

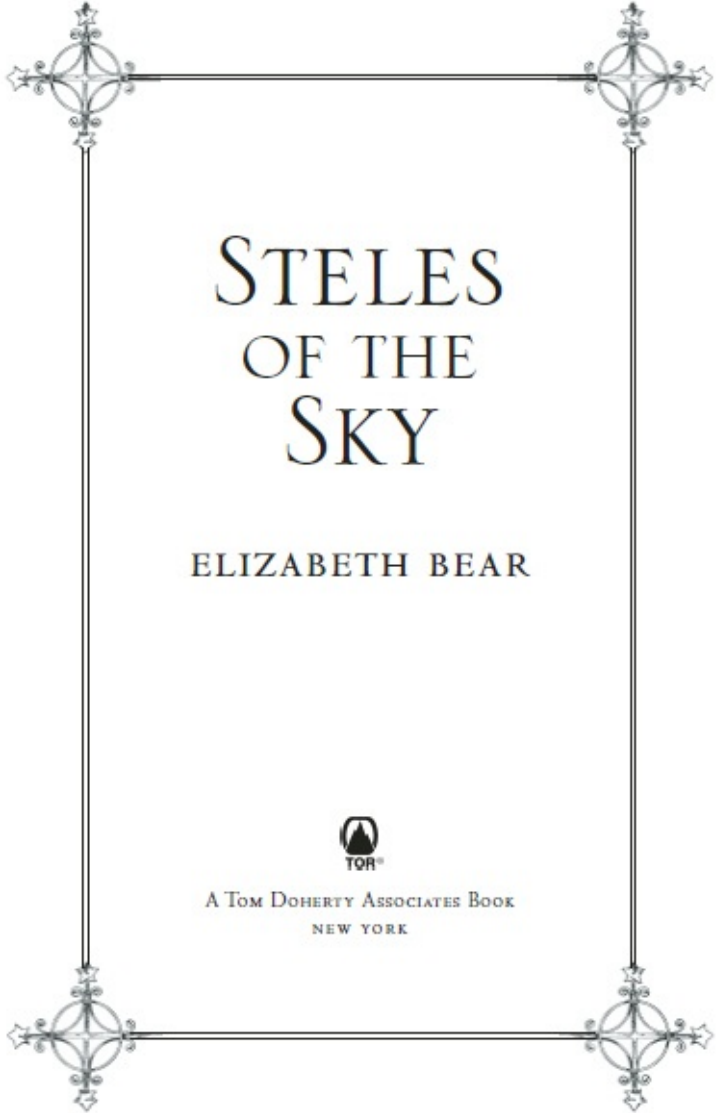
"Gripping, perfectly balanced and highly recommended."

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review) on *Range of Ghosts*

# STELES OF THE SKY

ELIZABETH BEAR

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STELES  
OF THE  
SKY

ELIZABETH BEAR



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  
NEW YORK

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*For Naima Ahmed and Malcolm Ahmed*





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Tor Books by Elizabeth Bear

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Temur sat cross-legged on warm stone. Brother Hsiung had brought him tea. Contents untasted, the cup cooled in his hands. The sound of a mountain stream rattling over rocks rose from the bottom of the gully several *li* below and to his left, but he had lost his immediate awareness of it.

He was watching his mare chase her colt around the twilit meadow while the chill of evening settled on his shoulders. Bansh was of the steppe breed, and her liver-bay coat gathered the dim light and gleamed like shadowed metal ... but the colt, Afrit, was the unlucky color called ghost-sorrel, and he shone through the gloaming like a pale cream moon.

Beyond them, the shaman-rememberer's mouse-colored mare watched, dark eyes in a face white from ears to lip giving her an uncanny resemblance to a horse whose head was a skull. She stood quietly, a mature and stolid creature with her ears pricked tip to tip, seeming amused by the romping of more excitable beasts.

Beyond *her*, strange jungles that had long overgrown the city called Reason were awakening for the night. Feathery ferns unscrolled from their stony daytime casements. Toothed birds whose legs were feathered jewel-blue and violet like a second set of wings crept from crevices and shook their plumage on their long bony whip-tails into bright fans.

Afrit bucked and snorted, shaking the bristle of his mane. His legs—seeming already near as long as his mother's—flashed even paler than his cream-colored body, as if he wore white silk stockings gartered above each knee. Bansh stalked him, stiff-legged, head swaying like a snake's. The colt hopped back nimbly for one less than a day old, whirled, bolted—and tumbled to the ground in a tangle of twig-limbs.

He scrambled up again and stood, rocky on splayed legs, until Bansh ambled over and nosed him carefully from one end to the other. By the time she reached his tail, he'd remembered about the tea and was busily nursing.

Temur sipped his cold tea. Afrit would have his mother's high-arched nose and good deep nostrils, the fine curve of her neck—even more dramatic with a stallion's muscle on it. He'd have her near-hard feet. The open questions were whether he'd ever be able to run on air the way his ever-so-slightly supernatural mother did ... and what his unlucky, impossible color might presage.

Temur did not look up at the footstep behind him. He knew it: the hard boots and swish of trowsers of the Wizard Samarkar. He played a game with himself, imagining her face without looking at her and breathed deeply to catch the scent of her hair as she settled beside him. He was disappointed: it smelled of dust, and the desert, more than Samarkar.

But her shoulder was warm against his. She leaned into him, reached over. Plucked the cold bowl of tea from his hands and replaced it with one that breathed lazy coils of steam. He lowered his face to the warmth and inhaled. Moisture coated his dry nose and throat.

In pleasure, he sighed.

She drank down the cold tea and set the bowl aside as he turned to her. As always, her real face was far more complex than the one he held in his memory. He never quite remembered the small scar through an eyebrow or the slight irregularity of her nose.

It made him wonder how well he remembered Edene, who he had not seen since the spring.

The stars were shimmering into existence in the deepening sky, constellations he'd known all his life and yet had recently wondered if he'd ever see again. The Stallion, the Mare. The Oxen and the Yoke that bound them. The Ghost Dog. The Eagle.

It was strange seeing them framed in mountains on all sides.

"Are you hungry?" Samarkar asked at last. "Hsiung is making something. Hrahima is ... of Somewhere. And the shaman-rememberer is sleeping."

"I'm waiting for the moons," Temur said. She'd know why; one moon would rise for every son or grandson of the Great Khagan still living.

Temur was checking on his family.

A faint glow limned the ragged outline of the mountains to the east. When Temur glanced west, the stark light made the forested lower slopes there look like the rough undulations of the scholar-stones they carved in Song. Glaciers and smears of early snow glistened at their peaks, broken by the black knife-lines of ridges. His heart squeezed hard and fast, as if a woman caught his eye and smiled.

He looked away as long as he could, though Samarkar reached down and threaded her fingers between his. When he drank the last tea from the bowl he still held in his right hand, it was barely warm.

He set it on the rock beside him and turned to the rising moons.

Once there had been hundreds, a gorgeous procession scattered across the night, light enough to read by. Now a scant double handful drifted one by one into sight. There the Violet Moon, smeared with color like chalk, of Nilufer's son Chatagai. There Temur's own Iron Moon, red and charcoal and yet streaked bright. He waited for the pale circle of Qori Buqa's Ghost Moon, just the color of Afrit's creamy hide—

It did not rise.

Only Samarkar's breathing told him she was in pain. He had clenched his hand through hers, and must be squeezing the blood from her fingers. When he forced his to open, his own knuckles ached. He stroked her palm in apology; briefly she encircled his wrist.

"Who?" she asked.

He shook his head, but said, "Qori Buqa is dead. If the sky can be trusted—"

"What can be trusted, if the sky cannot?"

He tipped his head in acquiescence. "Who killed him?"

"Another rival?" But she did not sound confident. "Some Song general? Does it change anything? We'll still have to fight *someone*."

He was silent a long time before he answered, "It's the way the mill of the world grinds."

She too left the quiet fallow between them for a while before she asked, "Have you dreamed this?"

His dreams—shamanistic, not quite prophetic—dated from before the blood-vow that was the reason she had originally chosen to follow him. It had been her wizard's scientific bent that had brought her along, in order to study the progress of his oath—that, and a loyalty to her sister-in-law Payma, whom they had smuggled out of the Black Palace one step ahead of the guards.

He shrugged. "Not exactly. I dreamed Qori Buqa backward upon a red mare. That could be death. Or it could mean that he goes blind to war."

"Went blind," Samarkar corrected. "He's not going anywhere now."

"Except on vulture wings," Temur replied.

When Temur looked up again, a moon he'd never before seen, a moon banded with rippled darkness and bright like the temper-water of a blade, rode among its cousins in the old familiar sky.

\* \* \*

Namri Songtsan I—by the forbearance of the Six Thousand Emperor of Rasa and Protector of Tsarepheth, Lord of the Steles of the Sky and a dozen other titles, though no one had called him that

them yet—opened his toothless red-gummed mouth and squalled. The equally unheralded Dowager Empress Regent of the Rasan Empire, Yangchen-tsa, turned her face away from the work of dust stonemasons. She pulled her wide silken wrap collar aside and put her son to her breast. But as was his not-infrequent habit, he gnawed the chapped nipple and would not latch. He turned his head aside, then craned the oversized thing back and began to scream like a peacock set live in a fire.

*Which of my husband's ancestors come back are you, little monster?* Yangchen thought with the blend of affection and exasperation that seemed to her to be all parenthood was made of. *A tyrant that's for sure.*

She drew a breath—a mistake; it was full of smoke and the first tang of rotting flesh. She wanted to hug Namri to her heart. She wanted to drop him over the side of the building and clap her hands over her ears and scream right back at him.

Instead, she jerked her collar closed and thrust the screaming boy at his closest nurse, then turned back to the thing she had wished she could ignore.

She stood on a hastily constructed platform on the roof of the house of a lesser—but wealthy—noble family, surrounded by such of her husband's royal court and inner circle as had survived. They overlooked the place where the Black Palace of Tsarepheth had stood. The aroma of burnt black powder still hung on the air. The riots of the previous day had sputtered into quiescence, and Yangchen had heeded the advice of the wizards and set up soup lines and first-aid stations where anyone could be fed or seen to, no questions asked. That *might* prevent a resurgence.

Another skinless corpse had been found nailed to a temple door, however. And her agents reported muttering that the smoke billowing from the Cold Fire sometimes took the shape of a malevolent face, a pale sky staring through the empty whorls of its eyes.

The wizards said at least one of their agents reported more and more rumors of the Carrion King stalking the cold streets by night. Perhaps Yangchen had that rumor as much as the chill of the encroaching winter to thank for the dissolution of the riots, come nightfall.

As for the palace—it had not been destroyed completely. One tower and a portion of the north wall had crumbled, the precisely hewn basalt stones blasted from their place by the force of the explosion. Yangchen could see clearly into several of the chambers and corridors, and she had an exquisite view of the workers below. Both stonemasons and rough laborers toiled—the laborers hauling cracked and collapsed stone, the stonemasons determining which rubble could safely be moved without collapsing the whole pile. The destroyed portion had contained the emperor's apartments and the council chamber.

The limited destruction was why two of her son's nurses were beside her, and her sister-wife Tsechen-tsa, and stooped old Baryan, with his spotted head uncovered because all of his hats were inside the ruined palace. That was why she was flanked by her husband's advisors—her own advisors now—Gyaltsen-tsa and Munye-tsa, and not the whole of the council. It was also why the sun overhead was wrong and strange, a flat-looking pale yellow thing that seemed too hot and too close.

Yangchen-tsa closed her hands on the splintery wood of the unacquered railing. She did not quite trust it to lean against. She'd scrambled up the ladder to watch this process because she felt it was her duty. Because she could not be entirely certain that this, too, was not her fault.

So many things were turning out to be.

There was no one Yangchen could speak to for comfort. Her only peer in the world was Tsechen-tsa who stood beside her tall and impassive, with her hair undressed and her hands folded inside the sleeves of the soot-stained robe no one had been able to convince her to exchange. Yangchen's clothes were fresh because she had been out of the palace when the detonation came, disguised as a commoner to confer with the wizards in their Citadel without her husband's knowledge, and Baryan would not hear of her being seen as the empress regent in those wool and cotton rags.

Across the entire breadth of the city, even the ancient white walls of the Citadel had rattled with the force of the explosion, and she had stood beside Hong-la and his colleagues and watched smoke

rise from the place that had been, for six years, her summer home.

Yangchen had had a mad urge, then, to take her son and head north, to keep her peasant garb and raise Namri as a—a calligrapher, an apothecary, a goatherd. Anything but an emperor.

Even as it occurred to her, she knew it for the fantasy of a child deluded by storybooks. Kings do not disguise themselves as noodle-shop proprietors. Empresses—even empresses widowed at the age of nineteen—did not toss everything aside and go running off to make a living by their fancy needlework.

Still, Yangchen was tempted. And she might have done it—except for the abiding horror that this, like so much else, was something she had caused to be done.

She could face the guilt for her own actions, her own ruthlessness. Her father had warned her that would be necessary, when she married both the future Emperor of Rasa and his brother. She could face the deaths—and the subtler wickednesses—that lay against her own choice, her own hand. It was harder to accept the evils she suspected she had been manipulated into facilitating.

It was up to her to do something about that.

She squared her shoulders in the borrowed robe—too long—and turned to Gyaltsen-tsa. He was younger than many of her late husband's advisors, closer to the age of the fugitive once-prince Samarkar. He had kind eyes inside a framework of character wrinkles and had affected fresh flowers woven into his braid. Yesterday's still draggled there, sour and browning, petals transparent with bruises and folds.

"We cannot stay here." Yangchen gestured to the work below. "This is fruitless."

"Dowager," Baryan said from her other side, thus becoming the first to speak her new title. "Your Imperial husband—"

She looked at him, hating how the tightness of her lower lip drew up at the center as she fought back tears. Her glare silenced Baryan—or perhaps the silent glare of the strange sky above was answer enough to his protest.

"If my husband were alive," she said, "would the sky have changed? Another God has claimed the land, na-Baryan. Shall we wait for his army to come?"

He looked down. "Your son—"

"Must be protected. He is the Emperor of Rasa now. And he should be in Rasa, under a Rasan sky where we can make him safe." She turned, away from the shattered tower, toward the southern horizon. They were high enough atop this commandeered house for an unobstructed view down the fertile valley. Yangchen's gesture took in the cradling hands of the mountains, the hills that centuries of cultivation had carved into scalloped terraces, the many-bridged canyon of the river as it plunged from stone to stone, dancing between the walls it had carved for itself. In spring the fields would be a thousand shades from pink to green to gold; now they were russet and umber or silvery-green, fallen under winter cover. *At least we got the harvest in.*

But it wasn't the fields she wanted her advisors to consider. It was the road that followed the course of the river, and the train of riders, walkers, and wagons—some one-wheeled, like giant barrows; some two-wheeled dog-carts; some four-wheeled for heavy hauling—upon it.

"With or without us," Yangchen said, surprised at her own eloquence, "our people are leaving. The question before us is do we let them face the road alone—or do we go with them to Rasa, perhaps bring some wizards to protect them from the demonlings, and take the chance that we can save our empire?"

Baryan struggled for an answer. Yangchen knew he could out-argue her. She couldn't afford to give him the opportunity. She turned to Gyaltsen, about to raise her appeal to his more sympathetic face—

A cry from below interrupted. *Not my husband's body*, she prayed, turning back to the rail—even as she prayed that it was. She knew Songtsan was dead, knew it in her bones, knew it by the sky. But was it better, somehow, to hold a tiny fragment of uncertainty, of half-hope—or was it better to know

unequivocally?

~~There was a flurry of activity among the ruins. Someone—one of the master stonemasons—was rushing to the ladder, climbing the wall of the appropriated house with one hand because a cloth sack swung in the other. He had his hands upon the rail where Yangchen’s hands had a moment before rested. Stone dust smeared his clothing and lightened his face. *Strange*, Yangchen thought with terrible disconnection. *You’d think the dust of the Black Palace would be dark—*~~

“Dowager,” the stonemason said, dropping his eyes abruptly. “Second-wife—”

Tsechen stepped forward. The hem of her dirty robes trembled against her shoes. Her hands knotted before her breast. She opened her mouth and made no words—just a moan.

“Honored sister-wife,” Yangchen said, placing one hand in the crook of Tsechen’s elbow. “Permit me.”

The look Tsechen gave her was not comfort but rage, but the anger seemed to strengthen her. She closed her mouth and did not draw away.

“Honored master mason,” Yangchen said. “What have you found?”

He stared at her for a moment longer and then knelt at the edge of the roof, one knee braced against the platform edge. Yangchen wondered how he did not tumble to his death, but masons must be used to scaffoldings. He reached into the mouth of the bag, fumbled, and with unsteady hands jerked it wide.

What he drew forth was the carved crown of Rasa, a spiked filigree circlet of oil-green olivine and peridot embedded in a matrix of opaque, crystalline gray iron, just as it had been cut from a piece of skystone on the command of Genmi-chen in the same year the Citadel was founded. Head lowered, he reached through the gaps in the railing and extended it up to Yangchen-tsa.

She took it in her hands. She had never been suffered to touch it before, and was surprised at its coolness and weight. It was smooth, as her fingers played over it, with only the faintest catch changing texture where the stone and metal met. She turned it in her hands, the incredible delicacy of the filigree suggesting the forms of dragons, phoenixes, the Qooros. More familiar beasts—carven hounds, serpents, tigers—were layered within, visible beneath the outer layer of pierced and lacquered carved stone.

“It’s so heavy,” she said.

“Madam,” said the stonemason. “We have uncovered the treasury.”

Munye-tsa gasped. “Six Thousand heard you,” he said, laying a subtly restraining hand on the arm of Baryan. “It is a sign.”

\* \* \*

Lightning throttled the column of ash and smoke writhing up the sky behind the refugee caravan. The Wizard Tsering—awkward astride a mare so weary the beast struggled to raise her head—had paused at the peak of a pass, reined her mount aside, and turned to look back along the snaking column. Groups of Qersnyk nomads and clumps of townsfolk from Tsarepheth trudged up the rise, heads as low as the mare’s. The train had spread out across the bottom of the valley; where the path ascended they fell naturally into single file again, winding up a series of switchbacks so steep Tsering-la could have dropped a persimmon on the head of someone below ... had she a persimmon to spare.

Feathery ash blossoms starred her mare’s shoulders like snowflakes. The horse could have passed for one of the Qersnyk fancies with their spotted coats, but these spots smeared and gritted in the mare’s sweat when Tsering-la passed her hand across them. She had abandoned trying to brush the ash from the mare, from herself, or from her hat brim, but she still patted the horse’s shoulder. She was unclear as to which of them she was trying to reassure.

A vaster billow of smoke rolled out, down the distant flanks of the Cold Fire, to disappear behind the shoulders of nearer mountains. Tsering could imagine she caught the red glow behind it, but it was

likely only the lightning. The earth dropped underfoot—suddenly, sickeningly, like missing a stair. Tsering clutched the pommel as the mare snorted and kicked out, too exhausted for more than a halfhearted attempt at panic. Behind and below, most of Tsering's fellow refugees did not even raise their heads.

You could even become used to a volcano—or too tired to care about it anymore. Although the eruption seemed to be worsening as wizards fled the Citadel, their strengths no longer combined to restrain it.

She wondered if this billow of ash, this shaking of the earth, was the one that heralded the failure of those wizards still left behind at the White-and-Scarlet Citadel of Tsarepheth to protect it, the citizens that shared its name, and the plague victims too weak to be moved—and who would have no hope of surviving away from the brewing vats of Ashra's healing ale. The master of Tsering's order, Yongten-la, and the others who remained behind were risking their lives for the sick—and for the Citadel, with its libraries and laboratories harboring irreplaceable centuries of knowledge.

There was very little those who were *not* wizards could do to protect themselves if the Cold Fire decided to kill them. And as for the wizards ... Tsering had never found her power. All her theory, and her understanding of the mechanics of how the universe worked, would not avail her if a blast of superheated poisonous gases pushed a wall of ash and stone down on them, if molten glass rained from the sky.

She wondered if even Hong-la could manage to protect anyone, protect himself, in such a case as that.

As if her thoughts had been a summoning—and surely even the master wizard from Song could not hear minds—the tallest walker toiling up the path below raised his head and looked up at her. Even from a distance, the gesture revealed the strong lines of a long-jawed, rectangular face beneath the slope of the brim of his hat. It was a peasant's cap, meant to shade the head and shoulders while working under the blazing sun, and it did a remarkable job of shedding ash. Trust Hong-la to recognize the easiest, most elegant solution.

*Wait there,* he mouthed.

Tsering raised a hand in acknowledgment. Her throat burned with the fumes of sulfur. She soothed her mare again and watched Hong-la climb. Eventually, it occurred to her that she could dismount and offer the horse water. She was no expert rider, preferring shank's mare—or soul's—to the actual sound of the wind, but she ran her hands down the mare's legs and checked her feet, wondering how she would know if something was wrong and—if she found it—what she could do about it.

Samarkar, with her noble past, would have known how to care for the horse. Or Ashra, who had spent so many years among the Qersnyk. But Samarkar was far away, if she were even alive still, and Ashra ...

Ashra was not alive.

Reminded, Tsering touched the saddlebags for reassurance, feeling the resilience of cloth and the weight of stones within. Those objects were the reason why she rode rather than walking. Tsering-la was one of the wizards and shaman-rememberers entrusted with carrying the wards, a cowardly responsibility.

As she was placing the mare's last hoof gently on the ground once more, the steady rhythm of trudging feet, clopping hooves, and turning wheels cresting the pass and starting down the other side was broken as carters and walkers hesitated in order to stare. She turned, and found Hong-la beside her—arms folded, chin tucked, standing on air as if it were a solid stone platform. He had levitated himself from his place below more easily than she could have scrambled up the slope.

She bit down on her reflexive envy and turned to him as he stepped forward sedately, his splinted Song-style boot coming to rest on the stone of her vantage point.

Tsering thought of Hong-la as a sort of human Citadel, a broad-built, bony tower of intellect and impervious strength. It was a shock to see his complexion faded and grayish, the smile and

concentration lines beside his eyes furrowed so deep they seemed inflamed. His usually cropped hair twisted into sweaty spikes by the exertion of the climb, protruded raggedly around the perimeter where his hat rested against his scalp. It seemed grayer, even—but that might be the ash.

“You’re another Tse-ten of the Five Eyes,” she said, shaking her head in awe.

“The Process of Air wants to lift us,” he replied. “Encourage that, discourage the Process of Earth that wishes to hold us close, and one can drift like a feather on the wind.”

“If it were as easy as that, it’d be the first trick any wizard learned,” she said. “I don’t think Master Yongten could manage that.”

He harrumphed, and Tsering held out the waterskin. “We could be doing this at the height of summer,” she said, by way of apology—though why she felt the need to apologize for eruptions and revolutions was beyond her.

Hong-la took the skin in his long, heavy-boned hand. Like most wizards, his fingers were decorated with a fascinating assortment of scars. He drank water sparingly and sighed. “We wouldn’t be racing winter, then.”

“Finish it,” Tsering said. “There should be water in the next valley.”

“If it’s not full of ash.” He handed her back the skin.

“I’m full of ash. Why should what I’m drinking be any different?” She hung the skin back on the saddle, where it hung forlornly slack. They’d need to filter water that night if they did not find some fresh. One more task to exhaust the too-few wizards among them. Hong-la should by rights be sleeping along one side of a single-wheeled cart by day, but who could rest rattling over these trails. In a cart that could tip down a cliff with one misstep?

She and Hong-la rejoined the column, Tsering leading the mare. The refugee train moved at a dragging pace determined by the Qersnyk carts and oxen. Tsering did not have the energy to chafe at it. Instead, she watched the road before her feet—because looking at the horizon was too exhausting—and lifted her gaze only occasionally to see how far she had come. Beside her, Hong-la toiled uncomplainingly—but he leaned on a twisted stick, something she had never seen him do before. The gnarled wood was smooth-polished, carved to accentuate its natural curves, and glossy beneath the dust and ash. Tsering thought it was Song workmanship, and wondered if he had brought it with him all that way, when he had come to the Citadel to become a Wizard of Tsarepheth.

Another day, she might have asked him. Now it was all she could do to raise a foot and put it before the other.

*Just keep walking.* It was a philosophy that had gotten her through worse losses—or at least more personal ones—than this.

At the palace in Qarash, the twins led a dozen men into hell. Saadet did not think she could have done it without Mukhtar ai-Idoj, al-Sepehr of her order and the adoptive father of her twin brother and herself, at her side. She was certain she could not have done it without the strength of her brother Shahruz within her, bearing her up, lending her endurance. Since his death at the hands of the Qersnyk pretender, Re Temur, he had shared her mind—a resurrection made possible by the twin’s bond that al-Sepehr’s magics had long ago strengthened.

Saadet’s belly did not heave merely because of the baby in it.

Only she and al-Sepehr had escaped the compound alive, and that much was plainly evident from the moment they stepped within again, surrounded by a half-dozen armored Qersnyk warriors and a pair of shaman-rememberers with their eyes concealed behind blue-dyed fly fringes. Each of the warriors wore the three horsehair falls of Qori Buqa and carried bows and spears. The pyramid of clean-sucked skulls in the dooryard was evidence enough.

“Blood ghosts,” one of the warriors said. He was a tall man, lighter-eyed than most, named E Esen. His cheeks—fair by Qersnyk standards—peeled across the bones with sun and windburn. His nose, hooked like an eagle’s beak, was framed by deep squint lines. He went hatless despite the chill and his hair, pulled back in a queue, revealed a shining expanse of pate. He glanced at the nearest shaman-rememberer. “Paian?”

Paian lifted sky-colored fringe across the back of his right hand. His eyes peered out under its shade. He pursed his lips and shrugged elaborately.

Under other circumstances, Saadet might have smiled. Now, she bit the back of her hand, sour bile rising.

*Weak, sister.*

*It is the babe,* she told Shahruz, not really caring if he believed her. They had done what they had done for the Nameless, and she would not regret it. If her revulsion made her seem more the grieving widow to the Qersnyk, so much the better.

Paian, the shaman-rememberer, laid a hand on her shoulder. She tried to meet his eyes, but he’d lowered the fringe drop and it defeated her. Its purpose, no doubt: anything that made a priest seem more mysterious increased his power.

“We go on,” she said, and led them into the open doors of the palace. She knew some of the men only followed because they would not let a woman show more courage than they.

Now it was Shahruz who held their head high as they moved down the corridors she had so recently—so briefly—lived in, and smelled the thick scent of clotted blood splashed like whitewash on the walls. It did not matter who gave her that appearance of strength; only that the Qersnyk saw her back straight and tall like a pole on which the banner of her body hung. Sticky and puddled, the blood on the floor tugged at their shoes with each step. The palace stank as if someone had been butchering lambs.

They found no dead within.

“They were dragged out,” Esen said after a glance at Paian. The other men muttered and jostled, turning to put their backs to one another.

“Dragged out and eaten,” agreed Shahruz, with Saadet’s tongue.



Paian too was fair, and the shape of his nose was a smaller version of Esen's. Saadet recognized their silent understanding of one another, and Esen's choice to speak for both.

*They're brothers.*

*Brother and ... whatever you call that, you mean,* Shahrüz answered, the weight of his disdain for the shaman-rememberer like robes soaked with rain.

*As you say, my brother.*

Because she could not go back, she went forward. Esen stepped before her, or she would have been the vanguard. Still it was she that guided them—to the chamber where the Khagan's war-band had met for the final time.

There was more blood here.

Esen turned to her. "How is it that you and your stepfather alone escaped this?" he asked. "How is it that we find ourselves now under a Rahazeen sky?"

Her blood chilled, but when her voice would have failed Shahrüz spoke for her. "My husband"—and surely Saadet was the only one who heard the way Shahrüz's distaste stained those words—"told me that he had dreamed that the Scholar-God and the Eternal Sky were in truth one deity."

Esen nodded. Qori Buqa Khagan had not been silent about his dreams. She knew he had consulted the shaman-rememberers as to their meaning, and the Qersnyk were everywhere renowned for the ease with which they adopted foreign customs, and their permissiveness toward foreign gods—so long as the worshipers of those gods rendered appropriate tribute to the Khagan.

Still, the sky made her more nervous than anything. Al-Sephehr could cast it a thousand ways. Qori Buqa's legacy, or Temur's treachery ... but there would always be those who scratched at whatever guilt he hung on the truth.

As Saadet rested a hand on her belly, Shahrüz continued, "I prayed to the Eternal Sky and to the Scholar-God for my life, and the life of my son, and the life of my father. Perhaps I was heard. Perhaps—it is just that I ran, and my father came to protect me."

Esen's gesture dismissed the stones over their heads as a temporary inconvenience. "And the sky?"

Saadet answered before her brother could. Her explanation was better—and she'd been paying more attention to these heathens and their customs, while he shuffled his imaginary feet at her in very real disgust.

"From what my husband told me, this is not the first time my usurper nephew Temur has been associated with blood ghosts. He was seen in Asitaneh, at the court of the caliph there, before the caliph was replaced by a Rahazeen faction. Perhaps the usurpers have allied themselves one with another?" She cupped her gently swelling abdomen. "It is my son—Qori Buqa's son!—who will bring the Eternal Sky back to the steppe."

She held his gaze, steady and calm, and wished she dared raise her veil across her face. So many eyes, and her expressions so naked now.

At last, Esen nodded. "You've spirit," he said. "It won't be enough."

"My son has the mandate of the Eternal Sky," she replied.

He snorted and looked away. "We'll see."

She had stood too long in one place. When they walked on, she had to rock her feet to unstick them from the floor. *I will burn these boots.*

*They are good boots. It will be hard to find others that fit as well, and you will need them. You will do no such thing.*

She blew the loose hair from her eyes, and swallowed her first three thoughts as unworthy. At last she managed to answer him: ... *As you say, my brother.*

\* \* \*

Tsering walked—or, rather, hobbled; she was not much accustomed to the saddle—around the camp

perimeter, too much of her wary attention on the sun instead of the wards and banners she was laying in place for the night. The sun had vanished behind the mountains, though the sky was still bright, and the clouds to the east had begun to stain the colors of poppy blossoms around the edges. Tsering's eyes and belly insisted on reading the light as sunrise rather than sunset, even though she knew better.

Every ten strides, Tsering pulled painfully against the stiffness in her lower back and inner thighs and bent to place a stone marked with Rasan and Qersnyk sigils of protection from the enemies that come in the night. They were prayer-stones, but they were also more than that. Every three stones, she found a place to drape a banner, or—better—to wedge its short stick between rocks so it swung freely in the light, cold autumn breeze.

The air cooled rapidly as the sun fell. She blew warm curls of mist on her fingers where they poked from her felted fingerless mitts. It seemed as if every stone she touched sucked warmth from her body.

The banners were sewn with images of the Guardian Beasts. The pale wind-horse of the soul—the symbol for breath and song—and the blue ice-lion of the mind were prominent among them. Tsering invoked the small gods of place where she knew them, but here they were mostly mysteries to her. The refugees had chosen to camp in a valley protected by a black basalt idol whose feet were ringed by withered offerings of food and parched flowers. A little cluster of refugees had been preparing to feed her further offerings as Tsering began her rounds. Tsering hoped that basalt boded well for propitiating against volcanoes.

The need for these rituals was one of the reasons progress through the mountains came so slowly and at such cost of exhaustion. Each morning, the vanguard could not swing out before dawn, and at night the wards of the night before must be collected and stowed, along with whatever goods had been needed for comfort before. And that same vanguard must stop at night more than a hand of the sun's passage across the sky before it met the horizon, to give time to make camp before darkness came.

They were still probably far enough into the Steles of the Sky to be safe from blood ghosts. But Tsering—and Hong-la, and the Qersnyk shaman-rememberers—were more worried about whatever invisible force—spores, or immaterial demons, or what-have-you—came in the night to lay the genesis of demonlings in a sleeper's lungs.

They could not afford infections. The only treatment any of them knew lay behind, in Tsarepheth—if Tsarepheth were standing still.

Tsering sent a guilty glance over her shoulder. Hong-la thought he would feel it if the Citadel fell.

Tsering, with no magic, only knowledge, had no such reassurance that all was well. Or as well as could be expected.

Slowly, the walking and bending was easing the stiffness in her body. Perhaps she should take up one of the moving forms of meditation; she wasn't as young as she had been, and sitting in contemplation left her stiff too—though not so stiff as the horse had. As she neared the outcrop of rock that marked the end of her allotted patrol, Tsering became aware of a sort of layered, carrying drone, busy with harmonics and tonal overlays. It was the chant of a Qersnyk cleric, and as she came around the corner she was glad to see the shaman-rememberer Jurchadai setting a pole from which his last banner snapped. She placed the stones leading up to it, his singing making the soft flesh between her jaw and throat vibrate like the wings of a bee, and straightened herself painfully to stand beside him while he leaned on that long stave.

"You're carrying flagpoles?" she asked, in her rudimentary Qersnyk.

Jurchadai frowned at her, but the motion of her hands seemed to lead him to understanding. "They are poles for white-houses," he said in the Rasani he had been learning in his own turn, speaking slowly. "I just borrowed them."

At least, she guessed the word was "borrowed": he used a term in his own language. She also guessed by "houses," he meant the Qersnyk huts of felted wool, which could be put up and pulled down in a matter of minutes by skilled labor, and which they carried with them in their carts.

Like all the Qersnyk shaman-rememberers, Jurchadai was third-sexed. A very few male wizards managed to grow sparse facial hair; Jurchadai had none. He wore his hair braided up into a sort of crown beneath his hat, and his shoulders were slight. At first it had been an effort for Tsering to remember to call this round-arsed person "he." Now she found it odd when she heard another Rasan make the same mistake. And, she thought, it wasn't as if she weren't used to the smooth cheeks of male eunuchs, being a female one herself.

Jurchadai and his colleagues were the ones who had eventually found a successful ward against the demonlings that did not rely on stout stone walls to be effective. He had, in effect, preemptively saved the lives of everyone in the camp tonight. Tsering laid the back of her hand against his shoulder briefly, trusting that he would understand.

They stood just within the protective circle of the stones and banners. He leaned back against the big stone. She put herself beside him, stretching out her thighs and watching the sun go down on the wrong side of the sky. The sky flamed below the edge of the pall of ash, behind the teeth of horizon-cutting mountains. Jurchadai sighed.

"It's not my sky either," Tsering said. "You said Temur ... How did you know?"

His teeth flashed white in the dimming day. He said, "I have it from my brothers. Re Temur has declared himself Khagan."

Temur was the Qersnyk man she had helped to rescue almost on the very steps of blighted Kashgar when she and Samarkar had first discovered the destruction wrought there by blood ghosts. He had later fled—with Samarkar and a Cho-tse tiger warrior—assisting one of the emperor's wives escaping a plot that would have likely ended in her death. It was only later that Tsering had learned that Temur was her friend Ashra's son, and a grandson of the Great Khagan.

"You have it from your—" She shook her head.

"Shaman," Jurchadai said, touching his breast. "Rememberer." He touched his temple beside the right eye. "What one knows, all brothers know. Re Temur says he is Khagan, and he will raise his banner at Dragon Lake."

"In *Song*?"

"It is Qersnyk. Or was. And none of the Song princelings close by have the resources to defend their claim."

Dragon Lake, that was a name Tsering knew. It was a name everyone knew: Temusan Khagan, the Great Khagan, had kept his summer palace there—a great pagoda in the Song style, red tile and black lacquer and gilt. But the Qersnyk claim on those lands had become a matter of contention since, with Song and Qersnyk armies squabbling fruitlessly over possession.

If Temur felt confident enough to raise his banner at Dragon Lake, he was making a powerful statement about his intentions to claim and reunite the entirety of his grandfather's crumbling empire. Tsering wondered if he had the strength of arms and will to pull it off.

That, and when she had last seen him, he had been headed west, along with Samarkar, Payma, and the Cho-tse. He'd have to cross the entire Qersnyk Steppe to reach the Song borderlands, and the steppe was held by another would-be Khagan, Temur's uncle Qori Buqa. Or had been, until his recent death.

Tsering stretched herself painfully. She'd stood still too long, and stiffened up again. Perhaps Hong-la knew a moving meditation he could teach her. "Won't Qori Buqa's heirs just crush him before he can muster an army there?"

Jurchadai had told her that Qori Buqa was no more. That he had married an Uthman girl and died on the wedding ride. Tsering was starting to understand how it was that he knew these things.

Jurchadai shrugged. His brows drew together in a frown. Only when the lines appeared did Tsering realize how fresh-faced he was. His manner made him seem much older, but even the wind and sun of the steppe under the Eternal Sky had not yet weathered his flesh.

She schooled her hands when they would have crept up to stroke the streak of silver in her hair.

She was not an old woman—just a grown one—but for the moment she felt her age on her like armor. She had seen and lost things before now. Jurchadai's youth should not wound her so.

And yet it did, quick and sharp and darting. She took a breath to soothe the pain, and another speak on.

"Please," she said. "Continue."

"The sun rises in the west over Qarash," the shaman-rememberer said, dropping back into Qersnyk. Tsering was coming to understand it better than she spoke it, at least. "Blood ghosts slew all Qersnyk's Buqa's war-band. And the girl has proclaimed herself regent in the name of her unborn son."

Tsering found herself standing upright, pain forgotten, back half a step and almost breaking through the ward-circle with her foot before she remembered. "Can she do that?"

Jurchadai's frown deepened. "If she's strong enough. She can do anything. But she may have a hard time keeping Re Temur from crossing the steppe."

\* \* \*

The twins slept under the stars that night, in a roofless ruin in Qarash. Or—*slept* might be too kind a word, Saadet thought. Her brother Shahruz slept, or at least he kept his silence. She, nauseated with pregnancy and exhausted for a thousand other reasons too, contented herself by leaning back against the battered old saddle that had served as the throne of Qersnyk emperors for more than twice her lifetime and resting her neck and shoulders on leather that smelled of salt sweat, grassfires, and weapon oil.

But at least the stars she stared at lidlessly were Rahazeen stars.

It was a night without moon. The comforting blue-orange-white strobe of Al-Ghul showed above the western wall of the ruin, where it had just risen, and Saadet shifted her not-yet-completely awkward body so she could regard it at her ease. Around it, familiar constellations picked out the shape of sacred words across a cold and bottomless sky. Spells were spellings, and spellings spells. When she and her twin were little, before Shahruz's murder had driven them to share Saadet's sacred and inadequate female flesh, both Saadet and her twin had learned to read and name them all in the childhood devotions. When there were no books to pray with, the Scholar-God's benediction could be read across the vault of the heavens and the faithful so redeemed.

Saadet comforted herself for a while by finding the Virtues—*kindness, charity, compassion, fidelity, piety, discretion...* That was as many as had risen above the walls and the horizon. The Virtues made an interlocking ring around heaven at midnight at midwinter over the sacred city of Asmaracanda. Saadet wondered how many would be visible even under ideal conditions, so far east of this.

She tugged her wolf-furs, gift of her dead husband, up under her chin. She was glad to lie out under the night. Glad that the house they sheltered in temporarily, until the corpses could be carried out of the palace, had not yet been reroofed for winter.

She would have thought this mood—the pleasant ache, the longing, the welcome melancholy freedom—was Shahruz's, for he had always been the one to seek solitude and lonely places. But Shahruz, as she had noted, did not seem to be with her on this night.

Having found the Virtues, she looked for the Benedictions, but a hazy pall blurred the southern horizon. It was the Cold Fire, burning deep in the heart of the Steles of the Sky as if to blazon the return of Sepehr, from whom ai-Idoj took his title. Sepehr had been the founder of her sect: the Nameless Rahazeen. Saadet revered him in direct proportion to the rest of the world's loathing.

She herself had broken open the seal on the volcano's deep fires so the world might see a sign that the Joy-of-Ravens returned.

Footsteps brushed the dust in the hall outside. She let her head roll the other way against the saddle and watched a familiar shape frame itself in the door against the pale stone of the wall beyond. A

Sepehr paused there. Saadet listened to his quiet breathing.

~~She covered her face with her veil. She must go barefaced among the Qersnyk, as their Khatun. But in privacy she could make herself comfortable.~~

“Master,” she said, sitting up, drawing her knees into cobbler’s position before her. “You should be sleeping.”

“Not I alone,” he answered. “Are you well?”

She opened her mouth to answer and belched instead. Her palm pressed her veil to her burning face; in apology, she shielded her eyes with her other hand.

“Heartburn,” she said, apologetically. “The babe has his own ideas about what I should be eating and when.”

Al-Sepehr stiffened, and she wondered if she had shared too much of women’s mysteries. She was becoming a barbarian in truth as well as title. But then he stepped within the door and said, “We will find you some ginger in the morning. Your son is well?”

She shrugged. “I am no midwife. No mendicant scientist, no Hasitan. But nothing suggests to me otherwise. Like most sacred duties, pregnancy seems to me unpleasant and wearying.”

His pause was long. Would he rebuke her for irreverence? But whether he took pity on her widowhood, the blood of the day before, or her sex, he just dug into his pocket and came up with a little silk bag. “This is for you.”

She took it in her hands, something hard and warm from his body, irregular but as large as an egg. She picked the bag open and shook the contents out on her hand.

Half a geode, any glitters that might strike from the crystals within dulled because they lay under the pall of blood.

“It was Shahruz’s,” he said.

Saadet folded the geode between her palms and bowed over her hands. But al-Sepehr only stepped away again. He spoke over his shoulder as he went. “Sleep, Saadet. You are guarded by me, and by a dozen eager steppe riders. And you will need your strength in the morning.”

This soft rain would have hidden the sunrise, even if Samarkar had been able to see it for the mountains. Clouds wrapped their slopes, coursed through the ravine that channeled the steep river below. Samarkar lay awake in the gray dawning, head toward the door of the ruined building she and her companions had appropriated. She pillowed her head on her arm, watching the mist tumble like slow water over the stones and between the trees and buildings of the valley to whose slopes Reason clung. At least it was dry inside their improvised shelter, for Samarkar had worked a little magic to keep the mist without.

The horses—Bansh, her foal, and the shaman-rememberer's white-faced, mouse-colored dun—had made their way inside at some point and now stood at the back of the structure with their heads low, dozing and breathing and steaming. Temur too breathed, warm against Samarkar's back, his forehead pressed between her shoulder blades, a blanket drawn up to his shoulders against the welcome chill. He snored faintly, as did Brother Hsiung. The shaman-rememberer slept silently.

The sound of the rain had awakened Samarkar. It pattered and shivered on the stone roof and the pavement, a sharp and welcome sound after so long in the desert and so long sleeping under shelterless skies. Temur's home might be wide horizons, but Samarkar had grown up in strong dwellings mantled by mountains' wings. Reason also curled within the embrace of high peaks, though the Shattered Pillars were not so high as Samarkar's own Steles of the Sky. She supposed that was how such an alien, ancient ruin could in some ways feel like home.

Sunrise was now imminent: jungle birds and night creatures spent their energy on one last burst of noise and activity before falling silent all at once. They anticipated the killing suns of ancient Eren. With a wizard's curiosity, Samarkar wondered how long it would take them to learn that the new sun, the sun of the steppe, was a friendlier creature—one that might burn, if treated disrespectfully, but would not sear eyes and scald living flesh from bone. Of course, suns changed over the world time and time again—but those were the suns of men, not the savage light of elder races. Reason was home to tree ferns that withdrew into limy, calcified trunks each dawn; to vines that folded their leaves and blossoms away like the opposite of a Song queen's parasol; to creatures that aestivated, hid, or—like the half-entombed dragon tortoise they'd passed on the road—simply drew into their shells and waited for the fire to go.

How did something so adapted to a perilous light ever begin to change?

*As well ask how to govern without empires.*

She thought it had grown as bright beyond the door as it was likely to. Perhaps she should rise and fetch water, start tea, let the others sleep—but she lay there, smelling the half-salty, musty petrichor of water falling on parched earth; the warm herbal bitterness of horse manure; the acrid char of last night's cooling fire. Soon there would be no more quiet.

A shadow moved through the mist and rain beyond the empty doorway. Samarkar knew the silhouette of its step, the breadth of its shoulders, and she did not fear it. Fog broke around the figure, its tendrils reluctant to release their embrace, revealing the pale belly and black-striped, rust-colored shoulders of the tiger Hrahima. Her fur twisted in wet spikes through her heavy ruff, was slicked smooth along her lean forearms that Samarkar could see every vein, every bone, every tendon, every

ridge of her extraordinary musculature. Beads of water, dull in this light as pendant jewels, swung and slid among the gold rings in her lobes until the ears flicked, splashing the droplets free.

The Cho-tse paused inside the door, whiskers plump with satisfaction. She glanced around the room, huffed at all the sleeping men, and hooked the claws of her huge hand in a delicate, beckoning twist that could have seemed incongruous.

Though she was stiff from her hard sleeping place, Samarkar rose without a sound. She slipped from under the damp wool blanket, found her boots, and pulled her worn black wizard's frock-coat from its peg—a stick jammed between the unmortared stones of the wall. She only paused to tuck the bloused bottoms of her trousers into the top of the boots before stepping out into the rain after Hrahima.

The mares and the colt watched them go.

When they were far enough from the doorway for their voices not to carry, Samarkar said, "You've been exploring."

Hrahima scratched idly at the proud flesh of a fresh pink scar marring one forearm. She kept her claws sheathed. "And I have found something, Wizard Samarkar."

\* \* \*

Samarkar followed the tiger through the rain. Her footsteps were not so silent as Hrahima's: her boots splashed and creaked, and the wet six-petaled skirt of her coat slapped her wet thighs. Strands of hair escaped from her braid and plastered her cheeks. Every sound seemed to resonate, amplified in the wet air and the amphitheater of the valley's enfolding walls.

Morning had by now most definitively broken, though the light still groped through the fog in a directionless haze. Hrahima's path led them between still more eyeless structures, houses and shops and things more mysterious, vanishing shapes serried one beyond another in the mist. "This must have been a city of ... tens, hundreds of thousands," Samarkar whispered, overawed. Even she, once princess of Rasa and Tsarepheth.

"A city of many thousands," Hrahima confirmed.

"How did they feed them all, here in the mountains? Under killing suns? How did they travel? Move goods?"

One would have to shelter everything by day—even the draft animals. Samarkar fell silent as she pondered the logistics problem. *Or maybe they weren't killing suns, to the people of Erem.*

"If you can call them people," she muttered, watching Hrahima's ears flick before the Cho-tse decided to politely pretend that Samarkar had not spoken. But the more she thought about it, the more Samarkar thought the point had merit. Their language blistered human mouths. Their books blinded human eyes. Their very suns were poison—

If the people of Erem had not been people, exactly, but something older, something ... tougher. Crazier. Trickier. Or versed in arts no modern wizard knew—

That explained how a civilization could live under those skies and leave such relics.

But what could destroy a race with the power to walk beneath the light of the suns of Erem?

... Or were what she knew as the suns of Erem, in fact, the suns of Erem's conquerors? She imagined Tsarepheth under their actinic light, the triple shadows cast in blue and gray and orange, the earth burned sear on every side.

The chill Samarkar felt was no doubt just the rivulets of mist condensing in her braid, rolling down her back beneath the collar of her coat. Suddenly, she regretted not wearing her relief-carved jade wizard's collar, which was still tucked safely into her bag. It would have meant nothing in practical terms, but she could have touched it—she jerked her fingers away from the notch of her collarbone and been reassured.

*These people. Whoever they were. The Rahazeen we're fighting have access to their power.*

Stone branches of trees that would blossom again come nightfall arched over the path, looming over the fog and rain before vanishing into it again. They had no scent now. Samarkar found herself flinching from each shadow, each echo—dripping water, her own footsteps. She steeled herself—*I am the Wizard Samarkar!*—and walked on. She could trust Hrahima's senses. Blind in the fog, the tiger would be only little diminished. Her senses of hearing, of scent, so improved upon the human that Samarkar knew Cho-tse considered their monkey cousins all but deaf and anosmic.

The jungle had reclaimed this part of Reason as well, though not as comprehensively. The streets were tightly cobbled, and not much grew between them. Vines draped from the overhanging branches but Samarkar could make out the clear outlines of streets, of structures, of gaps in the masonry.

Of doorways, here and there.

The one Hrahima at last stopped before seemed darker than most of the others. She stepped aside with a beckoning gesture—but when Samarkar moved to take the lead, Hrahima stopped her with an outstretched hand. Samarkar's head barely reached the Cho-tse's mid-chest. It was a large hand.

Samarkar said, "I don't understand."

"Wizard," said the Cho-tse. "Is there magic here?"

Samarkar stroked her face in contemplation and found the skin clammy and damp. "Magic," she said. "It isn't ... one thing, Hrahima."

The tiger regarded her. Hrahima's eyes were like heat-crazed jewels, chips of green and turquoise and amber all interleaved at random, with darker lines between. They gathered what light there was and so seemed luminous on their own.

"What I do," Samarkar continued. "The science of a Wizard of Tsarepheth, it's not the same as your Immanent Sun, or even the science of a Wizard of Song or Aezin. It's definitely not akin to the artifices of Messaline. Or the Curses of Erem, via Danupati or otherwise. Not the same as the gifts of a ... of a shaman-rememberer or the intervention of a god. But they're all called magic.

"I cannot just ... look at a thing and say *this is magic* or *this isn't magic*, as if I were identifying a mushroom."

Hrahima's whiskers luffed. Her thick tail twitched—perhaps impatiently.

Samarkar ground to a halt. She looked down at the backs of her hands, raised to gesture emphatically, and hooked the right one through her belt beside the square-hilted utility dagger and Rasani carried there.

"Actually," she qualified, "mushrooms aren't that easy to identify either."

"If they were," Hrahima agreed, "no one would ever die of poisoning."

Samarkar didn't think she was talking about mushrooms, exactly.

Hrahima said, "It'd be a poor sort of magic that followed the same rules no matter what the sky grew under, don't you think?"

Samarkar picked the wet drape of her coat away from her thigh. As soon as she released it, it swung back and stuck again. She could channel a little of the process of fire into it, or air, and dry it out—but in this atmosphere it would be instantly wet again. A long straggle of the hair that had escaped her slept-on braid dripped now in front of her eyes. She scraped it away and instead it stuck to her hand.

"I think that would be a very exemplary sort of magic indeed. Friendly. Useful, belike."

Hrahima snorted, a sound like a sneezing cat writ large. "Will you trust me to step through the door?"

"When you put it like that ... without explanation?" It wasn't distrust. It was more ... curiosity. An ingrained distaste for surprises? A moment more, and she was angry that Hrahima might have risked herself with no one around to watch her back. "Have you been through it?"

Hrahima's tail flicked, just the tip. "Easier to show. I'll go first—"

"No." If Hrahima were to betray her ... the tiger would have just killed them all in their sleep, last night or a hundred nights previously. "I'll not play the churl with you, of all the Mother Dragon



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