

The sun came up slowly, creeping over the edge of the mountains and slowly burning away the fog that clung to the ground near the Isle of Dreams. Arakel stood on the bank of the wide river that encircled the Isle, his eyes looking at the once stately buildings still wreathed in mist. Of the four bridges that once spanned the river, each built of heavy stone blocks sheathed in marble, one remained but its marble sheathing was cracked and in places broken off, exposing the stone blocks underneath. The heavy bronze stands that once held hanging oil lamps here either missing or broken at random heights along the bridge as he walked along it, returning to the Isle.

The Isle of Dreams had been a gem of a city, supported by the nearby gem deposits in the mountains. The buildings had been tall and graceful, sheathed in the purest marble with broad avenues that all lead to the Temple of Dreams at the very center of the Isle. The avenues had been lined with ancient oak trees that kept them shaded with their broad limbs as the tall, fair haired people walked beneath them, clad in robes and loincloths, the women unashamedly bare-breasted in the green-tinged sunlight.

Now, however, that city was a shattered dream. The invasion of the Ryu-Sincar had turned most of the once beautiful buildings into crumbling ruin. Most of the ancient trees had been hewed down and left to rot in the streets. Even the tightly fit paving stones of the avenues had been pried up or smashed in the invasion. As Arakel strode down the avenue, moving cautiously over the uneven ground, he saw little to no signs of animal activity, which somewhat surprised him. Two thousand years of wreckage and ruin, he had expected to see animal, or at least their signs, somewhere in the city.

He turned off the main avenue, and walked down a street that, while not nearly as broad as the central avenues, was still spacious enough that a pair of wagons could once have passed unhindered. The buildings down this street were only slightly less ruined than the others. He moved a bit slower now as he stepped through a ruined doorframe into one of the houses. Inside, the great winged stairwell was clogged with rubble, and the small fountain built into the curve between the two stairs no longer worked. Arakel stepped into the empty, rubble-choked fountain and brushed away the cobwebs and dust from the back curved wall to reveal the sigil of House Ve'Tria, one of the longest lines of priests on the Isle.

House Ve'Tria had been his house, his family and this ruined and rubble-choked building had once been, for thirteen years, his home.

Arakel's fingers traced the intricate knot of his family crest, moving almost nostalgically. He'd only visited a few times in the two thousand years since the Isle had fallen, and every time it hurt somewhat to see his family home in ruins. The first time he'd been here, only ten years after the Isle had been destroyed, he'd felt so much pain and agony coming from the ruins, each house screaming out to him and his inborn ability to hear and speak with dead. His footsteps had carried him here to his home, and he had fled not long after, the screams of his own mother and sisters screaming out at him of their repeated rapes and beatings at the hands of the Ryu-Sincar.

Now though, the dead were silent, the faint energy binding them to the Isle having dissipated long ago. His hand fell off the stone wall and he left the ruined building, where he was surprised to see that the sun had reached noon already. He retraced his steps down the street until he

reached the central avenue. Once there, he picked his way through the rubble towards the still-standing marble dome of the Temple.

As he drew closer, he was struck again by the thought that it was odd that after two thousand years of neglect that it still stood, the dome rising above the ruined buildings and the trees to stand guard over the once beautiful Isle of Dreams. The dome flowed down into four large halls, each one facing one of the central avenues, and even these had withstood time and weather. The great doors that lead into the halls had been smashed down with battering rams when Ryu-Sincar attacked the Isle and his people had fled into the Temple. For the first time since he was thirteen, Arakel stepped over the threshold and into the Temple that had once been the center of his world.

Broken chains dangled from the walls, the metal bowls that one held the oil and cast pools of golden light across the walls and floor long gone. His footsteps echoed back from the marble walls and roof, sounding forlorn and lonely. His memories of the place filled it with light, laughter, conversation and the smell of soft lavender incense. Now, it was dark, silent, smelling of stagnant water and rot. The Temple was still warm and humid, as it always had been

He stepped into the central room, his eyes automatically seeking out the great well in the middle of the room. This room looked to have been desecrated worse than the entire city combined, as a ring of steel spikes lined the well, each one with a skeleton crumpled at the base. More skeletons lay around the room, some half submerged in the stagnant pools that had once served as hot tubs, others lay on the floor or against the edge of the walls, rusted iron collars around their necks, the chains on the collars crudely hammered into the wall.

Arakel walked forward, and stood at the very edge of the well. There was a thin layer of stagnant water down at the bottom, but there was something else. He peered down, trying to see what lay in the shadows at the bottom of the well. Finally, frustrated that he couldn't make it out, he walked a few paces over and, after a quick check to be sure that the stone grooves hadn't been destroyed, he climbed down to the bottom of the well, only to draw back in shock.

Lying on its side was a dead Nek-Tem. Its tentacles were stretched out along the curve on the well, and for the first time in his life he saw its actual body. It had four sturdy legs and a small, roundish body, with no eyes or visible mouth. Arakel slowly walked towards it, one hand held out towards the only God he had ever known, and he could *feel* its spirit still lingering, which meant it was less than a week dead. He knelt in the stagnant water, and laid one hand on the head of his dead God. "Had I but known any of you were still here, I would have returned sooner to take you away that we might one day resurrect the Isle, and return both our peoples. Rest in peace my friend, rest in peace."

Arakel stood, and looked around the bottom of the well again. Just behind the Nek-Tem was a small hollow, roughly carved as though the Nek-Tem itself had used its tentacles to smash the marble into a small nook. He carefully stepped over the tentacles of the Nek-Tem, and knelt again in the water. His eyes widened as he saw an egg, dark in colour and covered with thick ribs to protect it, tucked in the rough hollow. He slipped the leather satchel off his shoulder, and opened it up. Then, with hands that shook from excitement and nervousness he picked up the egg, feeling again the rough pebbled texture of the egg, and tucked it carefully into the satchel,

which then went back over his shoulder. He stood, and looked again at the Nek-Tem, wonder in his mind and thanks in his heart.

As Arakel stepped out of the temple, he paused for a moment to listen. Now that he had the egg, he had every intention of being extra cautious on his way back to the Cave. He knew what was required to hatch it, and he had every intention of doing so as he moved down the avenue, and it was those thoughts that almost made him miss the footprints.

He turned on his heel when he realized what he had just seen. The footprints were there, heavy travelling boots of three different sizes that seemed, on inspection, to be heading down a side street. Arakel paused for a few moments, his silver scalp lock hanging down over his shoulder as his head came up, and he started moving without really thinking about it, walking quickly, and quietly, down the street. He paused at the end of each house, listening more than he looked before proceeding. It didn't take long before he heard the sound of voices, and then he moved even slower until he heard the sound of wood snapping, and when he heard it, he ducked into a ruined doorway to keep out of sight.

"Saern, why are we wasting our time here in this stupid pile of rubble," a female voice asked. It was a light voice, musical with a hint of an exotic accent that Arakel couldn't place.

"I agree with my sister. This is a fool's errand. The Nek-Tem and their whores have been dead for two thousand years. There's no way one could have survived the Purge." This was a man's voice, but as smooth and musical as the female voice and it shared the accent.

"The peasant slut's story is identical to the Nek-Tem however. It took her, used her for two weeks, and when she birthed the egg, it let her go. Her village is less than a week's travel from here. This is why we were sent. The Ryu-Sincar cannot allow the Nek-Tem, or their whores, to revive themselves." Arakel took note of this voice. It was older, and far more serious. It lacked the accent of the first two, and was rougher.

"Well, I'm sure the slut has learned to entertain our men by now," the first male voice said with a laugh, over the sound of flint striking steel.

Two more laughs joined in, and Arakel slipped out of the ruined house. He made his way back down the street, shifting the satchel on shoulder. At least now he knew where this egg had come from, but since it was likely the only egg, he was set on getting back to the Cave before the Ryu-Sincar came back this way.

It was nearing nightfall when he was finally clear of the ruined city, and he bypassed the place he had camped the night before. Instead, he walked on through half the night, putting as much distance between himself and the island as he could. By midnight, he was curled beneath the wide spread branches of a pine tree where the plains gave way to the dark forests that blanketed the foot of the mountains.

By nightfall the next day, Arakel was cold and tired as he climbed into the mountains. Heavy clouds had started to roll in as the sun had slid below western horizon, and by the time Arakel

had started up the long path to the Cave of Spirits, rain had begun to fall, sheeting across the ground to the accompaniment of heavy thunder and flashing lightning. When he entered the Cave of Spirits, he could hear something from deep inside. It took him a moment to recognize it as he moved deeper into the cave before he could place it.

It was a female voice crying out in passion, sharp cries and long moans rising above another sound, deeper and more guttural, one that he couldn't quite place, even as he moved deeper into the cave. The sounds grew progressively louder, and he heard a softer sound as well, the wet sound of two bodies coming together. Arakel slowed his pace, forgetting the heavy satchel over his shoulder for a moment, as he stepped into the smooth hall. There, in the middle of the main room, was Lim, on all fours with her ass in the air, her breasts scraping along the ground. Mounting her from behind was Treck, shifted into his half-man form. His face was altered from his normal appearance by a cat-like muzzle and topped by a pair of leopard ears. His broad shoulders were covered in short white fur that framed his muscular chest and stomach. His arms were well defined, and his hands were larger than normal, ending in fingers halfway between claws and fingers. His legs were long and feline, ending in large paws.

Treck was crouched atop Lim, his hips moving back and forth in harsh motions, each forward plunge causing Lim's body to jerk forward, her breasts scraping on the floor and her head flying backwards, long cries ringing in the air to be followed by shuddering moans as Treck pulled out. Her hands scrabbled at the smooth stone floor as Treck drove himself into her over and over, growling and purring as they coupled. Arakel leaned against the wall and watched, not entirely surprised that Lim had already gone to this extent. Over the centuries they had known each other, Arakel had gotten every secret Lim had out of her. She had been one of a few whores in her city that had enjoyed entertaining the lycanthropes so long as they never went into their full animal form, so he had almost expected this, though perhaps not so soon.

Lim's glorious purple eyes opened and she saw Arakel standing there, a faint smile on his lips and, judging by Treck's sudden grunt, her body tightened around him as she climaxed from having an audience, even one as small as an extra person. Treck gave a last hard drive into Lim and she cried out again, a groaning mix of cry and moan as her whole body shuddered. Arakel walked past the pair with a faint smile, and headed to the pool, where he stripped off his wet clothes and went down into the steam. He waded out into the pool, letting the satchel sink into the water. The warmth, he knew, would be good for it after the cold rain. When he reached the raft at the far end of the pool, he rearranged the cushions to form a kind of nest, then carefully lifted the egg out of the satchel and set it in the cushions. The egg was already beginning to change colour, changing from a dark grey to a lighter green. The veins on the egg were starting to slowly pulse with life, and Arakel set his hand on the egg with a smile.

It would not be long now.