strong alliances. There had not been a plague since his rule began, and still he was not happy.

Khoorlrhani-Tah took in a breath, and gazed outward at the fields from his throne room, and then he sighed. It was a broken and tired slump of a sigh.

"What troubles you, my lord?" A voice as if on cue called from some nearby place in the room.

"Bulaja," Khoorlrhani Tah huffed, "Tell me *again* this vision you have, I cannot see it. At what point will this despairing within me end?"

Bulaja seemed to glide across the room toward the Tah's throne, not seeming to have feet beneath the black robe that contained him. He took up his place at the right side of the king's throne. A hand-- black as soot-- pointed outward to the horizon.

"When neither mist nor marauder can enter that circle," Bulaja seemed to whisper. His voice had a subtle layered quality, as though two voices spoke in unison.

There were several raids reported today. The Mayak ravaged three villages near the city of Isiwa, stole food, twenty mehras, twelve women, and killed fifteen men and children. A common skirmish, this was not what troubled Khoorlrhani-Tah the most. It was his fear of a greater and unknown enemy.

In the distance, to where Bulaja's black wrinkled hand pointed, a large stockade fence was being built, its height so large that it could be seen from

the throne room, miles away as the sun set in the distance. The fence, one hundred and fifty feet high, and made of the trunks of sequoia trees, was to be fourteen miles in each direction from the palace completely surrounding Arkaya the capital city.

"But how will it stop a *demon*, sorcerer?"

"The fence will keep out the Mayak possessed by *her*. It is my blessing that will ward off the mist."

Bulaja replied. He spoke of an approaching force, a great terror that haunted the Tah in his dreams.

"But... so many sacred trees..." The Tah half-heartedly mumbled, sighed as if to bargain with Bulajaa.

"Oh, *nkosi*," The hissing voice grew excited from within the hooded confines of a robe, "It is the will of the ancestors, that the capital, the heart of your nation be *safe*. This is a most necessary sacrifice."

The Tah, sighed again, and wondered if there would ever be an end to the madness of his troubled existence, this confusion. Had he not waged enough war, built enough defenses?

He bent forward and placed his face into his hands as if a certain sound made his head ache. A cold leathery hand rested on Khoorlrhani-Tah's shoulder, consoling him.

"Great, Tah. The burdens you bear are heavy, but necessary, exalted one. Would you have the histories of your great nation dub you as the Tah who could not carry on the will of the ancients?"

Khoorlrhani-Tah would have lopped any other man's head off instantly at the suggestion, but Bulaja was a master over this king. He saw all the many twisted strings of his mind and pulled them at will, like reins of a mehra and directed him deeper into his traps.

"Careful, Bulaja. It is I who sit on the throne."

The hood was removed, and a two large, yellow and brown eyes gawking out beyond the dark sockets of a stained face, feigned an expression of apology, shocked, sincere, and pious. His lips were wrinkled and his cheeks sunk in.

Bulaja bent forward, rustling his robes, and threw himself down to the floor. He began to kiss the rings of Khoorlrhani-Tah's hand.

"Forgive me Nkosi! It is only my wish to serve," Bulaja feigned.

Khoorlrhani-Tah pushed Bulaja away, annoyed by the creature he was.

"Yes fine! Now get off!"

Bulaja slithered away and sat on the floor a few feet away from the throne, and appeared to hold his stare away from the Tah, but all the while the sorcerer studied Khoorlrhani-Tah to measure the effect of his work.

He waited for it. Then there it was, that look!

The Tah's face returned to that misplaced expression of nobility. Bulaja's magic worked.

After awhile the Tah sighed again as he stared at the fence that was under construction.

It made his land safe, and yet made it appear barren. Nearly a thousand trees were cut down from a nearby forest, which was once visible from where the Tah sat now. Originally, it seemed like a good idea, but now it seemed such a *deep* and unfortunate cut. There were thousands of tiny builders hard at work under the orange glow of torches and purple twilight, and there was a great line of heavy black horned mehras pulling logs on the dirt lanes that formed the grid of the distant city. An enormous row of men could be seen pulling a rope along a scaffold as a large crane made of rope and logs raised a giant stone over the top of steadied sequoias, pounding them into the earth.

"If the capital's defensive circle is as you say it will be, *impenetrable*, then we will need only a few legions

to defend the city." The Tah said, "The rest of my army..."

"Will carve your name into the chest of every Mayak raider who ever dared encroach upon your glorious Arkaya, master. And then we might allow the Mayak dogs to pay tribute to us as we permit them to settle the fertile lands they have left to defend." Bulaja hissed, fanning a spark to Khoorlrhani-Tah's eyes, and as he did he notice Khoorlrhani-Ta's jaw line flex and his eyes become full of fire.

"Yes," Bulaja groaned, pleased.

"And then?" Khoorlrhani-Tah shifted in his throne, grasped the hilt of his scimitar, his dark eyes pressed onto Bulaja's dilated pair, fixed to them, sending a nervous shiver through the creature.

"Then, master, the spirit of your brother will rest. I assure you, your haunts will end. You must trust me. The spirit of your dead brother cannot harm you if the ancients are appeased, for they are the circle; *they* are the wisdom of the land, its strength. Your work and trust in *me* will mend the rift. Trust me, the mists will fade."

This made enough sense to Khoorlrhani-Tah, these *concepts*, but the King's twisted heart could not feel beyond the lines drawn in his head by Bulaja.

Khoorlrhani Tah's heart, the voice of which was a mere dim drone within the confusing buzzing of his mind, informed him that an enclosure was a prison, a giant cage to live in. It also told him the option of peace with the Mayak seemed now a cold and distant dream in the future.

Khoorlrhani-tah, could not hear himself, listen to his heart as the fire of the desires for conquest were fanned by Bulaja. Khoorlrhani-Tah could no longer listen to his heart, was afraid of it, and even somehow unaware of it.

Khoorlrhani-Tah instead relied on his servant, Bulaja, a wise *ancestor* perhaps when he was actually alive, but who was now watching Khoorlrhani-Tah with the same feigned expression of devotion. The Tah grabbed his pipe of herbs and deeply sucked in the consoling effects of the stimulating smoke.

A slight smile appeared on the lips of Bulaja, as he watched his master smoke the favors he brought to him from the jungle.

Yes, he thought, *Good*.

"Yes, lord, sooth your nerves. It is so much to think about."

*And there went the smarts of the King
Who sat and smoked away most everything
Who bargained away his soul*

threw love into a dank dark hole

As he ruled, afraid and aloof

and avoided the simple truth

-- Children's song - written by Darlian

A child played with a simple acorn in the courtroom where the Tah sulked. The boy laughed and giggled, and rolled the acorn about across the smooth tiles. The boy was dressed only by a beige cloth tied about his waist, and a pair of sandals on his feet. His laughter entertained his mother and aunt who sat on the floor watching him take such delight in such a simple thing.

The Tah's eyes however looked beyond them, out into the infinite horizon of his mind, which wove fragile gossamer strands of thought upon thoughts, plans within plans, as he overlooked the now. The Tah's elbow rested against the arms of his throne, and his two index fingers met solidly beneath his brow and against the bridge of his nose, and in that manner he probed forward, fiercely. His eyes, deep, and dark and ringed penetrated beyond his focal point and drew up image upon image of a future he yearned for, or was afraid of. He sat this way every night, intent to solve it, to break the *problem* in his mind.

If only they would all leave me be!!

If they would demand less of him, he would have the wherewithal! If only he had one moment of peace, then! Then he would clearly see the problem and annihilate it. Why then he could...

What is this?!

The acorn rolled against his sandal, and the wide eyes of his son, Minot looked up at him, smiling.

Always distracted!

He stared into Minot's openness, and denied him. He stared coldly at him, a pair of dead eyes. Minot stirred, plopped onto his bottom, and began to cry. His mother collected him quickly, shushing him.

The Tah, satisfied, resumed his probing. His foot shadowed the tiny seed, the object of a playful gesture by his son and crushed it.

Chapter Six: A Test and Betrayal

There are many stories of Mayak families, and many stories of Khoorlrhani families. Many texts were passed down from generation to generation, but most were passed down by word of mouth.

It was said of this generation that the Khoorlrhani Tah only had sons, a *blessing* given by the goddess, Ashuta, to the Tah who worried that he would not have enough warriors to defend his land from the ever growing Mayak of the highlands. Of course to most, this was not seen as a blessing, but a curse.

Khoorlrhani families were volatile, full of passionate men who were often moved by jealousy and desire. It was said that a generation ago, before this wretched Tah, that his predecessor, his father, had ten sons, two who were named Boutage, and Kalid. His other sons were Toumak, Geeda, Taj, Obernon, Keth, Meenok, and Sol.

The Tah also had one daughter, Nandee. Kalid was the eldest of the sons and was favored most by their father who trained Kalid to be a great warrior. Kalid had large hazel eyes that seemed to see

everything. When his father taught him the art of swordsmanship, Kalid mastered his father in a manner of months. Pleased with this, the Tah arranged to have his son learn from the oldest swords masters in the jungle, who would only accept the most promising students, those with the potential for 'Diamond Eyes,' eyes that patiently, openly watched, with no tension of mind. It was said that Kalid bested his first teacher in a year, his next teacher in another, and at the age of sixteen was the finest swordsman ever seen in Arkaya. His brother Boutage often times challenged him, and frustratingly was never able to come close to besting Kalid.

"Show me, how to be a master warrior like you brother." Boutage often asked of Kalid who while shining his swords one day finally agreed.

"I will teach you everything I know, because you are my brother, and I love you. It will require all that you have though brother and you must remember that in the course of my instruction, I may be rough on you. You must never forget my love, or the bond between us will suffer. This is the key."

Boutage agreed, and they began. The course was just as difficult as Kalid warned, but Boutage remembered his brother's love, even when Kalid shouted at him to focus, to straighten, to let go more

and more, to give more and more of himself, everything he had. Boutage remembered to drop everything, *all and any* offense to remember that love.

They often sparred and it was said that crowds of jungle creatures would gather to watch the two dancing brothers and their astonishing swordplay.

It was said that Boutage was destined to be Kalid's pupil because his love for him was strong and obvious. He was hot tempered, like a Khoorlrhani, but was learning that his temper merely limited him. When his blade was smacked away, he bowed, and picked it back up, ready to learn more. When Kalid made him carry logs on his back, Boutage did so and released any reaction, resentment, and complaint. When Kalid poked fun of his ego, he tried to see his own error and have humor about it.

"When we are finished my good brother, your heart will be so open and so pure that you will be ready for the greatest gift ever given!"

The women in the village often times took interest and watched them and this attention pleased Boutage. One of the girls was named Suwan, and she and Boutage fell in love. She admired Boutage's apparent dedication, his humility and his love for

Kalid who was regarded as the master swordsman in the kingdom.

Suwan as well as everyone in the tribe loved and respected Kalid. To them he was simply the Master, indeed of the sword but primarily of the heart.

Kalid shone, like a diamond. He often spoke to crowds in his father's court, unified them, inspired and taught them. Even the Tah himself said that his own son was a wiser man than he, and he humbly took advice from his beloved son who was among the Tah's circle of advisors.

The Tah then, Bahju, was glad that such wisdom was in his son, and he was happy knowing that Kalid would become Tah of the Khoorlrhani one day.

"Never has such wisdom ever held the throne during our times in this dark age," The Tah said as he tried in vain to inspire his son to take interest in his *destiny*. Kalid did not want to rule. He had no zeal for it and could care less about status.

"Men can only learn through their attractions father. I need no crown on my head to love and teach mankind. I do it only because I love it, and will do it till Ashuta removes my attraction to such a thing. Then I will wander the jungles and eat berries and wrestle tigers." The young, radiant boy said.

"But you must become Tah, my son you must," The old man insisted lovingly.

“Your example will heal the fractures that have caused our One Great Clan to divide so.”

“Only if it is truly my destiny, father, which is only determined by the author of our tales, not by any will on my part.”

Thinking his son a dreamer, Bjaju assumed Kalid would grow to eventually accept his destiny as the next ruler.

Kalid, though, would wander through the jungles never adhering to court protocol and principles.

He spoke the truth all the time and was always natural. He wore only his skirt and sandals – no armor, no decorations of a prince, and he even cut off his mane of hair, a thing that a man of his age no longer did.

Boutage tried his best to match his brother. In all things, he competed and did his best so long as Khalid was his rival. He wanted the kind of respect Kalid had and he wanted to win the kind of admiration from Suwan that she had for Kalid. Though it was Boutage Suwan loved through and through, *as he was*, it was not enough for him. He wanted the same effect that Kalid had – to make hearts open, to make people take in gasping breaths by his words. He wanted it! Why shouldn’t he have this?

How am I any different? What makes him so special? He wondered during his darker moods, and his moods grew darker as they became grown men.

‘The only difference is that you still believe in a *‘you.’* Kalid told him flatly as they fenced and Boutage became enraged at his own inability to control the outcome, to win. In the throne room of their father, Kalid pointed his curved blade at his brother who was pinned against a statue of two giant tigers. He tried to ambush Kalid in sport, a plan that seemed flawless, and yet here he was again defeated.

“This... sword play of *us* is only the tip of the iceberg, brother, for the warrior’s heart is always surrendering more to the highest source, always *more and more*. Your tantrums... well, that is *your* pushing the source away, throwing it off, trying to be the *you* that *you* believe *you* are which is... not...well... *YOU* ahahahahahah!!!”

He gasped, laughing at himself.

He let his brother up, and held him by the shoulders, kissing his face. Together they walked the lower dark halls of the palace dijh, upward and beyond the torches that led them into the main living areas.

"You have to remember *love*, Boutage. Such stubborn belief in your boundaries of self is so dangerous to love. It holds her hostage! It is the voice that destroys a child's innocence, her trust. It refuses a hand to the weak, has no humor, no patience and cannot share the heart completely, *ever*. Ever!" Kalid said with grinning eyes. How he shinned!

Boutage sulked, not wanting to listen, holding only onto his disappointment with his fencing, his beliefs, his anger at Kalid, his jealousy.

"Can't you sense it my brother, don't you see your betrayal of *our* love, right now by your stance right now? Can you not release this?"

Kalid, slung an arm around him and they walked the brighter upper passageways of the dihj. Kalid scooped up a banana from off of a low table they passed. He peeled the fragrant fruit and stuffed a small piece into his brother's mouth.

Kalid spoke: "Boutage, all these years, we have been climbing the *largest* mountain together, as brothers, not as enemies. As we climb we see so much together, so much beauty, mountains, changing colors of the vegetation, and we see so many animals. However, up here, on our mountain, the air is thinner and our hearts beat faster, our limbs

begin to tire quicker. Boutage... we *must* make it to the top, but... *oh*... we begin to doubt that we can, and begin to pout, shrink away."

"We see the surroundings less and less as we worry more and more. We notice more of a problem and less of the beauty which is right before our eyes, the beauty which loves us, smiles at us, accepts us fully and calls us to keep climbing."

And Kalid smiled at Boutage, and Boutage sank his head onto his brother's shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I have made another mistake." He said.

"It is ok. As we climb... the tests are greater, the stakes *higher*. It is so exciting! All you must do, is be honest, admit your mistake and return to heart. This is what I'm showing you, the only *real* lesson of our tale. The swords... they are *junk*... secondary! Do you understand?"

Boutage nodded. Together they laughed and quickly ran out the southern passageway to wade in the nearby ponds.

Then came a day when Boutage appeared able to match Kalid, they danced together two swords ecstatically glimmering and clashing beneath the sun as they fenced by a nearby river. It seemed endless, blissful, and through it all Kalid brought the best out of his brother, and pushed him further.

Kalid teased him with an exacting humor that spurned his brother forward, higher, faster, and fiercer. It seemed endless, ecstatic! Boutage marveled, and tears streamed down his face as something seemed to happen. The edges of himself expanded and intelligence greater than himself moved him, guided him. There was nowhere Kalid stepped that Boutage did not feel as his own stepping.

There was a joyfull cry that seemed to belong to no-one as a personal being, and yet was experienced by the two. And this feeling grew more and more, until Boutage felt that he could let go completely to the intelligence that awakened him, that gave him sight like no other, the sight of diamond eyes! With them, he saw himself as the nearby river, the animals watching, the birds, insects, grass, trees and rocks all simultaneously breathing as one, without a mind of conflict, everything in perfect agreement, without *tension* of a singular identity.

And prior to all of this was the whitest point of light like a sun, his and his brothers *same heart*, as Kalid engaged in the art of combat Being Everything, right now. Thier swords were lightening beneath the clouds, cleverly dancing, arching, twirling and spinning and the two ducked, dodged, swung, blocked, kicked and jumped throughout the air!

Suddenly though Boutage became afraid that he might make a mistake. The vision then began to collapse in on itself. Though he tried to will himself back into the state, his mind wrapped itself around him, and he was again Boutage. He fought on and Kalid teased him.

“Lost something I see!”

After awhile, Boutage became sluggish, raw and agitated as he saw that his brother was still not nearly as tired as he was.

He became depressed and emotionally contracted, knowing that he still had a long way to go before he was *ever* as good as Kalid.

Kalid, sensing his brothers dulled emotional state – the state Boutage chose to believe in, in that moment-- knocked Boutage into the river, to cool off, to shock him, and the strong current carried Boutage away toward a great water fall. Boutage did not know it but Kalid, rushed to his aid

immediately and was able to catch Boutage, though the course was challenging for Kalid.

He pulled Boutage onto the slippery rocks. Kalid was weary from the struggle as he gave all of his energy away in order to save his brother. He laughed, said: "What a time!" and he panted. He bent over gasping as he stood on the slippery rock. Boutage sulked for a moment as he sat then looked behind him to see his brother standing beneath the yellow glow of the sun, radiant. Boutage's brow sank, and his eyes became dark. He was angry.

Boutage summoned his remaining strength to knock Kalid off his rock and into the crashing water fall below. He watched his brother's body hit the rocks, his face peering upward in agony of such a bitter betrayal.

Boutage blinked his eyes and came to the realization of what he had done.

You must remember that I love you...

He knew now that he failed most painfully. He knew that he forgot his brother's love. He failed. He could not believe what he had done, he would not believe. It was too horrible to see, too awful!

No! No!

He put his hands to his head and shook it. No! This was not happening! This was not him doing this! This was not him! No!

The animals in the forest howled and cried at the death of Kalid, and Boutage's heart sank even further, for not only did he kill his brother, but he wounded the many friends of the Master.

Internally though, Boutage convinced himself that Kalid provoked him. He lied to himself to justify the murder.

Boutage told his father and wife a lie, that Kalid fell and that it was an innocent accident, a dangerous stunt gone wrong, but every night Boutage heard in the forest the voice of his brother, a reflection of guilt calling through the forest; *You must remember that I love you...*

For years, it did not end, and when Boutage took the throne of his father, the voice of his guilt haunted him every second.

Suwan awoke Boutage up from nightmares, but he would never confide in her. Being the second oldest son, Boutage knew he would become Tah and should not be. It was a sham, a lie, an awful mistake, but Boutage would not confess.

Kalid appeared in Boutage's dreams, as if he were eager to tell him the punch line to a great joke, but Boutage refused to recognize him, to receive the truth waiting to be revealed through Boutage's unforgivable deed.

Soon Kalid's forgiving face vanished entirely from Boutage's memory so that the pain of what he had done could be forgotten. Because of his avoiding Kalid in the subtle realm, Boutage would instead dream of a tiger within the mists of the jungle, hunting him, invisible to him, waiting for the opportunity to exact revenge upon him.

During his worst fits, Boutage or *now*, Khoorlrhani-Tah ran into the jungle in the night, a madman, pleading.

"Please, go away!! Please make it stop," But never would he offer up the truth, not even to himself. The ghosts of the jungle would haunt him and he would spit angrily,

"I am the Tah!!! I... command you all; leave me alone!!! ," and the jackals and snakes, and bats, would laugh at him, all jeering *You must remember that I love you!!!*

To him, from that point on everything in nature seemed to spite Khoorlrhani-Tah, and each year the Tah became more and more estranged from the

truth, the more unnatural he became. He slept in the daytime and wandered during the night. His wife Suwan worried and tried to comfort him, but to no avail. He began to hear other voices from the lower realms, entities that wanted to bargain with him, ones that would offer him protection from his haunts, but for a price.

He could not bear this, but to face *himself*... this was too great. *No! I did nothing. No, Khalid jumped for an eagle feather. I... t..told (gasp)... told him it was dangerous.*

He fooled himself, and then fooled everyone else. His council consoled him. The sisters hung themselves on him. The brothers held him up, believed in him. Suwan woke him from his dreams of the tiger and kissed his tear stained eyes. He could not sleep.

I never sleep! I must not... for I must... I must protect our lands from the tigers. The kingdom is in danger, projection upon projection, lie upon lie.

One night, while wearily sitting near a bog, the Tah made the most unfortunate utterance. He intended it to be heard by one of the bargaining souls, one among the disappointed and passed that collected in the swamp.

"Protect me from my brother. Make it go away. I will do *anything*."

It was said then that he opened up a hole in the earth and the two black asps, Fear, and Deception slithered from beneath a rock and appeared to him as a man with yellow eyes. It bargained with him, writhing within the Tah's dreams beneath the moonlight.

"In return for quieting your demons, you must take me into your home. You must make space for me there. Trust me. I will guide you, and your brother's voice will forever be silenced."

"Who are you?" Khoorlrhani-Tah asked afraid of the apparition.

The image of the creature bent beneath the moonlight, and it wove patterns of light before the Tah's eyes, and fed itself on his fear.

"Do you not recognize the face of your ancestor?"

"I do not." Khoorlrhani-Tah sternly said and put his hand to his blade, ready to cut the head off of this man.

The creature drew its hands upward in defense and said,

"Oh great chief, I am the servant of the most ancient Tah's. I am called Bulaja." Its voice hissed as it

uttered the lie of its own name, and the dead bog swallowed up the sound of it.

Khoorlrhani-Tah's eyes widened. He remembered the name from childhood, a mythical name. Bulaja was the name of a great sorcerer whom only his great grandfather told stories about.

"Surely, my name was passed down in your great lineage, oh fearsome Tah?"

Khoorlrhani-Tah stood, was shocked and in disbelief. Bulaja, his grandfather told him, was the great witch-doctor who killed the twin snakes, Mandee and Jandee, Fear and Deception and cut them in half with a bolt of lightning. The old chief only told his grandson these stories to ease his and his brother's fear of snakes in the jungle. Surely this was just a child's tale, a myth, a lie as were the tales of Ashuta the goddess! And still, here was this man, appearing from the bog, not entirely human.

Whenever a man tells a lie, there are Mandee and Jandee to eat it.

And Mandee makes a man not hear his own lies,

and Jandee makes him spit out another.

The twin snakes, from under rocks they slither and tie

'round man to strangle and smother

—Khoorlrhani Children's song

Chapter Seven: The Curse

Who was this *Bulaja*? He was an apparition, an entity, and like all entities, forgot that he was in truth the same *one heart* as Ashuta, as Paen, as Kalid. He like, all the *selves* and *others*, forgot he was only *bright-reality-of-the-divine-one-of-many-names*. Bulaja comprised, by conviction of self, the dual aspect of what is untrue, separateness, the two folded error Mande and Jande. Because Bulaja, the sorcerer, amassed personal power during his lifetime of occult power-mad dreaming, he could not release himself to the bright One who could outshine the spell of the personal.

Thusly Bulaja, who was only comprised of the twin snakes of deception and fear, even though he no longer had a body, meddled in the realm of the physical and, produced for the Tah gold, silver, beads of pearls, gems and enticing ideas of personal conquest.

Bulaja performed a number of *miracles* and helped Khoorlrhani-Tah to scheme, and create a grand order that none had ever seen as he made the Tah's mind calculating and clever. Bulaja, for many, many

years, did everything the Tah demanded, and in the end, Khoorlrhani-Tah, a much duller man, believed that this *must* be good work. Still, though, there was something dangerous about this *Bulaja*, and the Tah did not welcome him into his home yet, not completely. He merely returned to the bog nightly to test the sorcerer, to weigh the risks, and then went back to the safety of his palace.

Irritated, Mandeë hissed to her sister,

"When will this Tah finally be ours?"

"When will he feed us his great tasting lies?"

asked Mandeë,

"Patience, let him return safely to his towers,"

"for must envail his eyes."

answered Jandee,

Mandeë, queen of fear, flicked her black tongue, and followed her sister into the waters of the bog.

"I will penetrate the lakes of the Tahs dreams,"

said Mandeë, fear.

"Only after I make his world other than what it seems."

said Jandee, deception.

The Tah did not know that the more attention he gave to these creatures in the bog, the less he knew himself. Bulaja told him nothing but lies, and the more of them the Tah listened to and based his reality on, the more lies he told to his subjects who in turn spoke more untruths, thusly feeding the beasts.

The more the Tah beheld the creature's strange appearance and listened to its voice, fear and deception poisoned his mind, convinced him to be a self, separate from Kalid, his beloved brother.

The Tah foolishly hoped that Bulaja would help him, but he did not know that he was staring into the eyes of a force whose only purpose was to drive man further and further away from the true power of selflessness.

The demons haunted him with their illusions and reinforced his ego sense, ensnaring him in their trap.

"My dreams are worse, *great* sorcerer." The Tah said, at his weakest point of reason.

"Do tell me these dreams, good Tah. Let me *sooooth* you."

"I dream of a predator concealed within a great fog. I cannot see it, but it can see me, with large green eyes. "

"Ahhhhhhh." Bulaja cooed in an all-knowing manner, proud of its own conjuring.

"Do you know what it is?" The Tah pleaded.

"Yes, beneath its growl is the utterance of your name." Bulaja said, knowing this as he was the conjurer of the dream.

"Yes," Khoorlrhani-Tah replied.

"And she stalks you, but never strikes, and she waits, ready."

"Yes. Who is it?" Khoorlrhani-Tah rasped

"And her voice a mere growling conveys a promise of revenge."

"Who is it, oh great Bulaja!?"

"Ahh... *nkosi*. This is the curse of the ancestors. It is the tiger mist, flowing toward your kingdom. I have humbly offered myself on behalf of the ancients. I am unworthy of a place in your court *nkosi*, understandably so... it is just that... well." Bulaja began.

"Speak, sorcerer!" Khoorlrhani-Tah implored.

"The ancestors are offended by the state of the kingdom. They feel unrepresented by your arms distance stance *against* me. I fear your dreams indicate that Tiaga, the queen tiger will ally herself

with your enemies, the Mayak. She will dispatch them forward in a horrible mist into the great circle."

"But I am a good Chief!" Khoorlrhani-Tah pleaded, "My people have all that they need. How have I offended the ancestors so?" The Tah asked, now blind, unaware.

"Yes, but you have made them unsafe because you will not confess to me of your *grave, grave* mistake *Nkosi*. Now it seems the Mayak and their Tah are to be favored among the tribes. It is not too late though! You must act quickly."

Khoorlrhani-Tah avoided the words Bulaja demanded.

"What is this about Tiaga? We have long since mastered the tigers. Tiaga and her mists are but a myth! How could what you are saying be possible?" The Tah smirked.

"Once we were one with the beasts. Once the circle was illuminated and the beasts only took what we offered them. But then you changed that," Bulaja said

A blast of air escaped Khoorlrhani-Tah's nostrils, and his eyebrows bent as he leaned to hear what the great liar was telling him.

"How did...I change this?" He asked.

"You killed Tiaga's son... Kalid."

"Her... her *son*." The Tah managed a small laugh, but his brow bent. He was perplexed.

"In your youth, you killed the tiger heart, the Master." Bulaja pointed at him.

"No... No... he provoked me." The Tah gasped, and sought shelter from the penetrating gaze before him. The asps ate the lies that were spat from his mouth, and then prodded him for more.

"You murdered him out of jealousy." Bulaja stabbed, digging for each tender and tasty denial of it from Khoorlrhani-Tah.

The memory of it was jarring, as it came fully into view before his mind's eyes.

"No! I..." Tears streamed down his face,

"No I tell you. He tried to kill me! It was *he* that..."

"You killed the *Master – the son of the tiger!*" Bulaja hissed and the asps joyfully ate all that was false, coming from their victim.

The Tah sank to his knees, crushed. He only sobbed denial after denial.

"No... *no no no*."

"...And now, the mother of the Master, raises an army and seeks revenge." Bulaja said.

Bulaja only manipulated and, in even his telling the truth to Khoorlhani-Tah, enslaved him. He did not tell the Tah the truth to free him, or to inform him of the ultimate truth which was that all characters in the play of life *were already* Ashuta, the Goddess animating, playing, entertaining, and dreaming everyone. The demon sorcerer only fed on the Tah's energy, and consumed his attention.

The witch-doctor watched the Tah, his one thousand mile stare into the future, watched the injection of fear over take the Tah as Bulaja's deception finally made Khoorlhani-Tah see more and more as Bulaja saw, as a separate one, *more and more* so.

"Oh great ancestor," The Tah gasped a broken gasp. "What shall I do? Please won't you tell me?"

"Oh Nkosi, we must defend! *Defend! Defend!*" The demon implored.

"Please, Bulaja, great ancestor. Come into my home, the heart of my kingdom and advise me. Help me defend my home, *my* Kingdom, *my* life." The Tah surrendered to the entity, the false god of his separateness.

And over time Bulaja's advice to Khoorlrhani-Tah was given more and more, and was relied upon more and more. And the Kingdom benefited from it, by way of more gold and more diamond mines, by way of a large army, by way of *more* agriculture, by way of *more* industry, by way of alliances with other powerful tribes, but in reality it was harmed by a lack of wisdom, of humanity, of simplicity and of heart, of the mandate of love, of truth as personal motive was stimulated, and personal validation was demand of everyone *more, more and more*.

The men of Arkaya's minds became more and more insatiable as their sense of individuality, their desire for status, recognition and a sense of purpose became stronger and stronger.

On the surface, Bulaja's *word* appeared like sound advice, practical, and obvious, but as the Tah could not hear the voice of his own heart, he did not know his own agony as deeply as he should.

He did not feel the clutter of his rich life—could not penetrate the dream he was living. He was blind to see the seeds of ambition planted within the land, by his own hands, as he strove to protect himself from the mist that came to him *only* in his darkest dreams but never came in reality.

Chapter Eight: The Black Diamond

Khoorlrhani-Tah over time held the council of his family less and less, as his intimates were cutoff more and more. He spoke with the forked tongue of politics, as the vocabulary of his heart diminished.

Suwan would come to her husband in the night. She was curvaceous and had the scent of wild flowers in her hair. Each night, she brought her husband a gift—flowers, fruits, beaded works—all from her walks in the gardens and in the hills.

The Tah, thinking her simple, ignored her. She would wrap her arms around him, to melt his seriousness away, to return him to the humor he once had. The Tah, thinking her irritating, rose to walk beneath his personal haunting moon in the night sky.

One evening, Suwan, hurt, but not giving up, followed her husband out of their room and spoke to him in their gardens.

"Boutage... your father *lived*. Your brother *lived*. You *must* live. Come to bed my love and..."

The Tah, thinking her out of line turned and pointed a stiff finger at her, paralyzing her with fright.

“Do not ever call me by that name, woman! I am your Tah, not your stud! Now leave me be!”

Her large eyes wide with shock did not faze him. The broken hearted expression that followed did not make him rethink himself. Her turning away quietly and obediently meant nothing to him. He no longer noticed anything, only his stately and private internal war.

He had four sons, young Boutage — his first-born, named after himself, Minot his second, then Kuba, and Seleth. They would grow to become fine warriors,

“And warriors your wife must bring to you,”

Bulajaa warned,

“For the nation must be strong with men to lead armies to defend the great circle!”

Khoorlrhani-Tah, was hard on his sons. He often ridiculed them and pushed them to be tough. His first son was pressured so much, that he became what the villagers would later call, the ‘black-diamond.’ Young Boutage was tough, exactly the way his father intended him to be on the surface, and yet beneath there was an intense desire for

acceptance that often times spurned the rage that others feared and considered un-natural.

Suwan, noticed that the boy stopped smiling at age fourteen – much too early. She pleaded with her husband to be gentler with him, but the Tah did not. He often times hit him and goaded him into conflicts. By the time of his adolescence, young Boutage was numb, and cold.

A common story about young Boutage was that he was once sent with a war party to cut off a small band of Mayak raiders who had burned a town in Tanaga. Boutage was sixteen at that time.

The war party was dispatched from Kamina but did not return for days. Nandee, the Tah's sister who was a skilled tracker was sent to investigate. She rode back to Arkaya, to sorrowfully report that the bodies of the party were discovered along a river in the foothills.

The Mayak had ambushed them. Nandee did not, however, find young Boutage's body. He was assumed dead after many more days passed without any sign of him. Suwan was broken hearted and could not bear losing her first-borne son. She lit candles for him nightly in hopes that he would return to her.

Khoorlrhani-Tah grieved inwardly but outwardly, he maintained a face of resolute sternness – as advised by Bulaja.

It was said that ten days passed, and then a lone warrior was brought to the palace. It was young Boutage, boldly riding back into the great circle. He was now a hard and solemn figure, the black diamond produced by the tension of his ordeal, the ordeal of life within his family and that had within the Mayak camp.

Though he did not show it, the site of Boutage horrified Khoorlrhani-Tah as his son entered the court where he and his wife sat. His son's body was scared and beaten and Boutage appeared to have fought desperately, to escape his captors.

Around his neck and wrists were ropes of vengeful trophies so horrific that Suwan, turned away and cried.

"Look at what you are creating!!" Suwan yelled at Khoorlrhani-Tah.

Refusing to hear her, to lose face, Khoorlrhani-Tah merely mumbled.

"Yes...and so I see you are finally a man,"

Chapter Nine: Suwan's Prayer

Suwan loved her sons. When they all were very young, she often brought them out with her secretly up into the hills and by the streams and waterfalls to help her with the washing of clothes. It was quite a walk, but the beauty along the way – the deep dark and fragrant greenery along the deer trails cutting through the thickness and the spots where giant meadows opened up to reveal the silvery mountains in the grand distances under the bluest skies-- made it worthwhile. Suwan would walk with the children, unaided by any palace body guards who she managed to shrug off, maid servants who insisted that she not work. She dodged them a countless number of times to be alone, alone, *alone*.

Suwan loved the forest. These walks were her love affairs. She often dreamt of their comforting embraces and longed often for the depths of their great silence. In them, she felt no fear, and held onto no problems, not for long at least. Problems seemed to evaporate, to be swept from her, washed away by the open purity of nature. In the thick of Arkaya, Suwan was happy. Suwan noticed everything, the butterflies, the bright moss on rocks, the thickness of

red bark, and red mud, the colorful patterns of beetle wings, and the way the sun right now was dropping though the treetops, falling on bright spots of ferns on the jungle floor, and the way dust and insects danced within the beams.

It was cool beneath the tall sequoia's and hot in the open meadows, and her sons laughed and joked along the way, happy, and simple, to their spot, a rocky place near ponds and water falls. Suwan carried a large bamboo woven basket on her head, and a large leather water bag was slung over her neck and across her shoulders. Periodically she shared fruit and water with the boys as they took a small break to cool off.

Young Boutage and Minot carried baskets and Kuba carried Selet, the youngest one. They bathed themselves in the small waterfalls they passed. Suwan wanted to be out of the palace, and beneath the sun, for she wanted to hear the laughter of her children, to bask in their innocence, to enjoy and care for them freely beyond the complicated influences of her husband, and beyond the foolish minds of the men altogether. As she washed the linen at a cool spot within the shade, she hummed to herself as the boys played and played.

Later, Suwan watched them, their skinny black bodies dancing as the clothing hung from

overhanging oak limbs. She would study their natures and smile, at how they moved, young, and ecstatic. She smiled.

Motherhood was hard, caring for them was hard, teaching them was hard, but she loved them so much, that she was carried far beyond any complaint of it, so far that she enjoyed her service to them. She loved watching them grow and learn.

In Suwan's hair, there were many beads, the kind she used to make when she was a teenager. She was very good at it, very creative, and she made so many beads, that she often wove them into the hair or the clothing of her friends, her cousins and nieces. She thought that if she ever had a girl child, she would braid her hair with them. She would like that, she thought, to have girls *and* boys to care for. She often thought of her children as her little beads, her art, whom she examined with great pride. She wanted the best for them.

A dark thought rose, one she had hoped would not haunt her today as she looked at her son, Minot. She began to wonder about the man she married. She recalled a conversation had weeks before that disturbed her.

"You do love me, do you not, Suwan," Khoorlrhani-Tah asked her, holding her hand rigidly, his eyes

narrow, red from smoking the day away to avoid himSelf.

"With all my heart Khoorlrhani-Tah," she responded, afraid, as those words did not warm him the slightest.

What has happened to him, she wondered.

"Then you do *intend* to bring me another son?" he *enquired*.

She was shocked. How could he ask such a stupid thing? Who was this stupid, powerful, and dangerous fool she married? If she bore a son it was the will of nature, didn't he know this?

Suwan saw the menfolk in court, really saw them, the assumptions they all agreed upon as truth! She saw how they justified their maltreatment of women, and how they believed themselves to be superior. It grew worse after Kalid's death. She thought for many years that Boutage would never seek to *own* her, never reduce her to the status of *cattle*, but here he was treating her like some kind of trained and pregnant mule!

She knew now that he only came to her in the night to produce princes, to command the armies he insisted upon raising, to extend his will. When she first laid eyes on him, she was captured by an open heart that served his brother.

What has happened?

She worried for her boys. She felt trapped. She watched them, and looked for any clue, any hint of how best to protect them, to prepare them for what was to come in their formative years. Already the Tah began to frown on them. He was cold to them, and regarded their delight, the smiles on their faces as *too feminine*. He poked at them and inspected them like a mehra trader would his live stock.

Suwan thought young Boutage was the strong one, but she noticed how he looked to his younger brother, Minot, for his confidence. Minot was the flexible one and hid his bravery well. He stayed out of trouble and out of reach from his father. He was clever she thought. She knew Minot could see that she was not happy. In the evenings after his parents argued, Minot often comforted her, flinging his small arms around her.

"Let's go to the woods mother, where we are happy."

Kuba was a joker and did anything for a laugh—to be loved, to be accepted. Seleth, the babe, could not yet talk, but never cried. In her belly, another child wriggled and kicked. Suwan hoped another son might calm her husband. She even intended to pray

to the goddess for this, advice that the maidservants suggested to her.

Instead, wishing only to accept her life, she prayed this;

I know you are here great mother. My eyes fail me, but I know you are here. You are all things, and I love you. I only ask that my sons know you in their hearts that they see beyond what these men may do to their minds. Help me Goddess, Ashuta. Help me protect them. I will give you my very life, every breath, every thought I will dedicate to you..

Suwan removed a small pouch of her best beads made of gold and placed it near the river as an offering.

The boys played, splashing water and throwing rocks, and swinging sticks. Young Boutage's voice was screeching, a pre adolescent tone and he carried Seleth on his hip across the rocks and pursued Minot. The dark thoughts left Suwan, and as she held her eyes closed for a moment she smiled at the sounds of her boys at play. She rested against the cool welcoming side of a grey boulder. She then became sleepy and drifted off.

As though she had never blinked an eye, Suwan watched a large frog hop up out of the stream and onto a large stone before her. Suwan studied it, and

was taken aback that it wore a tiny little crown made of gold. She burst into laughter.

"What's so funny?!" the frog asked, making Suwan laugh even harder covering her mouth.

"Is that any way to greet a Goddess?" Ashuta belched,

Suwan only laughed harder, and again the frog belched.

Suwan's eyes were full of joyful tears as the frog kept belching,

"What, you don't like my outfit? Blarrp!"

And it did not stop until Suwan was drunk on laughter at which point it was no longer a frog wearing a crown, but instead a woman wearing the armor of a warrior.

She was stunning, her leather armor white and studded with gold. Her hair was braided and beaded with gold at the ends and her boots were made of white suede. Her helmet was silver, and her black hair was drawn through an opening at the top.

Suwan gasped, and wept as the awesome and sweet memory of the Goddess returned to her. Ashuta took her hands and pulled Suwan upward onto her feet. She embraced her tightly like an old friend, a

sister, a daughter and laughed. Her heart beat in Suwans.

Suwan melted away and she kissed Ashuta's face and remembered!

"You are so beautiful, I remember you! You are so beautifull!" she gushed.

"Not bad for an ole toad, eh? I would have brought my sword, but I lent it out." The goddess joked, and Suwan laughed, thoroughly brightened by Ashuta's humor.

They sat down as Suwan wiped her tears. She could not believe it! Ashuta appeared to her. The boys kept playing in the background as though nothing else occurred. Ashuta removed her helmet and then took Suwan's hand back into hers. Her eyes were light brown, almost hazel, and they captured the sunlight that beamed through the treetops. She looked into Suwan deeply, smiled and then laughed.

"None of these problems really matter *now* do they?"

"No," Suwan sniffed, "Oh, how could I *ever* forget you."

"Well, now, that's the name of the game my darling, isn't it. You, as every being, are here to remember

Me, who is only your very self playing a mischievous game with *you*. “

Ahusta winked at Suwan, and said, “Tag! You’re not it.”

She laughed touching Suwan’s arm. Her smile was wide, her gaze regal and her laugh most genuine and pure. For a moment Ashuta re-manifested but in Suwan’s image, appearing as a dark and young woman, lovely with large brown eyes. She smiled richly back at herself.

“See?” Ashuta laughed.

Suwan giggled, as she looked around and saw all boundaries of herself disappear and lose all meaning. The story of herself as a trapped woman seemed to be absorbed by Ashuta’s radiance, rubbing out the lines of distinction where problems were created, made real, given value, and held together only by fear.

“There is no real problem to solve, my daughter, there is only remembering Me, loving Me. You are only here to love Me, to remember Me in the best and worst of times of your life. That is the game we’ve played all along. Ashuta raised her eyebrows, her eyes becoming comical,

“...remember?” She asked.

"I do remember now," Suwan said recounting the many *many* times Ashuta appear to her in dreams, "But as soon as you leave... I will forget everything."

"No, love, my being here proves you wrong. You remember more and more, until your destiny is played out, the destiny of seeing yourself as none other than consciousness, Me." The goddess kicked her now bare feet in the water and played with her braided hair.

"Thanks for the beads. They're beautiful," The Goddess said.

Suwan smiled and nodded. She loved Ashuta so much that she could not take her eyes off of her.

They sat quiet for a moment watching the boys.

"They are really cute kids." Ashuta said, and Suwan smiled, looking at Minot's large grin and dark protruding belly.

"Hey!" said Ashuta, "I really loved your prayer as well. Usually folks offer the kind where they ask me for things, and then they don't even bother to give me anything in return. It really sucks, but yours was very sweet."

Suwan only gazed at her, smiling.

"So..." Ashuta sighed, and put on a serious face,
"Your husband, eh?"

Like a fly drawn to a flame, Suwan returned to the bright and burning attraction of character, her story of Suwan, the trapped wife of the Tah. The emotions followed thoughts in relationship to the suggestion that she was again Suwan, a separate individual, and not the goddess, who was all things.

"He is... *mad*." Suwan gasped, "And I don't know what he will do when the baby is borne."

"Ah... so you know already." Ashuta asked.

"It is a girl, yes. I hear her singing, and see her in dreams. Her name is Anya, she told me."

They were quiet for some time. The sounds of water and children filled the misty air.

"Yeah, men are stupid, eh?" Ashuta chuckled,
"Well... what to do."

"What do I do?" Suwan asked.

"I say, do your duty as *Tas*, Queen, as a mother, but stick close to your sister-in-law."

"It is impossible! He is violent, unreasonable a tyrant, I cannot..."

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh... *now*...do as I say, and he will never lay a hand on you again, don't do what I say and entangle yourself further."

Suddenly, in a flash Suwan saw the lines and scenarios, the consequences a woman in her time would pay for divorcing her husband, her King in his time of need. She saw the minds of men reacting; judging in their narrow bands of brainwashed reality, she saw women who like sheep followed their men in tearing down her life to justify their own adherence to a slavish existence, as property. It struck a sharp chord within her. Suddenly Suwan saw clearly how hellish the culture of men really was, and how it was moving forward unconsciously by the work of her own husband. She saw the roles of women being shaped more and more, formed by the Tah's demand on the men folk, the rhetoric to stimulate their sense of importance and their lust for war and conquest.

Then she saw Nandee, her anger, her clear vision, her intelligent actions against the cultural programming of women. Suwan understood what Nandee represented as she saw Ashuta before her, dressed in the garb of a warrior. Nandee was her way out. Nandee was a chess piece of the goddess, for her daughters Anya, and Lenya, and for her sons as well.

Suwan knew then that she could only play her part which was given.

"So now you understand?" Ashuta asked.

Suwan nodded.

"Ok. Good. Well... I must go my love. You know where to find me..." and she winked,

"In your heart."

With that the goddess turned back into the frog with the golden crown. She belched.

Suwan nodded and waved as the frog plopped back into the stream and swam away.

During these days at the streams, the sun would rise – orange and purple skies, and large palms hanging over the reflective silver surfaces of nearby ponds – and then the sun would set to a deep amber and yellow as fire flies flickered silently against the darkness falling into the jungle. Suwan felt a small cold and wet hand against her face gently patting her cheek.

"Mumma!" Minot's voice chimed beckoning Suwan to awaken.

"Mumma!" He smelled like mint leaves. She smiled and awoke.

Chapter Ten: Nandee the Warrior

She was called the *little tiger*. Nandee, Kalid's sister was fierce. As a child the boys often tried to break her, make her *like a girl*, but she wouldn't have it. She fought, and was never afraid to lose. She risked everything for her sense of freedom, demanded it, and defended it. When puberty was on her, and the women folk came to her to put her under the knife, she fought so viciously. They would never cut away her womanhood, never! She pulled the hair out of her aunts scalps, kicked shins, and bit the hands that would dare try to scrape away at her vagina with a knife!

The uncles came and they tried, and she beat them with a stick. She made it clear to them,

"To fucking hell with tradition! I am already a woman!" She screamed

They could not handle her. They could not even approach her in her sleep, for she was the most alert warrior ever seen, next to her brother, Kalid.

She fought like him, as if he showed her how to defend herself, to be clever, to be direct. The

relatives were displeased, and suspected that Kalid was teaching Nandee, a girl, to be a warrior who could rival any man! This was not acceptable, was not the way of Khoorlrhani. Did Kalid not know this?!

Kalid knew that when Nandee was of age, they would come for her, the aunts who had lost their freedom long ago and were coming for Nandee. To the aunts and grandmothers, they were doing the right thing, doing what was expected of them—to cooperate, to agree, bow their heads as the yoke was placed around their neck by their own hand. After this honored circumcision, Nandee would have a lifetime of servitude to look forward to, of serving the sexual desires of men, serving their ideas of supremacy.

“Not my sister,” Kalid said to Nandee as they often times walked together in the woods,

“You will not let them, and then no other woman will be harmed in this way.” He told her, and he trained her, showed her all his clever tricks, but mainly encouraged her to be herself.

“The woman will not be able to tell you who you really are, neither will the men. Not even I can tell you who you are. You must simply know this yourself, and never let anyone obstruct that.”

And Nandee listened, kissed her brother's cheek and did what he said.

They came for her, and she gave them hell! They tried to convince her that if she did not do this, she will never be accepted by a man.

"To hell with men!" She shouted.

They told her that she would not become a woman unless she was initiated.

In the dark corner of the dijh, after it was all done and all, aunts and uncles alike, had given up on the circumcision of Nandee, there was a laughing youthful voice. It was the sixteen year old Kalid, hiding in a basket that sat in the far end of Nandeeds room. She recognized the laugh and went to the basket and removed its top. He popped up, laughing hysterically and she did as well as she threw her arms around him and kissed his cheek.

"You were here all the time!" She said. Her skin was light brown, and her eyes were dark. She twisted her hair like a boy, gnarled nappy and stubby. Her face was red from exertion.

"I wouldn't have missed this!" Kalid laughed.

"I did well, didn't I." she gushed, proud.

"Oh... my. Did you see the look on aunt Tesara?" Kalid howled.

"That will teach her to take me lightly."

They laughed and laughed and Kalid, stepping out of the basket put his arm around his sister.

"Very well little tiger," Kalid said, proud.

The next day, father spoke to Kalid,

"Son, have you been teaching Nandee your secrets of hands and feet? It is against our tradition," Bahju said, stroking his white beard, and smoking tobacco from a long pipe.

"No, I have not, Khoorlrani-Tah. Nandee is merely the *little tiger*. She is only like her brother in this way."

The Tah laughed and coughed, and winked at his son. He then addressed the complaining aunts and uncles and the official folk in the court.

"You see then. My son has not done as you accuse, and... if Nandee sees no value in this *ahh*... women's ritual, then I see no value in it either. Since she is horrified by it, I forbid it. This is now law. So now onto other issues concerning the Mayak..."

As Nandee learned and grew, she became more vocal in the court, and became an influence for many women who were not pleased with how things were going.

"Why should I not hunt?"

“Why can’t men serve their children as we do?”
“Who says that my place is only at home?” These were questions that women were asking as Nandee rode on her mehra, wore leather armor, hunted caribou with her bow, and tracked Mayak in the northern jungles. Only those with the sharpest eyes, noticed Kalid in her.

Not even Boutage knew that Kalid, his brother, indeed taught their sister, against all traditions and laws that forbade women to become warriors. It was a great secret kept for years and years. As the siblings grew well into their adolescence, Boutage noticed Nandee’s fire as did everyone else who disregarded her as an eccentric that was not to be taken serious. It was not until right before Khalid’s death that Boutage came to know that he was entirely wrong about his sister.

One day Boutage decided that he might wander in the woods alone. He traveled deep into the jungles where his mind was absorbed by the quietness, by the greenness of it all. As he probed deeper, he walked along a long stream that led to a giant water fall. In the shallow lake, there was Nandee, holding the curved blade of her own sword, much smaller than Boutage’s but fashioned perfectly for her.

The sight of her was a shock as Boutage watched her slowly practicing with it, as if she were listening to

someone instruct her, show her, teach her, and she, with her eyes closed, nodded, smiled, and moved in the knee-deep water. She seemed to be actually fighting, moving randomly, and then stopping to hear something unheard by Boutage.

Her form was perfect, delicate, and yet strong, almost masterful. Boutage shrugged it off and approached her. Nandee continued, swinging patiently, holding the blade high, extending her other arm to one side, lifting a knee upward and holding the pose, water dripping from her extended toes as she swung again. Boutage became tight in his chest as he saw this. *It could not be. She knows nothing.*

"What are you doing, little one?" He huffed.

Nandee opened her eyes and turned to see Boutage standing at the edge of the pond. He had a smirk on his face that immediately put her off.

"What do you think?" She replied.

"Playing with Kalid's knives?" He again bit in the way that drew her to anger.

Nandee took a breath and then let it go. Though she would keep the secret between her and Kalid, she would not hide or dumb herself down for this oaf.

"No. This is my sword. I made it." She said flatly and could sense Boutage's reaction as he took in the workmanship of Nandee's blade, a solid handle with turquoise stones and diamonds embedded into it, the blade many folded. He drew a fake smile across his face, and nodded.

"Come home, Nandee." He said patronizingly, waving her toward him with his curling of the fingers.

"Who do you think you're talking to?" Nandee, said, trying not to lose her temper. It was like a presence within her, the same one that was teaching her a moment ago was calming her.

Boutage then moved into the pond, wadding to go get her, throw her over his shoulder and take her home, the way he often did when they were much younger, when he was strong enough to overpower her, and reduce her to a little girl for his own satisfaction.

Only when Boutage moved within enough distance, Nandee held her blade outward a foot before him. She was serious.

"I asked you a question" She said, "Who do you think you are talking to?"

Surprised, Boutage said,

"Nandee, let's not be crazy. What do you think you are doing out here?"

"I am practicing the form of my Master." She growled, "And you are disturbing me."

Boutage laughed, howled! He slapped his side, and nearly doubled over. He sighed, wiped a tiny tear from his eye.

"What... master? I see no one out here, but you and your tiny *knife*." He teased.

Nandee inhaled again.

"That is because you cannot *see* my Master with such dull eyes. You cannot hear Her because you are afraid, are a *coward* deep down inside that bull's body of yours. Just as Kalid has said, you see only so much." She stabbed and a flash of white teeth shone through her tight mouthed expression. Her blade pointed directly at him, unwavering. She would not come without a fight.

Boutage's eyes then grew dark, deeply set. She sufficiently challenged him, and Boutage drew his sword, angry.

"Let's see what this imaginary master of yours has been teaching you."

And Nandee showed him, and showed him and *showed* him, until he nearly pulled his own hair out.

Every blow he delivered Nandee thwarted and dodged in the manner suited to her size and makeup, leaving Boutage in the open again and again. She fought almost as well as Kalid, but differently, like an opponent whom Boutage had never faced before. Nandee was fierce and nimble.

How could this be!? She bested him in every way under the sun! She disarmed him, tripped him up, countered him, and in the end put her tiny marks in his shoulders, his chest and back, never once harming him but making him more and more angry. He tried to overpower her, but she slipped him, like water through his finger tips, her sinewy body bouncing from side to side, and all the while, she listened to the voice within her that guided her. She could have killed him twelve times over and they both knew it, for he bore the tiny red marks to prove it. She handled him expertly, and was driven in absolute clarity.

Nandee, tiring, slipped, and Boutage knocked her blade out from her hand. He pulled her up by her shirt, tearing it, and with his other hand positioned it for a backhanded slap.

"See how you are a coward!" Nandee spat, "I am better than you! You cannot face the truth!!"

He held her thusly. Her final dagger penetrated him. He could somehow hear Kalid's voice in her, and somehow knew that the implication of what Nandee said came from Kalid, that the stage on which he now stood was set up by Kalid, and that this was another test from Kalid, his Master.

"It is a checkmate for you, brother, a gift." She panted, and Boutage knew, he was caught, seen. He wanted all the while to be Kalid's special student, the best warrior, most powerful, most honored, and here he was mishandling his *sister* who was a threat to this desire. This was the truth, and it burned his mind. As much as he tried, he could not avoid it. He let her go, not looking at her and waddled back to the forest.

"Boutage, it is the lesson for us all to learn!" She yelled at him. He merely waved his hand, dismissing her.

When Nandee was eighteen, she met a warrior, a centurion Dajaai. He was an honorable man, a great warrior who loved the Tah's family and knew Kalid well when he was alive. A talented warrior, he was the youngest member of the Tah's special guard and often times participated in their family functions.

To Nandee, he was a different kind of man, sensible, a leader and still kind and generous. Dajaai was tall, slender, and strong, and turned the heads of the many of available women in the city of Arkaya, but Dajaai only wanted Nandee.

The fire in her eyes attracted him, and her ferocity fascinated him. Still, she resisted him, not trusting any man but her brother. Dajaai, in love, did everything in his power to try and earn Nandee's trust, and kept enough distance, as Kalid, his contemporary said he should.

"She has no reason to trust any man, my friend," Kalid, barely a man himself, advised Dajaai,

"My beloved tiger's trust, is gold. To violate it is to throw your own heart away." Kalid warned.

"What should I do to prove myself then, Kalid?" Dajaai asked, as if asking for the answer to a great riddle. But to Kalid it was pure and simple. The way to Nandee's heart was a straight, genuine and honest line.

"Be who you are. Then let her decide. You can do nothing but offer yourself. You cannot *make* her love you, brother. She must be free, *always*, free to love you, and free to love her own life."

Dajaai, understood, and yet he was vexed by his circumstance. How could he have her if she was

free, not his? He listened to Kalid, and wondered this, and then it became clear to him. Inwardly, Dajaai gave Nandee his heart. He did not make any demands of this love, made no plans inwardly for it to bear fruits, to become a victory.

Instead, Dajaai loved Nandee for loves sake, not his own. When he thought of her, he made his unfulfilled desire for her his lover, made into a lover the magnetic space between them that burned him up, the frustrating journey during which his eyes did not wander from hers, and all the while, as he persisted, over the long years, Nandee *knew*.

His silent confession was ever so loud-- getting louder, pure—getting more pure. She could not avoid him. She trembled when she was by him. She feared losing control. She perspired as he glanced at her across the courtyard or in the fields. When she saw him a powerful charge of attraction pulled at her heartstrings more and more until finally, she opened.

When she did, Dajaai *still*, loved Nandee for loves sake, not his own, for that kind of love seemed to change him more and more, and as Kalid smiled at Dagaai, watching the play at hand, he said.

"Now that is how you love my sister," and he knew that one day they would marry.

They kept their love a secret and planned to marry only when they were ready, when Nandee was ready. She swore Dajaii to secrecy and he agreed.

Now Boutage had his eyes on this whole play over the long years, and he was still bitter about losing a most serious game of swordplay to his sister.

She embarrassed him, and hurt his precious *ego*. He never said a thing to Kalid, but he resented him, for teaching Nandee, for making *her* better than *him*!

The tests were becoming harder and harder for Boutage. He wanted to be a master, but he only seemed to fail more and more! He could not however confess his envy to Kalid. How would this look to Kalid – to be envious of a woman, his little sister? No! He would not confess. He would be fine.

"As we climb toward mastery, brother, we must face and accept certain things about ourselves. It is the necessary inventory taken to ask the question, '*who, who is it* that cannot accept these things?'"

"Remember the altitude, the tiredness, the aching and the burn; these are the qualities that are begging for us to stop climbing, to settle for something less than EVERYTHING, to settle for disappointment as an ego!!! You must remember, that your ego's defeat will bring the victory of love, and oh...."

Kalid said to him as he leaned against the post of a wooden bridge overrun with vines, the moon shining down upon them as Kalid shared a mango with Boutage, trying to cool him down after a long run. It had been a long hard week of training. Kalid pushed his pupil, and corrected him on a number of his mistakes. He had been taking deeper digs at Boutage's attitude, at his overconfidence, at his conceit, his pride. It seemed to come from everywhere, these lessons.

"Ahhh... if you only *knew*, Boutage. If you only *knew*. From where I stand, we are not separate. There is no such thing. You must see this view! She lives us all, right now, not after you've learned... *swordplay*, or have acquired your lot of the Tah's land, women, fame, and supernatural powers."

Boutage listened, but he could not hear. He was caught in his own internal conversation, worried that Kalid might sense his struggling. Boutage tried to calm himself down, to release it, to make it not matter, but he was too proud to confess to the Master, to talk to him, to laugh it off, to give it to Khalid who was the one who would free him of this in one fiery second.

Boutage could not look good in any way, neither in confessing his defeat to Nandee long ago, nor in expressing his doubts that he could make any real progress.

He could not! His ego still wanted to save face, and soon the feelings of resentment for Kalid rose. It frightened Boutage, but he was certain he could push through it on his own. A hand found Boutage's shoulder.

"Ahh... do not worry so. Every test is for you to know you are not separate, brother. It is a game... of surrender."

Kalid's smile caught the moonlight. Boutage saw the silhouette of his brothers round head happily bobbing in the darkness as he laughed. They were grown men now, in their twenties, and father was getting old. It would not be long before he would die.

Kalid would have the throne. Nandee would have mastery in the fighting arts. And Boutage would be second fiddle to a woman. He sighed, shook his head, tried to have more humor. He was stuck.

Kalid often visited the deep jungles, where the vegetation was thick with ferns and bamboo, where the heat was most intense and felt in the moist air and where fireflies came out at night to play over

translucent mirroring ponds. Prince Kalid would often go and not come back for months at a time. He would go and leave Prince Boutage behind to take his place in council.

At the time where Boutage's tests were burning his ego alive, Kalid had gone away on his adventures, confident in his brother's wisdom. In the second month of the summer the Mayak attacked several of the northern cities-- hard. They were the bloodiest battles had in years and many warriors were being sent from Arkaya to defend burning villages.

The Mayak attack was the long awaited retaliation against the Khoorlrhani moving deeper into the northern lands, pushing the Mayak into the barren highlands, where hunting was scarcer. The Tah, Bahju, decided much, but he was an old man and he needed the wisdom of his tribal council.

"Peace must be established, but our towns must be protected," he said.

The city attacked was Ketique which was many days away, on the outer edges of the Great Circle. It was discussed, and agreed that two legions should be sent immediately north eastward to secure Ketique as it was in danger of being overrun. It would become a garrison town, led by an appointed Lord.

"Who will lead this town, my son?" the Tah, asked.

Boutage suppressed a smile, reflecting upon a name.

"Khoorlrhani-Tah, It should be Dajaai. He is the most loyal, and the most competent." He said, as they all sat on the edge of a large round carpet on the clay floor of the chamber.

There was a gasp heard in the court room and Nandee sat on the edge of her cushion, alarmed. She looked at Boutage, appealing to him, but he ignored her and feigned ignorance of her plight.

"Surely there is a more experienced man, my son." The Tah said, stroking his white beard and smoking from his pipe.

"Our most experienced men are ambitious or too old, father. Dajaai is sharp, the most talented fighter in Arkaya aside from Kalid. If the battles draw out for long, Dajaai will endure."

And Boutage told the truth, but only to have his way, to separate the lovers. Nandee rose and exited the chamber. Crying, she ran through the torchlight tunnels and out of the dihj.

When Kalid returned he was troubled by the turn of events. The war with the Mayak had escalated, and the Tah's health was not good. All the while, as he entered the chaos, tending to the frightened women whose husbands were away fighting, tending to the affairs of the court and advising the Tah and his generals, Boutage hovered in the shadows, waiting for Kalid's attention, questing for it, demanding the recognition he felt he deserved. Kalid would not give it to him.

In the dark corner of the main chamber, Boutage hid and waited for Kalid. He was going to surprise him like he often did when they were younger, to show him how much he'd learned. He would prove to him that he was worthy of the *next level*. Then perhaps, he would become better than his sister.

Exhausted, Kalid entered the room, humming a tune. His scimitar hung low behind him from a simple rope and sheath. Kalid's sandals stroked the clay floor, and he scratched his head and yawned. He headed for a doorway leading to his quarters deeper within the dihj's lower levels.

Boutage leapt quietly, and landed onto Kalid. Boutage was thrown, and Kalid rolled onto his feet. "What is this?!" He scolded Boutage, "More child's play?!"

Boutage held his sword waiting for Kalid to draw his. Kalid then drew and knocked Boutage's sword so hard that the vibration stung Boutage's hand. He let go of the hot handle of the scimitar, and backed up against the wall as Kalid angrily pinned him with the end of his sword.

"When will you give this up? When will you finally hear me? Are you stupid?"

Confused, Boutage shook his head. He was stunned by the tone in Kalid's voice.

"When will you grow up?! What is this Boutage?" He yelled.

Boutage straightened and lowered his eyes. He was silent.

"What is this, I ask you!?" Kalid demanded.

"I... wanted to... welcome you back..." He stuttered.

"Like this!? In the middle of the night? On the eve of a goddamned bloody war!? You welcome me like this?"

"I... I..." Boutage stammered.

"I... yes. I is right! Go on. What is this, "I" about?"

"Nothing... I"

"Bullshit!!!! Do you think I can't see you? Do you think Nandee cannot see you!? You are stupid if you think so! Do you think we cannot see *you*, what you do, what you want?"

Boutage was thrown off. Kalid never reacted this way to him. He could be stern, but this was different, searing.

"So what is this!" Kalid persisted.

Boutage sighed,

"Answer Me!!!" Kalid screamed, others were drawn out to the room, aunt's cousins, and nephews.

"Kalid," an aunt called, "Let your brother go."

"I want to be a master." Boutage murmured.

"Master of what!? Master of ego?!" It was hard, strong, and fierce, like sharp claws.

"Master of warriors!" Boutage ventured.

"Ah...HAHAHAHAH!!!!" Kalid blurted,

"How by sending others away to Ketique to fight for you! Ah... HAHAHAHAHA!" His laughter cut through him like steel,

"Look everyone, I'm Boutage the great warrior!! I'll send my sister's lover to Ketique while I play master soldier, safe, Kalid's pet hiding in the shadows of my home!! Ah...HAAAAAAAAA!!!"

There were a few laughs from the relatives.

Boutage's jaw flexed and he blurted,

"I want to be better! I ... want you to show *me!* I want to... be better than myself," and he held onto it, pausing, then reluctantly said the rest,

"...Better than Nandee!" and the others looked on. Kalid waved at them.

"Finally! Back to bed everyone, my brother and I must speak alone," and they left. Kalid's demeanor softened. He lowered his sword. Boutage grimaced, and looked down at his own feet.

"You can only be better than yourself. To want to be better than Nandee or me is not the point."

"Why not! What makes me different than you!?" Boutage said, "Why must I be less than you?"

Kalid sighed and said,

"The only difference between me and you is that you still believe in a *you*, a *you* to defend, a *you* to protect, to improve upon, and to lose in battle. Once you give this idea up, you become limitless, formless at heart. That is the secret brother. It is not some metaphor to improve your *damned* fencing. Instead the fencing is the metaphor for what I'm showing you! It is so that you come to terms with the truth, that the *you*, of *you*, is not in control. It is unworthy

of your attention. The real One that is coincident with you is truly bigger than that. What I teach has nothing to do with the mastery of arms that you and men like you are fascinated with. This form, this martial art is only a means for me to show you the greater secret that lies within you. Surrender your ego, your... *You*... more and more and you will understand how the source of your life is living you right here, Boutage! Can you hear me say this to you? This... sword play of us is only the tip of the ice berg, for the true warriors heart is always surrendering more to the highest source."

The next day, by the gushing river, the source ran through Boutage, breaking open the boundaries of his separate identity. He caught a glimpse of what Kalid spoke of, an open place where there was no pinch of separation, no personal itch to scratch, no problem to solve, only pure flowing conscious force animating him, moving him.

Kalid gave it to him, made it possible, and just as it was his brother's wildest desire, Kalid gave this to Boutage in the context of the swordsman, opening him as they sparred like wild angels. He wanted his brother to see from where he stood, on top of the highest mountain. He wanted him to feel how he felt, true, innocent, alive, unlimited and this force moved through Boutage like a wild river of infinite

girth. He forgot himself, the patterns of mind, and memory that once had attached themselves to the name *Boutage*.

Instead he felt himself to be everything, white-hot-lightening, and the intelligence of everything directed him in their greatest sword match, made him a dancing marionette made of white crystals! Their swords clashed playfully together as they spun in the air, leapt across river-rocks, and twirled beneath the sun, stepping into and over each other with impossibly synchronicity as sparks were flung from their scimitars. Boutage felt electric!

He felt free! He felt himself to be the Master without ever having to be *anyone* to acquire it, to ascend to it, to own it, and this was freedom itself, mastery itself—to be no one! He felt Kalid, taking him higher, where lines of distinction could not hold to them, where an I or a you could not establish itself. It was Kalid, the force of his open heart that transmitted this to Boutage. He did this because he loved Boutage. He wanted him to see, and in that moment Boutage was like him, endless!

He was free!! He was Free!! He felt his own name to be a laughable subdivision of a higher name, a name more pure, and a name without a name, without meaning or purpose. Then Boutage became afraid to have no meaning or purpose, for to accept

this emptiness would require surrender to a kind of death, would it not? If he dissolved any further, the man who was once called Boutage would cease to be! With a tiny snake bite of fear, the slightest recoil of contraction of his heart, Boutage's mind began to return to him.

The state was broken. It was like a tiny splinter fell into in his diamond eyes, and having chosen to close his eyes cost him the delicate connection he and the Master Kalid shared. His error was to *assume* Boutage again, a lie, Jandee's bite, to assume a separate identity and become limited, afraid and in opposition to others, Mande's threat.

Kalid knew Boutage's plight, for he felt his brother as himself. Boutage tired, could no longer keep up, wanted to stop, and they did. They stood by the gushing river and Kalid watched Boutage.

Boutage bent over and panted, heaved as his body ached and swelled with shock. His large black arms bulged from over exertion, and his skirt was drenched with sweat. He dropped his sword. He gnashed his teeth from the pains in his side and he gripped them.

Kalid sat down patiently waited for Boutage to regain himself, and all the while he knew Boutage's disappointment. Boutage focused only on his

failure, and Kalid's gift then seemed to be a wasted effort. Boutage paced, sulking by the river, cursing himself.

"Why the dramatics, brother?" Kalid asked as he sat on a moss-covered rock.

Boutage would not answer.

"It appears that you've forgotten something. Ah-hahaha!! That was the best you have ever done!" Kalid offered.

"I cannot do anything, Kalid! It is all a sham!" Boutage growled, and threw a stone into the river.

"Ahh! Then you've seen then." Kalid laughed.

"All that I see is *You*, controlling everything, my life, and everyone else's life!"

Kalid laughed again.

"So it appears that way, but wouldn't it take a '*you*' for that to mean anything. Hahahahah!" Kalid's laugh rushed through the tree tops and dispelled a flock of birds into the open air.

Boutage said nothing. He only threw more stones. He was becoming confused.

"Boutage, Boutage..." Kalid groaned, "You insist upon your character's being real. You say, '*all I see is you controlling my life,*' as though I am real. I am not.

You are right. It *is* a sham, but it... it's the funniest damned joke you'll *ever* hear if you would just listen deeply to me!" Kalid rose and approached his brother.

"Did you not feel it, Boutage, the lightening of your own heart, extending beyond your assumed boundary? Could you not feel the source lending itself to you?! Could you not *feel* yourself knowing Me as yourSelf, so intimately that you could move *with* me?!"

"I felt *you* tricking me, *you* teasing me, *you* holding me back so that you can remain ahead of me!!!"

Kalid covered his face with one hand and shook his head.

"I only *appear* to direct this brother. I only play my part, but I do not control anything, now calm down, calm down, calm down." And Boutage tried but to no avail. Boutage became afraid, became internal. He gnashed his teeth more and turned his back. His broad shoulders were outlined by the horizontal flow of the bending river.

"But you can teach her! You can show her, make her... better than me!" He pounded his thick chest.

"Who...eh... oh... Nandee..." Kalid then became angry. He approached Boutage and said.

"And why shouldn't she be better than you? Nandee's prowess is only a reflection of her devotion, Boutage! It is you who believes he is privileged! It is you who believes you deserve something! You are not special! You are of the same mediocre sort that infects the kingdom! I give and give to you and you give nothing but ungratefulness," and Kalid walked off, intending to leave when Boutage grabbed his arm.

"What must I do!?" Boutage demanded.

Kalid snatched his arm back and then pushed Boutage into the river.

"You should cool off!" He shouted.

And after yards of being knocked around in the current, Boutage was scooped up by Kalid who ran ahead, and crossed a long row of boulders to reach him. He hung a single arm over the side of a low setting rock, grabbed his brother by the wrist and pulled him up before the falls could send Boutage over.

"I'm sorry... Bou.. Boutage... I... lost my temper." Kalid huffed, standing bent over. Boutage was not listening. He heard the voice of his own self pity, and righteousness. He would not release it, his justifications for his dramatic reactions. Kalid gave his last ounce of strength to save his brother, to

apologize. Boutage gave his last ounce of strength to move his fisted hand into Kalid's face and knock him into the depths below, killing him.

Nandee swooned with grief. The news broke her heart, stabbed it through. As Boutage told the story to their father, Nandee shook her head as she held it with both hands, and she covered her eyes.

Lies! Lies! Lies!

She knew, but no one would believe her, the black sheep. Boutage was seen as the one most close to Kalid, as his *devoted* brother, and the Tah, Bahju, believed this to be the case as well and thusly believed his son's story that Kalid fell over the edge while trying to catch an eagle. As Nandee's brothers, Toumak, and Geeda held her, she wailed and died inside.

The Throne Now Empty

Three months later, Khoorlrhani-Tah, Bahju, died and Boutage took the Throne. By his actions at the river he acquired the position of Tah, the master of Khoorlrhani men, but he lost the heart of the true Master for everyone, including himself. It was a dark time in Arkaya as the war with the Mayak intensified, and as wisdom was nowhere to be found.

It was said that Boutage, Khoorlrhani-Tah, demanded respect, obedience, and loyalty as he bribed, threatened, and lied to his subjects and yet he could never command the respect, loyalty and obedience of anyone, not even his wife, Suwan. Suwan was a bright woman, a daughter of noble Lord who once held position generations ago in Bahju's royal guard.

After Kalid, died, after the kingdom mourned, she noticed something about her husband. He was broken-hearted, a normal thing for a man who lost his brother, but to her, there was more.

Khoorlrhani-Tah was alien, secretive, and evasive. His pain was the sort of a man at war with himself. He wore a crown of gold like his father, and yet his face was dark, wan. He was decorated with feathers and furs, and yet he had no splendor. The pressures of a Tah were great during this time, true enough, as

many battles were being fought all over Genia. Suwan noticed however a kind of madness in her husband, and reluctance on his part to heal it. He would not let her near. He only came to her with calculating intentions—his many layered secret plan he kept. She wondered what it was that seemed to hold him, to close his heart. Who was it that he answered to in his nightmares?

The Tah worried about appearances, always, and when Suwan challenged his perceptions, he made her pay, for she would come too close to discovering the root of his paranoia. He made her pay and he made the children pay. Not only would he defend the kingdom, but he would destroy the Mayak, conquer them, plow down trees, build ramparts, motivate the common folk, make pacts with demons, all for the sake of upholding the one fundamental lie—That he was justified.

Khoorlrhani-Tah was justified in his unnaturalness, in his pride, and beneath the lowest stinking layer of his lies he was justified in murdering his brother. The Mayak and Khoorlrhani would not make peace for the Tah was justified in his propaganda of Khoorlrhani superiority. And so thusly, the men of Arkaya and their children believed in their superiority.

Fundamentally, Khoorlrhani-Tah, Boutage, was justified in his separateness. He would hear nothing of the contrary. His story, a mockery, was that of a king who would be shown the futility of his crown, the lackluster qualities of his jade and ivory throne on high, for what does it matter to be a king of *dream*?

What can be done with it? How does its treasure satisfy? Where does its status take one? Where is the place of its grandiose affect, where the king is master, where the swordsman is master, where the rich nation is master, where the beautiful and talented are masters?

There is only one kind of Mastery, the mastery of ego *surrender*, for to-- in ego *separateness*-- master men, creates war, suffering, to master the land creates barrenness, suffering, to master resources creates greed, suffering, and to master women creates a schism in the human heart, more suffering. Furthermore to master the arts of deception creates a subdivided mind that will victimize itself as the Tah's own mind, in the form of the demon Bulaja, did to him. With Kalid gone, the Tah could not see his own error.

Suwan prayed for sight, and the goddess opened her eyes. She followed the Tah to the bog and listened to her husband talking to himself, convincing

himself to do things, arguing with himself. Years later, much of the forest in the north was chopped down, and the largest fence ever seen was built around the villages. This was crazy! She had to protect her children, and herself. She sought out Nandee.

Chapter Eleven: The Escape

Suwan pushed and gasped as the midwives instructed her. She was in her twelfth hour of labor. The pain was great, but Suwan was happy to finally give birth to her new child. The room, a small round chamber sectioned off by a hanging tapestry was bright with candlelight.

She was tired but had no choice but to keep pushing. Nandee was there, and she held onto her hand and wiped the sweat from her forehead with a cool wet cloth. Suwan heard the midwife laugh with joy.

Suwan's vision blurred, and soon Suwan was swept away by the current of sleep. She awoke to find two children lying by her side, *two* girls — twins! Nandee stood in the room; she wore her sword at her waist, guarding Suwan like an owl. Her eyes were sharp and youthful. Her being there in such a manner spoke more of the truth of what was happening than Suwan ever allowed herself to see. She was afraid. Many of the family and royal servants were afraid, except Nandee the warrior.

"I defy him, Suwan. With all my heart, I will never allow this." She said.

"Don't speak so! He will have you killed sister," Suwan said.

"He will have to do it before the eyes of everyone, and that is something he cannot handle." Nandee said.

"Do you really think he's a murderer?" Suwan murmured.

Nandee looked at Suwan lying on the low lying bed of cushions spread out on a thick carpet. Her eyes were penetrating with an expression that was a mixture of disbelief and compassion.

"Suwan... *sister*... what do *you* think?"

They agreed. The girls would be hidden, taken far away from the Tah's rage.

"Minot must go as well," insisted Nandee.

A painful expression came over Suwan's face,

"Why, must..." She bargained, not wanting to be away from her son.

"Because he is the one your husband fears Suwan! He is not safe here."

Paen awoke beneath the morning sun, his head resting on his rolled up cloak under which laid the sword that Ashuta gave him. He remembered

dreaming of a wretched man. He shrugged the dream off; unable to remember it fully, and he enjoyed a breakfast of leftover fish and tea. He was soon enough on Quanon's back headed for the deep jungle valleys of Genia. He knew that in half a day's time he would be deep within the territories of the Khoorlrhani, headed for Isiwa.

He descended the side of the mountain he had camped on, and followed a dirt trail that wound along its side. The trail was worn down from the traffic of riders, both Khoorlrhani and Mayak, Quanon snorted, nayed, and shook his large white curled horns.

"Yes, I would say that things are to get more interesting for us now." Paen said.

Minot's mehra nudged him awake. *Get up, He's leaving!!* Minot seemed to hear a voice yelling at him. He did as the voice beckoned, and he rolled over-- awake. He spat a lock of his hair out of his mouth and crawled against the grassy ledge on which he and his mehra camped. In the distance, he saw a small figure riding, down the mountain. He burned in his belly, ready for the chase. He would capture this man.

Though he loved his mentor, his *uncle*, Dajaai, he knew that he was now ready to be on his own. He

tracked Paen expertly, and never lost him, even in the thickest jungle.

Minot squinted with his dagger edged eyes and could see in the distance a valley opening up beyond two thick rows of pine trees. The twinkling of a large river caught his eye.

"What a fool," Minot laughed to himself, for Paen was heading deeply into the great circle. Minot figured his work might be done for him as Khoorlrhani riders would more than likely find them.

Minot hopped on the back of his mehra and it went down into the thick grassy side of a hill. Minot felt uneasy, for he had not been to Arkaya, not in a long while, and he could barely remember his father whose honor he was trying to defend. Still he would hunt this man, the curious stranger, who somehow had a grip on his heart, a heart of fiery obsession. He would hunt Paen until he was satisfied.

He did not notice however that he was not the only hunter in the wilderness; he was the hunted, for in the distance, several yards, behind Minot, across a fat limb of a giant boabob tree, sat Tiaga the manju

tiger with her green gaze pressed upon the young warrior who mounted his mehra in pursuit of Paen.

It was not long before word of The Master, traveled throughout the Arkayan Nation as each of his visits marked much of the same kind of encounters, one where no one believed who he said he was and no one believed who sent him.

Minot, keeping out of site followed Paen into Isiwa and he saw how Paen could *never* be touched, how he stood free of the illusions of men, and did not fear their violence. Great warriors of the most fearsome reputation challenged Paen, demanding that he prove that he was the Master and yet never accepting the obviousness of the fact as he could never be matched.

Minot saw a countless number of them choose the thunderclap rather than accepting the gentle breeze of Master Paen, which he always offered initially. And still, as men were tumbled and rolled, their egos toppled from their pedestals of belief – belief in separateness from Ashuta-- they reasserted their silly notions of superiority and control.

Minot began to see now that Paen was not a threat to his father, and that instead, Paen was his savior if only Khoorlrhani-Tah would accept the truth, the

truth manifested *as* the Master who was Paen. The Master, Kalid, had returned!

In the few days of traveling, ghosting the footsteps of the Master, Minot began to see something entirely different, a potential that he had never seen a man ever live up to, not even his father who was Tah. It was all becoming clear, and Minot slowly began to accept it!

As Minot rode along, on the back of his mehra, he heard a voice call out to him,

"So my young friend," Minot heard a voice, and looked around and could not detect where it was coming from. Suddenly from behind him, he saw her, Tiaga! Her eyes were pale green and bright. Minot's were wide with disbelief, as he steadied his steed.

"Which path do you choose?" She asked. She stopped and then sat on her hind legs, calm. Minot's heart raced as he marveled at the sight of her, brilliantly orange and large. He knew that he could not escape, any attempt would be futile. His only option now was to respond honestly to the tiger who obviously spoke to him. He took a deep breath, and considered her question. He did not fear her the more he considered her question.

"I choose not to fight the truth. I've learned that this is unwise." He swallowed,

"I cannot see with diamond eyes, Tiaga, but I know, now, that Paen is true."

And Tiaga growled and approached Minot. She salivated, hungrily. Her eyes were ablaze and beckoned Minot to approach her, which he did. He dismounted and fell to his knees, afraid, but willing, surrendering. He would not fight her. Instead, he offered himself to her.

A hand cupped his chin and pulled it upward. Minot looked into the face of Paen, who said,

"Oh what a delicious meal you would have made!" and he laughed,

"But I guess one just can't go around making lunch out of his *friends*."

Minot rose and Paen put his arm around him as they walked together towards their mehra's.

"How did you do that?" Minot asked.

"Oh... I think you could come up with a lot better questions than that!" Paen responded, howling with laughter.

At age ten, shortly before the time of Anya and Lenya's birth, Minot wanted to become a warrior. The attraction grew within him spontaneously, like a blossoming flower. His eyes sparkled and he watched the masters with great intensity. He would often carve sticks to practice swordplay with his brothers. Young Boutage—the son of Boutage the Tah--, engaged him in this, and they often times played in the woods together until they were old enough to join the *yield*.

Minot was quicker; many noted it, even the court guards who watched over them. Dajaa the chief of Ketique, once while walking by where the Tah's sons sparred in the lower chambers of the palace, remarked to Khoorlrani-Tah,

"Your son is the image of Kalid, nkosi. He will do you proud."

This bent the Tah's mind, and filled him with paranoia. Suwan noticed how the Tah began to look at the boy. It disturbed her, the way Khoorlrhani-Tah seemed to fear Minot as he tried to influence him, subtly bargaining with him, to win him over in a perverse manner. It was not long before swordsmen in the Tah's company, Toumak-- the Tah's brother included-- offered their services to train Minot, whom they thought was the greatest

potential among his sons. They all spoke the truth to him,

“He is much like Kalid, Khoorlrhani-Tah, a most welcomed return.”

The Kingdom seemed soothed by the boy, and often the relatives would gather around the youth to play with him. Rumors in the fields were that Minot was the reincarnation of Kalid, that he was coming back to restore the kingdom, to bring his wisdom, to heal the Tah.

“Hmm, and it is a healing I need?”

He would coolly reply.

“Ohh...of course not your grace. Your integrity is most impressive! Forgive me please for suggesting otherwise, as it was not my intention...” they would shrink away fearful that they may lose their lives.

Still, this sent him spiraling.

How could this be?

He needed no healing, *damn it!*

His nerves were on end; his hands sweat, his heart beat wildly.

The mist... the mist... you killed Kalid...

...his thoughts haunted him in this manner.

On the rare occasions where he saw them, the Tah's council began to take notice of how deeply paranoid Khoorlrhani-Tah became. They noticed as he smoked more herb, and drank more wine to sooth his shattered sensibilities.

Privately, Khoorlrhani-Tah consulted Bulaja.

"Hmmm. It is strange that Kalid would choose to be reborn into your immediate family."

The witch doctor hissed almost unconcerned,

"What would be more vulnerable than being a helpless babe so close to your blade... and yet... how... *unexpected*. The *solution*, dear Tah, seems obvious though."

Bulaja was vague these days as the twin asps were rich from the Tahs banquet of many lies, their bellies bursting at their seams. The Tah lied willingly now, habitually, unprompted, keeping Mande and Jande stocked up for winters upon winters. No longer hungry, they became less excited. They were bored with the Tah, grew complacent.

"It is very strange great one. I must go back to my... *power place*... yes... where I can... get a cleaner vision." Tired, the demon slithered back to the bog, not to return for months.

The Tah, left to his own devices, schemed.

Poison? An assassin's blade? An accident?

Suwan heard him mumble it as they lay together one night. She heard it with her own ears! She glanced at her dagger on the floor, but fought off the impulse in order to tell Nandee. She would know what to do.

It was said that Khoorlrhani-Tah had the best hopes of young Boutage becoming a master warrior – to bring pride to the name, *Boutage*, to clean it perhaps, restore it. He did not expect Minot's growth spurt. He blossomed in his twelfth year, his eyes large and perceptive, and his body strong and sinewy. Many would say that Khoorlrhani-Tah had the children believe that he was once a true master himself, a role model for them to live by. He told desperate lies so that Minot would fear him.

"In my time, I was quite a fighter. I still am." He would say, lie to them, his red eyes narrowing as he bent and peered into those of his children.

"Is this not so?" He would ask of his subjects, and they would grin shit-eatingly as they nodded in agreement, humoring him, and avoiding his wrath.

The Tah would tell Minot stories, boring stories that the child was reluctant to listen to. They made him feel weird, edgy, twisted inside, and Minot could tell everyone hated them.

He knew, however that if he did not listen, his father would shout at him, and perhaps strike him. He did not know why his father took such a sudden interest in him, and he watched the Tah's long comical face bobbing as the words with no meaning came out of his mouth. He told him stories about his days of fencing with his brothers, Toumak, and Geeda who one day sat and listened while in the courtyard shaking their heads.

By then, the city of Arkaya was a river of rumors concerning the Tah. Field workers would gossip and remark how there was trouble in the Royal household that the Queen bore the Tah twin girls in defiance to him, and they gossiped of how the council was beginning to think the Tah insane — that he often took private council from a demon.

Poison? An assassin's blade? An accident?

In the courtyard, where eyes were cast down, the Tah told tall tales of how he was quicker and faster than his brothers, and how he defeated many Mayak enemies in battle. And Khoorlrhani-Tah would tell his tales, never once mentioning Kalid, the Master, whose memory was vivid in the minds of everyone who listened, but not in his own brother who spoke only about himself.

On that humid afternoon, while Khoorlrhani-Tah was involved in the worst of his reversionary tangents, Toumak and Geeda rose, folding their arms, having had enough of this. Toumak was a large dark man with a large mane of twisted moss green hair falling loose at his shoulders. He had two eagle feathers tied to his large biceps by black leather strips, and a large curved scimitar hung at his waist, along the straight side of his white and gold skirt. His legs were large, strapped by leather sandals at his thick calves. His eyes were heavy set and his face rigid, harsh. Toumak, a simple warrior, was perplexed.

Why does he tell such lies? He wondered, having heard enough. The Tah, was frozen by this as his brothers stared at him directly and intently, and confronted him silently. Suwan would not meet Khoorlrhani-Tah's searching gaze and Nandee, the Tah's sister left the room abruptly, snatching Minot out of the courtroom with her.

"You dishonor Kalid!" She yelled.

Toumak and Geeda stood, still watching. Geeda was also large, shorter than Toumak though and a bit softer. His eyes were blackened with face paint that contrasted the whites of his eyes and his head was bald. He looked around the circle of warriors and gestured to them to leave. They all rose and left

the courtroom. This was a family issue, they understood.

Khoorlrhani-Tah's pulse quickened as he felt the eyes of his brothers seeking him out, their edges creeping up on him, the mist itself. They starred, wondering who this man was. This was no longer their brother. They heard the rumors, and were now doing what the elders implored them to do!

They squinted and examined him. Geeda sniffed the air. Something was wrong. He knew it. Khoorlrhani-Tah pushed himself to the edge of his chair, closer to the hilt of his sword that leaned against its side.

"You tell *very* strange tales... brother." Toumak said.

"I only wish my sons to..."

"...To believe in lies, eh? Yes... I see..." Geeda bluntly interjected. He sniffed the air again. Geeda, sensitive to what could not been see did not like this.

"It is like... a demon, in the form of an asp, brother," He whispered to Toumak, and Toumak approached the Tah. They looked about the courtyard, but could not see what Geeda sensed.

Geeda chanted and threw rice onto the floor in some kind of bizarre ritual. They had been watching

Khoorlrhani-Tah for a long while now, for years. They could stand no more of this.

"Nandee is right. You have not told Kalid's story to your sons. It isn't right. Why do you hide this?" He asked.

"These are different times, Toumak" The Tah said.

"No Boutage," Geeda said, "You're different. You used to love Kalid. Now you love the shadows. Why are our people working for unnatural reasons? Why are they taught to want more than they need? Why must our women bare more children than they want to? Why must their Tah require this?" He asked, honest questions, questions that were tigers clamoring the stockades of Khoorlrhani-Tah's defenses.

His heart beat wildly, as if the end of the world was coming.

Khoorlrhani-Tah moved like lightening, his sword drawn and moving fast finding Geeda's throat but stopping before the cut. Geeda's eyes were wide with fright, and Suwan gasped.

"Boutage no!" She pleaded!

"Who are you to ask me questions you worthless and vile stump of a man!? I am Tah! I mandate what I wish! I answer to no one!" The Tah erupted.

"We are *talking* here, *brother!*" Toumak shouted, but Khoorlrhani-Tah was engaged most heavily in an escalating tantrum that was all too familiar to Suwan.

"How dare you embarrass me in front of my wife! How dare you interfere with me and my children, my council!"

The Tah then slapped Geeda with his free hand, hard and the man hit the ground in the same manner. Suwan screamed and ran to stop her husband but she was flung off. Toumak was in shock, but not enough to stay his own hand, which drew its sword and thwarted the down stroke that sought to remove Geeda's head! Toumak pushed Khoorlrhani-Tah with his large free hand, mightily, back into his throne. The Tah's gold crown was flung from his head and rolled across the floor.

"Sit!" Lord Toumak, the Tah's right hand roared, a bellow of a real fighting man, irritated at this exchange, unfazed by the Tah's show of violence.

"Sit! Yes, you shall do that, but never in all my years of knowing you will you *ever* stand for anything true, only for that which makes you look good!"

"Did you kill our brother?" Geeda gasped and stood, wiped the blood from his broken lip, piecing the puzzle together, chanting, throwing more rice.

"What have you been doing brother? What did you let in? What did you bring into our great circle?" Geeda asked, again sniffing.

Suwan shook her head, crying, hoping that they were wrong.

"Nandee, who is Kalid?" Minot asked his aunt Nandee. Her face conveyed a sense of pain in hearing the question. *How could he not have told his own sons*, she thought.

Nandee smelled like mint leaves to Minot. She walked with Minot, holding his hand, and walking with him hurriedly in the lower passages of the palace.

"What are we doing?" Minot asked. He had grown so much, and was almost old enough to ride a mehra.

Several guards allowed her to pass. They were expecting her and knew the plan. She thanked them anyway. She had skin the color of cinnamon and dark eyes that were large and sharp at their corners, an intense focused gaze.

Unlike the other women, Nandee wore leather armor. She scoffed at the cultural dogmas that the other women believed in — that there was a *way* for a woman to dress. She had been helping her sister-in-law, Suwan to see it; the cultural programming that was taking place, to stand up against it. She was helping Suwan, protecting her and Suwan's sons. Suwan told her everything; how Khoorlrhani-Tah obsessed with trying to affect Minot.

"I tested him, just as you told me to do. I told him, '*Minot has the qualities of Kalid.*'" Suwan had said, crying. "It sent Khoorlrhani-Tah into another rage."

"You don't think he would really do this would you, Nandee, kill his own son?"

"We will not let it come to that." Nandee said.

In the distant field a large brown mehra stood beneath the purple sky, and Dajaai, the new Lord of Ketique sat on the animal's back. Baskets were saddled to another nearby mehra and inside of the baskets were Anya and Lenya, the twins.

"Minot." Nandee said, "You must go with Dajaai to the new town."

"Go? Go where. What is going on? I..." Minot asked

"You know damned well boy." Nandee looked at him straight, demanding he see reality, grow up, perhaps sooner than convenient.

Minot glanced to the left then met his aunts eyes. He knew what was going on.

"For how long?" he wondered.

"I don't know. It's ok. Dajaai will be like your uncle. You know he's a great warrior, a good man. He's going with you. You do not need to be in Arkaya to grow strong."

Nandee kissed Minot and implored Minot to take up the saddle. Dajaai bent down to kiss his lover and then they rode off into the night.

Nandee quickly went to the children's quarters, deep within the dihj, and she dragged a lamb with her. The boys, young Boutage, and Kuba helped her. They ripped their own clothes, turned over their beds and then slaughtered the lamb, smearing its blood on themselves and on the dirt floor. They then dropped a torch onto the disheveled clothes and the room was ablaze. Nandee and young Boutage dragged the lamb carcass outside and threw it into the hole already dug for it in the woods. Nandee then heard the alarm.

"Infiltration!!!" It was the guard she had passed earlier. It was her queue, and Kuba's silhouette

came running toward her in the grass. He carried Seleth in his arms. The baby was crying, disturbed, frightened.

"Shshshshs." Nandee said. She took him and they ran deeper into the woods further away from the dijh. In the darkness, Nandee heard the sound of hooves approaching. Soon she saw the shadows of many riders headed her way. The sounds of their armor and weapons could be heard as they approached. Nandee flashed her silver bangle beneath the moonlight.

"There she is!" One yelled, and Nandee stood still. The riders approached.

"Quickly!" Nandee ordered.

"Yes, " A voice called to her, and the shadow of a man bent forward from the snorting mehra to take the child from Nandee's arms. Several shadows dismounted in the darkness.

"No! Take these two, and ride north. Do not come back with them for two days at least!" Nandee said, speaking of Kuba and young Boutage

"Do you understand?"

"Yes Nandee." And the men helped the boys up onto their animals.

"I'll bring this one home before dawn." She said, speaking of Seleth.

"None of my brother's guards must hear anything of this, anything! *Toumak* orders this."

"Yes Nandee, but we do this because we honor you as well." The shadow said.

Nandee was silent. This threw her. The other men agreed, and said, "No one will hear about this. Your nephews will be cared for."

"You are excellent men. Now... go, you must beat the scout to the gates before we are discovered. Dajaai will be waiting! Tell him..." she could not finish. She bit it off.

"I will tell him. I understand."

They rode off, the black cloud of them into the night.

Chapter Twelve: Invasion of the Heart

Three days later, when the warriors returned with the boys, the Tah learned what had happened that Mayak disguised as Khoorlrhani infiltrated the gates and kidnapped the Tah's children. Minot and the twins were believed to be lost, killed as no ransom note came, but Kuba, Seleth and Boutage were discovered. Nandee glanced reassuringly at Suwan. The Tah sat on his throne, one elbow held on his massive knee. He held his face in his hand, and the gathered mane of graying hair dipped forward through the top of his crown as he sunk his head low.

"So the tiger has collected her cub, right from beneath you?" Bulajaa hissed, later in the Tah's private chambers.

"It means nothing!" Khoorlrhani-Tah snapped.

"We will see wont we?" Mandee and Jandee jeered.

"Damn you!!" Khoorlrhani-Tah yelled, and the relatives surely heard but he did not care,

"Will you not tell me what to do?"

Bulaja, bloated, sighed. He thought for a moment and then said.

"We must finish the fence around Aryaka in a year's time, and we must enclose each city in its own, just like it, made of the tallest trees in the wilderness! Then... we must create the one *magnificent* fence that will encircle your entire kingdom! Our defenses must be raised by the most intense devotion to our namesake. If we do not finish this, the Khoorlrhani in on generation will not only become the prey of the tigers, but will pay fealty to the Mayak who will rise as overlords! It will not only be your babes that Tiaga snatches into the night, but those of your people and your name will be written with their blood!"

The mere first phase for the larger stockade called for forty three miles of building, fifteen of which had already taken one year.

And the Khoorlrhani built, and they built and they built, and the war with their brothers, the Mayak raged on for years. Khoorlrhani-Tah drove his men, his workers, his warriors, and when at last each city was surrounded by one-hundred-fifty foot fences, he drove his men even more, training boys to become warriors, elevating them above all men and sending

legions of them out into the highlands to Mayak villages.

"Tell me more about Dajaai, Minot," Paen asked. Their mehras trotted along in an open meadow. The sun was radiant, a yellow ball over the white mountain tops, and the air was thick with heat and humidity.

"Well," Minot said, "Of course you know, he's really not my uncle."

"No, I did not think so," Said Paen.

"Not by blood at least. My Aunt, she is... it's hard to explain."

"No need." Paen said.

They were quiet for a while and then Minot confessed:

"Dajaai was more like a father to me..." Minot started

"...than the Tah ever was," and Minot hung his head.

Minot knew that Paen understood already who he was, the Tah's son. His heart told him that Paen was to one day find Minot, that that day in Ketique was destiny, a chapter prewritten and played out. Minot sent his dark gaze into the turquoise horizon. On his face, he tried hard to show no pain as they approached Arkaya.

"I would be nervous too see him too." Paen said.

Again they were quiet. There was nothing but the sound of hooves. Paen could feel the emotions stirring in Minot, and then he said.

"It is not that the Tah does not love you. He does not love himself. He does not *know* himself well enough for this."

"How is this? He is the Tah! What better life is there other than his?" Minot growled.

Paen chuckled and said, "And that's exactly what he thought, but he found that there are no riches to enjoy, except the diamonds of truth, intelligence, and love, the things of the now, not of the future or past. All else is... gravy... is secondary. The meat, the *sustenance* is love of God." and Minot felt this to be true and said.

"So why can he not enjoy truth, intelligence, and love?" Minot was angry, "Is it so hard to do?"

Paen laughed again.

"Well, ask yourself the same question and remember yourself back at Ketique where we first met! Ah-ha ha ha ha!"

He slapped Minot on the back.

Minot laughed. He could not help it.

"But you were an utter stranger to me!" Minot protested.

"The truth is always a stranger until she utterly becomes your Master." Paen said, "Then you are free and then no one can ever be a stranger to you again!"

Minot grunted, eyebrows flashing over his eyes.

"Hmm. I see." He said.

They rode until the sun began to dip behind the deep purple band of the horizon. They entered the thickness of more jungle land.

"What will you say to him once we are there?" Minot asked.

"Ah... I will tell him he is a fool! Ah-ha ha ha ha!"

And then Paen snapped the reins, sending Quanon into a gallop, Minot following on his black steed, it's curled horns dipping as it charged.

Minot intuited they were being pursued. It was if Paen sharpened his mind just by being in his company.

Behind them twenty mehra men were fast on their trail.

Toumak and Geeda were not banished. Instead they were lashed publicly and thrown out of the Tah's

council. Seven years passed before they were ever seen again in the Tah's company.

Though Toumak was punished for his treatment of him, the Tah kept him near and after awhile appointed him again to be his general. It was said that after mourning the loss of the twins and Minot, relations in the royal family improved.

Even the Tah became *less* miserable. He even allowed for a holiday for workers from time to time. Victory was on the horizon. The Mayak were running to the mountains, outnumbered by the hundreds of thousand centurions sent to wipe them out. Khoorlrhani-Tah began to wonder if there ever was a tiger mist.

He wondered why he ever doubted his own power. Surely, he was the most powerful Tah in Genia. No one could prove otherwise!! There were celebrations, feasts, orgies, in honor of the Tah, in honor of Khoorlrhani power.

Soon, tribes from the distant lands paid tribute to the Tah, traveled thousands of miles bringing their gold, ivory, silks, and spices. Across the southern seas, the others brought steel arms, and tools and sailing ships. Mercenaries came from all directions to fight for gold, and to capture Mayak sold into slavery.

The Tah was a master of politics, as he pulled the reins of influence and steered the destiny of his people and peoples dependent on Khoorlrhani wealth.

It had seemed, the *voice* of Bulajaa had disappeared as the snakes were finished with Khoorlrhani-Tah, and having produced their finest work. They had had the Tah to the core, became him at heart, and there — in his heart-- they rested, a dormant parasite in the heart of the kingdom without anyone the wiser.

No one could touch, smell, taste or see the poison that poured outward from the throne, down the palace steps and into the fields, the fields that the Tah's servants worked to grow food and feed their children. Instead everyone grew more hungrier for it.

Elsewhere, no one could touch Paen. They were thrown left and right! They could not stop him. The harder they tried, the more severe the lesson. Minot stayed with Master Paen, marveled at him.

"Tell your Tah," Paen said, "That he must face me!" Paen howled, and smacked the rump of a mehra on which a wounded scout sat. It ran off into the jungle, carrying the simpering warrior.

Seventy miles north of Kamina, one hundred thousand Khoorlrhani troops took up station. One hundred miles northwest of Tanaga there were the same numbers. Toumak, the Tah's general planned on this day to move them forward. Lines of mehra men stretched the hillsides, their numbers making them appear as ants from a birds eye vantage.

Black helmets, black horns, and black hearts, The Tah's army was ready.

In Arkaya, a row of female dancers twirled to the rhythms of drums being beaten in the courtroom. The Tah held Suwan's hand. She sat next to him, basking in the warm glow of firelight, her belly large with child. It would be a son. She would name him *Darlian*.

The beat of the drumming was hypnotic, and women in grass skirts twirled large scimitars ablaze. The court was full of men and women dancing wildly, their hands clapping to the rhythm, and their voices wailing. And as the Tah gazed at the horizon, he watched torches lining the top of his completed circle, his great circle of power, of superiority, of separation, of difference, and of his most fundamental error.

The morning after, a rider approached the gates of Arkaya. His animal's stride was desperate. The archers recognized him as a Khoorlrhani and they let him enter.

"Enkosi!" The man gushed and threw himself down before the Tah. Two heavily armored warriors stood over him.

"What is this?" The Tah demanded.

"He brings word of the loner traveler from the east." One of the warriors said. His locks were thick, green and worn loose over red thick and studded leather padding on his shoulders.

"Traveler from the East?" Khoorlrhani-Tah shook his head and spat.

Toumak, moved to the edge of his cushion and sat on one knee.

"Brother, we did not wish to trouble you with this. The traveler was to be dealt with ..." Toumak began.

"He is... un...unstoppable!" The rider interrupted.

"What do you mean? *Fourteen* of you were sent to intercept him!?" Toumak said, puzzled, annoyed.

"It did not *matter*...he" the rider continued. His voice was shrill, disturbing.

"Quiet!!" Khoorlrhani-Tah yelled, irritated by the man's show of weakness. The room was silent. Khoorlrhani-Tah moved forward on his throne. He squinted and peered at Toumak.

"Who is this he speaks of?"

"A loner, a *vagabond*. He was first seen in Ketique, a crazed man, calling himself the *Master*," Toumak answered.

Khoorlrhani-Tah pursed his lips, and grunted. He waited for Toumak to continue, and as Toumak paused, the Tah prompted,

"And?"

"And *reportedly*... he bested an entire garrison... including... Dajaai. No man was killed however,

only... *chastised*. I sent twenty ⁵bakuwela to find this man."

Khoorlrani-Tah's eyes widened slightly.

The courtroom became a hushed murmur as the implication of what Toumak had just said sank into the Tah and into all that heard.

"This... man" Khoorlrhani-Tah's eye's squinted as he gestured with an outstretched hand to the broken one before him,

"Is... Bakuwela?" he asked.

Toumak blinked. He cleared his throat, but could not manage much more of a response. None of this made sense to him either. He nodded, affirmative.

"He is." Toumak said.

The Tah felt something move in his heart as a slight tinge of fear shot through him.

You killed Kalid, and old voice called to him.

He suppressed it, did not allow for it to surface. He was in control now. His defenses were impervious! The Mayak were running! He was the Tah and feared no lone man!

⁵ Bakuwela are an elite group of fighters in the Tah's employ. They often times are used to assassinate Mayak chiefs, and are known for their cleverness.

"And you, man, you've seen this, *master*?" The Tah asked.

"He is unstoppable!" The man cowered as if he had seen a ghost,

"He is unreal! He is the whirlwind, ⁶Magdriti!! He is the great destroy...."

"Calm yourself, damn you!" The Tah demanded and he shot an intense and concerned gaze at Toumak for more information.

"We sent fourteen to intercept him from Isiwa *after*... he had bested another twenty centurions in that town. This man, before you, was from the fourteen." Toumak grunted, "We did not expect this, brother."

Khoorlrhani-Tah sat stunned.

"Thirty four men?" he murmured.

No one answered.

"Thirty four men!!? Fourteen of them bakuwela?!!!" again no one said a thing.

The Tah's eyes were like a mad man. A voice chimed in from behind the Tah,

⁶ Magdriti is the warrior aspect of Ashuta. It is the shortened name of Magdritinathanay. The masters of the ancient Bakuwella schools worshiped this form of the Goddess.

"Plus the twenty men in Dajaai's company Nkosi."
It was Geeda.

"This is ONE man!!!" Khoorlrhani-Tah screamed.
He stood up and approached the man who was bent before him. He grabbed him by the shoulders and stood him up.

"What does he want?" He asked.

The man took in a breath as if to remember a most important message given to him.

"He said. *'Good King, I am coming to show you what lies behind the mist of your greatest fears. You and I will face them.'*"

Khoorlrhani-Tah suppressed his trembling. He swallowed hard and suddenly released the man.

"Send one hundred men!" The Tah demanded.

"Brother, one hundred men?" Toumak protested.

"That's not all. He has a boy with him. He has the eyes of the royal family!!!" The broken assassin said, then fell back to his knees.

This almost sent the Tah reeling back into his bench. He composed himself, asserted his will.

"Send them now! He will *not* enter my gates!!!!"
Khoorlrhani-Tah pounded his swords hilt into the tile floor and waved his hands at them both.

Nandee glanced at Suwan. A slight smile touched the corner their mouths.

Days passed in which there was news of large Mayak armies moving in the northeast. Many scouts reported that they were a formidable force planning to meet the force assembled near Tanaga. The Tah sent six-hundred more fighting men and archers to engage them. Khoorlrhani-Tah sat on his throne and waited. He looked to the horizon, waiting for news.

Days later, many men returned to Arkaya. They were worn, weathered by the sun of the open valleys from which they came. They smelled of sweat and dust, and had the look of well journeyed men who fought difficult battles. Their faces, grimacing, gnashing, betrayed a bitter defeat.

The tower men pulled the giant cedar lever that unhinged the great bolt over the gates which slowly began to open, creaking as they swung and kicked up a storm of yellow dust. At least a hundred somber silhouettes staggered through the contrasting beams of harsh yellow light that bit through the amber dust. They coughed and limped.

Toumak sat on the back of his white steed and watched as the men entered. He waited for the commander of the unit to report. He could not find

him in the confused and lackluster crowd of leather and steel. Toumak was troubled. Why had these men returned so quickly?

His brow sank deeply. Something was wrong. He waved to a passing gate captain, Kushta, beckoned him near him.

Toumak, puzzled, said: "This is only but a fourth of the men sent yesterday."

Kushta didn't understand.

"There are fourteen wounded who have not yet entered, but they are entirely here, Nkosi."

"I dispatched at least four hundred to the highlands!" Toumak snapped impatiently.

"And there are no armies reported anywhere in the west or the north!"

Kushta nodded, and bowed. He understood, and said as several of the aforementioned wounded passed by in clear view of Toumak,

"These men were sent to the east, toward Isiwa, a week ago."

Toumak's eyes widened. He could not believe it!

Kushta noticed his response and said,

"Some of them say it is Kalid, returned as a tiger, others say it is the spirit of the tigers come to eat us."

Toumak dismounted and worked his way into the crowd, until he found the feathered shoulders of the unit's commander.

"Tell me," He said, "What you saw."

The commander looked deeply into Toumak's eyes and said,

"You will see for yourself in two more days. He is coming here." The man had a sobered look on his face as if he saw a ghost.

"What does he want?" Toumak said

"He said, Nkosi, 'I am the Master, and yet only wish to serve. It is the Tah's choice to suffer this severe sting of his misalignment to truth.'"

"Lies, lies, lies!!!! It is not your brother returned!" Bulajaa, awakened from his long slumber, screamed almost hysterically,

"He tells lies to confuse you, weaken your decision making. He must not enter, Tah! You cannot rely upon his words! He must not enter!" The demon exclaimed, horrified.

"You must resist him, you MUST, YOU MUST YOU MUST. Defend! Defend!" It said, "Send five hundred men!"

"That will require a third of my reserves!"

Khoorlrhani-Tah exclaimed, "The Mayak are coming from the west..." He screamed.

"Send Six hundred, six thousand you fool, or suffer!!!!!" Bulajaa implored.

Minot sat before the campfire. He could not take his eyes off Paen who had rolled up on his side and was falling fast to sleep. Before he could let him go, Minot had to ask him. He had to know.

"Paen, who are you really?"

Paen snorted and murmured,

"Everything and nothing."

"I don't understand. How can you *never* be touched, how can you beat hundreds of men in battle, how is it possible?"

"For me, there is no '*one*,' in the way, Minot." The Master grunted.

He stirred a bit, and then sensing Minot's dissatisfaction, he turned around, smiling.

"Don't be so fooled, boy. Have a good hard look at me. I'm a man just like you. Cut me, I bleed. If I fall, bones break. I have flesh and blood just like you."

"But... no man can move..." Minot's throat seemed to tighten with emotion, awe,

"No man moves like... *that*." Minot gasped and fought the emotions that stirred his heart.

How could it be?

Paen sat up, snapped his folded robe and wrapped it around his own shoulders.

The light of the campfire shone against his bald head. He leaned forward.

"I move *nothing*. My legs, my hands," He shook his head,

"None of it is my doing." Paen held his fisted hand outward.

"It is all done for me. Never do I say in my mind, '*Move my fist, and move my legs, move left, move right.*' This is all done for me." Paen moved his fingers on his extended hands,

"Try it."

And Minot did the same.

"Do you see the truth of it? It's a clue," Paen said.

Minot moved his fingers.

"Are you commanding this movement, willing it to happen consciously?" Paen taught.

"I am," Minot fought. "I don't say it in my head but, I still command..."

"Oh... what about your eyes that have just blinked? What about that, and the swallowing of your throat, and the food that's being digested in your belly? Do you command these things to occur? Are you even aware of them?" The Master said.

Minot grew quiet upon that consideration.

"I guess I don't really... make those occur." The young man said.

"And why would you want to?" The Master grinned,

"You complain about enough work already, right? Ah-ha ha ha ha!" Master Paen laughed. Minot's eyes stared at the Master from across the firelight. His heart expanded and his face softened as he listened deeply to Paen.

"It is all done for me Minot. There is no assumption of a doer, a one who stands in my mind, influencing all things to occur. That one, which you are struggling to see beyond, is the only thing in the way for you to know what I know, to live as I live, to move as I move."

Minot was quiet for a short while, and then he asked.

"How does one see beyond the doer?" asked Minot.

Paen's round face beamed and he winked at Minot, "Just get to know me." He said. "Be my good friend. Learn to love me truly, purely. You will learn more by this than by any grandiose effort you could bring forward."

Minot was calmer, happier but seemed confused still. The Master stiffened his lip, glanced to the side then said.

"I do not rely on any belief for anything to happen or *not* to happen. I only trust the intelligence beyond the apparent confines of my body and mind. I trust it as being my form before you now as well as the forms you assume are separate from me."

"But how can you be all things when you are over there, separate from the trees, the fire, the sky..." Minot asked.

"*You* see this; *you* invent this belief, because *you* have assumed *yourself* as a thing separate from that tree, this fire, the sky. My *Self*, Minot, does not make this assumption."

"Then why do you call me, Minot, unless you've assumed yourself as separate?" Minot quipped.

"Ah-ha ha ha ha!" Paen laughed, "Very clever. Be careful though, it is cleverness that got your father in trouble."

They were quiet again. Then the Master said.

"It is love that wipes away these lines of separateness, Minot. These lines are nasty little things that create such awful reactivity in the human heart. They create jealousy, and most of all *fear*."

"Love is best for a mind to have its attention on. This is the activity best engaged in. Put your mind less on analyzing the lines of your form and more on loving them as they appear, working with them in love, with intelligence. Love moves me, steers me. Loving... *love itself* opens one and then the mystery is understood, but for this you must move for Her, in Her, bow to *Her*, and then you become *Her* so much that you share her beautiful secret and move as her."

"She is all things, Minot, high and low, blinking your eyes, digesting your food, moving your heart toward me the same way she moves me through and beyond seemingly impossible odds."

Minot smiled, he could not resist. He felt high again, quiet, his heart open, his mind quiet.

He felt he wanted to cry, but he felt ashamed. He held onto his pride just enough to fight the tears back.

"Why does She move you through my father's men?" He asked after the emotion subsided.

Paen poked at the fire with a stick. He then extended his hand and put it on Minot's shoulder, patting it.

"To inspire you. To remind you, what your true qualities are—free, absolutely and utterly. Your story is already written. Your happiness is already home at heart, your victory has already been established, you are *already* loved and nothing but loving Her needs to be done, *ever*."

Minot's defenses then became undone. He buried his face in his hands at first, but then sank his head against the Masters shoulder.

Three hundred horned mehras galloped steadfastly northeast along the Namne river, their hooves digging up clods of dirt and grass. The rains were coming, and electricity flowed in the graying skies. Toumak rode in the front. His helmet was black and his armor a deep dark red. His long and curved scimitar was slung along his back. He would meet this man face to face. All along he wondered who it

could be, this man who rode with the Tah's long lost son. This was not a part of the plan Nandee spoke of many years ago. Minot and the twins were never to return.

Could this be Kalid, returned? And was he prepared to do battle with his own long dead brother? Toumak was an amalgam of fear and exhilaration. He honestly did not know what to do once meeting, the Master.

Hours later, as the rains poured down, the men came upon the two riders. With no thought given to it, Toumak gave the orders,

"Attack," and the mehra men moved ahead of him, gaining on the riders. Toumak had to see. He had to see for himself!

Beneath the grey sheets of the downpour, Toumak saw each man turned, each sword blocked, several at a time, bodies hitting the mud, mehras twisted and turned onto themselves, and in the center of it all, Toumak saw the drunken smile of a sole man, dancing within a shining ball of light that radiated from wild electric channels of his opened heart!

Toumak's eyes widened. He became afraid, and then saw the Master as a tiger! He became inspired, and then the image shifted again, one man single

handedly taking on his legion of men, with force, with grace!

The ball of light grew intense and then in one moment, the sky opened up and sucked up the electricity flowing through Paen. There was a thunder clap, as Paen ducked, dodged, pushed tripped waves of men, his eyes wild, smiling.

Toumak saw it! It was clear! This man could not be touched, would not be stopped by the simple wave of the Tah's ringed hand! His power extended beyond anything he would know. At least eighty men were dealt with, and the energy of the Master only grew stronger.

Toumak had seen enough, and snapped the reins of his mehra, commanding it to gallop forward. He gave a signal to one man, and the retreat horn was sounded. The remaining men, nearly a hundred who had not engaged Paen galloped back up the hillside, as Toumake rode through them headed for the Master.

Those put down by Paen were being helped by him, healed. Toumak saw him speaking to a few of them, laughing, teasing.

As Toumak approached, Paen saw him. Toumak saw Minot, protected by the light that only they could see. Toumak removed his helmet, and

dismounted before his mehra even stopped. He rushed forward to meet Paen. His heart beat wildly, like a child's, as waves of emotion over took him. Paen sheathed Maburata, and her light vanished again.

And in that moment, Toumak knew, intuited; felt deeply within that despite the facial features of this man, he was Kalid, his heart reborn into the body of another man. The Master had returned! Toumak took Paen by the shoulders, then burst into tears and embraced him.

"Ah... *finally* I am seen." Paen joked. "What took you so long brother?"

Toumak knelt down, and cried. His men, the captains on the hillside, and the centurions stirred, confused. It was quiet now, only the sound of rain. Toumak did not care how his regard of the Master appeared. In his heart, he knew, the Kingdom was now saved.

"Yes, finally." Toumak cried, "Finally!"

Paen took his hand and had him stand. They looked at one another for a long moment. All his doubts were washed away, but then his mind began to reconstruct a problem.

"I was to destroy you, brother. This is impossible. The Tah will punish us if we fail. What must I do?"

Paen smiled.

"All you can do is your duty, good general." And Paen handed his sword over to him. "I am your prisoner."

As the four hundred men returned, with the Master bound at the hands and elbows, the gates of Arkaya swung open. The tower men recognized the General, Toumak, his signature gestures to have the gates opened immediately. It appeared as though this time, the lone stranger was defeated, and that was how the story spread as the four hundred men traveled through the villages. This story however was not so pleasantly received at the palace as the Tah heard it from the mouth of a servant.

"They have captured the vagabond!" she smiled, hoping to receive a good favor from the Tah. Instead she was thrown out of the palace, never to serve there again.

"He was to be killed on sight!! Why have you brought him into my gates?" The Tah roared at Toumak, when he returned. Toumak lowered his gaze. He said nothing.

"Execute him!" The Tah demanded.

Toumak stirred. He could not comply.

"I cannot, brother."

The Tah turned around to face Toumak.

"What?"

"You must see him brother." Toumak insisted.

"What is this you are telling me?!" The Tah insinuated treason and glanced at his Bakuwella bodyguards. They moved a step closer into the room, ready to arrest the General.

"You must see him, I say. You must see him for yourself!"

"All I see is a man gone insane!" The Tah said.

"Then you merely see the reflections of my eyes, brother! Why will you not see for yourself! Why are you so afraid to see him again!?"

"Again? See *who* again?! Take him!" the Tah said, and Toumak was seized by the black horde of guards.

"Have you forgotten your love?!" Toumak's voice echoed through the lower halls of the dihj.

"The other one is your son! Will you execute him as well?" Toumak yelled.

Khoorlrhani-Tah slung his arm over the back of his throne. The words struck him like lightning.

The Tah gave the order to have Paen executed at sunrise. He was held in a brig miles away from the palace and was surrounded by one thousand guards.

Minot was held with him for a time, and implored Paen to break free, to escape, and to conquer the Tah's entire army.

"Will you not use your power?"

Paen would not.

"I have my faith in an honorable man, my devotee, that he has learned what true power is," Paen said, as they took Minot away.

Minot was brought to the Palace that evening. The Tah looked upon him with paranoid eyes as his mind searched everywhere for a threat.

"*Nkosi*," Suwan whispered to him as he studied the man before him now,

"Do you not recognize your own son?"

Neither of them knew what to say to one another. Minot stood still before him, strong and sinewy. It was then, in that moment where his father sat beneath the glow of torches that Minot could see his father clearly. He saw his fear, and he saw his poisoned heart. He gazed at his father with a

knowing and yet compassionate expression. Minot loved his father.

Minot saw that his father was not an evil man but that he was trapped, that in his heart was a stitch, a tiny clasp holding shut and veiling what the Tah did to himself.

Minot sensed the Tah's pride in his own severance of life. He felt it coming from the Tah as an enormous, strangling work of mind and will, of his great lengths of ego face games to appear calm and in control, to present among his servants, to influence, and to defend.

Minot saw his father's patterns of this *holding shut* emanating as pure bitterness, and he saw this bitterness expressed by those around him, the servants that bowed and yet resented the Tah, and the guards that glanced at him for his approval and plotted against him, the workers in the fields who obeyed him and yet smeared the Tah's name, and the tribes that paid tribute to him and who feared and hated him.

Everyone was affected, by this example of the man on top.

There will only be war by this, Minot thought.

Minot could feel the Tah's lines, lines of distinction, judgment, justification, the years of them emanating from the *held shut* heart, extending, transmitting as black waves fed to all aligned to it, to all that agreed with it and served it.

Minot's gaze widened as he calmly observed. Still, Minot felt love for the Tah. The Tah, pulled the greasy bones of a bird past his lips. He threw the bones on the floor. A servant scooped them up, bowed and left. The Tah noted Minot's analysis.

"And so you are a man, now." He said as he sucked the flesh from another bone.

"You shall have a place within my ranks, a plot of land. Is that what you wish?" The Tah said dismissively.

"No." Minot said. It came out of him easily as though it were said for him,

"It is not."

"Then what? You wish to be a tree dweller, a vagabond like your traveling friend?" The Tah quipped.

"I have come to free you," Minot said most lovingly, and then he felt tiny hairs rise on the back of his neck.

The Tah laughed loudly, and many in the courtroom laughed with him, servants and warriors. Suwan gazed at her son and smiled.

"Free me! You are going to save the Tah within his own dihi?!" He threw his head back and bellowed, his open mouth exposing chewed flesh held between his yellowing teeth. The courtroom was full of jeering laughter.

"From his prison, I will free my father," Minot said, and the court became quiet,

"from his kingly illusions and from the prison of his mind which has tortured him and all those in relationship to him." Minot glanced at his mother.

Khoorlrhani-Tah's face soured. The message from the lips of his son registered deep within him, and within, he felt the panic of Bulaja.

It is him you fool!!!!

The court was silent. Suwan barely suppressed her smile as she sat next to the Tah.

With but a panicked glance many guards entered and filled the room. The Tah's hands visibly shook as he contemplated Minot. Still he persisted, asserted his will.

"How dare you threaten me, boy!" Khoorlrhani-Tah rasped.

Minot took two steps closer to the Tah, and with that hundreds of swords were drawn.

"It is not a threat I bring to you, father?" Minot said, "Only a message from the Master in whose heart I reside."

Khoorlrhani-Tah stood, trembling, outraged, and in one moment, he caught a glimpse of the true form before him! He saw the tiger. He feared for his flesh, that it would be ripped apart and eaten!

"Take him now!" The Tah commanded, and the Bakuwella warriors rushed Minot, but no avail.

Minot, without even drawing his sword, moved without resistance in his heart. Minot so loved Paen, so believed in him, that he received that which moved the Master – the grace of the goddess, Ashuta!

He surrendered to it completely, and it annihilated any effort against him. He pulled arms, tripped ankles, and used every means possible and impossible to stop the men who were dumbfounded.

How could this one boy best them all!?

The truth in the form of Minot's body outshined the strategies of the men whose art was based on limitation rather than limitlessness-- love. With

love, he could not fail, with love he could not be touched for nothing stood outside of him, instead all lines extended from his heart and were obvious!!

Tears rolled from his cheeks as he spun, as armored men fell into each other, and onto the floor, tangled, as Minot landed perfectly, always *already* prepared, always moving.

Over the cacophony Minot could hear his father screaming, afraid.

“It is one man!!! He will destroy me!” An endless stream of men poured in, and by the time it was done, Minot stood upon a pile of them! His arms were spread like bird’s wings, his face was bright, and his eyes were closed.

Paralyzed the Tah sat on his throne, and clutched its armrests. His eyes gapped at the form of his son who now walked toward him across the tile floor. An archer shot an arrow! Minot caught it, opened his eyes, and then broke it across his raised knee. Minot was then over the Tah who was now begging, pleading.

“Please no no no....” Khoorlrhani-Tah gurgled.

Minot placed a hand on the Tah’s shoulder and said, “Do not fear me. Walk with me,” And then placed his other hand over the Tah’s heart.

With that, they were together in the bog, the internal place where the Tah was being kept. Boutage was crying. The crown looked silly upon his head. Kalid stood over him and placed a hand over his head.

He held the scroll in his other hand, and handed it to his brother.

"It is for you."

"No! I don't want to see it!" Boutage refused.

"Don't be afraid, brother. It is only to serve you."

And the Tah took it. He broke the seal on it and rolled it open. He began reading.

Dear foolish one,

*If you could only see yourself, truly see yourself, you could see the meaningless of your efforts. You are my heart, silly king, and only my heart is king. You do not know this because you look away. How else could it be that your life is a hell? How could it be otherwise when you do not know Me, love Me, feel Me. The efforts of your singularity isolated you, and your defenses of it strangle you! Do you not know that **only my servants** are truly kings and queens?*

Oh dumbfounded one. Come home to Me. Be with Me, know Me and know yourself. Step toward Me, and all your fears will fade, for then what is there to fear when you know yourself truly as all things. You are my play!

You are my art! I love you insanely! You are my child. I long for your return into my arms.

And Khoorlrhani-Tah read his story on the scroll, saw all that he had done, recounted it all. It was a mirror of his entire experience as the boy known as Boutage, the king known as Khoorlrhani-Tah. He saw where his error occurred and how it got worse. He sobbed and laughed and sobbed. It was all a joke. A big joke!

Kalid lifted him up. Boutage flung his arms around Kalid, his brother.

"It was another mistake!" Boutage said.

"And you will make mistakes, brother." Kalid said.

"But I forgot your love and... destroyed..." The Tah began.

"There is *no one* to destroy my brother. You cannot destroy Me, for I am eternal. I AM love. I keep going and going and going, Ah-ha ha ha ha! It is but a mere trick of the light. You can withdraw from it, avoid it for awhile, but now I have you! You played your part as a means to serve others, and now you have learned what you needed to learn."

And Kalid guided his brother out of the bog, and through the mists of his fears. He burst the Tah's ghosts and demons into white light as they traveled.

It was a long and painful journey, swamps and wastelands full of the horrors of the Tah's mind, but Kalid stayed with his brother, leading the way through the briars of disappointment, the swamps of despair and doubt, and eventually to the giant stockade of the Tah's separate identity, his great misunderstanding and the defense of it. There in the greyness, standing before the immense gate made of sacred trees, Kalid said.

"You must open it."

Boutage rose and pushed against the wooden surface, gave it everything within him and the giant fence managed only a slight creak.

"Push!" Kalid demanded.

And Boutage did as his brother said, trusted him, relied on him, as his own muscles strained, ripped and healed, and as spine grew stronger, the obstruction began to move! The effort seemed to last for like a thousand years, a thousand lifetimes, but Boutage did as Kalid said and pushed.

And Minot's hand grabbed the two black snakes that were pushed out of the heart of his father. They hissed and Suwan screamed as she saw them being extracted. Minot pulled and his father, as if he took his first breath, gasped for air. Minot pulled them out, like thorns out from the paw of the lion, and he

fell backward, stumbling by their weight and accidentally releasing them.

The court was full of screaming as the two beasts hit the tile floor. Jandee of deception bore into the tile floor halfway only to be cut in half by Nandee who stood over her. Mandee of fear slithered away quickly into the darkest corner, hissing.

“I curse your family! I will feed on the hearts of your youngest for this”

Minot looked into his father’s eyes. His father looked back, held his son’s shoulder and smiled.

Geeda looked at Toumak who had just entered the mess made of the court.

“Oh...snakes. You see. I told you.”

Chapter Thirteen: Epilogue – The Demand of Truth

Paen laid on an ornate carpet in a soft meadow. He was surrounded by a countless number of people including the Tah, Minot, Suwan, her daughters and sons, Nandee, and all the others. The sun was bright and warm, and the locusts chimed their delicate mid-afternoon song. The Master toyed with a yellow flower as he sat watching, gazing and smiling at all those who sat with him.

“You ask me *always*, ‘Master, how can I be like you,’ and I say you cannot. Then you are angry with me. Then I say, ‘**You** cannot be anything! The divine is being **everything** for you,’ and you seem to hate this. You are always defending your separate point of view. You take extreme pride in it; you suffer fears to keep it going. You invent the silliest dramas with it. You say to me constantly ‘How are you not separate,’ and then I ask you ‘What is telling **you** that I am? I am not telling you this.’ Never have I said, ‘I am separate from you, better than you.’ I am only unlike you, in that I am the only one here, right now at least, who has no separate point of view! It is you who assumes I am separate, because you’ve

assumed this for yourself! Ah-ha ha ha ha ha! Do you see?"

"And then you all nod, and say '*yes, yes I understand Paen,*' but then you forget that it takes *Me* to hold you to any kind of *almost, sorta kinda* understanding of it."

"So you see, you resist this teaching! You resist Me. I can feel you now, wrestling this over, drawing all of your judgmental lines, always sparing you ego, but never getting on with what I have to tell you. Instead you want more proof, more stunts."

Right now a few of you are thinking, '*I don't believe in what this man is saying. He's a loon!*' '*Why should I trust him?*' '*This is not the way I see it, and I don't have to agree,*' '*Prove it,*' all of your varying shades of doubt. And yet here you are sitting here, wanting to hear something. There's an unmistakable thirst you see, that needs to be quenched. Well I Am what will quench that thirst. But you must drink!"

"You can either accept the truth gracefully or meet it in the end as your world implodes around you on your deathbed. That is how I am beginning to feel right about now."

"I have no more stunts for you though. The show is over in that regards. It has already been six years

with you and still, there is a big mess to clean up around here! Have you noticed?"

"You have assumed this...." And he smiled and looked at the Tah lovingly, tracing his finger in the air around the Tah's form,

"...this separate line, held in, contracted."

Paen then raised his opened hand and further illustrated with a clenched fist.

"You've adopted it as an identity as all the patterns of your experiences occurred. You could at any moment drop that assumption, but you are... *well...* all a bit chicken shit.... Ah ha ha ha ha ha!"

There was a roar of laughter.

"It is ok that you are chicken shit. I understand. I will keep showing you. I mean there is nothing better for me to do ... Aha ha ha ha!!"

There was another roar of laughter, then a long pause as he gazed over the lot of them. A soft breeze lifted the aromas of flowers in the Master's ornate garden.

"If you could only see the view from here, *oh...*(gasp). There is no object from my body to yours, to those mountains, beyond to the seas,

beyond the orb that is this world and to the countless stars in the heavens that I do not know as my very self! Do you have any idea of what I am saying? These are your diamond eyes I'm telling you about, the real ones, the ones with which you can recognize yourself in this way, free, unlimited and...enlightened! "

"As you may have guessed, in order to know this for yourself, you must give up the limitation you've mistaken yourself to *be*. To get past this, you must love the truth, the divine, all of Her forms, all of My forms. You must love Me enough to defend what I Am within you, despite yourself, where instead of holding in and onto your identity, you become driven by the divine, where you step forward as Her, and are turned to Me, the Master, here to free you!"

Paen's eyes wandered the lot of them and found Minot who wept joyfully.

"Some of you have been given glimpses of what it is like to be Mastered by me. Some are more willing to be moved, but only after I've sanded your beliefs away. Well... no more miracles from Me. I'm through softening your heads. Ah-ha ha ha ha ha!!!! Now I'm going for your hearts. If you want a war with your brothers in the North, go right ahead.

Don't ask Me to fight it for you. If you want special status with others in the tribe, then go for it, but you won't get it from Me."

"I'm here to inform you of a greater matter, the matter of the heart. Don't ask Me, *'Master, will you teach me your way of the sword?'* I've already given Mastery to you, but in order to really do right by it, you must bend my way, understand the real way, what I have been trying to teach you these many years since I came to you. If you will not do it, then you must not really want victory badly enough! And if this is the case, then... GIVE IT UP! Let your hearts be free of it and be with Me, who is the principle of the truest victory ever imaginable."

"If your search for ordinary victories brings you nowhere, give this effort up. Let your hearts be free of it, this rat race you are so preoccupied with, and be with Me. Give it up or try harder, I do not care which, but if refusing Me has not ultimately given you what you want, GIVE up your refusal of Me, your lines, your stubborn agendas to be these limited characters, because I AM *really* the way of freedom, not the way of conquest and ego building."

"What I am telling you is the truth. I do not lie; you are all Ashuta, God, Her many names, Her many faces. Be with Me, on My terms, not on your own.

Listen to Me! Enjoy with Me all that is being given right now, not after you've achieved your next rank in the Tah's silly army, not after you've been married to a prince. Today I am leaving these gates. I am returning to the jungles, leaving you here to clean up your mess, your shittiness, your bitterness, your loveless-ness."

There were many gasps and pleas,

"No Master Paen! Do not go!"

He softly put one hand into the air,

"I will be nearby. It will be ok. When you are ready to hear what I have to say, come to Me, but come to Me ready and with purity, with your heart open, ready to receive my teaching. Come dying, aching, to love Me! Come willing to serve Me, who is true. I will be waiting."

The End

Dedicated entirely to my guru Santosha Ma, and to
Adi Da, the Masters whose presence bathed me
during the writing of this and moved me through
my many limitations to reach the end. I love you
insanely, beloved Santosha Ma and Adi Da!!

-- Neil

NEXT: Diamond Eyes – The Last Khoodrhani Warrior