

The Curse of Kalathan

Trina has been thrown into prison for trespassing in the Temple loft - not surprising for someone marked and cursed as she is. What is astonishing, though, is that now that her time is up she is not being thrown back onto the streets: she is being taken, of all places in the whole of Kalathan, to the palace, home of the six princes she has fangirled over all her life.

Theo, eldest of the princes, is convinced that the pilgrimage he has been sent on by his father is a pointless waste of time. But the shrine holds a sinister secret that plunges him, his brothers and the devilclaw Trina into an adventure that will take them across Kalathan and into the Empire, where it will be up to them to challenge the Emperor and his icy daughter for the future of their beloved land.

Prologue

Kalathan. Still, when I say the name of my country my heart swells. What is it, that makes me love the land of my birth? How can a land, an inanimate land, inspire such loyalty and fierce devotion in me? There was a time when Kalathan tried to bury people like me, a time when I was worth less than nothing and was robbed of both my dignity and my freedom. I only have to look down at the mark on my wrist to remember. But then, there was a time when Kalathan needed me, a time when I had a choice: save yourself or save your land. I chose Kalathan.

I remember the deep, dark forests through which I journeyed, and the fertile plains beyond. I see the great river, born high in the Northern peaks, running determinedly past the city towards the great lake in the south and remember how its water was almost the end of me. I picture the desolate mountains in the north, the thirst that almost overcame us, and imagine the vast arid desert beyond them. I see the people, tasselled and embroidered scarves adorning their weathered faces, wrapping themselves in furs against the bitter winter winds, mirrored beads tinkling from the doorways of houses and tents in a summer breeze.

It is a different devotion to the one I have felt as I have gazed at my children after they were put into my arms for the first time, different to the love I have felt for my dear husband as we have walked through life together, as I have watched the hair at his temples turn to grey, as we clasp hands before each meal, our fingers no longer smooth and strong as they were in those early days together. It is different to the love and gratefulness I have to God who has made everything what it is, even Kalathan itself – Kalathan in a way is all of my loves, together. It is home, the source and the beginning of the people I love, it is God's beautiful creation. It is life, sustenance; it is belonging. It is purpose, for me perhaps more than for others who love this land as I do.

Kalathan is a shadow, I believe, of a land that awaits the faithful beyond the borders of mortality. I once thought I was sacrificing everything for Kalathan, but in the end there was mercy; Kalathan has given me more, far more than I gave up.

Chapter 1

When the door of the prison cell opened that day, flooding her face with light, she had almost given up hope. It had been months, she knew, since the soldiers had caught her sleeping in one of the lofts in the Temple and taken her away, but exactly how long she had been locked up she did not know. She did know that the cold that had settled itself in the dirty stone of the walls and the floor and mercilessly into every square inch of her body, was not quite as intense as it had been. Spring was coming, but it held no hope of warmth or new life for her.

Trina and her cellmates still kept the lumpy grey blankets they had been given wrapped around them all the time, their scratchy shifts completely inadequate against the might of the cold. For the past few days, Trina had found herself losing her determination to survive all this. She had been so sure, months ago, that she could live through it, that she had survived hard things before, and she would do it again. She huddled in a corner on the pile of musty straw, her fingers tracing the inked mark on her left wrist, not wanting for once to talk to the other two. Conversation and story-telling, clapping games and singing had helped to pass the long, icy hours, but as the days grew longer and she began to sense the change in the air, she struggled to stay cheerful. She wanted to be free again, to have *choices* again so badly that the feeling had settled in her gut like a stone, and she had to force down the dry bread and gritty porridge they were given twice a day.

When they heard the heavy footsteps outside, clearly not those of one of the silent grey women who brought food and emptied the slop buckets, she did not even consider that it could mean they were setting her free. She had been staring up at the window high in the wall, trying to remember what it felt like to be clean and warm. She did not usually allow herself to dwell on such things; it only made the grim reality of the present harder to bear, but today she had given in and let the memories come. The sound of her little sister's laugh, the feel of a kitten on her lap ... her old life seemed so terribly far away. She was daydreaming about flying up and out of that window, to the little lop-sided cottage in the craft quarter of the city where she had once lived in the days when her father was still alive, in the days before they had waved good bye to him in his soldier's uniform and watched him walk away from them forever. She longed to be free, but she knew that if she was ever released she didn't really have anywhere to go. Trina had stayed in the city after they had got the news about Father, while Mother had gone to the country with Rilla, who must be nearly seven now. Mother had wanted her to come with them, to live with their grandparents, but Trina had pretended not to care. She didn't want to do that to Mother and Rilla, or to her sweet grandparents. Without her, they had a chance at a life without stigma and persecution. It was just better for everyone, she knew, if she took her chances in the city. Alone. But now, when she had spent what must have been months in prison for nothing more than trespassing and loitering in the Temple, she was doubting her decision.

A key grated in the lock and the door opened. The old sentry stood aside and a soldier stood in the doorway, his red turban and tunic a striking contrast to the dim dullness of the cell. When he said her

name it was such a surprise that she almost forgot to answer. "Trina Delkarsin," he said, his voice echoing against the bare walls, his hand on the knife at his belt. He looked around at the three pale women staring up at him. "Which one is Trina?"

"I am," she said, scrambling to her feet when she realised what he had said. Perhaps Mother had come to visit her. Her heart leapt with that small hope.

"Come with me," he said, standing to one side of the doorway.

The others looked at her, their eyes wide. She lifted her chin as she reached the soldier, wishing that she wasn't so dirty, willing herself to remember that she was innocent, that she was not a criminal, that she was more than the bedraggled, smelly girl he must see in front of him. But he barely looked at her, just grabbed her wrist to inspect the mark on it, took her arm and pulled her through the doorway into the courtyard outside.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, not really expecting an answer.

He shrugged as he locked the door behind him and looked her in the eyes now, smirking, as if what he was about to say was amusing to him. "To the palace, girl," he said. "I'm taking you to the palace."

Chapter 2

Theo was mad. He stood with his brothers in front of the king and queen, his arms folded, trying to control the muscles in his face so he wouldn't betray his frustration. Again, Father was going to make him waste his time on some stupid religious pursuit. There were a thousand things he would rather do than spend a week sitting on a horse, just to feed some poor cow or sheep to a fire in a shrine. He had only yesterday found another old scroll in the archives that he wanted to get stuck into translating, and he needed to keep up with his training if he wanted to beat Kaspar at the archery tournament again this year. Kaspar was nearly five years younger, still a boy really, but he was getting better every day. Theo wasn't ready to give up his title to his seventeen-year-old scrap of a brother; no way was he going to let that happen. The twins didn't care; they always did well in the games without training much, but all they really wanted to do was play their silly lutes and flutes and make up songs. If they were all going on this ridiculous pilgrimage, there would be plenty of time for singing and all that along the way. But there was no library on the road to blasted Paristia. Just miles of road, acres of fields and farms and a few dirty inns.

"Father," he said, looking over at his mother, who had walked over to the window of the high-ceilinged parlour where the family had gathered. She gave him a sympathetic smile, pulling aside a heavy brocade drape to look out over the green courtyard. "Are you sure? I thought things were going better on the border."

"No, no," said the king, shaking his head and rubbing his forehead. "They were, for a while, but not lately. There have been rumours about the Empire's latest plans, and a few unprovoked attacks on the garrisons near the Kirgiz pass. We need the Spirit's help. We need to prove our devotion." Father always wore his crown over his turban unless he was in his private apartments, and Theo knew the heavy jewel-encrusted gold was uncomfortable. He had to wear one himself, when they went to worship at the Temple, and he hated it. When I am king, he thought, I will not wear that crown every day. Neither would he wear one of those hot old-fashioned turbans or bother with that line of black kulal under his eyes. And he certainly wouldn't waste precious time going on pilgrimages to appease spirits that he suspected didn't care much whether anyone visited them or not. He doubted that appeasing a Spirit would make any difference to what was happening on the border. But he felt guilty, instantly, for his disloyal thoughts. His father was the king, placed and held on the throne by God himself. Even if Theo thought this pilgrimage was unnecessary, whatever his opinions regarding spirits and shows of devotion, that didn't mean he should doubt his father's authority and wisdom.

There was a rattling from the corner, a clanking of charms and a rustling of fabric as a figure rose from the chair in the corner. Theo's heart sank as Shihazar, the prophetess, Father's spiritual advisor, made her way across the room towards them, her thick hooded cloak a darker red than the robes the priests wore. Wonderful, he thought, watching as the fold of the cloak trailed behind her, making her look as if she was floating over the floor. Theo wondered if she practiced it in front of a mirror and decided he wouldn't put it past her. He had never liked her; she smelt funny and he had always had the feeling that she didn't like him.

He should have realised she was behind this. "It is the will of God," she said in her raspy voice. "The Spirit of Victory requires our devotion before he will aid us to defend ourselves against our enemies."

"Why do we need to travel all the way to Paristia to show our devotion?" asked Kaspar. He looked around expectantly at his family and Shihazar, and Theo almost envied him his innocence. Kaspar always said what he thought and asked what he wanted. He was almost as tall as Theo now and promised to be taller, but his smooth open face under his glossy dark hair still betrayed his youth. Theo looked more like his father – the image of him in looks and character, people said, broader in the chest than his brothers and with the same softly curling dark hair as the king's. Theo had questions and opinions, more, he suspected, than Kaspar did, but he had learnt not to speak out too quickly. He had learnt to look for answers himself.

If Kaspar was expecting a straight answer now, Theo doubted he would get one. Father was a good king – except for the recent trouble on the border, for the more than twenty years of his rule Kalathan had thrived. He was respected, if not always liked, and even his family were a little in awe of him, of the weight of the divine right he carried. But lately, when it came to religious matters, Theo felt that Father wasn't as wise as he could be. He listened to crazy old Shihazar too much, that was certain.

"It's because the shrine is there," said Jandrin, one of the twins, leaning back on the long couch where he and Jameth had stretched out, all long arms and legs, when Father had finished explaining what he wanted them to do. They were both in green silk today, dressed alike as they often were. Dandies, thought Theo, noticing their pointed boots, the mother-of-pearl buttons on their thigh-length tunics, their long golden hair touching the embroidery on the high collars. "The spirit lives there, doesn't it?"

"It is there," said Shihazar, her gravelly voice rising in a crescendo and making Theo cringe, "that the Spirit is most accepting of our devotion and sacrifice!" She turned to the King and bowed low, the charms on her cape almost touching the carpet, then rose, her hands clasped before her. "To send all your sons to the shrine will be an act of devotion *far* exceeding anything you have done before, my lord."

The king did not look at Shihazar. He stared out, over his sons' heads, towards the courtyard. "Yes," he said, quietly. "I have in the past shown my devotion in many ways. But never like this."

"All of us? Am I going too, Mother?" Maikal tugged on his mother's sleeve and she looked down at him, her hand stroking his fair head.

"You are," she said, as if she hated to say it. "If your father has his way, you are all going."

"When?" Bendegarh was excited, as Theo knew he would be. He was only twelve, barely out of the nursery, and had never been anywhere outside Kalathan City. "When do we leave? Can I watch the sacrifice? What will it be – a lamb? A bull?"

"So many questions!" said Father, affectionately, placing his hand on Ben's shoulder. "You will leave as soon as we can make the preparations. And as for the sacrifice, I will be sending a priest with you to take care of it." The king looked over at his wife as he spoke, and Theo saw his mother meet his eyes, then look away again, her face expressionless. She's not happy about this either, he thought. No wonder, if all six of her sons, even Ben and Maikal, were going. But Father was her king too. No one, not even Mother, questioned his will, even about something like this.

The king held Theo back as Mother and his brothers left the room, Maikal and Ben whispering excitedly, looking forward to the horses, the tents, the campfires, the adventure of the journey. But the king was serious. "Theo," he said, facing his son and placing his hands firmly on his shoulders. "Kalathan needs this. We are in more trouble than you know. I am counting on you."

Theo was confused. "More trouble? What do you mean, Father – on the border?"

The king sighed, releasing Theo and turning away, rubbing his forehead under the crown again. "Yes, on the border. But it is more than that, more than I need to explain now. It is the same old story, that our neighbours are not happy to leave Kalathan in peace as we demand. I am counting on you to make sure this pilgrimage is successful. We need God's favour, Theo. We need it desperately."

"I will ... make sure it is successful," said Theo, looking over to where Shihazar still stood, her face half-hidden by her hood. If it was so important to please the Spirit, why wasn't she going herself? As he followed his father out of the room, he looked back at her. There was a smile on her sour old face, he was sure of it. She realised he was looking at her and changed her expression, bowing low again in what he was sure was nothing but mock respect. He was glad she wasn't going on this journey. He didn't trust the old witch at all. And he wondered, for the thousandth time, why his father didn't feel the same way.

Chapter 3

The water smelled beautiful, of jasmine and roses. It was warm – perfectly, beautifully warm, and Trina closed her eyes, her arms floating at her sides. She was clean; for the first time in months she was clean and it felt so wonderful that she ignored her very, very strong suspicion that it was all a mistake, that the soldier had never meant to fetch her to the palace, to this bedroom hung with velvet curtains and rich tapestries, to this steaming, magical, fragrant bath that was dissolving her fear and her shame in its luxury.

It had been three months. She had asked Sabine, the stout, bustling woman who had taken her from the soldier, what the day was. She had been in prison for three months, without a trial, a visit, nothing. It hadn't been especially surprising when she had been arrested. People like her expected injustice and accusations, persecution and random, unexplained imprisonments. It had always been part of her life, from the moment the red-robed, bald-headed greasy-faced priest had seen her innocently eating dried figs out of the bag her father had just bought at the market. "*The Devil's claw!*" he had cried out, pointing a shaking finger at her left hand raised half way to her mouth. Her poor father, who had trained her so carefully ever since she was old enough to understand, *never* to use her left hand for anything, anything at all, had to watch her being dragged away, screaming and crying, to the Temple and then to the prison at the castle. He was allowed to take her home three days later, and he had always said he hardly recognised the pale, limp, nearly frozen child they brought out from the dark cell, her secret discovered, her left wrist marked for life, her future now at stake. She was nine years old then, but she remembered it all. She remembered the fear, she remembered the hideous cleansing ceremony at the Temple, pigeon blood dripping from her head onto her dress. She remembered the cold cell, the needle and the pain in her wrist as they marked her. She remembered lying in the dark and wondering if she had died.

But that had all been ten years ago. She had stayed in the background since then, not going to school, staying at home with her parents mostly, ignoring the suspicious gazes of the people who knew what she was, learning what she could from the books her father and his friends could find for her. If she went out to the market, or to the woods with her mother to find herbs for medicines, she wore long sleeves to hide the mark. She tried, and she tried hard because she knew her future depended on it, but she was never able to do much with her right hand. She could not write, she could not sew, she could not cut up vegetables and herbs. Stir a pot; that was about all she could manage. Her father had learned to use his right hand, even to write, and no one but his family had ever known about his curse. He still used his left hand as he fashioned stools and tables and shelves out of wood, as he carved designs into his creations, all in private. In public, no one would ever have known he was a devilclaw. But Trina was different. Her right hand was stupid, useless at anything that might help her earn a living.

She did not try to hide it as she dressed. She noticed the servant girls staring at the way she buttoned the soft tunic they gave her, as she took the comb from them and worked it through her knotted, tangled hair. "Yes," she said, shrugging at them as she tugged the pretty comb through the snarls. Was it ivory? She thought it might be; it was carved with elephants. "The Devil's claw. But don't worry, I don't bite." One of

them suppressed a squeak, and she smiled to herself. It was strangely enjoyable, not to be bothering to hide it.

There was a mirror, in the room, a tall one framed in silver that showed her whole body at once. She stood in front of it and regarded herself, her whole self, for the first time in her life. The girl in the mirror was combing her hair with her right hand, she thought, wanting to laugh at the irony. She had dark circles under her eyes, but she was clean, shiny and scrubbed pink. Her hair was a nondescript brown, her face not particularly interesting, her nose perhaps a little too long, her dark grey eyes perhaps a little too large. Her arms were skinny and marked with raw red patches from sleeping in that cold, dirty cell for three months. No one had told her anything yet. She hadn't been released. Sabine dismissed her questions and said very little else, and the other servants who brought food and bathwater and helped her to scrub off the months of dirt said nothing at all. She had given up asking when she realised she wasn't getting any answers out of them.

Besides, right now Trina didn't really want answers. She was locked in the room now, alone, but she was in the palace, in a pretty dress, and there was a fire burning in the grate. Her belly was full and her body was warm, and even if this was a huge mistake, which she was almost completely certain it was, there was just a chance she might actually see the princes.

It had been so long since she had been able to be in the crowd lining the road from the palace to the Temple, since she had stood with the other citizens of Kalathan and watched the King and the royal family ride by on their way to worship. The king himself, broad and strong, his dark hair curling over the white fur collar of his cape, in his heavy gold crown over the red turban, the black kulal around his eyes – he was like a picture of a king in a storybook. Then there was the fair-haired queen, Nuria, always so sad and regal on her white horse, and behind her the princes. All six of the beautiful princes, living proof of God's favour on the king, riding behind their parents: from Theoland, the oldest, already a man and taller than his father, down to Maikal who was only Rilla's age. While she was here, until this misunderstanding was found out and rectified, she might just catch a glimpse of one of them across a courtyard or a ballroom or whatever other kinds of fancy rooms they had in a palace. Even if she was going to be thrown back onto the street or back into the prison, she might actually see them. It was worth a wait, she thought, taking a plump, juicy grape from the bowl on the table beside the bed, and falling backwards onto the spotlessly white, impossibly soft feather pillows.

Chapter 4

There wasn't much light in the archives; the old man who took care of the scrolls said the light damaged the old documents so he kept the place in near-darkness. Theo had to strain his eyes to read in the light of the dim lamp, but he was excited to have found this, excited as always to be putting together pieces in the puzzle of Kalathan's history. He had never been satisfied with the too-perfect stories the tutors had told them, or with the books he and his brothers had studied about how their nation had come to be. For the last few years this had been his secret hobby, this pursuit of the truth, this chasing of the real story of the land that he was to inherit one day.

It had all sounded a little contrived to Theo, a little too good to be true; the story of the birth of Kalathan. Children were taught that the friendly blonde giants from the west had ridden over the mountains into this land, offering unity and security, and that after some insignificant skirmishes the local people had welcomed them, submitting gratefully to their rule as well as their religion. Since then the blood and the language of the conquerors and the conquered had mingled so extensively that no one, not even the kings, could be very sure whose side they should take if it were ever necessary. It made sense, he supposed, to imagine it to be a happy event – that the army had brought their swords along just for show, that the local people willingly shared their land, their food, their homes and their wealth with their invaders. It was simpler to believe that the two peoples shared their culture in some kind of collaboration, and that it was friendship and co-operation, not coercion and violence that had led to the syncretism of cultures, the mix of west and east, of fair and dark, that was Kalathan.

But Theo had never liked assumptions. Simplicity was all very well but it wasn't *truth*, and Theo had always, since childhood, thirsted to know the truth of things. His mother still teased him, telling stories about his constant questions as a child, how he had begun reading when he was four and had never stopped, how he had begged to stay in the schoolroom when Jandrin and Jameth had begged just as earnestly to be allowed to leave.

Since he had finished with tutors and was the master of his own time, he had spent many spare hours in dim rooms like this one, trawling through old documents. He felt just as strongly about learning archery and swordsmanship, and about his duty to stay as strong and fit as any soldier in the army, but he enjoyed the discipline of studying more than his daily training. He had found histories written on cracked, dry parchments, forgotten evidence of orders and decrees, military records, letters and old laws. He had filled piles of notebooks, and often at night he would lie awake, feeling as if he was slowly learning to know his country as it had been, as it had grown and become what it was today.

But it was the faith of Kalathan, especially, that had fascinated him recently. In the past months he had learnt things that he doubted anyone else living knew about the history of the holy Kalathan Temple and the Temple scriptures, things that made him glad his father seldom asked him about his hobby, as everyone called it. Theo was piecing together bits of the past, and if Father were to ask him about it he might have to admit it: his discoveries did not always fit with what he had been taught.

This one he found the other day was gold – a letter from the same year as the conquest of Kalathan, the ink still readable and the parchment only barely crumbling. It was from a general of one of the armies of Albrin the Conqueror himself, a letter to someone that Theo, after all his research, recognised to be one of Albrin’s advisors. Theo made his way slowly through the letter, copying each word into his notebook as he translated from the Old Tongue into modern Kalath. At first it read much as he had expected, greetings and some other military details, until a few paragraphs in when he stopped, put down his pen and read on without writing it down. The general had been sent with his army to the lands to the north, to inform the local people of their new status as subjects of the new king of Kalathan. Theo’s brow furrowed as he read, as he pictured the soldiers scaring the locals with their weapons and armour, taking inventories of the wealth of each village, of the number of fighting men. He had been told, this general, to pay close attention to the religion of the people. Albrin wanted to know about their worship. He wanted to know about the gods they served and feared, and the general wrote back faithfully, describing rituals and shrines and practices in detail.

Theo reached the end of the scroll and sat back. Albrin, he had been taught, had brought the true religion of the Temple with him from the west, from where he and his followers had broken away from the Empire that had taken over most of the continent. They had made their way over the mountains to this land, where they had been met by the scattered Kalath tribes, who had found in Albrin and his army the leadership they had lacked. Albrin’s army had brought unity and peace to Kalathan, and they had built the first Temple, the stone foundations of which still lay under the walls of the current Temple in the city. Parts of the Scriptures had been brought from the west, and the final revelation had come from God, miraculously, to a humble priest who had accompanied the conquerors. It was through these final Scriptures that Kalathan’s status as God’s holy nation had been revealed. The Western Empire, he had learnt as a boy, did not serve the true God, the God of power and victory, the creator of the universe, the God who had chosen Kalathan as his own special land. Those in the Empire worshipped a weak God who had walked on earth as a man and even died, hung on a stake like a criminal. Theo had never understood this and had grown up believing all people in the Empire to be ridiculously stupid. How absurd to worship a weak God who took the form of a man! In Kalathan they held up and revered the sword, and they forged ahead in strength with the blessings of the Spirits of Victory and Plenty.

But this scroll was telling a different story. Theo’s brow furrowed as he read. The general described a ceremony marking a young boy as an evil omen because he used his left hand rather than his right. He peered at the text, trying to figure out the word that was used – a demon hand, perhaps? No, not a hand – a claw, a talon, like an eagle’s. The boy was marked on his wrist, blue pigment rubbed into a cut to scar him permanently. The people believed he was bad luck, said the general, and he would be an outcast, worthy only for the lowest of tasks. Just like the devilclaws we have today, thought Theo, cursed by God for some sin of their parents.

Theo thought of the city’s devilclaws, often homeless on the streets, rejected by their families, worth less than the lowest servants. They were sullen people, he knew, suspicious and dishonest. The strange inversion that caused them to prefer their left hands affected their characters, too, and it was common

knowledge that you could never trust a devilclaw. The prisons were full of them. It was a problem, one that worried his father terribly. An abundance of devilclaws meant a lack of blessing. They were evidence of God's displeasure with his people. Mother took pity on them and had opened a shelter down near the harbour, but Father disapproved, even of that. But now – this document seemed to be saying that this belief, taught in the Temple, was something taken from the original tribes of Kalathan.

But it couldn't be right. Theo had always been taught that the pagan tribes had abandoned their own religions to follow the Temple faith. He read it again, remembering the tutor who had been found out while he was employed at the palace, one of the best and nicest he and his brothers had ever had. He remembered the man being dragged away in disgrace. He remembered his mother comforting him, saying little, only that Father wanted him gone. He had accepted it then, child as he was, but now an awful possibility was creeping into his mind. What if this belief about devilclaws was nothing but a remnant of ancient paganism that had crept into the Temple worship? What if all the thousands of people in Kalathan vilified for their left-handedness were not cursed at all? It was in the Scriptures: "Cursed is he who lifts the devil's hand, who dares to bring the darkness into the holy shrine."

There wasn't much else in that letter that was interesting, and Theo made a few notes before getting up to put it back. He picked up the next one, and this time he recognised something else, something he could hardly believe. He shook his head as he read, his mind labouring over the tediously formal Old Tongue. Devilclaws were one thing, but this? He rolled up the scroll again and stared at it in his hand. It was as genuine as anything else in here, an original document, over five hundred years old. He returned the scroll to the shelf and picked up his notes. He needed to talk to someone about this.

He was in luck – Mother was in one of her rooms, working on embroidery in a circle of other women. When he appeared at the door, she sent them away, and he stood at her window, looking out over the courtyard as she put away her threads.

"You are dusty," she said, coming over to him, affectionately brushing off his shoulder.

"I've been in the archives," Theo said, smiling at her. She was still lovely; even though she was his mother he could appreciate that. Her golden hair was still thick and long, braided today in a complex crown around her head. "I found some things that confused me."

"And you thought I could help you?" She smiled, settling down in the chair she had been sitting in. "It's been a while since I studied any history."

Theo sat down opposite her, leaning forward. "I found some old letters from the time of the Conquest," he said. "One of them spoke about the old tribes of Kalathan worshipping a sword. They placed it in the middle of a circle and cut their hands with it, just as we do."

"That is odd. A coincidence? Perhaps they picked up the practice from the conquerors?"

Theo shook his head. "No, the dates don't match up. They had never met the conquerors until then. It was clearly part of their own religion, and the general who wrote the letter described it as such. And there are other examples. Mother – I have this strange feeling that there are parts of the Temple beliefs that come from the tribal religions of the old Kalathan."

Nuria laughed, lightly. “No, Theo. That can’t be right. Albrin and the conquerors brought the Temple worship from the West, and the final revelation came from God himself in the year of the Conquest. Everyone knows that.”

“They brought something from the West,” said Theo. “I just wonder what exactly that was. I know it sounds blasphemous, Mother, but I wonder if it was added to by men, not by God.”

“That can’t be right, Theo,” said Nuria. “God gave us the Scriptures, as they are. We can trust them.”

Theo leaned back in his chair. “I believe that, Mother. Or at least I think I do – I must. One day I will be the head of the Temple. But the evidence seems to be telling me something else.”

“Did you find anything about ... about devilclaws?” Mother looked away as she asked. “You know that is one thing I have always wondered about.”

“I did, Mother,” he said. “The old tribes also persecuted people who used their left hands. I found an example today.”

“They did?” She looked back at him. She seemed excited. “You know I have never believed they are cursed.”

“If it’s a pagan belief, then why is it in the Temple Scriptures?” Theo asked. “I don’t understand.”

“Perhaps there is another explanation for what you found,” said Mother. “You could speak to Shihazar. Or Amrak.”

“Shihazar?” Theo shook his head. “I don’t want to ask her. She deals in dreams and superstitions, not facts. I don’t know why Father puts up with her. And Amrak is so old and deaf these days. I can’t ask him either.”

Theo leant back in his chair and looked over at his mother, who had a faraway look on her face.

“Why don’t you believe devilclaws are cursed, Mother?” he asked. “You are so devoted to the Temple in every other way.”

“It’s not easy to explain,” she said.

“Tell me,” said Theo, leaning forward eagerly.

“Oh no, Theo,” she said, smiling. “There’s nothing to tell, really. But I did hear once, from a friend I had before I married your Father, that there are people in Kalathan who reject the Temple and the Scriptures. There are people who say it is false and who travel around Kalathan preaching that. My friend had listened to one of them, in an inn.”

“Tell me more,” said Theo. “I have never heard of anything like that. How would anyone dare to say such things in public?” To question the Temple and the Scriptures was to question the authority of the king. And that was treason.

“I don’t remember much more,” said Nuria. “I only remember that he said he had listened to this man, who was a foreigner, from the west. From Ahrania.”

“A foreigner, of course,” said Theo, feeling a little comforted. Surely no true and loyal citizen of Kalathan would ever do such a thing. He was confused, yes, about details, but it would be absurd to think that it was *all* a deception. It would make his life, his entire destiny into something meaningless, something founded on a lie. A gong sounded from beneath them, summoning them to dinner.

“Come on,” said Nuria, reaching over to him and putting her hand affectionately on his knee. “Time to go. And I am proud of you, Theo, of the way you search for knowledge. A man who has knowledge is a man on his way to wisdom.”

“So far today, knowledge is only confusing me,” grinned Theo, as he followed his mother down the staircase. “I don’t feel wise at all.”

Chapter 5

She wasn't the only girl who had been brought to the palace from the prison. There was another one, a girl so small Trina had been surprised to learn she was eighteen, only a year younger than herself. She was dark-skinned, her eyes black, almond-shaped and fearful. She was from the north, she told Trina in her heavily accented Kalath after she had been brought in, washed and dressed as Trina had been, and then locked in the room with her. And she was a devilclaw too, as awkward and useless with her right hand as Trina was. Her family had pleaded with her to leave their village when she had been found out, and she had travelled to the city with a trader. She had found work and a bed sweeping and cleaning in the market for a cloth merchant, but then her sleeve had slipped. The stall owner didn't want bad luck to ruin her business, and Uka had spent the next days and nights in the streets until she had been arrested at last, hunger driving her to theft. The mark on her arm was newer than Trina's, her shame more raw.

"Do you think we are leaving now?" she whispered to Trina, as Sabine told them to take their hooded jackets and the bundles waiting beside the door and follow her. It was dawn, the light just beginning to turn golden.

"What do you think?" asked Trina, annoyed at the stupidity of the question. Of course they were leaving. The girls were dressed to travel, in fur-lined boots and sensible brown dresses, of far better quality than anything Trina had ever owned herself, and the bundles looked as if they held spare clothes. She felt sorry for Uka, for the traumatic months she had lived since her left-handedness had been discovered, but she was uneducated and so nervous that Trina didn't particularly enjoy her company. They had been told by the woman that they were going to be servants on a journey, on a pilgrimage to Paristia. "We are servants?" Trina had asked, not understanding. She didn't much like the sound of that, but it was better than being thrown back into prison.

"Yes," said Sabine. "Servants for the journey. You will serve the pilgrims."

"Who are the pilgrims?"

The woman shook her head. "You will find out when you leave."

"Wouldn't they rather have men? For a journey?" A scary suspicion was growing in Trina's mind. She knew how to make a campfire and cook food over it, she had been a servant, but perhaps that was not the kind of servant they were expected to be. Why take two women, two omens of bad luck, on a pilgrimage? In the two years she had been taking care of herself, scraping a living doing the work no one else wanted to do, often going hungry and sleeping in the cold, she had managed to protect herself from men who thought her curse meant she was not worthy of their respect. She had learnt to keep away from men as much as she could and had once had to bite and kick her way out of a bad situation in a cheap boarding house. She was not willing to sink that low now, even if it meant she would never be hungry and cold and scared again. She had her pride, if not her freedom.

“Servants,” said Sabine, firmly. “That is *all*.” She met Trina’s eyes, and Trina thought she saw compassion there. She decided to believe her, and to put her suspicions aside. Uka was trembling; but Trina doubted that the thought had crossed her mind.

“And after this journey? Will we go back to prison?”

“I don’t know,” said Sabine, and Trina felt that she was telling the truth. Then she looked around before lowering her voice to speak to them. “And take these. Keep them with you.” She handed them each a small knife.

“What for?” Uka held hers as if it might bite her.

“Just ... in case. From me, hear. Don’t mention it to anyone.”

Trina took the knife and put it in the inside pocket of her jacket. Sabine had been terse and brief with them over the past days, but she had taken care of them and Trina had learnt to be glad for any kindness, whatever form it took. If they were going to be traveling with a group of men she might be glad of the knife.

So they were going on a journey. If Sabine was right and they were going along to work, it was nothing to complain about. They had warm clothes, there was likely to be decent food – Trina knew she was still a prisoner, but it was better than a cell, and she allowed herself to feel a little hope alongside her uncertainty.

Carrying their bundles, the girls followed Sabine along passages and down stairs. Trina’s eyes darted everywhere, still hoping for a glimpse of the princes. The golden-haired twins in their colourful clothes had always been her favourite, and then perhaps Kaspar who was only a little younger than she was. He was getting as handsome as his brothers, and unlike grumpy Theo he always had a smile for the crowds. She wasn’t especially fond of Theo; his broad, open face and thick, dark hair were too much like his father’s for her taste, and he was never cheerful as his brothers were. Theo and the queen were the sullen ones, the ones who looked as if they would rather be anywhere else than on the road to the Temple, that they would rather be doing anything else than waving and smiling at the ordinary people who had flocked to see them. The other two were just children, Ben already the image of his father and eldest brother, and Maikal as fair and pretty as his mother.

But in the four days since she had been brought to the palace, three since Uka had arrived, this was the first time she was even leaving the bedroom. She had stared out of the window for hours, searching all the time, but the room was three storeys up and faced a back yard. The only young men she had seen were trussed-up servants and weedy stable boys. Not a prince in sight. It was disappointing. Now they were leaving on this journey, and she would lose her chance.

They were led outside, across a green courtyard, out the other side towards what looked to Trina like stables. There was a group of people and horses outside.

“You are not to speak to them,” said the woman, as they walked. “Pralin will tell you what to do.”

Trina did not ask what she meant, or who Pralin was, because she had seen someone in the group gathered around the horses, a face buried deep in her memories. He was older, ten years older, his head still shiny-bald, his gut still straining the red fabric of his robe. He was sitting on a pile of luggage, drinking from a leather flask he held in his fat hand, shouting for someone to move, to hurry up with his horse. She

felt the bile rise in her throat, as the memory of terror and disbelief washed over her. She was looking at the priest who had caught her, who had dragged her away from her father that day, the priest who had shoved her through the doors of the Temple for the ritual that had left her dripping with pigeon blood and shivering with disgust. Was *he* the pilgrim, this priest? Could she bear it, if he was? Perhaps it would be better to refuse, to take her chances back in that cell in the prison.

And then she looked around, still reeling from the shock, at the other people gathered around the horses, her stomach hollow at the thought of having to serve this man, at the thought of travelling with him. She turned her face away towards the horses, clutching her stomach against the nausea she felt. Standing just a few feet away from her was a young man, his dark hair glinting a little in the weak morning sunlight. He was fastening a bow to the side of a horse – no, two bows, and he was carefully wrapping them in cloth as if he was concerned that the journey should not hurt them. He turned at the priest's shout, only glancing at Trina briefly before focussing his attention on his saddle again. He had no silk turban or gold crown today, no cape lined with white fur. His eyes were not even blackened with kulal as they were at the parades, but Trina knew him immediately. And the others were there too, she realised – Jandrin and Jameth, their golden hair standing out against the drab brown of their travelling clothes; Kaspar, older now than she remembered, stroking the nose of his horse. Ben and Maikal, standing with a slight older man who was fastening their capes around them.

So these were the pilgrims. She looked back at the priest, who was eating now, shoving a heel of bread into his mouth and washing it down with more of whatever was in his flask. She was a servant to the princes of Kalathan! This could be the miracle she had been hoping for, it could be a gateway to a new life, a new chance to be something more than a fugitive. If she served them well, if she behaved herself and kept her tongue, maybe, even though she was a devilclaw ... there were so many possibilities. As she was helped up onto a pony with Uka, she marvelled at her luck. Even if she had to spend a few days serving the odious priest, it would be worth it. *If you could see me now, Father*, she thought, happily, as the procession began to move forward, *you would be so proud*.

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