

The organised chaos of setting up camp went on around Hasoe without encroaching on him. He stood in the doorway of his pavilion, hands behind his back beneath the heavy silk and fur of his over-robe, and gazed out to the north. The view was, as always, impressive.

The GodStone was a massive pillar of black rock rearing over two hundred feet into the leaden sky. At the base, its diameter was that of a large house, and it narrowed only marginally towards the summit. The sides were sheer, but there were signs that once a narrow path had wound up to the top. Now bushes and slender trees grew about its jagged feet and the grass surrounded it like a frozen tide.

Beyond the GodStone was the river, wide and fast-flowing, the colour of dull iron save where the water broke whitely over submerged boulders. Beyond that the land rose a little, and on the shallow ridge were the painted tents of the D'Shael, as they had been in past years.

Hasoe nodded to himself. Thus far all was at it should be. The change of leadership had not changed policy, it would seem. The ceremony would begin at noon. The D'Shael had insisted on that right from the first treaty, superstitious savages that they were. Which reminded him of the Giftings. The girl-child and the Prince did not matter, the courtesan was as poised and unruffled as ever - she knew her role and it held no terrors for her. But Merse was less wise and every glimpse of him showed he was becoming paler with every passing minute. It would not do for him to succumb to an attack of nervous fright. A gesture and a word sent a slave running to do his bidding, and within minutes Merse was there, making obeisance.

"There is no need to fear," Hasoe said quietly. "I know all this is strange to you, and it is only natural to be afraid of the unknown. Therefore ask what you will about them and I will answer you. Speak freely, boy," and he smiled, holding open his robe. Merse crept into its shelter, shivering. "I'm not angry, my jewel, and I don't look to send you to your doom. You'll have a task to do for me among these barbarians, remember? Now, ask those questions that are turning you green."

"They are giants," Merse whispered, "tattooed and hideous." "Well, taller than most, certainly," the trader-prince agreed cheerfully, "but not tattooed. They wear warpaint to the meetings, to remind us they are as ready for battle as for peace, but that's not as fearsome as it sounds. Each man wears the same, a black bird-shape across his eyes and temples. Look beneath it and you'll see they are not an ugly race for all their barbarity."

"None of the Tribute has lived long..."

"Ah, yes. Why do you think you have packs of warm clothing to go with you? Northern weather is fierce - you're cold enough now; a few weeks journeying further north and the snow still lies thick. More importantly, Caier, who was indeed a giant and intemperate to boot, is dead. A man of savage appetites,

that one. Perhaps I did too good a job of introducing him to our ways, eh, my jewel?" smiling down at the pale face by his shoulder.

"Everyone says he was great and terrible, my lord," Merse muttered. "What then is the man who ousted him?"

"A younger man. Now, listen to me. Yes, they are barbarians and illiterate -- I had some lessoning in their language, which is a simple one and unwritten. They have a hundred words for 'grass', and none at all for money! And yes, they can be brutal. But they are also unsophisticated and easy to manipulate. That is your task. You are going to deliver a nation into my hand."

"Yes, lord," Merse said obediently, but he was still shivering. Hasoe laughed and gave him a swift hug, then released him.

"All will be well, you'll see," he promised. "Go and ready yourself, and see that our prince is also suitably prepared. I'll send for you when it's time and you can ride at my side to the treaty place."

The Shi'R'Laen were waiting, men and women sitting tall on their huge, restless stallions. Spears glinted gold in the sunlight, the long hair of warriors and horses rippling like woven silk on the wind; they were poised - as readily for battle as for treaty. There was no order to their line, no discipline, and neither armor nor shields.

Still, Hasoe knew their fighting skill. In his youth he had faced a D'Shael warband. Their attack had been as remorseless and unstoppable as an avalanche. Sheer luck was the only reason Hasoe lived through it. These warriors did not know defeat. That was one rumor about them that was frighteningly true. And it was the main reason for the Treaty and the Tribute.

Five years of these Tribute Meets had lessened Hasoe's initial shock and awe. The D'Shael were, for all their height and ferocity, like many others in the world. All people had their price. Hasoe had found Caier's quickly enough. Whoever now led would be much the same.

Hasoe's ornately canopied litter, carried by eight large slaves, paced sedately over the turf. Merse was curled close to his side among the cushions. Hasoe's retinue was fanned out behind him, bright with gold and jewels and brocades, displaying all the pomp and authority a trader-prince had at his command. His features impassive, Hasoe scanned the mounted ranks of the Shi'R'Laen as he approached.

The barbaric splendor of their Standard glowed in the sunlight, and Hasoe recognised the white-maned giant who bore it. Beside Kardan was a much smaller, younger man on a chestnut stallion, both horse and rider were dwarfed by the Elder on his massive roan. The younger man's pale blond hair blew in the wind, and on the naked chest beneath the cloak of black fur, gleamed the great Sun Disc of the Stallion.

Hasoe guessed that the new Sun Stallion could not be more than twenty-five or twenty-six years old. Beneath the warpaint the young man's face was handsome in the D'Shael fashion of planes and angles rather than Tylosian-rounded softness. His body, though hard-muscled, was slight compared to the bulk that had been the Red Bear's. How in the Goddess's Name? But of course - it was obvious. A man drunk or drugged does not fight well. What could be simpler than to slip a potion in the Bear's ale and then the Challenge? A clever man, then, this new Stallion. Or rather cunning, which was not necessarily the same thing.

"To the right of the white-haired giant," Hasoe whispered without moving his lips. "The fine-looking young man in the black cloak. That is the Sun Stallion." But Merse's tension did not lessen, despite Hasoe's carefully chosen words.

"Him?" It was close to a squeak. "My lord - witchcraft!"

"Poison, more like," Hasoe drawled, and felt Merse relax a little. Poison and palace intrigues were the eunuch's life-blood and delight. He would feel on familiar ground. "Now pay attention. The old men, and that giant with the Standard are six of the Elders of the tribe, the warriors immediately about them are the SwordBrethren. They are the most savage of their fighting men. But the Stallion leads all of them. Control him and you control the tribe." Hasoe didn't think it politic to tell Merse that the courtesan had received the same instructions. "And see, he is young, my jewel."

The litter came to a smooth halt scant yards away from the mounted barbarians. The slaves had been chosen for their height, the litter itself specially designed. Consequently when he rose to his feet Hasoe's gaze was level with the Elder's and he could actually look down on the smaller man. A subtle test of superiority, Hasoe thought with an inner smile.

His satisfaction did not last long. Chill blue eyes stared up at him, patient, judgmental, entirely unimpressed by the weight of majesty and authority that Hasoe represented.

"Great Lord of the D'Shael," Hasoe began, rich voice pitched to carry. "We of Tylos welcome you across the river." He spoke slowly, clearly, knowing that few of the D'Shael had bothered to learn more than a few words of Tylosian. Only a couple of the Elders spoke it with any degree of fluency, and then with atrocious accents. "In earnest of this, and of other things, we bring you many fine gifts - rare and exotic treasures for your pleasure." There was a restlessness among the SwordBrethren, but the Sun Stallion on his chestnut horse might have been carved from stone. Hasoe waited for Kardan Elder to translate his words, but the old giant did not speak.

"Of these other things," the Sun Stallion said, "we will talk later." His voice was a clear tenor, his Tylosian fluent despite the inevitable lilting accent. "In the Eye of the Sun, I greet you, Hasoe Trader. I am Rythian, Son of the Sun, and I stand before the God for my people."

"So we have heard, my Lord." Hasoe made obeisance, hands on breast. "And to honor you we have brought great riches." The Goddess was indeed generous. With a language in common, Merse's task was made yet more simple. Hasoe clapped his hands, and the Tribute litany began. "Gold I bring you, mighty lord, silver, pearls, and jewels from many lands. Carpets of perfect weave and design, silks and brocades from far islands, spices and exotic fruits. Rare wines from the finest of our vineyards."

Slaves brought out the Tribute as he named the gifts; glittering caskets and bales of silky brilliance, barrels and tubs and amphorae all laid out in display on the turf.

"Six pairs of coursing hounds, finely bred and trained to hunt the hare. Six gyrfalcons from the ice-bound fjords of Seaholme, majestic birds fit for the wrist of a king. They can kill a deer, take a heron from the sky." He was very proud of those falcons. They had cost a small fortune. They sat on their jeweled blocks, hoods like miniature crowns glittering in the sunlight.

There was a stir among the Shi'R'Laen; yes, he'd known the falcons would be appreciated by a people who lived by the hunt. "Six mares from the desert tribes far to the east, swift as the wind, gentle as royal maidens, chosen for you for their excellence and their coloring."

They were delicate beauties, with limbs like gazelles, dark courtesan-eyes unafraid and trusting. Their coats gleamed burnished gold, their manes and tails were blonde silk, pale as the hair of the Sun Stallion himself. For that fortuitous happenstance Hasoe promised the Goddess a suitable gift.

"And finally, great lord," he went on, "slaves hand-picked to serve your every whim. Two trained in pleasure, two whose untouched virginity are jewels of delight for you alone."

The chestnut horse threw up his head, ears flattened, then became still again. His rider had not moved a muscle. Nor had his face changed expression throughout the Gifting. In fact he had not glanced at all at the riches spread out before him. All the time those cold eyes had remained on Hasoe's face, and it was not a comfortable stare. Was the fool being deliberately insulting, or was he so new to his position that he must seek to impress Elders and SwordBrethren alike? The Gifting was rich - there was, no doubt, many he would need to bribe, young as he was. Unless he was the puppet of more powerful men? Certain of the Elders, Hasoe's spies had told him, had long been unhappy with Caier's ways.

"LyDia, the Butterfly of the Flower Isle, the most famed courtesan in all Tylos," he announced and she glided forward, unveiled mahogany hair and fine robes fluttering about her bright as the wings of her namesake.

For the first time Hasoe saw a reaction from the Sun Stallion; his steady gaze left the trader-prince and lingered on the courtesan's loveliness. She smiled and the hard young face warmed a little to an answering smile. So. The boy

was not immune to beauty. Hasoe gestured to Merse and the eunuch slipped gracefully to the ground and made obeisance.

"The Jewel of the Court," Hasoe announced, "Merse, also trained from childhood in the arts of pleasure. A eunuch whose beauty shall not coarsen nor age, but will remain ever-young, ever-pleasing."

The Sun Stallion acknowledged Merse as he had the courtesan, with a slight smile, and even though the eyes that returned to his face remained cool Hasoe was by no means discouraged.

"And now a virgin for your bed, great lord," he went on. "The fairest daughter of an ancient, noble line, picked for her gentleness and beauty and knowing nothing of men. She is ripe to learn the ways of pleasing her new Lord. She is NaLira, Flower of Gossamer."

She had been coached over many weeks, and was, indeed, of noble lineage. She managed to walk with proud grace to the courtesan's side, but there her courage failed her and she half-knelt, half-collapsed to the grass.

The chestnut stallion bugled in fury, surging up on his haunches, forehooves lashing out. NaLira screamed and the great beast was still, trembling and sweating. Now the man's eyes were no longer cold. They burned like blue fire in a rage that struck into Hasoe's guts and turned them to knotted rope. A rumble of anger went through the ranks of the D'Shael and swords were raised, underlining the extent of his misjudgement. This gift was more than unwelcome.

Rythian had schooled his face to show as little as possible. He had not been as successful in schooling his mind, and Zaan was sensitive to his mood.

"Father of Fires!" Voran blazed in their own language. "What are they in that land? Animals? Rythian, we cannot deal with such people!"

"Be still," Kardan said in the D'Shael language. "The child will fare better with us than with Tylos."

"It's as well Rythian is Sun Stallion," Arun snapped, "and not Caier."

"Peace," Rythian cut in, and they fell silent. Across the expanse of turf Hasoe's eyes were narrowed and watchful, and Rythian held that suspicious gaze with his own until the pale eyes shifted aside.

The trader raised his arm again, and three men came forward, two of them obviously attendants. But the third, between them, wore gilded chains on wrist and ankle, like a prisoner.

"A prince, Horselord, from far Khassan," Hasoe went on quickly, "that distant land where chimerae dwell in the sands. A great prince, and warrior, taken in battle, brought here to be part of this tribute we lay at your feet."

"A prince?" Rythian repeated non-committally. He sensed the seething fury behind him, stilling to a cold contempt as the translation was passed among the warriors. Most of them had no idea what a prince was, save that it was a Tylosian title of high-standing, but all knew the warrior's honor-code. Rythian took his eyes away from the trader and stared at this 'prince'.

Like the boy Merse he wore long tunic and loose trousers, of an iridescent blue silk with the shimmer of a bird's spring plumage. His hair was short, curling on the collar of his tunic, a heavy mane of raven-black curls. The shirt was open to his waist, and in the fashion of Tylos, his honey-brown skin had been oiled. If he was freezing in the chill wind, he did not show it.

There was something about him that hovered on the edge of recognition; that and the contradiction of the hard-bodied man beneath the perfumed oil and silk held Rythian's attention. This particular gift did not walk forward with any aspect of submissiveness. This one had the grace of the hunter, rather than the dancer. Enhanced by arrogance, contempt and a fierce hatred, he had walked between his attendant guards as a conqueror enters a captured Hold, proud head high, eyes and mouth expressive of his scorn. By Hasoe's hastily hidden consternation, this was unexpected and unwelcome.

"Indeed, Lord," Hasoe said quickly. "Kherin is called the Hawk of Khassan."

"Again they insult us and the God!" Mettan hissed. "And they call us savages?" For the hawk was sacred to the D'Shael, the winged Child who carried the souls of the dead up to the Sun.

"Hawk?" said Arun loudly in Tylosian, "Peacock of Tylos more like." That was translated as well and a snicker went through the warriors. Hasoe paled a little, and the slaves holding the litter shifted restlessly; if they were horses they would have bolted.

Not so the prisoner. Manacled hands clenched into fists, and dark blue eyes, icy with frost, swept the SwordBrethren, as a leader might mark out an insubordinate troublemaker.

"This peacock has spurs," Rythian said quietly in D'Shael. "Are you Shi'R'Laen, or cattle herders?" he demanded of his own people and there was a shuffling of hooves behind him, the resettling of backsides in saddles. Some of the tension ebbed. "So," he went on in Tylosian. "A prince and a warrior, you say?"

The trader snapped his fingers and the guards pulled the man's shirt off his shoulders and tugged it to his elbows. The stance did not alter, but suddenly every muscle was taut. "As you see, Lord, there are battle scars."

And undoubtedly there were, pale on the tan, the marks of edged weapons. But not one of them was a fresh wound, not one less than a year old by the look of them.

"When was he taken prisoner?" Rythian asked Hasoe coolly.

"Three moons since, great chieftain."

Rythian nodded. Taken in battle and unmarked? A direct contradiction, that, with the pride the man displayed. If he had been captured in battle then surely that pride would have given him the Inner Path to honorable freedom. But all Tylosians lied. Rythian met the chained Prince's freezing gaze and held it with his own critical stare. "Indeed," he said, as much to the prisoner as to the trader, "Khassan is a land of wonders."

His sarcasm struck home with both. Hasoe bit his lip. And the man Kherin grabbed towards his hip for a sword that was not there, and the chains went taut for a moment. Then the captive stood unmoving again, his face a mask, only his eyes betraying the rage and shame within.

There was a story here, Rythian realised that he should not be so swift to leap to a too obvious conclusion. So be it. Rythian was at fault and he gave the man a brief nod of the head, acknowledging it, then flicked his gaze back to the Tylosian.

"Hasoe Trader," he went on, "the gifts you bring are in truth a reflection of all that is Tylos. We will have much to discuss when you come to the Sun Fire."

"But, Lord, we have a great feast prepared for you and your warriors, as is the custom."

"No," Rythian said. "It is not my custom, Hasoe Trader. You and your Council will be before my tent an hour from now." He looked down at the courtesan and the weeping child wrapped in her embrace. "Butterfly," he said quietly, "Take care of the little one. No harm nor threat will come to her from any of my people." He made a sign and the D'Shael were abruptly in motion, the massive horses pacing with ponderous grace to form a barrier between the Tribute and the men of Tylos. "Kardan, tend to these four; the child and the Prince look to be frozen. If they have none, give warm clothing to them. Mettan, get that stuff onto the wagons and across the river without delay. There will be a full Council meet in my tent as soon as possible." The cold bite of command in his voice was given immediate and unquestioning obedience, but he did not wait to see the orders carried out. He headed Zaan towards the river at a swift canter, the SwordBrethren following in his wake.

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The effects of the drugs that had kept Kherin docile during the uncounted weeks of his captivity were waning. He could think coherently for the first time since Alzon's betrayal. He had felt trapped in a nightmare; now he discovered it was stark reality. The sunlight, weak as it was, was painful to Kherin's eyes. The wind cut through the flimsy silk like a knife. It took a concentrated effort merely to stand upright and straight, and not join the crumpled child on the grass. It came to him that he should do something for her distress. The child

had crept into the courtesan's arms, but plainly the woman knew nothing to calm her. He took a step towards them, reaching inside himself for the power, the healing touch that would soothe the frightened mind.

He found nothing. His hand, already extended, dropped uselessly to his side and he stood shocked, mute and blind.

Surely it was an after-effect of the drug, clouding his mind so that he could not find his way within. Calming his mind to stillness, Kherin went inside himself, seeking the shining path of Knowledge and Power given him by the Goddess Herself when he became Her Chosen. He had walked that path every day of his life, secure and proficient. Now where the path should have been, there was nothing but confusion and the wellspring within was dry.



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