

**The Chronicles of Heaven's War:
Book I
Sisters of the BloodWind**

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These Chronicles are dedicated to the silent sentinels who have sacrificed everything for us, the unknowing and uncaring, so that we may have a hope of a better future. Without their assistance and protection, I doubt any freedom would still exist for mankind to enjoy.

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Prologue:

My children, you have asked me why your mother walks in the shadows of your world, seeking dark, quiet places. You say she prefers songs of lament to cries of mirth and joy. You wonder at her silence, her quiet moods and her distant stare. Be patient, for her days of mourning have yet to pass. Though the century comets have returned a thousand times, she has not come to forget the suffering. And should they return a thousand times more, she will still be haunted by ghosts from long ago. So, do learn from my story and come to understand.

To the days of long ago I will take you -
Before Shadow-walkers roamed the forests and hills,
Before the daughters of Tolohe danced beside the firelight,
Yes, before your people took a breath.
That is where I will transport you -
Into an age without light, filled with despair,
To a time when hope was little more than bitter faith.
You shall see things and you will become afraid.
Then you will comprehend,
And insight will grow in your minds.
Your mother you will gain empathy for.
Your mother you will begin to understand.
Your mother you will start to know.

So journey with me, my children of innocence. I will teach you the way it was then.
And if my children should fail to learn, the Darkening Age may well come again. So be
silent and listen. Gain wisdom and live.

* * *

Section One

Destiny's Road

“To reach the beginning, you must start in the middle,
And to attain the finish, you must comprehend all things.
Time goes ever forward,
But knowledge learns always from the past.”
~ZoeStethos

‘The child has arrived and is hurrying on to an uncertain destiny. Today will prove
to be the beginning or ending of all things...’

The person sat back, eyes aching from haunting visions, head pounding because of a
distorted, musical unpredictability playing its disenchanting melodies along with a heart
being overwhelmed with dread concerning future days.

All life hung upon a thread - the choice of a moment, the beat of a troubled heart,
and little could the Maker of Worlds do other than trust it to the wisdom of a very
impetuous child who drew now ever closer to this uncertain destiny.

Chimes of the great clock sounded in this person's ears. How many times had it
called out, to the distress of nations? How many children could no longer hear the
beautiful music it made? Was it ten million, a hundred million, maybe more? This one,

sitting back waiting for the arrival of a treasured, precious child did not recall. What the person did know was that the belly of Hell was not yet satisfied.

With head shaking from side to side, tears began. Should the Empire win this coming conflagration, even though the child may prove wise, many times those who had already gone to their deaths would fall to Wrath's coming storms. Should they lose? Well, that could not be allowed even if it cost the lives of all the children of the Empire...the universe.

The person stood, walking onto a balcony, looking down on a jungle of greenery seen nowhere else but here, the lone remaining peaceful bastion in this tempestuous universe.

Sighing quiet remorse that no others were allowed to sense, a musical cry of dismay went out to the breeze, a cry of bitter lament from a wanton heart that sought only selfish cravings to never feel alone.

“Lo, foolish dreamer, your wish come true,
To sense the world with heart imbued.
Doth now the vial of bitter brew,
Its caustic taste your heart renew?”

And now Rhiannon an oath does take
To bind her children to an evil fate.
For should the world be made anew,
It first must pass through this witch's brew.”

The person looked off toward the sound of the great clock as it chimed its last refrain. Then with head bent down in sadness this Maker of Worlds turned and slowly retreated into the darkness of hidden rooms to await the evils of the coming Fates.

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The speeder eased to a stop outside the opened entrance of an ancient blue marble wall. This pearl-white auto-car sat motionless, hovering just above the pavement, a subdued humming noise coming from its motor, opaque windows keeping secret any mysteries hidden within.

From a cloudless sky, the heat of the morning sun pressed upon the day. Steam from a late-night shower rose from pavement bricks and surrounding stones, vanishing as a mist in the summer air. Shrubs and trees in surrounding gardens dripped with a welcome deluge of the night while little harvester ants scurried about busy at their duties as sunlight reflected off glistening water droplets, creating an illusion of a world filled with sparkling diamonds.

A loud *click!* followed by the low whir of servos disturbed the silence. As if rudely awakened from a pleasant slumber, a covey of mourning doves rose from secluded perches, noisily flying overhead. A door opened in the side of the auto-car, quietly sliding back along an inner rail, revealing a shadowy figure hiding in the cool darkness of the idling machine.

Slowly a hand reached out, grabbing the roof rail followed by a foot coming to rest on the pavement. Laboriously, like someone ancient weighed down with burdens beyond their years, a woman emerged into the brilliant sunlight. With a grunt, she stood. How strange it would have been for an observer, for this woman did not look ancient. She was young and stunningly beautiful.

Squinting, the woman shaded her eyes to view the surrounding landscape, the silent grandeur of these sights vividly impressive. Beckoning one to come forward and receive their ever opened embrace, giant leaved gates made from exotic, shimmering metal delicately engraved with intriguing designs and runes stretched outward like two great arms, supported on massive pivots buried deep within the walls' two opposing circular guard towers.

Imposing as these gates were, they paled in comparison to the fortress towers and walled battlements whose marbled heights rose well over eighty cubits before reaching the open roadway traversing the wall. From there it was another sixty cubits to the roofed battlements of the towers. Polished black onyx inset with chrysolite and other precious jewels crowned both the towers and ramparts.

The woman sighed, unmoved, merely turning toward the machine and muttering a command, its door swiftly closing. The auto-car's motor sprang to life, speeding away, soon disappearing down the road, leaving the solitary figure standing there, staring into the distance.

Again, she turned her attention to the battlements. Looking up, the woman could see the massive guard towers with flags fluttering on poles far atop peaked roofs, recalling to her mind the grandiose beauty viewed from their ramparts where, on countless occasions, the breathtaking panorama of the surrounding countryside had unfolded before her eyes.

To the east were gently rolling hills and valleys covered with orchards, vineyards and pastures. Patches of woodland dividing fields of grain grew along the streams and brooks that descended to a broad plain below, the waters gathering together in force to produce a wide, serpentine river sluggishly laboring northward, fading from sight.

Beyond rose a wall of blue-green hills, dipping and swelling as though an army of shadowy giants were on the move, marching off into the distant haze, hiding the roots of rock-hewn mountains jutting above the clouds in snow-covered peaks. In the morning blackness, the sun would fill the sky behind these mountains with a dark glow as if orange fire were ascending from the depths below, struggling its way up the mountains, colors brightening until a vivid red sun would suddenly erupt over the peaks, flooding the countryside with its yellow brilliance.

The fortress walls stretched north and south for better than two leagues. Long ago, tall forests had grown up around these fortifications, shading the blue river of marble with their wide evergreen boughs. Old growths of giant cedar, hemlock and redwood trees towered high above the greatest battlements, dwarfing the heights with their three hundred cubit spires.

Nor was beauty lost on the secrets hidden behind the marble walls. Ornate patchworks of courtyards, orchards and gardens nestled along the trails and broadways, a rainbow hue of bright, scented flowers scattered throughout the dark green mats of shrubs and bushes, exciting one's emotions in a kaleidoscopic display. Flagstone roads of red, blue and green crisscrossed this expanse of luscious growth, sweeping in like a sea around the base of the walls.

“Enough of that!” The woman sputtered, shaking her head to clear it of seemingly useless memories.

She started toward the gates along the jasmine-lined roadway leading into Palace City. Glancing west, the woman took little note of the dazzling imagery and beauty of the city’s center, nearly a league away. Had she bothered to look up while passing through the gates, she would have seen the splendor of this jewel of the universe...had she bothered. This inspiration for poems and songs went unnoticed by the woman, her mind caught up with other pressing matters. Whether she chose to observe it or not was of little concern to the artists who created it.

The ‘Eternal City’, as the architects had named it, would always shine with breathtaking delight for they had willed it to be that way. The gilded palace towers of jade, inset with gold and precious stones, and the palace proper, crowned in onyx and domed in diamond crystal, gold, and chrysolite made it appear as though the sun had descended from its home in the heavens and settled here. The old palace had sat its weathered butte long before this woman’s kind was born, and would continue to shine from it even if her kind should fail.

The woman smiled. She had chosen wisely this morning. As she expected, the streets were empty. And the guard towers? They never saw a guard...only occasional lovers seeking seclusion after a night’s merrymaking. This did not mean that her presence had gone unnoticed. Even now someone watched her, following her every move. But such knowledge was more reassuring than discomfoting.

At Candletoe, a distant outpost, the woman first noticed this voice calling to her, beseeching her to journey here. She regretted abandoning the fleet at such a perilous time, but what else could be done? There was a tone of urgency in the request, a pleading on the part of the one making it. And to be called here, to the royal palace, could only mean the summons was of greatest importance.

Sounding of hurried footsteps descending a hidden staircase in the north guard tower startled the woman. Instinctively preparing for battle, crouching while eyeing the tower’s opening, she listened and waited. Footfalls echoed from the passageway and off the metal gates, confusing her ears as to the number of feet on the stairs. An instant more and she would know if the approaching feet were that of friend or foe.

Laughter erupted from the doorway. In a sudden rush, a couple holding hands, eyes fixed on each other, sprang from the blackness. Paying no heed to their surroundings, they nearly bowled the woman over. At the last instant, the man saw her and, pulling hard on the girl’s arm, twirled her around and into his.

Not having noticed the stranger in their midst, the girl flirtingly cooed, “Why Zadar, has your hunger overcome you so quickly? Do you wish to revisit the tower lounge before we return to the others?”

A handsome man with thick, dark hair, deep-set hazel eyes, bushy eyebrows, and a neatly trimmed beard pretended to clear his throat and pointed past the girl. “We...we have company.”

The girl’s eyes followed Zadar’s hand, her shining black hair dancing on the air as she spun her head around. She stared, the flirting smile still on her face and then, when she recognized the woman standing there, cried out in surprise, “Mihai, my sister! What a thrill to see you safe and well! Oh, how I’ve missed you! Come share the wine and

good times with me again!” Releasing Zadar’s hand, the girl lunged for Mihai, locking her in an iron embrace.

Mihai wheezed, “I... I’ve missed you, too, my darling Darla. Please, allow me a breath.”

Darla released Mihai, holding her at arm’s length as the two stared into each other’s eyes. Mihai pondered the wonders of her sister. ‘How beautiful she is, and still with the seeming innocence of a carefree little girl. Seeing her here, who would ever guess an evil madness lurks, hiding in her mind. She covers it well with her finery of silk and gold, makeup and twinkling eyes. But I know...I know that this child has not seen even one day of peace in her troubled life.’

A spark of hope ignited in Mihai’s own troubled heart as she watched Darla’s placid face. She lowered her head, speaking wistfully, “This place has the ability to lift the darkness from the mind. May it also do the same for me...”

Zadar stepped forward, arms spread wide. “M’lady! It is so good to see you after such a long absence!” He gently pushed Darla aside and hugged Mihai.

“Harrumph!” Darla snorted, placing her fists on her hips. “He just wants you in the tower with him, that’s all!”

Mihai stepped back in mock surprise, grasping her dagger. “If I’d known that, I’d defended myself against your advances!”

Grinning, Zadar asked suspiciously, “Just like the way you did the night before you parted company for the fleet?” Not waiting for a reply, he snapped, “If I had known M’lady was gonna come sneakin’ around the back door of this place, I would have brought some brandy to welcome her and possibly offered her an invitation to visit a spell.”

Mihai retorted, “I wasn’t sneakin’! I wanted some time to myself to clear the air in my head. Leave it to someone like you to spoil it for me. And stop calling me ‘M’lady’!”

Zadar wrinkled up his face in fake apology. “Oh, excuse me, your Lordship, but I didn’t give you that title. You did it to yourself. I’ve already heard rumors of a big change coming. I’m just getting a jump on the others, that’s all.” Sarcastically, he asked, “What name do you want me to call you by, ‘Mihai’ or ‘Michael’?”

Mihai soured, “You know few call me by that other name. ‘Mihai’ will suit me just fine.” Sadness grew on her face. “‘Mihai’ helps me forget things I wish not to remember.” She took hold of Zadar’s hands. “Please, my dear little brother, allow me to leave certain memories in the clouds for now. They cover the things I don’t want to see.”

Zadar squeezed Mihai’s hands, grinning, “Mihai it is, then.”

Mihai’s dark feelings quickly faded and her eyes began to twinkle. “I would have been grateful if you had brought that brandy with you.”

Darla pretended to clear her throat. Getting their attention, she pouted, “So, am I just an abandoned soul now, tossed by the wayside like a discarded toy?”

Mihai laughed. “Oh yes, we could cast you aside as easily as one does a winter tempest.” She peered into Darla’s emerald-green eyes, pondering, ‘A person could become lost in those fathomless pools and never want to return.’

Letting go Zadar’s hands, she reached out and held the girl in another embrace. “Oh, my dear Darla, I have missed your company for so long!”

They stood, locked together as one, sharing inner thoughts, memories from some long-forgotten time. There were few people Mihai loved and trusted more than Darla. In

fact, she owed her very life to her. Mihai kissed Darla on her lips and then asked, "How is it we chance to meet at this time? I thought you were doing sentry duty on Stargaton."

Darla blinked in surprise. "The summons, of course! You are the last one to get here. Zadar and I, along with the others, have been here for several days. We were beginning to think you might choose to ignore it like you have done in times past."

Mihai denied that was so. "You know I have never ignored a summons. But there have been times when I could not possibly abandon my duties. This time is different. I could feel the urgency."

Zadar piped in, "Well, if you'd let us know the time of your arrival, we'd come to the depot and gotten you."

"That I don't believe!" Mihai poked an accusing finger toward Zadar. "You?! Miss out on a sweet interlude with our most beautiful of flowers just to keep company with me? Please, don't make me laugh."

"That's not so! That's not so!" Zadar cried.

Pretending offence, Darla grumped, "What's not so...that I'm the most beautiful of flowers? You weren't shy about lavishing your attention on me last night in your attempts to lure me out here! Was it out of obligation you delivered your innocent sister to the tower, saying 'Let us watch the sunrise over the mountains'? And did you keep my glass filled with wine only fearing I might become thirsty?"

Zadar was shocked. "Lure you?! As I recall, you dragged me under the first mulberry tree we passed after leaving the others. And for the wine, you treated yourself to many more than I dispensed, including mine."

Mihai stopped the teasing. "Enough of this! You're both incorrigible! Should all the children be as passionate, there would be no time for strife or war." She spread her arms wide, drawing both her companions close, speaking in little more than a whisper, confiding, "I told no one I was coming. This council meeting is secret - at least it is to be for the moment. I believe my lieutenants are trustworthy, but let's just say not all secrets remain secrets. I didn't dare trust the enemy finding out about my absence."

Mihai changed the subject. Looking at Zadar's and Darla's attire, she commented, "It must have been some fancy gathering you two were at last night." She was justified in the statement, as the couple was dressed in sheer, silky, ankle-length garments.

Darla's attire was more feminine in cut, gathered at the waist, accented by a diamond-studded belt. It also had an open bodice, with golden lace sweeping down from her shoulders and around her exposed breasts which refused to be hidden under her knee-length cape of woven silk, gold and silver. A pair of white, laced sandals finished the woman's apparel. Her braided locks, although disheveled, were festooned with rings of diamond-studded gold. With her dangly ear-fobs, three bejeweled gold necklaces and jingling anklets, she was quite an alluring sight.

Zadar's garment was more like a long robe and his ornaments simple, consisting of a finely braided gold chain necklace and a black onyx ring on his right hand. He also sported a finely crafted timepiece on his waist-belt, while a jade brooch fastened the two ends of his long, flowing cape together.

Zadar explained the party had been a reunion of sorts. Some close acquaintances recently returned from a long sojourn in the Outer Ranges were celebrating the successes of their expedition. Mihai then asked if the party was last evening, why were they still dressed in such garb so late the following morning?

Zadar leaned close, nuzzling against Mihai in a sensual embrace, and whispered romantically, “Because they make me feel sexy...”

Mihai pushed him away and laughed. “Feel sexy?! Zadar, you have never felt anything but sexy! From the day of your coming of age, you have chased the ewe. Your first lover surrendered you up to her sisters before your days with her were to end, worn out and in need of rest. She said of you, ‘But for necessity of food and drink, we would have grown to the bed!’”

Zadar looked abashed, then grinned. “That aside, these clothes can still make you feel...well...special.” He put his arm around Mihai. “The council isn’t going to assemble until evening. Do you want to come with us to the Winter Gardens? That’s where we are to join up with the others. I’m sure we could find some brandy there...”

Merriment disappeared from Mihai’s face. “It would be my greatest pleasure, but I must decline.” She took Zadar’s hand. “I have some business to conclude this morning, having a need to change out of this stodgy uniform and freshen up first. May I walk with you to the palace? We can talk along the way.”

Darla wrapped her hands around Mihai’s arm while Zadar did the same with her other. Darla made her little girl face, grinning in satisfaction. “How sweet a walk it will be, too.”

Mihai thanked them both for their kindness and love then glanced over at Darla’s dress and asked, “I know it’s such short notice, but can you manage to find me some clothes like yours for my morning’s business? It would make me feel...feel like a woman again.”

Darla giggled with pleasure, “For you, my sister, anything, anything at all.”

Mihai lingered with her companions until they reached the Winter Gardens, located at the convergence of four wide concourses. The gardens were a grand expanse of exotic flowers, shrubs and trees crisscrossed by dozens of walking trails. A bubbling stream with its own waterfall completed the scene. Of course, there were many hidden, secluded corners where benches and tables had been conveniently placed for the wanderer’s benefit.

Indulging herself in the fresh, mist-filled air, Mihai sucked in a long, deep breath and exclaimed, “It’s always early summer here, like the after-breath of a late day shower.” Looking up at the high, domed ceiling, watching the cool white of day shimmer through the translucent stone, she happily sighed, “In this place, Time forgets itself. We are standing below the very center of Palace City, the North Concourse running directly under the Old Palace that was constructed upon a butte of solid diorite.”

Darla and Zadar shot knowing glances at each other. Here it came, another ‘you’re so young, you won’t know this’.

Mihai’s eyes scanned their surroundings as she explained, “It is this part of Palace City that was said to have existed long before our kind were born. The remainder of the city, including the Winter Gardens and long concourses with their hundreds of eateries, cafes, pubs and shops, was designed and built by the children of the First Age, countless millennia before my birth. How wel...”

Shouts echoed across the nearly empty building. Zadar waved his arm, calling back to the new arrivals. He excused himself and hurried away. Darla promised to find Mihai a sensual outfit and offered to walk her to the tramwaiter.

Mihai thanked her. Glancing in different directions, she said with a shudder, “It’s such a long time since I’ve been here. Where are all the people?”

“Pay no mind to it, Sister.” Darla casually replied, taking Mihai’s hand. “This is still early morning, by business standards, anyway. Things will wake up around here by the lunch hour and the dinner crowd will be pretty good. It’s always quiet this time of day, remember?”

Mihai nodded. She remembered all right! Long before Darla was born, long before the Rebellion tore her people apart, long before all the wars, when she was a youngster still in her teens, this place was off-handedly called, ‘the world that never sleeps’. There was always a crowd here.

Mihai thought back to those long millennia passed. She could see the concourses packed with partiers and merrymakers, elbow to elbow, making their way from one festive event to another. There were the pools, spas, theaters, and gymnasiums that entertained the body and the mind. If food was to your liking, you could lose yourself in the hundreds of eateries, serving the palate anything from frozen chocolate crêpe to spicy, baked halibut smothered in clam sauce and onions.

And one must not forget the Palace Coliseum! Sometime during the First Age, architects hollowed out a cavern in the butte directly under the Old Palace. Every technical innovation of that age was built into its design and construction, enabling artists to recreate their wildest imaginings in three dimensional sights and sounds for audiences of over two hundred thousand. The Coliseum’s doors closed many centuries ago, its vaulted chambers now filled with silent darkness.

The intoxicating excitement of that day was gone. This day, Mihai only heard the quiet echo of a few footsteps on the polished marble floors mixing with the lonely splashing of the garden’s waterfall. She sadly smiled. “Yes, my dear one, I remember...”

Darla walked with Mihai down the South Concourse until they came to the tramwaiter. Soon there was heard the whirring of powerful gyro-motors, announcing the machine’s rapid approach. The whirring stopped, followed by a *click!* and a hum. Double doors slid open, revealing the coach’s opulent interior.

A woman stepped out offering salutation, hurrying off, leaving the two alone. Mihai glanced into the empty car. “When the world was innocent, these things were always filled. It would be nothing to see several dozen riders queued along this wall waiting for the next tramwaiter, and that was at this same time of day.”

Darla said nothing. She believed her older sister, but could not comprehend such numbers. Her memories of large crowds had been watching great armies on the march or slaughtering one another on the battlefield.

Mihai had seen that look on Darla’s face before. She smiled and squeezed her sister’s hand. “The hour is coming, or so I’ve been told, that another great celebration is to take place here. It has even been said that the Palace Coliseum’s doors shall again be spread open. Then you will see for yourself what a wonderful world this place really is.”

Darla’s eyes filled with wonder and then question. “I have heard others speak of this ‘marriage of the lamb’. Are you revealing secrets to me about mysteries hidden or am I being the fool, wishing for shadows and dreams?”

Shaking her head, Mihai answered, “You are no fool. Trust me, you are no fool. If it has been promised to us then it will happen, but when and how, I don’t yet know. My dear one, wishing for shadows and dreams is not a bad thing. At times it may be all we

have to hold on to. As for the celebration that I speak of, it is something far grander than any of which you have been informed. It is part of the greatest mystery of all.”

“What is it, my lovely one? If you know what it is, please tell your sister.” Darla was nearly dancing with excitement.

Mihai tipped her head back in laughter. “You already know almost as much as I. For now, we must both place it in our shadows and dreams, trusting in the One who has promised it.”

Stepping through the door and into the tramwaiter, Mihai turned and asked, “You will find me a lovely dress? I will have need of it soon.”

Darla assured her sister that she would deliver it shortly, said goodbye and started for her waiting company.

The doors closed and the droning whir started. Mihai sat down on one of the ornate, overstuffed chairs as the machine whisked her away, relaxing to pleasant music as the tramwaiter snaked its way along hidden passageways toward her destination. Built by artisans of the First Age to complement the growing expanse of Palace City, the coach line traversed its length and breadth, except for the Old Palace.

In short order, the woman found herself standing in an open courtyard, untended and overgrown with summer greenery. A tiny apartment just across the way was her home during the early years of her youth. She inhaled the pleasant wisp of memories passed. This place was the ‘keeper of her innocence’, from its latticed balconies to its cool, shadowed walkways...the ‘protector of her heart and soul’. It was for that very reason she returned to this childhood residence to forget for a moment the dark days of despair and the evil that almost destroyed her.

The sun was still blocked entry by surrounding buildings as Mihai rambled across the deserted courtyard. There was something special about this shadow-world full of life but still shaded in morning’s mysteries. Reaching the apartment door, she paused to watch ghosts of happier times dancing on the multi-colored flagstone. She lingered to capture the fleeting vision lest her mind might forget it completely.

A robin’s song broke Mihai’s dreamy spell. She sighed, turning back to the door, opening it. Glancing over her shoulder, she wistfully hoped to catch another glimpse of those bygone days, but the sun peeked over the roofline, flooding the courtyard with its golden splendor, chasing away any hint of the past. Mihai frowned, slipped inside, silently closing the door.

True to her promise, Darla delivered a splendid-looking gown to her sister. Mihai grinned with delight, striking different poses for the mirror. Each movement caused the sky-blue, silky cloth to dance this way and that. She stopped in a pose, standing at an angle, hands gracefully outstretched as she curtsied. “Hello, my Lord PalaHar. It is such a pleasure to have your acquaintance this evening.” She laughed and turned, repeating her action. “Well, well, my Lord Ardon, does our wise counselor approve of my attire?”

Pretending she was arrived at the coming council meeting, Mihai offered her gracious salutations to several others she expected to meet there. The tingling sensation of the fabric on her skin and the way it floated up like a billowing cloud as she turned made the woman laugh. As her feeling of sensuality grew, she began to slowly dance to a tune in her head.

A young, flirting maiden suddenly appeared in the mirror. “Why certainly you may not kiss me, you cad! When my lover hears of this, he will thrash you with his scolding tongue!” She bowed again. “Yes! Yes, the dinner has been so fine. Never have I tasted truffles prepared so splendidly.”

Closing her eyes, the girl flung her arms out and head back as she gracefully twirled on one foot. She did not see the mesmerizing beauty in the mirror or the feminine charms she revealed. Firm, toned muscles accented by the woman’s full, round features and milky-white skin enhanced her appeal. Her breasts bounced in rhythm with her moves as her buttocks rippled in tight little waves as she shifted her weight from one long, sinewy leg to the other. What a sight! Oh, what a sight!

Spinning around one final time, Mihai stopped and, with a lissome move, bowed before the admiring audience. She peered into the mirror, examining the face staring back. Most pronounced were the piercing blue eyes accented by golden eyebrows crowning a strong forehead. The face was misleading for, at first glance, one could see the semblance of a child not yet out of her teens. A closer look revealed a sharpness like hewn stone weathered by the ages.

High cheekbones, a long, straight-bridged nose and a determined jaw gave Mihai the hardened, proud appearance of a noble leader, while her full-bodied, rose-colored lips and compassionate countenance suggested a guileless maiden. Whichever way a person chose to view her, there was no denying the breathtakingly handsome beauty this woman possessed.

Satisfied, Mihai stood upright and did a half turn, striking another pose. Laughing, she snapped her head around to observe her stance, making her golden tresses float high in the air, revealing hidden secrets. Laughter died from her lips when what she saw resurrected painful memories.

Slowly, she reached behind her back to pull the golden tresses aside for another look. A jagged scar started at the base of her neck and trailed to the right, across the shoulder blade and down her rib cage. And what had she accomplished from the near fatal experience? Nothing! Her kidnapped sister was still not free, and now her traitorous brother was making a ‘big diplomatic to-do’ about it.

The Stasis Pirates’ ion trail had been easy to follow...too easy, now that Mihai thought about it. She followed it along the Outer Corridor, past the Trizentine and into the Frontier. Nearing hostile territory, she disembarked from the battle cruiser in her fighter, telling its captain to remain there on patrol. The fighter stealthily passed the Frontier, following the pirates’ trail far into forbidden territory.

The Stasis had made directly for ZemiaKone, meaning ‘Lost Rabbit’, the enemy’s westernmost territory bordering on the Frontier. It was believed to be little more than an outpost - at least that is what was agreed upon at the armistice. As Mihai drifted toward its surface, dodging radar and sonic detection, she felt there was way too much chatter on the communication channels to be coming from a few lonely outposts.

Her ship settled down in a desert canyon a few miles from where the fighter’s instruments indicated the pirates landed. Following the gullies and ravines, she gingerly made her way in the direction of a distant space terminal. About a mile away, she found a narrow draw, leading down to the plain far below. Soon the rocky walls stretched high above her head.

A sudden chill raced up the woman's spine. Something was wrong. Instinctively, she twisted away from some unknown assailant. Mihai's prescience saved her from death, but not from injury. A plunging, razor-sharp claw from a guard droid caught her as she spun around, driving her toward the ground. She could feel its icy-cold blade tearing through the flight suit and into her flesh. Then came a sickening sound of cracking bones and snapping tendons as the beast ripped a deep gash down across her back, slamming her face down into the dirt.

Mihai rolled away to her left in a choking cloud of dust just in time to escape a second blow, the blade making a swooshing noise as it passed her face. Still tumbling, she triggered her lanner holstered on her left hip. There was no time to pull the weapon free. The raised arms of the droid were already dropping for the final thrust that would skewer her through.

In one violent kick, Mihai managed to roll right, reefing the gun barrel toward the metallic monster. She pulled the trigger, energy exploding from the muzzle, shredding the holster and sending a searing wall of fire down along the length of her thigh into her attacker. After blasting a hole in the droid's armor, she quickly pulled the gun from its holster and fired a second charge into its open rupture. The infernal machine belched acrid smoke and crashed into the dirt.

Mihai's head spun in pain, but there was no time to take account of the injury. The guard droid undoubtedly sent a signal to the outpost. Soon the place would be swarming with others, and not droids this time.

She staggered to her feet, struggling to stand, fighting a numbing ache in her back, her right arm hanging limp and in pain. She could feel warm, sticky blood oozing down her back, and there were already large red stains in the dirt. Taking a step, the woman cried out in agony. She glanced down to see pieces of her flight-suit flaking away from her left leg, leaving gaping holes in the silver material. The air stunk with the smell of charred flesh. Fighting back a dizzying sickness trying to overtake her, she shook her head. 'They'll know who's been here when the blood's tested. No time to worry about that now.' She needed to get away.

Whirring of servos alerted Mihai to the fact there was more than one guard droid. She didn't even have the strength to lift her head and look in the monster's direction. There was nothing to do now but wait to die. Mihai remembered little else. The sound of metal smashing into metal filled her ears, and then silence - no servos, nothing.

Mihai dreamed she was falling only to be caught up in strong arms and carried aloft on wings, or so it felt. After an eternity of silent flight, the woman came to her fighter, floated through the open cockpit and into the seat. Just before the canopy snapped shut, a voice fell on her ears, "Be well, my Lord."

The rest was just a painful blur in Mihai's mind. When she woke in the stillness of a darkened room, she was looking into the distraught face of a woman with smoky-grey eyes and platinum-colored hair.

"Ga... my G..." Gentle fingers rested on Mihai's lips.

"You're safe, my darling. Your soul has returned to us once more." The gentle voice continued to sing little songs of love in Mihai's ears.

"When the summer grass turns to brown and the leaves die from the tree,
I shall call to you, my love, crying, 'Come back, come back to me'.

The river ever flows and the glade will never tell
The depth of care our hearts do share and the pain of a fallen dove.”

For some time, Mihai drifted in and out of strange and bewildering dreams. When she finally waked enough to fully comprehend her surroundings, the woman crooning the sweet tunes frowned and scolded, “It should be a blessing remembered and thankful you should be that the Grave-maker happened to cross your path. If not for her, you would be hanging from a pike, drying in the breeze!

The woman shook her finger in Mihai’s face. “If you ever attempt another stunt like that again, you may find me less forgiving than that droid!” She quickly turned away and left the room.

Mihai was saddened to think her actions hurt the woman so. For six thousand years, he had acted like a mother to her, indeed, a mother to thousands, many who never returned from such adventures. And only once had she allowed anyone see her weep.

Other than a nuisance pain when moving her arm, the scar was the only evidence of the droid’s attack, but the lanner blast was different. Skin was now covering the burns that had eaten into her leg muscles, but the rejuvenating nerves itched and ached. She was well aware the pain would exist long after the red blotches disappeared. Even with the use of healing machines, nerves took a long time to heal.

Mihai considered herself very fortunate. The weapon she carried that day - her design - was an energy gun. It activated a chemical compound ignited by an electrical discharge passing across the gun’s chamber, decomposing a portion of a stabilizing agent suspending the very unstable mendelevium. The greater the voltage across the pellet, the faster the breakdown of the stabilizing agent, thus the greater the energy delivered to the target. The power released could easily be controlled by adjusting the voltage capacitor. This lanner had a thumb lever for quick adjustment, giving its user the choice of stunning someone with a heat blast to instantly dissolving flesh from the bone.

Mihai shuddered. Had her leg not been bent at the knee and received a more direct blast, surgeons would have been forced to amputate her lifeless leg. To regrow the bone, tendons, nerves and flesh could take years, even with healing machines.

She sadly walked from the mirror, the little girl having been chased away by the gloomy memories, and sat on the edge of her bed, staring down at her hands. The woman became introspective, searching inside herself for answers to questions unasked... unasked out of fear... fear of what might be revealed. The time was now passed for such self-indulgence, for remaining in the world of pleasant indecision. Choices had to be made. To keep her sanity, changes were necessary.

She had been field marshal for too long. For over a thousand years, she ruled the Army as ‘lord dictator’. Her decisions were final. The greater the slaughter, the more willing the people were to follow her. They had obeyed her commands without hesitation...never once a complaint. The long war never really ended. The armistices only gave pause to it, allowing the enemy time to rebuild his forces. And what of the last war, the Great War? What had it accomplished?

Stargaton...twenty thousand lost in one hour...friends and lovers. And what had they achieved? A miserable little rock floating in a forgotten part of the galaxy! Memphis...two corps destroyed because she had calculated the enemy incorrectly. Through four years of bloody conflict, she had sentenced over three million of her people

to pour out their blood for this holy war. How much closer to the end were they now? Had the price been worth it?

Those battles were over fifty years ago and the dying was still going on. Oh yes, there was an armistice, but the enemy still found excuse for the occasional bloodletting. How much longer would death keep devouring those she loved so much? How many more would be butchered because she thought it necessary? Mihai closed her eyes and shook her head in despair.

What else could have been done? They followed her because she was their leader. Her people would have fought without one. At least they didn't die for her or some imagined reward. Everyone was aware of what was at stake. Billions of innocent lives depended upon their success. The destiny of generations gone, present and even those coming hinged upon the outcome of events.

But had the people not already paid the ultimate price? Was death really the supreme sacrifice? She thought not. The Age of Innocence was gone for them, destroyed forever on the fields of blood and betrayal. It mattered little the outcome. Her people would never be able to completely forget the death and suffering. 'Like a maiden violated by her guardian and protector...' Mihai nodded her head, 'except he has raped both flesh and spirit.'

Mihai no longer feared her own death. In fact, there were times when death appealed, ending the guilt plaguing her mind. She could manage the daylight hours, but...but in the quiet of the night when the rest of the world slept, accusing voices of all the slain would sing out in her head, their scolding faces passing in visions before her eyes. No matter how she made excuse or sought absolution, she could still see their blood dripping off her hands.

Mihai's thoughts conjured up visions creeping from dark corners of her mind into this waking moment. There suddenly appeared heaps of bodies, torn and mangled. In horror, she watched while her fingers went probing open wounds, seeking bloody flesh to satisfy an insatiable hunger. While Mihai's stomach churned in sickness, her lips smacked with anticipation, squealing, *"Is this all there is?! Are these tiny morsels all you have delivered?! How are we to survive on such paltry rations?! We are hungry! We are hungry!"*

Mihai shook her head violently to drive the ugly dream away. With many curses and outcries, the demon slowly crawled back to its hiding place, threatening a return. It would come again. It had promised. She dropped her head in dismay. How much longer could this continue on before the mist of insanity would completely envelop her? Did she have a year...a day...an hour?

A bitter chill swept the room raising an army of goose bumps marching across Mihai's sweaty skin. She involuntarily shivered, more from the encounter with her monster within than from the cold. There was no more wondering which of Destiny's roads she was to take. One and only one path lay open. It was no longer a matter of choice. The time had come for her to speak of this while a small piece of innocence still resided within her heart, while she still retained mastery of her own mind.

It was time to leave. No longer did this room, this little world of her youth, have the power to drive away the evil. She was the evil. It was a part of her living being. Until it was driven away or destroyed, it would be part of her. There was no longer any need to

hide from it. No place could protect her. Mihai gritted her teeth. She was determined to become whatever she must in order to defeat this enemy.

Standing, Mihai reached for her officer's cape and cloaked the beauty of the dress. She faced the door, willing to endure any storm that might come. Lifting her head high and throwing her shoulders back, the woman marched into the courtyard. No longer was she going to seek shelter from her fate. What tomorrow would bring, what battles there were to confront, no matter the results, they were going to be faced head on!

* * *

Fearing a reuniting of friends if she returned to the Winter Gardens, a direct route to the Old Palace, Mihai rode the tramway to a more distant exit to the north and east of her destination. From there it was a mile's walk to the Eastern Portal, the grand public entrance to the Old Palace better known as the 'Upper Palace'.

The path traversed a labyrinth of narrow streets and broadways snaking through the artfully created mountains of tall, ornate buildings. Constructed during the Second Age, this new palace city, better known as the 'Lower Palace', eclipsed the Upper Palace from view except for its central, domed spire and the four guard towers at the corners of upper battlements. Few were the feet on the street this morning, the echo of Mihai's footsteps often the only sound to be heard.

At the end of her walk through the city's streets, Mihai entered a narrow, deep, tapering recess in the face of a high cliff. At a juncture where the two walls converged, she arrived at the Majestic - a wide, winding staircase inlaid into the diorite butte, crisscrossing its way up hundreds of feet to the palace proper. Each flight of hewn stairs ended in an immense grotto that spread out into a beautiful, enclosed balcony carved into the mountain itself. Giant windows had been cut from the outer wall, providing a breathtaking view for a pilgrim journeying to the palace.

Said to have been built by the Ones Who Came Before as a gift to the children of the First Age, these stairs, like the rest of the Upper Palace, never needed repair nor did they weather with the passage of time. The Ancients, many of the oldest children of the First Age, called this place 'the Home of the Living Stones'.

A person needed to see this marvel of engineering to grasp the grandeur and beauty of the 'Road to Heaven', as it was often called. There were no visible construction marks, added building blocks or reinforcements, just one solid piece of finely polished obsidian, carved with intricate designs.

(Author's note: I believe it worthy to mention here that the Upper Palace was named 'Heaven' by the oldest of the Ancients who first sojourned into the unknown beyond the outer walls. Out there, in the 'Eres', translated 'Earth' in our tongue, travelers had to fend for themselves or carry supplies enough for their journeys. The paved highway beginning at the east wall and leading west toward what would later be called the 'Majestic', became known as the 'road to Samayim', translated 'Heaven' or 'Heights' in our tongue.

Both words, Eres and Samayim, are said to be phonetic pronunciations from the language of the Ones Who Came Before, as the oldest of the Ancients recalled from hearing the words spoken. Eres literally means 'to go away from' as in 'going away

from what is known'. Samayim has the understanding of 'becoming satisfied' as in 'filled up with every good pleasure'.

So it was, when the first children of the First Age ventured into the wilderness, they spoke of going into the Eres. After a long and exhausting journey, often filled with sacrifice and privations, the Eastern Gate where the paved highway began meant they were close to the luxuries of home. Being on the road to Heaven symbolized being near one's reward for having succeeded in accomplishing the return journey. Now the riches of home were no longer a dream or hope but a reality.

As the children reached further into the wilderness, eventually leaving EdenEsonbar, the home planet, they carried the name 'Eres' with them to symbolize their going into the unknown. When the Second Realm or Second Universe was revealed to them as a place they would one day go, the name 'Eres' was given to it. Later, the sons of men on Earth were given that name for their home planet and, by the time of the Great Flood, were calling the land of the children's dwelling place 'Heaven'.)

Mihai remembered little more about this morning's journey up the Majestic than the day so long ago when her companions carried her up these same steps. Those six millennia passed had not changed the sights, but she believed they would never impress her like they once did. Now these stairs were merely a conveyance used on her road to Destiny, a means to an end. So little remained of the joy this world once basked in.

About one hundred fifty cubits above the Majestic's threshold, the stairs made a sharp turn, tunneling into the butte as it rose toward the Upper Palace. It finally opened into a towering, vaulted chamber called 'Raven's End'. The chamber, like the Majestic, was built of polished obsidian, its finely chiseled pillars reaching thirty cubits to the shimmering-black ceiling. Openings in the east wall allowed observers a panoramic view of the Lower Palace from twenty stories above the courtyard far below.

The sound of surging blood filled Mihai's ears as she staggered up the last set of stairs before reaching the chamber, her lungs aching, her heart pounding against her chest. Three times she had stopped on her ascent, a climb often jogged in her more carefree days. Wheezing, she stumbled forward, seeking a bench near one of the pillars.

Sitting, Mihai rested her head in her hands. A smell of hot, sticky sweat filled her nostrils, making her stomach churn even worse than her headache had managed to do. She needed to take her mind off her personal concerns. 'Think girl, think!'

Looking around the empty expanse, she began to ponder its name. "Raven's End? Raven's End? Oh, yes! Now I remember. It was told me that when the world was new, when the Ancients were still little more than children, sojourners beyond the distant walls would take birds along with them to send messages back to the palace."

She stared at the windows and the hundreds of tiny nooks around them. "Pigeonholes! That's what they are. They say that at one time this chamber harbored thousands of birds of all kinds."

Mihai could see and hear the excitement of that time, multitudes of birds cooing and crying while others swooped to and fro through the air. What a sight it must have been!

Gentle footfall echoing across the empty expanse interrupted Mihai's recollections of this place. She squinted, peering into the shadows, muttering to herself, "Now who should be wandering out here at this time of day?"

Raven's End was cavernous and dark, its only light during the day coming from the windows and open exits. The Majestic's final staircase spiraled its way up the last sixty cubits to the Upper Palace's outer courtyard from the far end of the vaulted chamber, it offering little light for Mihai to observe who was coming.

"Mihai! What a wonderful surprise! I had no idea I would be seeing you before tonight." A woman of slight stature, medium build and delightful appearance materialized from the shadows, hurrying over and taking Mihai's hands, leaning down, giving her a gentle kiss.

Mihai grinned, asking, "Trisha?!" Then glancing at the woman's light blue uniform, puzzled aloud, "*General* Trisha?! I thought you were commanding Hunter's Brigade on Pilneser. What brings you here, I mean, so far away from your duties?"

Still gripping Mihai's hands, Trisha smiled. "Oh, my Lord, I have been a busy, busy person. I was called away from my duties on Pilneser some months ago, being given a temporary assignment in the Second Realm. Then, just three weeks ago, I was summoned to Palace City. Been here ever since, waiting for tonight's council..."

Mihai puzzled. "Who ordered you away from your post? I saw no request come across my desk."

Trisha's answer was upbeat and cheerful but revealed little as did her facial expressions. Her eyes, though, could not lie, twinkling in a way a child's does when hiding a secret. "My Lord, the day is young and many a breeze must blow before its end. Rest assured, the powers that brought me here have also delivered my lord to this same destination. The journey is long and may be dark, but the wind ever blows us home."

Mihai attempted to pry more information from Trisha but the woman said nothing, which was very much part of her nature. If she chose to speak, all well and good, but no known force existed that could make her confess a word if that was her disposition. Mihai surrendered to what little she had been told, marveling at the woman's stolid constitution, finally shaking her head. "You're hopeless. Just plain hopeless."

"Thank you!" Trisha replied, grinning. "I'll take that as a compliment. Better to look like a fool, I say, than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt."

Mihai returned a toothy smile, nodding. "There's a lot to you, General. Your youth confuses and intrigues me. I see eyes filled with wonder and excitement, but you speak with the wisdom of our counselors. The powers that delivered you to my world are wise and discerning." Her statement stirred memories of this woman in her mind.

Trisha was not a child of this realm. She had grown up during an age of violence, when old ways and beliefs were being challenged and new religions were forcing themselves into the lives of people around her. She had refused to compromise her values and beliefs, making the woman an outcast among her people. But that was all gone now. By the time she awoke from the Field of the Minds, her memories were all that remained of the world of that day.

Mihai marveled at this woman's strength and lasting integrity when she suddenly recalled being told about her loyal perseverance during those long-ago years. Trisha had suffered much back then, from the death of children to abandonment by her husband and so much more. Those experiences had hardened her. Her years here had not removed that hardness. How could it? Mere months after her arrival found Trisha at CoblinPort, helping in its defense against Stasis Pirates.

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