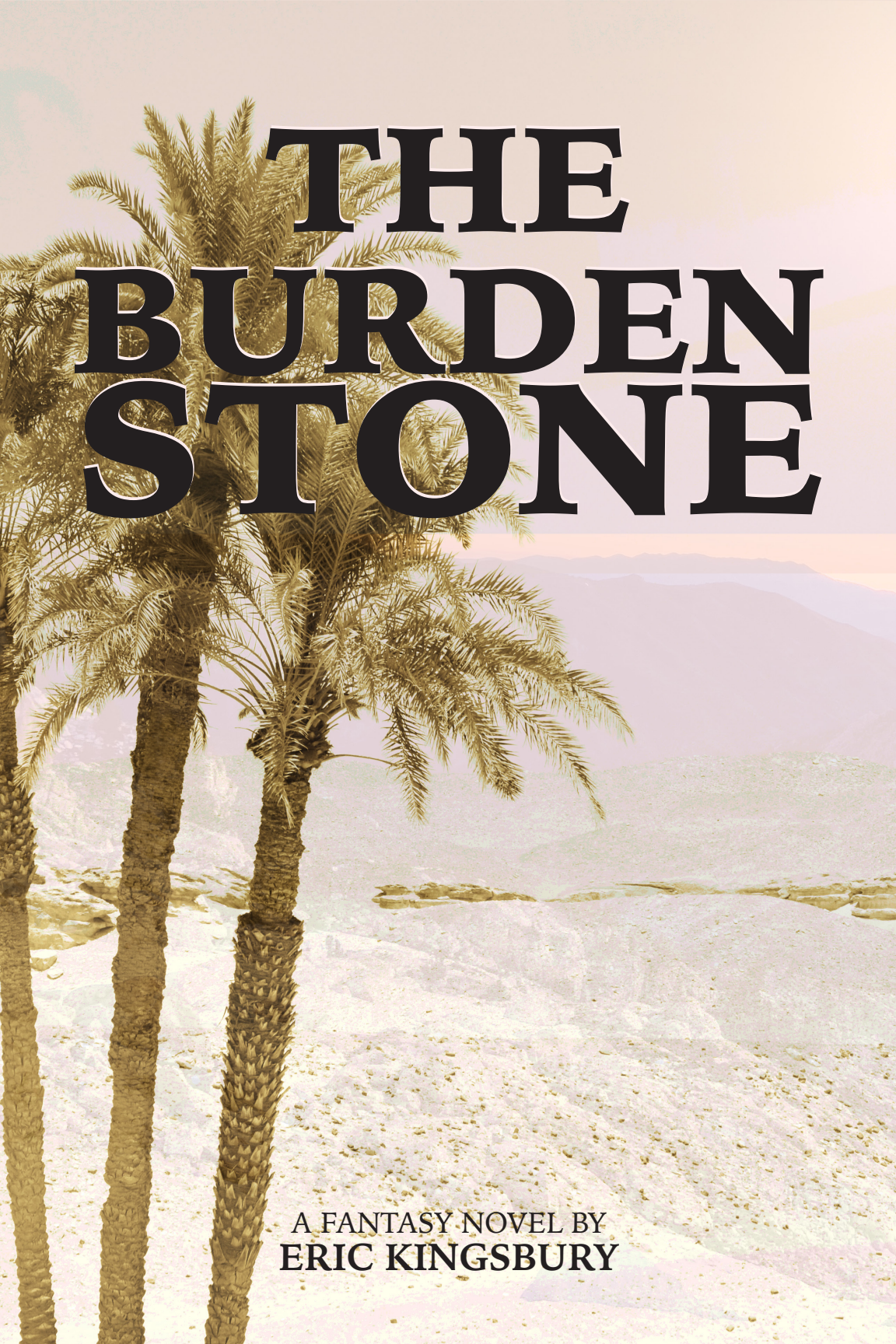


The background of the cover is a photograph of a desert scene. In the foreground, three palm trees stand on a sandy dune. The middle and right trees are more prominent, with their fronds reaching upwards. In the background, there are rolling sand dunes and a range of mountains under a sky with soft, warm colors from a sunset or sunrise. The overall tone is golden and serene.

THE BURDEN STONE

A FANTASY NOVEL BY
ERIC KINGSBURY

The Burden Stone: Part One

A Novel by Eric Kingsbury

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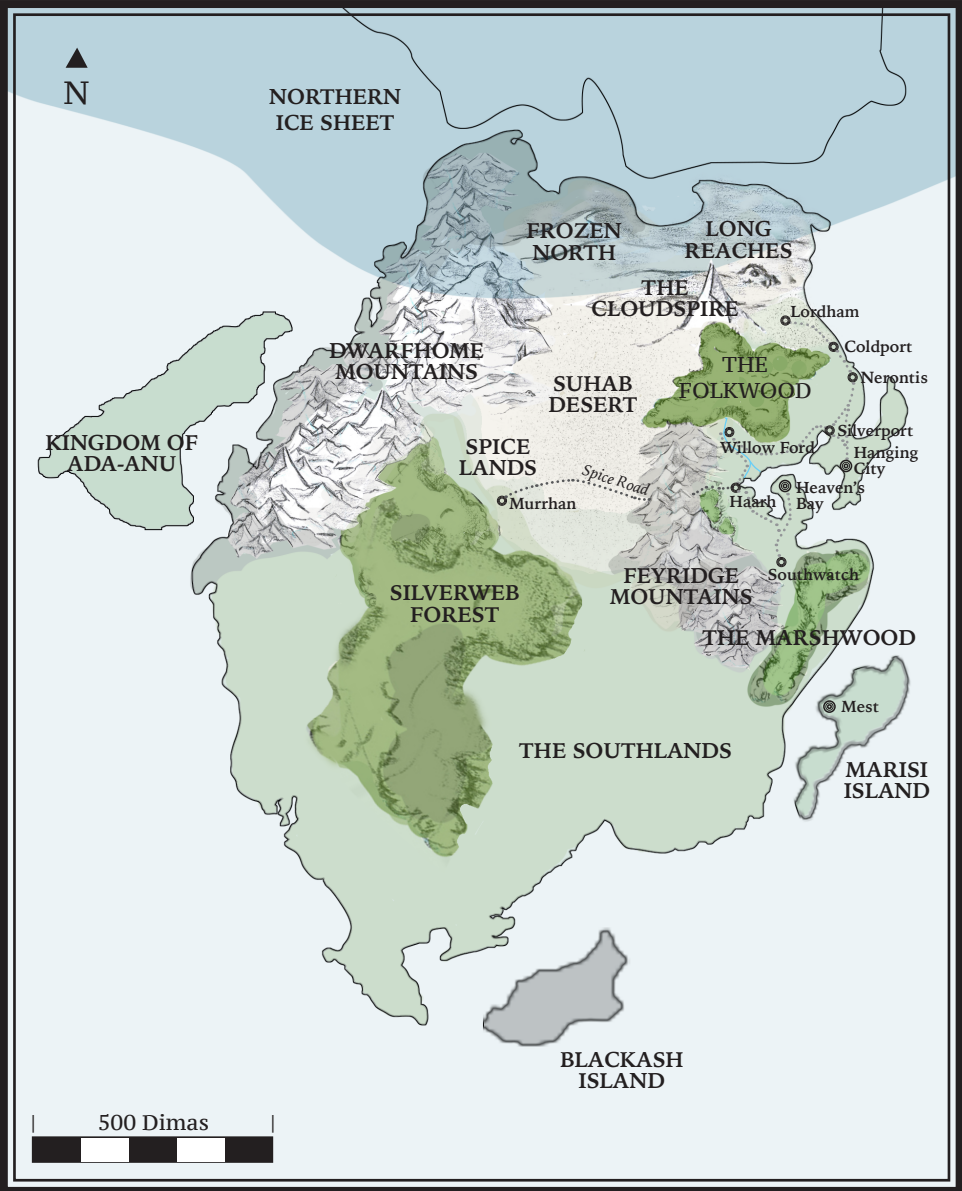
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THE BURDEN STONE

PART ONE

A FANTASY NOVEL BY
ERIC KINGSBURY

THE WORLD OF SANAREUN



IN THE EARLY AGE OF MEN

Chapter One

Hashem Naruddin Arasti lay unconscious, cold, dreaming.

He dreamed he was in his tent, at his Arasti tribe's nomadic camp north and west of the Alhammas plateau, gathering his implements for the morning hunt. He could hear the sand seethe outside, could feel the ambient heat of the low desert crawl through his tent flap, but he could find nothing he needed for hunting. How would he convince Kirathi of his strength and cunning, his hunting prowess, his masculine worth, without his bow, his quiver, his long knives?

I have had this dream before, he realized suddenly, but he continued to root about the spacious tent, searching desperately, until he had somehow dug a deep trench in the sandy floor. The trench opened down to a vast cold cavern of distant walls lined with dimly glowing gemstones. Or were they eyes? A million glinting eyes? Spiders? The Muwathi?

How many times have I dreamed this?

Powerless to turn away, frozen in a kind of paralysis, he stared deep into the earthy blackness until familiar sensations took hold — the visceral pull of his body down into the dark abyss; the vertiginous slip into unseen, bottomless depths; the weightless fall into infinite nothing.

But wait, is that Kirathi? Falling ahead of me?

He awoke with a start, coughing, shivering, his eyes watering, and it was all gone — the tent, the heat, the cavern, the falling.

Above him, instead, a darkening sky of long sooty strokes of cloud spread out in all directions. He was flat on his back against hard-packed glacial ice. His breath drew raggedly in, sputtered out in plumes of mist. A burning pain radiated from his right thigh. His head ached. His ears rang. And the cold. The all-penetrating cold on his face and hands. A swarm of falling snowflakes glimmered like crystal fireflies in the oblique rays of the setting sun.

Where am I?

He sat up and shook his head, winced at the pain, rubbed the dream from his eyes.

What place is this?

He looked around him. A monotonous field of blue-green ice ran far into the gloaming distance, dotted here and there with low columns of black stone piled around with snow, like shadowlords cloaked in white vestments.

A distant screeching of predatory birds echoed through the frigid gloom.

Ah yes, the Frozen North.

He shivered.

But where is Raspiel? Where is that drunken son-of-a-whore gharib?

Hashem's head burned at the thought. He reached up to feel a swollen mass of sticky blood along his hairline. And his leg? A knife puncture. Not too deep. Already clotting up. It would be sore, but nothing serious. It would heal.

He stood slowly, keeping his weight on his left leg.

His mule was gone, his pack gone, his travel tent, his walking staff, his coat, his bow, his swords. Everything gone. He felt for the Burden Stone he carried in a pouch at his hip, hidden inside his leggings. Relieved, he found it there, small and round and radiating a soft warmth.

But the betrayal of the morning returned to his memory in its bitter fullness.

Raspiel!

The middle-aged *gharib*, or foreigner, had wandered into the lonely sand circle of Hashem's campfire one night over a week before. A beaten cast-out by his looks, his slumping, shuffling gait and low stray eyes carved dubious glyphs in the sand and moonlight. He had dark matted hair and beard, a patched rucksack, an empty quiver at his side, a weathered longbow in one hand, a tarnished knife at his belt.

Hashem had stood, startled, his hands instinctively moving up and out, ready to draw the crossed short swords slung across his back.

"Who goes there?"

"Peace, friend," the interloper drawled, his words soft and sweet, his palms held out at the edge of the circle of firelight. "I am Raspiel of Lordham, hunter and trapper of the wastes. I have had a bit of it, I'm afraid, and would welcome the company of you and your fire. I harbor no ill-intent, I assure you."

Hashem felt at once that he shouldn't trust the *gharib*, but he recalled his uncle Omari, who had been the Arasti Far-Wanderer in his day, lecturing him gently, prior to Hashem's ritual exile from the Arasti tribe.

"On this journey, boy," his uncle had said, "your mandate is to cultivate wisdom. There will be times when you recoil in fear or suspicion from the learning opportunities the *dimmiun* offer you, and that may seem wisdom, may indeed be wisdom at times, but there will be occasions when you must still your doubting mind and take chances. See what there is to see. Feel what there is to feel."

"But this wisdom, what is it?" Hashem had asked. "How will I know when I've found it?"

"It is a pearl worth more than all the gold in the Eastern Shores. You will know it when you have found it."

Pah! Riddles! Hashem had thought. I must risk nothing and return home to Kirathi at the earliest opportunity. She is my pearl.

“Do not worry,” Omari had added, misreading Hashem’s expression, “you will find the threads to follow. They will rise to you, like the *dimmiun* themselves, and you will follow them, and you will begin to see.”

More riddles.

These doubts, these internal conflicts, the friction that rubbed between his pride at being chosen as his own generation’s Far-Wanderer and his desire for Kirathi, painfully postponed, to say nothing of his fear of the unknown, these broodings cast their shadows about him as he departed the Arasti camp, and with it all of the Suhabi people, and trudged out into the desert those many weeks ago.

He had resolved to do his duty, keep to himself, learn what he could, and return home safely at the end of the traditional two-year exile. No risks, no entanglements. He would be content within himself, the lone Far-Wanderer, and he imagined nothing more than the joy he would feel when he returned to Kirathi’s arms, a proven man and a future leader of the tribe.

But the Suhab desert has considerable abrasive power. The sun, the sand, the endless immutable horizon — it can scour the soul of delusion, of ambition, of resolution, of hope.

By that early spring night, when the foreigner Raspiel arrived at Hashem’s camp, the young Suhabi was in a vulnerable mood, his resolve eroded by the desert. He was increasingly sullen, emotionally lost and lonely, having wandered so far and so long already, walking east then due north into the barren elevations of the high desert, into colder and colder wastes, searching for a direction, some thread to follow. Along the way, he had encountered almost no one, and he had begun to despair of his ability to even go through the motions of this impossible solitary quest for something that neither he nor the tribal elders could define with precision.

Moving closer to the fire that night, Raspiel went on to explain that he had been hunting the elusive sandfox, prized for its exotic pelt, but had failed to track any down. Further, he had barely just escaped a pack of wolves, exhausting both his quiver and his strength. He claimed to have abandoned his tent and supplies in haste and was fated now to head back in the easterly direction of his home, Lordham. Again, he pled to join Hashem.

After a pause, Hashem gestured to the ground next to the fire, translating an old Suhabi expression of hospitality into the common tongue, “You may join me at my fire.”

Hashem shared his rations with this new acquaintance, listening as Raspiel told him of his home in Lordham. The *gharib* seemed to speak with a mix of pride and bitterness, lingering for some time on the city's military and mercantile traditions, before segueing unprompted into more personal territory.

"Me own father's an armorer for the citadel," Raspiel had said, as he pulled out an earthenware flask and offered it uncorked to Hashem. "Bit of a nip then?"

"I do not partake of fermentation," Hashem solemnly. "It is not our way."

"You Suhabi," Raspiel chuckled and took a swig from his flask. "No magic, no liquor, no women, no fun."

"There are certainly women in our tribe."

"Right," Raspiel laughed again. "But where was I? Yes, the old man. Getting far on in years, the bugger. Won't have anything to do with old Raspiel, he won't. Carcass peddler, he calls me. Drunk, he calls me. Be a fine day they lower his carcass into the dirt, I say."

Hashem frowned and stared at the fire, unaccustomed to such talk. Suhabi tribal culture was built for survival in the harsh desert environment. The family, and by extension the tribe, formed the essential bulwark against the extreme elements. No matter how you felt inside, to openly disrespect one's elders in the manner of Raspiel's speech would be tantamount to blasphemy in any Suhabi camp.

I have much to learn of the ways of foreigners, he reflected.

The stranger rambled a bit longer and a bit less coherently about the glory of Lordham, its dwarven history, and its battles against monsters from the north. To Hashem, it seemed a fascinating if confusing and forbidding place.

"And where be you heading?" Raspiel asked.

"East," Hashem demurred. "The Eastern Shores."

"Gah, that's a large target to hit, innit? No mean to pry your business, but what a Suhabi want in the Eastern Shores? Never heard of such a t'ing."

The alcohol was clearly affecting the *gharib*.

"My tribe has some business in Heaven's Bay," Hashem fabricated, tossing out the only city name he knew in the Eastern Shores. "It is not unheard of. For us to travel on rare occasions."

"Aye, I meant no offense, laddie. O'cor. Heaven's Bay, that's an easy eye on the map, due east innit, but some wild country between, alas. Have you been?"

"No."

"Well, then, anstulas, as you people say. The gods be wit you."

We say nothing of the sort, Hashem thought, but said nothing.

The *gharib* rolled to his back on the sand and stared up into a clearing sky filled with misty clusters of stars.

“Yea, the gods be wit you.”

Then Raspiel rose from whatever starry reverie had captured him, slurring, “I’m afraid I’m all in, then, friend.” He shuffled to his feet and into a drunken singsong refrain of “in, then, friend, in, then, friend” for several vacant moments. Finally, the stranger slumped over to his pack, spread a dirty bedroll across the frosty high-desert sand, near the fire, and sprawled out, opposite Hashem’s humble camel-hide travel tent.

The young Suhabi kept his eyes on the foreigner for a short interval, then hearing the deep snoring of alcoholic slumber, Hashem retired to his own tent, his own reflections, and eventually his familiar dark dreams, always some variety of the monstrous half-human Muwathi creatures crawling in fathomless tunnels deep beneath the desert sands.

For the next few days, Hashem and Raspiel walked together, due north through the high desert, trailed on a tether by Hashem’s pack mule, whom he had named Omari, after his esteemed but overbearing and stubborn maternal uncle.

Raspriel chattered constantly, to Hashem’s mild annoyance, often rehashing hunting stories or warning Hashem of various regions to the east, all the while repeatedly entreating him to delay his business in Heaven’s Bay and join Raspiel on the passage back to Lordham. Hashem mostly grunted along with Raspiel’s meandering narratives, offering little, committing even less.

The *gharib* drank a lot, was generally untidy and undisciplined, yet he seemed harmless enough. So, on the third day, after much consideration, Hashem agreed to join Raspiel on his path back to Lordham. The tribal elders had given him little guidance in terms of where he should go and what he should do on this quest for wisdom. There were no maps in Arasti possession that extended much beyond the Suhab desert. All Hashem knew of the wider world was that his uncle, in his time, had gone to a place called Heaven’s Bay.

Lordham was a direction, Hashem told himself, a thread to follow.

The haggard *gharib* slapped him on the back at the news.

“Atta boy,” Raspiel said, laughing. “Stick with ol Raspiel and I lead you true.”

If anyone had seen them walking through the wastes of the high desert, they would have started at the contrast between the two men. Raspiel shuffled along in his dirty, stained, worn leathers, with a multi-colored, multi-patched coat over him, often dragging his unstrung old longbow carelessly behind. Hashem, on the other hand, shined in the freshness of his youth, his movements crisp and elegant in the proud manner of Suhabi men, his tough hide armor unsullied beneath an immaculate longshirt and a finely combed and insulated camelhair tunic. The sight of

the two men suggested impossibly juxtaposed journeys, or the concurrence of the sun and the moon in one sky, or perhaps one might see in the couple's contrast the inevitability of age, corruption, and decay.

On the fourth night, around the fire, the two unlikely companions shared Hashem's diminishing rations of hard flat-tack bread, almonds, dates and Arasti jerky, made of dried strips of chevon, berries, and spices.

"Aye, Hashem," Raspiel called out to him, over his shoulder, as he relieved himself nearby, "do you know where we are now?"

Hashem paused, as he habitually did before speaking.

"We are heading into the northernmost expanse of the high desert." He surveyed the distant moonlit horizons and recalled the rudimentary, poorly marked maps of the area that the Arasti elders had shown him. "The Cloudspire looms there to the east, with the Folkwood in its southern shadow. The old mountains of the Dwarf Lands are far off there, west, and the Frozen North encroaches upon the high desert straight ahead. As I consider it. So, it's due east to Lordham, no?"

"My Suhabi friend, you continue to surprise. Correct, correct. Ol Raspiel knows these parts like the back o'is hand. So many, many hunting and trapping seasons in these forsaken wastes. Aye, our travels and travails find us at that point. But gah forbid! We cannit go direct east from ere. Not to Lordham."

"We cannot go east?"

"No, not direct." Raspiel returned to the campfire, wiping his hands on his coat. "East lies a troubled area, the domain of Lost Rathor. You know it?"

"No, I have never heard that name."

"Aye, Lost Rathor. Ruins of a ancient dwarfen fortress, when all this waste was grassland. Real land, ya know, the kind wit villages that grew crops an fed cattle. Gah, but was long ago an Lost Rathor now's a haunted place. An ancient evil lurks inside that fort, they say. Jus west a the Folkwood. No one goes there. Least comes out. Not even orcs or goblins brave Lost Rathor. We cannit move through that place. And jus north of Lost Rathor, the foothills of The Cloudspire, filled with darkness and monsters. Yet another place to shun. We'd like as be eaten alive in dere, jus the two of us. We daren't move due east or northeast from ere."

"Then what do you suggest, Raspiel?"

"Hark well, if we keen to live, the path is first northwest, into the Frozen North a stretch, then east, so as to skirt above a Lost Rathor an The Cloudspire, through the bottom of the Long Reaches, to the old roads that lay the way to Lordham. Aye?"

The Frozen North, as Hashem knew, was a massive desolate glacial expanse

that crowned the Suhab desert and stretched north as far as anyone knew. Rumors and legend told of ancient elven and dwarven cities buried unspoiled beneath the ice, frost giants roaming the higher reaches, and nameless horrors in the so-called skull-caverns that punctuated the interior regions. But to the knowledge of the Arasti, no one could confirm these mythical dangers. Less exotic threats — wolves, bears, and the brutal cold — these were enough to worry about in the Frozen North.

Though suspicions flashed briefly through his mind, Hashem nodded, taking the risk proffered to him, and the next day, the unlikely partners turned their heads north and west and began the gradual climb out of the high Suhab and into the luminous heights of the Frozen North.

Onward they trudged, with Raspiel unusually quiet and moody, an effect perhaps of the eerie barren silence of the landscape. It was a welcome change for Hashem, who retreated into quiet meditations on the *dimmiun*, the tiny animistic spirits that the Arasti worshipped and that they believed adhered in all living things, as the collective universal intelligence of creation.

The ground continued to climb, colder and steeper, day after day for several more days, until one evening they were finally atop the massive glacier and its expanse of boulders and snow.

There, they set up camp on a level floe of colored ice, white and blue and streaked with turquoise. They built their small fire with wood from the back of the sullen mule, and Hashem brought out the rations, as he had each evening of their long journey.

“Lo it looks like supplies are gettin short, no?” said Raspiel.

“A few days left, no more. Enough to carry us off the glacier if we’re frugal. Then we will need to look to foraging.”

“Aye, a few days for two,” the *gharib* muttered, but something in his manner struck Hashem. A surly tone. Raspiel took out his flask then and upended it over his mouth. His hand trembled. Only a few drops fell. “An poor ol Raspiel dry as a bone.”

Ah, he’s out of alcohol. What will this mean?

The answer to that question would come in several hours.

As Hashem lay still in his tent early the next morning, waking from another dream, the dawn light just beginning to kindle outside, Raspiel burst through the cloth flap, dagger in hand. Hashem’s quick reflexes deflected the knife stroke away from his chest, and down into his thigh, where he felt it hit. With a hard twist of Raspiel’s hand, the knife clattered away and loose, but the two men were locked in

mortal struggle, Raspiel trying to strangle Hashem, shouting “die, boy, die,” and Hashem furiously trying to throw the *gharib* off him and grasping unsuccessfully for one of the short swords stashed away at the head of his shelter.

The two wrestled around and out of the small tent, across the slick ice, trading blows and wrenching holds. The air brutally cold, the *gharib*’s breath foul, the fire scattered and smoking. Hashem had the upper hand briefly, flipping Raspiel over and beneath him, but Raspiel squirmed out of the hold and suddenly hefted a large rock from the ice surface and brought it down on the young Suhabi’s head.

Once, a second time, again.

“Ya shoulda stayed home, boy,” the *gharib* hissed.

Then the darkness, the cold, the dreaming.

But Hashem didn’t die.

Standing there, a full daylight stretch after the attack, in the cold, fast-gathering dusk, on the spot where his blood splattered the glacial ice, Hashem tested his right leg. He could walk well enough, if less briskly. On his head, he could feel cuts and clotting scabs, the swelling along his hairline, the blood caked on his forehead and in his hair. His thoughts emerged from a fog. He was dizzy and nauseous, but intact.

He at once set himself to searching the area. Raspiel had taken everything he had. Judging from scattered footprints and mule traces, the conniving foreigner had left immediately after subduing Hashem, heading due east. This detour into the Frozen North was most likely a deception, Hashem surmised, allowing Raspiel to ambush and abandon the Suhabi in the deadly elements, with little risk of Hashem tracking him down later through all the patches of smooth ice.

If he survived the assault at all, that is.

A short distance from the camp site, Hashem found Raspiel’s unstrung long-bow amid a patch of jutting rocks. Hashem had had a bow and quiver himself, strapped to his mule, and Raspiel must have cast away his old one in favor of Hashem’s.

Using the *gharib*’s bow for support, he hobbled back to the bloody spot on the ice where he had fallen that morning. He sat down again, cross-legged, the bow across his knees.

Without his tent, his tinder kit, and his coat, Hashem doubted he would survive the night. Raspiel had a day’s lead on him. It seemed unlikely that he would be able to track the swine down in that time, and in what kind of condition would Hashem find himself after a night of trudging through the deadly cold?

Either way, he would likely perish.

Waves of emotion began to roll over the young Suhabi, with tears of self-pity emerging mixed with despair and embarrassment.

I have dishonored my people at the first test, he thought, imagining the dismayed look on Kirathi's strong face if she were to see him now. I have broken my vow to myself to avoid risk, avoid entanglements, and it has exposed me for a fool. Damn the elders! This is a fool's journey.

And then the hot anger welling up in him.

Damn that Raspiel!

"I will kill that filthy *gharib*," he shouted, his rage echoing out across the darkening ice. "I will find him and slit his throat!"

It grew colder, and Hashem could feel his hands and feet growing numb. His face stung, the moisture froze in his nostrils. The snow fell thicker and began to cover him with a thin layer of wet crystals.

If only I can survive this night.

Then he noticed that one thing was warm and radiated heat.

The Burden Stone.

He retrieved the small desert stone from the hip pouch inside his trousers.

It was a humble-looking, round, lumpy stone the color of desert sand. It was said to have been passed from one Arasti Far-Wanderer to the next, generation after generation, back into long-forgotten times. Why the tribe called it the "Burden Stone," no one knew. It had always been called by that name.

"In this stone," his uncle Omari had told Hashem, as he handed it to him, "all the wisdom of our ancestors is collected. Every long journey, every desperate trial, every unexpected joy. It was attuned long ago to the *dimmiun*, the life-spirits of the world, and you will add to its power through your own trials and triumphs. When you are in need, think of the stone and the *dimmiun*, and they will rise to aid you."

It had seemed like more foolishness to Hashem at the time. Or like magic, which most Suhabi tribes habitually distrust and despise, but also for which the Arasti have always had some tolerance. Hashem himself was uncertain about magic and his tribe's sympathy for it. He had never himself seen magic at work, and it just seemed to the young and skeptical Suhabi as too fantastic and dangerously out of tune with the natural order of things.

But there, alone on the ice of the Frozen North, the Burden Stone fit neatly in his palm when he closed his hand, and its gentle warmth persisted, as if it retained the heat of the blazing Suhab sands to the far south. He wondered what more strange magic might lie inside the small brown rock. He closed his eyes and thought of the *dimmiun*, the gods to which he had prayed absently and doubtfully

so many times before, but that, like magic, he had never seen.

“If only I can survive this night,” he whispered.

Hashem sat on the cold ice whispering, for how long he didn’t know, but it seemed hours. His entire consciousness narrowed to the warm stone in his hand, the vast exterior cold of the night, and that simple idea, survival. He repeated the word over and over again like a mystic’s mantra, until he began to feel and hear things. First, there was a tingling on the crown of his head, and then, out in the icy night, the sound of small movements in every direction, like a flock of birds scratching the ice, and finally something like the dull falling and shuffling of objects on the ground in front of him.

He opened his eyes and saw them.

The dimmiun!

All about him in the cold moonlight, small luminescent globes, like soap bubbles or the iridescent eyes of peacock feathers, swarmed about in busy activity. Some were cutting out blocks of ice and arranging them in a circle near the site of the previous night’s camp. Others darted off into the far distance, returning with sticks and logs, and piling them in a neat conical campfire arrangement. Still others brought back wild game. First, a pair of snow-white winter hares, and then a large, brown-feathered fowl of some sort.

Is this it? Is this what magic looks like?

Before Hashem’s astounded eyes, the small, animated spirit-particles erected a domed shelter of ice blocks, with a roaring fire inside, and the smoke vented out through a small opening in the roof. The floor of the shelter was lined carefully with dried grasses and bird feathers. Each small shimmering globe placed a bit here, a bit there. They piled the fresh game next to the fire along with a few shards of sharp obsidian. They carved a small depression in the ice near the fire and filled it with pure, clean glacial water.

Hashem wept with a profound mixture of joy and awe and shame, and he knelt prostrate to the luminescent swarm that hovered around him. He held the Burden Stone to his forehead in his clasped hands.

“I will never doubt again,” he said aloud.

Before he could even blink, the *dimmiun* were gone.

The night was dark and quiet, and the camp complete.

Where did you come from? he mused, gazing about him. *Where did you go?*

Hashem rose at last and stumbled into the enchanted shelter. He made himself comfortable among the bedding, near the fire. Using the razor-sharp obsidian blades, he skinned and roasted one of the hares, taking care to preserve its heavy

fur pelt. Miraculously, he had food and water enough to revive and sustain him. He felt more exhausted than ever before, but he was alive. He could hardly believe it.

Staring into the fire that night, as sleep pulled him down into the dark caverns of dream, Hashem Naruddin Arasti clenched his jaw. He would survive the night, he knew. He would rise again in the morning. And he would find that filthy *gharib*.

2

Kirathi Salman Arasti dashed through the desert sand on a breezy early autumn evening, skipping, spinning, and cartwheeling like a frenzied *djinn* from the spirit world. Laughing, Hashem chased her around the inner camp circle, as the flames of the massive central bonfire swirled high and bright into the orange sky. Showers of glowing ash drifted off to the west and floated down harmlessly into the livestock pens. It was the Arasti tribe's autumn festival, marking the equinox and the passing of the lower Suhab's hottest months, a celebration of survival, and for that, a collective expression of gratitude to the dimmuni, the tribe's animistic deities.

The annual holiday was also a time for the momentary relaxation of tribal formalities, frugalities, and labor. Feasting, dancing, and laughter were the orders of the day. The men let their hair down, the women uncovered their faces, and the children darted freely through the growing clusters of Suhabi. A boisterous crowd of Arasti women, their faces aglow in the late afternoon sun, busied themselves over the spits and kettles of the open community kitchen nearby, their voices bubbling with gossip and jest. A group of normally stone-faced warriors teased one another as they hung box lanterns on poles about the central camp circle. Musicians tuned their instruments on a spread of carpets in front of an area cleared for dancing, casually smoking their pipes and chewing betel nuts, waiting for their big moment.

Over everything, the tribal elders looked on from an elevated platform, smiling and nodding benevolently. Everywhere they looked, the air vibrated with relaxed laughter and gentle motion, with light and joy.

Hashem and Kirathi had both turned twelve years old that year. Born only a month apart, the two were cousins, and since the death of Hashem's parents, they had been raised together in the household of her father, his uncle Omari Salman Arasti. The pair had been inseparable since the day they could crawl, and that autumn night was no different, as they cavorted through the festivities, still children at heart, no matter how close they were to the threshold of adulthood. In constant motion around the fire, they paused only to sample the sweetened almonds and candied dates that circulated in flat woven platters among the crowd, then on they went to join the other children in their spontaneous games of horse tag or stomp-the-snake or falling towers.

Hashem could still see that night clearly in his mind, six years later, as he rekindled his campfire on a crisp Frozen North morning. But the distance in time

and space seemed to add new insight and meaning. He remembered the inevitable changes that emerged in Kirathi that year, changes he was slow to recognize at first. The round wonder of her childish face had tightened to a sculpted, almost masculine beauty. Her plump physique had stretched lean and strong in muscular curves. She still laughed readily at childish things, her head tilted skyward, her voice a cascade of musical tones, but to Hashem's mind, that year was the birth of the new, mature Kirathi — more serious and intellectual in outlook, more fierce and aggressive in spirit, more rebellious and strident in speech and attitude.

For Hashem, however, change manifested itself in the awkward masculine vagaries of coming of age — his face seemed misshapen and oily, his voice warbled, and clumsy social insecurities haunted his every step. He felt still trapped in childhood, as she became a woman before his very eyes. But above all that, he remembered how happy he had been that holiday night, when they stole away late in the festivities to a quiet field of dunes. She had let him kiss her, a child's kiss, and she stroked his face in the moonlight. The transgression of the forbidden premarital kiss was thrilling, but more than anything, the intimacy comforted Hashem that she loved him, even as an uncertain future loomed ahead.

He would always love her for that, and so many other moments of devotion as they grew together, although the last few months before Hashem's exile from the tribe had been fraught with tension. Kirathi, as strong and independent as she became, had petitioned the elders to allow her to go on this wisdom quest with Hashem. But it was forbidden for women to go, and it was forbidden for two to go. She railed at length to the elders against the traditional role of women in Suhabi society, to no avail. And she fumed silently for a month afterward. Hashem sympathized, and he would have liked nothing better than to travel with her, but he lacked her courage to challenge the old ways, he supposed, and he had refrained from speaking out.

It had upset her deeply, he knew, but in the end, she seemed to accept this unacceptable order of things. On the day of Hashem's departure, she kissed him privately, pressed her forehead against his, and promised she would wait for him, but it was clear that both despaired the coming two-year separation. They knew it would be a long time before they would hold each other again, and worse, at the back of their minds, there lingered the thought that this could be their final kiss.

But now, Hashem needed to set aside these memories. The morning on the glacial ice of the Frozen North was bright, quiet and cold, and there were things to do.

Inside his ice-block tent, well-sheltered from the cold, he stoked his fire and set to preparing the remaining winter hare that the dimmiun had brought him the

night before. While the hare sizzled on a crude spit over the fire, he cleaned the shallow wound on his thigh, washed the cuts on his head, and cleared the dried blood from his face and beard.

His head ached still, bruised and swollen, but his thoughts were clear. He held a small chunk of ice to the knot at his hairline and ate slowly, contemplatively, from the meat on the spit.

The emotions of the previous night had evaporated, but he was determined to go after the *gharib*, to recover both his possessions and his dignity. There was no other course of action. In the clear light of the morning, he felt less desperate now. Raspiel would certainly leave a careless trail, and with the *dimmiun* at his side, Hashem would find him in good time.

Hashem scraped out the two rabbit pelts and hung them around his waist, where he also tied the dead fowl the *dimmiun* had brought him. He fashioned a wooden handle for the best of the obsidian shards and tucked the crude knife into a loop in his longshirt. At last, he drank deeply from the small water cistern, doused and scattered the fire, then stepped away from the miraculous camp that had saved his life.

The day waxed still brighter, the sky a burning blue, the glacier a blinding white. With the *gharib*'s discarded bow as his staff, he picked up Raspiel's trail again, the prints obscured slightly now by a light coat of snow. And thus, Hashem headed east, down the gradual slope of the Frozen North, in the easternly direction of the Long Reaches.

It had taken days for Hashem, Raspiel, and the mule to ascend the glacier to that fateful campsite, but even with Hashem's hobbling gait, and the treacherous fields of slick ice, the descent was faster and easier. He reckoned it would only take another full day of trekking before he was back in the cold sand wastes of the high Suhab.

Shortly before nightfall, in the rapidly dropping temperatures, Hashem stopped and found a suitable campsite. The cold daylight had been difficult enough, but the wind was picking up, a heavy snow began to fall, and he could bear no more exposure. As he did before, the young Suhabi held the Burden Stone in his hands and with soft prayer summoned the *dimmiun* to provide for him. And as before, the tiny glowing, spherical entities rose from the encroaching darkness to assemble a comfortable ice-block shelter, this time nestled against an outcrop of black rock, complete again with bedding, fire, water, and game.

Hashem skinned and gutted a fresh winter hare and began roasting it on the fire. He had three sizable, thick-furred pelts now, and after eating, with rockthorn

and sinew, he improvised thread and needle to stitch together a humble length of fur. It would be a short blanket tonight, he thought, but the next morning, he would add another pelt to it, and then another in the evening, and before long he would have a cloak thick and warm enough to bolster his tolerance of the elements. These little creative acts of survival, performed in a soft bubble of firelight in the midst of howling darkness, as blowing snow drifted over his shelter entrance, these things simply thrilled Hashem. The obsidian knife, the rabbit fur coat. It was a beginning. He smiled and felt liberated. No longer a pressed and starched figure of naivete, he would craft a new Hashem Naruddin Arasti. Day by day, piece by piece, scarred and bloodied by his own trials, dressed by his own resourcefulness, draped in his own eccentric trophies of personal triumph.

Hashem, a Ranger of Sanareum, his own man.

Early the next morning, the young Suhabi bolted awake at the sound of low, rough voices very close, somewhere behind and above him on the rock ridge. Strange, growling, barking voices, in an unfamiliar, guttural language.

Goblins? Orcs? Probably Orcs.

Acting quickly and quietly, he doused and buried his smoking fire. The entrance to his shelter had drifted completely closed, but the chimney-hole at the top opened to a yellow-pink dawn sky. He covered his white pelt blanket with loose ice and snow and carefully stuffed it into the ceiling hole, and with the Burden Stone in one hand and the obsidian knife in the other, he held his breath.

He waited for what he guessed an hour. The voices came and went above him, seeming to search the area. He counted five, maybe six of them.

He had never seen an orc before, but he had heard them described by the Arasti elders. They were large inhuman monsters, he knew, violent and merciless, from some cold, defiled land far to the north. He also knew they were nothing he was prepared to face in his present condition.

When he no longer heard the sound of voices or movement, he gently cleared the drift from the shelter's entrance, gathered his possessions, and with all possible stealth slid out on to the snow-covered ground.

There, he saw nothing, heard nothing.

With as much caution as he could muster, he crept south, down a steep icy expanse, then picked up his pace, east a stretch, before heading north again to locate the trail left by Raspiel and Omari the mule. It took him two hours, but he did find it, and he followed it well past nightfall, until he was finally at the edge of the more gently sloping glacial terrain west of the Long Reaches.

At times throughout the afternoon, Hashem thought he had heard those ugly

voices in the distance, always to the north, and he had held still, hoping his white garments would blend into the blanched terrain. Each time he paused, the voices would fade soon enough, and Hashem would carry on.

At length, exhausted, he collapsed in the lee of a patch of thick and defoliated scrub brush. The *dimmiun* rose again at his entreaty, and soon he was cocooned in a warm shelter, his fire extinguished this time for safety. He promptly curled up under his small blanket and drifted into deep sleep, too tired to bother himself with food or with voices in the night.

The next morning, after a few hours' trek into the permafrost sand of the high desert, the trail changed.

Raspiel's shuffling footprints and Omari's well-spaced tracks led to what could only be a campsite. A small, blackened fire ring, the outline of a bedroll, a pile of human waste. But the trail that led away east was only of the mule's tracks. Raspiel's prints were gone. The vista was open and barren, visibility clear and far. There seemed to be no place the wily *gharib* could have hidden.

Strange, Hashem thought, but he guessed that, for whatever reason, injury or illness perhaps, Raspiel had mounted old Omari and continued on the mule's back. A sense of having missed something gnawed at him, and he checked the area again, but nothing. All the young Suhabi could do was to pursue the only trail available.

For two days, Hashem followed the mule's tracks through the high desert, descending gradually in altitude, still cold but growing noticeably warmer. The wound in his leg had mostly healed, and he could walk normally without pain. Each day, his rabbit fur coat grew until it hung full and heavy from his shoulders. From time to time, he thought he heard orcish voices in the far northerly direction, but he put it down to his imagination. He saw no one.

On the next day, the mule's trail turned inexplicably south and began to meander more, seeming to pause here and there, circling as if lost at times, then leading directly toward a spine of low, red, and rocky mountains that jutted out of the desert a few miles away, west of the Cloudspire foothills. He could see a column of grey smoke rising from a cluster of distant brown-orange foothills at the edge of the low mountains.

So this is it, he thought.

He girded himself for the inevitable encounter with the dirty thief that had betrayed him. He decided to camp another night, closer to the mountain range, to face the *gharib* fresh and early, and the next daybreak found Hashem surmounting a rocky promontory that overlooked the location of the still-smoking fire. Sunrise broke in a wash of golden light, with strokes of blue haze along the horizon. Dark

shadows awakened from pockets in the rocky landscape, stretching out long, then shrinking as the full naked sun emerged from the horizon.

Hashem crouched low on this high vantage point, and the entire rocky desert vista spread out before him. He could see the smoke rising from the center of a flat, open area nestled in a canyon not far below. A ring of large rocks circled the fire. A small natural spring pooled in a depression a short climb up from the camp floor. Several dark openings, like cave entrances, dotted the face of the orange rock further up from the glittering pool.

And there was Omari.

The mule sauntered idly among the boulders below the pool, munching on scattered outcroppings of vegetation. Hashem could see the saddle pack still in place on the mule's back.

But where was Raspiel?

Hashem stood to get a better look, and caught sight of another column of smoke, a mile or two to the north. It was difficult to tell for certain, but a handful of black figures, no bigger than peppercorns, appeared to gather round the source of the smoke.

Are those the orcs I've been hearing?

"You there!" A voice called from below him. "I say, you there!"

Hashem turned back to look at the canyon below. A figure stood next to the smoking fire. But it clearly wasn't Raspiel. The figure shouting up to him appeared to be that of a tall, elderly man, with long white hair and long white beard. What's more, this man wore only a dull-colored loincloth. His skin was baked brown and leathery. Hashem rubbed his eyes.

What enchantment is this? How does he not freeze in this cold? Could it erhaps be a djinn?

The old man again, "You up there. Come down. Join us. No need to be afraid."

A second elderly figure emerged from one of the cave entrances in the rocks. This one was shorter and broader and bald but dressed in a dirty loincloth as well.

"What are you on about this time, Maury," the second man called to the first.

The first man simply pointed up to Hashem. Then a third old man, similar in appearance to the first, but darker-skinned, stepped out of another cave entrance.

The three of them stood looking up at Hashem.

Mystified, Hashem called down to them, "Are you *djinn*?"

At this, the three old men erupted in a fit of convulsive laughter, which lasted several minutes, and included the shorter of the three falling to the ground and rolling about in appaarent tears.

“*Djinn!*” the first man erupted at last. “Heavens no, boy. We’re hermits. Come down and share in our hospitality. We have food and water. Don’t be a fool. Or rather, come join us fools!”

The other two men giggled at this, but they turned and set themselves to building up the fire from a pile of wood stacked next to it.

“Hermits?” Hashem called back.

“Yes, well, of a sort.”

Giggling again.

“Have you met a man named Raspiel?”

“What? Raspiel?” the shorter man called out. “Besides this lovely mule here, we haven’t had a guest in many years. When was that last one, Maury, that silly dwarf. Remember?”

The first man shrugged.

“Come down, or be on your way, boy,” the third man barked. “You’re ruining the scenery!”

How bizarre these men seemed to Hashem. He had heard of hermits, but why would hermits invite strangers to join them for breakfast? Wasn’t solitude the point of their lifestyle? And where could Raspiel have gone? Was he hiding in the caves? It all seemed unreal and suspicious to him.

Hashem did feel foolish, however. *Djinn*, he chuckled to himself. But he had come too far now to worry about embarrassment or to hesitate at the risks of encountering crazy old men. His anger at Raspiel had dispelled his reticence.

“I’m coming down,” he shouted.

He shot a quick glance north at the other fire, but it was out.

The black dots in the distance seemed larger, closer.

Hashem descended the rock wall, wound down across a tumbled field of boulders, through the narrow canyon, and on to the flat sand of the old men’s camp. At the ring of stones, Hashem bowed to the hermits and introduced himself.

“Please sit, my friend,” the first man said. “My name is Maury.” He gestured to the shorter second man, “this is Leonard,” then to the third, “and this is Abbie.”

Up close, they were all as he had expected. Ancient, weathered, their voices high-pitched and lilting, with wild eyes that to Hashem suggested what the Suhabi called *majunin*, meaning “god-touched” but also “demented” or “insane.”

“A Suhabi, is it?” said the one called Maury.

“Yes,” Hashem replied, “I am a Suhabi of the Arasti tribe.”

“Ah, Abbie was Suhabi once, weren’t you?”

“I was indeed,” Abbie said. “Countless moons ago. An exalted prince of the

Qahtan tribe, I was. You should have seen me in my youth.. The finest camels, the finest tent, the finest blades. A great man excommunicated for witchcraft!"

The three of them burst into laughter.

"Pay no attention to that old fool," Maury said, pointing to Abbie.

"Or that old fool," added Abbie, who pointed at Leonard.

"Or that old fool," Leonard pointing finally at Maury.

The three cackled again, slapping their knees and clutching their stomachs.

Worse than djinn! Hashem thought. One Suhabi, two gharib, all gone completely mad.

"But where are our manners?" Maury and Leonard stood up. "You are certainly far from home. You must eat and drink with us."

Maury returned with a gourd of water and handed it to Hashem. Leonard set a large copper pot filled with stew on a tripod over the fire.

"So, what brings a young Suhabi to this terrible part of this terrible world?"

"I am on a quest," Hashem replied.

"Ah, so," Maury whistled. "A quest for what, pray tell?"

"Wisdom."

The three men hummed, in an off-kilter kind of harmony, nodding.

The stew began to bubble in the cauldron.

Hashem stole a look at the mule, who continued to rummage idly through the green bushes across the camp area.

"Do you know this animal?" Leonard asked.

"Yes, he is my mule. He is called Omari, after my uncle."

"A mule's nephew," Abbie laughed, "on a quest for wisdom."

Hashem felt his face reddening.

"Oh, the animal just wandered into our world yesterday," Maury said. "He's been stubborn company, I tell you, and rude. If he's yours, you must take him when you leave."

Leonard handed out wooden bowls and spoons and ladled a hot stew of vegetables, roots, and herbs to each one of them. It was delightfully warm and savory to Hashem's tongue, a welcome change from days of roasted fowl and rabbit.

"We too are on a quest for wisdom," Maury said. "But we no longer believe one must travel this world to find it."

"In certain ways, it lies deep within you," Abbie added, grinning enigmatically, "like the rhythm of the heart, the flow of the breath, the deep stillness of the mind. In other ways, it may lie beyond this world." He gestured at the sky.

It was something a hermit would say, and Hashem had the sense that they were

teasing him, but the young Suhabi turned away, distracted now by the sound of familiar rough voices in the near distance.

Seeming to hear the voices himself, Leonard started laughing hysterically.

Abbie smiled wide and hummed, "They come. They're coming!"

"Do you hear the voices?" Hashem asked, alarmed.

"Oh yes," Maury nodded. "They have seen our fire, and they are coming this way."

"We need to put it out at once," Hashem stood, his adrenalin rushing. "Those are orcs! They have been trailing me for days!"

The three old men lost their composure again, practically falling off their rocks with glee.

"No need, my young friend," Maury purred, as the three of them stood. "You will see. Stay here. We will return in a moment."

"We're getting dressed for the ball!" Leonard chortled with joy. Then he wrapped his arm around Abbie's waist. "How long has it been since we've danced together, my love?"

"I hope you remember the steps, you old fool," barked Abbie, and pushed Leonard away from him.

The three old men, indeed madmen to Hashem's mind, climbed to separate cave entrances above the level of the pool.

"Don't run off," Maury called back to Hashem. "They'll get you if you do."

By the diminun, what are they doing?

Alone near the fire, Hashem panicked that these madmen were slipping off to hide in some labyrinth beneath the mountains, leaving Hashem to die, trapped in what amounted to a box canyon. He could feel tears welling up in him. Should he too escape into the caves? Like a coward? Instead, he ran over to his mule. *A sword!* One of his short swords remained strapped to Omari's back. But no bow or arrows or anything else beyond an empty saddlebag.

Guttural voices rang out more clearly, closer, echoing in the rocks, clambering down the canyon toward them. Hashem drew his short sword and stood behind a low boulder, prepared to meet his death alone if necessary.

To the young Suhabi's amazement, however, the three old hermits emerged from their dens. They each held an ancient wooden staff, carved with different intricate designs and topped with unique headpieces. Each also had a belt around the waist from which dangled small pouches. A golden dagger hung from Abbie's hip. Maury wore a heavy silver necklace with a broad pendent etched with some arcane symbol.

Seeing Hashem's expression, as he gaped at what he could only consider lunacy, Leonard stretched out his arms and bowed, "Ta-da!"

Heavy footsteps could be heard, very close, louder still, but no voices now, the orcs scrabbling through the boulders, just around the corner. Certainly, five or six or more of them.

"The orchestra's warming up, gentlemen," Maury said, smiling wide at the other two hermits. "Let us take our places near the fire."

The old men seemed to wink at each other.

All at once, screaming like nothing Hashem had heard before, four, five, six orcs charged through the canyon, directly toward the three old men. The orcs were bigger and uglier than Hashem had imagined. They wore crude leather armor and wielded rough bucklers and heavy serrated broadswords. Hashem froze in place, half-hidden in the rocks, twenty feet behind the hermits, terrified, muttering a garbled mix of prayers to the *dimmiun* and curses at himself.

When the last orc rounded the corner, the three hermits raised their staves in concert and began to hum soft strange incantations, with Maury touching also the intricate symbol at his sternum and the other two drawing arcane scripts in space with their free hands.

The air in the canyon before them vibrated perceptibly for a few seconds, then exploded in flame, a solid wall of green and blue and red fire, fifty feet up and a hundred feet out from the chanting hermits. Within a heartbeat, the six orcs fell to the sand, their swords melted to slag, their bodies charred beyond recognition. Then, as suddenly as it erupted, the fire was gone, leaving no trace on the ground or the surrounding rocks. Just piles of orc ash, already starting to blow away in a gentle breeze.

The old men laughed, more madly than Hashem had yet to hear them laugh, and they danced about like hysterical monkeys. Finally, gathering their wits, it seemed, they straightened up comically and assumed formal postures and manners, as if they were nobles meeting in royal court.

"You dance divinely, my love," Leonard bowed.

"And your grace is beyond that of an icebear drunk on fermented urine," Abbie curtsied back to him.

"Why, thank you, dear."

More laughter and embraces.

"Ah, but how is our young Suhabi friend?" Maury said at last, looking about for Hashem.

"I'm fine, I think." He drew a breath, for the first time in ten minutes, it seemed.

“Ah, poor Hashem, you must consider us demons, and our magic a blasphemy,” Abbie lamented as the young Suhabi sheathed his sword and joined them again near the fire.

“No, no,” Hashem mumbled, still in shock. “My tribe has a different attitude toward magic. We’re a bit more tolerant than the others.”

“Indeed?” Abbie raised his eyebrows. “Well, that is new.”

“Now that the fun is over, gentlemen,” Maury interjected, “let us finish our breakfast. Look, our bowls are still steam with warmth. Tell us your story now, Hashem. Who is this Raspiel you seek and how did you become separated from your animal friend?”

Hashem stood perplexed and astounded, and it took several minutes for him to find himself, but at length he sat with the old men and began to talk. Patiently and thoughtfully, without laughter or jest, the three old men listened as Hashem recounted in some detail his journey, from the Arasti camp, through his days with Raspiel, to his arrival at their humble canyon home. He omitted any mention of the *dimmiun*, however. The Arasti gods represented sacred knowledge best confined to the tribe, so he took credit in his narrative for the survival camps the *dimmiun* provided for him. Inevitably, Hashem focused most on Raspiel’s betrayal and his own desire to recover his equipment, avenge the assault, and continue his journey to the Eastern Shores.

The three old men sat as if in meditation for a moment after Hashem’s story.

“I have not heard of your tribe, Hashem, nor of its customs,” Abbie said, breaking the silence. “The Suhab is big and the tribes many. They do not work together as they once did, nor do they all value wisdom in the broadest sense. Your quest is a noble one, although you may feel it is difficult or without meaning. I salute the Arasti. And you. As to this Raspiel fellow, you must pursue him if you must or forget him if you can. Two paths. Two lessons.”

Maury nodded along and hummed in assent.

“It’s a nasty place, Sanareum,” Leonard added. “Filled with small, nasty creatures. Forgiveness without justice feeds the darkness in many cases, but beware the rush to vengeance inside you, Hashem. It too can feed the darkness and bring a chaotic energy to your soul.”

Hashem felt again that sense of resistance he had long felt for the advice of old men. *What did they know anyway? They were not there when the gharib betrayed me.* But he nodded and said nothing.

The hermits stared into the fire for several minutes longer, but Hashem got the sense that some speechless conversation passed among them. A flickering of the

eyes perhaps or the small movement of weathered hands.

“Well, it’s settled,” Maury announced. “You must stay here today, Hashem, rest here tonight, and then be on your way tomorrow morning. The Eastern Shores are as fine a destination as any, when you don’t know where you’re going or what you’re looking for. We will assist in strengthening and provisioning you as much as we can. Perhaps there will be some wisdom in your short time with a few humble hermits. Will you accept our invitation?”

Hashem looked from face to face, and each of the old men smiled warmly.

“I would be honored,” he said, and the madmen began to laugh again.

TO BE CONTINUED



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