

DREAM OF THE HUNTERS

by Ayaz Minhas



SERIES I : *the Knight of the Jinn*

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White Day

From Djinnipedia, the free encyclopedia

White Day is one name for a mythological wolf deity described in multiple North American, Meso American, and South Asian cultures.

In some cultures, White Day is said to have been the incarnation of a divine spirit, possessing supernatural abilities. In other cultures it is said to be a Jinn, a beast of Smokeless Flame. Its sole purpose is the protection of humanity. Professor of Anthropology John Navington described the wolf as “the ultimate warrior spirit, akin to Achilles or Gilgamesh, possessing qualities of virtue similar to King Arthur.”

In the fantasy novel the *Fate of the Hunters*, White Day was a leader of a group of anthropomorphic animals, all of whom possessed supernatural abilities and were dedicated to the protection of mankind. At the climax of the novel, White Day died defending a human village from the Acolytes.

THE COYOTE IN THE DESERT



ABOVE THE MOJAVE DESERT, the stars glittered like pieces of shattered crystal. They glowed unchallenged in the vast dome of night. Their light poured over the side of the cliffs, illuminating ancient rock and conjuring shadows in the creases of their faces. They watched over a land flat and immense, hammered and beaten by the ages, clothed in sand dunes. Beneath the barren land the bones of ancient creatures lay, covered by layers of sediment. The roots of mesquite trees and cactus crawled deep in this earth, seeking drops of water and mingling with worms and millipedes.

Late this night the coyote wandered. He was a beast with brown fur tinged red like the sunset, and ears that were long and slender. He ran across the desert, his body flexing like a whip as his limbs made flying strides. As he moved, the sand turned to

clouds, throwing dust on the barrel cacti. His eyes burned white in the dark.

The coyote's name was Red Shaam, and his ancestors were shaped from fire. He had been born and raised in the desert, brought up on the flesh of lizards and jackrabbits. His life had taken him to other strange corners of the continent. Once in his youth, he had seen the great Mississippi, and had been awed to see the endless stream of gushing freshwater. In his middle age, he had even travelled far to the cold Midwest, where he had seen steel barges cross the ice water vastness of Lake Superior. Now and again, he had gazed upon the Pacific, the edge of North America. Yet his travels today had brought him back to his home.

Shaam kept his snout to the ground. He was thirsty. The tarantulas were crawling tonight, and he hoped that he could utter a few syllables in their bizarre tongue to locate water. He had heard the screeching of bats, and once a mass of them had crossed the sky above him, but they paid him no heed as he called out to them. Shaam was not surprised, the desert was not a hospitable place, and its inhabitants had no reputation for altruism.

Some of his comrades had the ability to cut through the cacti and extract the juices within, like the humans could do, but such were not within his talents. He had once seen a pup in his pack get caught in the spines of a cholla cactus. The youth had been unable to recover from his wounds and was soon a feast for the scavengers. Shaam would always remember his fur, so lush and thick with youth, painted in crimson.

Though he longed for water, Shaam thanked the Spirit that he was travelling beneath the stars. When the sun would rise and

smear the sky with gold and red, the oppressive heat would return. Shaam was determined to reach his portal then, and cross between spaces. He smiled at this. Though humans could work their wonders with their hands, electricity, wire and steel, other sciences were known to those shaped from fire. Humans had not practiced those mystic arts in ages, and those who did in this era paid awful prices. There were shamans and sorcerers in every corner of the globe who claimed they had access to the Unseen, but most were charlatans. In all his travels in his long life, Shaam had never met a true human sorcerer. He had met hunters, oilmen, engineers, writers, poets, tourists, photographers, astronomers, and drug addicts, but never a man who could conjure lightning, speak to the trees and animals, or cross the astral gates.

And they think they know everything, Shaam thought. And they live in a universe held aloft by things they cannot see, and they know this. And they think they know everything.

Shaam banished this thought from his mind, and continued seeking the portal. He sniffed the air, and the data transmitted to his narrow snout told him that the gate was near. He slowed his pace. Often the gates were well marked, but out here, everything looked the same.

Shaam searched his memory. This was where his masters had told him a gate would be opened for him to cross, at this longitude and latitude. Yet he waited, but could not feel the trans-dimensional tendrils reach out from space and take him home.

“Brother,” Shaam heard someone say. The familiar sound of a viper’s rattle filled the air. The coyote turned, and his lips slid

across his teeth to reveal a snarl. Shaam's eyes narrowed as they locked with the lidless gaze of the rattler.

Shaam did not like snakes and despised rattlers. The serpent before him was armored in thick scales with a diamond pattern. His tongue, a worm that rapidly thrust in and out, was as black as pitch. Shaam briefly wondered how he had not sensed the snake.

“Brother,” Shaam heard again. “You are a creature of Smokeless Flame?”

“I am Jinn, serpent, descended from the Ifrit,” Shaam told him. *How did he surprise me?* Shaam narrowed his eyes at the rattler. “If you are an Acolyte, you will return to the Spirit tonight.”

“I am no Acolyte,” the snake responded. “Just a humble rattler. But I know some things. Your gate is closed.”

Shaam said nothing, and concentrated. The snake was right. The portal was closed. Though he was born of the desert, the coyote had no time to waste, and had to return to tell his master what he had discovered. Ignoring the rattler's hisses and rustling, Shaam sought the telepathic link that bound him to his comrades.

“You will find that your brothers cannot hear you,” the snake hissed. “The gates are closed, all around this desert. Your witches cannot reach you.” The rattler rustled his coils.

That's not possible....” What sorcery is this?”

“The same as yours,” the snake hissed. “My master wields its power.”

Shaam snarled again, and his red fur rippled. An ethereal glow filled his pupils, and light like the stars poured from them.

The snake paid these lanterns no mind. “You worry about Acolytes, brother? While there are no Acolytes here, there are skinwalkers.”

A shiver went down Shaam’s spine. He gazed upon the desert around them. A normal coyote would not be able to see what unfolded before him, but Red Shaam was a creature of Smokeless Flame.

Black shapes emerged from the ground. They were without physical substance, and moved like vapor. Shaam’s vision blurred as he tried to focus on one, they were everywhere, leaking from the sand around him like chimney smoke. Some took the shapes of rabbits, others of giant spiders. Others mimicked the shapes of the Bandar Log, the monkey people. All of them, though, had glowing green eyes, bright as neon. They crawled toward Shaam and the serpent, swallowing the sand beneath them and banishing the cactuses from sight.

Fear filled Shaam’s heart, and he looked around him, trying to count the eyes. They seemed numerous as the stars above.

“You cannot escape, Red Shaam.”

A terrible snarl filled Shaam’s throat, and the coyote’s limbs tensed like ripcords. If he was to die tonight, he would take this serpent and at least some of the demons with him. He growled and barked at the snake, and the shadows around him for a moment flickered away in retreat.

“I don’t know who you are,” Shaam said, his voice revealing no fear. “But you kill me and the Janissaries will come, and Vaylan will slay you. Then they will hunt Azazel down to the ends of the earth.”

Snakes are not capable of smiling, but it seemed as if this one did. “Brother, you mistake me. As I said, I am no Acolyte of Azazel, nor am I trying to kill you. My master merely wishes to have a conversation with you.”

The black shapes around them vanished and a thousand green eyes disappeared from sight. The snake sidewinded away from Shaam, “Come with me and speak to my master. He has some water. You might survive this. Or spend your time with the skinwalkers.”

Shaam looked to his left and right. The creatures were gone, and the desert stared back at him. He felt his thirst cry out to him.

“The choice is yours, Red Shaam.”

Shaam turned his head and exposed his throat. It was a sign of surrender. Reluctantly, the coyote followed the snake, and both went into the darkness.

They travelled for hours. Shaam kept his ears alert for other species, but the desert was not crowded tonight. It wouldn’t have surprised the coyote if other living things were giving him and the rattler a wide berth. He wracked his mind on how the serpent had managed to summon so many skinwalkers. Though the minor imps thrived in every desert on earth, Shaam had never heard of them massing in such a manner.

I must tell the others, he thought. He wondered if he could kill the snake and attempt to escape, but if the skinwalkers truly were under the rattler’s thrall, he doubted he could survive long. Not against so many. Shaam was a spirit guide and a traveler, but he lacked the martial skills of many of his friends. Yet, the coyote

recalled that the sun would be up soon. He had fought skinwalkers before, and he knew that they would lose their power come morning. He only had to hold out until then, and then he could kill the snake and find his way back to his comrades. If not, he could seek out old companions in the desert, other coyotes he had known, and perhaps warn them of the danger.

After many leagues, Shaam caught sight of a campfire burning in the distance. He could smell burning meat, and the scent of a man. *He's taking me to a human?* Shaam thought, mystified.

Sure enough, the two animals approached the campsite. The rattler had traced a pattern in the sand across the desert. Shaam glanced at the circular trail and his own paw prints before looking at the surroundings. A cook fire burned, encircled by stones. Shaam smelt burnt meat and foodstuff he recognized as the type of feed humans contain in cans. Sitting near the aura of the firelight was a ragged tent. Shaam could hear the breath of a human from its interior.

The serpent hissed, “Enter, Red Shaam.”

Shaam thought of the countless black skinwalkers that had reared up from the ground. He had no choice. The coyote padded forward into the tent, his heart pounding.

“Greetings, coyote,” came the raspy voice.

Shaam’s red furred ears perked. In all his years, he had never encountered this before. The human was speaking the common word of the beasts. *This isn’t possible.*

“I sense your fear, coyote,” the human said.

Shaam stared dumbly upon the human, who was wrapped in blue blankets. His face was concealed. A rifle sat at his side,

along with a half-drained glass bottle that contained a foul-smelling spirit.

“Speak, coyote. You’re a Jinn, aren’t you? You must be smarter than the snake then. Almost as smart as a human being.”

Shaam had seen and done strange things in our world, but he had never tried speaking to a human. He opened his jaws, and was silent for a moment, before he finally said, “I am shaped by fire. You are shaped...”

“By clay, yep,” the human said. “I’ve heard that one before.”

“How do you know our language?” Shaam demanded. “How is this possible?”

“I listen, coyote,” the human responded. “And I have seen the Unseen.”

A sick feeling filled Shaam. For a human being to command magic and wield the power of the Jinn, they had to perform grave sacrifices or call on a familiar. Though he was afraid, the coyote snarled and spat, foam flecking from his lips. He bared his teeth, white and curved like flint daggers. Shaam heard the human’s breath quicken, and his paws sensed that he was shifting. The man was afraid. *Good....*

“I’ve never killed a Janissary before,” the human said. “So I’m a bit nervous.”

What the hell is happening? The coyote barked once, and then yelled, “How is this possible? How do you know...?”

“Know, coyote? I know many things. And there are others like me. Human beings who seek the power of the Jinn and can wield it.”

“This power is not meant for man,” Shaam said. He felt a shiver go down his spine, and he rapidly turned around to face the opening of the tent. He glimpsed the firelight, and a thousand glowing green eyes.

“Mankind has no need for magic,” Shaam said again, turning back to face the man. “The Janissaries.... we guard you...watch you...”

“And who watches you?” the human said. “Men have conquered the earth and will conquer space. We have no use for antiquities. No demons hunt us in the night while we crowd around fires.” He paused. “Well, perhaps you folks have some use...”

Shaam suddenly felt cold, and more shivers went through him. It was a bone-deep iciness that poured into him, cutting beneath his fur and chilling the blood in his veins. Before now, the worse cold Shaam had felt was when he had ventured north and seen the Great Lakes. Yet this cold was worse; it was as if terrible northwestern gales were screaming inside him. Shaam barked again, then attempted to turn, to run off into the desert and escape this madness, so he could warn the others. But the blood had left his limbs. Ice had crawled up his legs, coating his red-tinged fur with twinkling frost.

Shaam whined, and turned to try to open his jaws, and gnaw off one of his frozen limb. But it was no use, the ice was crawling up his neck and seeping through his fur. Snow had dripped on to his snout.

“No....” Shaam said softly. The coyote tried again to escape, but the ice was everywhere, everything. And the cold, the

nightmarish cold that slowed the desert blood inside him, had taken him into its jaws.

“No?” the human said. He threw off the blanket, and dropped his hood. “And I thought you were made of fire?” Black shapes filled the tent, veiling the human in a ghastly shroud. As the cold and ice consumed Red Shaam, the last thing he saw a thousand eyes, green and harrowing.

THE CATS IN THE EAST BAY



IT WAS ON THOSE CHILLY BERKELEY NIGHTS the cat would come out to play. He would leap and bound through the fire escape of his house, propel himself toward the deck facing the international student building, and soar through the air in a brilliant arc to the top of the roof and bask in the moonlight. On those nights he would look out over the immense California panorama before him and savor in the sights, smells, and sounds. His jade eyes would look out over Bancroft Street, upon the steep hill.

In the distance he could see the water of the Pacific and the glimmering city lights of San Francisco. His ears would be filled with the caterwauling of the local vagabonds; the students, the artists, the homeless, the academics, the other stray cats, the dogs,

the rats, and the screeching bats. The air would be filled with the scents that drifted from the ocean, mingled with burnt cannabis and northern California flowers.

Sometimes, those traversing his street late at night could see him watching. He caught the eye easily, his fur, bright red, yellow and orange, glossy and shining from the tip of his nose to his lithe forelegs, looked like flame. His athletic movements at night on the rooftop of the place made him appear as a flickering, streaming light, emerging and vanishing in the dark.

As the night got late and the cat got bored he would hop from the rooftop and effortlessly slink inside the house through an open window, which his human kept ajar for cigarette smoking. There in the dusty interior of the place he would find the odd mouse to snack on or another human to play with.

The house was designed to emulate a sailing ship. The wood inside was deep and dark and nautical-themed paintings plastered the wall. The corridors were topped with low ceilings and lead to wide spiraling staircases. The stairs were lined with carved banisters that the cat loved to balance on.

The rooms were filled with students. The cat rarely ventured inside these cramped dens, the young humans that inhabited them often played strange music and their movements would become staggered after they imbibed their beverages, which reeked with a chemical scent that made his nostrils burn.

Occasionally the cat would explore the largest room, the library. In this place, an ancient piano sat next to a wide bookshelf, filled with old textbooks, untouched religious manuscripts, and old tomes about seafaring.

Sometimes during the day the cat would fall asleep on the bright red beanbag in his human's quarters, and occasionally he would rest in the beams of light that poured through the stained glass windows that framed the front door. But at night the cat nor wanted nor felt the need to rest. Often at night the young inhabitants of the house would be up late, laughing, chatting, and drinking. On those occasions, they were too busy to bother playing with him, so the cat would seek the darker crevices of his home. In the basement he would practice his pounces between the pool table and the barstools and maybe slay and eat an invading rat. When he became uninterested in this, he would drape himself over a leather armchair and wait for a human seeking solitude to come down, light a cigarette, and run hands through his thick shining fur.

When the cat got bored of this, he would seek out his young human on the eastern side of the house, elevated in a manner that it looked out over all of Berkeley. If the human was too tired to play, the cat would find warmth beside him and his thick blankets, and watch the first glints of sunrise before settling to sleep.

The cat was called Raska by his human. It was a different name from his original name, which he was not fond of using. Raska's dreams were troubled lately, even on those nights that he slept aside his human and his yellow-haired companion. He dreamt of a long endless wasteland that baked in the sun, a deep ocean where he would flounder, utterly terrified, before vanishing into darkness, and a massive wolf with fur of a blinding white. And he would dream of a fire, a flame so bright and hot even in his dreams

he could feel the heat on his fur. And on those nights, he would leave his human's side and return to the rooftop, puzzled.

Now Raska was born a feral cat and carried little fear in his heart. Before he had been adopted by his human he had confronted starvation, tangled with other strays and bartered for scraps with villainous carrion birds. In the streets of Berkeley the other animals knew of him as the strongest and swiftest cat in all of the East Bay. But the strangeness of his dreams filled the young cat with a terrible apprehension that made him clench his claws and grind his fangs.

“Maybe I’m going soft....” He thought. For too long he had lived with the humans and he longed for adventure. He knew that his human’s time in the place was fleeting, and perhaps it was time for Raska to move on.

So it was on one summer night Raska emerged from the warmth of his human’s bed, and went to lie in the moonlight again, that the course of his days would finally shift.

“Not resting, not hunting, and there’s no sun out. What are you doing lying around here?”

Raska turned. Few animals in the world could startle him, but few were Zann the fox. The gray fox lay next to Raska, lapping up liquid from a broken beer bottle the human students had left on the roof. Raska smiled at the fox. He was older than Raska. His fur was red and gray, and his eyes deep blue. The fox was originally from Canada, or so he told Raska. When he was young, older cats had always told Raska never to trust foxes, because the legend went they could never decide between being dogs or cats.

Yet Zann and Raska had become close friends. Raska had met Zann in the Mission District of San Francisco. They had shared a rat between them, and spent the day playing with humans in Dolores Park. Raska had been stunned at the gray fox's ability to climb trees, and the two animals had challenged each other to see who was the better climber for the following days after their first encounter. Since then, the fox and cat had remained friends.

"You know what it is?" Raska told the fox. "I'm bored."

"Bored!" the fox laughed. "So am I, actually. Summer's ending, friend."

"It never changes around here," Raska told him. "And it gets boring. What are you doing up?"

"I was hunting. You live with humans, so you don't need to worry about that. I'm glad I caught you over here, I thought you'd be sleeping all day."

Raska had to admit to himself that the stereotype was true. He sighed, and he told the fox, "You know, cycles ago, before I came up here, I used to travel all around California. Playing with the dogs on the beach, letting the human girls in San Diego pet me, fighting with those LA strays. Sure, there were times I was starving, times I was ill, but when I was having fun, I really had fun. Now, I'm here, and everything's okay, but nothing's new anymore."

"You've been eating out of a bowl for too long."

"Yeah, maybe that's what it is," Raska thought, and he began licking his paw. *Was there something left in that bowl?* he considered.

“You know, when you moved here you brought a lot of excitement to the place.”

“Well...

“You fought a mountain lion.”

“Yeah, I don’t know how I did that. I guess I was just faster than him. It was a pretty small mountain lion.”

“You’re so modest.”

Raska smiled.

“I have an idea,” the fox offered. “Let’s go east.”

“East?” the cat narrowed his eyes. “Why would I want to go there?”

“Well, you’ve never left the West Coast,” the fox observed. “There’s much to see in North America, much to see in the world. We could make it an adventure.”

“What makes you think I’d want to travel with you?” Raska laughed, he extended his claws and rapped the fox’s ear playfully.

The fox chuckled, and lightly nipped the cat’s ear. “Personally, I’ve heard there are many beautiful foxes on the East Coast, and I’d like to meet them.” The fox flapped his tail. “Besides, California’s burnt out. You don’t know this, but for the rest of us still living feral, there isn’t a lot of water left. It’s a hard life here. If I’m going to live a hard life, I want to have an adventure.”

Raska considered this. “Yeah, but if I left,” the cat turned to look back at the window, where he could hear his human sleeping. “Who’d look after him?”

The fox laughed. “You have become a housecat.”

Raska swiped a paw at the fox again. “I’m kidding of course. He can take care of himself. Since I’ve been here he’s always let me come and go as I please. Also, I think he’s moving on a bit too.”

“Of course he is. I believe in his years, he is your age. He’s probably feeling what you’re feeling.”

“Yeah,” Raska agreed.

“We should see New York,” the fox said. “I’ve heard it’s amazing. Very different from anything you’ve ever seen.”

“I’ve seen LA.”

“It’s not like Los Angeles,” the fox remarked, but said nothing else.

Raska cocked his head to one side. “Well, in that case, maybe we should go. Guess if I don’t travel now, I never will.”

“Hell yeah,” Zann said. “And don’t worry about your human, he’ll miss you, but it won’t trouble him. After all, he can take care of himself.”

“Yeah, I know.” Raska said.

“Well, better be off, see you tomorrow, cat,” Zann said.

“See you.”

The gray fox walked across the roof, his bushy tail bobbing behind him, before effortlessly scaling the side of the house and vanishing in the dark. After he disappeared, the young cat turned, and strode back to the windowsill to return to his human. Zann was right. There was so much of the world to see. If he did not start exploring now, his youth would vanish quickly, and sure enough, he wouldn’t have the strength or speed to cross the desert

and the river and see the great human cities. *Why stop there?* Raska thought. *I could go anywhere.*

But there was one thing he was certain of that he did not disclose to his friend. His human would not be without him. Raska was talented and his speed, strength and cunning were among his greatest skills. But he remained artful at abilities unknown to most in the animal kingdom. For Raska had the ability to enter his human's dreams at night. When he was sleeping, often, he hunted in a vast forest bordered by a rolling stream. When he crossed the stream, he found himself in his human's dreams.

There, he observed what he thought must be the dreams of any carefree young human. The dreams were filled with color and light, beautiful girls, flowing water and endless green fields. Occasionally, however, Raska caught glimpses of dark forces. Dogs with red eyes and foam flecking from their jaws, animated corpses, towers of books and papers marked with crimson ink, and seething masses of coiling snakes. When Raska encountered these apparitions, he could feel his human's fear. Then, of course, he would charge at the phantasms, roaring, hissing, and slashing with his claws. When he did, the realm of his human's sleep would become filled with cosmic light and the monsters disappeared. It brought the cat no greater pleasure to then watch his friend return to his pleasant dreams, before he returned to his own in the forest.

So yes, Raska knew that if he left Berkeley, he might not see his friend again. But he knew that whenever he entered the realm of sleep he could always return, and stand guard against anything.

Not far from Raska, in the depths of a redwood forest stood another young cat. He was colored silver from his nose to the tip of his tail. His coat shined beneath the slivers of moonlight that cascaded from the treetops, and his eyes were blue like crystal. He stood on a wide trunk, the petrified foundation of a centuries-year old entity that had watched over the woods long ago.

He could feel the power of the woods pulse through this place. Once, the cliffs had swooned and raved, bidden to movement by colliding tectonic plates. The earthquakes had shaped the gradient of the land and allowed water to gush between the new mountains, giving birth to the ecosystem around him. The resplendent moon above filled his pounding heart with anticipation as he thought about what was to come.

Tonight, Sedkazan Farishta Swiftasdeath would learn if he passed his examination. If he would be named a captain of the Janissaries.

The test had been difficult. The physical trials included proving himself in ritual combat against his comrades, who included some of the mightiest predators that walked the earth. Then, he would have to prove he could face demons on the field, and slay them when it was required. This, of course, was merely the physical portion of the exam. Among other things, the mental requirements demanded meditation beneath an olive grove for days without food or sleep, a ritual once performed by human shamans with their animal familiars. Then he had to show mastery of the mystic arts. The captains had to demonstrate that they were adept at the art of magic in and outside of combat. Yet, the hardest part of the test, of course, dealt with the protection of mankind.

With violence across Asia and Europe unfolding, Sedkazan had a variety of options to prove himself. He had guided a band of travelling humans to water in the midst of a scorching drought, and protected a human family from a gang of wraiths and phantoms that had haunted their home.

So Sedkazan had gone through these trials and in order to prove himself. He knew he was a competitive candidate. It was he who was hand selected by White Day, the legendary arctic wolf from the Yukon.

Sedkazan smiled. In his darkest days, when he was facing starvation or cut in a hundred places he would always remember that White Day, who had never taken successors and mentored no one, chose him, so long ago. White Day, the one who watched over him when he was half-drowned from a fall in Mississippi river. White Day, who reminded him of the balance of the earth's forces and his own predatory nature when once he saw a flock of gulls consume thousands of turtle hatchlings before they could touch the water. White Day, who had stood at his back as they faced off against an army of ghouls in the Gobi Desert— the stuff of nightmares. White Day, who promised, should Sedkazan pass, to defend the one thing that Sedkazan loved.

Sedkazan's thoughts were immediately interrupted by movement in the foliage. Out of instinct, he flattened himself against the trunk of the tree. His ears went back against his head and his tail waved back and forth. Sedkazan, as he was taught, expunged all distracting thoughts from his mind and focused on his senses. He could feel the vibrations beneath the wood under his paws and smell the scents of the forest. He could hear the life

forms wrapped up in the wild night and zone in drone-like on every note in their enigmatic symphony.

But though his talents were impressive, he did not see her approach. He heard the rush of air after it was too late to react, and before his eyes, the horned owl appeared before him. Her wingspan was daunting, over twice the size of the length of Sedkazan's body, unusual for the species. Her golden eyes blazed like a sunrise, and her horns looked like they could pluck the moon from the sky. Sedkazan's stomach turned as the head of the great bird rotated while her eyes remained locked with his. *Damn, no matter how many times I see that...and everything else I see...it's still weird,* the silver cat thought.

“Sedkazan Farishta Swiftasdeath,” the owl announced.

“Yep? Sedkazan replied. *Yep....Really?* Sedkazan cursed himself. There was a sense of formalism that this meeting required and his mind went blank.

“Yes, it is I,” he corrected himself. *That must have sounded right.*

“It is the opinion of our body...” the owl began. Each of her words was spoken slowly.

Sedkazan’s heart pounded faster than it had ever before, and the insides of his stomach turned and twisted.

“That you shall be granted access to the Unseen.”

There was a pause. Sedkazan stood still. Every fiber of his being wanted him to leap and shout with joy and scream up into night. Everything he had worked for, everything, had come into fruition. But he remained still, and bowed his head.

“Thank you,” he said. Closing his eyes, he said solemnly, “Give my appreciation to the Lord Executor.”

“I’ll let him know.” The owl turned, flapped her wings once, and propelled herself upwards. As her glowing eyes burned in the dark like phosphorous, she called out, “You have my congratulations. Drink, hunt, and celebrate, Farishta Swiftasdeath. You have been granted the most distinguished of honors.”

The owl disappeared into the night, letting out a single echoing call.

Sedkazan sat on the trunk of the tree in silence for a few moments, waiting till the owl was gone from him. Then he allowed a laugh to escape from his lips. He preened himself with satisfaction. He had not yet grasped the entirety of his accomplishment. But he knew now was the time to celebrate. The moonlight glowed as the silver cat released shouts of joy and relief, that flew across over the redwood forest and etched themselves in eternity.

Series I

The Knight of the Jinn

“The Jinn are of three types: a type that has wings, and they fly through the air; a type that looks like snakes and dogs; and a type that stops for a rest then resumes its journey.” - Abu Tha’labah Al Khushani

“Jinn can come in the form of black dogs. Similarly, they can come in the form of black cats.”
-Majmu ul Fatawa

“And He created man from clay like pottery. And He created the Jinn from a Smokeless Flame of fire”
-Quran 55:14-15



VAYLAN



IN A HIDDEN CORNER OF THE NEW WORLD was the richest and deepest jungle. Untouched by humanity, the air was filled with heat and moisture. The sun gleamed high above the canopy, pouring life into the inhabitants beneath it. Coiling vines adorned massive trees and macarangas with immense leaves burst from the undergrowth, seeking the light to fuel their growth.

Beneath the trees and plants was world a filled with shadow. Near the depths of the jungle fungi emerged from the forest floor. What would begin as beads would feast on the decay of the jungle and blossom into wide capped mushrooms sporting thick weblike filaments. Though they were agents of deterioration,

they served an elegant purpose, recycling minerals critical to the life of the trees.

Birds of paradise flexed their bizarre wings to tempt their mates and seek out food among the legions of insects. Ants toiled endlessly in the thicket, weary of the birds, pitcher plants and toxic fungi. Spiders navigated their gossamer structures and waited for their meals. Sloths meditated, and snakes and lizards exchanged knowledge with the birds.

Near the time of the sunset mists would fill the thicket. Bats swept through the sky, chattering about old prophecies, and wide-eyed colugos effortlessly glided between the treetops to feast on the leaves. Ocelots materialized from the dark before their bigger brothers came out to play.

In these deep thickets the thousand-year-old cycles of birth and death continued, but there were some who resisted the pull of time.

This was the Jungle of Draekar, the deepest wood since the birth of mammals, the place where the river Styx flowed and the greatest of Jinn made their home.

The jaguar wandered through the trees. In the dark of the forest his eyes shined with haunting luminescence, and the circles on his coat moved like a magnified bacterial mass. He glided through the darkness, his massive paws marking the black mud of the rainforest floor. All the beasts, birds, and even some of the plants new him as Vaylan, the Lord Protector of humanity and Executor of the Spirit's Flame, honored since the days of the Maya.

Vaylan was an ageless beast of the rainforest. His eyes were as sharp and keen as the time when Olmec Shamans had made

sacrifices in his name, before the arrival of the Spaniards and their conquistadors. His claws were as iron and his jaws as relentless as they were when he was young, when his lust was deep and passionate, when he would wander beneath the moonlight looking for mates and crocodiles to kill. His fur gleamed of molten bronze, lightning up the spots and circles on his coat like the edge of an eclipse.

A tapir scuttled in the distance, sniffing the earth with its snout for growth to eat. Looking between the trees, the jaguar released his claws and pounced. The leaves and earth scattered beneath his feet as he flew through the air.

The tapir felt a brief pain, and then Vaylan's jaws did their work. As life left the tapir, birds fluttered in the understory, startled by the sudden death. Blood spilled into the earth as the great cat ripped flesh from the carcass. As he ate, an owl descended from the treetops.

“Speak, captain,” Vaylan said.

“Farishta Swiftasdeath has imprisoned the great marid of Damascus,” she told him.

“Good,” the jaguar said. He closed his jaws and cracked the bone of the Tapir’s ribcage, and ripped out another string of flesh.

“The others are comparing him to White Day,” the owl said.

“I hear they also compare Angelo Northstar to White Day. It means nothing. Sedkazan is a talented fighter, talented at magic, the others loves him and he is a myth to many of his own species,” the jaguar said. “But none of that makes him like White Day. But

we shall see.” The jaguar did not want to dwell on this subject. Sedkazan was fierce, intelligent, and highly talented, no doubt, one of the greatest warriors alive. But he was also narcissistic, temperamental, and most problematically, young. Vaylan did not view any of these talents as valuable in a leader. But his brothers and sisters had insisted that Farishta Swiftasdeath be raised to captaincy two cycles ago, and after much hesitation, he had finally given his consent.

“What other news do you have for me?” Vaylan asked, wanting to banish the subject from his mind.

“We still have not found Red Shaam,” the owl said somberly.

The jaguar felt a touch of sadness. Red Shaam was one of his oldest friends. He had been the first beast from North America the jaguar had ever met in their younger days. When they had fought the Dragon, Red Shaam and he had howled and roared and battled alongside one another. Red Shaam had been one of the few Janissaries to look the great serpent in the eye, and survive an onslaught of hellish flame.

“I am sorry to hear that,” Vaylan sighed. “But he knew the risks. Is that all?”

“No,” the owl responded. “I have become aware of another candidate for our brotherhood. As the code requires, I am bringing it to your attention.”

“Thank you,” the jaguar rumbled. “See how he grows, and perhaps one day we will bring him into our order.” Vaylan prowled over to a wide leaf that contained a small pool of rainwater. He lapped up the water, paused, and said, “I wonder if there is any

need to bring in new Janissaries. The humans have survived the wild wood and the dark, and are flourishing.” A ghost of a smile appeared on the jaguar’s lips. “There are too many of them, and perhaps too many of us.”

“Perhaps,” the owl said. “But the Acolytes still trouble the earth.”

“Yes, they do,” Vaylan agreed. “But I have drafted many little animals into our order. Even if Red Shaam does not return, there are other great Janissaries still fighting. I think our needs have been met.”

“This creature has excellent talents,” the owl told him.

“They all do,” the jaguar said. This conversation had gone on too long. With his meal finished, he had other matters to attend to. If Red Shaam was truly gone, the data from the Creosote was also beyond his reach. Vaylan saw the owl’s head rotate to one side. “There is something that you are not telling me?”

“A few things,” the owl admitted.

“Speak your mind.”

The owl opened his wings. “We have talked about your...suspicions. If what you suspect is true, it may be wise to have an ally you can trust. An ally raised outside our order.”

The jaguar blinked, “That is true. But by the time this one is grown what I fear may have already come to pass.”

“That is the other thing,” the owl said. “This creature is no child. He is Ronin. A wandering Jinn.”

“Ronin?” Vaylan said. “It is out of the ordinary to suggest Ronin join our brotherhood.”

“I agree, my lord. But this creature is unique. He has lived with humans, and with feral cats. He has befriended foxes, birds, lizards, dogs, and even rodents. He has known fear, and has known hunger. He has gazed in human telescopes, slept in human spaces, fed orphaned pups, and nurtured dying horses. He has travelled across rivers and human highways. He has made prayers to feline gods, but has learned the myths of other species too. He has even battled with other Jinn.”

“Sedkazan, Northstar, many of our brothers were groomed for our fraternity since birth. Ares Andromeda Starhazzard is Ronin, no doubt. But he was born to protect humanity. If the calamity you suspect is coming, you want him at your side.”

The jaguar thought on this. He ripped another chunk of flesh from his kill, chewed, and swallowed.

“Watch him, then,” the jaguar concluded. “If you believe there is worthiness in him, have Zenith bring him to me.” The jaguar locked eyes with the owl. “That is all.”

The owl flapped its wings and took flight, expertly navigating through the canopy as she sought out the sky. Vaylan knew her species was not inherently talented at flying through a jungle such as this, but this was Draekar and Draekar required that the most talented beasts adapt to their surroundings.

Finishing the last scraps of his meal, the jaguar turned and leaped back into the dark wood, his spots melting into the wild night.

SEDKAZAN



IN THE LEVANT SEDKAZAN WANDERED among the sands. He was big, lithe, and gray. His fur shined with a metallic hue, and some of it stood upright like shards. When he sped across the wasteland, however, leaping across the sidewinding serpents, all that could be seen of him was a flash of silver. These days, many of the beasts between India and the Maghreb knew of him. The jackals hated him for his arrogance, bigger cats wanted to be him, the falcons and raptors called him cousin, and some feminine creatures wished he could reincarnate as their species so he could bear their young.

“In the next lifetime, maybe,” he would say.

“What type of cat are you?” many would ask. He was too small to be an African wildcat, too big to be a domesticated cat, yet

his broad shoulders and the arc of his spine suggested were reminiscent of the larger members of the genus.

“A cat that is Jinn,” he would respond proudly. With that he would blink his eyes, blue as sky, and disappear with a flash.

On that day, the silver cat was pleased with himself. Recently, he had done battle with the great marid of Damascus, an ancient spirit that had decided to make war on humans. Sedkazan had faced the creature, and using his magic, had defeated it after a long battle. The silver cat loved hunting for victory, and since becoming a captain of the Janissaries, his reputation for bringing demons to their end with his legendary powers had expanded.

So Sedkazan had taken some time to enjoy himself, finding peace in the day running and leaping over the vastness of the dunes and drinking water from a nearby oasis. Sedkazan thought about some days in the past when he wandered the White Desert of Egypt, when he gazed upon the marble rocks and watched as the sandstorms whittled them away into the surrounding expanse.

The desert's always changing, he had thought to himself. The silver cat briefly reflected on his recent battle. He knew that though the marid had been accused of attacking the humans in Damascus, not far from that city the humans had been fighting themselves.

“Wonder what the point is, sometimes...” he thought aloud.

The cat sniffed, and in the fluid of his vision he thought he saw some movement. Not far from his position, a reptile moved, breaking the golden surface of the sand as it went. Sedkazan’s eyes narrowed, and he extended his claws and went to his feet, his warrior instinct priming him for an adversary. The reptile was

running toward him, coming into focus as it escaped the distant desert haze.

Sedkazan had seen small lizards run in the desert before, and he knew they could move fast. This creature was much larger, however. As the lizard came closer to him, Sedkazan examined her. She was a Caspian monitor, almost the size of Sedkazan, and she moved too swiftly for a normal member of her species. Long black stripes ran through her scales.

The silver cat relaxed. When he caught her scent, he realized she was a messenger.

“Sedkazan Farishta Swiftasdeath,” the reptile said as she finally reached him, the dust around her settling as her limbs came to a halt.

“Yeah,” Sedkazan said. Though he knew she was a Janissary, he did not know her name.

“You did not respond our messages of the mind,” she said.

Damn reptiles. Always so blunt, he thought to himself. “Yes, that’s because I was ignoring them.”

The lizard blinked, and her long tongue flicked out to taste air. “You must follow the astral gates, and return to Draeker at once.”

“Oh yeah,” the cat said, yawning. “Why is that?”

“They have chosen the newest Janissary.”

KJAREZ



KJAREZ TERAXIS NIGHTBRAKER, THE PERSIAN CAT relaxed on a rooftop balcony as a young boy ran his fingers through her glossy black and white fur. She breathed in the scents of Tehran, and her ears perked up as the *Adhan* resonated through the city. The sun was dipping into the horizon, so this was the time for prayer. The boy ran his hand across her fur once more, then turned to perform his ablutions.

Later, at night, he would go into the basement of his family's home with his friends. They would take up strange- shaped instruments and make terrible but wondrous noises that would echo through the house, accentuated by guttural shouts and deep

singsong intonations. Kjarez would watch and listen with enjoyment, though she admitted some of the songs were too discordant for her tastes. But she loved her human friends. She loved their long hair, an affront to the local clerics, their youthful compassion, and their kindness. Kjarez knew enough about humans to know what some were capable of becoming, so she appreciated them.

Now Kjarez had her own music too, and she was a listener, a conductor, and a performer. When Kjarez closed her eyes and let her mind wander she could cross the rift between this world and others and glimpse the pathways that linked them. She could sense the other realms, some places where nothing existed in the universe but boundless energy, others whose frontiers only contained a space the size of her eyes, others filled with mist and water, and others filled with fire. She could feel the terrible rumble of dark matter as it swallowed stars that would make the sun cower, and sense the haunting moan of the formation of wormholes.

Lesser creatures would have been driven mad by this gift, but Kjarez was proud of her heritage and proud of her duty as one of the few Sorceresses of the Janissaries, a handmaiden to the astral gates. Indeed, her awareness of these events was akin to her observation of the night sky; she could observe a sliver of infinity but could not plunge herself in its depths, beyond one or two minor manipulations: The Persian cat could open doors between this dimension and one other smaller planes, allowing instantaneous transport from one corner of the earth to the next. She could connect the thoughts of others, if they chose, through a

small universe created by human shamans millennia ago when they worshipped the Jinn.

So this was her music. Frequently, she wrote the notes of her compositions herself and let others command them, as she was unwilling and unable to be privy to all correspondences across the world. Yet when they were aimed at her, and when they carried such tones that shook the walls that carried them, she took them seriously.

<Sorceress....> came the voice.

“Seredes, how are you,” she said, smiling to herself.

<How are the gates?>

“The gates are fine,” she responded. “I see Sedkazan and some of the others have been jumping back to Draekar.”

<Then you know there is important business to be discussed?>

“Sure,” she yawned.

<My lady, the Lord Protector requests your presence.>

“I serve at the Lord Protector’s command,” Kjarez said, wondering what was requested of her. *<The Lord Protector has chosen the newest Janissary, and he respectfully requests your presence.>*

She licked her paws.

<This won’t take long. You should be back by tomorrow.>

“Very well,” she said, stretching out her paws. She closed her eyes.

A watcher from the streets might have seen a glint of bright blue light and a puff of mist. Then the cat was gone.

From the Lady Snow Leopard's lessons to Kjarez Nightbraker: Man and Jinn

In our world, the Spirit of Life, the creator of worlds, formed some creatures from the clay of the earth. Others, he fashioned from Smokeless Flame.

For example, mankind and his cousin the Bandar Log, the monkey people, are such creatures made from clay. Most of the mammals and reptiles are made from clay. Most of the other beasts that traverse the air and water are made from clay. The trees and grass and flowers are made from clay.

The Jinn are made from fire. We are creatures of Smokeless Flame.

ZENITH



IN THE EASTERN PART OF NORTH AMERICA a storm had arrived. Foam-capped waves towered from the sea, rising and crashing under bright lightning. Howling wind filled the October air, and the bruised heavens rained fury down on the land and ocean.

Yet one soul did not fear the turmoil. He knew of its causes and knew it was not merely a symptom of the natural world. Standing on a jagged rock that stood high from the ocean was a black cat. Long pointed ears crowned his dark face, looming over a pair of shining red eyes.

The cat was waiting for his charge. The storm was something he predicted would obstruct him, and though the rain swept across his fur, the sum of his senses was focused on his prey, an abandoned ship, forgotten by the watchman on the mainland. The animal knew that this was the ship he was waiting for. He knew that its human captain had been taken by the waves and water, and its lone survivor faced a dire threat from the sky.

The cat closed his eyes. An ancient power that surged inside him told him that two agents soared among the squall's brutal winds and jarring rainfall, and they sought what they believed was theirs with a deep devotion.

Strong winds swirled about the cat, and he closed his eyes. Flattening his haunches and whipping his tail back the black cat pounced. Spirals of rain went streaming about the cat's shadowy physique as he soared into the air. Yet the cat did not fall into the ocean, as the winds carried him high into the tormented darkness.

As he went flying high above the maelstrom, Zenith Farishta, the Kin of Witches, opened his eyes. It was time.

RASKA



ON THE BOAT SHIVERING IN THE CABIN was a cat with fur the color of fire. As the thunder cracked around him and the boat jolted back and forth, Raska tried to balance himself. Fear coursed through the young cat, and he could not help his thoughts from approaching what was once unthinkable. *This is how it ends. This can't be how it ends.*

Though he was terrified, soaked, freezing cold, and ill from movement of the waves, Raska could not help but reflect on his conversation with the Zann the fox a few cycles ago. *Why the hell did I leave California?* he thought. The young cat squinted as a flash of lighting lit up the sky, visible through the cabin window.

“Well, if this is the end....” Raska summoned a bit of strength in his legs, and swiftly propelled himself through the shattered cabin door. Though terror was in his heart, a primal force pulsed through him. When he was in the cold part of North America, he had heard tales from a bobcat. When wildcats were confronted with a hunter, a trap, a bear, a snowstorm, or anything that they could not hope to kill or escape from, they would call out their original names.

As Raska emerged into the rain, invoking this memory, the boat rocked again, and splintered lightning illuminated the sky. The sky was filled rolling clouds, and the ocean was a vortex of foam and dark water. Raska immediately turned around to retreat to the cabin, but stopped himself. If this was the time for him to die, he would not cringe, or cower away from it, nor would he would accept it, as simple fate. He would not close his eyes and wait, or run from it, like many of his rodent prey had done when Raska had brought the end upon them. Raska would challenge the storm. He would challenge its rights over him.

Raska hissed and faced the gathering darkness, “My name is....” But his call was drowned out by a clap of thunder. Raska forgot himself and meowed, unable to escape the fear. Then, at that moment, the storm seemed to become calmer, and the rocking of the boat subsided.

The eye? Raska considered momentarily. A lesson in storms from a seagull he had spoken to came to him briefly, as the cat pondered this good fortune. But something about this didn’t feel right. *What the hell is happening?* His ears suddenly twitched as they heard a new sound. The young cat heard a baleful voice.

“See how the Ronin taunts our master’s storm.”

Even as the rain gushed around him, Raska heard the flapping of wings and the clacking of teeth, and he then caught sight of two pairs of glowing purple eyes. Two nightmares fell upon the deck, and the sound of their flesh falling upon the wood sent shivers down Raska’s spine. It was as if what came before the young cat was vomited from the skies above.

A flash of lightning fell over the two creatures, illuminating their hideous details. Tattered bat-like wings arched over spines, curved and snakelike. The beasts had no feet, but had two long, angular limbs with wide hands that ended with talons. Their faces were unlike any beast Raska had seen, with eyes white and aimless. Their heads were flat and scaly, but their jaws were long and narrow, curved like a hook, and filled with needle-sharp teeth.

Raska’s paws instantly propelled him away from the creatures as his heart tapped against his chest. He had never encountered creatures like this before, beasts that stank with the stench of carrion.

One of the creatures spoke, his jaws slavering. “Come to me, Ronin. Face me.” In a bizarre stuttering motion, one of the arms of the beast groped forward.

“Come and face the servants of Azazel,” said the other. “Face us, or join our cause.”

Raska’s senses were so overwhelmed by these apparitions that his survival instinct was immediately stilled. The cat was frozen in place. Never in his travels had he seen anything like this before. Though rain fell upon him, he couldn’t find the will to move.

Then there was another voice. “Tonight you will not rest in the underworld, Ronin.”

Another bolt of lightning seared the sky, and a black cat fell from above and touched down between the creatures and Raska. It was as if the wild night itself had dispatched this red-eyed newcomer.

One of the creatures spoke. “The Janissaries send their windrider against us. What a waste,” it hissed.

Its partner responded. “I will bring his hide back to the Black Dervish.” Thunder punctuated his sentence.

“Your master will follow you to hell,” the black cat responded. The newcomer’s back arched and he bared his teeth, which shone in the lightning like gleaming razors. Raska blinked as the air rushed about him as the black cat pounced, and descended upon the scaly nightmare. It happened quickly; there was barely any visible motion as the black cat fell upon the gruesome being. Like a marionette with severed strings, the creature collapsed on the deck, killed instantly.

Raska had seen a mountain lion run down a deer in New York once. Yet never before he had he seen such a swift kill before. Before he could spend time contemplating this, the remaining creature spoke.

“You fight a useless battle, Kin of Witches,” the creature hissed. “Whatever happens to us, the message of Azazel will spread.”

What the hell is going on? Raska thought, petrified by the horrors before him.

Lightning flashed again, and the black cat smiled. “Ghoul, the spawn of corpses carries no messages.” Zenith licked his paw and turned to Raska. “But I wonder if this one does...” Zenith looked at Raska and said:

“Try to take him, demon.”

The creature paused, as if considering this for a moment. Then it whirled around to face Raska, its wings dangling in the wind. The apparition hissed and snapped its teeth. Raska saw the beast coming toward him and yelled to black cat, “Help me!”

The black cat spoke, his voice echoing over the sounds of the squall. “You have spoken to the storm, Ronin, and it has answered your challenge.” His red eyes gleamed, and there was a subtle hint of a smile on his face. “Do you fear the carrion birds when you hunt them? For this travesty of life is merely their cousin.”

The young cat had no time to respond. Raska bolted backwards as the creature struck with his talons. The young cat felt a wild instinct take him, an adrenal rush that abrogated the fear. He pounced.

Raska’s claws raked the creature as he landed, striking and biting, but the creature’s wings flapped violently, throwing Raska from him. Its long limbs reared back and struck. Raska dodged the sharp talons, but watched in horror as the damp wood of boat’s deck was rendered into fragments by the monster’s strike. The creature clapped its teeth again, and stared at Raska with empty eyes like that of dead fish. Thrashing its tail, it moved toward the young cat again. Raska’s fur looked like fire as he moved. His claws flashed again, but the creature was undeterred by his strikes.

“Join us, Ronin,” the creature spat. “Join us or die.”

There was a thunder crack, and the boat rocked again. Fear still had Raska in its clutches, but the young cat let out a defiant snarl.

The apparition raised its long arms again, ready to kill. Then there was a rush of air and moisture. The black cat fell on the creature. Lightning flashed again, illuminating the sight of the dark feline, his face stained red, the narrow neck of the monster in his jaws, slain.

The black cat released his kill, and addressed Raska. “Well fought, Ronin.”

The boat rocked again, throwing Raska briefly off balance. Anger and fear of the unknown filled him as he wondered if more nightmares would unfold before him tonight. *What the hell is happening? Is the storm gonna kill me? Are those monsters, or this cat? What the hell is happening?*

“Who are you?” Raska demanded. “What are you? And what were *those*?”

The black cat looked out over the water. He did not seem troubled by the wetness clinging at his fur or the predicament that he shared with Raska. Finally, he said, “Their master will return for you.” He was making an observation. “And my name is Zenith Farishta, Kin of Witches.”

And with that, the seas came crashing upon their heads. Raska had no time to cry out as the water engulfed him, and his sight became dark save for a glimpse of some foam and bubbles. Panic filled his feline heart.

<Ares Andromeda Starhazzard> came a voice, echoing in the chambers of his mind.

For some brief seconds, Raska thought he could glimpse the outline of another cat, whose fur, tail, and head were traced in blue starlight.

<Find me in the dark.>

Then, everything went black.

SEDKAZAN



IT TOOK SEDKAZAN FARISHTA SWIFTASDEATH, the silver wildcat, three long leaps through the astral gates to arrive in Draekar. The land of Draekar was protected by an iron dome of magic that required many leaps to access.

The first leap sent him to Morocco. The cat appeared in the shadow of the sandstone mosque in Marrakesh. On noiseless feet, he took some time to explore the spaces of the house of worship. His eyes, blue as crystal, blinked as he looked upon Andalusian arches, inlaid with ivory and silver. The human artisans

always managed to impress him. He reflected how man's physical crafts were just as complex as the Jinn's in the realm of magic. He did not tarry long, and called upon the astral gates to teleport him once more.

The second leap brought him to a beach in the southern tip of North America. Sedkazan smiled as he looked upon waves crashing over the shore, beneath an evening sky. The sight made him happy and reminded him of place of birth. He watched the water for a few minutes before leaping again through the gates.

The third leap brought Sedkazan atop a tunnel leading into a human city. The cat had no trouble keeping his balance on the spot he emerged, right above the mouth of the tunnel. He noted with some displeasure the scent of gasoline in the air as a river of human metal and tar poured into the underground passage. This had not always been a human road, and had once been the unbroken side of a mountain. The headlights of the cars beamed bright and irritated the silver cat's vision. Once Lord Safeydraat the Wolfking had told him of the destruction these carriages reaped upon the world and how one day it could create a calamity that not even the Janissaries could stand again. But that day was not today and Sedkazan vanished in a flash of blue and quickly forgot the sea of human travel.

Finally, Sedkazan appeared in Draekar, in a valley deep in the jungle. He stood on a slab of stone on a steep hillside, where massive trees gave way to smaller plants, creating a clearing. The stone overlooked a vast field, touched by the banks of a river. Its dark water fluttered silently. The sky was thick with clouds, but for brief moments the light of the setting sun glanced on the water's

surface. This was the aquifer, the *Maul Hayat*, the place where the divine river Styx flowed into the natural waters of the earth, guarded for millennia by the Janissaries. This was where Jinn and the Spirit of Life made the covenant to protect man.

Sedkazan sniffed briefly, and shifted his paws, testing his balance on the slope of the valley walls. Behind him were countless trees, dripping in moisture, harboring all manner of fungus and insects, blanketing the gradient of the earth. Tendrils of mist flowed between their trunks. Across the field and across the river was the other side of the valley; the earth, layered in dark forest, reared toward the sky. Where the edges of the trees met the sky, the light of dusk gleamed on the horizon.

Where is everyone? Sedkazan thought, mildly irritated. As if on cue, flashes of blue light danced around his vision. The grassland before him became lit up, as beasts of all shapes and sizes crossed the astral gates and appeared from thin air. Nocturnal eyes shined in the encroaching darkness, and the musk of many species, avian, mammalian, and reptilian; some from the jungle, others from the savannah and tundra, joined the array of tropical scents. He could hear the earth rumble as the largest beasts appeared.

Sedkazan was fierce and powerful, and the Covenant of his order precluded hunting and unsanctioned combat at this hour, but instinct was instinct. He flattened his body to the earth and sprang from where he was sitting, seeking the grassland. He did not want his back to higher ground, where bigger predators would no doubt soon emerge. He heard the sound of scales across bark, and wondered if Agathodaemon, the Lord Python, would be attending this ceremony.

As he moved toward the field, he caught the sights of others, some teleporting from the astral gates, others emerging from the jungle. There was Kodak the feared ice bear of the north, who could command glaciers with his mind. He was a legendary veteran of a number of battles with the Acolytes. Kodak stood proud, like a pillar of carved marble, untroubled by the tropical heat of the jungle.

There was a rush of air, as Mordred the prince of cheetahs painted a golden blur with his movement, expertly weaving through the trees and sprinting toward the center of the valley. It was said he moved so fast he scoffed at the use of the astral gates. As new creatures appeared, the cheetah went from beast to beast to make conversation, filling the air with his high reedy laugh. Sedkazan was not fond of Mordred. Mordred had been his grader during his examination in Africa, when he had to steal a jewel guarded by a Rhino chieftain. Sedkazan had succeeded, but it had been a terrifying experience and Mordred had almost failed him.

The great Komodo lizard Kamal slunk through the grasses. The monster of Asia, the lizard was half again the size of a normal Komodo dragon and was utterly without a sense of humor. Sedkazan maintained a healthy respect for Kamal, as he had slain fellow hatchlings that had killed human villagers for pleasure. Kamal believed in the cause of the Janissaries and did not deviate from the original teachings of the Covenant. Sedkazan had to confess some admiration for puritans, as unpleasant as they could be in social settings sometimes.

Then other animals appeared, some nocturnal, some forcing themselves awake in defiance of their natural habits:

Anvanzar the Light Stag, Selim, the Kestrel from Anatolia. Kyrune, the wolverine princess of the Yukon, and Joseph, the Welsh bloodhound.

Scores of other Janissaries Sedkazan did not know well made their way to the field. Those who were apex predators put their inclinations aside in this place, Janissaries were forbidden to hunt each other, and no beast could feed near the waters of the Styx.

“Sedkazan!” came a familiar voice. Sedkazan relaxed. It was the voice of a friend.

A bronze-furred creature and a long-legged bird approached Sedkazan Farishta Swiftasdeath. It was the mongoose Rikki, followed by the heron Ardechai. Both were talented Janissaries and Sedkazan was proud to call them his brothers.

“How is the good life?” Rikki said.

“Fantastic,” Sedkazan said, flashing his teeth. “Vaylan has given me my own authority to hunt down Acolytes and their allies all across Asia in West Africa.”

The mongoose said, “You’ve gone far.”

“Be kind to me, and I’ll take you all with me,” Sedkazan responded. He narrowed his eyes. “Is there any word from Red Shaam yet?”

The heron Ardechai shook his head, “None.”

Sedkazan considered this. He had never liked the coyote, but he was a good leader, and he respected the beast’s uncanny ability to dreamride. If he was gone, it would be a severe loss for their brotherhood.

“Well,” Sedkazan said, “I hope he’s out there, somewhere.”

“It’s starting!” Rikki said suddenly.

There was a burst of light and a rush of heat. Two big fires appeared in the field, immense yellow and red flowers, throwing light on the surrounding beasts. Sedkazan could hear the howling of wolves and the yelps of wild dogs, and the pounding of hooves. A chorus of hisses and growls came from cats, big and small. The fires did not consume the field, but burned bright and hot. Smoke did not rise from them.

We don’t fear fire, Sedkazan thought proudly. *Not like the other beasts. Because we’re made of fire.*

Near the flames, a dark plume rose, coiling above the water, screeches emanating from it. A colony of bats swarmed above the other beasts, making patterns in the sky. Larger beasts from Old World continents slammed their paws and hooves in the ground, making the valley floor thunder, and the cries of raptor birds pierced the twilight air.

The silver cat’s ears twitched, and he heard the crowd become quiet as a thousand animal tongues went still. A figure emerged, stepping into the aura of the flames.

“So this is the kid, huh?” Sedkazan remarked to Rikki.

He was a husky dog, white, his fur streaked in ashen grey. He was young, but every inch of him was heroic. He was not a large animal, but as he walked forward, his muscles rippled, hinting at his speed and agility. His eyes were a light blue, like a winter sky. There was a brightness to the dog, a light that seemed to pour from his face, even as he stepped into surroundings of flame and night,

into this company of wild beasts. Sedkazan rolled his eyes. The dog looked like he had jumped off the screens of human televisions.

“He looks like White Day,” Rikki commented to Ardechai.

“No one looks like White Day, especially not this kid...” Sedkazan uttered, refusing to hide his sneer. “He looks young.”

“He is young,” Rikki said.

Sedkazan heard the resonant trumpet of an Indian elephant. A rhinoceros, who Sedkazan had not seen appear, yelled out in a deep baritone. *“Brothers! I am proud to present Angelo Northstar!”*

In a myriad tongues the crowd of Jinn Beasts gave their applause. Stags pounded their hooves and great cats roared. Wild dogs yipped and howled, and serpents rustled their coils close to the earth to show their approval.

“That’s quite a name,” Ardechai said.

Sedkazan narrowed his eyes. It was ill advised to summon this many Janissaries to the aquifer. A massive typhoon had hit the Philippines and mankind was in deep suffering. Though it was tradition, this kind of pomp and circumstance was a waste, especially for one beast.

“You know...” Sedkazan jumped a bit as the cheetah Mordred appeared aside him. The beast was lean and tall, and his black and yellow fur was as coarse as wool. “He descends from clan of wolves said to be related to Safeydraat and White Day.”

Sedkazan smiled, “I see a lot of dog there. Little wolf though. But I bet the mutt has strong genes though.”

Mordred chuckled, “Are you implying something, Farishta?”

“Why Mordred, my friend, not at all.” With so few cheetahs left on earth, Mordred was one of the few that were Jinn. As a result, his blood was thin from inbreeding. While he was an asset in combat and the fastest beast on earth, Mordred was rumored to have suffered terrible hallucinations and destructive moods as a result of generations of close parentage.

“Angelo was the best of my squires,” Mordred boasted. “He saved a human from drowning in a river when he was just a cub. His tutors have told me that they have not seen such talent since...”

“White Day?” Sedkazan interjected.

“Since you, actually,” Mordred said.

Sedkazan had to smile at that. “Well, we’ll see.”

Rikki commented, “It’s doubtful he’s a descendant of the Wolfking. If he is, he’s probably pretty distant. Safeydraat is thousands of cycles old, and the only offspring he ever had was White Day.”

“So they say,” Sedkazan said in agreement.

“So they say,” Mordred echoed.

Angelo barked happily. *He doesn’t look like White Day. He looks like he should be playing with human cubs somewhere*, Sedkazan thought.

“I hear you had a great victory in Damascus,” Mordred uttered. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Sedkazan said. He couldn’t take his eyes off the husky. Angelo Northstar’s wintry eyes were full of the pride that comes with being young, handsome, and athletic. *I remember being*

like that, Sedkazan thought, then told himself, Whatever, I still am like that...this dog's definitely not White Day though. White Day was humble.

“These are peaceful times we live in, Sedkazan. The Black Dervish is on the run, a few imps and skinwalkers hide in alleyways in the Old World, and humanity grows more powerful by the day,” Mordred continued.

Doesn't he ever shut up? Sedkazan thought.

“I fear your talents might never be fully put to use,” the cheetah pressed

“Maybe,” Sedkazan said. He heard the other animals become quiet again.

Some more beasts emerged from near the flames. The biggest had fur that was dripping wet, soaked with river water. Vaylan the jaguar, the Lord Protector of humanity, the Executor of the Spirit’s Flame, emerged. The jaguar was the leader of their order, granted his titles for his ability to swim unharmed in the waters of the Styx. On his right approached a lithe ocelot, slim as coils of steel, his companion Shirazia.

Angelo Northstar sat down, and uttered a few whimpers, a sign of his acknowledgement of the jaguar’s place in their hierarchy. The jaguar approached.

“Angelo Northstar,” Vaylan called. The firelight illuminated his spots, making their centers light up with shimmering gold. “You have been called before this body in consideration for entry into the Janissaries.”

Northstar nodded, trying to look as humble as possible.

“Do you swear to protect and defend humanity?” Vaylan said. It was less of a question, and more of an announcement.

“I do,” Northstar said. His voice was thick with a drawl shared by many dogs born in North America.

“Do you swear to abide by our code of honor?”

“I do.”

“Do you swear to remain loyal to our brotherhood?”

“I do.”

“Do you swear to honor the Covenant between Man, the Spirit of Life, and the Jinn?”

“I do.”

Vaylan nodded once. “Then drink from the water of the *Maul Hayat*, the fountain where the river Styx flows.” Vaylan turned, and stared upon the riverbank. The husky trotted forward, crossing between the two flames, and drank from the water’s edge. He finished, and turned toward the crowd, grinning ear to ear.

Vaylan announced, “Rise, Angelo, you beast of Smokeless Flame. Rise as a knight, rise as a Janissary.”

The crowd of animals went wild, growling, roaring, trumpeting, hissing, and stamping their paws and hooves into the earth. The wolves and dogs among the legion darted toward Northstar. He leapt up and met them, and the animals began wrestling and playing. They exchanged scents and licked each other joyfully.

Sedkazan rolled his eyes. *Dogs*, he thought. Sedkazan saw Rikki was shouting as loud as the rest of them. The heron had taken wing for a few moments, flapping above them. Yet even Sedkazan felt some surge of excitement. When he had been inducted he felt the same way, like there was nothing that he

couldn't accomplish. *When you join the brotherhood, he recalled, it's like an explosion of light goes off inside you. You never feel that way again.*

"Perhaps you should conjure some of your famous lightning for us all," Mordred told him, interrupting the silver cat's thoughts. "No doubt it would entertain our canine brothers.

"Another time, maybe," Sedkazan said, wincing at the din.

"But I love your magic so much though."

A Persian cat came through the grass to meet them. Half of half of her was covered in inky black fur, the other in splashes of white. Her coat appeared soft as down.

"Kjarez Nightbraker," Sedkazan said, smiling. He padded toward her. "Didn't think you'd be here. After all, Vaylan likes to keep some of you watching the astral gates."

"It's fun watching them knight the new Janissaries. Vaylan obviously can't tolerate it," she said.

"You think so?" Rikki asked.

"Once I was working with the lady snow leopard on a creating a gate. Through the white sky, I believe. We were visiting Draekar, and there was the Lord Protector himself. He was with Shirazia, talking about old times, and complaining about how wasteful the ceremony is."

"Really?" Rikki said, shocked.

"Really," she responded.

"One day when I'm in charge I'll change things," Sedkazan told her.

"You as Lord Protector?" Ardechhai the heroin inquired. He shook his head. "I can't see it."

“You will see it,” Sedkazan said. The silver cat heard Mordred scoff.

“Maybe,” Kjarez said. She trotted near Rikki and lay down.

“You don’t think I can do it?” Sedkazan challenged. Mordred laughed raucously, and Rikki turned away. Ardechais stayed silent.

“The Farishta line is powerful, no doubt,” she told him. “Your uncle is the Kin of Witches, and you are a captain, of course...”

“And I will be Lord Protector, one day.”

“But there’s more to being Lord Protector than fighting. There’s more to it than being valiant. He has to name you, or...”

Sedkazan turned to Kjarez and bared his teeth. “I know, and after I kill Azazel I’ll have proven myself to Vaylan.”

Mordred narrowed his eyes, “That’s quite a thing to say, even for you.”

“Yeah, Sedkazan,” Kjarez said. “You really think Vaylan is going to send you?”

“Vaylan will send me,” Sedkazan asserted. “I imprisoned the Damascus marid. I’ve slain more ghouls than captains ten times my age, not to mention all the Acolytes I’ve hunted down. I’ve dueled with Aednat the eagle. I was trained by White Day himself...”

“We know, Sedkazan, we know,” Kjarez said. “All that’s well and good, but swimming in the Styx is another thing entirely.”

Sedkazan rolled his eyes. He did not want to discuss this further. In some ways she was right. He should not have made the boast. Azazel was the famed criminal leader of the Acolytes.

Intelligence on his movements was known only by Vaylan, and a handful of others. Few Janissaries had faced Azazel in single combat and lived, because of his legendary Plague Bite. Sedkazan had heard whispers that the Acolyte had finally been tracked down, and that Vaylan was planning a mission to put an end to him once and for all.

Under promise, over deliver, he told himself. Soon, Vaylan will send me to hunt down the Black Dervish.

“Sedkazan!” the silver cat heard a voice call out. Angelo Northstar approached the silver cat, flanked by a group of wolves, his eyes alight with joy, and his tail wagging rapidly. “Glad you could make it!”

We were all ordered here, “Great to see you, Angelo!” Sedkazan said, smiling.

“This is so awesome!” Angelo yipped. He sniffed around Sedkazan’s tail. The silver cat winced. “I’ve finally made it! This is how you must have felt, back in your day, right?”

The fur on the back of Sedkazan’s neck began to rise. Kjarez shot Sedkazan a small smile, and she began licking herself. Rikki and Ardechai exchanged glances.

“Well, I’m still in my prime, little brother,” Sedkazan said. He stretched out his back, and extended his claws. He licked them a little. “I am after all the youngest captain. You may be taking orders from me.”

“Oh, I’ll be a captain soon,” Angelo told him.

You’re kidding, right? “Haha, we’ll see,” Sedkazan said. “Don’t get overexcited.” Out of the corner of his eyes Sedkazan

saw other beasts approach, and his ears caught the sound of muttering.

“You know,” Angelo said, and he nipped at Sedkazan’s tail playfully. “I’m now the youngest Janissary, and you’re the youngest captain? How about a friendly duel?”

“Sorry friend,” Sedkazan responded. “I don’t do friendly duels.”

“C’mon,” Angelo urged. He nipped again at Sedkazan’s feet. The silver cat let out a low hiss.

“Okay, that’s enough...” Kjarez began. Then Mordred yelled out.

“Everyone! Sedkazan and Angelo will duell! No better occasion, right?! The youngest captain and the youngest Janissary!”

Wolves darted toward the pair, eager to watch the action. Other mammals followed, and Sedkazan saw snakes crawl through the grass. The silver cat then witnessed Joseph the bloodhound pad over to them, and he could hear the call of Selim the kestrel.

“Not going to happen, brothers,” Sedkazan announced. Angelo looked disappointed. “You all know that when I fight, I don’t fight to win, I fight to kill Acolytes and kill demons.”

Sedkazan heard a growl of approval come from Kodak. He then wondered where Vaylan was.

“It used to be tradition for the youngest captain and youngest Janissary to duel,” Mordred said again. The rhino rumbled in approval. “Sedkazan, we all know your strength and speed is unreal. We all know that Angelo Northstar represents the finest young talent we’ve inducted into our brotherhood.”

“Yeah Sedkazan. It’d be a great fight,” Angelo chimed in. “After all, White Day was your mentor. And I’ll be his successor. Why shouldn’t we go a few rounds?”

“Damn it,” Rikki muttered. Kjarez put her head in her paws.

“What is this?” the crowd of watching beasts parted, bowing their heads and lowering their horns, as Vaylan the jaguar approached, flanked by the ocelot Shirazia.

“Lord Protector! I wish to spar with Sedkazan Farishta Swiftasdeath!” Angelo said. He strode into the shadow of Vaylan and bowed deeply. “Sedkazan is one of the most talented among us, and I wish to try my skills against him.”

Sedkazan suddenly felt the blood pounding behind his ears. *Remember me, Sedkazan*, he remembered the white wolf lying there, his fur blackened from flame, blood staining his arctic fur. He remembered him repeating the words. *Please remember me*. He remembered the human girl, her olive skin, her hair, dark brown with red streaks, the color of wine.

“With Lord Vaylan’s permission,” Sedkazan said. He arched his back and hissed. His fur gleamed in the light of the fire like dagger blades.

Vaylan looked both of them in the eyes. Sedkazan held his gaze, and Angelo Northstar looked away.

“Sedkazan Farishta Swiftasdeath,” the jaguar said. “I’ll allow this duel. Under the condition that you agree no magic is used.”

“Yes sir, Lord Protector,” Northstar said.

“By your command, Lord Vaylan,” Sedkazan assented. It was a common condition. Magic, with its destructive properties was rarely used in sparring, outside of strict conditions. The silver cat’s blue eyes locked upon Angelo Northstar. *Remember me, Sedkazan. Please remember me.*

The mass of animals formed a circle around the two beasts. Angelo’s gray and white fur shone brightly in the fire, and Sedkazan was a platinum silhouette among the grasses. The jaguar Vaylan stared at both of them, and roared once. Then it began.

A growl filled the air, and the husky Angelo Northstar bounded across the grass, his wintry eyes alive with animal fierceness as he aimed himself at Sedkazan. His teeth were bore back in a savage smile, ready to strike. The silver cat danced sideways, light shimmering off the tips of his fur. He expertly landed on his paws, and aimed a pounce at the husky. Quickly, the husky rolled sideways. Threads of grass flew into the air as he moved.

Sedkazan hissed, and launched himself at the husky again, his claws fully extended. The dog snarled, and propelled himself backwards, leaving Sedkazan to strike empty space. The two beasts continued their contest with sightless speed. Silver, white and ashen gray moved into a whirlwind as they sought to wound each other.

A claw strike from Sedkazan had aimed for Northstar’s eyes. The husky had dodged the blow, and the silver cat’s claws eviscerated the tall grasses around them. The young captain of the janissaries moved with the speed of rushing water. No matter

where Angelo Northstar aimed his teeth, the silver cat would disappear.

“Go easy, Sedkazan,” Kjarez called out.

“White Day, huh?” Sedkazan laughed like a sprite. He leapt far above Northstar, landing deftly on his paws. “You think you’re White Day?”

Northstar was panting furiously. He barked, and threw himself at the cat again. Sedkazan vanished from his line of sight, and appeared behind him, laughing again.

“That all you got, kid?” Sedkazan challenged, his voice ringing with a mocking tone. Sedkazan moved like a silver blur, aiming at Northstar one, twice, thrice. The wildcat, for his size, had five times the agility of a non Jinn leopard. In spite of this, Northstar managed to dodge the blows.

Sedkazan hissed. This event had transpired for a couple of minutes. It had been far too long for his liking. He should have been able to draw blood on Northstar immediately. The silver cat hid his anger, and announced. “Don’t worry, I’m just getting warmed up!” The silver cat spat, and his eyes became narrow slits. He charged at the husky.

Northstar couldn’t control himself. His eyes suddenly gleamed bright white. Sedkazan felt the air turn moist, and for a brief moment felt cold. There was a flash of blue light, and blades of ice materialized in the air around them, seeking Sedkazan’s flesh. The crowd gasped. The silver cat cursed as part of the conjured ice cut alongside his ribcage, but he managed to weave his narrow frame between the frosty scythes. Vaylan the Jaguar roared.

Vaylan ordered no magic! Anger filled Sedkazan’s heart.

“Whoa....sorry....” Northstar said immediately, realizing what he had done. The husky bowed his snout and bared his throat, a sign of surrender.

Sedkazan remembered hearing the roar, but he never really knew if he had heard Vaylan call for an end to the duel. His fighting instructs had taken over. He had barely seen Northstar surrender when the blood in the back of his head began pounding. Sedkazan’s blue eyes shined with bright purple, and the temperature increased. He thought he heard Kjarez yell out something to him. Bright sparks fired from the tips of the cat’s fur. The hints of electricity consolidated into a raging mass of energy, and a crown of purple lightning surrounded the silver cat. Blistering bolts danced around him, casting light upon the watchers, who reared back in fear. A hyena yelped as part of the grass caught fire. Northstar looked upon him in terror. He knew of the cat’s powers but had never seen them before. That hesitation was all Sedkazan needed. A jagged thunderbolt lashed out at the white husky, rendering him stunned.

“ENOUGH!!” Vaylan threw himself between the two beasts. A bolt of lightning struck next to one of the jaguar’s paws. Sedkazan came to his senses the moment the big jaguar appeared before him. Realizing what he had done, the silver cat bowed down. The lightning vanished, leaving the three beasts, their spectators, and a grassy field burning from the sorcery around them.

The field went silent. Sedkazan felt the battle high leave him, then felt a surge of shame as he heard Angelo Northstar

whimper. Vaylan loomed before Sedkazan Farishta Swiftasdeath, locking his ancient eyes with the young silver cat.

“Shirazia,” Vaylan finally said, turning to the ocelot. “Is Northstar fine?”

“Yeah, is he alright...” Sedkazan began.

“Silence!” Vaylan roared, foam flecking from his lips. Every beast in the field became utterly still. In the days when man’s hands were rough from gathering food and throwing spears at mammoths, the Lords of Janissaries had killed beasts for less than what Sedkazan and Northstar had done.

Quickly, the ocelot Shirazia prowled over the husky, and nudged him with her paw. The husky responded, “Yeah, I’m fine. It was my fault, I got carried away, I...”

“Sedkazan Farishta Swiftasdeath will join me for a conversation in the jungle,” Vaylan said quietly. “Shirazia, you are given my permission to deal with Angelo Northstar as you see fit. The rest of you...” the jaguar turned to the animals around him. “Remember that orders are orders. When Safeydraat Wolfking and I slew the Dragon, had the Janissaries not obeyed our commands, *the whole world would still be on fire!*” The jaguar’s voice echoed throughout the field. Even the rolling clouds in the sky seemed to shake at the great cat’s voice.

Remember me, Sedkazan. The silver cat was scrunched down, curled in a little ball.

“Return to your posts,” the jaguar roared. “Humanity is still young, and needs your protection.”

Sedkazan saw Kjarez cast him a sympathetic look, and in a flash of blue light, she vanished. Rikki and Ardechai followed suit,

and the field became an arena of pulsing light as the beasts around them teleported away, vanishing into the gates. He did not see Angelo Northstar vanish. *I shouldn't have done that. I'm a captain, he's just a stupid kid. I should have known better.*

It seemed to take an eternity for every animal to disappear, then Vaylan and Sedkazan were finally alone in the valley. The jaguar looked down upon the cat, and bore his massive jaws.

“Now Sedkazan,” he said in a low voice. “We will speak.”

From the Lady Snow Leopard's lessons to Kjarez Nightbraker: The types of Jinn

There are many types of Jinn. The Ifrit were our ancestors, the most powerful of all creatures of Smokeless Flame.

The wraiths are creatures of the shadows that live in dark places. The marids are immense and powerful shape shifters; in past times, humans thought of them as creatures that could grant wishes. The ghouls are a lower class of Jinn that hunt small creatures. There are the skinwalkers, beings of burning mist, and the shaитаan, who can walk through dreams.

Then there are the Jinn Beasts. Long ago, the last of the Ifrit took the form of animals. Though they have retained their animal forms and bloodlines for generations, they are blessed with a fierce intellect. And like all Jinn, they possess the power to wield magic.

We call those Jinn that attack the humans, demons. We call those that wander, Ronin.

RASKA



RASKA OPENED HIS EYES and immediately took a deep breath. He tried to collect his senses and pulled himself on his paws. Immediately, his survival instinct kicked in. The cat crouched low, and his eyes opened wide. His pupils immediately dilated as his senses became adjusted to the darkness of his new surroundings. The air was hot and moist. Raska had felt fierce humidity in his travels before but this was different. A thousand fragrances accented the moisture, overwhelming the young cat. He felt like he was breathing mist, and he could not discern between the scents around him. The cat looked around him, and he

examined the data coming from his paws, his tail and whiskers. He was surrounded by long grass. His eyes caught sight of wide trunk trees around him, massive creatures with the girth of redwoods. The roots of the trees were wreathed in ferns and rainbow wildflowers.

Raska flattened his body to conceal himself in the grass, and he felt his underbelly touch warm soil saturated in rainwater. Strange sounds echoed in the distance, frightening screeches and a mechanical sounding hum of a collective of singing insects.

Raska filed through his memory, but could not associate the sounds with any species he had heard before in any place. At this moment, it became apparent that he was not the largest predator in this place, wherever he was. As apprehension fell over him, the young cat's intellectual faculties surfaced, and he briefly asked himself, *Where the hell am I? What the hell happened to the boat? What were those monsters? And thank god, but why am I not wet?*

The cat's ancient animal instincts silenced these questions, and he delicately prowled forward, breathing deep the scents around him. There had to be something around here that was familiar. Raska had travelled through much of continental America, and never before had he encountered such an alien domain.

Raska had a curious thought, and against his instincts, the young cat gazed upwards. Fear and awe flooded his senses, as the cat observed the immense heights of the trees around him. It was not nighttime, the forest around him was so crowded and its foliage was so thick the daylight above was nearly obscured. A few narrow canyons of sunlight cut through the canopy above, feeding

the ferns and grass with precious photons. Raska observed thick vines connecting the trees, dripping with water from a heavy rainfall. The cat blinked as a bird crossed a channel of light above, disrupting the sun momentarily and throwing another shadow onto the ground below.

A sick feeling filled Raska. Large birds he had befriended and smaller ones he had killed and eaten had told him of such a place. *Yeah, I'm definitely not on top of the food chain here...*

But that thought came and went, as Raska felt something else in his belly. The cat realized how hungry he was. His body was craving prey, and these needs subsumed the cat's desire to make sense of this bewildering predicament.

There'll be time to figure this out later... Raska thought. Raska reminded himself of his feline ancestors and the other members of that lineage. Once they were the most terrifying predators on land, and even now they vied for dominance on almost every continent on the planet.

With that grim thought, the young cat surrendered to the coding embedded in his blood, and answered the call of the hunt.

Raska prowled through the undergrowth, keeping his body close to the ground. Occasionally he could hear birds cawing in the distance, their cries pulsing through the wood. His insides ached with hunger, and his heart would jump and eyes would dart at every rustling in the grass.

After wandering for an hour, the young cat caught sight of a brightly colored frog. It sat near a mound of mushrooms, equally bizarre in their raiment. The frog was smaller than most mice, but

it gleamed yellow like sunfire. Raska could see its throat flutter rhythmically.

Raska pressed his haunches down, but he felt a feeling of illness pass through him as his eyes locked upon the yellow frog.

“Ugh,” he muttered. “Stupid cat.” Had he not been so hungry, he would have been able to instantly recognize what the frog’s bright pigment represented. So the young cat pressed on, his limbs weak and his breathing haggard. If there were larger predators in this jungle, he doubted he would be able to defend himself. Finally, he found what he was looking for.

A bird sat resting in a nest, half-hidden by a broadleaf bush. Its wings were scarlet and black. Its beak gleamed in the waning sunlight as it rested, its tail feathers ruffling in the wind. It stood beneath a shaft of sunlight.

Silently, Raska approached. He calibrated each of his motions with the earth and grass around him, so his movements did not betray his presence. His claws slid from their sheaths, and he took a pouncing stance. His eyes narrowed, and all other thoughts became dormant save his hunger and the thrill of the hunt. And with that, the young cat leaped at the bird.

At that moment, the apparition appeared again. A black cat materialized from the undergrowth and fell between Raska and the bird, his eyes shining red and fangs bared. The bird cawed once and flew off, charging through the beam of light, toward the refuge of the sky.

Raska snarled and spat. Anger overwhelmed fear. His fire colored fur stood straight on the back of his neck, and his back arched like the curve of a cracked whip.

“It is forbidden to hunt the flyers, Ronin,” the black cat told him in measured tones. “On this day.”

Raska recognized who he was, the phantom beast who he had encountered in the squall. As Raska had wandered he had entertained this was his dream or one of his human’s, but the sleek females he had mated with in a penthouse in Los Angeles had not appeared, no matter how hard he thought. Nor had his human’s common visitors of yellow haired human females made their appearance. Unhappily, the black beast before him and the harsh jungle that surrounded both were all too real.

“Don’t you know it’s bad luck to chase away another’s prey?” Raska growled. He drifted sideways, attempting to circle the other feline. “The gods curse it.”

Zenith responded, “Mere superstitions. There are no gods, there is only the Spirit.”

Raska was too hungry to discuss this. Fighting the beast before him would be a waste of precious energy. Though a distant curiosity urged Raska to question this cat, and gnawed at him to discover how he had come to this place, Raska’s hunger was still strong. The young cat spat once, and turned to leave.

“Ronin,” the black cat called behind him. “There is a fish in a creek not far from me. Permit me your company, and we shall eat together.”

Raska did not understand the word “Ronin,” but he could not dismiss the invitation. It could be hours before he found food again. If predators were about, the young cat deduced, perhaps two were better than one. *Though right now, he can probably run faster than me...*

“My name is Raska,” the young cat said, as he turned, eyeing the black cat before him. He narrowed his eyes, and searched his memory. “Zenith, right?”

“Yes,” the black cat said. “I have sought after you for a long time, Ronin...”

“After we eat, okay?” Raska rolled his eyes. There would be a time for revelations later. Now, only the young cat’s hunger mattered.

For a time the black cat and gold cat travelled through the jungle. The younger cat looked upon his surroundings with curiosity, but his hunger kept him from questioning his dark companion. Finally, Zenith and Raska came across a hill overlooking small creek in the jungle, its water shimmering beneath a pillar of sunlight. The water in the creek was clear as glass. A crop of moss-covered stone formed a bridge between the top of the hill and the water. Raska observed small silver fish swimming in the shallows. gingerly, Raska hopped from rock to rock, his tail wafting left and right and whiskers twitching as he balanced himself. Raska extended his claws, and deftly lashed out in the water, catching a fish, and throwing it upon a rock. The young cat smiled.

He set himself upon the fish, and lapped up some water from the creek. When he had his fill, he turned to Zenith. “Not eating?”

The black cat said nothing. Raska nodded.

“So do you want to tell me what happened back there?” Raska inquired.

“Two ghouls were sent by the Acolytes to kill you. It is a common practice of theirs to assassinate our candidates or Ronin sympathetic to our cause,” Zenith told him. “I saved you.”

Raska paused, forcing himself to understand. He had heard of the Acolytes in legend before. The young cat had heard many myths from his travels, and enough to know that there was truth in some. “Acolytes, huh? And ghouls? So they’re real?”

“As real as you or I,” Zenith responded.

“Hah, well I’m not so sure about even that right now,” Raska laughed. He hopped to another rock, and pulled a fish from the river.

Zenith cocked his head to one side. “You’re not afraid of water.”

“I’ve spent a lot of time around water,” Raska told him. “But I’m still afraid of it.”

“Indeed,” Zenith said. He blinked his red eyes. “I heard you were near water when you killed Samayel.”

Raska narrowed his eyes. The memory of the hound crossed his mind. “I didn’t kill him.”

“But you saved a human child.”

“Maybe,” Raska shrugged. “Who knows what would have happened.”

Raska had been in Baltimore when it had happened. The sun was bright that day, and the young cat was lazing on the sidewalk. The air was choked with the humidity that plagues the Mid-Atlantic every summer. It was then when the young cat had heard the cries of a human child echo through their air. The young

cat's ears perked up, and he came to his feet. Honing in on his senses, he trotted down the road to a nearby alleyway. Raska sniffed as he smelt butts of cigarettes, and the contents of discarded chip packets. Soon after, he smelt the thick scent of canines.

Raska discovered three dogs were barking at a human boy, who was screaming. Two were Dobermanns, and one might have been the largest dog Raska had ever seen, with fur that was a deep crimson. The red dog nipped at the boy's heels, and pushed him down with his snout as he tried to get up. The boy kept crying.

Raska sniffed. Dogs were rarely cruel to humans, and none of these beasts appeared rabid. That was unusual. Raska had seen such cruelty before, but it was usually driven by disease. The young cat also noted that the boy was still alive, yet the three dogs were still taunting him. Dogs didn't normally behave that way. *What was the point of this?* Banishing the thought from his mind, he let out a loud hiss.

The dogs turned to look at him.

“Go away, little cat,” one of the Dobermanns said.

“What the hell are you doing?” Raska snapped.

“Having fun,” the other Dobermann announced.

“Let him go,” Raska announced. One of the Dobermanns approached Raska, snarling, white foam flecking from his mouth.

“Get out of here, cat.”

The boy stopped crying. His skin had become pale. The massive red hound had placed one of his paws on the center of the boy's chest. Raska smelled blood. The boy must have been going into shock.

“Let him go, dog,” Raska said again, his voice quiet.

“Or what...little cat?” the other Dobermann sneered.

“Let him go,” Raska repeated.

The two Dobermanns laughed. The red dog remained silent.

“Who does this cat think he is, Samayel?” the Dobermann cocked his head to the red dog. “White Day?”

“White Day is a myth. I am real,” Raska said. He extended his claws.

The Dobermanns tensed up, when finally the red hound spoke.

“White Day was real, my friend,” the red hound said. “And so is Samayel!”

The red hound became a blur of crimson as he launched himself at the cat. Raska summoned all his agility and moved to the side, raking the dog’s ribs with his claws. The hound was taken aback; he had not expected that cat to move so swiftly.

“*Jinn*,” Samayel hissed. He snarled, and the two Dobermanns flanked him. Raska moved as swift as flame, lashing out with his claws, and the Dobermanns howled as their blood spilled in the alleyway. The massive red hound went at Raska again, ripping into a trashcan as he charged at the young cat. Raska dodged him again, leaping on the side of the building before falling on one of the Dobermanns again, raining fury with his claws.

One of the dogs had lost an eye and the other was bleeding profusely. Whimpering the two dogs scampered off, leading Raska and the red hound alone. The boy had regained consciousness.

Taking a look at the two warring animals, he pulled himself to his feet and sprinted away, sobbing.

The red hound spit out chunks of metal caught in his teeth. Raska's eyes widened in alarm. *How is that possible?*

"You're pretty fast, little cat," Samayel observed. "But I've fought faster." The dog charged again, but Raska vanished before him, swift as smoke.

One bite and I could be dead, Raska thought. Maybe its time to run for it. Or finish this.

"I'm going to find that human boy, cat," Samayel announced. "I'm going to find him and kill...." He did not finish the sentence. Raska's claws had lashed out again with sightless speed, beneath the hound's throat. The red dog fell to the ground. Wounded, he spluttered, "How did you...how did you..."

"You're not the biggest I've tangled with, Samayel."

Raska had heard the shout of an adult human. His ears caught the click of a firearm.

"Cat! Help me!" Samayel uttered.

"Why?" Raska said.

"You can't let them kill me, cat."

Raska looked at the red dog before him. The canine tried to scramble to his paws, but whimpered. Blood was pouring from the wound in his neck. The young cat cast a glance at a broken tricycle not far from them. Just as he was distracted, the red dog lunged at Raska, gnashing his teeth. Raska slid backwards, and the dog collapsed.

"You're not helping yourself, dog," Raska said.

"Help me! My master will reward you," Samayel told him.

“Cats don’t seek rewards,” Raska said. He bounded atop a trashcan, then onto a rung of a fire escape ladder.

“I’ll be back!” the dog spat. “I always come back!”

Raska didn’t knowledge this, nor did he turn around as he heard the shouting of humans, then the echoing bang of gunfire. The young cat shuddered.

Raska blinked as he put the memory out of his mind. He locked eyes with Zenith. The outline of his red-eyed companion merged with the shadows around him. The young cat noticed that the light was beginning to fade.

“So where am I, Zenith? And why did you bring me here?”

“You are in the jungle of Draekar,” Zenith responded. “And I brought you here through the astral gates because you are Jinn, and because you protect humans.”

Astral gates? What? Raska thought. “You’re telling me this is Draekar?” Raska said. He shook his head and leapt across the rocks to meet the black cat on top of the hill. *This can’t be real*, he thought. “I can believe the Acolytes exist, I’ve been called Jinn before, but Draekar is another thing...”

“You are Jinn,” the black cat told him. “How do you explain your strength, your speed? Your cunning? Your intellect compared to the other cats? How do you explain your other talents? How do you explain the strangeness in the world?”

Raska shook his head. The young cat was bewildered. In his travels since leaving Berkeley he had heard of other beasts with his strength and speed, and other strange talents. A bird who could speak to humans, an raccoon who could walk up walls, a rabbit

that could leap on water. Legend had it that beasts such as these were descended from Jinn, creatures from legend said to be shaped from Smokeless Flame. A blind dog in New York once told him that he could only be such an animal. Raska's encounter with Samayel had further raised his suspicions. As for the creatures that attacked him on the boat, they were unlike anything Raska had seen before.

“So,” Raska said slowly. “Let’s say I am Jinn. Let’s say this is Draekar, and those ghouls were friends with the Acolytes. Does that make you...?”

“Yes, a Janissary,” Zenith said.

More myths. Raska had heard tales of the animals sworn to the protection of mankind, gifted with keen intellect and the ability to command magic. Some tales had said these beasts were able to command magic because they were also Jinn.

“I’m having a hard time believing all of this,” Raska admitted.

“You saw the ghouls. You see me and you saw Samayel. You know the world is full of different beasts with different talents. Is it so hard to believe?” Zenith offered.

The young cat’s tail swayed back and forth. He said, “So if you’re a Janissary, what do you want with me? Why did you save me?”

The black cat had sat down, and tucked his paws beneath his body. He closed his eyes. “That is a question for my lord Vaylan.”

Raska grabbed another fish from the water, and ate. He hopped back up the hill and approached Zenith. “Lord Vaylan?”

“The leader of the Janissaries, the Executor of the Spirit’s Flame, Lord Protector of humanity,” Zenith uttered. He blinked slightly. “You will meet him tonight.”

“And what if I’m not interested in that?”

“Then prowl around the jungle, for all I care, and see what becomes of you,” Zenith told him. Raska hissed in annoyance.

“Do not think on this too hard, Ronin,” Zenith said. “You are far from home, or rather, the last place you wandered through. I have watched you from afar for a long time now, and I know you value your freedom. I know you value adventure.”

“I’m not going to be a warrior slave to anyone, if that’s your idea,” Raska said.

“If you think that is our purpose, you are gravely mistaken,” the black cat responded. “But Vaylan will not imprison you. He has the ability to send you back from where you came, if that is your wish. Rest tonight, little cat. You will not be harmed by any beast while you remain near me. When it is night you can meet my lord, and decide what your next adventure is.”

That was enough for Raska; his instincts told him Zenith was telling the truth about this much. The young cat trotted away from Zenith, and found a place among the grass. He yawned, lay down, and closed his eyes. He inhaled the damp scents of the jungle, and his ears caught the cawing of birds before sleep clouded his mind.

From the Lady Snow Leopard's lessons to Kjarez Nightbraker: The Janissaries and the Acolytes

The tale of how our order of Janissaries was founded is a complex one. As is the tale of our enemies, the Acolytes.

But let me tell you the way of things, quickly. The Janissaries are Jinn sworn to protect humanity by our Covenant with the Spirit of Life. The Acolytes want things to return to the old ways, when Jinn pretended they were greater than Man, and demanded their worship.

The Janissaries are lead by our Lord Vaylan, the Executor of the Spirit's Flame, and his chosen captains.

The Acolytes are lead by the Black Swan and her champion, Azazel.

SEDKAZAN



VAYLAN THE JAGUAR STRODE THROUGH HIS JUNGLE with Sedkazan beside him. The spotted big cat dwarfed the smaller one, though Sedkazan's fur shined like polished steel when he crossed near the waning fire light from the ceremony. They walked in silence for a time that seemed interminable to Sedkazan, when the silver cat finally spoke up.

“Lord Protector, I apologize for...”

“Be quiet,” Vaylan uttered.

Sedkazan shut up. The two beasts continued to walk for a few more minutes.

“I heard....” Vaylan began, “That you wanted to join the faction that would hunt down Azazel.”

Sedkazan said nothing.

“You understand that this is an impossibility now, correct?” Vaylan said.

Sedkazan thought very hard about what he was about to say. “I understand that is your prerogative...”

“You disobeyed an order from me,” Vaylan growled, turning his eyes upon Sedkazan.

“Northstar...”

“Northstar used magic first? He’s young and new to our order. You’re a Farishta and a veteran of countless battles,” Vaylan asserted.

“My lord, my apologies.”

“When the time comes, I will send the other captains to hunt down Azazel,” Vaylan said. “The Black Dervish is our most dangerous enemy, and I will not have someone with your temperament risking the mission.”

“My lord, I am just as skilled as...”

“It was a mistake making you captain.”

The words struck Sedkazan to his core. He looked down, and his tail dropped, “I...my lord...”

“But you will remain one,” the jaguar said. “But I am revoking your access to the Unseen.”

Are you kidding me? Sedkazan thought. “Thank you, Lord Protector.”

“In addition,” Vaylan continued. “You will assume command of Red Shaam’s warriors. You are familiar with them, correct?”

“I am,” Sedkazan said. That could be worse, he supposed. Working with Rikki, Ardechhai, and Kjarez again could be

enjoyable, though he knew he would be engaged in far more mundane tasks than what he had been doing before.

“In addition,” Vaylan said. “I am ordering that you train and a new Janissary.”

“What?” Sedkazan could not help himself.

“He is Ronin.”

Sedkazan ground his teeth, “My lord. If you remember, I defeated a marid last week. A marid that even Zenith, Shirazia, and Mordred had not been able to contain. I’m concerned that my talents might be put to waste if I have to...”

“That is your concern?” The jaguar uttered.

“Yes, my lord...”

“That is your concern?” Vaylan said again sharply. “My concern is the protection of humanity. My concern is that my captains obey orders.”

“I understand that, but...”

“It is not your place to question me, Sedkazan.”

Sedkazan said nothing. He felt the fur rising on the back of his neck again. *Babysitting new Janissaries? Ronin, too? Who am I?*

“I can sense you are angry,” Vaylan said softly.

Sedkazan was angry. For a brief moment he wondered how formidable the Executor of the Spirit’s Flame actually was.

“And I know you are one of the most dangerous creatures on earth, Sedkazan,” Vaylan said. “But I never knew you to be stupid.” The jaguar turned to look at him. His eyes made Sedkazan turn his nose to the earth with as much humility as he could muster.

“My claws are at your command, my lord,” Sedkazan said. His eyes remained downcast. The silver cat knew he had lost. “When will I meet this Ronin?”

“Zenith has brought him to Draekar,” the jaguar declared. “Tomorrow you will meet him, west of here.”

Sedkazan nodded.

“Don’t disappoint me again, Farishta Swiftasdeath,” the jaguar said. The spotted great cat locked eyes with the silver feline, then turned and bounded into the jungle.

RASKA



AS HE SLEPT, RASKA DREAMED OF HIS HUMAN. He saw the young human looking out over his bedroom window. Bolts of lightning shined in the distance, brightening a torrent of rainfall. His human picked a book from the windowsill and began reading.

“The Janissaries. They are not like other animals; they’re imbued with the spirit of the Jinn. They are creatures of Smokeless Flame. There are many animals like this. The Janissaries, however, are the protectors of humanity from dark spirits and the Acolytes...”

A wolf howled in the distance. Raska’s ears perked up. The human kept reading, but the words became inaudible whispers.

“Who do you think you are, White Day?” someone uttered.

Raska turned. He found himself outside on the windowsill of his human’s house, looking out over Berkeley. Thunderclouds

crashed in the distance. *There were never storms in Berkeley...* he thought in his sleep.

“Ronin.”

Raska woke up. It was nighttime. The young cat’s eyes dilated, and his senses adjusted to the dark. He saw Zenith before him, his tail swaying.

“You will follow me into the jungle.” Zenith told him. “Try to keep up.”

Raska yawned, then arched his back and stretched out his arms in front of him. He smiled. “I don’t think I’ll have any trouble.” Zenith looked older than him.

Zenith glared at him, his red eyes shining. “I am quite old, I’ve drank from the river Styx for two human centuries. But I am also quite nimble. We’ll see how fast you are, Ronin.”

A puzzled expression crossed Raska’s face, then Zenith moved, swift as a shroud in the wind. He vanished in of the jungle. Raska leapt to his feet, sniffed the air, and followed, moving as quickly as he could.

Raska saw that the black cat was no stranger to this territory. Zenith moved weightlessly, leaping over tree trunks, and balancing himself on low hanging branches. He fell and vanished into the shadows of trees, only to reappear meters away, his movements cloaked by his nightblack fur. Raska followed as gracefully as he could. Though Raska was agile, he had rarely navigated such dense foliage. The black cat moved through the jungle with a mechanical elegance, as if he was a moving part of the understory. Raska’s heart pounded he followed.

Soon the world around the young cat became blurred. His mind swam in confusion as he leapt over a frog with massive red eyes and a palpitating throat. He gasped as he dodged a spider web, almost colliding with its eerie, eight-legged courier. The night air was thick with alien scents, sending Raska's senses into haywire. A dirge like howl almost caused the golden cat to lose balance as he slid beneath the low hanging leaves of a fern and leapt on a log bridging a stream. Zenith's eyes were bright in the dark and the musk of the black cat was strong, providing Raska with a path, yet the jungle was its own beast, blanketing the young cat with its form.

Raska sucked air to his lungs. His ears caught the sound of voices, some in languages he had never heard, others in the common animal tongue. He could not discern their meaning. He began to feel his muscles tire. They had been moving for an hour, and Zenith had not relented. *What is the point of this?* he wondered, but his curiosity kept him moving.

Finally, Raska caught sight of what seemed like starlight. The trees began thinning, and the young cat found himself in a clearing atop a tall cliff, overlooking the forest. The moon poured light over him. Zenith stood at the edge the cliff, his silhouette visible in the starlight. Raska approached him, breathing deeply. He caught sight of vastness of the forest. He could see the canopy of the jungle merge into the dark horizon.

"I leave you here, now, Ronin," Zenith said. The black cat jumped off the side of the cliff. Raska's eyes widened in surprise, and then he heard a roar.

From the edge of the clearing the beast emerged, leaping from a pit of darkness between two trees. Raska had never seen

such a creature before, though he had heard of them in stories told by older cats in Los Angeles. He recognized the short ears and large jaw, the myriad black circles, stamped on a mane that glowed gold even beneath the moonlight. Fear struck the young cat's heart, as Raska's eyes locked with two shining orbs. A terrible musk filled Raska's nostrils, reeking of the deepest part of the jungle. The young cat suddenly felt very small.

The beast approached. He strode toward Raska with long, fluid motions, moving like mercury. Raska cowered; the earth seemed to shrink as each of the mighty animal's paws touched down upon grass. The young cat let out a hiss, as if instinct was commanding him to show some bravery in the face of this creature, though with one massive swipe of its paws it could have obliterated him. This was a jaguar, a king of cats that could traverse forest and water.

The young cat's head darted back and forth; perhaps he could escape, or maybe dive back into the jungle and look for a tree to climb. He considered leaping off the cliff, wondering how Zenith had disappeared.

"Ares Andromeda Starhazzard," the jaguar said. "I have been waiting for you."

"What...please...don't..." Raska said. *How does he know my real name?* Raska could sense himself trembling. *So this is what it felt like...* the young cat thought, and an awful sympathy for the dormice he had eaten welled up in his narrow chest.

"I am the master of the earth, I am the master of the arbor, I am the master of the river. I walk our lands and the land of men, and I dream of the underworld. I am shaped of Smokeless Flame,

I have glimpsed the Unseen,” the beast said. The jungle itself appeared to pour into the beast’s voice. “Run from me and meet the Spirit.”

Raska stood utterly still.

“Ares Andromeda Starhazzard,” the jaguar repeated. “I am Vaylan. Lord Protector of humanity, and the Executor of the Spirit’s Flame.”

“What...what do you want with me?” the young cat said.

“I have heard many tales about you, little cat. I have heard of your travels, of your love for humanity, for all life on this earth. I have heard of your strength and speed,” the jaguar said. “I have heard that you too are a beast of Smokeless Flame.”

Raska’s eyes darted left and right, and then fell upon the great cat. If he ran, he doubted he could get very far.

“I brought you here to offer you a place among the order of the Janissaries,” the jaguar said.

“I think I see that,” Raska said. “Why...should I join you all?”

The jaguar said, “You are young, and strong. You long for excitement, you long for adventure. Because you are Jinn, you will live for many cycles. But you will not live forever.”

“I don’t want to live forever,” Raska said.

“Join us,” the jaguar uttered. “And I can show you an adventure beyond your imagination. I can show you corners of the world beyond your America. I can reveal to you the extent of your talents. You can drink from the river Styx, and live for hundreds of cycles.”

“Why would I want those things?”

The jaguar approached Raska, and the young cat shrank back, edging toward the cliff. “The hunt is thrilling in the moment, but does it not bore you? Your travels from human city to human city, do they not grow tiresome? You descend from the Ifrit, little cat, you are capable of so much.”

Raska regained a little bit of his courage. “And be a slave? Spend my life protecting humans?”

The jaguar nodded, “The protection of humanity is our ultimate charge. And Janissaries swear an oath to our order. But do so, and you will meet the wonders of the universe.”

Raska shrugged. Fear still pulsed through him, but he said, “But the cost is the loss of my freedom?”

“The loss of some of your freedom, yes,” the jaguar said. “At the gain of the greatest adventure. Think of what you can achieve, Andromeda Starhazzard. Think of the wonders.”

The jaguar turned to look back into the forest. “You are under no obligation to accept, little cat. If you wish to return to your America, I will send you back. If you wish to stay, you may travel with some of our greatest knights for a time. You need not decide immediately to swear an oath to us.”

There was a moment of silence between the great cat and the small one. Raska cocked his head to one side, “Vaylan, you say?”

The jaguar nodded.

“Well Vaylan,” Raska said. *Life is short. Time is fleeting. Maybe this is the next path in my life. America is big, but America is not the world. I want to cross the oceans. I want to see the other great cats. I want to live and fight and hunt like no one else before. If these creatures are who they say they*

are, I might be in for a world I've never seen before. That's why Zann and I left California...that's why I left my human.

“I'll stay here,” Raska finally said. “For now. And we'll see where it goes.”

“A wise choice, little cat,” Vaylan responded. He turned to face the jungle.

“That's it?”

“For now,” the jaguar said, as he prowled toward the trees. “Go now, little cat. Your new comrades will find you in the morning.”

Vaylan the jaguar vanished, leaving Raska alone with his thoughts.

From the Lady Snow Leopard's lessons to Kjarez Nightbraker: The tale of man:

So what was the origin of our order? Let me tell you the tale. Like many stories, much elapses before it gets interesting.

The Spirit of Life has existed in all realms, all planes, and all times. He made many planes, many universes, and would visit each one. In every plane he visited, every time he opened his eyes, a thousand worlds would emerge. Every time he closed his eyes, another thousand worlds would emerge. He made many worlds, and on one of these worlds, he made some creatures from clay, and some from fire, such as the Jinn. Here is the beginning of our world, our earth:

Our world emerged in a storm of fire, where the Jinn were born. Because Jinn, after all, are creatures of Smokeless Flame. But then later the fire cooled, and our earth, one of thousands, was blessed with the gift of water. It is true that those who were made from clay first emerged from the water. For is it not true, my child, that clay is a mixture of earth and water?

So from the mud of the waters of our world, many creatures emerged. Creatures with fins, creatures with scales, creatures with wings. The Jinn watched over these creatures, and lived alongside them, occasionally using their magic to jump to other realms and other worlds to play. The Jinn were the cleverest of all creation, after all.

Now, for eons the reptiles ruled the earth, and the Spirit struck up a calamity that came from the sky. No one knows why. From the ashes the little mammals

emerged, who then gave birth to larger and larger mammals. Eventually, all manner of warm-blooded beasts walked the earth.

Then came the “Bandar Log,” the monkey people. No one thought much of them in the beginning, the Jinn would mock their clumsy motions, and how easily they fell to the fangs of the favorite mammal of the Jinn, the saber-fanged cat. Yet one day, things changed.

Sure enough, a family of Bandar Log wandered into a lush jungle. There, they gave birth to new young, each generation smarter, stronger, and cleverer than the next. The Spirit dubbed this dynasty Man, the cleverest of the Bandar Log.

As the generations passed, the Jinn noticed that Man was becoming clever like the Jinn. Others noticed how happy this Man was. She became good at gathering fruit, caring for her young, swift on her feet to avoid the saber-cats, and smart enough to fashion objects to make her life easier.

Man and Jinn lived alongside one another for a time, and then things changed.

KJAREZ



KJAREZ HAD NOT RETURNED TO HER CITY when Sedkazan had called out to her. That night in Draekar she had hunted rodents to tame her hunger. Though food was not difficult to find in Tehran alleyways, prey and clean water was always plentiful in Draekar. Watered, fed, and satisfied, she had fallen asleep amidst a bed of large jungle lilies, the color of a spring sky.

The black and white cat dreamed of the astral gates when she slept. She dreamt of the shifting planes between our universe and the others, and the massive explosions in deep space. She felt the quaking of the dark matter that formed the passages that allowed the Janissaries instantaneous transportation across the earth and channels of telepathic communications. Through them, she heard that chatter of a thousand minds as she slept. Once,

these sounds were an awful din that she despised, but through her training under the snow leopard Artemisia, these sounds were white noise.

Through this clamor, Sedkazan called to her, sending his thoughts to hers.

<Kjarez!> he said. <Can we talk?>

She blinked once, returning to the land of the woken, feeling irritated. In theory, telepathy was only to be used when Janissaries were on missions, or if business of the order was to be discussed. In practice, all the captains used it whenever they desired.

<Glad to see Vaylan didn't try to eat you alive, Sedkazan> she said, throwing her thoughts back at him. *Might have done him so good though*, she thought privately.

<You're telling me> Sedkazan replied. <Can I see you?>

<That depends.>

<I just want to see you, to speak.>

Kjarez rolled her eyes and looked around. <I was having such pleasant dreams.>

“I doubt that.”

The Sorceress leapt to her feet, hissed and whirled around. There was Sedkazan. She swiped at his nose. The silver cat ducked beneath her paw, and smiled again.

“So I see you’re still with us. What did Vaylan do to you?” Kjarez said.

Sedkazan’s arched his tale, “Well, I’m not going to be the one to hunt down Azazel.”

“Well, that was to be expected,” Kjarez replied.

“It gets worse. My access to the Unseen is gone,” he said darkly. “And I have to mentor a Ronin.”

Kjarez yawned, “Well, at least he didn’t eat you alive.” She pounced playfully at him, “And why the hell were you using telepathy when you were right here? It’s a waste of energy.”

Sedkazan narrowed his eyes, and said, “I thought magic was limitless.”

“Nothing is limitless,” she responded. “Though everyone seems to think that.”

“Yeah, right,” Sedkazan nodded. “But anyway, I have to mentor this Ronin. All for using magic in a duel *after* Northstar used magic. The little punk deserved a good frying.”

Kjarez rolled her eyes.

“What’s that?”

“Don’t worry about it,” she responded.

“No, tell me,” Sedkazan snapped.

“Sedkazan, you’re not a kitten. In fact, you’ve done so much and fought so hard. Angelo’s a puppy. But you can’t blame Vaylan or him for what you did, so you just have to accept that,” Kjarez said.

Sedkazan opened his mouth to speak, but Kjarez interjected, “But never mind that. Who is this Ronin?”

Sedkazan batted an insect that had flown by, “Just some cat. Too old for our order, but Vaylan and Zenith both want him.”

“Well, he could ask for no better teacher,” Kjarez said.

“Forget that,” Sedkazan said. “I spoke to Rikki and Ardechai. They’re going to handle this kid. I’m going to go to Asia to bring back Kaliya Wakestalker.”

“For what?” Kjarez said. She was beginning to get bored of this conversation, and just wanted to sleep, and travel back to Tehran.

“This is the best part of my punishment!” Sedkazan said. “We’re all going to be fighting together again. Us, and this Ronin.”

“You hate working as a team,” Kjarez said. “You hated it when we all worked together under Red Shaam.”

“That’s why Vaylan is punishing me this way,” Sedkazan remarked.

“So why are Rikki and Ardechai handling this cat when it’s your job?” Kjarez inquired.

Sedkazan extended his paws and elevated his back, “Well...I’m more of a hands off type of mentor.”

“Gods,” Kjarez muttered. “You’re so full of yourself.”

Sedkazan laughed. Kjarez shook her head, “Okay, Farishta Swiftasdeath, I’m going back to sleep. I guess I won’t be going home any time soon. Least not until I meet this Ronin.”

“Yeah. I’ll see all of you in a few days,” Sedkazan said.

“So what’s his name?” Kjarez asked.

“Hmm?”

“The Ronin, what’s his name?”

“His name is Ares Andromeda Starhazzard,” Sedkazan said. “Zenith says he goes by Raska for some reason.”

“Starhazzard, hmm?” Kjarez said, she closed her eyes and yawned. “I like that name. Starhazzard.”

“I like it too,” Sedkazan said.

“Maybe he’ll end up being better looking than you,” she said.

“I really doubt that,” Sedkazan offered.

“Good,” Kjarez said. “No go away, and don’t wake me up again.”

“Sure thing,” Sedkazan smiled and padded away. Kjarez saw a glint of blue light in the distance as the silver cat used the astral gates to leap away.

Kjarez cared for Sedkazan, but was too aware of his flaws. After the death of White Day he had never been quite the same, and his temper had increased. It wasn’t long ago that they had slept in the same places. For a time she had loved him passionately, but she had grown tired of some of his traits, and demanded they end their tryst. Most often, she had no desire to keep him close to her, and refused his occasional advances. Sometimes, when she saw his blue eyes and silver fur, or wield his legendary lightning, she felt a pang of longing inside her.

The Sorceress banished these reflections from her mind, and lay back down, stretching her body. In the world they lived in there were always more important things at stake. Now was the time to rest. The Persian cat drifted off to sleep, where the furious sights of space awaited her.

KALIYA



IN A DUSTY ALLEY IN KARACHI, a fakir dressed in a kurta white as snow impressed the locals with his snakecharming. The villagers would gasp and point, for though there were many such entertainers in Pakistan, few could command a cobra like this.

The serpent would weave through the narrow arms of the fakir, and sway inches away from his face like a lover. As the fakir locked his eyes with the serpent's, the terrifying mask on the cobra's hood would glare at the city folk with two black eyes and a mouth twisted into a smile. Some watchers would whisper verses of scripture beneath their breaths, and attempt to avert their eyes, as the cobra shifted like a ribbon of smoke, and the gnarled hands of the fakir strummed his coils.

Sometimes children would hurl stones at the fakir and dart off into the distance, telling their friends that the old man and his giant snake were proxies of the devil. Kinder ones would toss weathered coins into the fakir's begging bowl, taking care to avoid

hitting the serpent. The old man would speak thanks from his withered lips, which were blanketed in a tangled beard.

Few knew that the snake was in command of the human's mind, for though the cobra was no servant of the devil, he was a creature of Smokeless Flame.

The cobra's name was Kaliya Wakestalker, he was the serpent who could command the minds of men and beast. He was a Janissary with a notorious and harrowing reputation. Once, he had infiltrated the mind of a warlord in the North West Frontier Province, and set his men on a Tajik magician that had attempted to access the dark arts. Kaliya had also slain the legendary black rabbit of Qamar, the Acolyte corsair who had guided young humans to their demise. It was said that Kaliya Wakestalker used his telepathy to the keep the Black Rabbit's brain functioning as Kaliya devoured him, so he could feel every second of pain before death. A fitting punishment to Kaliya Wakestalker, but a deed that his comrades believed hideous.

So Kaliya was sent to the troubled city to keep whatever peace he could. Once he had been a feared beast known across all the subcontinent, yet now, he shared his mind with old snakecharmers, using his talents to entertain the locals, and slay demons and Acolytes when he could find them.

As Kaliya draped his coils over the fakir's bony shoulders, he reflected on how most of the trouble in this city was caused by men themselves. Demons and imps thrived here, no doubt, but the crime and its violence was far more pervasive, and had more mundane origins. Kaliya neither cared nor wanted to intervene in such affairs unless he was ordered to do so.

The crowds dispersed. He had spent so many weeks in this alleyway that many of the denizens no longer cared about watching the show. *So this is how my legacy ends...entertaining humans while the Black Dervish and the Acolytes gather, with my score against the Darmak unsettled...*

“Hello Kaliya,” quipped a voice.

The cobra turned to look behind him. The fakir did not move, half his mind in another place. The cobra’s eyes fell upon a cat with silver fur.

“Sedkazan,” the cobra uttered. “What are you doing here?”

“I miss you too,” Sedkazan said, yawning. He plopped to the ground and stretched his arms.

Kaliya looked at the cat. *Killing Sedkazan is no easy task, but I could digest him with little trouble....*

“I hear you are a captain now,” the cobra told him, loosening his coils around the human and slithering closer to the silver cat. “Congratulations. It’s no easy office.”

“I’ve been told that many times,” the cat responded. He ignored the snake as he drew a circle around him with his massive coils. “Though I take you seriously. You were one of the best.”

“I don’t think Vaylan ever thought so,” the snake responded.

“Lord Vaylan,” Sedkazan corrected. “Lord Protector Vaylan. Lord Executor Vaylan. But hey, what does captaincy mean anymore?”

Kaliya flicked his tongue out thoughtfully. “Nothing is earned anymore.”

“Nope.”

“And here I am, where Vaylan sent me, after cycles of doing my duty.”

“Lord Vaylan. I mean, what you did to that Acolyte was rather extreme...”

“What the black rabbit did to us was worse. What he did to those children was worse than what most of my most brethren do to prey,” Kaliya said with a low hiss. He opened his hood.

“You know, if you acted like you felt bad about it you’d be a captain again,” Sedkazan said. He closed his eyes, ignoring the shadow of the cobra fall over him.

“I am speaking objectively. Snakes do not feel good or bad about things. They just endure. They act. They commit. I assessed the punishment as being just for the crime, and I stand by that assessment,” Kaliya said.

“Yet you don’t agree with your exile?” Sedkazan asked, batting the snake with his paw.

“I was not exiled, I was....”

“Well, whatever you want to call it,” Sedkazan sighed. “Let’s not go through this again? I want you on my team.”

There was silence. “You once fought under my command,” the cobra hissed.

“And things change, right?” Sedkazan said. “You’re not the beast you were when you were young. I’m not either. Vaylan’s made a puppy a Janissary. Acolytes are everywhere, humans are destroying the planet, Red Shaam is missing, probably dead, and I’ve been ordered to mentor a Ronin. I want something I can rely on, someone I can rely on.”

“You don’t like me. You never did.”

“Of course I don’t like you. Nobody likes you. That’s because you’re an” Sedkazan saw the cobra’s eyes flicker. “But that doesn’t change the equation. We have important missions to go on, where we might even run into your old friend Darmak. Don’t you want to join the fun?”

It wouldn’t be difficult to digest him... “If I go with you, I can leave this place?”

“Of course!” Sedkazan told him. “Don’t know how you’d fit in North America, thought. You’re a rather big snake.”

“I’ve never been to America,” the cobra admitted.

“It’s the best place in the world, after Japan,” Sedkazan told him.

“So when do we leave?” the cobra asked.

“Now, I suppose,” Sedkazan said, his tail wafting back and forth. “I only have access to these gates for so long, and I’m supposed to meet this Ronin on the other side of the world. It would be great, of course, if you came with me.”

“My fangs are at your command, Sedkazan,” the snake hissed.

Sedkazan smiled, “Glad we’re working together again, Wakestalker.”

Kaliya hissed, “So why are you mentoring a Ronin?”

Sedkazan licked his paw, “I dueled with Angelo Northstar after his initiation ceremony. Magic was not allowed. He used magic, I used magic in retaliation, and Vaylan is punishing me for that.”

Kaliya thought about this for a moment. He was familiar with Sedkazan's temper. It was something, as a cold-blooded creature, he did not understand. "Very well. Who is this Ronin?"

"A cat. I sent Ardechais and Rikki to meet him."

"The mongoose?" Kaliya felt a wave of antipathy.

"Yeah, don't let it get in the way, Wakestalker."

"It won't, we are Jinn, after all," the cobra swayed his head back and forth. "But instinct is instinct. Shall we depart?"

"Of course."

The fakir had glanced at the silver cat, but did not notice the flash of blue, though he blinked at the shining dust that drifted in the air around him. He was left alone, his hands free of the snake's coils, his mind unclouded by the serpent's preternatural thrall over him.

From the Lady Snow Leopard's lessons to Kjarez Nightbraker: The rebellion of the Jinn:

Not all believe this story, but it is said that the Spirit of Life called the Ifrit of the Jinn, the most powerful of Jinn, to the lush forest where Man dwelled. The Spirit of Life demanded that the all the Ifrit of the Jinn bow to Man, for Man was the greatest of the Spirit's creation. The Spirit demanded that all Jinn recognize Man as the vicegerent of our world, the earth.

Most of the Jinn present accepted this as law, but there was one Jinn who did not. He challenged the Spirit's command.

"We are made of fire and he is made of clay," the Rebel Jinn said. "We shall not bow. We should rule this earth, the world, and all the worlds and planes the Spirit has created."

"You will bow," the Spirit thundered, but the Rebel Jinn refused.

The Rebel and his allies among the Jinn decided to make war on Man. Now the Spirit was the most beneficent and most merciful, but he could tolerate this. From the earth, he summoned great beasts known as the Kaiju, who beat back the Jinn. The Spirit broke the Rebel Jinn by hurling him to the earth, then he had him placed in chains of dark matter and banished to the heart of a singularity.

Now the Rebel Jinn had been clever, and left instructions for his disciples, those Jinn who did not agree with Man's sovereignty on earth. These Jinn were bent on the destruction of Man.

And so it was one of these Jinn that transformed into a snake. How fitting to choose a reptile!

Now there was a fruit deep in the woods of the greatest jungle. This fruit pulsed with a power not known to Jinn or Man. The Spirit had forbidden man to eat this fruit.

One day, Man wandered into the part of the jungle where the fruit grew, looking for food. The snake approached him and spoke the tongue of man.

“Eat this thing!” the snake told Man.

“Why shall I eat this?” Man responded. Man knew some foods caused sickness.

“Eat this, and you will become better than the Jinn! You will become like the Spirit of Life!”

Now Man knew of the Jinn, and their powers, and envied them. While he feared the Spirit, and knew it was only his place to serve the Spirit, not become him, he wished to be like the Jinn. So, he used his free will and consumed the fruit. He fed the fruit to his children. His children, intoxicated by the fruit, gave birth to new children.

There was something about this fruit that changed the nature of man. Man developed better tools. Man became swifter. He gave birth to children more selectively. But he became crueler. He needlessly killed his brothers and sisters and needlessly savaged the world around him.

Now the Spirit ruled over many planes and many worlds, yet he knew of this transgression. He saw that man ate the fruit and cast him from the lush jungle had had made for Man. Yet the Spirit reserved his rage for the Jinn.

“Why did you not stop this?”

“Verily, it was not our duty!” the Jinn cried out.

For this transgression, the Spirit stripped the Jinn of most of their magic, most of their powers. And he transformed the greatest of the Ifrit into the form of the beasts of earth, the numberless beasts lower than man. This, my child, is how our ancestors, the first of the Jinn Beasts, came into being.

RASKA



AFTER HIS ENCOUNTER WITH THE JAGUAR, Raska went hunting again. He managed to catch a couple mice he found wandering on the forest floor. After his meal, he fell asleep again. He dreamed of the house on Bancroft Street in Berkeley, and the clear nights where he'd hunt and play and lie between his human and the girl he loved. He dreamed of Zann the fox, and their late night chats beneath the moonlight. He dreamed of Siyara, a mate from a summer ago, and her thick tabby hair. As he dreamed, he felt the warmth of his human's companion against him. Yet it

wasn't long before the warmth became a deep cold. The young cat found himself in a field of blazing white, his fur burning in cold as he was hit by jets of wind carrying snowfall. The young cat blinked. He saw two dark eyes appear in the distance, pinpricks in the vast blankness.

"What can be done against my champion, when White Day is dead?"

"Wake up, kitty."

Raska blinked and awoke. He quickly leapt to his paws. Two strange creatures stood before him. One was like nothing Raska had seen or smelled before. He was the size of a cat, but resembled a weasel. He had thick bronze fur and hazel eyes, and his tail was long and bushy. The creature looked light on its feet.

His companion was a species Raska had encountered before. He was a large blue heron. The young cat recognized the long legs and beak and the feathers the color of cobalt. A dark stripe ran from the bird's eyes down his neck, which was tall and serpentine. A tuft of black feathers topped his skull. The bird carried a large fish in his beak. He stood next to the other creature, dwarfing both him and Raska.

"Who are you?" Raska asked, somewhat shaken. The young cat didn't like being surprised. He tensed up and leaned back, ready for trouble.

"Cool it," the bronze creature said in an accent Raska did not recognize. "Sedkazan sent us to find you. We hear you want to join us."

The heron dropped the fish at Raska's feet. "Eat, enjoy."

Raska eyed the fish, then took a small bite of it. Swallowing, he said. "And you are Janissaries?"

“Two of the greatest,” the bronze creature said. “I’m Rikki, the bird here is Ardechai. I take it you’re Ares?”

“I go by Raska,” the cat responded. “Rikki?” He looked the creature up and down, and came to a realization. “So you’re a mongoose?”

“Yeah.”

Raska nodded. “Rikki as in –?”

“No, no, I’m not related to him, it’s a rather common sort of name.”

“He tells folks he’s related to him. All the time,” the bird named Ardechai said.

“Good to meet both of you,” Raska said. “So what are you here for?”

Rikki shrugged, “Sedkazan was supposed to meet you, but he was busy. So he sent us. We’re supposed to show you the ropes, I suppose.”

“Sedkazan?” Raska asked. His ears twitched. “You don’t mean *the* Sedkazan, do you?”

Rikki rolled his eyes, and Ardechai chuckled. The heron said, “Yeah, the legendary Sedkazan. I take it you’ve heard of him.”

“I thought he was a myth. Cats across North America speak of him,” Raska said.

“Oh he’s real. Way too real,” Rikki said. “You’ll meet him, soon enough.”

“So, cat, what are your talents?” Ardechai asked.

“My talents?”

“You are Jinn, correct, otherwise you wouldn’t be here. You sound too smart for a normal cat anyway,” Rikki said.

Raska ignored the second comment, and shrugged. “I’m faster than most, stronger than most. I like to think I’m a fast learner.”

“That’s all of us,” Rikki said. “Can you do anything else?”

“What do you mean, anything else?”

Rikki grinned. Ardechais raised a wing, “Dude, we have jungle surrounding us. Don’t try out any of your new tricks, here.”

“Fine, fine,” Rikki said. The mongoose turned, “Come this way, cat. We’ll be showing you around Draekar, and telling you what we do.”

“Right on,” Raska said. He licked his paws.

“Oh, take your time, please, cat,” Ardechais said, waving a wing dramatically.

Raska began licking himself slower, and yawned.

“Oh you’re going to be that way, aren’t you?” Rikki said.

Raska stopped preening himself, and smiled. “I’m done now.”

The mongoose smiled. “Let’s walk and talk, then.”

Raska cocked his head to one side. *Might as well go with the flow.*

Ardechais flapped his wings and caught air, leaves fluttering in his wake. Rikki grinned again, and dashed toward jungle. Despite everything, Raska felt a flicker of playfulness inside him. He found his feet and sprinted after the others.

As the animals moved into the jungle, Raska felt the morning light fill the place, making the shadows retreat in the trees. The heron glided effortlessly above him the cat and mongoose,

who moved quickly; dodging branches, and pausing to take time to scale the sides of trees and lap up pools of gathered rainwater.

Rikki moved fast, talked fast, and talked a lot, and talked boastfully. But he was a fascinating creature with many tales to tell about adventures across the world. The mongoose had a gleam in his eyes as he spoke about powerful rivers flowing into the oceans, tall roaring waterfalls, blistering deserts, snakes he had battled with, and even demons he talked of slaying. He had even spent time with charlatan magicians in human circuses and slept in hammocks with trapeze artists. He spoke of his longtime friendship with the heron above them. There was a passion for life Raska saw in the strange creature Raska saw in himself.

“They knew who I was in Spain and India,” Rikki proclaimed. He darted after a flying insect. “I brought medicine to sick humans, slew the lava demons of Kamokuna, and defeated a Pan in a tournament of riddles.”

“Sounds wild,” Raska said. He glanced upwards at the heron. “Does he talk much?”

“Oh, he does, you have to get him on the ground and one-on-one,” Rikki said. “So how did you end up here?”

Raska felt himself go into a pouncing position. He dapped the other creature on the side of the head, attempting to spar. Rikki laughed. “Careful, cat.”

“I’m from western North America. Lived around the city of Los Angeles. When I was a kitten I found myself in the back of a surfer’s van and sure enough I was in San Francisco. Spent a lot of time there, fighting, playing, hunting, spending time around all sorts of humans.” Rikki leaped at the young cat. Raska leaped

higher, and felt the mongoose fly beneath him. He landed on the bough of a nearby tree. He draped himself over the branch, his limbs and tail pouring over one side of the branch like a stream of liquid flame.

“How did Zenith find you?” Rikki asked.

Raska closed his eyes, feeling the warmth from the sun. He yawned. “A few cycles ago, I went travelling from one side of North America to the other. I jumped on trains, met some strange creatures, rode in cars, spent the night in cardboard boxes and even in the big houses of some humans. I ended up on a boat after being chased by a few large dogs that I couldn’t fend off.”

Raska jumped from the branch and landed behind Rikki. He attempted to playfully swipe at the mongoose, but the mongoose dodged his blow and swiped back. Raska hopped backwards. “Next thing I knew there was a storm...and these things...these strange animals, like nothing I’ve seen before came after me. They were like bats but big and scaly.”

“Ghouls?”

Raska glanced sideways. The heron had landed.

“Yeah, I guess,” Raska said. “Then the big black cat had appeared, he fought them off, and I ended up here.”

The time passed, and Raska and the mongoose hunted together, the bird flying above them. The mongoose told Raska tales of the Jinn and their many forms.

“Have you met other Jinn before?” Rikki asked.

“Yeah, a few,” Raska admitted. “A few cats, a couple foxes and a snake. A raccoon once. They could all do weird stuff.”

Rikki yawned, “A few cats, huh?”

“Sedkazan likes to say that cats were the first types of Jinn Beasts,” Ardechai the heron said. “I’ve met some cats that pretended they were Jinn.”

The trio found themselves on a tall hill overlooking a stream. Raska saw a flash of blue and saw the heron fly into the air, the gray sky framing him as he climbed upwards.

“Always wanted to do that,” Raska commented.

“You might get to, one day.”

Raska looked at the mongoose quizzically, but found his sight back on Ardechai, who danced elegantly in the sky. The bird suddenly dived. Raska’s vision could scarcely follow the heron as he vanished into the water without a splash. He emerged moments later, a fish in his beak, his feathers glistening. He made some loops in the sky as the last light of sunset glinted off the water.

“These waters converge to form the jungles of Draekar,” Rikki told Raska. “The holy land granted to the Janissaries by the Spirit of Life.”

“The sacred river Styx flows through their waters. Jinn who drink from this water are granted immortality....”

“Not true immortality,” Ardechai interrupted. “There’s no such thing. Sure, it’ll prolong your life, heal you, but...”

“You know what I mean,” Rikki shot back, somewhat irritably.

Raska looked down upon the river that cleaved the jungle. It looked like any other river he had encountered, a chasm of unknown waters between two breasts of green land. “So this river is the river Styx?”

“Nah, the Styx is underground. Or somewhere, exactly,” Rikki said. “No one knows exactly. Only the Lord Protector, Executor of the Spirit’s Flame, can see the Styx. To become the Lord, they have to bathe in its purest waters.”

“The jaguar,” Raska said quietly.

Rikki laughed suddenly. “Ardechais here thinks he’s some expert on the Styx. Because of...”

“I’ll show him,” the heron responded. The bird took flight again, flapping his cobalt wings. He reached half the height of a nearby tree, when Raska felt drops of rainwater splash upon his golden fur. Instantly, the young cart darted to shelter under a large leaf.

“Relax, Starhazzard,” Rikki said. “You’ll be glad for this rain one day. Its Ardechais’s finest talent.”

The bird descended, and lowered his neck, bowing like a showman.

“I absorb the water through my wings,” he told Raska. “In times of need, I conjure rainfall laced with the water of the Styx. If you’re ever in a tough spot, my water will heal you.”

Raska’s memory of the dark storm, Zenith, and the ghouls briefly surfaced. He felt a pang of fear. “Might be something I’d have to pass on.”

Rikki shook his head. “You won’t. Trust me. Ardechais can cure any harm.”

“Almost anything,” the heron corrected him. “Except....”

“Azazel,” Rikki interrupted. His face grew grim.

Raska cocked his head to one side. “Azazel?”

“Don’t worry about him,” Rikki said. “Not yet.”

Raska sniffed, and looked at the mongoose again curiously. “Well, it was great talking to you guys.”

“Hah, going somewhere, Raska?” Rikki said.

Raska looked at his surroundings, and said nothing. He was not sure of where his path lay. He was in a new jungle, surrounded by new beasts, and he felt alive in a way he had not experienced in some time. He thought of the great jaguar, and his offer for a new adventure. On the other side of things, he knew that with every new place, danger lurked somewhere. *Truth is, I don't know where I am, and I don't know what's coming next.*

“So I guess you guys want me to join your little pack?” Raska asked.

Rikki’s tail wafted back and forth nonchalantly. “It’s not what we want, it’s what Vaylan wants. It’s what Sedkazan wants.”

“Sedkazan,” Raska remarked. “You mentioned him before. Is he one of you?”

“Yep,” Rikki said. “What do you know of him?”

Sedkazan was something of a new legend in the feline world. Cats had all sorts of myths to tell their young, about the great cat gods of Egypt, the demon cat beneath the great American city, the tiger gods of India. In his travels, there were tales of other felines. Cunning creatures, tricksters, allies of humanity, and of course, Jinn in the form of cats. One such tale he had heard recently involved a silver cat named Sedkazan, known for protecting humans from hungry wolves and feeding hungry kittens in the bleakest city corners. He was known for appearing near lightning strikes.

“We all choose our paths. I joined when I was a pup and I haven’t looked back,” Rikki said.

Raska laughed. “Choose my path, huh? I don’t even know where the hell I am. Or how to get back where I came from.”

Rikki smiled, and Ardechhai laughed, cawing. “Wellllll....there might be a way,” the mongoose told him.

Ardechhai took flight again, and called down to the two beasts, “Follow us, little cat.”

Raska sighed. “Guess we’re going on another walk, huh?”

“You bet,” Rikki said. “Try to keep up.”

The mongoose darted in the jungle, and Raska followed.

Night moved across the jungle, and the understory became wreathed in shadow. Raska had trailed Rikki and Ardechhai, but the two creatures seemed to have disappeared in thin air, and their scents became faint. He thought he heard the mongoose laughing and the wings of the bird flapping, but those sounds became lost. The young cat’s vision adapted to the night around him, and he looked around. The jungle created an array of shadows, and all the wild things that hid in its corners – from the insects to the frogs to bigger creatures that Raska feared – sang into the air.

As Raska prowled, he felt apprehension again. Rikki and Ardechhai were friendly beasts, for sure. But they were still alien to him. This world of Jinn and Janissaries and the great jaguar were unknown and frightening. But they called out to Raska’s curiosity.

“Ronin,” Raska heard someone call. The young cat turned around, and was surprised to see a female cat.

She was small and lithe, and her fur was a deep black splashed with white patches. Such a patch covered the fur around her eyes, which glowed with a strange incandescence. Raska breathed in her scent. It carried both the jungle and the aroma of a city the young cat could not identify, a smell of packed streets and spices.

“Greetings,” Raska said. “Who might you be?”

“Kjarez Teraxis Nightbraker,” she said.

Cool name... Raska thought. “You didn’t happen to see a talkative – ” Raska paused to find the word – “mongoose and a big blue bird, did you?”

“Oh, I saw them,” she said. “I sent them a thousand miles away.”

Raska looked at her, trying to understand this, “Ah, what?”

“You’re looking for an adventure, alley cat?”

Raska was taken aback. “I’m not an alley cat.”

“Of course you’re an alley cat,” she said. “You look like an alley cat. You smell like an alley cat. And you talk like an alley cat. Alley cat who thinks he wants an adventure.”

Raska chuckled, hopped on a nearby root, and sprawled himself over it. “Oh, I do want an adventure. But I’ve seen all of America, and I don’t know what more there is to see.”

“What have you seen in America?” she asked.

Raska paused. No one had ever asked him that before. “Much of what they call California, New York, some of the big desert. Beaches at night, docks filled with rats. And alleys, I suppose. I am apparently am an alley cat, after all.”

She laughed. “So you’ve seen a very tiny part of America. Must have been quite the adventure.”

“It was,” Raska said. “It’s hard to travel across something so big.”

“Not necessarily,” she said. There was a burst of blue light behind Kjarez, and every crevice of the jungle was illuminated. Raska leaped back in fright, squinting his eyes as they adapted to the radiance. As Raska’s eyes adjusted, something unusual happened. It was as if the jungle around them was disappearing, falling into a vortex of swirling light, and the edges of a human city’s skyline framed by a hot sun emerged.

Kjarez locked eyes with Raska, though the young cat’s attention shifted to the vast metropolis that appeared behind her. “Tehran, my hometown,” she said. “My favorite city.”

The city vanished in blue light. Raska then witnessed streams of foaming water cascade down a mountainside, feeding life into a forest.

“China,” she said. The waterfalls disappeared, swallowed by the blue light. Raska cowered as a mountain range appeared, crisp against a sky that seemed to touch the edges of space. “Tibet.”

The mountains vanished in the light, revealing a city that sat between a vast blue ocean and tall cliffs. “Capetown.” The city disappeared, and a desert took its place, its sands deep and red. “Utah. A place in your America you haven’t seen.”

The desert vanished, disappearing into the blue. Then the light faded, falling away into an invisible place behind Kjarez. The jungle returned, steeped in darkness.

“Whoa,” Raska said quietly. “What...was that?”

“I am one of the few Sorceresses of the Janissaries,” she said. “Disciple of the Artemisia, a handmaiden of the astral gates. Through me, you can jump between the gates to see places you’ll never see in your lifetime. Join us, Ronin, and I’ll give you your adventure.”

Raska looked upon her, trying to absorb what he had just experienced. The young cat was at a loss for words. He had seen much travelling and had encountered magic before, but the sights before him in this jungle were perplexing.

“So, little cat,” came a voice behind him.

Raska turned, and there was the jaguar, looking down on him from the heights of a tree. In the corner of his eye, he saw the black cat Zenith surface from the shadows and a horned owl land on the branch of a tree.

“Have you enjoyed our jungle, little cat?” Vaylan asked, leaping from his perch.

“It’s a beautiful place,” Raska admitted, his voice shaking slightly as he witnessed the great cat. “I would like to stay and learn more.”

“Then stay, Raska,” Vaylan said, finally using the cat’s chosen name. “You are a creature of Smokeless Flame, and with us you can use your talents to meet a noble purpose.”

“Protecting humanity?”

“Yes,” Vaylan responded.

“Do they really need protection?” Raska challenged.

Raska heard the black cat Zenith hiss.

“They will always need our protection,” Vaylan responded. “Our order was founded when the Ifrit, the greatest of all Jinn, thought they could conquer this world and enslave those made from Clay. It was for that transgression that this order was created.”

“We protect humans from evil Jinn, those creatures that become monsters and demons. With knowledge from the Unseen, we guide humans toward better futures and protect them from a hostile world. And sometimes we protect them from themselves.”

For a moment, Raska was silent. *America is not the world*, he thought. Then, he said, “What’s next, then?” Raska said.

“You will meet your captain,” Vaylan said.

Blue light flashed around the young cat, piercing the shadows of the jungle. Raska saw the jaguar’s face, outlined in white, before it vanished in a cluster of starlight.

From the Lady Snow Leopard's lessons to Kjarez Nighthraker: The origin of the Janissaries:

The tales split like the branches of a tree. Many disagree with how the Janissaries became the most powerful of all Jinn and have their own stories. Some do not even believe in the tales I told you, my child. But here is what the legends say.

Because the Jinn rebelled against the Spirit and claimed greatness over his creation, Man, the Jinn owed the Spirit of Life recompense. But because Man had eaten the profane fruit, he too owed a debt.

The Spirit would not enslave Jinn, because they have free will, and not all rebelled against him. The Spirit would not enslave Man, because he too has free will, and was the Spirit's vicegerent on earth.

But Man would have to make his own way in the world, without protection from the Spirit, in a place where hunters and the elements would strike at him. In a place where famine and disease would take his children. In a place where some Jinn would choose to do evil to him.

But of the Ifrit, those Jinn that became beasts that walk the earth, there would be a Covenant between the Spirit of Life and the Jinn. There would be Janissaries, the warrior servants of the Spirit of Life, that would swear oaths to protect man. Only the greatest of Jinn Beasts could join them. The rest could walk and wander the earth as they pleased, so long as the Janissaries fulfill their duty to protect Man and his progeny.

VAYLAN



VAYLAN WATCHED KJAREZ, RASKA, AND THE BLACK CAT ZENITH disappear through the astral gates. He then looked upon the horned owl. The owl fell from the branch of its tree and glided over to the jaguar. She landed before him, her thick talons clutching the soil.

“He will make a good Janissary, my lord. And if the next calamity occurs, we will need him,” the horned owl told Vaylan.

Vaylan nodded. “Perhaps. But in the meantime, it is time to face today’s calamity. I must commune with the Styx.”

“Indeed,” the horned owl responded. “I must tell you, my lord, that my sister the snowy owl reached out to me.”

“Oh?”

“Safeydraat Wolfking is on the move,” the owl told him.

Vaylan considered this briefly. “Thank you for letting me know. I will be glad to see him.” The jaguar said nothing further on the subject, keeping his thoughts hidden. He turned from his servant, and went off into the jungle.

Vaylan crossed much of Draekar before he found the edge of the river. It was still as glass he looked out over it, far from where it diverted into gushing whitewater and farther still from the coasts where it connected to the great oceanic kingdom where the Emperor dwelled. Vaylan took a deep breath and dived.

Vaylan felt the coldness of the water sift through his fur as he entered the river without a splash, and he began making deep strokes with his limbs. The great cat moved diagonally through the river, descending as he went. For a time he saw fish and reptiles swim by him, quickly diverting their paths in case he thought they were prey. As he went, layers of sediment cast a pall over Vaylan’s vision. Then finally, the natural waters of the river seemed to become replaced by something enigmatic; darker waters in a place where the light of the night sky above the surface of the water dwindled into nothingness.

In Draekar, the *Maul Hayat*, the river Styx coursed through the tributaries of the jungle, blessing tonnage of water with scattered, magical drops. Of the Janissaries, all could drink from these waters and benefit from its regenerative powers. Of the captains of the Janissaries, some could enter these waters and look into the Unseen, and gain insight and wisdom. But only one beast could swim through the river and enter the Styx itself. Tradition

mandated that only the Lord Protector, the Executor of the Spirit's Flame, be granted this sacred duty. This generation, it was Vaylan who occupied that esteemed station.

The jaguar felt a tightness in his lungs, but kept swimming through the deep. He felt a strangeness enter his mind as gazed into underwater blackness. There, in that moment, as he had many times before, he looked into the heart of the Styx.

The world around him changed. Briefly, the jaguar glimpsed a castle of shimmering coral, where shoals of colorful fish swam and a great creature with massive tentacles leered at him from throne of a thousand glowing polyps. The image vanished, and the jaguar felt himself swimming through mist and cold water, where he knew sheets of ice thicker than mountains stood between him and the sky of a lifeless world. The cold vanished, and the jaguar felt as if he was floating through the night sky itself, looking out over mesmerizing clusters of light and gas that were vaster than the spaces between the sun and the moon.

Finally, the Styx spoke to him, as it had many times before.

The great cat first saw an image of Raska and Sedkazan, the cats of gold and silver looking out over a human city. The image vanished, and he saw the coyote Red Shaam, his old friend, running through the desert, throwing dust up as he went. He saw the coyote enter a tent, and heard a human voice.

"Know, coyote? I know many things. And there are others like me. Human beings who seek the power of the Jinn and can wield it."

Who is this being? Vaylan thought.

Vaylan felt his body call for air. The images changed, as the Styx had other stories to tell. He saw an old house in North

America, a decrepit ruin surrounded by overgrown plants, and he heard the sounds of laughing children.

Enter, my children.... came the voice of a laughing creature, as he saw small humans cross the garden to enter a door. From a small window at the top floor of the house, Vaylan could see something that looked like smoke.

A wraith, Vaylan thought. A wraith is attacking humans...I must dispatch my Janissaries.

The image of the house vanished, and the blackness of the water returned.

No! Vaylan thought furiously. Where is Azazel? Where is the Black Jester?

The jaguar found himself in Mongolia. He was speaking to the snow leopard.

“Vaylan, the things that you should be afraid of are things you can’t see...the things that you should be afraid of you can’t see, you can’t predict, and will destroy your Janissaries when the world burns behind you.”

“Where is Azazel!!??” the jaguar tried to roar, but his breath was lost in a swarm of bubbles.

Vaylan’s mind became cloudy. He felt a blackness close around him, not the blackness of the water, but something else.

“Read.”

He heard the voice, echoing through a cave.

“Read.”

A dark forest unfolded before him, filled with pine trees with layered with dry bark. There, among rows and rows of trees, was a single black creature, laughing madly.

“Azazel!” Vaylan said with the last of his breath.

The creature laughed again. Suddenly, a fire coursed through the wood, enveloping everything in yellow flame, ravaging the trees until they collapsed.

Then the flames vanished. In their place, among an ocean of endless black, another beast emerged, tall and handsome, with fur as white as the snow of the arctic underneath a naked sky...

Then the images were gone, and Vaylan only felt the water. The jaguar moved his limbs, feeling the life force pulling from his body. He swam and swam, his body thirsting for air, as he sought out the surface, thrashing and pulling to escape. For a moment again, he saw the black creature. He smelt the wood and could feel the earth pressed against his paws.

Then his face touched air again. Vaylan shattered the surface of the river, and gulped in air.

The jaguar swam for the edge of the river, heaving deeply as he waded. Finally, his paws touched the riverbank, as he pulled himself away from the water's edge, stopping to shake liquid from his spots.

“Azazel,” he said with a gasp. “I’ve found you.”

RASKA



RASKA WAS MOMENTARILY lost in a flash of blue before appearing in the room of a house. Raska took note of his surroundings; time appeared to have moved, since light from an open window spilled onto a dusty hardwood floor. On one side of the room a globe stood on a table, the painted landmasses on its surface faded. A shelf full of books stood on the other. Raska sniffed, as he caught the presence of other creatures in the room.

“Good to see you, Raska,” Rikki the mongoose emerged from one side of the room. Raska felt some a rush of air, and the heron appeared, peeking his long neck inside.

“Hey,” the Ardechai said.

“Hi,” Raska replied, looking around. He saw Kjarez next to him, who was licking her paws.

“You have brought us all here, Sorceress?” Raska’s eyes went to the bookshelf. The black cat Zenith appeared, prowling on the edge of the shelf. He stared at Raska.

“I have,” Kjarez said. “I take it...”

“We’re all here,” Raska heard someone say.

The young cat turned around, and leapt back in fright. A large serpent was before him, bathing in the light of the fading sun. Instantly, Raska snarled and produced his claws. The serpent loomed, opening its hood, casting a shadow upon the young cat.

“Don’t worry,” came a new voice. “Kaliya won’t harm you. Not unless I tell him to.”

Raska’s eyes went past the snake, and found themselves looking upon a feline resting in the sun’s warmth. The other cat’s left ear twitched, and his eyes opened. He then leaped from his place of rest, vaulting over the snake and landing to meet Raska face to face. Raska smelled a powerful musk that reeked not only of the jungle but the thick scent of human cities. Before him was a large silver cat who looked as if he was carved from a block of steel. His fur, long in some places, shorter in others, had a metallic sheen to it. His eyes were piercing blue. The bigger cat began circling Raska, his paws silent as they pressed and rose from the floor. He sniffed the ground around the gold cat. Raska saw the hair at the back of his neck rise.

This cat could only be the one spoken of in legend. Raska dipped his head, a show of deference. He had never in his dreams thought he would meet Sedkazan Farishta Swiftasdeath.

“So this is the Ronin that I am supposed to mentor?” Sedkazan said, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

Raska looked at his companions. The cat Kjarez had leapt upon the windowsill, and was staring at the sky. Ardechai the heron and Rikki the mongoose were chatting to themselves about something unintelligible. The black cat Zenith was nestled between two large books, and his red eyes shined like candlelight. Raska tried to ignore the serpent nearby, who had its lidless eyes fixed on him.

“You go by Raska, is it? Raska Starhazzard?”

Raska was still stunned he was talking to this creature, but he made an effort to hide this. “Yes, that’s it.”

“Zenith has told me a lot about you,” Sedkazan said. Raska noted that silver cat had a peculiar manner of speaking, as if everything he said appeared to be directed at some large audience. “They tell me you can fight?”

“I don’t like fighting,” Raska said. “But I’m good at it.” The fire colored cat felt a surge of boldness, and he flattened his haunches and whipped his tail back. He showed his claws and hissed.

Rikki and Ardechai started hooting with laughter. Kjarez turned to Raska, and smiled, but did not laugh. The serpent and the black cat said nothing.

“I’ve heard you were brave. Didn’t hear you were dumb, though,” Sedkazan said with a laugh. “But all right, that’s cool. Starhazzard. I like that name, Starhazzard,” Sedkazan repeated. “Maybe Angelo Northstar can chase you around one day, and we’ll see how much of a hazard you are.”

“Awww, Sedkazan, are you jealous that you were left with a Ronin, and Angelo Northstar is off with the other captains?” Kjarez teased.

Sedkazan ignored her. “Truth be told, I don’t know why Vaylan sent you to me, but here we are, and we have duties to fulfill. There are Jinn Beasts in our fraternity twenty times your age who wish they could fight alongside me. The creatures around you I selected myself for our missions. But, Vaylan wanted you, and here you are.”

“You should be proud,” the mongoose Rikki called. “Few get to fight alongside Farishta Swiftasdeath.”

Raska glanced at the mongoose. “Well, Swiftasdeath,” he began. Sedkazan’s eyes narrowed. “I was having quite a time wandering until those ghouls came after me, and this guy over here rescued me” – Raska turned his head to look at Zenith – “which, by the way, is still appreciated.” The black cat said nothing. “Vaylan told me about the Janissaries, and truth be told, I don’t think I really appreciate or understand what you all do. But, I’m here for an adventure.”

“You think this is an adventure?” the serpent called Kaliya suddenly hissed.

Raska immediately said, “I’m not minimizing what you do. I’ve heard tales of you, Sedkazan, and other beasts. But they were just stories about powerful animals, legends. But yeah, I am here for an adventure, and whatever comes with it.”

Sedkazan smiled, and he began circling the younger cat. Sunlight layered his fur in white as he walked. “You’ll get your adventure, Starhazzard. There are things that fly in the night you

can't imagine. There are tricksters who jump into our world and wreak havoc. Kjarez can tell you about them. There are other beasts shaped by fire, and mad humans who want access to our powers. And if you're lucky, you'll get to drink from the *Maul Hayat*, and outlive every cat you've ever known. Maybe live forever."

"I don't want to live forever..."

Sedkazan interrupted him. "But we exist to serve and protect man. From themselves, from other Jinn, from the Acolytes."

"I understand that."

"And you don't want to live forever?" Sedkazan laughed. "Who the hell doesn't want to live forever?"

Raska said nothing. He wanted to show a sign of strength, of irreverence, but he couldn't help but feel a sense of unease around the other predator.

"Ares Andromeda Starhazzard," Sedkazan announced. "I want you with me on *my* adventure. We all do. You are made of fire, not clay, and I want you with me. Let me take you as my squire. If you prove yourself worthy, you will be knighted as a Janissary by my lord Vaylan, Executor of the Spirit's Flame."

Raska's thoughts began racing. He thought of the scents of the jungle of Draekar. He thought of chasing Zenith through the night and Rikki's tales. He thought of his travels across the continent and his yearning for new adventures. He thought of his dreams.

"I accept," Raska finally said.

Sedkazan smiled. He licked his paw. “Then let your adventure begin.” Kjarez hopped from where she was sitting and landed next to Raska. Rikki moved excitedly to join her, and the serpent hissed loudly.

“This is going to be fun, cat,” Ardechais said.

“Yeah, can’t wait to see what you can do,” Rikki said. “Let’s see if you can run and fight and use magic like the best of them.”

Raska smiled, and Sedkazan flattened his body and raised his haunches, stretching. The young cat felt his heart beat faster, as he wondered what lay ahead. The silver cat, yawning, glanced at the globe and deftly jumped atop the bed that it was next to. He patted it with his paw, pushing it to make it spin. He extended a single razor-sharp claw, then turned to Kjarez, smiling.

“So where do we go, Kjarez?”

She returned his grin. “Back to the forest. Then the big wide world awaits.”

A flash of blue filled the room.

Raska appeared somewhere in the clearing of a forest. He sniffed, and he could not sense the other animals. He noticed the air was chilled slightly and smelled of redwood trees. *Could it be?* The setting sun poured light through the tall trees, illuminating corners of the grove with showers of gold.

“Recognize this place, Starhazzard?” the voice of Sedkazan echoed somewhere. Raska looked around, seeing the big trees all around him, but he could not place the silver cat.

“The East Bay,” Raska said, trying to display confidence. “This is where I started travelling...”

“Yeah, this must smell of home to you,” Sedkazan said. The silver cat fell before Raska, the sunset glancing of his fur.

“Yeah,” Raska responded.

“You said you were good at fighting.”

Raska cocked his head. Sedkazan smiled at him disarmingly. The young cat let his muscles loosen, but prepared for them to move.

“Defend yourself, Starhazzard.”

The silver cat pounced. Raska expected him to be fast, but the young cat did not expect his attacks to appear from all sides. He felt light strikes on his side, his neck, and his tail.

“Behind you, Starhazzard,” Raska heard from behind him. Raska whirled around to confront him, his claws unsheathed. He hissed at the silver cat, but immediately noticed that the other feline’s claws were not visible.

“I could beat you without my claws,” Sedkazan said with a smile. “But attack me with what you have.”

Raska knew the silver cat was testing him and a brief part of him wondered what the purpose of this contest was. But the young cat’s fighting instincts took over, and he leaped again at the silver cat. Sedkazan laughed, effortlessly vaulting away and landing on the bark of a nearby redwood. Raska’s eyes widened as the silver cat leaped again and again, landing weightlessly among the thick roots of the tree before appearing before Raska’s eyes.

Raska did not hesitate. He feinted to the right, shifted his weight, pounced, and then attacked Sedkazan from the other side.

Sedkazan's eyes glinted momentarily, but he moved from the path of Raska's attacks with ease, his tail waving to adjust his balance.

"You've fought other Jinn before, haven't you?" Sedkazan said. Leaves disturbed by his movement fluttered around him.

"On occasion," Raska said. He caught his breath and pounced again. Sedkazan threw himself onto his back and absorbed the momentum of Raska's attack, and kicked up with his hind legs. Raska flew through the air, his senses momentarily confounded, before he found his balance and landed on the tips of his paws.

"Think you're strong?" Sedkazan said. "I've seen Golems break the shells of mountains."

Raska moved, the yellow and red of his fur catching the brightness of the fading sun. Sedkazan sprang from his path. "Think you're fast? I've watched Marids outrun lightning." Raska attacked again, but Sedkazan did not move to escape. He let the young cat try to attack him with his claws and teeth, but ducked and weaved, letting his paws leave the earth to parry his strikes.

"You think you're tough? I've watched ghouls on fire fall out of the sky and attack me with everything they had."

The young cat kept attacking, and in the sunset the two continued to spar, gold and silver fur swirling in the California woods. The cats kept at their play, until night began to rise. Finally, Sedkazan raised a paw to Raska.

"It's one thing fighting another cat," Sedkazan told him. "But there are other beings you will have to fight one day."

For some time Sedkazan and Raska continued their duel. Then somehow, the time after that became a blur to Raska, as if it was one of his dream.

The young cat found the time and space divided by flashes of blue as Kjarez used her powers to send him spots around the world. On some days he found himself in Draekar, where the black cat Zenith would lecture him on the history of the Janissaries and their covenant before vanishing. Other times he would find himself with Ardechai near a river at the foot of a mountain filled with white water as the heron spoke of the river Styx and its mysteries. He would find himself lying in a savannah beneath a dome of radiant starlight, hunting rodents with Rikki in alleyways of unknown cities, and gazing at crashing waves in distant islands. Once, he listened apprehensively as the serpent Kaliya, coiled at the roots of a tree, told him stories of demons – evil Jinn of all types– that hid in dark corners across the earth, stalking and killing humans throughout history.

From time to time, Sedkazan would appear, a silver shadow that came ad went. He would demand contests with Raska, and the two cats would spar. Each time the silver cat defeated the gold. Sometimes, they would speak. He was less boastful than Rikki, but there was a hardness to Sedkazan that Raska found a bit chilling. He did not speak of any life before his time in the Janissaries. Still, the silver cat was charismatic; there was something magnetic about the way he talked, the way he jumped, the way he leaped, the way he used his claws.

Then one evening, after a match, Sedkazan and Raska found themselves near the edge of a river in Draekar.

“You still have a lot to learn,” Sedkazan said. “You can fight, but your next lesson tomorrow night will be about magic and the astral gates. It’s no accident of course that we pulled you from the storm and can send you where we want across the world.”

“Magic? Astral gates?” Raska said, licking his paws.

“Yeah,” Sedkazan said. “Magic is what separates Jinn from Man, those made from fire from those made from clay. And the astral gates are how we Janissaries have kept the world safe for generations.”

“Made from fire,” Raska commented. “You’ve said that a lot.” He thought of the color of his fur, and laughed a bit. “I guess I’m made from fire.”

Sedkazan was silent for a moment, then he said, “I’m off, kid. Try to get some sleep.” The silver cat glanced at Raska before he bounded off in the shadows.

Raska climbed up a nearby tree, and nestled himself in a place where a bough met the trunk. He realized that he had rested little through the past few nights. Then his eyelids fluttered, and he found himself falling asleep.

That night, Raska dreamed of fire.

He dreamed a red flower that burst in the middle of the jungle, and engulfed a tree in yellow and orange tongues that swayed under the night sky. He watched the spectacle in terror, and saw bits of flame crawl from the trunk of the tree to reach other plants, instantly ravishing them. He watched as branches

cracked and burned before falling to the earth. The cat turned his tail to run, knowing that the flame would be after him.

He sprinted away from the flame, but the red flower came after him, snaking through the jungle.

“Magic is what separates us from those made from clay,” Raska heard Sedkazan’s voice.

The young cat kept running, feeling the heat behind him. He heard the jaguar.

“I have heard you descend from Smokeless Flame.”

Raska kept running.

“Not tonight, little cat,” growled the black cat Zenith. *“You will see morning again.”*

Raska skidded to his feet, and turned. Before him, was the fire. It had consumed the jungle that had been behind him; there was only the black of night in the sky and a storm of red and yellow flame. But there was no smoke. Raska gazed into the inferno, his eyes burning. He arched his back, and hissed.

The fire shrank, dwindling to half its size.

Raska roared and swiped out with his claws. The fire parted momentarily, then came together.

Raska, his mind taken by the dream, let his tail sway back and forth. He smiled, crouched down, and pounced, leaping into the heart of the flame.

“Join us, Ronin, and I’ll give you your adventure,” it was the voice of the black and white cat Kjarez.

Raska woke up, blinking back the light of the morning. He was back in the jungle of Draekar, in a world untarnished by flame.

The cat jumped from the top of the tree, sniffed the air around him, and wondered where his next adventure would take him.

From the Lady Snow Leopard's lessons to Kjarez Nightbraker: History and the Janissaries:

In the early days, after man ate the fruit, and after the Janissaries swore their oath, man and Jinn kept living among each other. Man kept creating his tools, and his mud huts turned to houses of stone. Man, in his ignorance, would come across Jinn at times, and be awed by their power. These were the numberless Jinn that were free to wander the earth, and were not the few chosen to be Janissaries.

In their ignorance, some Man worshipped the Jinn. Other Man became friends with Jinn, and posed as magicians, using Jinn as their familiars to wield magic. Some Jinn, such as the marids and the shaitaan, demanded that human beings even worship the Jinn. The Janissaries forbade this, yet this persisted for a time. Then after years and years, the Janissaries walked the entire earth, bringing with them their Covenant and slaying those Jinn who disbelieved. Soon, humans forgot the worship of Jinn and abandoned magic.

So, my child, in the world you are born in today, only we Jinn can use magic. Only we can draw its energies from other planes, and walk through the astral gates. This is our law. This is part of our Covenant.

KJAREZ



WHERE THE HIGHWAY, THE TREES, AND THE WESTERN HORIZON converged, a cone of orange sunset blossomed into the vastness of a cloudless night. Kjarez thought briefly on the rotation of the astral bodies that produced this spectacle as she waited for her charge. She blinked. In an instance she felt him rushing through the gates, his matter careening through a chamber of light and color. Before her he emerged, appearing with a sudden crack of blue light and a puff of glittering dust.

Raska hopped on the tip of his paws, then sought after his tail. He was disoriented, seeking his balance.

“Ares Andromeda Starhazzard,” Kjarez called out. “In case you forgot, I am Kjarez Teraxis Nightbraker, Sorceress of the Gates.”

Raska blinked and sniffed, and nodded once. He was still grappling with what had occurred.

“You have just crossed a gate I conjured,” Kjarez explained. “They are a method of travel for Jinn. We Sorceresses built them long ago. If you want to be a Janissary, you’d best learn how to use them.”

“Where are we?” Raska asked. He looked like had found his senses again.

Kjarez smiled. “On a human method of travel. A highway!”

Twin points of light appeared behind Raska, and the sound of an approaching engine blared. The young cat yelped in surprise. Kjarez laughed, and a blue light flashed around her and her student.

They reappeared on a bridge leading to a human city. Across from them, the polished white pillar that this particular city was famous for pricked the sky. The city lights shimmered yellow in the distance, shining next to the red lights of westbound traffic.

“You’re a cat, so you know movement,” Kjarez said. “You know the night. You know how to leap off trees, forage in alleyways. I’ll show you how to leap between the spaces that you can’t see.”

Using her abilities, she tapped into the edges of his mind.

<Can you hear me?>

“Yeah...what...how are you doing that?”

<Try to call back to me in your mind. It's like sound. Think about where it's coming from.>

<Can you hear me?> Raska called.

<Yes, you're a fast learner> Kjarez said, <On missions, when we can't speak, this is how Janissaries communicate. Follow me.>

There was another flash of blue light, and they appeared in the center of the city, close to a group of humans enjoying their weekend nights. Kjarez watched as Raska again adapted his senses, looking briefly at the forest of moving human legs before tracing the shadows of the streetlights. The young cat quickly found himself again. *He's more comfortable in cities. Typical alley cat*, Kjarez thought, careful not to broadcast the observation.

<Follow me, Ares.>

<I go by Raska.>

They always pick new names for themselves, she thought. In a distant corner of her mind she felt a stream of plasma coil from a star, striking at unfathomable heights. She pushed these thoughts away, and returned to the task at hand.

<Raska, then. Follow me.>

She dashed away from the Raska, sliding beneath a food truck and sprinting by a laughing musician, who hammered away at makeshifts drums near the metro. Raska followed.

The cats went racing through the city streets. The skyline of the city was smaller than others Kjarez had encountered. In the past this had made her feel exposed. She had liked the taller buildings of other cities; they seemed to provide a comforting shield from the sky that reminded her of the cosmic forces that

roared in her mind. She had gotten used to it, however. It was an urban environment, like any other, filled with the scents of men and women, of vehicle exhaust, discarded foods and spilled beer, populated by busy humans with their suits, ties and cellphones, young lovers kissing under the streetlights, and panhandlers buried in fabrics to avoid frigid nights.

Kjarez moved swiftly across the sidewalks, startling humans as she rushed between their legs. As Raska followed, he took care to move under the shadowy creases of the city, where the sidewalk met the buildings, avoiding contact with humans if he could. Kjarez understood this. Without gates, even some Jinn Beasts could encounter hostile humans and find themselves trapped in cages for a night, or worse. This no longer concerned her.

She stopped in a city park, where a figure of a human riding a horse stood, in the center of the fountain. Arches of water spewed around the statue. A human girl called to Kjarez. She ignored the girl, and waited for Raska.

“The source of all magic is from gates to other worlds, other places. That’s where it comes from. Now, our magic can pull us through these places, so we can jump instantly across the world.”

“Only Sorceresses, with our connection to the far spaces, can bring other Jinn through these gates. You have to be bound to us to use them.”

“How do I use them?”

“You signal a Sorceress, and she responds,” Kjarez told him. “You have to know how to signal.”

“Follow me, little cat,” she said, and she flashed a small knowing smile at him. A bright light surrounded her, and she disappeared from Raska’s sight.

<Your physical surroundings are important. But look for what is Unseen.> She watched Raska from afar. She knew what he was experiencing. No doubt, he felt something pulse through him, a spark that began at the tip of his tail, cross through his fur and scatter in the corners of his mind. No doubt he sensed her, calling out in the distance, and saw a picture, an image of her in the moonlight, playing with a red string on top of a building as humans bustled in and out of a door beneath her.

There was a flash of blue, and Raska appeared next to Kjarez.

“This is how we dance through space and crawl through the night,” Kjarez said. “This is the power of Jinn.”

From the Lady Snow Leopard's lessons to Kjarez Nightbraker: Magic, the astral gates and their power:

Something cannot be created from nothing. This is a principle laid down by the Spirit himself. Yet magic appears to come from nowhere. Why is this?

The creatures made from fire, the Jinn, were blessed by the Spirit with the ability to reach into other worlds, other universes. Through this, a Jinn may conjure magic.

Some of our brethren are more talented at magic than others. Some have employed these arts for warfare and martial purposes. Others have used them to heal and survive.

The Sorceresses used magic to create the astral gates.

Long ago, the fastest means for a living creature to travel were through its feet, wings, or fins. Man, adroit at physics, used his machines to cross great distances of water and land. The Sorceresses discovered another way.

Sorceresses gazed into the other worlds and planes, in the same way that humans gaze upon the stars above them. Using energy from a plane filled with storm and thunder, they created bridges between different places on earth.

The Sorceresses did not finish their work there, however. In the early days of Lord Protector Vaylan the Jaguar, the Lady Snow Leopard constructed a web of the astral gates. This web allowed two things.

First, Janissaries could communicate with each other with their thoughts, so long as they were linked to a Sorceress to bridge their minds. Second, was the more significant accomplishment: Through this web, any Janissary, anywhere in the world, could jump great distances, so long as he was linked to a Sorceress.

This is the duty of the Sorceress. She is the handmaiden of the Astral Gates, keeper of the paths between worlds.

So what is the Unseen, you ask? Have the Sorceresses witnessed it? The Unseen is a picture of all planes, all worlds, in all time and space. Like the Lord Protector and the captains of the Janissaries, many Sorceresses have looked into Unseen for a few, fleeting moments. These moments vanish like tears in rain.

RASKA



LIGHT AND COLOR swirled around Raska for an instance. In the vortex he thought he caught a glimpse of the night sky, but swiftly illuminated, filled with prismatic light and cosmic pyrotechnics. He then caught sight of Kjarez, waiting for him on top of a building. The light subsided, and he emerged alongside her.

“This is how we dance through space and crawl through the night,” Kjarez said. “This is the power of Jinn. Now, your first lesson, alley cat, is how to leap through the gates. How to pass through them.”

“Teach me, then,” he said with a smile. He began licking one of his paws nonchalantly.

She matched his smile. "Then catch me, little cat." She vanished in a plume of blue vapors, and appeared across three rooftops. Raska's eyes could barely catch her. He saw her moving, the glittering dust around her slipping away into the night.

Raska watched her as she became a speck in the distance, bewildered momentarily, before finding his senses. He sprang forward and gave chase. The cat sucked in air, trying to find her scent, as he cascaded over a rooftop. Dodging a heating vent, he ran across a roof and leapt, shaking a metal drain as he landed on the edge of an adjacent building.

<You have to do more than that> she spoke to him.
<Hear me call to you, find me in the dark.>

Raska kept sprinting, trying to keep up. *How am I supposed to catch her?*

<Find me in the dark.>

At that moment, he sensed it, and caught the glimpse again. The sight of a massive blue landscape, cold and endless, colliding with a dark sky wearing the light of the cosmos. A coil of blue vapor burst from the ground, birthing an icy canyon in silence. Then he saw her, running down a flight of stairs between two brick mansions, her body from nose to tip of the tail tracing the arc of a longbow. Blue light flashed, and he leapt, appearing instantaneously behind her.

<Nice job, Raska> she said.

<How is this possible?> Raska said, continuing his pursuit, momentarily baffled as he discovered he spoke straight to her mind.

<All magic comes from elsewhere, other places, some far away in our world and others> she said. <The gates let us leap through these spaces and emerge wherever we want. The voice you hear now travels the same path.>

She spoke aloud between breaths, “It’s how we Janissaries protect mankind across the world.”

She disappeared again in a cloud of glittering smoke.

<Find me in the dark.>

Raska concentrated. In his mind’s eye, he saw an immense red torch burning in the distance, illuminating the massive curve of a planet that seemed filled with coiling orange mist. He saw her again, dropping noiselessly alongside a streetlight. Raska’s vision filled with blue again, and he jumped. Her landed next to her, and the smells of the city block immediately touched his nose. It reeked with the smell of fish.

She turned and smiled, “Very good, Raska. Let’s take a break, little cat.”

“Thanks for that.”

“What? Little cat?”

He smiled, a little flustered. Beside himself, he said. “Not calling me Ares. Not a fan of that name, really.”

“All right, well I think we can stick with little cat,” she said.

“Whatever you say,” Raska laughed.

She ignored him briefly, then moved quickly into a nearby alleyway. Based on the smells, Raska reasoned they must have emerged in a human market where the sale of creatures from the sea was common.

Kjarez approached a narrow black door, and meowed loudly. She put her paws on the door and meowed again. The door rustled, and Kjarez hopped backwards, her tail dancing.

A man dressed in white appeared. With a gnarled hand, he petted her, and laid out a plate filled with colorful cuts of fish. Raska's eyes widened as the smell hit his nostrils. The human stroked Kjarez once again, then shut the door behind him.

“Yeah, I have my charms,” she said, and lowered her head to bite into the fish.

The two cats ate the offering, before Kjarez asked, “So what are you doing here? Really?”

“Hmm?” Raska said.

“You weren’t a Janissary from a young age. Very few Ronin join us. Zenith was one, I recall. Some others. What makes you love humans so much?”

“Truth be told, I’m a feral cat.”

“Obviously.”

“Let me finish though. I’m a feral cat and I’ve never cared much for humans,” Raska said, stretching his body out. “One or two have been good to me overall, but they’re not that big of a deal to me. Just like any other animal, really.”

“So why are you here?”

“Just for the adventure. Isn’t that enough?” Raska asked back.

She stared at him curiously, and sniffed. “I don’t believe you,” she said with a light laugh.

“What?” Raska said, a slight edge of defensiveness to his voice.

“Well, I believe that you like adventure,” Kjarez told him. “But you wouldn’t be doing this if you didn’t care about some humans. Or a human.”

A brief memory of his time in Berkeley passed through Raska’s mind, laying between his human and his human’s companion. The memory came and went. “Yeah, maybe. So why are you here?”

Kjarez sniffed. “I remember being raised by the lady snow leopard Artemisia, educated about the thousand and more astral gates. One day she told me I would serve the Janissaries, to be one of their Sorceresses, and here I am. The cycles have passed since.”

“Do you like it?”

“It gives my life purpose,” she said. “More purpose and more joy than the hunt.”

Raska cocked his head to one side. “Are there any humans you care about?”

“I care about my duty to the Janissaries and the Covenant,” she responded. “So I care about humanity. But I don’t care about any particular human. We’re really not supposed to.”

Raska ate the last sliver of fish on the plate, and began licking his paws. “I guess I see what you mean.”

Kjarez looked at him curiously, then her eyes clouded a bit. Raska watched her, a bit confounded, when Kjarez suddenly moved away from him, and hopped silently onto a nearby stoop. “Looks like we have an adventure for you, Raska.”

The young cat felt her call to him in his mind, and a glimpse of space filled his mind’s eye. Blue light flashed, and the two cats disappeared, leaving behind an empty plate and the capital’s streets.

From the Lady Snow Leopard's lessons to Kjarez Nightbraker: The Phantom Realm

Some time ago, Man and Jinn Beasts would make alliances. Jinn Beasts would act as their familiars – their conduit to the world of magic, so humans could perform dark and powerful deeds. Some of these humans were known as witches, and they would shape the world with their crafts.

When the Janissaries came to new places with their Covenant, the rules were clear: Jinn and Man were to be separate from one another. Humans could no longer wield magic. Jinn could no longer serve as Man's familiars, nor could they use their powers to harm humans. Soon, in time, the Janissaries spread this Covenant across all corners of the earth.

I told you of our enemies, the Acolytes. They, like the Rebel Jinn before them, demand that humans worship them. They view themselves as greater than Man, and think they can ally with those humans that would serve them.

To those Jinn that violate the Covenant, to those that are the cruelest to humans, they suffer the ultimate punishment. If they are not slain, they are to be exiled from earth and banished to the Phantom Realm, a dimension of mist and darkness.

Just as we can open the astral gates, my child, we can open gates to the Phantom Realm, and send Acolytes and demons to meet their doom.

KALIYA



IT WAS HALLOWEEN NIGHT in a city suburb near North America. In an empty park between two houses, the light of a lamppost glowed softly on a winding path near an empty playground. A merry-go-round creaked, and the wind made the chains from a swing set tingle. There was a flash of blue light, and for a moment bright particles dusted the path like early snowfall. A group of beasts emerged from the light.

The serpent Kaliya appeared alongside Sedkazan Farishta Swiftasdeath. His tongue forked in and out as he observed the cats Raska and Kjarez and the mongoose Rikki.

“So what are we here for?” Raska asked. The Ronin cat blinked blue dust out of his eyes. The cat was still clearly confounded by the astral gates.

“In an old house over there is a wraith. It’s a lower form of Jinn. Fairly unintelligent,” Sedkazan explained. “They normally don’t bother anyone, but this one’s been harming some of the local humans. You’re here to trap it. Our cobra friend here can make it easier by hypnotizing him.”

Kaliya looked at Raska, assessing him. He seemed so young. He probably tasted sweet. Sedkazan seemed to catch the serpent giving the Ronin cat that look, and he shot Kaliya a glance, irritated.

The snake turned his attention to the Persian cat. Kaliya had alerted them to the fact that while a mongoose might be able to pass for a local creature, a cobra would draw attention in this suburb, but Kjarez had made the point clear earlier.

“You’re the only one of us who can hypnotize a wraith,” Kjarez pointed out. “I’d rather do that to send him to the Phantom Realm than let Sedkazan tear apart the town with lightning.” She cast a glance at Sedkazan.

Raska commented, “I guess there was some truth to that hypnotizing stuff, wasn’t there?”

“Long before man, my kind used to rule the world,” Kaliya said.

“Yeah, I know about Jinn...”

“Not Jinn...reptiles. We used to walk this planet with such fierceness magic did not scare us.” *Yet how could a cat appreciate this knowledge?* Kaliya thought. It defied logic to think they could.

Raska looked at him curiously, then turned to Sedkazan. “So what are we going to do?”

Sedkazan licked his paw. “Well, I’m not going to do anything. I have better things to do than deal with a single wraith.”

“I knew he was going to do this,” Rikki muttered. Kaliya did not think it was appropriate for the mongoose to comment on their captain’s choices, but said nothing. He avoided conversation with the creature to prevent instinct from creating friction.

Kjarez seemed displeased. “Vaylan ordered you to command this mission.”

“I’m commanding it now. As I was saying...,” Sedkazan glared at Rikki, who shrunk back. “Wraiths are easy enough to destroy. But it’s better we send them to the Phantom Realm. It’s another dimension the Sorceresses have access to, inhabited by all sorts of lower Jinn. It’s more of their natural habitat.” *We know this.* *He must be saying this for the benefit of the Ronin,* Kaliya thought.

“What if it doesn’t want to go?” Raska asked.

“Damn, kid, you have a lot of questions,” Sedkazan snapped. “When it started attacking human cubs, it began losing its choice on the matter. Law of the jungle. You live by the claws, you die by the claws. We’re sworn to protect man, so this is what we’re going to do.”

Raska blinked. He appeared to be satisfied by that answer. The question seemed irrelevant to Kaliya. The mission comported with their oaths as Janissaries. The snake had no sentiments for humans attacked by Jinn, but knew that his purposes on earth were to make war on their attackers, and survive. That was enough for

the snake, as it was for most reptiles, and for that matter, most Janissaries.

“Rikki will give the orders,” Sedkazan said. “Not that I don’t trust you, Kaliya, but with so many humans around you don’t have the sensitivity.”

“Understood.” Kaliya was aware of his limitations. When it came to their broader goal of defending humanity, he knew the others did not accept some of his methods.

“I don’t understand, Sedkazan, where are you going?” Kjarez demanded.

“I’m going to explore a lead in the City of Shadows, and you are going to carry out this mission,” Sedkazan said. “The four of you can handle this.”

Kjarez said nothing. The serpent looked at Raska, who appeared to be focusing on their surroundings.

“Good hunting,” Sedkazan said. He stepped away from the others. Blue light flashed again, and dust hovered briefly in the air. The silver cat disappeared.

Kaliya turned his attention to his surroundings. The snake tasted air with his tongue. The serpent saw the aging structure before him, its edges blurring into the night around them. He focused his senses, sending blood into his eyes to enhance his vision. The house was large, surrounded by a spiked fence, brush and vines erupting from the spaces between the bars. Down the street from it were other homes. Bright lights gleamed from the porches of each house. They were the lights of Jack-O-Lanterns. The tall chimneys of the house made the others look small in

comparison. Kaliya's tongue whipped in and out, sensing the world around him. This was a place that was built to last.

The cats and the mongoose hopped between two bars of the fence, entering the yard of the place. Kaliya followed swiftly. In a region like this, cats were fairly common and would not be bothered by humans. Certainly, the mongoose could have been mistaken for any local mammal species. A cobra, however, may alert attention.

The animals entered the house through a passage, leading into the place's cellar. Kaliya watched as the cats' eyes glowed, adapting to the darkness. The animals found themselves a stairwell, leading upstairs into a large chamber. Kaliya's tongue caught the tastes of many life forms. Rats, mice, spiders, cockroaches, wasps, possums, cats, foxes, other humans, mold, mushrooms, grass. Many creatures had traversed this space since it was abandoned.

“Any idea where he is, Kjarez?” Rikki asked.

Kjarez sighed. “How many times do I have to explain this to you? My sense of spacetime can't pinpoint a creature like this exactly. It's enough that the sync bats got us here.”

Rikki said nothing. He probably acknowledged this with body language, but the snake couldn't see it.

“This is a large house,” Raska offered. “Maybe we should split up?”

“I give the orders here,” Rikki said. He paused. “Let's split up.” Kaliya heard Raska scoff loudly. “Kjarez, can you create a telepathic link?”

<Got it.>

“Kaliya, you and Raska head upstairs. Kjarez and I will search down here.”

“By your command,” Kaliya responded. “If we encounter the wraith, we will tell you.”

Kaliya and Raska ascended the long staircase. The cat and snake found themselves exploring the second story of the house. The hallways were long and full of clutter. Paintings hung on the wall, old furniture draped in sheets stood near the doorways. High ceilings filled with oily shadow were above them.

Kaliya saw the young cat sniffing beneath a sheet, and admonished him, “Careful, cat. Jinn love hiding in dark places, and some can change their form with ease.”

Raska heeded the serpent’s advice, and moved away from the sheet.

“Sedkazan told me this creature preys on humans,” Raska said softly.

“For a time it merely frightened them. But our lord Vaylan has said it has committed violence against them. Humans can’t defend themselves against these creatures. Few of them even have the capacity to even see a being like this.”

Raska nodded, and his ears twitched. “I think there’s someone else here. An animal, but not a mouse or anything.” He motioned his head toward a room. Kaliya peered in the same direction, and only saw the gloom staring back at him.

Kaliya’s coils sensed sudden movement. His fangs slid from their hiding spots and he arched his back, ready to strike. Something sped from out of the room. Kaliya didn’t think about it. He struck, but his fangs caught nothing. Surprised, he felt his

head being rapped to the side, the momentum of his missed strike sending his coils tumbling. The snake recovered and hissed, ready to attack again.

“Cool it! Cool it! It’s just a little fox!” Raska yelped.

Kaliya took a brief second to collect his senses. His eyes caught sight of a small, terrified fox. He then deduced that Raska must have struck his head to keep him from attacking. The snake took a moment to note that few of his brother Janissaries commanded such agility, and made a mental mark to remember how fast this feline was. The cat also seemed to have valued this creature’s life. Not uncommon for mammals. However, few, even Jinn, and even many Janissaries, would risk Kaliya Wakerstalker’s bite to save a stranger cub.

“Understood,” Kaliya said to Raska. *He didn’t bite me that hard, either.* The cobra focused his senses on the little fox. It couldn’t have been more than a few cycles old. It was small and skinny. It smelt of fear. Kaliya’s predatory instincts surged briefly, then subsided.

“You okay?” Raska asked the fox.

The fox must have been petrified by its run in with the snake. The cobra considered briefly that it might provide valuable information.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, we’re friends....” Raska said. The fox whimpered.

“Move aside,” Kaliya hissed. He attempted to slither between Raska and the cub.

“Wait a second!” Raska snapped. “You really want to scare him some more?”

“He could have valuable information about the wraith. Let me hypnotize him.”

“No way!” the fox yelped. “Keep him away from me!”

“Don’t worry about him, look, he just thought you were someone else,” Raska said. “He’s not going to eat you, okay? You’re not going to eat him, right Kaliya?”

“It remains a possibility.”

“Damn it,” Raska said. The fox whimpered again. “Look, calm down, kid. He’s not hunting, we’re looking for something. Kind of...what does this thing smell like?”

Before Kaliya could respond, the fox said, “The ghost?” the fox said. “Yeah, the ghost...he leaves us alone, but sometimes....he lures humans, and....”

“Where is the ghost?” Raska asked.

“He’s in the attic. I try to hide when he comes down. The only reason me and my sister stay here is because there’s plenty of mice to eat. He doesn’t bother us, but...he’s done things to humans that have come here.”

Raska sniffed. Kaliya’s tongue sensed another presence. There was another creature in the room.

“Come out,” Raska called. “We’re not going to hurt you.”

He assumes so much, Kaliya thought.

A second fox appeared. She was younger and thinner than her brother, her fur was scraggly and thin. Kaliya could sense her fear.

“Don’t worry,” Raska said. “We won’t hurt you. Do you know where the ghost is?”

“He’s in the attic,” the female fox said quietly.

“Hear that, Kaliya?” the cat said. “Can you take us there?” Raska asked the foxes.

The sister fox shivered, and her tail twitched. “No.”

“No, we have to!” the brother fox said. “Can you get rid of him? He does...bad things. To small humans.”

Kaliya heard Raska hiss. “Unacceptable,” the serpent said. “It is against the Covenant.”

“Can we take him on?” Raska asked. The feline’s displeasure at what the foxes said was evident.

“With the others it should not be difficult,” Kaliya responded. <Kjarez, the adversary is up here.> The snake waited. Raska shot him a quizzical look. <Kjarez?> There was no response.

Something is interfering with the telepathy, the snake thought.

“We’ve lost contact with the others,” Kaliya said. “It is an unfortunate occurrence.”

“Damn.”

“We should consider....”

The snake had poor hearing but he heard both sounds. He first heard the scream. The scream of a frightened human child. He then heard the wail. It filled the room like floodwater, and appeared on all sides, as if the walls were bleeding the sound. The foxes whimpered, and a mask of fear crossed Raska’s face, before it became hard.

“He must have caught someone...he must have...,” one of the foxes whispered.

“Take us there, now!” Raska said fiercely.

“But...”

“We’ll protect you. Just take us there!”

He speaks as if he commands authority. Waiting could be wise, but if a human is in danger, we have to act. “Take us there, foxes,” the serpent concurred.

The foxes exchanged terrified glances, and the sister said, “This way.”

The two small animals darted out of the room. Raska and Kaliya followed. They went down a dark hallway, crossed into two rooms, and emerged in another passage, before greeting the sight.

A small figure in a white robe stood at the base of a long wooden staircase that rose into a dark space carved into the ceiling. A strange green light blinked from the space, casting a long shadow that touched the animals. The figure turned. Its face was obscured by a sheet that hung over its head, which stopped short of the floor, revealing two thin legs that stood tightly together. What looked like eyeholes were cut in the sheet. The figure peered at the group of animals momentarily, before turning, and stumbling up the steps. The wood creaked and splintered as it walked. The way it walked suggested it was a human cub.

The wail sounded again. It was an otherworldly noise that sounded in part mechanical, and in part the sound of a howling nighttime gale. The small child in white turned back, paused briefly, before going further into the pit.

A hand suddenly appeared, impossibly large and gray. It wrapped around the human, then both vanished. The animals heard a despairing cry.

Kaliya saw a bolt of yellow fur sprint toward the dark from the corner of his eye. Raska had went charging after the human.

For reasons the snake did not understand, the male fox followed. The sister fox yelped, and instantly went after her brother.

Foolish mammals...it's a trap, the snake performed a brief mental calculation. He sought on Kjarez again, but no answer. He had no choice. Mustering his speed, the snake went after the mammals. The cobra summoned his strength to climb the stairs and entered the attic. He swung his head to his immediate right. Raska's back was arched, and the cat was hissing and spitting. The two fox cubs were huddled behind him. Kaliya was greeted with a high grim laugh. The child in white, standing as still as a ramrod, peered at the snake with green light pouring from the eyeholes of the sheet.

***"My lord was right....the Janissaries would come!!!!!!
Have you never seen a mirage before, Kaliya Wakestalker?"***

The child in white vanished in a plume of green smoke, and the wraith emerged, filling the room with its shadowy girth. It had the shape of a man, except a long wisp of smoke trailed where there should have been legs. It had two massive arms, so large the creature looked cramped in the attic. Instead of fingers what looked like long gray knives extended from massive hands. Its head appeared wrapped in a fluttering cowl. Its eyes pulsed with green, throwing radiance upon the massive space's interior, lightning up an attic with a high ceiling. The creature let out a wail.

"I need not steal a child tonight, serpent...an image of one was sufficient to draw you out!"

Kaliya felt the fighter's instinct pulse through his coils. *All I need to do is keep his gaze and he's mine...but the wraith moved as it*

spoke, its green eyes falling upon the serpent, then the cat, then the foxes.

Kaliya heard Raska hiss and snarl again. The serpent glanced and at his comrade. The fur on his back had risen into a million golden spikes. The snake could tell the cat was afraid, but made note of the mammal's bravery. The fox pups let out a small whimper.

“By the Covenant of the Janissaries,” Kaliya called out. “You will be banished to the Phantom Realm. Surrender to our Sorceress, and it will be easy.”

“I will slay you, Janissary,” it wailed.

“We’re not humans you can frighten,” the snake responded.

One of the wraith’s hands swooped across the room, aiming for Kaliya. The snake’s head darted sideways, dodging the blow. The strike was slow and clumsy, but Kaliya knew its effects. The blades could harm no tissue, but were psychic in nature. They would send pain into the mind and fill the victim’s head with nightmares. An attack far more potent against mammals than reptiles, but painful nonetheless.

Raska pounced at the tail of the wraith, but found himself flying through smoke.

“**You are mine, little vermin,**” the wraith moaned. The wraith seemed unharmed. Raska scrambled to his paws, disoriented by the creature’s lack of substance.

One of the foxes yelped, and the creature whirled around. It reared back its talons, and sent its arm swooping toward the foxes. *Must attack now, while he’s going after the cubs*, the serpent

thought. Kaliya Wakestalker was known for two talents: His hypnotism and the venom inside him, a poison that carried black magic mixed with the ground bones of demons. Kaliya bore his fangs.

Before he could strike, the serpent heard a cry. Raska had thrown himself between the fox cubs and the wraith, and had been hit by the being's claws. The cat writhed on the ground momentarily, hissing, and clawing at nothing. The fox pups scrambled away. The specter seemed to ignore them, and shifted itself toward the cat.

“Do you feel the nightmares? Do you feel them?” it moaned.

Kaliya knew the cat was in immense pain and fear. The serpent bore his fangs, ready to strike. Just then, he felt a sudden burst of heat, like the rays of summer daylight he so enjoyed, when the sun was at its apex. His vision caught the light of flame, a vivid tongue of fire that engulfed the pale green light of the wraith. It burst forth from thin air near the eyes of the creature. Screaming, it crossed its arms in front of it, shielding itself from the fire.

The fire burned for a second, then vanished instantly, leaving the twin green lights of the apparition unchallenged in the attic. Kaliya slithered sideways, curious as to what had occurred. Raska had risen to his paws again. The fox cubs were behind him, cowering. The cat's eyes were closed, his face was strained with pain, but he spat and hissed. His claws grasped at air, blindly challenging the wraith, half conscious of what he had conjured.

Red Flower? Kaliya thought. *He is a fast learner,* Kaliya thought. *The fire is his.*

In spite of his moment of defiance, the young cat collapsed instantly with a gasp. The wraith had recovered from the shock of the fiery attack and loomed over the feline.

“Your magic is young, little lion,” it cried, “I have lived for centuries, and watched the young become the old and the old become the dust. I will show you your nightmares. In the name of Azazel!”

“I will show you yours,” Kaliya hissed. Raska’s flame and the wraith’s taunts were all that the serpent needed. The snake slid beneath the specter and rose between it and the cat. The serpent glared into the two green lights in dark void that was the creature’s face.

“Kaliya!” the snake heard someone call to him. The snake did not avert his eyes from the face of the wraith, but he flicked his tongue and tasted the air. The others had arrived. It was the Sorceress, Kjarez Teraxis Nightbraker. She and the mongoose had found them.

“I am working,” the serpent said, focusing on the task at hand. “Look into my eyes,” Kaliya said. “I am the serpent in the garden. Look into my eyes.”

“**Noooooooooooo.....**” the creature wailed again. Kaliya’s hearing was poor but the scream sent vibrations through his coils.

“Look into my eyes,” Kaliya felt the magic charge through him. This is what he excelled at, more than any other form of magic. He felt his soul slither from his skin, and enter the chambers of the Jinn’s mind. There he saw the wraith’s memories, when it had first emerged from the nether, when it had befriended a young

girl long ago, when it had grown sad and tired with humankind, when it had written its first nightmare.

“Let me welcome you to my garden,” Kaliya repeated.

Almost every creature alive fears something, the snake reminded himself. “What do you fear?” Kaliya hissed.

So many terrors had this Jinn scrawled into the hearts of man. Females, males, young, the old. Some he had scared for mere days, others had been driven to melancholy, one or two to insanity. Kaliya watched his memories, when the wraith had haunted the house’s dreary passages, savoring the fear it had planted in its victims.

“You fear solitude?”

“**Noooooooo.....**” it wailed again.

“Feel it, wraith. Let it burn inside you,” the snake sang.

“**Noooooooooooo.....**”

Kaliya had paralyzed the creature, turning its own fear on it. Even the darkest specters of the night feared something; even the beings who humans thought only resided between the covers of their books.

“I have him now,” Kjarez hissed.

The beast let out another wail, which subsided into a growl, and then transformed into a high hammering shriek. “**Aaaaaah serpent. A valiant effort. But I will not go easy.... You don't know the magic I've been granted.....**”

Kaliya felt a strange sensation, and in an instance he felt his senses shatter. Everything around him became black as the hypnotic link immediately was severed. “What is happening?” he hissed aloud to himself. He squirmed, his coils thrashing as he tried

to find his senses. He hissed and whirled himself around, feeling the survival instinct pump through him.

“You think you can hypnotize me?! I will not go into the dark!”

The wraith must have struck again with his talents. Kaliya felt a terrible pain course through his head, and feeling of ice cold, hunger, and thirst wracked his body. *An illusion*, the snake thought. *Do not fear the illusion. It is the mind killer.* Kaliya felt his focus return. The wraith stood over him, and let out another wail. ***“You cannot defeat me, Janissaries. I am an Acolyte of Azazel.”*** The creature approached Kjarez and Rikki, its massive claws outstretched, its green eyes glowing. The being lashed out with its talons. A field of shimmering gold came between the wraith and the two beasts. The wraith screamed.

Khaansi daal, Kjarez thought. *The bronze armor. The mongoose has always been useful.*

Sure enough, the mongoose Rikki had used his own talents to defend himself. Rikki glared triumphantly as the creature attacked again, but the shields he had conjured held.

“So that’s your little trick,” Kaliya heard someone say. The snake turned. Raska had returned to his paws.

“Not gonna let you have all the fun,” the mongoose said with a laugh. *He’s overconfident. Always overconfident*, Kaliya thought. *No matter. We must strike again.*

The mongoose did not hesitate. Kaliya felt a rush of air as Rikki threw himself at the wraith. His teeth and claws glowed gold as he struck, the magic from his shields coursing through him. He moved with sightless speed, striking left and right with his claws

and teeth, painting the air with ribbons of light. Kaliya hissed, as he focused, and bore his fangs. Serpent and mongoose struck together. The wraith screamed again, agonized by the attack, but then reared over the animals. “***You will not send me to the dark!!!!***” it shrieked.

Kaliya heard Rikki curse. *We underestimated this creature. Sedkazan should be here*, the snake thought.

Suddenly, a yellow flame burst between the wraith’s eyes. Raska had struck again with his magic.

“What the --?” Rikki said. “Red Flower?”

The wraith seemed to wither. The flame had hurt him, evidenced by another scream. The wraith had shrunk to half its size. The serpent wasted no time. Rearing back his head, Kaliya struck again with his fangs. Once. Twice, thrice, each strike punctuated by a cry of pain. Finally, the snake found himself staring into the eyes of the wraith again.

“This time....” the snake hissed. “This time I have you.”

“***Noooooo...***” the wraith cried. “***Noo....not to the dark place.....***”

Whatever magic the wraith had used to resist the serpent’s hypnotism had failed. The wraith looked small, as it seemed to huddle under the glare of the cobra. But there is no mercy in the heart of snakes, and Kaliya Wakestalker was no exception.

“*Look into my eyes,*” Kaliya hissed. “*Look into my eyes, and enter the garden.*”

Again, the snake felt the fear again of the beast. The fear of the dark place and the fear of loneliness. He surrounded the

wraith's mind with this fear; he focused on it, devoting his entire being to it. This time, the creature would not escape his coils.

“Now, Acolyte....let me show you your nightmares!!!!”

The wraith froze, the fluttering mist of his form becoming still.

The snake's tongue went in and out rapidly. He had done his part. “Proceed, Sorceress.”

The black and white Persian approached, and stood alongside the serpent. Her eyes blazed with bright blue.

“By the oath of the Janissaries,” she said. Her voice had deepened, and resonated throughout the attic with a frightful echo. Shafts of blue light gathered beneath the wraith. Kaliya felt a pull on his coils. Because of Kjarez's magic, the earth's leash on its riders had shifted.

“You are banished to the realm of phantoms.”

“Noooo! Nooo!!!”

Desperately, the wraith rocked left and right, its eyes marking a trail of green as it sought an escape. But it was to no avail. The blue light gathered around the creature. Resplendent beams closed around him like bars in a cell. There was a sudden bang, and the blue light vanished, taking the wraith with it, leaving a drizzle of sparkling dust around the animals, before the attic became dark, cool, and silent.

Raska looked bewildered at the sight. Kaliya stood silently, and wound himself into a circle. *It shouldn't have taken that long...he thought.*

Rikki piped up. “Why didn't you guys call us?”

“Something must have severed our link,” Kjarez responded.

“Is that possible?” Kaliya asked.

“Maybe,” the Sorceress responded. Her eyes glowed blue again. “I’ll figure it out later. In the meantime, it seems to be working now. Time to call the bats.”

Kaliya took a brief look at Raska. The cat seemed to have been confounded by this experience. No doubt what would come next would be equally strange. The snake chose to say, “That was an impressive use of magic, cat.”

“Thanks,” said Raska.

“How did you learn how to do that?” Rikki demanded.

“I dunno...I dreamed about fire a couple nights ago,” Raska said. “I dreamt that I...moved it.”

A dreamrider? Kaliya thought. Kjarez and Rikki exchanged looks, but the Persian cat’s attention shifted. She knew what was coming next.

“Interesting,” she commented. “We’ll talk about it later. In the meantime...the bats are here.”

Kaliya’s hearing was poor, but the rustling of wings caught his ear, then blossomed, as screeches encircled the walls around them. The bats came, funneling through the hidden nooks and crannies of the old place. Kaliya watched as they streamed through the fractured roof and weaved their way through the dilapidated shutters of the attic, throwing a million small shadows on the attic’s surfaces as they darted. The snake’s tongue slid in and out as he tasted the air. He had tasted bats before. They were satisfying. But of course, he was barred from tasting the sync bats.

The snake watched as Raska looked upon the sight with awe. He heard Rikki chuckle. *What was amusing about this?*

The bats fell silent as they found different places to perch or hang, dangling from the roof like ghastly ornaments, pushing up against one another as they fell upon the dusty artifacts of the place. Kjarez Nightbraker strode from the others, as one small bat fell from the pack and in front of her. The creature used the claws at the end of her wings to crawl close to the cat, before she spoke.

“Greetings, Sorceress,” the bat said. “It is good to see you.”

Kaliya saw Raska leap in fear as suddenly every bat in the chamber echoed her words. Rikki winced.

“I never get used to that, Seredes,” Kjarez said. “Did you learn anything from the wraith as he was banished to the Phantom Realm?”

“No,” came the small voice from the bat Seredes, followed by the mighty echo. “But we know that he guided many humans to this house through dark dreams. It is unfortunate.”

“Do you think he was allied with Azazel?”

“I don’t know,” Seredes said. “These days ever mad Jinn claims allegiance to Azazel and the Black Swan. But we remain worried. So many dreams are troubled. We lost Red Shaam.”

“That wasn’t your fault...”

“It was our responsibility. We swear the same oath as you. We may appear numberless but each of us has a passionate devotion,” replied Seredes, followed by the massive echo.

Kaliya did not understand why they had to speak like this. At times it appeared to prolong conversation.

“Nevertheless, he’s in the Phantom Realm,” Kjarez replied. She paused, then turned to look at Raska, “This is our newest squire. It looks like he’s a dreamrider, too.”

“I am Seredes,” the small bat said to Raska. There was silence following these words, as her comrades did not speak. Then she said again, “It is impressive you are a dreamrider, cat. For those Jinn that are beasts, that is the usually the talent of coyotes and bats.” The echoes returned.

Kaliya looked at Raska. The snake sensed the young cat was no longer scared, but curious. The cat narrowed his eyes. “Have we met before?”

“The sync bats fly across the world looking for young beasts to make Janissaries. Likely we have met both in your dreams and in the corporeal world. If you are knighted, you will see more of us.”

“They also carry the souls of creatures I capture to the Phantom Realm,” Kjarez said.

“We are all guardians of the underworld,” Seredes said. The legion around her repeated her words.

“Yeah, no doubt,” Rikki suddenly said. Kaliya knew the mongoose was unsettled by bats, even the ones that were their allies. “Anyway, if there’s nothing you found out about this particular wraith, we can all get back to Draekar.”

“By your command,” Seredes said. She flapped her small wings, and took to the air. The bats dispersed, screeching and crying, as they exited the attic and flew out into the night. The animals in the attic stood quietly until the last of their screeches turned into silence.

“I swear,” Rikki said quietly to Kaliya. “Her predecessor didn’t have all of them echo like that. It went against their traditions, sure, but it made everything a lot quicker.”

Kaliya was temporary surprised the creature addressed him. He then said, “You don’t have to share this thought with me, you know I agree.” Rikki scowled at Kaliya briefly, then padded away to speak with the other mammals.

“Are you going to be okay?” Raska said to the fox cubs, who seemed to have emerged from hiding.

The cubs uttered a response that Kaliya ignored, finding the discussion uninteresting. Kaliya then looked upon Raska, and thought for a moment. The cat had fought bravely upon seeing the wraith. Creatures raised Janissaries, who were younger and brasher, had often let fear take them when faced with such a specter. The cat had also risked his life by placing himself between the wraith and the fox cubs, despite Sedkazan’s instructions that their goal was to eliminate the creature. Though the cubs meant nothing to Kaliya, he valued other animals that had a sense of principle, even if the principle was misguided. And of course, Raska’s disciplined use of magic, in this case Jinn flame, the Red Flower, was objectively impressive.

The snake’s tongue moved in and out, and he thought, *I like this cat.*

ZENITH



ZENITH HAD BEEN TAKING TIME TO REST. He found himself wandering through the jungles of Draekar seeking prey. He made meat of a toad before encountering the cheetah Mordred, who was with his allies Joseph and Angelo Northstar.

“I heard you retrieved a new Janissary, Kin of Witches?” Mordred said.

“Some nights ago, yes,” the black cat said.

“I heard some chattering among the other beasts,” Mordred commented. “The little Ronin in Sedkazan’s command used Red Flower in battle.”

“Fire?” Zenith responded. Jinn flame was not an easy spell to grasp. It took significant training to use it in a controlled way.

“The sync bats say he is a dreamrider,” Mordred said. “Who would have thought, a dreamrider is our newest squire.”

“Fascinating,” Zenith said. “Who was the target?”

“A wraith,” Mordred said. “But no mere criminal, he was radicalized. Another Acolyte sworn to the Black Swan.”

They are everywhere, now, the black cat thought.

“Another dead Acolyte, and more to follow. We slew some jackals who had been stalking humans at night,” Mordred said proudly. “Angelo Northstar ended three of them.”

Zenith said nothing.

“Come now, Kin of Witches. You used to enjoy this more than most.”

“Why do so many Jinn follow the Black Swan’s message?” Angelo suddenly piped up.

Zenith looked at the puppy quizzically. “They are criminals...evil creatures...”

“Hah, oh come on, Zenith,” Mordred sneered.

Zenith’s red eyes flashed. Mordred laughed. “You don’t scare me. I am faster than your wind.” The cheetah turned to Angelo, “Little brother, many of our kind live in a world where they are powerless. Many are caught between man and beast. They want something, brother. Any creature gifted with any intellect wants more than water, warmth, and hunt. That’s why all of us do what we do here. That’s why we chase the immortality of the Styx. The normal beasts of clay, they don’t think about death, but we Jinn do. These Acolytes want to feel immune from death, that’s

why they follow their Black Jester. They want power in a world where nothing means anything. If that power comes from mayhem and cruelty, so be it,” Mordred said. He chuckled. “They want to live near death and wield it. I on the other hand, will end their suffering.”

Zenith was taken momentarily aback by this explanation. He grudgingly uttered, “We are sworn to protect humanity from harm.” He thought of past days. Jinn Beasts rarely made war on humans. Wraiths would attack from time to time, but never declare themselves allied with each other or to a leader. It was against their nature. Times had changed.

“Yes, and we will kill all those that defy the Covenant,” Mordred said.

Angelo appeared confounded by this discussion. He put his nose to the earth, as if trying to find something else to pay attention to. At that moment, there was a rustling in the leaves. Shirazia the ocelot appeared near the beasts, her spots materializing from the brush.

“Zenith,” she declared. “Our Lord Executor requests your presence. To speak of the wraith captured in North America by Sedkazan.”

She was listening...and Sedkazan was not there...Zenith thought.

“There was a type of magic used during the skirmish that Vaylan wishes to speak of,” Shirazia told him.

“My claws are at his command.”

“Then come with me, Kin of Witches.”

Zenith acknowledged Mordred and his companions with a nod, before following the ocelot into the jungle.

After travelling for some time, he found Vaylan resting on the bough of the tree. Kjarez Nightbraker sat below him. He suppressed a growl. She turned to him, and hissed quietly. The black cat was aware of her antipathy for him.

“Zenith,” Vaylan rumbled. “There was a time in the human cities long ago where you encountered unique types of magic, correct?”

“Aye,” Zenith said. “Alchemist magic. Many types of strange conjuring.”

“When the humans practiced magic, your city was once the center of their world,” Vaylan responded.

“True enough.”

Kjarez got to the point. “We were battling a wraith. Somehow it did something to destroy our telepathy. Messed with Kaliya, too.”

“How are they interfering with our telepathy?” the black cat demanded.

“I don’t know,” Kjarez confessed.

“It is your prerogative to know, Sorceress,” Zenith shot back. He turned to Vaylan. “I have knowledge of certain dark spells, but I am no expert. She is.”

Kjarez had no love for the Kin of Witches. “You think I know about every variant of magic that exists? Azazel didn’t always have his Plague Bite and healing abilities, after all.”

“If they have the ability to interfere with our telepathy....”

“We’ll deal with it,” Kjarez snapped.

“I will deal with it,” the black cat snarled.

“Enough from both of you,” the jaguar growled. “Did you talk to Seredes?”

“I did,” Nightbraker responded. “She doesn’t know what happened. Sometimes, you don’t know how magic works. That’s why it’s *magic*.” She shot Zenith a glance when she said that.

Vaylan the jaguar looked at both of his warriors. He waited in silence for a few moments. He then spoke, “We cannot allow disciples of Azazel to obtain this type of magic.”

“I agree,” Zenith said. His eyes glowed red.

“You recall Vega the rat, don’t you?”

“How could I ever forget him,” the black cat hissed under his breath. Zenith had not been a Janissary from a young age. Two hundred human years ago, him and Vega had been the familiars of a sinister human witch. The black cat had acquired the power of wind through that chapter in his life, though it had been a dark time.

“Question Vega about this,” Vaylan said. “Got to his rat pit. Find out what he’s doing”

“By your command.”

Vaylan paused. “And if he was responsible for sharing this magic with an Acolyte, kill him.”

Kjarez looked shocked. “What....?” Though Vega was a rat, he was Jinn, and Vaylan’s choice to immediately assassinate him seemed hasty even to Zenith.

“We are sworn to protect humanity,” the jaguar said. “If he is distributing magic to the Acolytes that can block our telepathy, he must be killed.”

Zenith bowed his head. “By your command.” Zenith turned from the great jaguar. He saw Nightbraker stare angrily at him, but he ignored her as he padded away from the two of them.

Kjarez had never liked Zenith due to his treatment of Farishta Swiftasdeath. Once, he had thought she would have been a suitable mate for his nephew, until she revealed she had little desire to wean kittens. Her willingness to accommodate Sedkazan’s tendency to have emotional ties to humans had strengthened his contempt for her.

Thankfully, the black cat did not need her to traverse the gates. The horned owl provided those pathways to him. In the heart of the ancient jungle, he caught a sight of the vast blackness of space, mirroring his own hide, before becoming swallowed in blue light. The black cat took several jumps before he could go no further, and emerged in the famed city, New Orleans.

He appeared beneath a bright moon, balancing on the roof of a tall building looking out over a large square filled with mausoleums. He then leaped from rooftop to rooftop, scaling the railings of balconies that overlooked Halloween parades. He cast glances at humans with faces painted with skeleton smiles, gathering around lurid constructions of wood, paper, and plastic, the likenesses of monsters the humans had never seen in their lifetimes.

The smell of food from the sea drifted upwards into his nostrils, filling him with pangs of hunger. It had been a while since he hunted. It brought back memories of days he had scavenged near the Creole neighborhoods in the city, before he had met the witch. She had lived here long ago. He thought of her at night

sometimes, her skin like slate and her barbed French accent, and her hands running through his midnight fur.

Absent a willing Jinn, humans have no natural capacity for magic. Him and Vega had been the witch's familiars, eager to use their powers to support her. He had been addicted to it, the thrill of conquering humans and other Jinn, and testing the limitations of his power. There was no greater joy than being young and dangerous and skilled at magic in the old American city in the 19th century, when gangs of Jinn skirmished with one another in the alleyways and sewers with smoke and flame, when humans sought the black arts to enchant lovers, predict the future and wreak vengeance on enemies. Like all things, however, the good times had ended. The black cat's tragedy had struck and the Janissaries had come with their Covenant, demanding that all mystical beings respect human life.

Why do you wish to think of the past, Kin of Witches? he thought.

Zenith put aside the memories. He moved through the city instinctively, with a map programmed into his mind from the years of his youth. He wove through the narrow spaces of the city, crossing through the Greek Orthodox enclave before entering the French Quarter. Some things had changed, much had stayed the same. He finally found the old hotel, awash in the light of streetlamps, the mahogany door of its entrance left ajar to allow the sounds of the city make their mark on the occupants. Two peculiar gargoyles, their grimaces eroded by tempest rain, loomed above the entranceway. The cat's ears twitched, and he moved silently away from the door, seeking out his target.

He found what he wanted near the side of the building, where sounds murmured from beneath a dark hole between bricks. The cat sank into this place, and wound his narrow frame through the building's foundation and followed the whispers till they transformed into jeering and yelling. He followed the sounds, and then entered a large chamber, the basement of the old hotel.

The room was filled with crowds. Cats and foxes, stray dogs, possums and raccoons, Zenith even saw two massive reptiles out of the corner of his eyes. They screeched in a myriad animal dialects and languages. Some were Jinn Beasts, some were simple nocturnal beasts curious about seeing such a strange spectacle in their habitat. In the center of it all was a black cauldron, where a single repulsive creature sat on its edge. The rat.

His fur was grey and black and his ears were wet. His tail was longer than the tails of most rats, and he was without teeth. Vega wheezed when he spoke, "Come one, come all! See the darkness, hear the mute hiss! Feel the void across your skin! See the power of the Jinn!"

Smoke bubbled from the cauldron, and sparks flew from its hidden interior. Some of the animals screeched in fear and pleasure at seeing the light.

There were few bloodlines of Jinn in the form of prey creatures. Most were predators, a vestige from ages ago perhaps to avoid bloodshed among beasts of Smokeless Flame in the name of hunger. Yet some did exist. Vega was one such being.

"Who wants to taste the lightning?" the rat said in a high reedy voice. Vega had gone rabid years ago, but being a creature of

Smokeless Flame, the disease had not killed him. He did not seem to mind the madness.

A stray dog panted and yelped, and sprinted toward the cauldron. Vega chuckled, and his face vanished in the cauldron. A stream of black liquid spilled over from the vessel's edge, which the dog lapped up greedily.

Zenith watched curiously. After a moment, the dog yipped with pleasure. The black cat saw a thin thread of electric blue appear on the tip of his tail and travel to the top of his nose. The dog yipped in pain. A bolt of lightning suddenly appeared from the dark ceiling above, and fired into the cauldron. The basement was filled with an awful light, and the dog collapsed, a twisted grin on its face. It lay on the floor motionless.

“This is the magic, my fellow beasts!” Vega sneered. “Few creatures posses it. Many Jinn know not how to wield it. The Janissaries have pretended its arts are theirs alone for generations. Magic belongs to all creatures.”

“You speak lies, vermin.”

Zenith approached. Creatures whispered in fear. The Kin of Witches was legendary in the city. Cats hissed, dogs whimpered in fear, a large reptile blinked once, and turned away, wanting no part of the matter any further. The rats jeered. The ranks of some of the beasts began to thin as creatures departed into holes and dark corners.

“Kin of Witches! You have graced us with your presence!”

“Magic destroys those made from clay,” Zenith sneered.

“Ahh, but I am not made from clay, old friend,” Vega laughed. “I can reach into the Unseen, the upside down spaces, the

dark worlds, like you can. Some of our other brethren, they want to taste the fire, as well.”

Zenith was tired of talking, and wanted to put an end to the rat now, but an uneasiness swam inside him. *What was the creature speaking of?* In the corner of his eyes, he saw the dog that had drank from the cauldron twitch on the floor.

“You came alone,” Vega tittered. “I doubt your Sorceresses can pull you from out of this space, so deep underground. Not with my magic surrounding us, at least. And that legendary wind of yours, that held the old witches aloft in the sky, cannot be summoned here.”

The red light behind Zenith’s eyes glowed brighter. He snarled. “Are these your last words, scum? I’ll play with you before I kill you.”

Vega looked momentarily terrified, his rodent instincts reacting to the cat’s threat. Then he laughed. “Do you miss our mistress? We have a new master, now. And he wants the Jinn to rule again.”

“So you have sworn allegiance to Azazel and the Black Swan,” the black cat hissed. “Your end will not come easy, rat.”

The dog on the floor suddenly lurched, twisted, and rose, coming to its feet like a puppet. Zenith watched, transfixed at the sight, as a patch of white crawled across the dog’s brown fur, and the hair drifted off its body. Its eyes became bloodshot. Foam dripped from its mouth.

“Ahh, my concoction,” Vega said. “For most of the lower beasts, it makes them feel good. For some it kills them. For a chosen few, well...”

The dog barked furiously at Zenith. The black cat observed the beast. Its muscles seemed to have grown to twice their girth, and the teeth of the dog looked as sharp as shattered glass. Zenith hissed, and arched his back, ready for battle, when two pale shadows emerged. Thin naked felines, with milk-white skin, emerged from the shadows. They hissed and spat at the black cat.

The remaining crowds of animals watched the sight, mesmerized. Vega stood atop his cauldron, his tail whipping back and forth. “Jinn Beasts, ghouls, skinwalkers, wraiths, shaitaan, marids, *demons!*” the rat screamed. “Azazel will give us the earth again! And to those chosen creatures made of clay, those who are lucky can join us!”

“I will slay these monstrosities,” Zenith sneered.

“You will try, Kin of Witches. You will try.”

The white creatures pounced, and the black cat roared.

SEDKAZAN



SEDKAZAN WANDERED THROUGH THE MARKET IN NEW ORLEANS, smelling spices, fish, and the scent of fabrics. A few humans reached down to pet him as he moved, and he purred. He found himself twice rewarded by chunks of meat. *Always good to get a little extra food*, the silver cat thought as he glanced at his reflection in a row of olive oil bottles. *Investigations are tough*. As he moved, the silver cat wondered if he had missed any action from the mission to contain the wraith. *Rikki and Kjarez handled it*, he thought. *This is more important.*

The silver cat slid through between surfaces of several vases and then jumped atop the wares of an outdoor bookseller,

ignoring the protests of nearby humans. The humans were out late this evening, drinking and celebrating one of their festivals.

Sedkazan did not have to wander much longer when found the spot. A corner shop with a thin door painted red. The cat entered through a smaller door designed for dogs.

Should have brought Kaliya, he would have been useful here, Sedkazan mused. *Always difficult travelling with a damned snake though.*

He turned, and waited.

“Chimgaader, where are you?” Sedkazan called out. He looked around. Colorful fish in strange bottles lined a long shelf. Shattered human machines were stacked on a table, and music blared from a black cylinder nearby.

Sedkazan leaped upon the table with the black object, and looked around. He sniffed. The human shopkeeper was not present. But he smelled the creature.

“Chimgaader,” Sedkazan called out.

“Is that you, Farishta Swiftasdeath?” a voice creaked.

The black cat turned. In the corner of the shop, dangling from a tall lamp, was the flying fox. The large bat’s snout was long and she had the face of her species’ namesake. She looked at the cat with oily eyes.

“I want to see your boss,” Sedkazan said.

“My boss is out with his mistress,” the bat replied.

“I wish to see the marid, not the human,” Sedkazan snapped irritably. *She knows who I’m talking about.*

The bat asked, “So what brings you to New Orleans this time around, Sedkazan?”

“Confirming a lead. Been chatting with some strange creatures. Been attempting to track down some information, and well, I believe your boss has what I need.”

“She may,” Chimgaader replied. “But as you know, marids don’t look kindly to most other Jinn. Perhaps you should ask Vega.”

“Vega is a rabid psychopath and if I had my way one of us would have killed him a long time ago,” Sedkazan said.

“Oh, really?” Chimgaader tittered.

“Yeah, really,” Sedkazan said. He sensed something in her tone that he could not identify, but he let it pass. “Now can I talk to your boss or what?”

Chimgaader spread her wings. They were long and wide, like a ghoul’s. “Alright, captain. You may speak with her. We try to respect the Covenant in our city.”

Sedkazan rolled his eyes. In North America, New Orleans had once been a center for all manner of Jinn to congregate and play with the magical arts. The Janissaries had put an end to widespread use of magic and some creatures still resented that.

“You can find her in there,” Chimgaader said, nodding to a nearby doorway covered in tapestries.

“I appreciate it,” Sedkazan said. The silver cat licked his paw, then went toward the room. Entering, he found a small table lined with a stack of cards and a silver orb, and shelves filled with strange artifacts. Sedkazan looked upon a polished woodcarving of a turtle, a brass likeness of a human skull, and an oil lamp.

The cat leaped on the table, then hopped on the edge of the shelf. *Might as well have a bit of fun.* He looked around, then

casually began pushing items off the edge of the shelf. Finally, he approached the lamp. “Can’t believe they still use these.” He pushed the lamp off and it clattered as it hit the ground.

Sedkazan jumped off, landing next to the lamp. He nudged it with his paw. The cat then jumped back upon the table in the center of the room. “Guess that wasn’t it...”

“Little cat thinks he’s Ala’ ad-Din.”

Sedkazan watched as the walls and objects around him seemed to melt away. Smoke filled the room. The ceiling above the silver cat seemed to vanish as the smoke rose to a sky filled with red and black clouds. The smoke formed a column that seemed to rise stories, and the likeness of a human face emerged at its apex, framed by cascading red and silver hair.

“You disturb my slumber, Janissary?” she challenged.

Sedkazan looked on the mirage impassively. The silver cat extended his paws and stretched his spine. He had seen these tricks before.

The smoke descended from the enigmatic heights, and swirled around the room, forming a coil. Then it gathered, shaping itself into the likeness of a female human. The ceiling of the chamber returned, and the clouds above vanished. The marid sat across the table, transformed. She was now wearing the raiment of a human woman, with jet-black hair and a black sari. Red and silver jewels hung from her ears.

“Sedkazan Farishta Swiftasdeath,” she said. “My lord of lightning. I’ve been expecting you.”

“Marid,” Sedkazan said dryly. “I take it you don’t have a name I can pronounce.”

“What brings you here?”

“I’ve been in New Orleans for the past day or so, chasing leads,” Sedkazan said. “There are said to be disciples of Azazel here, and Ronin that follow the old ways of this city. I am looking for ways to kill the black jester.”

“Of course you are,” she said. There was a puff of smoke. A metallic pot with a long handle emerged with an accompanying glass. She poured coffee into the glass and took a sip. “Azazel heals fast and his bite is incurable.”

Sedkazan looked at the coffee, and frowned. There was another puff of smoke, and a bowl with creamy white milk appeared on the table. The silver cat approached and lapped it up.

“The marid of Damascus had sworn his allegiance to Azazel when I had our Sorceress send him to the Phantom Realm,” Sedkazan said. “It was quite the battle, but I got him to talk. He said I needed a sword and a shield to kill the creature. Human terms.” Sedkazan’s tail flicked casually. “He also pointed me in the direction of a possessed medicine man in South America, who had taken poison from a goliath toad in the Cameroon. After I finally found said goliath toad, he pointed me in direction of this city. After a few more conversations...well...here I am.”

“Indeed,” she responded. There was a curious glint in her eye. She reached out with long fingers toward Sedkazan’s metallic fur.

“No,” Sedkazan said.

“Fine,” she responded. “It’s pretty, that’s all. So, you think I will help you?”

“Yes, I think you will help me,” the silver cat said testily. “The world is different now. Azazel will never defeat us. You and I both know that. But his violence breeds more violence. Every time he strikes with his creatures the world gets more dangerous.”

“The humans put this world through enough peril by themselves.”

“Maybe,” Sedkazan said. “But they are the vicegerents of this earth.”

“Per your Janissary Covenant,” she told him. “After all, it’s been ages since the war between the Ifrit and the Kaiju. Perhaps our people’s debts have been repaid. There are Jinn in this world who would see us walk the earth openly again.” She narrowed her eyes.

“You don’t want that,” Sedkazan told her. “The Jinn out there that want to us to abandon our protection of the humans don’t understand what the world would look like if we disappeared. How quickly it would change. There would be fighting in the ancient cities. Shaitaan would drive scores of humans mad. Jinn Beasts would emerge and hunt humans freely. Everyone would suffer...man, Jinn, beast.”

The marid rolled her eyes. “You’re not very convincing.”

Sedkazan looked her straight into the eye. “You like taking the form of humans, correct?”

“Yes,” she responded. She ran a hand through her dark hair before looking at the cat curiously. “It must be a pity, a creature of Smokeless Flame, trapped in that little body.”

“One thing that Jinn Beasts understand that you shape shifters don’t...” Sedkazan said fiercely. “Is that we don’t have the

arrogance to think that when the world changes we can always adapt. When the floods come, when the fires come, when the drought comes, beasts die. Prey disappears. Plants vanish. Water turns to dust. Change is the most terrible and dangerous predator. It destroys most things.”

The marid smiled, and said nothing for a moment. She appeared to be taking this in. *If she doesn't talk, I will make her, Sedkazan thought. I've come too far for me to talk sense to this marid.*

She clapped her hands. “Alright, my lord of lightning. I'll give you your prize.” The marid got down to business. She waved a hand and a deck of cards appeared. She placed her hand on the top of the deck and swirled it into a circle of cards.

“What is this?” Sedkazan said, not understanding what she was doing.

“Just a game, little cat,” she said. “But a game that will give you your answers.”

She flipped a card over. “The King of Swords.” On the card, Sedkazan saw the image of a human on a throne carrying some type of weapon.

“You are destined for authority and leadership, Janissary. You will achieve great things,” she told him.

“What does this have to do with...”

She turned over another one. The cat saw a picture of a smaller human, also armed. “The Page of Swords. Youth and immaturity. Cat, you act rashly, pouncing and leaping where you shouldn't, acting without thinking.”

Sedkazan's mind flashed to Angelo Northstar, and the rage he felt as he summoned lighting to strike. An image of White Day

the wolf flash in his mind's eye, his fur covered in crimson. *Remember me, Sedkazan. Please remember me.*

The marid flipped another card. The image of a cloaked figure looked back at the silver cat. "Death. Your enemy, Azazel. He whose bite is more powerful than the river Styx itself. Whose blood carries healing properties that render him immortal..."

"You need a poison to defeat him, Sedkazan. A poison that will overwhelm his healing powers. A poison from the deepest jungles on this earth. A poison from the heart of Jadzir."

Sedkazan locked eyes with the marid. In her pupils he saw dancing flame. In the fires, he saw a girl from ages past. He saw her laughing.

The marid interrupted his thoughts. "See if you can pick a card, cat." Sedkazan looked at her, and clumsily placed a paw on one of the cards. He awkwardly pushed at it. The marid retrieved it with her long fingers, and flicked it over.

"The Knight of Cups," the marid announced, pointing at an image of a human carrying a gold cup. "Victory against your enemy will not come merely from strength of arms, but from wisdom." The marid reached across the table, and petted Sedkazan lightly. The silver cat could not help himself, as he purred. Sedkazan found himself feeling drowsy, lost in her words, as if he were on the edge of slumber.

"You will need a shield from the masters of wisdom, the Turtle Lords of the Oceanic Kingdoms. This will protect you from the venom from his bite."

“Another card, cat,” the marid rumbled. Her voice had changed, resembling rolling thunder the cat had once heard as he hunted near an African horizon.

Sedkazan reached out, and pushed with his paw. Some of the cards scattered. The marid turned over one. There was an image of human in gold armor on a horse, waving a sword, wreathed in flame. “The Knight of the Jinn,” she said. “To defeat Azazel, you will need a powerful companion. A friend or an enemy, but a companion. With the sword and shield, and this companion, you will defeat the Black Jester.” Sedkazan found himself staring into the marid’s gaze again. Flames dances in her eyes. This time, in the fire, he thought he saw his reflection, except instead of a feline with silver fur he saw a cat looking back at him that seemed molded from red-and-yellow flame.

Sedkazan suddenly stood up, leaping to his paws. “What the....”

“I gave you what you wanted, Janissary,” she said, folding her arms. She took a sip from her coffee. “Now leave.”

Sedkazan kneaded the table with his paws, trying to find his footing. He felt unsure of himself, as if he had emerged from a long period of sleeping. The cat let his tail wave back and forth as he found his balance. “Marid...” Sedkazan said with a stammer, trying to find himself. “I thank you for your information...the Janissaries appreciate your...”

“One more thing, Farishta Swiftasdeath,” she said. The marid smiled.

“What is it?” Sedkazan said, his senses returning to him. He hopped down from the table.

“We marids can sense much of what goes on in the world around us,” she said. “The movement in the astral gates, the leaps of your fellow Janissaries.”

“Yes, I’m sure you can,” Sedkazan said irritably. “Perhaps you can tell me where Azazel is, then?”

“Not the Black Jester,” she responded with a smile. “But your comrade the black cat. The Kin of Witches.”

“Zenith?” Sedkazan uttered. *What about my goddamn uncle?*

“I fear your friend’s life may be at an end soon. I think him and his old friend Vega are having some words.”

Sedkazan leaped back upon the table and looked her in the eye. He felt the heat of his lightning gather around him. “Where?” Sedkazan demanded, barely concealing a snarl.

The marid laughed. “There are three hotels within a mile of here. He’s in the basement of one of them. See if you can find him.” Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t take my information for granted again, Janissary. Whether you know it or not, it comes at a price.”

Sedkazan said nothing more. The silver cat whirled around, leaped off the table, and ran off into the New Orleans night to find his comrade, leaving the genie and her chamber behind him. As he left her shop, he could hear her laugh, accentuated by the sound of thunder.

ZENITH



IN THE BASEMENT BENEATH THE NEW ORLEANS HOTEL, Zenith bled in all places and sucked in breath. His red eyes darted left and right, catching the sights around him. He had slain one of the phantom creatures and several of Vega's disciples, but his endurance was failing him. Across from him was an alligator, its mouth slavering and left eye bleeding from the black cat's claws. Flanking the reptile were the remaining dog and cat apparitions with their harrowing white skin.

“Not so dangerous without your wind, are you, Kin of Witches?” Vega challenged from his perch on the cauldron.

Zenith cast a glance at the corpses around him. “If they were alive they wouldn’t think so.”

Snarls erupted around the crowd, and the two white beings leered at the black cat. “It looks like your time is at an end, Zenith. Until we meet in paradise,” Vega said.

Unafraid, Zenith hissed and spat. “We will enter hell together tonight, vermin.” He crouched down to prepare to throw all his might at the rat, when a flash of silver glinted from the corner of his eye. Sedkazan.

“It’s Sedkazan! Run!” some beast shouted. Animals began crawling over each other to escape as the silver cat entered the fray.

“Fools!” Vega spat. “It’s just one cat.”

Zenith could count the flaws and deficiencies of his nephew readily. But the silver cat was a sight to behold in combat. Even in the basement of the hotel there was a brightness to Sedkazan as he charged, leaped, pounced and slashed with pitiless claws, as if he was comprised of shards of glowing steel come to life.

“Damn you, Sedkazan!” Zenith sneered. “Use your lightning!”

“You’re welcome, uncle,” the silver cat snapped as he slashed at a retreating stray. The silver cat whirled around, turning to confront the white dog that Zenith had faced earlier, its eyes mad. Sedkazan ducked and slashed, but the animal was relentless.

“They don’t feel pain,” the black cat said. He dived toward Sedkazan’s adversary. Uncle and nephew struck together, and the beast was felled.

Sedkazan laughed, enjoying the battle high, when the fallen creature's limbs shook rapidly. It returned to its feet as if compelled by a puppeteer's strings, drool dripping from his jaws.

“What the hell?”

“It takes a lot to take these creatures down, whatever they are,” Zenith snarled. “Hard to kill even one.”

Sedkazan’s eyes glittered, and a violet light surrounded his gaze. The white phantoms approached fearlessly, snarling and lashing out with their claws. Behind them, the alligator let out a long droning hiss. Braver animals near them who had not departed hissed and snarled. Sedkazan arched his back, ready for combat, when he heard Zenith coughing blood. The black cat collapsed.

“God damn it,” Sedkazan muttered. He stared at his adversaries, the rat, and performed a quick mental calculation. “Get up, Zenith. We’ll finish them later.”

“We’ll finish them now!” the black cat roared.

“The hell we will,” Sedkazan sneered. “We don’t know what these things are, you’re injured, you can’t use your wind, and we can’t bring in backup. Let’s go. When we’re outside we can call to Kjarez or the owl.”

Zenith glared at Sedkazan furiously. But the black cat had not lived as long as he did and survived the dark insurrections of New Orleans without learning when the time was best to retreat.

“Fine,” the black cat hissed. He locked his red eyes with the rat Vega. “We will meet again, Vega.”

“Kill them!” Vega screamed in response.

The alligator rushed forward, the white phantoms beside him. Zenith summoned his remaining strength, spun around, and

darted toward the exit, diving over strays and vagrants as he did. Sedkazan followed. As his muscles were failing him, the black cat's survival instinct welled inside him. He sniffed and breathed to relax himself as he sought out the exit. Finally, he caught a whiff of the city and the sounds of drumbeats.

The living night of New Orleans guided the two felines to their escape, and the black and silver cats found themselves on the streets.

"We're outside. Can your wind carry us?" Sedkazan said.
"I'm trying to reach Kjarez."

"I am..." Zenith said. He tried to concentrate and summon his powers, but his strength was failing him. He looked at the night sky briefly. *I used to ride in that.*

"Screw it!" Sedkazan said, "Let's keep moving."

The silver and black cats sprinted into city, the sounds of Bourbon Street's parade calling in the distance.

From the Lady Snow Leopard's lessons to Kjarez Nightbraker: The Dreamriders.

A unique talent among the Jinn Beasts, a rare form of magic, is the ability to enter the dreams of Man, and read what's in his heart. Few possess this ability. Those with coyote blood are known to have been able to do this. The sync bats can do this, but only when they fly together in their vast colonies. Some felines have the capacity, but often, only the spotted ones have this ability. The serpents, for all their talents at stalking those who are awake, cannot break the barrier of sleep.

What is a more intimate act than the dancing between dreams? What is more limitless than the imagination of Man? We Sorceresses have our telepathy, our command over the gates, but we envy those who can cross into the dreams.

The world is a big place, my child, with many places to hide. And yet with the astral gates at our disposal, we can reach so much in so little time. In dreams, Kjarez, there are so many more places to hide, to run, to hunt.

KJAREZ



“HMMM?” KJAREZ SAID. She felt herself drift away from sleep. After the battle with the wraith, and the discussion with Vaylan, she had found herself back in Draekar resting. It was a good sleep, the images of space did not visit her with the frequency they normally did. Only once did she see a glimmer of vanishing ice on the surface of a comet. But as she awoke, she felt the fabric of the gates flutter. It was a telepathic call that roused her.

<Kjarez! Kjarez!> came the voice. <Can you hear me?>

Her heart raced. It annoyed her that it did. She had watched thousands of beasts go to battle before and had heard many Jinn cry out to her through the gates. She had seen Sedkazan throw

himself into danger countless times. Yet every time he did, it struck her heart.

She moved these thoughts from her mind and focused on the task at hand. She watched the gates, and sought out the light of the two souls. She felt the chatter of a thousand sync bats, as they passed their signals from one to the other, letting the Sorceress's magic extend across the globe. She concentrated, trying to find him through the endless lights that danced in her mind. She focused her breathing and used her magic to seek him out. Finally, she caught a glimpse of the City of Shadows, New Orleans.

She saw him. The silver cat was running in the New Orleans night, followed by the black cat Zenith. She could feel the edges of their mind. Sedkazan was in some pain. But she could sense Zenith's hurt, a raging pain that she could feel through the telepathic channel.

<Kjarez! Kjarez! Can you hear me?> Sedkazan cried again.

New Orleans was far from them, but her talents were great, rivaled only by the snowy owl. She felt herself reach through the barriers between space, and focused on the sync bats and their rushing wings. She abandoned her earthly senses, and looked into the heart of space where the light of dead stars still shone.

There was a flash of blue, and before her, Sedkazan and Zenith appeared. The silver cat was rasping, and Kjarez's heart filled with apprehension for a brief moment, then she saw he was unharmed.

"Thanks, thanks, I'm okay," he said. He locked eyes with her gratefully.

"What happened?"

“Get me the heron,” she heard the growl. “Get me the goddamned heron.” Kjarez turned to see Zenith. The black cat was heaving, his fur lined with crimson marks. He collapsed in front of her. He spat blood.

Kjarez did not hesitate. She used her telepathy to call for her comrades. They were near her enough where she did not have to tax herself to teleport them.

The Lord Executor Vaylan arrived first, leaping from the treetops to land near the smaller animals.

“Ardechai!” Vaylan roared. “Where is Ardechai?”

The heron swooped down from the sky. “Move!” the bird said to Kjarez and Sedkazan. He approached Zenith, and extended his wingspan. Then, he flapped. Water laced with the Styx fell upon the black cat, making the red and black on his fur glisten. As the moisture pooled near him, the black cat lapped up the water greedily. Zenith’s breathing became calmer, and he began to stand, his legs shaking as he found his footing.

“Easy, easy,” Ardechai said.

“I’m fine,” Zenith growled. “Just a few scratches.”

Ardechai shook his narrow head. “You’ll be fine, so long as you let this heal you.”

Kjarez hated the black cat, but she had to admire his resilience. Paired with Ardechai’s magic, the Kin of Witches would recover swiftly, no doubt.

“I saw Vega,” the black cat rasped. “I saw what he could do. Let me go back and kill him, my lord.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Kjarez saw the mongoose Rikki approach with freshly killed rat his mouth. He dropped the kill before Zenith. Without looking at Rikki, Zenith took the meat.

Zenith swallowed. “He is now in league with Azazel. He has something new at his disposal...he can turn beasts made from clay into...things....”

“Is Vega dead?” Vaylan asked.

Zenith closed his red eyes. “He is not. I have failed you, my lord.”

“You have not, Kin of Witches.”

The black cat turned to look at Kjarez. She saw a glimmer of appreciation in his eyes. It did not surprise her. They had fought together before and had faced all sorts of threats.

“I killed some of Vega’s lackeys,” Zenith told them. “Sedkazan...made an appearance.”

“You’re getting weaker in your old age, Zenith,” Sedkazan sneered. “The Styx must be wearing off.”

Zenith’s red eyes burned with contempt at Sedkazan, and he turned back to Vaylan. “Sedkazan came in time and helped me fight off the rest of them,” Zenith admitted grudgingly.

“I thought I tasked you with defeating the wraith?” Vaylan said quietly.

“I delegated,” Sedkazan said. “My lord, the other captains do it all the time. Red Shaam used to do it.”

Vaylan glared at the silver cat. Kjarez knew that Sedkazan was right.

“It was for the best you were in the City of Shadows,” Vaylan said. “What were you doing there?”

“Chasing a lead I’ve been looking at for some time,” Sedkazan said. “A way to kill Azazel.”

Kjarez’s interest immediately piqued.

“Finding Azazel has always been the problem,” Zenith snapped. “I’m certain one of us could kill him.”

“Every time we’ve found Azazel, we’ve never been able to kill him because of his healing factor!” Sedkazan retorted. “And it’s hard to get in close because one bite and...”

“Enough,” Vaylan said. “What did you learn?”

Sedkazan shot Zenith a look. “We need a type of ancient magic. Ronin magic.” He licked his paw, “A shield, from the oceanic kingdoms. A sword...a poison...from the dark jungles of Jadzir.”

“A shield to deflect his Plague Bite, a poison strong enough to overwhelm his healing factor,” Kjarez commented.

“Here’s the problem,” Sedkazan said. “The Jinn in those places don’t trust us. And it’s hard to learn that type of magic quickly, unless you’re a dreamrider.”

There was a moment of silence in the group.

“Something I don’t know?” Sedkazan said, cocking his head.

“Raska used Red Flower in the battle with the wraith,” Kjarez said. “He said he saw the fire in his dreams.” The Persian cat considered all that had been said. Finding Azazel was challenging enough, and he was a formidable fighter with a network of demons and criminals at his disposal. *But disabling his powers...that’s another story.*

“The Lords of Jadzir may trust a former Ronin,” Ardechais the heron offered. “As would the ancient turtles.”

“Raska?” Sedkazan said, a slight sneer in his voice. “Azazel would rip him to shreds.”

“Maybe,” Kjarez pointed out. “But as a dreamrider and a Ronin, he is in the best position to acquire and learn this magic from these creatures.”

Kjarez looked at Vaylan. The Lord Executor looked skeptical. The sounds of the jungle rustled. Finally, Vaylan said, “This is foolish talk. Azazel will be defeated through tactics we have used before. Gambling with ancient magic from unknown places will get us nowhere. Even now, I have intelligence on Azazel’s whereabouts, and I plan to strike tomorrow night.”

“My claws are at your command,” Zenith said.

“As are mine...” Sedkazan said.

You idiot, Sedkazan, Kjarez thought.

“No,” Vaylan said, looking at the silver cat. “You left the beasts under your command to face the wraith alone. After I ordered you to mentor a new Janissary.” The growled. “You will continue your mentorship with this cat.”

“I have!” Sedkazan objected. “We’ve been training and...”

Vaylan let out a snarl. Sedkazan shrank backwards. “My lord, I understand. But the wisdom from the marid. About the sword and shield...should we not...”

“God willing, tonight I will face Azazel,” the jaguar said.

“Lord Executor,” Kjarez said softly.

“Yes?” the jaguar turned to her.

“Azazel is dangerous and difficult to slay. Even for you, my lord,” she said. “If what Sedkazan is saying is true...I suggest we consider obtaining this magic. And consider that Raska may be helpful.”

The jaguar looked at her, and paused. From the corner of her eye she saw Sedkazan look at her appreciatively.

“Raska?” the jaguar finally said.

“Yes,” Kjarez said. “The Ronin, Raska.”

Vaylan looked at her, then turned to look at Sedkazan, then looked back at Zenith. “We will see what transpires tomorrow night,” Vaylan finally said. “Sedkazan.”

“Yes?”

“Find your Ronin. Continue his training. That is what I ask of you.”

Sedkazan wisely did not protest, and nodded. “Yes, my lord.” The silver cat turned from the other animals and took his leave to seek out the young cat.

He's angry, Kjarez thought. He's angry he put all this work into discovering this, and that Vaylan is seeking battle with Azazel this way again. And he's right.

“Kin of Witches,” Vaylan said, turning to the black cat. “Has the Styx done its work?”

Zenith flexed his spine. “It has, my lord. I will be ready for battle tomorrow.”

Kjarez cast a glance at Ardechai. The heron did not betray any emotion. *He's not healed yet. Not fully. But Vaylan wants him at his side, Kjarez thought.* She was tempted to link their minds and ask the bird directly, but she knew that would be a grave betrayal of

her loyalty to Vaylan. The Persian cat watched as the jaguar wordlessly turned away from his underlings, no doubt to begin planning his attack against the black jester.

RASKA



AFTER THE BATTLE WITH THE WRAITH, Raska had joined his companions to return to Draekar through the astral gates. Kjarez, the heron, and the mongoose had quickly disappeared, alerted of something that they did not disclose to him. The serpent Kaliya parted ways with Raska without saying a word.

The young cat felt exhilarated. He replayed the battle with the wraith in his mind, savoring the details. Every inch of him felt charged with strength and power. Yet hunger gnawed at him, and the young cat prowled the undergrowth for prey to find, soon finding a mouse to slay. As he fed on it, he briefly considered if

there were Jinn Beasts of these species. The question unsettled him momentarily, but his hunger trumped the concern.

As he finished his meal, Raska saw a flash of silver in the undergrowth. Sedkazan had appeared, a fish in his mouth. He padded over to Raska and dropped it before him.

“Nice job on your first adventure, Raska,” Sedkazan said. “Here, have some of this.” Raska looked at him curiously, then bit into the fish. He chewed and swallowed. Sedkazan lay down on the undergrowth, his tail wagging back and forth. The silver cat closed his eyes as Raska ate. As the young cat finished, Sedkazan finally said. “Come, Raska. Walk with me toward the river and have a drink with me.”

Raska and the silver cat walked from the jungle depths toward one of the waterholes of Draekar, eager to quench their thirsts. Beads of sunlight sparkled on the pool’s surface, appearing to dance between the leaves and water lilies that drifted atop the water.

“Do you feel alive?” Sedkazan said as they crossed the grass.

“Yeah,” Raska admitted. “When I hoped on a freight train once, it was pretty terrifying, but fighting that thing was amazing.” The young cat thought briefly of when Zenith had rescued him, but that had almost felt more like a dream.

“You’re a powerful fighter, for a Ronin,” Sedkazan said.

“I guess I’ll take that as a compliment,” the young cat responded.

“It is.”

The two felines approached the water, Raska dipped his head down to lap up the nourishment. Just then, there was a bright flash of blue light as around them beasts. Raska's paws scrambled in surprise, and the hair on the back of his head shot upwards. Sedkazan remained still, and then began to drink.

“An amazing battle, Northstar!”

“Couldn’t have done it without you all!”

“Those Acolytes won’t stand a chance.”

Raska found him and Sedkazan crowded by three large beasts. One was a young husky with long gray stripes. Another was a bloodhound; brown as river mud with thick arms and a long face with even longer, swooping ears. Raska widened his eyes at the third, a large cheetah stood next to him and Sedkazan, lean and golden, his face marked with the unmistakable black teardrops, his coat crowded with spots. Raska sniffed. Of the three, the husky reeked of living with humans.

Raska blinked as the two dogs plunged their faces into the water, splashing him and the silver cat as they drank. The young cat hissed slightly as he felt the large cheetah push past him and begin lapping up water. Raska opened his mouth to say something, when the husky spoke up.

“Sedkazan! It’s great to see you. Did you hear about our battle with the skinwalkers?”

“I have heard about it now, Angelo,” Sedkazan said. His tone was level. Raska saw the husky approach the silver cat, and sniff his haunches. Sedkazan moved away from him silently. The young cat saw a hint of anger in his companion’s blue eyes.

“This is your Ronin!” the dog named Angelo barked.

“I’m....” Raska meowed as the husky sniffed under his tail. The cat quickly moved away.

“Awesome!” Angelo said. The dog did not introduce himself, and turned to the bloodhound, who was still drinking. “Joseph, that was an amazing fight, wasn’t it? It was amazing,” Angelo repeated.

The bloodhound harrumphed, spraying water as he did, but said nothing, and returned to his drinking. The cheetah lapped up water and said, “How is your kitten sitting going, Farishta Swiftasdeath?”

“No better than your puppy sitting, Mordred,” Sedkazan said. If this had been an insult to the young husky, the dog ignored it. Raska saw the dog pull from the water, and begin sprinting back and across the edge of the waterhole.

“This is Ares Andromeda Starhazzard,” Sedkazan said, jerking his head toward Raska.

“I go by...”

“I don’t care,” Mordred uttered without looking at Raska.

“Besides the Acolytes you slew, is there anything exciting you have to tell me?” Sedkazan asked the cheetah.

“Nothing you need to know about,” the cheetah responded.

“I’ve been hearing that our lord will be going into battle,” Sedkazan said quietly.

The cheetah narrowed his eyes, “Where did you hear that?”

“I have my sources, Mordred.”

Mordred the cheetah sneered. “Must have been that cobra. I hear you’ve brought him back from his exile in Asia. You’ve

certainly putting the band back together, Sedkazan.” Without looking at Raska, he remarked, “Do you have your kitten fighting Acolytes yet?”

“We just contained a wraith,” Sedkazan said. “One that had been haunting a house and going after humans.”

The cheetah turned to look at Raska. “Well, I’m glad you’re getting your claws dirty. It’s not easy being one of us, little cat.”

Raska tried to say something sharp, but found himself failing. He had tangled with bullies and braggarts of all shapes and sizes in his travels, but he had momentarily found himself off center with this group of beasts. Mordred and Angelo were twice his size, likely; just as powerful as him, and ranking members of a clandestine group of beasts not long ago he had thought existed in legend.

“Come, Angelo, Joseph,” Mordred called out. Raska blinked, the cheetah appeared to vanish in thin air, leaving a plume of dirt in his wake. There was no glittering powder of blue to reflect a jump through the gates. The young cat saw Mordred next to Angelo, who was chasing his tail. The bloodhound finished drinking, nodded to Raska once, and ran off to meet his companions.

“I hate that guy,” Sedkazan said quietly.

“No kidding,” Raska responded. “I guess his whole thing is that he’s fast, huh? A super fast, cheetah.”

“That’s about right.”

“Angelo reminds me of some other dogs I’ve met back home, too,” Raska commented.

“You can blame him for us working together,” Sedkazan said.

“What does that mean?”

“I’ll tell you some other time,” Sedkazan responded. “But let me tell you a secret about Angelo.” Sedkazan’s voice became a whisper. “He has the sync bats bring him food from elsewhere. He doesn’t hunt, and can’t stand eating anything else in Draekar.”

Raska laughed, “That’s hilarious.”

“Don’t let those guys bother you,” Sedkazan told him. “Mordred is powerful and cunning. Angelo, as much as I think he’s a fool, is strong too. But you’re just as talented as them. Stick with me, Starhazzard, and you’ll go far.”

“Right,” Raska said. “So where were you when we were fighting that thing? We could have used you.”

Sedkazan licked his paws. “I was exploring a province that’s commonly known as stay out of my business, cat.”

Raska smiled disarmingly. “Whatever you say, Sedkazan. Since I’ve joined your little group, I haven’t seen you in action. At least not outside of our little matches.”

“Watching me fight is a gift, Starhazzard,” the silver cat responded. “Maybe one day you’ll get the chance.”

From the Lady Snow Leopard's lessons to Kjarez Nightbraker: Azazel The Black Jester

Azazel is the enemy of all of us. He is the servant of the Black Swan of the Acolytes. He is a criminal. He must be killed.

VAYLAN



THE LORD EXECUTOR OF THE JANISSARIES leaped through many portals before he ended up in the black wood. There, the black cat Zenith and the ocelot Shirazia awaited. Shadows from the trees slashed across their forms. Nearby, the great polar bear Kodak wandered. A puma preened herself on the forest floor. Her name escaped Vaylan, and he felt a pang of guilt over this. This would be no easy mission, and it at least called for recognition of his warriors' names. He remembered he had selected her at Shirazia's recommendation, and knew she was a skilled warrior. *But that name....*

“If Azazel lurks in this forest, I want him to meet no escape,” Vaylan said to Zenith.

“We should not risk you...”

“I fought the Dragon, Zenith. The ratel is naught compared to him.”

“Just so,” Shirazia said. “My lord....

“Do not question me,” Vaylan rumbled.

“As you say, my lord,” Zenith responded. “Shirazia, Hyperion and I are at your service.

Hyperion, Vaylan thought. Yes, that was her name.

The animals prowled through the dark, the felines and the bigger cats pressed against the forest floor, the bear breathing quietly. The sky was black with clouds, and a breeze sang through the forest, making the trees shiver. The eyes of the cats glowed, responsive to the darkness.

According to their intelligence, Azazel had been meeting with some manner of forest demons here, eager to join his crusade. He would be accompanied by few allies on this night.

“Bats?” Vaylan heard Zenith say. Vaylan focused his senses. He could hear the rustling of wings.

Shirazia blinked. “They’re not sync bats.”

“They’re not bats,” Vaylan said. He silently jumped three times atop the boughs of trees. He could hear them. Bats spoke to each other when they flew, they spoke to the night, they screamed out their little signals to paint a picture of the world. These were no bats, these were ghouls.

“Zenith, ascend,” the jaguar said. “Shirazia, cloak.”

The windriding cat did as he was ordered, and leapt high into the air. Gusts blew around him, elevating him into the canopy. Shadows fell around Shirazia, and her spotted fur became transparent as she used her magic. She vanished from sight.

“Kodak, Hyperion,” Vaylan said. “Come to me.”

“I should have known you would come, old cat,” came a voice. “The Black Jester will not meet you tonight.”

Out of the darkness a black panther leapt. He was about the size of Vaylan, with longer limbs and a thinner face. Flanking the panther was what appeared to be two plumes of smoke, with pairs of green eyes boiling at the center of each.

“Skinwalkers,” Hyperion said.

“Surrender now, and I will allow you to be sent to the Phantom Realm,” Vaylan said.

The panther did not waste any time, and pounced. The jaguar met in kind. The wood seemed to shake as the two animals met, their massive paws swiping, growls scraping through their jaws. Vaylan heard that battle above him as he engaged his enemy. He could hear Zenith, and the screams of the ghouls as the windriding cat slashed their throats with his magic, as Shirazia brought death to them.

The panther was young as strong, but Vaylan had faced worse. As his teeth sought the throat of the creature, his ears sensed the beast’s hammering heart. The big cats exchanged blows as Vaylan unleashed his claws on the panther. Finally, he vanquished him with a savage stroke, leaving him mortally wounded.

The jaguar turned, feeling fire and ice sear the air around him. Kodak and Hyperion were using magic. Only magic could kill skinwalkers, those beasts without form. He saw a tree splintered into pieces by Kodak, its trunk frozen into delicate glass before the bear had careened into it. He saw fire dance around Hyperion's form. He saw a black figure glide between the treetops, touching its paws down for half-seconds, a swarm of ghouls following him. He saw Shirazia's eyes opening and closing amid the swarm as she clawed her opponents from their flock and slew them.

Vaylan turned his attention to Kodak. He could see blood marking the blank white coat of the bear. The skinwalker was fighting back, sharp talons materializing from its shadowy form. Vaylan wasted no time aiding his soldier, he swiftly bounded beneath the apparition, took a deep breath, and blew a stream of flame at it. The green eyes of the skinwalkers turned, and the last thing it saw was a storm of fire.

Red Flower, Vaylan thought.

Hyperion's magic was not as potent as his, but the puma vanquished the second skinwalker not moments later. The shapeless demon turned to thin air as her fire did its work. Vaylan looked up. The ghouls still battled Zenith on high, flapping their tattered wings. There were so many of them.

“The forest burns, my lord!” Hyperion shouted.

Vaylan whirled about, and smelt the air burning. His magic and Hyperion's had killed the skinwalkers, but the dry forest had caught the flame and given birth to a conflagration. Zenith's windriding had stoked the inferno. Flames licked at the base of half a dozen trees, climbing to reach their highest branches. The jaguar

could hear the other creatures of the forest scuttling about, desperate to escape the flames.

“Kodak!” Vaylan snarled, “Put it out!” The jaguar did not wait for his comrade’s response, and launched himself in the air. The Lord Executor of the Janissaries pushed off the limbs of trees to reach the sky where Zenith rode. Yipping and screaming, the ghouls set on the jaguar.

Vaylan commanded vast arrays of magic, but there were some things he wished he could do that others excelled at. Farishta Swiftasdeath’s lightning was an example of this. As he slashed at the phantoms with his claws and tore their necks with his teeth, his mind raced. There was no sun for a solar sword, no ocean nearby to summon a wave. He was not in an area where he could command the earth to shake. Ice was a possibility, but little moisture remained in the air from Kodak’s spells. Whatever remained had to be used to control the fire.

The Black Jester had chosen wisely to deceive them and bring them in this black wood, so dry and full of dust. Vaylan could only summon fire or wind, or fight them without magic. Vaylan growled as a ghoul slashed his hide, its claws almost piercing his eyes. *Without magic, then*, he thought. But world would know the raw physical strength of Vaylan. The jaguar ripped with his claws, leaping between trees, diving back to the earth, jumping high again, a dead ghoul in his jaws like any other forest bird he’d have made a meal out of, blood mingling with the spots on his coat. Animal rage had taken Vaylan. The ghouls could scratch him, they could bite him, but it did nothing to him.

Finally, two dozen corpses of the ghouls littered the jungle floor, rapidly disappearing into dust. The remainder of the swarm ascended, flying high into the sky, the sound of their wings rolling across the sky until they vanished, as quickly as a summer stormcloud.

Vaylan returned to the forest floor. He felt Zenith drop beside him, and Shirazia reappear. Hyperion and Kodak approached unharmed. The jaguar breathed deep. This skirmish was over. The Black Jester had deceived them, and was still alive, likely far from here. But the forest was burning.

“Can we put it out?” Vaylan asked Shirazia. Shirazia could read the natural world against the magical better than most.

“My lord, it may be best to let the flame run its course...”

“Can we put it out?” Vaylan repeated with a snarl.

She sighed. “Yes, between Zenith, Kodak, and I, and the surrounding moisture, we can contain it. Hyperion has not yet learned the power of ice.”

“Do it,” the jaguar ordered. “I’ll join you in a moment.” Kodak roared, and the animals set off to their task.

The jaguar padded over to the panther, mortally wounded.

“Where is he?” Vaylan demanded, locking eyes with the dying beast. “I can heal you. I will pardon you. Where is he? Where is Azazel?”

“Until we meet in paradise, Vaylan,” the panther uttered, and his green eyes went blank and cloudy. Vaylan cursed. His animal instincts took over him, and he placed a paw upon the chest of his dead enemy, and roared out into the night. His jaguar heart pulsed with the thrill of dominance.

“A flawless victory, my lord,” Hyperion uttered as the jaguar’s roar went silent.

“Flawless?” Vaylan panted, regaining his senses. “Another dead end. We have been hunting Azazel for cycles, killing his captains, allowing him to choose the battlefield! We slay his comrades, but he stays alive. And everywhere we fight burns as a consequence!”

“It is necessary damage, my lord...to protect humanity...” Hyperion began.

“We used to go into the mountains or the desert to slay monster jinn. There were great battles, yes, but then things would be put to rest, and we would go back to helping humans bring food to their young, medicine to their villages, water to their farms. Now our only purpose is to wage war against these criminals,” Vaylan said, his words hot with frustration. Too many times had he sent other beasts into similar battles. Too many times had they slain Azazel’s fourteenth second in command. This time he had wanted the Black Jester for himself, to finally put an end to all this. And once again, all that was before him was another dead young Acolyte, a Jinn Beast who had more than likely been an aimless wandering Ronin not months ago.

Hyperion looked stunned. Vaylan cursed inwardly. With his temper blistering, the jaguar had forgotten that such a speech was not appropriate for one of his Janissaries. As he began to choose his words carefully, Vaylan abruptly heard Zenith call to him.

“My lord!” Vaylan turned his head. There was the black cat, returning with the ocelot and polar bear.

“Did you put out the flame?”

“We did not,” Zenith said. “There was a wall of ice containing the fire, thick as stone, tall as trees.”

Vaylan narrowed his eyes. The black cat was breathing heavily, and blood dripped from his dark fur. The jaguar noticed that the windriding cat had not moved with his usual swiftness. *Perhaps he has not recovered from the fight in the City of Shadows...* turning his attention, Vaylan looked at Shirazia. “So what happened? Where did this ice come from?

The ocelot answered, “A new source of moisture must have appeared, conjured by powerful magic.”

“Acolytes?”

“No, old friend,” sang the voice.

Vaylan turned to acknowledge its source. He sniffed, and smelt the familiar scents of Siberia and Alaska, tinged with the tops of the Rocky Mountains. Between two trees appeared the figure, draped in a pure whiteness. There was the wolf.

From the Lady Snow Leopard's lessons to Kjarez Nightbraker: The War of the Dragon:

The Janissaries speak of the war with the Dragon. This was their greatest war in all their histories.

No one knew where the Dragon came from. But the Sorceresses saw him, his horns wreathed in flames hotter than a nova star, teeth as long as elephant tusks, eyes that poured red light, and breath that smelt of white phosphorous.

Stories are told of his size. Some Janissaries say he was the size of a mountain, others the size of a human ship. Some say he was merely the size of the Emperor in the Oceanic Kingdoms. Whatever his size, we feared him. Oh, we feared him.

The Dragon spread his black wings, which seemed to blot out the sun itself. He claimed he would make war on humans till the last of them were ashes.

The Janissaries knew they had to confront him, and in the center of Asia, they readied themselves to face him in battle. There was the Lord Jaguar, Vaylan, the Lord Anaconda, Agathodaemon, the Lord Wolf, Safeydraat Wolfking, and the Lord Lion, Rab. Backed with thousands of Janissaries, thousands of beasts descended from Ifrit, they faced their adversary.

We don't know how many died. We don't know if the humans took note of our battle. But it was the Jaguar, the Lion, the Anaconda, and the Wolf that stood at the vanguard.

Agathodaemon's power over the earth's plants could not create a toxin that could slow the monster. His cunning could not be deployed against the creature. Vaylan's strength, speed, and mastery of water could not put the fire out. Flames dripped from the Lion's mane but they were vanquished by the Dragon's own infernos. The lion was slain, the anaconda wounded, the jaguar held at bay.

It was the wolf, with his power over snow and ice, who hurled a lance as hard as the arctic glaciers through the heart of the Dragon, quenching its flames. It was the wolf who closed his teeth over the Dragon's throat. It was Safeydraat Wolfsking who slew the Dragon. It is Safeydraat Wolfsking, protector of the northern passages, who is the greatest protector of mankind.

RASKA



AFTER HIS DRINK WITH SEDKAZAN, RASKA HAD FOUND HIMSELF EXHAUSTED from the battle of with the wraith. He did not remember how long he had slept when Rikki the mongoose woke him, a small rodent in his jaws.

“Dude, eat this,” Rikki told him. “There’s going to be a big meeting today.”

Raska yawned. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” Rikki responded. “Safeydraat Wolfking is returning to speak to us all.”

Raska ate the meat that the mongoose had provided, chewing and swallowing. He felt the morning light of the jungle in his eyes.

“But more importantly, Vaylan wants to introduce you to him,” Rikki told him urgently. “So eat this and do that thing where you clean yourself. Vaylan is south of here.”

“Who’s Safeydraat Wolfking?” Raska asked.

“I’ll tell you on the way!” Rikki said. “Let’s get moving!”

The two animals went on their way south into the forest. Raska was somewhat groggy from sleeping. He wondered how long he had slept for. He found his musings interrupted as Rikki lectured him about Safeydraat Wolfking.

Soon enough, the mongoose and the young cat entered a clearing, where Vaylan the jaguar waited, resting on a log. He looked impassively at Raska and Rikki. “Thank you for coming.”

“Yes, Lord Executor,” Rikki said.

“Yeah, thanks,” Raska said. Rikki shot him a glance.

The jaguar said nothing, and his eyes drifted somewhere. Then, there was a dazzling burst of blue light, and there was a sudden explosion of cold air in the tropical heat. Raska jumped back, startled. He sniffed the air, and he was surprised to feel chilled air enter his lungs. The cat’s eyes widened, as he discovered that in an instance, part of the jungle before him had been blanketed in snow. The branches of trees had instantly become gilded in frost and leaves were encased in delicate glass. Icicles grew from nowhere from the tips of the flora, targeting the earth below.

In a swirl of snow and frost the massive wolf emerged, padding forward. The dust from the supernatural leap mingled with the taste of winter he had brought with him, and glinted like polished diamond.

Safeydraat Wolfking was as pale as morning mist, his coat lush and thick. Strands of silver fur grew from behind his ears, which were long and shaped like arrowheads. He was tall and his limbs were slender, and his eyes were pieces of black jade. The wolf was millennia old, and it is said he watched over humans when they crossed Siberia and entered North America, long ago when ice and tundra glazed the Bering Strait.

The Lords of the Janissaries were not emotional creatures, but while tales were told of the jaguar's passion and rage, it was said Safeydraat was as cold as the vast frozen oceans of worlds beyond our own. When White Day died, all the Wolfking said was "I knew he was not immortal." Safeydraat's glacial features never crumbled, he continued his duties as fabled guardian of the passages of the North America.

"I mean, though, what's the point?" Rikki had said to Raska earlier, very quietly. "No one crosses those passages anymore."

Silently, a snowy owl flapped behind him. She was whiter than he was, coated in such pure blank feathers her brightness hurt Raska's vision. Her eyes were bright yellow with pools of black in the center.

The jaguar approached. Raska noticed how small he was compared to the wolf. The snow the wolf had brought with him rapidly melted as the tropical heat pushed back against the incursion of alien elements.

"Welcome, brother, welcome sister," the jaguar called.

"Greetings, brother jaguar," the wolf replied. He had a beautiful voice. It was neither deep nor high, but occupying the

middle tones with a soothing cadence. His voice was accentuated by subtle chiming, as if tolling bells had been strung to the syllables.

The wolf's black eyes fell on Raska. Raska couldn't stop himself from being afraid as he stood beneath the larger' predator's gaze.

"You must be Ares Andromeda Starhazzard," the wolf declared, smiling to bear teeth like diamond razors.

"Yes, sir, uh, my lord," Raska stumbled with the words. "I go by Raska."

"Good to meet you, Raska," Safeydraat said. "I am Safeydraat Wolfking, the ghost of Christmas future."

"The ghost of what?"

"Brother," Vaylan interrupted Raska to address Safeydraat. "This is the cat I told you about. He fought against a wraith with Farishta Swiftasdeath and his band."

"Impressive," Safeydraat said.

Vaylan said. "I have killed recently, Safeydraat. Are you hungry?"

"No, not at the moment, Vaylan. I slew a great Elk in Wyoming before I arrived. A valiant creature. With massive horns. I love their horns." The wolf looked down on Raska. "They are as smart as predators, little cat. It's one thing killing your mice and rodents. Their intellect is feeble. But killing one of them...there is no greater fusion of joy and shame."

Raska looked at him quizzically. It was taboo among predators to sympathize with those that they hunted. Few had the capacity to even understand that those they were slaying and eating had their own languages, drew their own breaths, and felt their own

pain. In the past, Raska had been scorned by some cats for speaking to prey creatures he had hunted before.

Vaylan did not address the comment, and said, “Shall we head to riverbank? I know you have much to say to our comrades, Safeydraat.”

The animals embarked through the jungle, and found themselves in the crowded field. The field was packed with beasts of all sorts, cats, reptiles, birds, bears, and wolves. Their noises swept across the field. As was demanded by the Covenant, these Janissaries reigned in their animal urges to hear what their leaders had to say.

“Find your comrades,” Vaylan said to Raska and Rikki. “This meeting will begin soon.”

Raska did as he was commanded, and called out telepathically to his friends as Kjarez had shown him. Weaving through the crowds, his senses taking in the chaos of a myriad animal scents, he found Sedkazan, Kjarez, Kaliya and Ardechai.

“What’s this about?” Sedkazan asked. He eyed Raska fiercely.

Raska widened his eyes, “Don’t know. Vaylan asked me to meet Safeydraat, and...”

“No one speaks to Safeydraat. No one’s seen him for cycles,” Kjarez told Raska. She looked suspiciously at him. Raska cast a glance at Rikki and Ardechai. The mongoose and heron exchanged glances.

Raska saw the crowd part, and he witnessed Vaylan appear near the riverbank. There were gasps and snarls, and the white wolf Safeydraat padded up beside the jaguar. The wolf looked bright

and spectral next to the spotted creature. In the sun, his fur seemed to glisten like melted snow. Vaylan almost looked ugly beside him. The jaguar roared, and the valley became silent.

“We have come to order,” Vaylan declared. “Today, Janissaries, our brother Safeydraat Wolfking wishes to address the Janissaries. Lord Safeydraat, please proceed.”

“Lord Vaylan, it is an honor to be introduced by you, and it is an honor to be among my noble brothers, shaped from divine fire,” the wolf said. *Damn, he has a beautiful voice*, Raska thought. Every vowel rang with the resonance of hands flowing across a harp. Each word printed a memory in the young cat’s mind.

“It has been many cycles since you have seen me,” Wolfking said, taking long strides as he spoke. “Many among you I have never seen before. I was alive generations before your ancestors. I have been a Janissary for many millennia. When imps and demons went after human children, when their kings asked us to bless their steel, when shamans made deals with Jinn to practice magic. When the Dragon covered the earth in fire.”

Several wolves in the audience howled. Other roars and grunts of applause followed. Raska jumped a little as he heard an elephant trumpet.

“We know who you are, Wolfking,” Raska heard a creature roar. Looking to his left, he saw a white bear take a few steps toward the wolf, and then halt to some distance away. “Why did you call the Janissaries from the fold?”

“My brother implores me to get to the point,” Safeydraat Wolfking said. “Fair enough. I have spoken with the Black Swan of the Acolytes and her champion, Azazel.”

“What is this?” Kaliya hissed.

There was a moment of silence, then the valley was filled with noise. Kaliya was not the only one who was shocked. Sedkazan looked out over the crowd at Wolfking, stone-faced. Shouts and roars erupted. Raska could hear hissing and snarling from the cats. Some creatures yelled shouts of treason. Wolves and wild dogs barked back at the cats. Suddenly, the voice of Angelo Northstar rang out.

“Brothers! Let’s hear what our lord has to say!”

“Stupid puppy,” Sedkazan hissed.

A terrible roar pierced the brouhaha and rendered the crowd silent. Vaylan glared at his comrades. Without acknowledging Angelo’s comment, the jaguar said, “Safeydraat is a Lord of Janissaries. He shall speak without interruption, and is entitled to deference. Continue, brother.”

“Thank you, my friend,” Safeydraat said. “The world is changing, brothers,” Safeydraat sang. “Few demons and imps exist on earth. Few ghouls wander the night. Skinwalkers are almost extinct. The Dragon is slain. The Kaiju are sleeping. The beasts we wage war against are Jinn Beasts like ourselves. We wage this war as the earth burns.”

“I have spoken to Azazel on neutral grounds. I have told him of a greater calamity than the wars between us. To you, I am proposing a truce between our sides to confront this future.”

“A truce with the Acolytes?” Kjarez whispered. “He can’t be serious.”

**#AZAZEL#BLACKJESTER#HONEYBADGER
#عزازيل#EXTREMIS**



“THE ELEGANCE OF CREATION IS SIMPLE. The logic of the Ifrit is absolute. That which is made of fire is better than that which is made of clay. That which survives is better than that which does not. That which has intellect has dominion over what does not. This is the truth of our mistress, the Black Swan,” the beast said.

He sat at the base of a wide banyan tree, atop a hill in a lush valley in Kashmir. He sat at the very center of its wide trunk, and looked like he was crowned by the ancient tree’s numberless weaving branches. It was one of his favorite places in the world.

He was a ratel, big and fierce, and his name was Azazel. His fur was a cosmic black from the tip of his snout to his tail. A thick stripe the color of white coal ran down his back, and his

claws, long and curved, were six inches long. He was powerful, but he was known for his strength, magic, and his words.

Ronin Jinn Beasts from miles away to see him speak. Ghouls and skinwalkers would sneak out of their lairs. Once a great marid came from his hiding place. Wraiths would slide through the alleys and enter the jungle to gather around him. Listening to him speak was a privilege. His wisdom brought tears to the eyes of hardened hunters and murderous specters. As he spoke, the ravens cawed. The jackal howled. The cats sat in silent. The foxes growled. The eyes of the skinwalkers would become wide and terrifying, bathing their surroundings with bright green. The wraiths would float, paying rapt attention, balancing on hot air of the jungle, thick with the humidity of a recent monsoon. And the ghouls would fly and shriek, paying their adulations to their prince and sheik.

Local villagers regarded him as a demon. He had come into their homes before, snuck inside their houses, and enjoyed the light from their hearths and the food from their kitchens. Then, he would find cattle or places of worship and kill and desecrate them. Sometimes, tales were told of him desecrating the tombs of ancient saints. Other more horrid stories were told of him in previous generations – guiding children from their beds into the dark, where they were never seen again. Other enclaves in the subcontinent had worshipped him, sacrificing goats in his name, invoking him to heal their children, begging him for water during the droughts and food during times of famine. He answered these prayers in stride, though in times today, many men had forgotten.

Once, he had been acquainted with men, who knew of his origins and his ancestry, and sought his power. They had called

him the *Kala Darvaish* – the black dervish. He preferred a different name, in human tongues and the common word of the beasts – the Black Jester.

“In this place, we don’t know how we were all brought together. We don’t know why we inherited this amazing power, this gift from the divine. It is absurd, isn’t it? But we have it nonetheless?” the Ratel proposed.

“In a place like this, the humans have forgot what the night was like. They forgot the source of their myths and stories. There was a time I remember when children feared the dark, and their parents did too. There was a time I remember where their worship was a noble trade for our fire. There was a time I remember those of you that rode on black wings gave wondrous performances, while the humans hid in their huts, awaiting the light of dawn. There was a time I remember children learned fear through the nightmares were gave them. When their parents learned submission through when we took their sacrifices.”

Some foxes in the crowd yelled, and wolves howled out a dirge. A panther growled.

“We are not cruel. We are the masters of power, my brothers. We were given this message, this message of our power, and it is our duty to subdue those around us in the natural order. We have forgotten that duty. We have forgotten that fire is better than clay. My cousin wraiths and ghouls, who remembers all hallows eve? Do you know that on their little boxes they mock you? They playact you?”

“So says the master of death! Champion of the black swan!” a voice called out.

Azazel smiled. “I am not a master of death. Death has a sense of humor. I am death’s jester.”

“You’re all talk.”

There were snarls in the crowd. A ghoul shrieked. Several wraiths turned, their movements blurring their surroundings in fog.

“My friends! My friends! Quiet down! Who has the pleasure of meeting us today?” Azazel called out. *It can only be one beast. The troglodyte. Baal.*

“Give me the pleasure of killing him, my lord,” one of the wolves called out.

“I am not your lord!” Azazel said. “We are all masters of this world together. I am an Acolyte alongside you. A mere servant of the Black Swan. I am but a jester, here for your amusement, so we can hunt and laugh together, and better understand our place in this chaotic world.”

“You speak like a human,” came the response.

A big black bear marched through the crowd. His name was Baal, he was an old Ronin, a Jinn, two hundred human years old. His age was showing, he had no use for magic, and had only drank from the Styx a handful of times in his long life. But he was known for his wisdom, and compassion.

You’re on the wrong side, Azazel thought. He almost felt pity. You’re on no side. I could respect you if you were a Janissary, but you are worse than them. Now after years of avoiding me, you challenge me here?

“I will no longer have it,” Baal said. “I swore to keep out of the wars between you and the Janissaries, and kept away from

the world of man. But you preach this venom every time you return to my lands. I won't stand for it any longer."

There were savage shouts from the crowd. A skinwalker screamed. Ghouls flapped in the sky. Azazel smiled. He moved away from the banyan tree, and the creatures before him stepped away from him, splitting the crowd in two as he walked to meet the bear, several times his size.

"Baal, be reasonable. You can't beat me. Go back to your cave with your cubs and grandcubs, and leave me to preach peacefully."

"I will end your venom."

"Baal, leave now. I don't want you as an enemy," Azazel said.

"You will sleep in the garden of the Spirit," the bear bellowed. He charged at the ratel.

In the darkness of the night it was hard to see him move. The ratel's agility was unreal, even for a creature of Smokeless Flame. One moment, the bear raged toward Azazel, a mountain falling upon a smaller creature. The next, the bear lay slumped at the base of the hill, his neck painted in arterial red. Azazel stood several meters beyond him. Without a glance backwards at his enemy, he licked the blood from his lips, savoring the taste.

"I am....I am alive," the bear mumbled.

"And you will remain so. For a time. You will not heal. Nothing can heal my Plague Bite. It will make your insides burn. Then, Baal, you will die."

"The Styx....the Styx..." the bear growled. "The Janissaries owe me...they will let me drink from this."

Azazel did not respond at first, savoring the silence. Jinn lived long, but the Styx, guarded by the Janissaries prolonged their life and healed all injury. All injury, save Azazel's Plague Bite. No beast alive could survive when he struck with his fangs, and drinking Styx itself could not heal the wounds.

"The Styx will not heal you," Azazel replied. "You know this."

"I will summon Vaylan here....I...I will..."

"You cannot call Vaylan. There are no witches here to open their gates. You knew that already, otherwise you would have brought him here already. You may, try, bear, but if you do, I'll kill your cubs and your cubs' cubs."

"Leave....leave them out of this."

"I have!" the ratel replied, aghast. "But you just made war on me, and war requires slaying the enemy and striking fear into his allies. My mercy to you is their lives. Call for help, and each of them will die. Your bloodline will die. I will summon Acolytes to kill each and every member of your progeny."

"Leave them out of it!" the bear tried to rise to his paws, but collapsed into a heap.

"I will, Baal, if you accept your death with bravery. Relish in the pain, brother. It will remind you of a beautiful life. Permit me to be merciful to your children." Azazel said. "I will not enjoy taking their lives."

"I am merciful," Azazel said again, loudly. The crowd made noises of agreements. "The Black Swan, she is merciful. We must all practice mercy, even in the face of our enemies." Azazel walked

toward the bear. “Rise, Baal. Go back to your cave and think of the things you love.”

The bear rose to his paws, took a few staggering steps, and collapsed again. He rose, and let out a moan.

Azazel shook his head. He called out, “Baal is one of the bravest creatures I know. Too brave for the Janissaries, I’ll wager. But see what physical pain does to bravery, my friends. Though we are made of fire, we are still animals. And no animal can take pain forever.”

The ratel returned to the place of his preaching, and looked out over his legion of onlookers. He sniffed the air, recognizing the scent of one of his favorite disciples.

“Darmak, my friend, approach,” the ratel called out.

From the crowd a single snake appeared. He was a black mamba. The serpent approached the ratel before coiling before him, his lidless eyes transfixed by the sight of Azazel. “Tell me what has happened.”

“Terrache has been killed by the jaguar,” the snake responded.

“A terrible loss.”

“He was a valuable asset,” the snake commented.

“Did we take any of theirs?” Azazel asked.

“No, none.”

“No matter. Every time we strike it weakens their moral. The Janissaries have never had to fight a war like this before. They don’t have the spine.”

Darmak’s tongue flicked in and out.

“Now, my friend, I have a mission for you,” Azazel said.

“I am at your command.”

“There is a colony of bears not long from here. They are descendants of Baal. Take who you will, and kill every one of them, except for a single male and female. Make sure you kill the young, too.”

The snake looked at Azazel with unblinking eyes, then turned to do as he was bid.

The ratel looked into the night sky. He was merciful, in leaving some of Baal’s bloodline alive. They would live to tell of how they were spared by the Black Jester. Significantly, this brutality would remind others not to challenge him and his noble aims. *I take no pleasure in this*, Azazel reminded himself. *It is necessary. In the long run, it will save lives.* Fear was a necessary component in his campaign against the Janissaries. It was necessary to win this conflict.

The River Acheron

From Djinnipedia, the free encyclopedia

Acheron is a supernatural river that flows into the mythical jungle of Jadzir. The river was said to have emerged when the archangel Lucifer (or in Islamic tradition, the Jinn known as Iblis) was hurled into the earth after his rebellion, creating a spring from where its waters flow.

Acheron is said to have regenerative properties that rival that of the river Styx. Yet, the river is also the source of powerful poisons. In some legends, the river Acheron stretches underground to the Mojave Desert, where it feeds into the Creosote bush.

The jungle of Jadzir and the river Acheron are guarded by a horde.

