The Hidden Ones

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*Chapter One: Nyélmekh*

Coppery dark and hawk-featured young Táksuru hiViridáme lay upon his soft woven sleeping mat and waited impatiently for the dawn. The boy desperately needed sleep, but sleep had eluded him all that long winter’s night. Instead, he turned restively from one attitude to another, repeating over and over again the oracle’s verses. Their significance escaped him, though with each repetition he sensed more strongly a great logic working far beyond the region of literal thought. Something there suggested both beauty and terror, but Táksuru could define the augury no further. Suddenly, he ripped the sheet from his head, frustrated that not even by burying himself beneath his light coverlet had he banished the ringing in his ears. Though the great temple gongs across the Chaigávra River had rung the night through in celebration of the winter solstice, the words of the Seeress of Úrmish alone tolled in Táksuru hiViridáme’s hearing.

*In each direction shalt thou grow,*

*And in every one a death shalt know:*

*First down then west toward dying sire,*

*So south across the ring of fire,*

*Yet east almost to crooked tower*

*Brings thee home to rise in power,*

*Why north to sit at feet of one*

*Who last leads in by birth the son.*

Táksuru little knew that the Seeress’ verses were repeated by others as well as himself that restless night, or that by running seven-hundred *tsán* away from home to confirm his parentage, he had instead severed his parents from himself forever. Even now their guardianship was laid aside and he existed within a hurricane’s eye. Barely fourteen, however, Táksuru knew only his own discomfort. He felt cold and hot at the same time. His youthful imagination wandered among sharply drawn vignettes, but his eyes felt dulled beneath a thick liquid heaviness caused by physical and emotional strain. Dust, sweat, and ichor cemented his eyes shut, so that even when the eventual nightmare overwhelmed the boy he could not jar them open. His face free of the smothering *firyá*-cloth coverlet he had brought along for a bedroll, Táksuru breathed deeply the cool night air coming through the oval window centering the wall nearest his head. He turned his face and upper body to better catch that lulling caress. He inhaled again and this time held, then released. Outside the window black night stilled the dreams of most in that handsome if utilitarian medieval city, but it awoke the dreams of others.

Finally drifting, Táksuru saw, more clearly than would have been possible had he stood and looked, the panorama visible from the oval window he lie facing. Over-arching all draped that impersonal and absolute dark which so weaves each creature’s skein of destiny as to make but one thing, and one thing only, impervious to change – change itself. Beneath which hung the spheres of the celestial bodies, the bright planets and moons and planets and *Tuléng* herself which together govern the patterns that change weaves into fate’s tapestry. Lower still floated the realm of the powerful ones: heroes, legends, sages and fools who challenged fate and mastered change, if only briefly, to all the worlds’ good or ill. Below that curve there stood the home of man, his allies, and his enemies, the world that built the great commercial city of Úrmish with its large greyed-yellow limestone buildings – temples, palaces, monuments, and fortifications crowding the shallow slopes of five hills along the muddy Chaigávra River. But underlying all lurked the *tsu’urúm*, the vast under-world, where innumerable raddled tunnels, crypts, chambers, and halls, cloaked in a silent and velvet dark, every bit as alien and indifferent as the limitless vaults of space, wove also change into the destiny of man. Though more immediately, though with sharper will.

Drifting deeper as the night air soothed Táksuru’s face, his half-lucid vision focused more closely upon the dark outstretched city beneath the thin dream-amplified light of almost empty heavens. He saw across the river the city’s heart. Tall pyramided temples seated on platforms of enormous stone blocks crowded the nearby opposite shore; walls, towers, obelisks, and trees cloaked their forecourts and interiors, but one there, the nearest, Táksuru had seen and would never forget. From there nineteen other massive structures climbed over the slopes of Úrmish’s southernmost hill. The city’s four other heights and the depressions between supported factories, shops, warehouses, clanhomes, villas, and other structures needful of a mid-sized business-like city. Dedicated at present to the amassing of coin, Úrmish remembered long ago other, less prosaic, occupations. Once it had been a center for the worship of the Dark Trinity. Indeed, their immense fortress-heavy temples crowned the hill across from the Manor of Chikkúru where Táksuru lay, at last dreaming. Even across that distance they seemed to look sternly down upon the young boy, and he imagined strongly that they recognised him and knew where he hid, unlike his parents back in Jakálla.

Fear of discovery brought Táksuru’s vision further yet into focus. Úrmish teemed. Barely discernible figures filled its avenues, carpeted its plazas and squares, swarmed up and down terraces, and clogged its alleyways. Slaves, naked except for a loincloth, workmen in their knee-length kilts and leather vests, merchants wearing broad lamellar collars with up-curving shoulder pieces, soldiers, priests, and officials dressed in robes, stiff tabards, and headdresses, and aristocrats donning expensive costumes and bearing staffs moved through the night darkened city. Deliberately. They moved with fell deliberation toward Táksuru. Fright shook the boy in his sleep; he grimaced but slept still, swept away by the dream’s awful clarity. Ten, twenty, forty-thousand souls streamed toward Úrmish’s walled-in foreigner’s quarter where stood the Manor of Chikkúru and its young seeker-after-auguries. “Thá chakúl!, Thá chakúl!, Thá chakúl!”, they chanted in slow cadence, their voices one voice – deep and rattling. Obeying, Táksuru rose not, but lay paralysed by malevolence all around. He saw them coming. He saw them cross bridges spanning the Chaigávra River. Knotted swarms charged over the great open Plaza of Chuyón the Slayer and entered the gates of the foreigner’s quarter. Others climbed down the outermost walls of the governor’s palace. When Táksuru realised that *mrúr*, *shédra*, *qól*, and *hrá* had clawed their way up from the underworld, he desperately, desperately tried to awake.

The old Manor of Chikkúru hoisted three beleaguered stories above a roiling sea of forms stretching out to the limits of Táksuru’s vision. Here and there sudden violent movements erupted in the otherwise uniform agitation of that mass. Táksuru looked, as though his gaze were drawn, to see what caused the disturbances. Cold white fear sprang like liquid fire into his bowls and brain. He convulsed once and let go a muffled cry but could not pry open his eyes; he knew he dreamt; he knew that little mattered. Dreams bridge the void between worlds; whatever crosses, crosses, and to deny any arrival invites disaster. The lone figure causing explosions of terror where it passed wore the semblance of a delightful girl, with smooth slender limbs, delicate shoulders and a fine, shapely neck. Her face radiated, each expression emitting either shadow or light according to immediate mood. She smiled up toward Táksuru, but frowned darkly upon the barred doors of his traveller’s hostel. Her glossy straight black hair fell in long silken strands which drifted slowly across the features of her face, her smooth broad forehead, her piercing citrinous eyes, her nose, her lips, as though borne upon a wind all her own. Her dark bronze skin shone. She would find a way to him. Legend named her Lelmiyáni, the Sweet Singer of Doom. She would find him and force him to follow her, as Jakàllayáni folktales described; then he would be hers.

The multitude below recoiled in swirling eddies at her approach, looking from Táksuru’s vantage like flocks of *hmá* evading *feshénga*. But whenever Lelmiyáni passed completely by, the throngs resumed their unerring advance upon the boy who vainly struggled to shake such dreaming. Lelmiyáni gained the manor. She placed her narrow, dextrous hands upon its walls. She smiled and looked toward Táksuru, her large yellow-green eyes gleaming. Next searching high and low along the walls, she moved slowly around the entire structure until at last returning to her point of origin. The many thousands looked on. Lelmiyáni slowly stepped back from the wall, surveying its tired proportions and ratios with an adoring smile. The Manor of Chikkúru withheld not the slightest particular of its construction. She knew every crack, every point of ingress, each potential exit. It was hers. Turning, she faced the surrounding horde with a childish glower. Those nearest withdrew, but the surged. Lelmiyáni vanished and appeared in Táksuru’s chamber. He jellied. The throng out-side roared, “Thá chakúl!” The demoness glanced out the window dismissively, and then danced down to Táksuru’s side. Helpless and no longer caring where dreaming led, Táksuru turned to meet her gaze. She lay a hand upon his neck, tracing with her thumb the line of his maturing jaw, the muscles along his oesophagus, so full of life, and circling finally into the soft dell where his collarbones framed the base of his throat. There she pressed very slightly and stared deeply into his eyes; both gestures made indelible marks. The stabbing pain of her thumb press nailed Taksúru’s eyes open, a dry scratch caused by the winter’s night air stinging his lower throat and making him cough. The gripping presence of Lelmiyáni’s stare pierced him with a strange and lingering sensation, somehow at once stasis and change, change and stasis.

Whatever the facts of his birth, his open query of Lady Biyún hiTu’unkáimo had exposed him to danger in an alien city far from home. The ill-intentioned were on the move. Better to follow Lelmiyáni’s advice; every epic-singer knew her reputation for conducting heroes through treacheries, mazes, imbroglios. She as often led into these as well, but ever-the-romantic Táksuru assumed himself her favoured hero. He would return at utmost speed to his parents in Jakálla and confront them with the words of Lady Biyún, Seeress of Úrmish. With them he would force some answers, and finally get some sleep.