

A BETRAYAL IN WINTER

DANIEL ABRAHAM

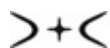


Biitrah, eldest son of the Khai Machi, was dead, murdered. The two surviving sons of Machi had vanished. The best estimates were that the old Khai wouldn't see another winter. Going north was dangerous.

He knew that, and still it didn't escape him that the Khai Machi dying by inches was his father, that these men were the brothers he knew only as vague memories.

And because of these men, he had lost everything again. If he was going to be haunted his whole life by the city, perhaps he should at least see it.

The only thing he risked was his life.



“The second volume in Daniel Abraham’s Long Price Quartet delivers a mix of subtle intrigue, illicit murder, and ill-fated romance, and further explores one of the most unique and engaging systems of magic in contemporary fantasy.”

—Jacqueline Carey, bestselling author of *Kushiel’s Justice*

“Compellingly plotted and elegantly written.”

—[SciFi.com](#), on *A Betrayal in Winter*

“*A Betrayal in Winter* features Daniel Abraham’s gift for complex, realistic characters in a setting that has none of the tinsel or derivative, second-hand feel of so much fantasy. This series is a major accomplishment; *A Betrayal in Winter* more than fulfills the promise of *A Shadow in Summer* and I look forward eagerly to reading the next.”

—S. M. Stirling, author of *The Sky People*

Turn the page for more praise for Daniel Abraham

More Praise for *A Betrayal in Winter*

“*A Betrayal in Winter* is a novel to inhabit, full of multifaceted characters whose public poses often belie their inner motivations, and full also of hope that men and women can be equal and that systems which degrade us can be changed.”

—[BookPage.com](#)

Praise for *A Shadow in Summer*, Book One of the Long Price Quartet

“Most ‘otherworldly’ fantasy is anything but, yet here Abraham has created an evocative world and culture that seems very strange and alien, yet still somehow feels real. The plot ... pays off for the patient reader and should leave fans eager for the next installment. An impressive start.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“*A Shadow in Summer* is a thoroughly engrossing debut novel from a major new fantasist. The world of the Khaiem, the andat, and the poets makes a fresh and original setting for a poignant human tale of power, heartbreak, and betrayal that kept me reading from first page to last. Abraham’s varied cast of characters are a lively and interesting bunch, and he tells their stories in an elegant style that reminded me by turns of Gene Wolfe, Jack Vance, and M. John Harrison, while still remaining very much his own. So when is the next volume coming out?”

—George R. R. Martin, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“There’s something genuinely *new* here, and it will be fascinating to see how the Quartet develops.”

—*Locus*

“From the opening lines, *A Shadow in Summer* carries us into an exotic, fantastic, yet utterly convincing world. Bravo! The writing is extremely visual. Drawing heavily on Eastern cultures, the author has created a mannered society in which every tone and gesture possesses special meaning. The setting is neither Japan nor China, however. Together with the multidimensional characters and wealth of fascinating detail, this place exists only in the extraordinary imagination of Daniel Abraham. I look forward to the next book in the series.”

—Morgan Llywelyn, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“Abraham has an interesting set of distinctive characters, a good sense of plot, and a fresh take on several of the usual fantasy tropes. He’s also willing to examine real-world issues a lot of popular fantasy doesn’t look at—abortion and violence against women, for example. It’ll be interesting to see where subsequent volumes of this series take us.”

—Asimov’s Science Fiction

“*A Shadow in Summer* is an ambitious, intelligent, and assured debut that should satisfy both readers hungry for the satisfactions of traditional fantasy and readers hungry for something more.”

—SciFi.com

“Reader, be warned: If you open Daniel Abraham’s *A Shadow in Summer*, he will lead you into a strange, seductive world of beatings and poets and betrayals, intrigues you do not fully understand and wars you cannot stop and places you are not sure you want to go. Intricate, elegant, and almost hypnotically told, this tale of gods held captive will hold you captive, too.”

—Connie Willis, multiple Hugo and Nebula Award-winning author

“Abraham’s debut is impressive. The world-building is solid and internally consistent, and it’s incredibly interesting. The varied characters—from the malicious andat to the ambitious Liat and secretive Itani—are fascinating and original. Readers looking for

something new and a little offbeat will enjoy this book.”

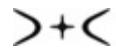
—*Romantic Times BOOKreviews*

“A very nice debut, and an enjoyable read that has me very keen on reading [*A Betrayal in Winter*]; as for *A Shadow in Summer*, I take a pose of admiration.”

—FantasyBookSpot.com

“In a word: Brilliant!”

—BarnesandNoble.com (Editor’s Choice: Top Ten Novels of 2006)



THE LONG PRICE QUARTET

*A Shadow in Summer**

*A Betrayal in Winter**

*An Autumn War**

*The Price of Spring** (2009)

Hunter's Run

(with Gardner Dozois and George R. R. Martin)

* A Tor book

A
BETRAYAL
IN
WINTER

>+<
Book Two
of the
Long Price Quartet
>+<

Daniel Abraham



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NEW YORK

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A BETRAYAL IN WINTER: BOOK TWO OF THE LONG PRICE QUARTET

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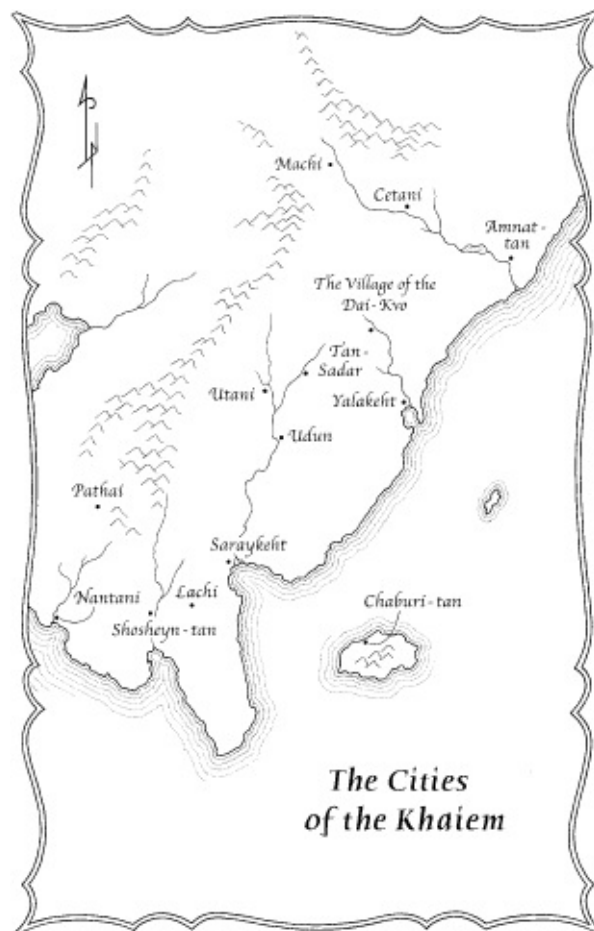
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And I am especially indebted to Paul Park, who told me to write what I fear.





PROLOG

>+< “There’s a problem at the mines,” his wife said. “One of your treadmill pumps.”

Biitrah Machi, the eldest son of the Khai Machi and a man of forty-five summers groaned and opened his eyes. The sun, new-risen, set the paper-thin stone of the bedchamber windows glowing. Hiami sat beside him.

“I’ve had the boy set out a good thick robe and your seal boots,” she said, carrying on her thought, “and sent him for tea and bread.”

Biitrah sat up, pulling the blankets off and rising naked with a grunt. A hundred things came to his half-sleeping mind. *It’s a pump—the engineers can fix it or Bread and tea? Am I a prisoner? or Take that robe off, love—let’s have the mines care for themselves for a morning.* But he said what he always did, what he knew she expected of him.

“No time. I’ll eat once I’m there.”

“Take care,” she said. “I don’t want to hear that one of your brothers has finally killed you.”

“When the time comes, I don’t think they’ll come after me with a treadmill pump.”

Still, he made a point to kiss her before he walked to his dressing chamber, allowed the servants to array him in a robe of gray and violet, stepped into the sealskin boots, and went out to meet the bearer of the bad tidings.

“It’s the Daikani mine, most high,” the man said, taking a pose of apology formal enough for a temple. “It failed in the night. They say the lower passages are already half a man high with water.”

Biitrah cursed, but took a pose of thanks all the same. Together, they walked through the wide main hall of the Second Palace. The caves shouldn’t have been filling so quickly, even with a failed pump. Something else had gone wrong. He tried to picture the shape of the Daikani mines, but the excavations in the mountains and plains around Machi were numbered in the dozens, and the details blurred. Perhaps four ventilation shafts. Perhaps six. He would have to go and see.

His private guard stood ready, bent in poses of obeisance, as he came out into the street. Ten men in ceremonial mail that for all its glitter would turn a knife. Ceremonial swords and daggers honed sharp enough to shave with. Each of his two brothers had a similar company with a similar purpose. And the time would come, he supposed, that it would descend to that. But not today. Not yet. He had a pump to fix.

He stepped into the waiting chair, and four porters came out. As they lifted him to their shoulders, he called out to the messenger.

“Follow close,” he said, his hands flowing into a pose of command with the ease of long practice. “I want to hear everything you know before we get there.”

They moved quickly through the grounds of the palaces—the famed towers rising above them like forest trees above rabbits—and into the black-cobbled streets of Machi. Servants and slaves took abject poses as Biitrah passed. The few members of the utkhaiem awake and in the city streets took less extreme stances, each appropriate to the difference in rank between themselves and the man who might one day renounce his name and become the Khai Machi.

Biitrah hardly noticed. His mind turned instead upon his passion—the machinery of mining: water pumps and ore graves and hauling winches. He guessed that they would reach the low town at the mouth of the mine before the fast sun of early spring had moved the width of two hands.

They took the south road, the mountains behind them. They crossed the sinuous stone bridge over the Tidat, the water below them still smelling of its mother glacier. The plain spread before them, farmsteads and low towns and meadows green with new wheat. Trees were already pushing forth new growth. It wouldn't be many weeks before the lush spring took root, grabbing at the daylight that the winter stole away. The messenger told him what he could, but it was little enough, and before they had reached the halfway point, a wind rose whuffling in Biitrah's ears and making conversation impossible. The closer they came, the better he recalled these particular mines. They weren't the first that House Daikani had leased from the Khai—those had been the ones with six ventilation shafts. These had four. And slowly—more slowly than it once had—his mind recalled the details, spreading the problem before him like something written on slate or carved from stone.

By the time they reached the first outbuildings of the low town, his fingers had grown numb, his nose had started to run from the cold, he had four different guesses as to what might have gone wrong, and ten questions in mind whose answers would determine whether he was correct. He went directly to the mouth of the mine, forgetting to stop for even bread and tea.

HIAMI SAT by the brazier, knotting a scarf from silk thread and listening to a slave boy sing old tunes of the Empire. Almost-forgotten emperors loved and fought, lost, won, and died in the high, rich voice. Poets and their slave spirits, the andat, waged their private battles, sometimes with deep sincerity and beauty, sometimes with bedroom humor and bawdy rhymes—but all of them ancient. She couldn't stand to hear anything written after the great war that had destroyed those faraway palaces and broken those song-recalled lands. The new songs were all about the battles of the Khaiem—three brothers who held claim to the name of Khai. Two would die, one would forget his name and doom his own sons to another cycle of blood. Whether they were laments for the fallen or celebrations of the victors, she hated them. They weren't songs that comforted her, and she didn't knot scarves unless she needed comfort.

A servant came in, a young girl in austere robes almost the pale of mourning, and took a ritual pose announcing a guest of status equal to Hiami's.

“Idaan,” the servant girl said, “Daughter to the Khai Machi.”

“I know my husband’s sister,” Hiami snapped, not pausing in her handwork. “You needn’t tell me the sky is blue.”

The servant girl flushed, her hands fluttering toward three different poses at once and achieving none of them. Hiami regretted her words and put down the knotting, taking a gentle pose of command.

“Bring her here. And something comfortable for her to sit on.”

The servant took a pose of acknowledgment, grateful, it seemed, to know what response to make, and scampered off. And then Idaan was there.

Hardly twenty, she could have been one of Hiami’s own daughters. Not a beauty, but she took a practiced eye to know that. Her hair, pitch dark, was pleated with strands of silver and gold. Her eyes were touched with paints, her skin made finer and paler than it really was by powder. Her robes, blue silk embroidered with gold, flattered her hips and the swell of her breasts. To a man or a younger woman, Idaan might have seemed the loveliest woman in the city. Hiami knew the difference between talent and skill, but of the pair, she had greater respect for skill, so the effect was much the same.

They each took poses of greeting, subtly different to mark Idaan’s blood relation to the Khai and Hiami’s greater age and her potential to become someday the first wife of the Khai Machi. The servant girl trotted in with a good chair, placed it silently, and retreated. Hiami halted her with a gesture and motioned to the singing slave. The servant girl took a pose of obedience and led him off with her.

Hiami smiled and gestured toward the seat. Idaan took a pose of thanks much less formal than her greeting had been and sat.

“Is my brother here?” she asked.

“No. There was a problem at one of the mines. I imagine he’ll be there for the day.”

Idaan frowned, but stopped short of showing any real disapproval. All she said was, “It must seem odd for one of the Khaiem to be slogging through tunnels like a common miner.”

“Men have their enthusiasms,” Hiami said, smiling slightly. Then she sobered. “Is there any news of your father?”

Idaan took a pose that was both an affirmation and a denial.

“Nothing new, I suppose,” the dark-haired girl said. “The physicians are watching him. He kept his soup down again last night. That makes almost ten days in a row. And his color is better.”

“But?”

“But he’s still dying,” Idaan said. Her tone was plain and calm as if she’d been talking about a horse or a stranger. Hiami put down her thread, the half-finished scarf in a puddle between her ankles. The knot she felt in the back of her throat was dread. The old man was dying, and the thought carried its implications with it—the time was growing short. Biitrah, Dana, and Kaiin Machi—the three eldest sons of the Khai—had lived their lives in something as close to peace as the sons of the Khaiem ever could. Otah, the Khai’s sixth son, had created a small storm all those years ago by refusing to take the brand and renounce his claim to his

father's chair, but he had never appeared. It was assumed that he had forged his path elsewhere or died unknown. Certainly he had never caused trouble here. And now every time their father missed his bowl of soup, every night his sleep was troubled and restless, the hour drew nearer when the peace would have to break.

"How are his wives?" Hiami asked.

"Well enough," Idaan said. "Or some of them are. The two new ones from Nantani and Pathai are relieved, I think. They're younger than I am, you know."

"Yes. They'll be pleased to go back to their families. It's harder for the older women, you know. Decades they've spent here. Going back to cities they hardly remember ..."

Hiami felt her composure slip and clenched her hands in her lap. Idaan's gaze was on her. Hiami forced a simple pose of apology.

"No. I'm sorry," Idaan said, divining, Hiami supposed, all the fear in her heart from her gesture. Hiami's lovely, absent-minded, warm, silly husband and lover might well die. All his string and carved wood models and designs might fall to disuse, as abandoned by her slaughter as she would be. If only he might somehow win. If only he might kill his own brothers and let their wives pay this price, instead of her.

"It's all right, dear," Hiami said. "I can have him send a messenger to you when he returns if you like. It may not be until morning. If he thinks the problem is interesting, he might be even longer."

"And then he'll want to sleep," Idaan said, half smiling, "and I might not see or hear from him for days. And by then I'll have found some other way to solve my problems, or else have given up entirely."

Hiami had to chuckle. The girl was right, and somehow that little shared intimacy made the darkness more bearable.

"Perhaps I can be of some use, then," Hiami said. "What brings you here, sister?"

To Hiami's surprise, Idaan blushed, the real color seeming slightly false under her powder.

"I've ... I wanted Biitrah to speak to our father. About Adrah. Adrah Vaunyogi. He and ..."

"Ah," Hiami said. "I see. Have you missed a month?"

It took a moment for the girl to understand. Her blush deepened.

"No. It's not that. It's just that I think he may be the one. He's from a good family," Idaan said quickly, as if she were already defending him. "They have interests in a trading house and a strong bloodline and ..."

Hiami took a pose that silenced the girl. Idaan looked down at her hands, but then she smiled. The horrified, joyous smile of new love discovered. Hiami remembered how once she had felt, and her heart broke again.

"I will talk to him when he comes back, no matter how dearly he wants his sleep," Hiami said.

"Thank you, sister," Idaan said. "I should ... I should go."

"So soon?"

“I promised Adrah I’d tell him as soon as I spoke to my brother. He’s waiting in one of the tower gardens, and ...”

Idaan took a pose that asked forgiveness, as if a girl needed to be forgiven for wanting to be with a lover and not a woman her mother’s age knotting silk to fight the darkness in her heart. Hiami took a pose that accepted the apology and released her. Idaan grinned and turned to go. Just as the blue and gold of her robe was about to vanish through the doorway, Hiami surprised herself by calling out.

“Does he make you laugh?”

Idaan turned, her expression questioning. Hiami’s mind flooded again with thoughts of Biitrah and of love and the prices it demanded.

“Your man. Adrah? If he doesn’t make you laugh, Idaan, you mustn’t marry him.”

Idaan smiled and took a pose of thanks appropriate for a pupil to her master, and then was gone. Hiami swallowed until she was sure the fear was under control again, picked up her knotwork and called for the slave to return.

THE SUN was gone, the moon a sliver no wider than a nail clipping. Only the stars answered the miners’ lanterns as Biitrah rose from the earth into darkness. His robes were wet and clung to his legs, the gray and violet turned to a uniform black. The night air was biting cold. The mine dogs yipped anxiously and paced in their kennels, their breath pluming like his own. The chief engineer of House Daikani’s mines took a pose of profound thanks, and Biitrah replied graciously, though his fingers were numb and awkward as sausages.

“If it does that again, call for me,” he said.

“Yes, most high,” the engineer said. “As you command.”

Biitrah’s guard walked him to the chair, and his bearers lifted him. It was only now, with the work behind him and the puzzles all solved, that he felt the exhaustion. The thought of being carried back to the palaces in the cold and mud of springtime was only slightly less odious than the option of walking under his own power. He gestured to the chief armsman of his guard.

“We’ll stay in the low town tonight. The usual wayhouse.”

The armsman took a pose of acknowledgment and strode forward, leading his men and his bearers and himself into the unlit streets. Biitrah pulled his arms inside his robes and hugged bare flesh to flesh. The first shivers were beginning. He half regretted now that he hadn’t disrobed before wading down to the lowest levels of the mine.

Ore was rich down in the plain—enough silver to keep Machi’s coffers full even had there been no other mines here and in the mountains to the north and west—but the vein led down deeper than a well. In its first generation, when Machi had been the most distant corner of the Empire, the poet sent there had controlled the *andat* Raising-Water, and the stories said that the mines had flowed up like fountains under that power. It wasn’t until after the great war that the poet Manat Doru had first captured Stone-Made-Soft and Machi had come into its own as the center for the most productive mines in the world and the home of the metal trades—ironmongers, silversmiths, Westland alchemists, needlemakers. But Raising-Water

had been lost, and no one had yet discovered how to recapture it. And so, the pumps.

He again turned his mind back to the trouble. The treadmill pumps were of his own design. Four men working together could raise their own weight in water sixty feet in the time the moon—always a more reliable measure than the seasonally fickle northern sun—traveled the width of a man's finger. But the design wasn't perfect yet. It was clear from his day's work that the pump, which finally failed the night before, had been working at less than its peak for weeks. That was why the water level had been higher than one night's failure could account for. There were several possible solutions to that.

Biitrah forgot the cold, forgot his weariness, forgot indeed where he was and was being borne. His mind fell into the problem, and he was lost in it. The wayhouse, when it appeared as if by magic before them, was a welcome sight: thick stone walls with one red lacquered door at the ground level, a wide wooden snow door on the second story, and smoke rising from all its chimneys. Even from the street, he could smell seasoned meat and spiced wine. The keeper stood on the front steps with a pose of welcome so formal it bent the old, moon-faced man nearly double. Biitrah's bearers lowered his chair. At the last moment, Biitrah remembered to shove his arms back into their sleeves so that he could take a pose accepting the wayhouse keeper's welcome.

"I had not expected you, most high," the man said. "We would have prepared something more appropriate. The best that I have—"

"Will do," Biitrah said. "Certainly the best you have will do."

The keeper took a pose of thanks, standing aside to let them through the doorway as he did. Biitrah paused at the threshold, taking a formal pose of thanks. The old man seemed surprised. His round face and slack skin made Biitrah think of a pale grape just beginning to dry. He could be my father's age, he thought, and felt in his breast the bloom of a strange, almost melancholy, fondness for the man.

"I don't think we've met," Biitrah said. "What's your name, neighbor?"

"Oshai," the moon-faced man said. "We haven't met, but everyone knows of the Khan Machi's kindly eldest son. It is a pleasure to have you in this house, most high."

The house had an inner garden. Biitrah changed into a set of plain, thick woolen robes that the wayhouse kept for such occasions and joined his men there. The keeper himself brought them black-sauced noodles, river fish cooked with dried figs, and carafe after stone carafe of rice wine infused with plum. His guard, at first dour, relaxed as the night went on, singing together and telling stories. For a time, they seemed to forget who this long-faced man with his graying beard and thinning hair was and might someday be. Biitrah even sang with them at the end, intoxicated as much by the heat of the coal fire, the weariness of the day, and the simple pleasure of the night, as by the wine.

At last he rose up and went to his bed, four of his men following him. They would sleep on straw outside his door. He would sleep in the best bed the wayhouse offered. It was the way of things. A night candle burned at his bedside, the wax scented with honey. The flame was hardly down to the quarter mark. It was early. When he'd been a boy of twenty, he'd seen candles like this burn their last before he slept, the light of dawn blocked by goose-down pillows around his head. Now he couldn't well imagine staying awake to the half mark. He

shuttered the candlebox, leaving only a square of light high on the ceiling from the smoke hole.

Sleep should have come easily to him as tired, well fed, half drunk as he was, but it didn't. The bed was wide and soft and comfortable. He could already hear his men snoring on the straw outside his door. But his mind would not be still.

They should have killed each other when they were young and didn't understand what precious thing life is. That was the mistake. He and his brothers had forborne instead, and the years had drifted by. Danat had married, then Kaiin. He, the oldest of them, had married Hiami and followed his brothers' example last. He had two daughters, grown and now themselves married. And so here he and his brothers were. None of them had seen fewer than forty summers. None of them hated the other two. None of them wanted what would come next. And still, it would come. Better that the slaughter had happened when they were boys, stupid the way boys are. Better that their deaths had come before they carried the weight of so much life behind them. He was too old to become a killer.

Sleep came somewhere in these dark reflections, and he dreamed of things more pleasant and less coherent. A dove with black-tipped wings flying through the galleries of the Second Palace; Hiami sewing a child's dress with red thread and a gold needle too soft to keep its point; the moon trapped in a well and he himself called to design the pump that would raise it. When he woke, troubled by some need his sleep-sodden mind couldn't quite place, it was still dark. He needed to drink water or to pass it, but no, it was neither of these. He reached to unshutter the candlebox, but his hands were too awkward.

"There now, most high," a voice said. "Bat it around like that, and you'll have the whole place in flames."

Pale hands righted the box and pulled open the shutters, the candlelight revealing the moon-faced keeper. He wore a dark robe under a gray woolen traveler's cloak. His face, which had seemed so congenial before, filled Biitrah with a sick dread. The smile, he saw, never reached the eyes.

"What's happened?" he demanded, or tried to. The words came out slurred and awkward. Still, the man Oshai seemed to catch the sense of them.

"I've come to be sure you've died," he said with a pose that offered this as a service. "Your men drank more than you. Those that are breathing are beyond recall, but you ... Well, most high, if you see morning the whole exercise will have been something of a waste."

Biitrah's breath suddenly hard as a runner's, he threw off the blankets, but when he tried to stand, his knees were limp. He stumbled toward the assassin, but there was no strength in the charge. Oshai, if that was his name, put a palm to Biitrah's forehead and pushed gently back. Biitrah fell to the floor, but he hardly felt it. It was like violence being done to some other man, far away from where he was.

"It must be hard," Oshai said, squatting beside him, "to live your whole life known only as another man's son. To die having never made a mark of your own on the world. It seems unfair somehow."

Who, Biitrah tried to say. Which of my brothers would stoop to poison?

"Still, men die all the time," Oshai went on. "One more or less won't keep the sun from

rising. And how are you feeling, most high? Can you get up? No? That's as well, then. I was half-worried I might have to pour more of this down you. Undiluted, it tastes less of plums."

The assassin rose and walked to the bed. There was a hitch in his step, as if his hip ached. *He is old as my father*, but Biitrah's mind was too dim to see any humor in the repeated thought. Oshai sat on the bed and pulled the blankets over his lap.

"No hurry, most high. I can wait quite comfortably here. Die at your leisure."

Biitrah, trying to gather his strength for one last movement, one last attack, closed his eyes but then found he lacked the will even to open them again. The wooden floor beneath him seemed utterly comfortable; his limbs were heavy and slack. There were worse poisons than this. He could at least thank his brothers for that.

It was only Hiami he would miss. And the treadmill pumps. It would have been good to finish his design work on them. He would have liked to have finished more of his work. His last thought that held any real coherence was that he wished he'd gotten to live just a little while more.

He did not know it when his killer snuffed the candle.

HAMI HAD the seat of honor at the funeral, on the dais with the Khai Machi. The temple was full, bodies pressed together on their cushions as the priest intoned the rites of the dead and struck his silver chimes. The high walls and distant wooden ceiling held the heat poorly; braziers had been set in among the mourners. Hiami wore pale mourning robes and looked at her hands. It was not her first funeral. She had been present for her father's death, before her marriage into the highest family of Machi. She had only been a girl then. And through the years, when a member of the utkhaiem had passed on, she had sometimes sat and heard these same words spoken over some other body, listened to the roar of some other pyre.

This was the first time it had seemed meaningless. Her grief was real and profound, and this flock of gawkers and gossips had no relation to it. The Khai Machi's hand touched her own, and she glanced up into his eyes. His hair, what was left of it, had gone white years before. He smiled gently and took a pose that expressed his sympathy. He was graceful as an actor—his poses inhumanly smooth and precise.

Biitrah would have been a terrible Khai Machi, she thought. He would never have put in enough practice to hold himself that well.

And the tears she had suffered through the last days reclaimed her. Her once-father's hand trembled as if uneased by the presence of genuine feeling. He leaned back into his black lacquer seat and motioned for a servant to bring him a bowl of tea. At the front of the temple, the priest chanted on.

When the last word was sung, the last chime struck, bearers came and lifted her husband's body. The slow procession began, moving through the streets to the pealing of hand bells and the wailing of flutes. In the central square, the pyre was ready—great logs of pine stinking of oil and within them a bed of hard, hot-burning coal from the mines. Biitrah was lifted onto it and a shroud of tight metal links placed over him to hide the sight when his skin peeled from his noble bones. It was her place now to step forward and begin the conflagration. She

moved slowly. All eyes were on her, and she knew what they were thinking. Poor woman, to have been left alone. Shallow sympathies that would have been extended as readily to the wives of the Khai Machi's other sons, had their men been under the metal blanket. And in those voices she heard also the excitement, dread, and anticipation that these blood paroxysms carried. When the empty, insincere words of comfort were said, in the same breath they would move on to speculations. Both of Biitrah's brothers had vanished. Danat, as was said, had gone to the mountains where he had a secret force at the ready, or to Lachi in the south to gather allies, or to ruined Saraykeht to hire mercenaries, or to the Dai-kvo to seek the aid of the poets and the andat. Or he was in the temple, gathering his strength, or he was cowering in the basement of a low town comfort house, too afraid to come to the streets. And every story they told of him, they also told of Kaiin.

It had begun. At long last, after years of waiting, one of the men who might one day be Khai Machi had made his move. The city waited for the drama to unfold. This pyre was only the opening for them, the first notes of some new song that would make this seem to be about something honorable, comprehensible, and right.

Hiami took a pose of thanks and accepted a lit torch from the firekeeper. She stepped to the oil-soaked wood. A dove fluttered past her, landed briefly on her husband's chest, and then flew away again. She felt herself smile to see it go. She touched the flame to the small kindling and stepped back as the fire took. She waited there as long as tradition required and then went back to the Second Palace. Let the others watch the ashes. Their song might be starting, but hers here had ended.

Her servant girl was waiting for her at the entrance of the palace's great hall. She held a pose of welcome that suggested there was some news waiting for her. Hiami was tempted to ignore the nuance, to walk through to her chambers and her fire and bed and the knotwork scarf that was now nearly finished. But there were tear-streaks on the girl's cheeks, and why was Hiami, after all, to treat a suffering child unkindly? She stopped and took a pose that accepted the welcome before shifting to one of query.

"Idaan Machi," the servant girl said. "She is waiting for you in the summer garden."

Hiami shifted to a pose of thanks, straightened her sleeves, and walked quietly down the palace halls. The sliding stone doors to the garden were open, a breeze too cold to be comfortable moving through the hall. And there, by an empty fountain surrounded by bare limbed cherry trees, sat her once-sister. If her formal robes were not the pale of mourning, her countenance contradicted them: reddened eyes, paint and powder washed away. She was a plain enough woman without them, and Hiami felt sorry for her. It was one thing to expect the violence. It was another to see it done.

She stepped forward, her hands in a pose of greeting. Idaan started to her feet as if she had been caught doing something illicit, but then she took an answering pose. Hiami sat on the fountain's stone lip, and Idaan lowered herself, sitting on the ground at her feet as a child might.

"Your things are packed," Idaan said.

"Yes. I'll leave tomorrow. It's weeks to Tan-Sadar. It won't be so hard, I think. One of my daughters is married there, and my brother is a decent man. They'll treat me well while

make arrangements for my own apartments.”

“It isn’t fair,” Idaan said. “They shouldn’t force you out like this. You belong here.”

“It’s tradition,” Hiami said with a pose of surrender. “Fairness has nothing to do with it. My husband is dead. I will return to my father’s house, whoever’s actually sitting in his chair these days.”

“If you were a merchant, no one would require anything like that of you. You could go where you pleased, and do what you wanted.”

“True, but I’m not, am I? I was born to the utkhaiem. You were born to a Khai.”

“And women,” Idaan said. Hiami was surprised by the venom in the word. “We were born to women, so we’ll never even have the freedoms our brothers do.”

Hiami laughed. She couldn’t help herself, it was all so ridiculous. She took her once-sister by the hand and leaned forward until their foreheads almost touched. Idaan’s tear-red eyes shifted to meet her gaze.

“I don’t think the men in our families consider themselves unconstrained by history,” she said, and Idaan’s expression twisted with chagrin.

“I wasn’t thinking,” she said. “I didn’t mean that ... Gods ... I’m sorry, Hiami-kya. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry ...”

Hiami opened her arms, and the girl fell into them, weeping. Hiami rocked her slowly, cooing into her ear and stroking her hair as if she were comforting a babe. And as she did, she looked around the gardens. This would be the last time she saw them. Thin tendrils of green were rising from the soil. The trees were bare, but their bark had an undertone of green. Soon it would be warm enough to turn on the fountains.

She felt her sorrow settle deep, an almost physical sensation. She understood the tears of the young that were even now soaking her robes at the shoulder. She would come to understand the tears of age in time. They would be keeping her company. There was no need to hurry.

At length, Idaan’s sobs grew shallower and less frequent. The girl pulled back, smiling sheepishly and wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I hadn’t thought it would be this bad,” Idaan said softly. “I knew it would be hard, but this is ... How did they do it?”

“Who, dear?”

“All of them. All through the generations. How did they bring themselves to kill each other?”

“I think,” Hiami said, her words seeming to come from the new sorrow within her and not from the self she had known, “that in order to become one of the Khaiem, you have to stop being able to love. So perhaps Biitrah’s tragedy isn’t the worst that could have happened.”

Idaan hadn’t followed the thought. She took a pose of query.

“Winning this game may be worse than losing it, at least for the sort of man he was. He loved the world too much. Seeing that love taken from him would have been bad. Seeing him carry the deaths of his brothers with him ... and he wouldn’t have been able to go slogging

through the mines. He would have hated that. He would have been a very poor Khai Machi.

"I don't think I love the world that way," Idaan said.

"You don't, Idaan-kya," Hiami said. "And just now I don't either. But I will try to. I will try to love things the way he did."

They sat a while longer, speaking of things less treacherous. In the end, they parted as if they were just another absence before them, as if there would be another meeting on another day. A more appropriate farewell would have ended with them both in tears again.

The leave-taking ceremony before the Khai was more formal, but the emptiness of it kept her from unbalancing her composure. He sent her back to her family with gifts and letters of gratitude, and assured her that she would always have a place in his heart so long as it beat. Only when he enjoined her not to think ill of her fallen husband for his weakness did her sorrow threaten to shift to rage, but she held it down. They were only words, spoken at such events. They were no more about Biitrah than the protestations of loyalty she now recited were about this hollow-hearted man in his black lacquer seat.

After the ceremony, she went around the palaces, conducting more personal farewells with the people whom she'd come to know and care for in Machi, and just as dark fell, she even slipped out into the streets of the city to press a few lengths of silver or small jewelry into the hands of a select few friends who were not of the utkhaiem. There were tears and insincere promises to follow her or to one day bring her back. Hiami accepted all these little sorrows with perfect grace. Little sorrows were, after all, only little.

She lay sleepless that last night in the bed that had seen all her nights since she had first come to the north, that had borne the doubled weight of her and her husband, witnessed the birth of their children and her present mourning, and she tried to think kindly of the bed, the palace, the city and its people. She set her teeth against her tears and tried to love the world. In the morning, she would take a flatboat down the Tidat, slaves and servants to carry her things, and leave behind forever the bed of the Second Palace where people did everything but die gently and old in their sleep.

>+< Maati took a pose that requested clarification. In another context, it would have risked annoying the messenger, but this time the servant of the Dai-kvo seemed to be expecting a certain level of disbelief. Without hesitation, he repeated his words.

“The Dai-kvo requests Maati Vaupathai come immediately to his private chambers.”

It was widely understood in the shining village of the Dai-kvo that Maati Vaupathai was, not a failure, certainly an embarrassment. Over the years he had spent in the writing room and lecture halls, walking the broad, clean streets, and huddled with others around the kilns of the firekeepers, Maati had grown used to the fact that he would never be entirely accepted by those who surrounded him; it had been eight years since the Dai-kvo had deigned to speak to him directly. Maati closed the brown leather book he had been studying and slipped it into his sleeve. He took a pose that accepted the message and announced his readiness. The white-robed messenger turned smartly and led the way.

The village that was home to the Dai-kvo and the poets was always beautiful. Now in the middle spring, flowers and ivies scented the air and threatened to overflow the well-tended gardens and planters, but no stray grass rose between the paving stones. The gentle choir of wind chimes filled the air. The high, thin waterfall that fell beside the palaces shone silver and the towers and garrets—carved from the mountain face itself—were unstained even by the birds that roosted in the eaves. Men spent lifetimes, Maati knew, keeping the village immaculate and as impressive as a Khai on his seat. The village and palaces seemed as grand as the great bowl of sky above them. His years living among the men of the village—only men, no women were permitted—had never entirely robbed Maati of his awe at the place. He struggled now to hold himself tall, to appear as calm and self-possessed as a man summoned to the Dai-kvo regularly. As he passed through the archways that led to the palace, he saw several messengers and more than a few of the brown-robed poets pause to look at him.

He was not the only one who found his presence there strange.

The servant led him through the private gardens to the modest apartments of the most powerful man in the world. Maati recalled the last time he had been there—the insults and recriminations, the Dai-kvo’s scorching sarcasm, and his own certainty and pride crumbling around him like sugar castles left out in the rain. Maati shook himself. There was no reason for the Dai-kvo to have called him back to repeat the indignities of the past.

There are always the indignities of the future, the soft voice that had become Maati’s muse said from a corner of his mind. Never assume you can survive the future because you’ve survived the past. Everyone thinks that, and they’ve all been wrong eventually.

The servant stopped before the elm-and-oak-inlaid door that led, Maati remembered, to

meeting chamber. He scratched it twice to announce them, then opened the door and motioned Maati in. Maati breathed deeply as a man preparing to dive from a cliff into shallow water and entered.

The Dai-kvo was sitting at his table. He had not had hair since Maati had met him twenty-three summers before when the Dai-kvo had only been Tahi-kvo, the crueler of the two teachers set to sift through the discarded sons of the Khaiem and utkhaiem for like candidates to send on to the village. His brows had gone pure white since he'd become the Dai-kvo, and the lines around his mouth had deepened. His black eyes were just as alive.

The other two men in the room were strangers to Maati. The thinner one sat at the table across from the Dai-kvo, his robes deep blue and gold, his hair pulled back to show graying temples and a thin white-flecked beard. The thicker—with both fat and muscle, Maati thought—stood at a window, one foot up on the thick ledge, looking into the gardens, and Maati could see where his clean-shaven jaw sagged at the jowl. His robes were the light brown color of sand, his boots hard leather and travel worn. He turned to look at Maati as the door closed, and there was something familiar about him—about both these new men—that he could not describe. He fell into the old pose, the first one he had learned at the school.

“I am honored by your presence, most high Dai-kvo.”

The Dai-kvo grunted and gestured to him for the benefit of the two strangers.

“This is the one,” the Dai-kvo said. The men shifted to look at him, as graceful and sure of themselves as merchants considering a pig. Maati imagined what they saw him for—a man of thirty summers, his forehead already pushing back his hairline, the smallest of pot bellies. A soft man in a poet's robes, ill-considered and little spoken of. He felt himself start to blush, clenched his teeth, and forced himself to show neither his anger nor his shame as he took the pose of greeting to the two men.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I don't believe we have met before, or if we have, I apologize that I don't recall it.”

“We haven't met,” the thicker one said.

“He isn't much to look at,” the thin one said, pointedly speaking to the Dai-kvo. The thicker scowled and sketched the briefest of apologetic poses. It was a thread thrown to a drowning man, but Maati found himself appreciating even the empty form of courtesy.

“Sit down, Maati-cha,” the Dai-kvo said, gesturing to a chair. “Have a bowl of tea. There is something we have to discuss. Tell me what you've heard of events in the winter cities.”

Maati sat and spoke while the Dai-kvo poured the tea.

“I only know what I hear at the teahouses and around the kilns, most high. There's trouble with the glassblowers in Cetani; something about the Khai Cetani raising taxes on exporting fishing bulbs. But I haven't heard anyone taking it very seriously. Amnat-Tan is holding a summer fair, hoping, they say, to take trade from Yalakeht. And the Khai Machi ...”

Maati stopped. He realized now why the two strangers seemed familiar; who they reminded him of. The Dai-kvo pushed a fine ceramic bowl across the smooth-sanded grain of the table. Maati fell into a pose of thanks without being aware of it, but did not take the

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