

Markan 1

Markan almost enjoyed the guards chasing him. They were keeping up pretty well. Most of the guards in other towns would've given up by now. Especially when all he stole was an old knife. Not in Quill though, here the guards took their jobs seriously. Markan vaulted over a garden fence, flattening a couple of flowers before ducking under the back porch of one of the town's larger houses. He crawled out the other side and started running back toward the little marketplace where the chase began. Based on the lack of screaming he assumed he had lost the guards. He ducked into an alleyway and threw himself behind a couple of crates of food scrap probably being kept for animal feed.

After a moment, when he was sure the guards had lost him, he pulled out his prize. It's not like the smith was ever going to even sell the knife. Just looking at it you could see it'd been sitting on that table for years. A sticky layer of dust coated one side and there was rust starting to appear at the base of the blade. It was nothing special at all. It was long and sturdy, but it was dented and dull on its edge. The grip was asha wood, the most common tree on the continent. It had no engraving or design, just a small makers mark. "*Ina'a*," Markan cursed aloud, "Those guards were committed, that smith should've thanked me."

Markan stuffed the knife back into his small bag and pulled out a cloak. It was a thin beige hood of the same kind that all the Bojaara wore. The nomads used them to keep warm in the wind of the highlands and to keep cool in the desert and plains. He threw the hood up to disguise his face and started toward the outskirts of the town where his clan had set camp.

Elroc was in their tent, knelt in prayer with a talisman of Ermess, the god of travelers and nomads among other things. They didn't keep many possessions, as was easiest for most of the

Bojaara, but Elroc had a small collection of artifacts that he used in prayer and meditation. As well as a short sword passed down to him from his father, an heirloom more than a weapon. A symbol of protection for the clan. Markan was careful not to disturb him, respecting Elroc's beliefs, though he never quite understood the gods himself. Markan pulled the knife from his bag and tucked away his hood. He sheathed the blade into a larger pack where he kept the rest of his belongings, though there wasn't much. He had a slingshot that he used on long trips to pass the time, a single change of clothes very similar to the clothes he already wore, and a small pouch of coins he accumulated over time by selling stolen goods. The Bojaara didn't approve of thievery, but Markan wasn't nearly as good with crafting goods and trading as the rest of the clan. Stealing was an easier way to make a few coins. The knife though, he wanted that for himself.

He had always admired the guards and soldiers of the places they passed through. He used to sneak away to watch duels and tournaments. He thought maybe with a blade of his own he could learn to fight too, though none of his clan would teach him as the Bojaara were sworn to non-violence. He didn't care, he wasn't truly a Bojaara anyway.

"Where'd you get that *Eci*?" Markan nearly threw himself into the side of the tent. Elroc had finished his prayers and turned to him. He smirked when Markan jumped. "Sorry," he said without the slightest hint that he meant it. Elroc was handsome with dark sandy skin and eyes as deep blue as the Daskor Sea like most of the Bojaara of the Desert Clan. His hair was long and curly, but he kept it tied back. Most people thought he and Markan were brothers, though Markan's skin was just notably lighter and his eyes not quite so blue.

"I found it at the market," Markan replied with a smile.

"You stole it you mean?"

“Borrowed. For an extended period of time.”

“Ah. Stole it.” He smirked and rolled his eyes. “Can I see?”

Markan unsheathed the knife from his bag and handed it over.

“Not very nice, is it?” Elroc said studying the blade.

“Well, I wasn’t about to take the nicer ones. The man has to make a living. You know I’m careful about what I take.”

Elroc handed the knife back. “Just don’t let the elder find it I suppose.”

As if on cue the tent shook as an elderly woman with sagging skin the color of dried mud and gray woolen hair stormed into the cabin. She wore a simple gown dyed a vibrant gold. Markan slipped the knife into the back of his pants before she could see.

“Grandmother,” Elroc said, bowing respectfully, “is-is there a problem?”

She looked at Markan and sighed, “Come. Now.” she said in a voice that could beckon mountains to move.

“Y-yes Elder.” Markan bowed politely as he pulled his shirt over the handle of the knife.

The Elder led him to the edge of the town where a young man cloaked with fine furs stood waiting with a scarred, older gentleman with ash smeared across the top of his bald head. She threw her arms out and bowed low. I followed her example. “Governor Morris, I beg your forgiveness for this *insolent* crime. Your town has been nothing but welcoming to our people for generations and I swear to you this shall *never* happen again.”

The young man waved his hand dismissively. “Silence bocwath.”

Markan's whole body clenched. What right did this man have to speak like that to an Elder of the Bojaara?

"As long as the boy returns what was stolen, I will not hold it against your *people*." He said the word as if they were something less than a people. "The knife boy, hand it over."

"I don't know what you are talking about, I don't know anything about a knife."

"I saw you," the older man stepped up, "I saw you take it!"

"Markan," the Elder said, "that knife was not a worthless object as you might see. To him, it is the work of a late apprentice. A child, gone too soon out of this world."

Markan hadn't taken notice, but the older man was blurry-eyed. He was almost sobbing now, "that-that knife belonged to my dear boy Osden, he made it. I told him it would sell, and I swear to you boy I'll sell it before I die. Or before I let some thieving kid take it from me. Give it back and I won't pay you any more mind."

Markan considered his words and brought the knife out from his back. He held it out to the man. "I'm sorry for your loss sir," he could feel the Elder's eyes on him, "and I'm sorry for taking this from you." The man snatched it and inspected it, rubbing his thumb along the maker's mark. There was a fierce determination on his face.

The Governor rolled his eyes, "now that we've settled that matter, I think it's best you and your caravan get on your way."

"Of course, Governor Morr," the Elder bowed her head, "we will be gone by dawn."

Morr gruffed and walked away, the smith close behind him.

“Sir,” Markan called after the smith, “would you give me a moment. I’ll be back, I- I have something else for you.”

The smith scrunched his face, “and what would that be?”

Markan didn’t take the time to answer, he bolted to his tent and returned with his pouch of coin offering it to the smith. “There should be enough there for me to buy the knife.”

The smith took the pouch and dumped the contents into his hands. He considered it for a moment and looked back to Markan. His face had lightened. He looked the boy up and down before nodding solemnly. “Well thief, you’ll be helping me to fulfill a promise with this coin. Next time you think to get your sticky paws on something, consider what you learned today.” As he handed the knife back to Markan there was a moment where they shared the grip and the smith’s hands tightened. He looked into Markan’s eyes and nodded. “My boy wasn’t perfect either. He didn’t get the chance to learn from his mistakes. You carry his blade—” his voice cracked, “then you swear to use it honorably.”

“Yes sir,” Markan said. Nodding in agreement.

The smith released the blade and went on his way, hands clenched to the profit he swore to make.

#

Markan had the blade in his lap as he sat in the tent of the Elder, her eyes cleaving into him. “What ignorance possessed you to do something so foolish?”

“I’m sorry Almathorna, I—” he looked down at the blade to avoid her stare.

“These people, all these settled peoples in the south already think of us as thieves and lowlifes. You should know better than to try and prove them right.” Her sigh released an angry growl from her throat. “‘*Bocwath*’ *I could just...*” She mumbled under her breath in Bojaar, the nomadic tongue. Markan didn’t know it well enough to say much but he could decipher most spoken words.

“He should not have spoken to you like that Elder.”

Her eyes snapped back to him. “Oh? And why not? Clearly, he was speaking from what he saw of us. It is acts like *yours* that brought that kind of stigma on us in the first place.” She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. For a moment she seemed to be praying. “Make a round and let the people know that we break camp at first light.”

“Yes of course.” He hesitated.

“Was there anything else Markan?”

“You’re not going to take the knife from me.”

“You bought it. It is not mine to take.”

“I just—I assumed you would take it. We are a non-violent people.”

“The blade is not violent, is it? My grandson keeps a blade that is a symbol of peace to our people. Many of us have no such need for them, but it is not forbidden to carry one.” She leaned forward as if looking for something in Markan’s eye. “Is that why you stole it, child?”

“Yes.” It was only partially true.

“So, you’ve never stolen while traveling with us?”

He shuddered. Of course, he had. He couldn't lie now. Not with her eyes so intent in his own. They, like Elroc's eyes, were deep. It was an ancient depth that had been carved from years upon years of strife and harsh demand, and Markan had waded into their very center. He could say nothing in his defense.

"No more." She said the words not so harsh as he expected as the depths of her eyes seemed to recede until they were almost mournful. "My obligation is first to my people, and then to the weary and broken. If you continue to endanger our name, I will not have you among us dear boy. No more."

Markan nodded and quickly began the round letting all the clan know that they would leave at first light, continuing toward the desert.

Markan 2

As the caravan approached the desert, a dry heat took over that was all too familiar to Markan. He put on his cloak and wrapped it around himself, Elroc and Shadda did the same. Shadda had joined the clan almost a year after Markan had. She was a runaway living in the streets of Towkos. She was nearly starved to death when the Bojaara came through. Her porcelain skin and straight brown hair made her stand out among them. Markan worried most for her as they neared the Land of the Sun. At least most of the clan had the kind of skin that wouldn't burn too easily, but Shadda had no such protection, and the look in her eyes told Markan she was all too aware of what was to come.

They rarely passed through the desert itself despite being called the Desert Clan. They tended to keep to the much cooler plains surrounding it. Though it was occasionally necessary to brave the heat and sand, as was the case with the trek to Dran. Dran was the safest city for any of the Bojaara, as they were among the men to first settle there. It was once a great fortress, but now a simple city known for its fine goods and skilled laborers. Markan hated Dran. He could remember the last time he'd been within the walls, almost five years ago. He had no desire to return, nor any choice in the matter.

The city reminded him of his parents and his brother. He did have much to remember about his parents. He was just a baby when they died. He and his brother were taken in by their uncle, but they never spoke of them, so Markan knew almost nothing about them. After some years his brother too left, thinking Markan was too much of a burden. It wasn't long after his brother fled that his uncle fell ill. By the time he turned ten, Markan was alone on the streets of Dran living off the scraps and pity of others. He learned to steal, he learned to lie, and he learned to be alone. That was until the Bojaara came through.

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He remembered being huddled under a tattered sheet at the gate of the city when they came. It was a place where refugees, fugitives, and others in need of community gathered. When the gates opened, he expected to see merchants from far off or laborers returning home, but what he saw instead was an elderly woman with long braided locks of white hair and a flowing yellow cloak that dragged in the sand. She turned her eyes directly on him, but they did not see him. She was blind, her eyes covered in a white film. Yet as she walked into the city, a large group of people followed, trusting her path. It was a caravan of five or so wagons and about two scores of people on foot.

The wagons strayed to park in the areas around the refugees and many of the strange people dispersed into the city, though a small group began to pitch tents around the wagons. The guard didn't seem to think this at all odd, nor did any of the other people passing through the lower city. Markan though was fascinated by the travelers.

As night began to fall the people returned to the encampment set around their wagons. They lit fires, played music, and some of them even danced in the cooling winds of the desert night. Some of the other homeless congregated around the lively bunch and their spirits seemed to lighten. It was while watching them that Markan smelled the sweet aromas, smells he had never known before, and he saw where it was coming from. Above one of the stranger's fires was a large iron pot pouring over with steam. His stomach growled, aching not only to be full for the first time in a fortnight, but also for the simple pleasure of tasting such a delectable meal as whatever was in that pot.

It was easy to steal bread and produce from under the noses of vendors at the market. Stealing stew was a much more difficult task. He thought to first steal a bowl and spoon then wait for the opportunity to swipe at the pot, but then noticed that many of the strangers would occasionally set down their servings to dance or to move about the fire and talk with others. In some of these cases, there were full bowls left unattended. Still, it would be hard to grab them so close to the light of the fires. He would be seen. Then he saw the bowl he wanted, it was full and steaming, and he knew he would not be seen. Under the canopy of a wagon, sitting at the edge of the light was the elderly woman with no sight.

As he approached her, he felt almost bad. Was it wrong to steal from such an old woman? From a blind woman? This moral dilemma was no match for his hunger though. He was right beside her, just out of reach now. He tried not to breathe. The woman was smiling facing the dancers at the fire as if she were watching them and remembering a time when she too danced with such joyful youth. Perhaps she was simply hearing the laughter and the music or enjoying the intoxicating aromas of the stew.

Markan reached his hands around the bowl, careful not to touch the woman's fingers with his own. He let them rest gently on the wood before slowly tightening his hold. Then came a voice, "are you hungry?"

He jumped back and fell, tripping on a couple of stones in the street. He thought the woman had noticed him, but the voice was that of a child. The woman turned toward it. It was a boy standing in the shadows behind her, and he was looking at Markan with an inquisitive smile. "Elroc?" The woman said, "No, I have quite enough stew, thank you dear one."

The boy ignored the woman and came to kneel in front of Markan. "You don't have to steal. I can get you some."

Markan wasn't used to anything being offered to him. He wasn't so sure if he should trust the boy. Then his hand shot out and grabbed Markan by the wrist, hauling him to his feet toward the fire and past it to another wagon where a younger woman stood handing out bowls and spoons. Markan took note that it was not the strangers who were coming up to her, but the other refugees and fugitives.

"Mother, mother," the boy called as they approached, "mother, I found this boy trying to steal great grandmother's stew."

A shiver ran down Markan's spine. The boy was trying to get him in trouble. He almost ran, but then the woman began to laugh. "Is that so?" She said it with a warm smile and eyes as rich and bright as the embers of the fire. She knelt and grabbed Markan by the shoulders. She looked him over and grabbed his face ever so lightly with her soft hands. "What's your name dear one?"

"I—I am Markan."

"Markan. That's a nice name." She squeezed his face a little and smiled wide before pulling away and offering him a bowl. "If you are ever hungry you need only ask. Elroc has yet to eat, he can help you fill your bowl." The boy nodded happily behind her, holding up a bowl of his own.

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Markan wasn't alone after that. The Bojaara became his family, though even as he walked with Elroc, Shadda, and the rest of the caravan into the desert, he couldn't help but feel like he wasn't truly a part of them. He knew the same thoughts dwelled in Shadda's head. They

were different from those who were born in the clan. On some level, they would always be different. At least Markan looked enough like them.

“Halt!” A voice rose from the back of the clan. The wagons came to a stop and the Elder turned towards the voice. A man of the clan called Jondo came running up to speak with her. “Algathorna, there is a group approaching from the east. They saw us moving toward the desert and sent a young man running with a message. They say they are refugees from Raewb. Some of them are wounded and they are seeking a guide to the city of Dran. I told him we are heading in that direction. They wish to join us; they have never been through the desert.”

“They seek Dran?” She asked, “Why would they not go to Draos?”

“I asked the same thing myself. I’m afraid that Draos has come under a temporary truce with Raewb. There have been great losses on both sides, and they have agreed to allow a season for the wounded to be transported home. As part of the truce, all those who fled Raewb to support the Court are to be turned over. It—well it’s quite horrible. I’m not sure what the empire would do to their deserters.”

“Nor do I,” the Elder’s voice was sympathetic, “but I won’t be the one to allow these weary folk to find out. We set camp and rest for the remainder of the day so their people can catch up to us. Send their runner with the message that they will not get much rest, we walk together to Dran at nightfall.”

“But Algathorna, that’s absurd. We should leave on the morrow if we are waiting for them. They will need rest more than us.”

“With all the rest in the world, they will not survive the desert in the day. It would be best if we moved in the cool of the night,” She hesitated, “and if Raewb is seeking their deserters we should move as fast as possible. We will not wait. We go tonight. So says the Desert Elder.”

Jondo nodded, “so says the Desert Elder.” He bowed his head and left running to the back of the caravan.

They set up camp quickly, hiding from the heat in their tents. Shadda didn’t bother to pitch her tent, opting to join Markan and Elroc in theirs. Markan and Shadda sat against the corner post by the entrance while Elroc began his prayers near the back wall of the tent.

“I don’t like it,” Shadda said after a while, “the heat I mean. Towkos was never nearly this hot. Even at the peak of summer, there were cold breezes wafting down the mountain. Here the wind—well, it almost makes it worse.”

“I don’t like it either,” Markan said.

“I don’t understand why we left Quill, we could have waited for autumn before taking on the desert.”

Markan felt a twinge of guilt, surely that had been the Elder’s plan if he hadn’t messed it up. “We follow the Elder, wherever she goes. At least now we get to travel by night.”

“Thank the gods for that,” Shadda sighed as she laid down. “Markan, do you think the war will reach Dran?”

Markan shook his head, “I don’t know.” He didn’t know much about war, the Bojaara stayed away from political conflict whenever they could.

“What does the Empire want anyway? What’s the point of the fighting?”

“Why the sudden interest in the war?” He slumped against the post, trying to get comfortable.

“I just don’t get it. I don’t understand what could make so many people put their life at risk?”

Markan understood what she meant. They had fought for their lives unwillingly when they were on the streets. It seemed strange to put yourself in that position purposefully. The war between the Bojan Court and the Thusian Empire had been going on for longer than they had been alive, but in the past few years, more and more imperial troops had come to Boja to fight. Why would soldiers lay down their lives for a man who openly wanted more power for himself? “I wouldn’t know. We should be safe in Dran though. And it’s the best place for fugitives to hide from the rest of the world.”

“Dran can’t hold everyone, and it would seem Draos can’t hold anyone at all. It’s sad to see people forced from their homes.”

Markan didn’t disagree, but he still didn’t know why Shadda was dwelling on it. He made himself a little more comfortable, adjusting how he sat. “We can’t stop a war Shadda. It will end someday.”

Shadda squinted, considering his words. “You’re probably right.” She forced a smile at him. “We should get some rest, long night ahead.”

Markan thought she looked anything but restful, but that didn’t stop him from trying to take a nice nap.

Elroc 3

Elroc prayed to Ermess for safe travel. He worshipped all of the Vasdakki, but as a nomad, he considered Ermess his patron. When he was young, his mother had told him stories of the god's many adventures. They were not adventures of might or conquest, but adventures of discovery and beauty. There was a legend his mother told him often as a bedtime story, about how Ermess sought to see every land and meet every person in every corner of the world. At the beginning of this adventure, he met a king who challenged him, who said that he could speak with all of his subjects before Ermess could find the single crone who lived in the northern woods of his kingdom. Ermess accepted and scoured the forests for the crone. After finding nobody in the woods he began to ask every passerby. He went to every town in the kingdom frantically asking for the location of the crone. Nobody seemed to know who he was talking about. Soon he had spoken to all of the subjects of the kingdom, except the crone. He returned to the King to find him lazily sitting on his throne.

He laughed at the god, "Did you find her?"

"No, your excellency. As you sit on your throne, I assume you have beaten me."

"Fool, I have yet to leave my home. There is nobody worth speaking to in my kingdom, I have done this to teach you something Traveling Lord; your pursuits are worthless. You wish to speak to everyone, but you need only seek the mighty. We, the Kings and Emperors *are* the world you so wish to see, but you would insult us by giving your time equally to commoners and crones."

Ermess was angered by the King's words. "There is no crone in your kingdom, is there?"

The King laughed at him, “Of course not you fool. I wanted to show you just how worthless your time is if you are seeking the weak. Spend your time among the only men who matter.” The king put his hand on his own chest, but his fingers had contorted, growing old and wrinkled. The age spread like a blight over him. He screamed in fear. “What is happening to me?”

“I curse you!” Ermess yelled, “I am not the fool, if any person has breath, they are worthy of my time and my company! Of every subject in your kingdom, you are the only man who has disrespected me, and so you alone will be the worthless wretch of this kingdom!” The king slumped to the floor and arose a crone, a sickly old woman rotting from within and without. Ermess banished her to the northern woods and bid the trees never allow her to leave. She would never be allowed the company of any person, and she would see none of the world.

Elroc recited the words of Ermess in his prayers, “If any person has breath, they are worthy of my time and company.” It was a comfort to Elroc, that Ermess would not forsake him, that he would not be found unworthy in the god’s eyes, even if he failed others. And it gave him purpose, to help everyone whose path he came across knowing that everyone was worthy of his time, his company, and his aid. He looked at Markan as he finished his prayers. He was fast asleep now, his soft curly hair hanging just above his eyelids. He was living proof that anybody was worthy of Elroc’s love, even a street rat who would steal from an old blind woman.

Elroc remembered the way the sun gleamed off the walls of Dran the last time he had been there. For a young boy, just seeing the fortress was worth the trek through the desert. The walls were magnificent, twice the size of the tallest trees in the Wilds of Arnab, and the smooth sandstone seemed to melt out of the sky itself. Even more rewarding to Elroc, the people. So many people appeared as the gates swung open. It was not that there were more people than the

other big cities, but that more of these people looked like him, with curly long hair and shaded tones of skin. He felt that here he could fade into the city and never be noticed as one of the Bojaara. He would just be a boy like any other.

Among the many poor and homely people just inside the gate, he saw few children, which he thought a shame. He hoped that he could find someone to make a friend of. Nobody seemed to pay them any mind as their caravan came to a halt in the lowest district of the city, which Elroc found odd. He knew the Bojaara often passed through the city, but everywhere else seemed to meet them with some form of surprise. Dran didn't even seem to notice their arrival. He did find one eye intent on them among the crowds: a boy. A young boy about his age. He was thrilled, a tickle ran through his body. He turned to his mother next to him and pulled at her sleeve, "Mother, mother, there's a boy in the crowd, can I go meet him?"

She chuckled and smiled, "In good time dear one. We have work to do first."

His heart sank, "but mother, what if we don't see him again."

She scanned the streets looking for the boy and found him. She took a soft breath and looked back at Elroc, "You are so like the Traveler, dear one. Wanting to meet everyone." She beamed down at him. "Don't worry, you will meet him. In fact, I think *he* will find his way to *you*."

He smiled.

#

Elroc prayed once more at sunset as Shadda and Markan broke down the tent. The Reawbian refugees were of nearly fifty people, more than doubling the group. They seemed tired and weary which was understandable. Elroc caught some of the newcomers looking suspiciously

at him while he prayed on his knees. He paid them no attention, the Vasdakki and the rest of the Wakir were little known to peoples outside of the Bojaara, they were old gods, long forgotten in most of society.

Markan gently grabbed his shoulder when it was time to leave. Elroc finished his prayer in the nomadic tongue, “... *and may the moons guide us with bright light. Swiftly, Traveler, bring us across these lands.*” He bowed his head and stood, ready for the journey. He grasped Markan by the shoulder. “*Ready to go home, Eci?*”

Markan shook his head sourly. “Dran was never home to me.”

Elroc nodded, he knew Markan had complicated feeling about his birthplace, but he had only fond memories of Dran.

The Elder called out from ahead of them, “People of the Bojaara, we welcome the people of Reawb to our journey. We send out our prayers to Ermess, to Ashan, to Pollamis, and to Annan, that we deliver them to safety in their time of need. *Vasdakii himwioholo!*”

“*Vasdakii himwioholo!*” All of the Bojaara repeated her words as the caravan began forward.

The desert could get very cold at night, but the gods must have been with them because the air was still and there were no bitter winds. The night was bright under the light of the moons and stars. The Reawbians didn't seem as tired as Elroc had thought they would be, though they still seemed weary and worn. Perhaps it was some deal of determination that kept their bodies moving. There were children among them. Some were being carried, napping on the shoulders of men. Even some of the Bojaara had offered help in carrying the younger children.

After a couple of hours of silent marching, Elroc felt a tug on the back of his shirt. He turned to find a young boy with eyes like gold. Even in the low light of night, they seemed to reflect the sun. He was surprised to find the boy, mostly because he didn't seem to be Reawbian. His skin was too dark, he looked much more like the Bojaara, but Elroc didn't know him, though he did look almost familiar. Had someone set him down to rest their arms? If not, how did such a young child keep up with them? Markan and Shadda continued forward, seeming not to have noticed. The boy just stared at him, with those eyes of liquid gold. "Where's your family dear one? Are your legs tired?"

The boy smiled, he didn't seem tired or weary in the least. "Are you strong?"

"Strong enough to carry you I'd think." He knelt and ruffed up the boy's straw-like hair.

The boy laughed and made a frantic attempt to fix his hair, "That's not what I meant Elroc."

A chill wind seemed to blow through for the first time that night. "How do you know my name?"

The boy laughed and turned to run. He weaved through the caravan heading back the way they came. Elroc followed him, weaving in and out between everyone until he was at the very tail of the caravan. He heard the boy laugh in the distance, but he couldn't see him. For a moment fear overtook him. The playful laughter seemed to come from all around, what direction had he gone? That boy would die out there alone. Elroc was ready to run into the night in pursuit of the child when he felt a tug at his back again. He turned and found the boy standing there with nothing but empty desert behind him. The caravan had vanished. "Elroc," the boy said, "I am her, don't be afraid."

He *was* afraid. Elroc looked into the boy's eyes. It wasn't a light he had seen earlier. It was age, wisdom; it was power. "Who are you?"

"You know me. You know me better than most men." He pointed a finger out into the desert and Elroc watched as a wind blew through the sand, paving a shallow road into the night. "I'm sorry to have stolen you away from your people." He vanished. A pair of warm hands caressed Elroc from behind and the voice changed. It was gentler and softer, yet somehow, even in a whisper, it felt powerful. "I just had to meet you." The words came off lips that just skimmed his ear. It was Markan's voice. He turned and found him standing there. At least, it almost looked like Markan, with ancient golden eyes. He wore only a pair of loose white pants and a silver pendant depicting a wheel with branches around the spokes. He was lean and beautiful, majestic even. Elroc didn't know how long he stared in awe before the being spoke again, "You're a faithful man, Elroc. I'm sorry for the crossroads you will come to, the paths you will have to endure." He brought his hand—Markan's hand—to Elroc's cheek. "Remember me when that time comes, remember my words, 'Everyone is worthy.' Know that you will meet me again, but you will not know me. Take this as my blessing and go." The wind picked up and sand engulfed them. When it died down, the being was gone. Elroc was alone in the desert.

He didn't know what the being had meant. What crossroads was he talking about? He wanted almost to believe that it was all a dream, some figment his imagination had conjured. He couldn't quite convince himself of that. He pulled out his talisman. It was wood, but the depiction was the same as the silver amulet the being wore. A wheel with branches wrapping around the spokes. It was the symbol of the Traveling God, of Ermess. Elroc noticed the darkness starting to wane, the sun would rise soon. He would not make it out of the desert alone

if it did. He turned about trying to decide which way to go when his eyes came to the gentle road the being had revealed.

As Elroc walked on the path he started to forget where it had come from. He knew where he was going, but how did he get separated from the caravan? Did he follow the boy that far? The boy—had there been a boy? Was there someone with him? He remembered talking to—talking to—surely, he had been with someone. But in the middle of the desert? He couldn't put the pieces together. He couldn't quite remember. He wandered in desperate thought, trying to pull at the strings that seemed to fade more and more the further down the path he walked. As day broke, Elroc could see the city of Dran rising over the dunes. He started to hear voices around him as the path began to fade. The sun grew brighter, its light engulfing the sand like fire. After a moment he was surrounded by familiar faces and strangers. The caravan was all around him. Markan and Shadda were at his sides. He felt confused and a little dizzy, but he couldn't quite place why, where else would he be?