

THE SILK BETRAYAL

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Chapter 1

Two things stood out in the stillness of the high tundra plain—the gleaming metal of new train tracks and a huge trail of destruction that stretched along those rails. Pavresh moved cautiously among the debris. Scraps of metal lay scattered beside other detritus. Broken bales of raw cloth. The hard rinds of unripe squash split open, their seeds spilled on the ground. Raw ore, maybe even from his father’s mine. Other upriver goods, unrecognizable with the force of the crash. At one point, shards of ice littered the ground where a car had been carrying glacial ice down to Romnai. Splintered wood covered the ground like a coarse snowfall. Stillness and violence combined in such a complete and uncanny way. Pavresh shivered at the terror of the scene.

Real snow also fell, a dusting that melted as it hit the ground and sizzled where it touched hot metal. Autumn had barely arrived, but out here snow could come any time of year.

At the worst of the destruction, where even the rails were melted and twisted into grotesque shapes, Pavresh saw the remains of the terrifying new steam engines. They still radiated heat. There were no cries of survivors, no calls for help. A cold like that of the high winds blew down his neck.

Beyond the crash center, the goods were downriver items, mostly fish that were already beginning to rot. Despite the smell, Pavresh stopped, thinking that his father had once known that smell every day, before being sent inland to leave the sea behind for good. Pavresh only knew the smell from the occasional fish brought to their remote home for special feasts. His sister, three

years older than him, might possibly remember the sea itself, but he'd never asked her. And leaving as he had, it seemed doubtful he'd get a chance to speak with her or any of his family, even if he somehow met them. That thought didn't sit well on his mind, so he pushed it away.

Instead of fish, Pavresh and his younger brother had only known the smells of mineral-heavy water pumped from the deepest tunnels, of iron ore and copper, of the many people of lower castes forced to labor in the mines. The smell finally made him bring his hand up to his nose, a thin nose, its color he would have preferred to compare to the rich copper that came from their mines, but in truth, he thought it closer in shade to the rust that gathered on the rails running deep underground.

The devastation was shocking, far too much to let him dwell on the past. Pavresh tried to examine exactly how it made him feel. It wasn't the anger of being robbed or the outrage of a murder or the indignation of a *nefli*, a low-caste laborer, touching someone from a higher caste. It was betrayal. The technology that promised so much had betrayed those who had trusted it.

Which magic would that be? Pavresh closed his eyes and tried to recreate the same feeling. The betrayal. He imagined a brother's murder, a lover's unfaithfulness, a child's rejection. He added a touch of hope only to crush it. It still felt a little too human to fit the scene. He'd have to keep working on it as he finished his journey to Romnai, find some way to bring in the mechanical feel of it. Even so, it was close. He should be able to add it to performances soon.

His satisfaction vanished as he opened his eyes to the destruction and the uncaring river beyond. How could he think so calmly about using this tragedy for his magic? It seemed cold and calloused, not the person he considered himself at all. And yet...maybe that was a part of him. Ever since he'd begun to understand the magic, he'd seldom had a situation, no matter how

terrifying or sad or joyful, when a part of him didn't wonder how he could take those feelings and use them.

This scene nearly silenced that part of him with its absolute destruction. But only nearly.

Nonetheless, he gave a shiver and swore aloud to the empty scene, "I will never ride one of these contraptions."

Nothing answered his shout. Not even the animals yet dared to come and scavenge. Pavresh walked between the two sets of rails once he was past the worst of the destruction. How had both a downriver and upriver train ended up on the same tracks? He walked as quickly as he could and tried not to imagine what it had been like for those aboard the train.

Really, the new steam-trains weren't all that different from the rail cars that brought ore from his father's mine. He'd ridden them often growing up, feeling like he was flying into the darkness. It was a mock sense of danger that thrilled him. A safe danger, like riding a boat down minor rapids or taking a horse through a course that only looked tricky. He'd never actually done either of those things, but he had recreated the feelings in his magic after listening to the stories of others.

And they weren't even all that different from the horse-drawn rail cars that had brought goods upriver here for centuries. But somehow it was those slight differences that pushed it from safe danger to true danger. As exciting as the false kind was, Pavresh had no desire for real danger. He desired magic, and through magic, perhaps some level of fame. Danger had nothing to do with such things.

Downriver now he could see people arriving from the city to salvage and scavenge what they could. They would search for survivors. Pavresh pursed his lips sadly. After what he'd seen of the crash, he knew it would be a futile search.

Not wanting to meet the people, he moved north, away from the river, and set up his camp among a small cluster of tumbled

boulders. The dusting of snow hadn't wet the dead wood all around.

Pavresh lit a fire and bowed briefly to it. Then he untied the tightly woven cord that wrapped three times around his thin waist and performed his *kusti*. It was a graceful movement, slow and calm and punctuated only occasionally by a quick snap of the cord over the fire and to each side. The rest of the time he held the cord loosely in his calloused hands and moved it high and low, behind his neck, behind his back. His legs held his lower body in a sequence of stances to complement the motions and allow his mind to free itself and become a part of the fire.

As he felt himself enter the fire and the fire enter him, Pavresh wrapped the cord around his waist, chanting the ancient *Enshi* prayers. The ritual knots came without thought.

He sat beside the fire, his face blank. Large flakes of snow struck him and melted into steam. Some time later, he came back to himself, ate a piece of dry bread with salted meat, gulped some water, and lay down to sleep. Two more nights sleeping out here in the wild, he thought, and then he'd reach the city.

* * *

Romnai, the capital city of his people, stood across the river from Pavresh. It had never been his home, never been his father's home. It probably hadn't even been his ancestors' home for centuries, if ever, but it still felt like a homecoming. Certainly one of those deep-seated feelings his magic could play with.

A wet snow fell on the buildings, and that seemed right, fitting despite the warm air close to the ground.

Dilapidated buildings stood on the near side of the river, the old loading docks and stables from the days of horse-drawn rail carts. Further on, the bit of city on this side of the river grew wider, and the tracks curved through their midst to follow the

river north. He hadn't come this close to the tracks since leaving the debris-strewn field. They looked so innocent, once again promising everything about the future and progress and perfection that the terrible crash had betrayed.

A single bridge crossed the river, an elaborate structure that arced high over the water. Pavresh approached, and the far side of the bridge disappeared behind the curving summit. A sign beside the bridge named it "The Bridge of the Forgotten South," called for the land of folk tales that the people of Eghsal claimed as their original home, centuries ago. A few carriages glided over the smooth bridge, but mostly it was laborers who crowded its span, especially the messengers and delivery men known as *wallas*.

Pavresh climbed slowly, relishing the way the city revealed itself to him. From the middle of the bridge, he could see clear across to the lava fields, hot springs and geysers that kept this northern valley warm. They disappeared, and the sprawling houses of the city's thirty princes with them, as he walked down to the bank. Steam from the fumarole field still dominated the sky straight ahead, a backdrop to everything he saw. Where it reached cooler air overhead, it turned to snow. Rougher buildings stood before him.

As he stepped into the narrow streets, three men came forward to block his path.

They weren't untouchables. He saw that right away, despite their ragged clothing and rough looks. Something in their expressions was too defiant and self-assured for that. Back in the mine his father ran, they'd sent untouchables to the deepest tunnels. Most had broader faces and features that seemed only half-formed. Many had lighter skin, perhaps from an ancestry that included the native numblers. These men looked too sharp and alive to be untouchable.

Pavresh untied the knots on the kusti cord at his waist and waited.

“Fine clothes you have there,” one man said. “A bit rustic though.”

Pavresh glanced at his sturdy traveling cloak but said nothing.

“To fit in on these streets, you’ll need a new set,” another said as a knife appeared in his hands. “We’ll just take yours.”

Pavresh knew he couldn’t wait any longer. He pulled the cord from his waist and snapped it. The man with the knife cried out in pain and dropped his weapon. Moving quickly into another stance, he swung the cord again, making all three men duck. Then he switched directions and flicked a frayed end across a face.

Before they could react, he took off running. Slush sprayed from his feet. Street twisted into street, and he was breathing heavily when at last he dared stop.

His immediate thought, even as he swiveled around for any sign of pursuit, was to recapture the feeling he’d had, the fear of the attack, the thrill of fighting back, the terror of the flight.

It was the strong sense of fighting back for justice that overwhelmed the other feelings. He would have to be careful using that one. It made him wish he had stayed and truly punished the men. He imagined wrapping the cord around a neck, of snapping it so fiercely it would cut flesh. The cord was a decent weapon; he could have done that, he thought as he refastened the traditional knots. But the rational part of him knew he wouldn’t have won. He’d caught them by surprise was all. If he’d kept up the fight, they would have easily overcome him. A quick charge by any one of them would have brought them too close for him to use the cord. He might have been able to sting whoever charged, but its threat was no more than a bit of pain. And what good was fighting for justice only to lose?

A powerful emotion, undoubtedly, but a dangerous one.

Pavresh moved on, looking for the district he’d heard of and the building he’d been seeking.

Now, as he wove among the buildings, he noticed the

untouchables begging along the streets, some lame or injured, but most whole, merely unlucky by birth. It was a *nefli* neighborhood, low-caste with older buildings crumbling at the corners and narrow streets lined with refuse. In many places, the buildings reached across the street to touch those on the other side.

Pavresh walked by both the untouchables and the *neflis* with the mid-caste *brenil* behavior he'd been raised with. Though originally a fisherman and later a mine overseer, his father was *brenil*, technically a part of the merchant jati for reasons even Pavresh didn't fully understand. Something dating back at least to his grandfather's grandfather.

Without thinking about it, Pavresh did something he never would have done back home—instead of looking past these people, he turned his eyes to them. He saw the fear and, beneath it, the glimmer of defiance of the untouchables, the weariness and pride of the *nefli*. And for the first time since he'd left his home at the edge of the mountains, Pavresh wondered exactly to what caste and what jati he belonged. By rights, he should follow his father in the merchant jati, a sub-caste of the *brenil*. His sister had married within that caste, and his brother also would remain in the merchant jati. It hadn't mattered to him out in the wilderness where there were no other people, but now it seemed to. What caste was a magic performer, an arcist like him? The answer, he realized, was none.

None? Might as well be a mumblor, some hold-over from the Mumbler Wars of his father's era, hiding for forty years within the city they had tried to conquer. He even raised his fingers to his face, as if to feel the paleness of the valley's original inhabitants.

For once, he didn't try to understand the terrifying yet liberating sense this question created in him. He stumbled to a wall and leaned against it. The world beneath his feet seemed to open up. People passing by gave him odd looks, but all he could think about was falling into an endless chasm where the world

wasn't what he'd always believed. Where a world without castes had no form to hold the sacred fire, where it merely fell away into nothingness.

Finally, he was able to breathe normally. He grabbed his canvas water bottle and poured what remained in it over his face.

After a moment, he pushed the thought away, echoing the mental action with the physical act of pushing himself from the wall. For now, he would assume all would be well, that the magic itself as he learned more and trained would eventually give him the certainty he lacked. The vertigo remained, threatened to overwhelm him if he thought about it closely, but with effort, he could keep it at bay.

Soon he found the building, tucked between an inn and a tailor's shop. Not a fancy area, but less run-down than some he'd passed through. It was a house, narrow and connected to the buildings on either side. A steep roof of wooden shingles sent snow falling down in front of the door. A single window opened from among those shingles on the left side, and other windows marked the two floors below, all of them lit.

Pavresh paused in front of the door. A hero was inside, hero to many. The soldier who'd saved the city from the mumblers forty years ago, but even more—to Pavresh, anyway—the man who'd discovered arcist magic. Using the magic's power he'd inspired his unit and later the whole army to fight back with a ferocity the mumblers couldn't match. And then at the height of his fame, he'd walked away, broken jati to wander Eghsal, speaking to people of every caste so he could understand the magic better. Chaitan, the legend. When sickness had forced an end to his wandering, the man had come here, to this house in Romnai.

Taking a deep breath, Pavresh pulled on his magic. He wanted to give himself the right image, a bit of the rugged wanderer, but still young and cocky. So, something of the rising star, the precocious wonder child. It took time and effort to focus on

the magic, as his questions about how he fit among the castes threatened to return. When he'd crafted the glamor as he wanted, he hesitated. These people would be used to arcistry, so he didn't want to lay it on thick. He imagined the snow, coming down more heavily now, muting the magic.

Simple and blunt, but hopefully effective. That much he could do, even with what little he'd learned from a *nefli* miner, but he wasn't satisfied with knowing the magic merely at a simple level. He would learn from the master.

Most of the scene inside scarcely registered with him. He saw many faceless people sipping tisane through metal straws. He saw a musician in a corner, but he didn't bother identifying what instrument she played. He saw a stage of sorts along one wall where a couple danced a routine.

All of that was nothing.

He felt arcist magic shifting with the music and dance, but that also was nothing.

What mattered was the ailing man propped on pillows against an inner wall. Pavresh walked up, his own magic delicately playing the image he'd created. A red blanket covered Chaitan, and his eyes were half-closed as if in pain.

Pavresh knelt on two knees and bowed his head the way a *nefli* would to a prince or other member of the *kortru* caste.

"Who are you?" The words were slurred with pain, but there was interest in Chaitan's face, not the annoyance that might have accompanied those words.

Before he could answer humbly with his name, Pavresh remembered his persona, the arrogant wanderer. What came out then surprised even him.

"I'm your heir."

Chaitan opened his eyes wider to look at him.

"I've been a wanderer. A mountain walker. A village bum. A train rider. A fisherman and a miner." With each claim, whether

true or a lie, he altered his magic subtly. "I'm an arcist. Your heir."

"Well," Chaitan settled back into his pillows and closed his eyes, "I'm tired tonight, my heir. Tomorrow you may perform for me, and we shall see."

As Pavresh bowed his head in response, he was struck with an image, an arcist event: the Passing of the King and Choosing of the Heir. The force of the image nearly knocked him over as he withdrew from the old man.

He couldn't decide, as he looked for some place to settle himself, whether that had been an encouragement for him or a warning. Or even a bit of ironic mockery.

Chapter 2

“You look like another pilgrim. Have you reached your holy shrine?”

The words had the ring of the sea, and Pavresh looked up to see a fisherman, at least by dress, though he didn't smell of fish. He was dark-skinned and short, but with striking features—eyes like bronze that had begun to harden and smooth, sharp cheeks. He held a hollowed-out gourd in one hand, identical to the one Pavresh was sipping hot tisane from.

“I'm not sure yet. I...” *Play the part*, he reminded himself. “I've traveled all over the valley,” he lied. “Maybe this is the place. Or maybe I'll move on to wilder places.” He shrugged and sipped from the metal straw.

“I'm always ready to explore new lands, too. I'm Ekana.” The fisherman held out his hand. “Welcome, and I hope you find what you want.” He touched Pavresh's gourd with his own then sat beside him on the low, cushioned bench.

“Thank you. I'm Pavresh. What's this about pilgrims, shrines?”

Ekana laughed and rubbed his cheek with a finger. “Oh, just the way they talk here, as if everything they dream of is sacred and holy.”

“And it's not?”

“Sure. And no. Some just take it so seriously, I guess. They believe their own boasts too much.”

Pavresh nodded. He could see that happening. “You came here also. You're not a pilgrim?”

With a shrug, Ekana answered, “In my own way, I guess. Isn't everyone? I like to be where new things are happening. I might be

as happy working on creating the new steamships, but they don't accept a fisherman like they do here."

"So, are you an arcist, as well?"

"No. We perform with the arcists."

Pavresh looked around the room. No one was on stage now, and if anyone beside the stage was performing an arcist magic, it was too subtle to pick up. One woman sat beside the stage on a tall stool, playing an oddly shifting music on a large stringed instrument. She made the instrument seem to talk to itself.

"We?" He inclined his head toward the instrumentalist.

"No, not her. Indima and I dance together. Here, let me introduce you to her." He half stood up and leaned toward a clump of people sitting on the floor and talking in low voices. "Indima. Come, meet Pavresh."

A woman rose from the group, handing her gourd of tisane to a neighbor to set down, and Pavresh's mouth froze on the metal straw. She was beautiful. Smooth, bronze skin, a fine nose, light brown eyes flecked with darker colors. She was *kortru*, highest caste, he had no doubt. Her clothes were fine silks, which made them hundreds of years old, since the silkworms of the Forgotten South could not survive in the north.

Among the *kortru* jatis were the silk weavers, those people with the skill and knowledge and perhaps a bit of magic to preserve and reweave the precious silk that remained. They were respected above almost any other, the equals of the priests and princes. Pavresh was sure she must be one of them.

He fought the urge to play caste to her, to treat her as society demanded. But clearly that didn't matter in this house.

She smiled and held out her hand to him. Taking it, he realized that she had said something to him, but he hadn't noticed what. He swallowed the honey-sweetened tisane in his mouth, but his tongue stumbled. He added a touch more magic to his image, hoping to recover his poise. At last, he got out the words, "Pleased

to meet you.”

“And I you. Welcome to Chaitan’s house.” She gave no indication she’d noticed his distraction. “I don’t think you’re a musician. You didn’t walk in with an instrument.” Her eyes studied him. “Probably not a dancer either, though you’re fit. A good dancer could work with you, if you’re not clumsy.”

Pavresh glanced at Ekana and back to Indima. What exactly was she saying to him? Pavresh swallowed hard and asked, “And, are you a good dancer?”

She laughed, and it was a beautiful sound to match her face. “The best. But no, I think you’re a magician.” She put her arm through Ekana’s arm, and the motion spoke everything that words hadn’t, that she’d seen how he looked at her, that she was flattered, that she was committed to her dance partner. “Would you like to perform while we dance?”

He almost refused, for his wounded pride, for the unfamiliarity of this place, for his own lack of practice performing. But then he remembered his persona. The young wanderer would have performed in public many times, for all kinds of people. Pulling on that role was a relief after the confusing introduction to the silk weaver. He nodded and moved toward the stage.

Ekana and Indima positioned themselves on opposite sides of the stage and waited for the musician to move into a new song. Pavresh watched them and listened to the music and tried to decide the primary arcist magic. In their first hesitant step toward each other, he knew it.

The Forbidden Love. The castes might not exist in the magic exactly, but he could often find ways to get at the idea. There was no way to see this pairing except through the eyes of the caste system. As they came closer, he added a touch of the thrill of false danger. When their hands first touched, it became true danger.

They moved about as the music developed, and he added other

touches, hints of other emotions. One that crept in without him noticing was jealousy. The Rival. Once he recognized it, he kept it there, allowing it to swell and fade and return as the dancers turned and spun and leaped. The audience, he realized, should feel jealous, as if they were a third part of the picture.

This was why he'd come to Romnai. Not simply to develop his arcist skills, but to use them, to perform in this exciting new art form. The dancers and the musician and the arcist, improvising together a scene that was a sort of conversation. The audience would feel his magic, not overtly but an inner feeling that played on how they saw the dancing, how they heard the music, all without them realizing.

When they finished, the forbidden lovers crushed by the overbearing father or the self-righteous priest or whatever image the audience created to explain it, those sitting around set down their gourds and smoking pipes and applauded.

Pavresh's cheeks flushed with pleasure as he joined Ekana and Indima and the group of people she had been with when they had interrupted her.

"Nice work, Pavresh." Indima ran a hand down his upper arm. It sent chills up his neck. "You were good."

"Thanks. It was...fun. I've never performed with such skilled dancers. And musician." He turned back toward the stage and saw the woman move into another song as if unconcerned that they had stopped. This one seemed to be an argument, an inner debate as the instrument struggled with what to do.

"Namrani," Ekana said. "She's good, but she hardly seems to know we're here. Except when someone's on stage, then she catches every nuance."

Still smiling more childishly than his rugged wanderer persona ought to, Pavresh was introduced to those sitting there drinking tisane. Jaritta, at first glance, was another beautiful, high-caste woman, perhaps around thirty years old...but then he

saw the old scars on one side of her face. She covered most of that side of her face with a loop of cloth from her dress. If that was caused by fire, and he guessed it was from the smooth skin of the scar, she would have been cast out, no matter what family she had belonged to. Her clothing didn't quite make her look untouchable, but it certainly wasn't silk or anything fine.

Iksheen called himself a poet. There was an angry look in his face as if the world he saw didn't match what was right. His clothes, a mixture of good quality and poor, his slightly unkempt hair, and the fine pipe he was smoking all seemed contrived specifically to frustrate any attempt to place him in any caste or jati. He didn't seem untouchable or outcast, simply outside the castes themselves. Neither below nor above them. He was young, like Pavresh, and his greeting was not enthusiastic.

Many of the other introductions went by him too fast. He promised himself he'd learn them all later. Most of them were young, from the late teens and up with Jaritta on the older end. But there was one older man—in his fifties, Pavresh guessed—Marankiya. As soon as Pavresh heard the name, he looked closer. It was not a common name, and he had to guess this was the man he'd heard of. Stories were told of him, or rather of the youth he'd been. When he was eight, he had already read all the sacred Aidras. When he was ten, he had studied the holy Tarmarayan epics. By the time he was twelve, he had memorized six thousand Peisharn verses and studied with the greatest religious leaders of the valley.

Great things were expected of him. Certainly, he would create the next religious text explaining the nature of fire and the gods and the way to free the soul, people believed. Only it never happened. The religious waited and waited, but Marankiya gave them nothing new. He wrote, but it never lived up to the expectations. He explained his understanding of the sacred fire and the gods, but it always lacked the profundity people had

longed for. His fame soon fizzled except as a byword for one who didn't live up to expectations.

Pavresh wanted to talk more with Marankiya, to learn what he was doing there at Chaitan's house and to understand what exactly must go through his mind. What image could Pavresh possibly create with his magic to conjure up such promise and disappointment?

But the introductions continued, and Marankiya seemed to have attention only for his mug of something that wasn't tisane.

The center of the group, the most charismatic and vocal of them all, was Rashul. On the street, Pavresh would have pegged him for *brenil* caste like himself, perhaps the cheetah *jati* that served the families of the *kortru* caste as personal servants. But in this house Pavresh had already learned that he couldn't rely on appearances. Rashul had lighter hair than most people, though nothing like the strange yellows and reds of the pale mumblers. Yet his skin was very dark and smooth, his face handsome. He wore a farmer's clothes, but Pavresh was confident he was no farmer and had never been one. His words were cultured and hypnotic.

Rashul wasted little time greeting Pavresh before launching back into whatever discussion they'd been having.

"Haven't you ever wondered why we know so little of the Forgotten South? Six hundred years. That's not long enough to forget so much. And even the earliest history of our valley is incredibly vague. I say intentionally so. We know almost nothing of the first three hundred years here."

Several people grumbled an assent. Jaritta shifted into a thoughtful pose, her left hand resting against her scar, and asked, "So, you say there were no untouchables when we first came here?"

"Not only no untouchables." His voice was louder now and passionate. "No castes. We were all one caste, all one *jati*."

This created a stir, and Pavresh realized it must be a new idea he was sharing, or perhaps a new development of ideas he'd already been talking about.

"So, someone here just invented the whole system?" one of the listeners asked.

"Could be. Or maybe the Forgotten South had the same system, but the colonists were all one jati, driven away by the others. Maybe they were all untouchables or all princes, driven out by another jati that wanted to rule, or all priests who fled as heretics when the religion changed. I'm still trying to figure that out."

Pavresh wasn't sure what to think of this or the fervent talk that followed. He hadn't come to Romnai for political ideals or any desire to change society. He wasn't opposed to it, but he'd come for the magic. And for the performances. That was what woke his passions.

Yet, clearly these political ideas were important to the other performers. He would do well to listen and appear to agree. Perhaps his wandering persona would be more concerned with this than he was in reality. He'd have to think about that, see what exactly would lie hidden in the young wanderer. And there was real power in the ideas of justice they evoked, an arcist power that resonated in him, even if, at times, they took it too seriously, as Ekana had said.

The conspiracy about the past sounded unlikely. Rather, it seemed Rashul's attempt not to discover the truth of history but to reinvent the past. Pavresh fingered the kusti knot at his waist. Certainly, his suggestion that they were all priests didn't seem right, or they would all agree on religion. But the Enshi religion he believed in was not the same as the more common pantheonic religion of Tiespetre and all the other gods. Beyond venerating fire—Tiespetre's father according to the priests—they had little in common. But he wasn't about to tell even these people that he was

Enshi.

The talk continued, and they refilled their gourds with tisane, and Namrani played her strange, conversational music that certainly didn't arise from the Aidras or the epics or any priest-approved source.

* * *

“Let's play kiwan.”

The voice woke Pavresh up from the corner he'd crawled into to sleep, and not long enough ago judging by how tired he still felt and the way his cheeks pulled down on his eyes. Chaitan waited in front of him, supported by two figures who were blurry in his half-lidded sight. He climbed to his feet.

A few others were also sleeping in the room, but most of the people had left, including the musician, Namrani. He supposed even these most daring and accomplished performers must have tedious day jobs of some sort.

Pavresh rubbed his eyes, ran his hands through his dark hair, and followed the halting figure toward one wall. Chaitan and his two attendants—were they his children, perhaps?—formed a single blurred form moving slowly. Pavresh yawned and did his best to wake up.

The kiwan table stood near a window made of oiled paper, so muted sunlight fell onto the pattern of lines. Kiwan was usually played standing, but this table had been lowered for Chaitan's sake. His attendants lowered him onto a pile of cushions. Once he was situated, he gestured for Pavresh to seat himself on the bare floor, which put him too low to play, so he kneeled. The rim-wall that ran around the table was perfectly polished, the wood grain showing striking contrast both on the outside and on the inner curved ramp that led down to the table.

Pavresh scanned the squares and lines and raised wooden

bumps that marked the board. It was the finest kiwan table he'd ever seen. Chaitan handed him two heavy bags.

"Check these. Make sure you're satisfied that both sets are fair. Choose whichever one you want."

Pavresh opened one bag and poured out the markers. They were all disks painted green, but beyond that, they showed a great variation. Some were metal, small and heavy, some wood and some clay and even a few that were a mixture of materials. They varied in size, and some had other ornamentation that would affect how they rolled and spun.

Keeping the green ones in front of him, he opened the other bag, ran his fingers casually through the blue markers there and handed the bag to Chaitan.

"Looks good to me."

"Then you go first." Chaitan shifted his back and shoulders, moving the pillows until one of his attendants leaned forward and adjusted them for him.

When he'd finished and appeared comfortable, Pavresh selected a medium clay piece and held it against the edge of the ramp. Chaitan gave the traditional nod, and Pavresh released the piece with some backspin and watched it roll down and settle on the edge of a black square.

Chaitan held his wooden piece, waited for the nod, and sent it directly into a corner.

Pavresh was selecting his next piece when Chaitan spoke. "Why are you here?"

He paused and looked at the sickly man across from him. "I want to learn the magic."

"Don't stop playing. Just talk while we play."

Pavresh dutifully sent a metal disk with topspin bouncing over the wooden bumps and into the center of the board.

"You know the magic already. You've been laying it on so thick since you came here I can barely breathe."

Chaitan's piece curled around the edge and settled along one side. Pavresh eased up on the magic and picked his next piece without answering. He could feel his cheeks warming with blood.

They continued in silence for some minutes, in some rounds sending new pieces onto the board, in other rounds moving those that were there, capturing each other's pieces and taking strategic positions.

Finally, Pavresh spoke again, meekly. "I know the magic, but I haven't had the experiences you've had. I haven't talked to all the people you've talked to. I guess I know the magic, but I want to understand it."

Chaitan nodded as he took a heavy piece, flicked it so it was spinning on its edge, and sent it careening into two of Pavresh's pieces, taking over the strategic spot between them. Pavresh had never seen such a move. He stared at the piece, trying to replay in his mind how Chaitan had done that.

"Good," Chaitan said, as if he hadn't done anything special. "It's good you understand that difference."

He gave Pavresh the ceremonial nod to continue play without adding anything else. Pavresh debated trying to duplicate the spinning move, but instead, he slid one of the pieces on the board into a better position.

"So, why don't you just go out and talk to people? Have experiences like mine. Easier than learning it at a remove from an old, dying man." Chaitan moved a piece into an attack position.

Pavresh studied the board in silence to decide how to protect his own pieces. No clear path ahead., He slid a new piece down to rest beside Chaitan's attacker.

"I guess because you've understood the stories you've heard. I want to understand them. I try to understand my own feelings, the events I witness, the people I meet. But you have, umm, a frame for them, I guess."

He looked at the board for a moment, then continued. "It's

like I'm trying to play kiwan without the squares and lines on the board, just guessing where everything goes. I...I need your help to draw the pattern on the board so I can actually see what I'm playing."

Chaitan was looking at him now. Not just looking at him, but studying him, examining his face, his mind even, it seemed. He leaned closer, as if to see Pavresh, actually see him, for the first time. Pavresh realized he had completely dropped the arcist persona that he'd put on before entering the house. He was simply himself.

"Well, then." Chaitan was smiling now, though Pavresh noticed how uncomfortable he looked, even on his pillows. "Very insightful. And you admit you need help. Maybe you don't fit the image of overly confident youth exactly after all. We'll see."

He picked up one of the oddly shaped disks and bounced it in his palm. "But for now, let's finish the game." The disk bounced down the ramp and twisted among the bumps and other pieces to land in a protected space on Pavresh's side of the board. To Pavresh, it looked like the advance troops of a conquering army, one he had little hope of defeating.

Telling himself—and the pieces that remained to him—that he was fighting a just war, a war to defend his own land, he planned his next moves and hoped his pieces would perform the best they could.

The game lasted much of the morning before Pavresh lost, but he was sure it could have ended much sooner if Chaitan had wanted.

When Pavresh's last piece was captured, Chaitan sat back with a sigh and closed his eyes. "I have enough people lounging around here with nothing to do."

Pavresh looked around the room at the few people moving about, most seemingly engaged in work for Chaitan himself, certainly not lounging around.

“Other arcists who fill the air with their overly dramatic performances. If you wish to be my heir, I’ll teach you and tell you stories, but during the mornings, you need to be out of this house, talking to people and learning their stories and experiencing everything the city offers. In the evenings, you may perform if you wish. In between, we can talk and create this frame in your mind.”

“Thank you, sir.” Pavresh dipped his head as the old arcist’s attendants led him away.

* * *

As he stepped into the street, Pavresh remembered his earlier encounter with the thugs. His *kusti* had saved him, and it was tied tightly about his waist now, but he didn’t want to repeat that. He cast over himself the persona of an honest laborer with just a hint of the sly, good-natured thief. The combination, he hoped, should give him the appearance of one who belonged on the streets of the city. For good measure, he added a bit of the rough, old-fashioned soldier as well.

Within a few blocks, the streets became uneven, lined with garbage and old buildings in poor repair. Pavresh headed away from the river, toward the *kortru* houses and the lava beds. The buildings became finer and larger as he went. The streets everywhere were full of people, mostly *wallas* carrying their packages or messages, all in a rush.

The mass of people thinned out as he reached the hot baths and smaller manor houses along this stretch of lava fields. Replacing them were untouchables begging beside the street where the wealthy might pass. Pavresh walked by and stood beside the great, otherworldly jumble of rocks and steaming pools of acrid water. The heat was intense, like nothing he’d felt back home in the mines. Yet, he’d benefited from them even

there, for it was only these lava beds and others like them that made living in that northern valley bearable. Without them, the river valley would be as cold as the mountain heights where they'd driven the pale-faced mumbler. The smell struck him, soon overpowering the other senses, like eggs lost in the hen-house.

A geyser broke the surface to his left, an awe-inspiring sight as the heated water tore through the air.

Here was the dwelling place of fire. Both his own religion and the more common pantheonic religion taught that. Water, yes. Stone, yes. But most importantly, fire, the source of the entire cosmos. Water and rock and even Pavresh himself were simply the smoke and ashes of that great cosmic fire.

Pavresh closed his eyes and imagined that warmth filling him. This was why arriving at the city had seemed a homecoming. It was the dwelling place of the almighty fire.

Chaitan had offered him a precious gift, and all he had to do was experience things like this, whatever the city had to offer. That and talk to people and learn their stories. No demands to change the world, as those gathered in Chaitan's house dreamed of, but merely to understand it. Pavresh turned and scanned those scattered about the wide boulevard, looking for someone who might be willing to talk.

Adding to the magic already there, he threw about himself the aura of the primitive storyteller, the wise keeper of tales. Then he stepped into the street in search of anyone with a story.

Which meant anyone at all.