

Prologue

The figure lowered himself onto the bench opposite, slid back the hood of his cloak and said, "I am told you speak the Gods' tongue."

Acrid smoke billowing from the dung fire scratched at the back of the foreigner's throat and stung his eyes. His gaze slid past the cloaked man, took in his burly companion leaning silently against the wall behind him. Over the din of conversation in the drinking hole the shrieking of a thief being whipped in the public square outside did little to allay his anxiety.

"You are Hafeez?" he inquired.

"You asked this name of the barman when you entered?"

The foreigner nodded. In reply the cloaked man smiled, gold canines gleaming. "Then I am Hafeez." He continued to study the traveller, his amber eyes fixed upon him. "You are a little, how to say..." He waved a hand lazily as if trying to conjure the word, bejewelled rings flashing. "...studious, for taking such a risk in coming here, no?"

"I am learned, I would say. And I know the risk I take." The foreigner turned the clay goblet round and round in his hands, still to sample the wine.

"Mmmm, I do not think that you do," said Hafeez, wagging a finger at him. "You may be of the blood, but for all your learnings it seems you lack for knowledge in this subject." He leaned back in his seat, at his ease as he watched this agitated stranger from the Lost Isle. "But, if what the messenger says is true and you speak the language of the Creators, I will not be so foolish as to underestimate you. I am a cautious man in ways of the Art."

The foreigner leaned forward, lowered his voice. "It is about such matters that I take this risk. I would speak to you of..." His eyes flickered over the faces crowding the room beyond their private booth. "Of your plans."

Hafeez arched a sculpted eyebrow. "My plans? You wish to talk of my desire for a long life of good health, prosperity and many wives? You have journeyed such a distance to speak of trivial matters." He smiled. "Unless you have a beautiful sister or much gold to offer me, traveller, I have little desire to speak of such things with you."

The derisive tone was not lost on the foreigner. Not a man given to fits of anger, still he felt annoyance at Hafeez's easy mocking of him. He had not made this long and treacherous voyage to be treated as a dunce. "You know I am not here to talk of wives," he hissed.

The figure leaning against the wall shifted. Only slightly, but the foreigner caught a wink of steel slide from his sleeve.

Hafeez raised a staying hand, and that steel disappeared. A serving girl sidled over, placed a carafe of wine and a goblet down upon the tabletop and swiftly retreated.

"Then let us speak plainly." Hafeez poured himself some wine, eyeing the traveller from beneath his brows. "What do you wish to discuss?"

The foreigner's eyes darted about the space once more. He kept his voice low. "The awakening of those who once walked among us."

Hafeez paused, the goblet halfway to his lips. Those amber eyes had lost whatever humour they previously held. He said nothing for a few tense breaths, before half-turning in his seat. His companion stepped away from the wall and leaned in. Hafeez spoke his native language in little more than a murmur. The foreigner caught a word or two, but they were spoken so fast, perhaps intentionally, that he gleaned no real meaning from them.

The burly man grunted, turned, and began to shout in a booming voice. His words the foreigner understood. "Out! Everybody out. *Now!*"

The drinking hole rapidly emptied, the customers scattering like rats from a sinking ship as Hafeez's companion ushered them out the door. The owner and the serving girl slunk out through a curtained doorway behind the bar without fuss. All the while the foreigner sweated in his seat, and Hafeez continued to observe him.

A clatter as Hafeez's bodyguard shoved the door closed, hairline shafts of light seeping through gaps around its shoddily constructed frame. The flames in the fire pit seemed to grow suddenly in their intensity. Smoke gradually clouded the space with only a single smoke hole in the roof by way of escape. The foreigner pulled his scarf up over his mouth and nose.

Hafeez's eyes gleamed through the ghostly trails. "Your next words will determine the manner in which you leave this room, traveller," he said.

When Hafeez said nothing more, the foreigner took this as an invitation to salvage the situation, and quite possibly his life. "A sailor who had docked in a town on the south coast of my homeland confided in me whilst in his cups. Of rumours he had heard on his travels." He paused to stifle a cough. "I am aware seafarers are a superstitious breed and prone to exaggeration, but his fear was true. He spoke of imperial colonisation, the hunting and bloodletting of Conduits. And necromancy."

Hafeez was silent for a long time, his face portraying no emotion. It was his companion, now wielding a knife as he leaned against the bar, who broke the silence. The foreigner concentrated during the heated back and forth in their native tongue, picking out the key words.

"He's dead," he said, cutting their conversation short. Both turned their eyes on him. "None other heard his words to me, and he spoke of this to nobody else, I assure you. He told me of the ship on which he sailed, its boarding, the search for the fugitive slaves and the galley's subsequent sinking. And he confirmed to me that he had been the sole survivor."

"You are certain of this?" Hafeez's voice was calm, yet the threat behind the words was more than a subtle undertone. "Should this sailor still live, for you death shall be a blessing."

The foreigner nodded, blinking away smoke-drawn tears. "I am certain." He reached into his cloak, pulled out a leather pouch and placed it on the tabletop, sliding it closer to Hafeez.

His companion stepped away from the bar and snatched up the pouch. He pulled out the severed hand, inspected it, then turned it so the palm faced Hafeez to reveal the mark branded upon the skin. The imperial servant's mark. He had been a traitor.

Hafeez regarded the foreigner. "It was you who killed him?"

"No. A colleague of mine." He held up his hands as the second man growled something, jabbing the knife in his direction. "She is no threat to your secrets, and neither am I. It is why I am here. I speak for us both." His tongue darted over dry lips. "We wish to form a part of your noble endeavour."

Hafeez's brow arched once more. "And what do you believe that to be?"

"To return those of the Gods' blood to the summit of power." He shifted in his seat, leaned forward. "I have read extensively of the culling of my kinfolk on our shores. How our ancestors suffered. And how we have since come to accept the governance of the debased bloods and ceded power wholly to them. I have also studied our history and our origins in length, and have come to understand that it is us who should have taken up the Gods' mantle. By right this world and the lands within it are our inheritance. I would see the balance of hierarchy restored."

Hafeez was silent again for an uncomfortably long time, one forefinger tapping lightly against the goblet, eyes narrowed as tendrils of smoke curled about him. "There is one way to make certain of loyalty," he said quietly. "If loyalty is what you offer." He glanced at his companion, gave a subtle nod.

The man tossed the severed hand into the fire pit, flames flaring and spitting like gleeful serpents. He stepped to the foreigner's side, the knife outheld. "Your hand," he demanded.

Eyes widening, the foreigner looked pleadingly across the table. Hafeez raised one hand, palm facing outwards. The man wielding the knife also showed the scar running across his own palm. "Insurance," said Hafeez. "One all claiming loyalty to our Imperial Emperor must agree to."

He fished inside his cloak, pulled out a small phial and passed it to his companion.

The foreigner was in too deep to back out now. He'd played his gambit. A man had paid with his life for him to come this far. A flurry of twitches briefly affected the right side of his face. Reluctantly, he held out his hand.

The blade flashed across his palm. So sharp was its edge he did not feel the cut until blood began to well and the fire-fierce pain made him hiss. The man wielding the knife tipped his hand so the blood dripped into the phial. Once full he stoppered the receptacle and handed it back to Hafeez, who smiled as he tucked it into the folds of his cloak.

"What now?" asked the foreigner, wrapping a handkerchief around his hand.

"Now you return to your homeland. I understand there is once more disharmony between your rulers? Rumours of war?"

"The West made demands that the East has refused, and threats have been issued. As a result the border is being bolstered by armed troops of the East. The coastlines are watched. Tensions are high, this is true."

"Then, while we continue to unify our continent and carry out our research, you and your companion, whose blood we shall also require, will sow seeds of discord wherever possible. And when war ensues your hands shall be in it. Chaos and division, the fracturing of your two kingdoms, this is what you shall, how to say...perpetuate." He paused, eyes narrowed in thought. That cunning smile returned, canines glinting. "The one cast down by your Gods, you will liberate him from his confines. You shall, however, need to constrain him until such time as we are prepared."

"But...I...resurrect the Fallen One? I cannot-"

"You can. And you will. You are a learned man, traveller, are you not? With the Gods' tongue and your knowledge, such a task should not be above you."

The foreigner was quiet, his mind seeking to comprehend the undertaking asked of him.

"And...for how long must we imprison the Fallen One?"

"Centuries. A millennium, perhaps. By which time we will have finalised our preparations for expansion."

"A *millennium*?"

"Of course. Such duration is necessary for one so long suppressed to recuperate their power. Though for them it is the blink of an eye. And *you* shall take the necessary precautions to guarantee your survival when the time comes to liberate him again, hmm?"

The foreigner pondered, then realised of what Hafeez was speaking. "A Transferring?"

"Is that what you Lost Islanders call it? Then yes, a Transferring. Where there is death, there is life, no?"

He swallowed some more wine, set down the goblet and rose. His companion slipped the knife back up inside his sleeve and made for the door. Hafeez regarded the foreigner still rooted to his chair. "When the war in your country is concluded, it would be best for you to flee for a time. Remain...how to say...?" He waved his hand lazily again. "Inconspicuous."

Hafeez turned and walked through the smoke drifting throughout the bar like fog. His companion forced the door open, flooding the room with murky daylight.

"Wait!" the foreigner spluttered through his scarf. "I have more questions."

In the doorway Hafeez faced him, his form outlined in a hazy glow. "And they shall be answered. Until then," and he patted the front of his cloak where the phial rested, "have a safe journey back to your homeland."

With that he stepped outside and was gone, his companion following. The foreigner was left sitting alone, blood from his palm soaking into the handkerchief, wondering what exactly he was conspiring in. And what terrors it would unleash upon the world.