

Chapter 1: Arrival

"The students arrive alive and thus far have left otherwise. My experiments make no difference, but I will not be discouraged, for I will find a stable manner by which to bind jiin to man."

– *Lufadrins Journal*

The sky took on a magenta demeanor as the sun began to set, and it was only once it fell behind the distant mountains that they finally caught sight of the keep. A lone tower jutting defiantly from sullen walls and into a purpling sky. A boorish structure that lorded over the squat foliage, and rolling hills of the continental highlands. The road there had taken longer than expected as the recent earthquake had damaged much of the already squalid path. The outskirts of the Xanduan Empire had nary a civilized byway, and here the outgrowth of the emperors road was little more than a potholed path laced with fissures, and entirely washed-out sections — by Marrakesh's estimate it was little more than a winding sodden mess. Naturally, this had made the remaining few miles for Sirens Company tedious and tiresome. The company consisted of eight wagons in total, each pulled by mules in teams of four, one empty vardo, guided in the finest of adornments, and over a dozen experienced mercenaries. There was a buzz in the air as the company lowered its guard — for threat of the Forsaken, and their banditry was at rest now that they were so close to the keep — excitably the men gabbled at the prospect of a warm bed, and fresh food — even if it was to be soldier fare. The company had been on the road for weeks ferrying supplies and aid to the frontiersmen at the behest of The Order, a reclusive group that functioned outside the preview of the Empire.

The Order's existence commanded a conflicting set of public opinions, but ever since the Age of Arcanum this once solitary society of scholars, inventors, and mages had committed much to restoring the commoner's misperception of them. For starters they handed much over to the first would be ruler of what was now the Xanduan Empire. Those who would not follow the example set by the founders of The Order were brutally murdered by its hand. And as the then king united the land and sought to bring Xandu from the Dark Ages it was The Order whom helped make this possible – offering knowledge, advisory, and even their mages. As time passed from one clast to the next and other spheres of influence grew The Order became more reclusive, pulling back from public affairs and turning inwardly within the confines of their precious Citadel.

To this day The Order had managed to govern a sprawling fiefdom endowed from the royal family, and has become both the hub where those of means may send their children for tutelage, and the eyesore for those of a more superstitious inclination. Both reviled and loved, it remained all the same to Marrakesh and his companion Mer. As Speculatores for The Order their job was to follow missives disseminated by their superiors – those of the First Sash – and to report in great detail on the state of things outside of Citadel. In this case they had been called to witness the anointment of Goldpasture – the latest empire sponsored settlement in the hopes of expanding its boundaries into the wilds of the east. But the two Speculatores would have had little need for the services of Sirens Company if that was all there was to their task. Indeed, long before they had embarked from Citadel it was determined they would be escorting a member of the Sanctum back into Xandu proper, and so it was that they found themselves nearing the Keep.

At the front of the caravan rode the two Speculatores. Both wore flowing robes of green and grey.

"I cannot wait to be done with this mission," Mer grumbled, brushing traces of golden hair from her face – the strands of her were so fine that they nearly ran white. "These robes are stifling and not to mention shapeless."

"I believe they are rather flattering on you," Marrakesh said without looking up from his book – Mythos and Folklore – "and not to mention honorable. You forget their are those who would pay a lords ransom for the right to wear these."

"Just as well are those who would pay such a fee to see those who wear these strung from a tree."

Marrakesh sighed, it was a tried and tired argument. There would be no change to Mer's mind, she was more stubborn than the mules pulling their wagon, and fiercer than wolf. It was better to let it go. Marrakesh pulled his cowl tighter overhead. It had been cold day and it would only get worse as the night set in. The Frontier Highlands were notoriously frigid and even in the heat of summer it barely rose to the comfort of a proper spring day. With winter having finally just faded enough to allow travel through the treacherous passes in manner that was safe for a large number of travelers this meant snow and ice still clung to the land. Whistling the wind seemed to laugh at his attempts for comfort and gooseflesh prickled the back of Marrakesh's shaved head. Bronze of skin and wide features, Marrakesh displayed all the signs of Malto heritage despite being raised well away from the once independent seafaring city-state. Mer, on the other hand, had an angular face, speckled freckles, and skin the color of storm cloud. Her body was composed of a chitinous carapace that was hard as a rock. Standing taller than most men she cast a long shadow, and despite an easy smile the tips of jutting canines were enough to unsettle most. To be desheeni in Xandu was to invite castigation and scorn for the sin of being born different, but Mer did not take it

personally – though she would have been well in her right to – people were just scared of anything that was different, and she was different.

"You are ignoring me," she sniffed indignantly.

"And mean to provoke me into yet another fruitless bandy of words."

"Well. I am bored." Marrakesh shook his head, there was nothing to say – Mer would always be Mer. It was a wonder the two meshed at all but he was grateful they did. Having Mer as his Talent was like taking a breath of fresh air, the Drafter had never known a better friend.

What about me?

"You don't count," Marrakesh murmured, lost in thought.

"What was that," Mer asked.

"Nothing," Marrakesh flushed. Had he really said that out loud? He needed to get it together, the Voice had become extra poignant lately. Breathing deeply, he meditated his thoughts within the Vaulted Mind. The practice always seemed to excel in pushing the Voice away.

Mer turned to look at him, a serious expression on her face. "It is getting worse. Again."

"I—" Marrakesh started, but there was no point in avoiding the accusation. "Yes, it's has been. Ever since we arrived in Goldpasture."

Mer stared at him for a long time searching his eyes. "I'm telling you. Just see what happens, just once?"

"Maybe," Marrakesh nodded, but he knew the answer. He could never let the Voice free, and neither could he seek help. The thought of exploring those dark scars was enough to make him tremble and fall still with fear. Mer just did not understand, and neither did she need to. It was his burden after all. One look and Marrakesh knew she would not disturb the walls which protected him from the horrors of his past, such a wonderful friend was she, and an even better Talent.

A jutting horn sounded, and thankfully brought an end to the conversation. Bleak walls of stone and mortar greeted them as the gates of the keep began to grind open and the horns man bugled once more from above.

The keep was a relatively small compound, enclosed by four walls with two gates on opposite side. The opening itself was just big enough for a pair of oxen to pass side by side, and short tunnel led within to a open interior. Mud and flattened rock carpeted the ground and much work had been exercised to push the snow in grimy, muddy, lines against the walls. The central building with its pinprick tower dominated the central space while the stables, barracks, and mess hall were built off the peripheral of the walls. The soldiers who did not have the honor of greeting the contingent busied themselves with the mundane duties associated with such a life. Glancing about Marrakesh noticed the scars and signs of the latest of the many earthquakes to grip the region. Cracks laced the earth like fine splinters and parts of the outpost still stood in disrepair.

"Welcome," called the Captain, a jubilant man, and judging from his scars was no stranger to danger. Extricating himself from the three men at his flank, the captain strode in great lengths to greet them. Garbed in the standard grey of military dress he had added a minor personal affect in the form of a amber scarf tied gently about his neck. Along the trim in arcing sweeps was a flowing script of Rubearean calligraphy.

Enthusiastically the Captain greeted them with an extravagant bow, of which he followed up by gingerly, and respectfully kissing the tip of Mer's finger. "Praetor Marrakesh and Praetor Mer at last I have the pleasure of meeting you. When the Sanctumite requested escort back to the Empire it warmed my heart to know a Drafter and his Talent would be the ones to come. Not that I do not think our ranks capable but as of late the Forsaken have become more of a, problem, so to speak. Plus, we do not entertain many visitors, especially interesting ones, you understand?"

"May we live up to your expectations then," Marrakesh said.

"Well," Mer smiled, "he might not, but I will."

"Of that I have no doubt Praetor Mer. I am certainly intrigued to see a desheeni so civilized and serving as a Talent nonetheless, but we can speak more of this at supper. Please, this way. The hour does grow younger and I am certain you are both famished, Valerians know I am." the Captain said, turning with military precision. He led them from the inner baily to the central building from which rose the keeps stubby little tower.

Leaning over once Captain Heath had turned his back, Marrakesh whispered into Mer's ear. "Do me a favor Mer."

"Yes?"

"For once, just this once. Please practice some restraint. Do not insult the man."

"No promises," Mer winked.

Later, once comfortable in the private officer dining room the captain displayed a surprising amount of interest in Mer, badgering her with questions regarding her heritage, and peppering her with flowery compliments. At one point the man gave her

a standing invite to visit his vineyard when he returned back to Sherwater this coming summer. Marrakesh observed it all with a small amount of amusement, pleased to know that even if his Talent did not show it she was likely flustered by the turn of events. Judging by her witty remarks it was a certainty that Mer was outside of her element. The two were nearly as close as husband and wife, such was the process of binding a Drafter and Talent. And as friends there was little that need be said for the two to understand one another. It was good for Mer to see that not everyone outside of The Order were bigots and hate mongers towards her kind, and even better if she sees that there were those who could love her. Sure, Marrakesh had his own demons but so did Mer.

Mer and the Captain erupted into a conspiratorial roar and laughed until they were pink in the face. Pulled away from his wandering ruminations Marrakesh blinked trying, to no avail, to follow what had been said. Wiping a tear away The Captain pointed a finger at Mer, exclaiming, "You would not survive a day in the military."

"Why is that?"

"You know how to have a good time and us stodgy brute do not like that. You are a jewel my dear, an absolute bloody jewel."

"Well," Mer flourished with a grandiose bow, "I am glad someone realizes, now if only you could convince my companion of such a worthy conclusion."

Pouring another round of spiced wine, The Captain touched his heart and solemnly chastised Marrakesh.

You should learn to open up like her, the Voice whispered. Marrakesh instinctively shook his head. Frowning he pushed the thought from his mind.

"Sorry lad. I did not mean any offense. Just a playful jest," The Captain, said dropping the honorific as the wine began to take effect.

"Don't worry Captain Heath, my ward is not the friendliest," Mer teased.

"So, you are Drafter," Heath said, "we were very excited to hear one of your kind would be a part of the Sanctumites escort back into the capital. Even better that you were also able to preside over the ratification of Goldpasture, it saves me a lot of time, what with the increase in Forsaken activity. Ever since the last quake my hands have been full between hunting down those monsters, repairing the keep, and seeing to the Sanctumites needs. I would not have been able to stand witness for at least a span or more."

"It was necessary," Marrakesh said. "The Order holds a relative prestigious position within the hearts of those who live within the Empire, but here on the outskirts there is still much work to be done if we do not wish to be seen in the superstitious light that uneducated sometimes like to think of us in."

"Well, it all works out in the end. Let us chalk it up to Gabriel's providence," Heath suggested, drawing a long gulp from his chalice. Serving staff had begun to set the table and in doing so presented two more bottles of wine. Vivacious red liquids housed in green bottles with long goose necks and labels with thick northern writing.

"Volcanic deposits make for the best grapes," Heath smiled, "I save treats like this for special times. The sweet smell alone is enough to transport me from this hellish post to the warm seas of the Crescent Islands. Please have some."

Unsurprisingly Mer was more than happy to partake as alcohol had little effect on her kind, but Marrakesh politely declined. He required clarity of mind, and clarity of emotion – such was the burden of the arcane. Besides the few times he had imbibed in alcohol, the Voice always grew stronger, and he did not want that.

"Tell me," Heath whispered conspiratorially, "I've seen those sand runts use the jiiinic arts in combat, I've read the myths, but tell me... How does it actually work?"

Sitting back Marrakesh crossed his arms thoughtfully. It was not that he could not, nor should not share the process of binding and drafting, it was more a question of how. To explain drafting for him was like explaining the process of drawing breath into one's lungs. Not only was it so natural that he hardly thought about it anymore, but the process in many ways was also more complex than he knew.

"Can't say then? It was a longshot I suppose. I mean you are Praetor after all," Captain Heath said with a sigh.

"No. It's not that. Drafting is like the transition of energy from one place to another."

The captain stared at him blankly.

"Take this fork for example," Marrakesh said, lifting the fine silver. "Right now, it is here, but with the right binding it can be held within one of these." Marrakesh said holding up a thin clay tablet. In size it was no bigger than his thumb and as thick as a small wad of paper. On its surface were small glyphs, and if Marrakesh wanted, he could break it as easily as snapping his fingers.

"A stave," the captain nodded, "So you can put the fork in there?"

"Well, not exactly. A stave is more of a placeholder and a link. In truth we do not know what happens to the subject of the binding," Marrakesh tried to explain further, but felt he was probably just confusing the man further.

"Anyways, I break the stave and use its connection to draft whatever it was linked to be it thing or energy," he said, putting the fork under the table. "The energy or matter

flows through me and reconstitutes back where my Al-tar wills it," Marrakesh said, placing the fork back onto the table.

Heath was quiet for a moment; in the way one does when thinking very hard. "So drafting," he said quietly, "is like being a channel to between things?"

"Exactly," Marrakesh nodded.

"When I toured in the Swath," the captain said darkly, "there was a Rubarean priest who did something similar; but instead of conjuring a fork, he forced the breath from my comrades' lungs. I watched as my men began to float one by one into the air as if hanging from a noose. They scabbled at an invisible rope, but it was no use because there wasn't any to be found. What about that? Can you explain that nightmare?"

Mer glanced at Marrakesh, a look of concern on her face — such topics were forbidden by The Order. "The Rubarean aren't like us," Mer whispered, "We've tried to trade knowledge with them, and establish a code for drafting but Ruba has refused to speak with The Order." Marrakesh nodded, "That is where the stories of jiin come from, but they are little more than myths born from the evils of such drafters."

"False!"

The doors to the dining hall slammed open as a thin pale man dressed in scarlet robes strode past its threshold. "Ah, there he is, come sit so that we may dine at last," smiled the Captain brittlely. "My honored guest, here is the reason by which your presence has been requested. Lord Phinas, these are the Praetors who will oversee your safe passage back to Xandu. Both Drafter and Talent as requested, and The Order has spared no expense in hiring the brilliant Sirens Company to serve alongside them.

"Charmed," the Sanctumite said, as he took his seat across from Mer with an air of frigid self-importance. Snapping for the wine he squinted at Mer in disgust. "I have seen those of the so-called Sirens Company, and I am not impressed. And worse than that I find myself in the presence of a non-believer," he said, turning to scrutinize Marrakesh.

"Well, I will tolerate no falsities in my presence Sir Praetor. The jiin are as real as you and I, and somethings need not be seen to be known. Those inbred Rubareans who use their magic only commit blasphemy before Sruel and the house of the Valerians. Captain Heath though your men may be lost you will rest well knowing that the wicked will always be punished in the end," Lord Phinas said, sipping from the edge of his cup. From his neck jangled a heavy chain necklace as he did so. Along its countenance glittered seven tiny sapphire stars, one for each angel of creation and patron to the holy house of the Sanctum. Marrakesh's stomach fell. This is going to be as bad as we feared – days on end spent in the company of a zealous Sanctumite.

Smiling, the captain bombastically clapped his hands and immediately the wait staff began to bring forth the foods. Dozens of saucers, pans, and plates were laid out across the table, and the room sprang blossomed with the smell of rich meal.

"I am famished," the Captain spoke, "as you must also be so let us sup.' Once we are fat and happy, and only then we shall attend the details of things to come."