

Chapter One: “The Fire and the Faithless”

The village of Hebron has two main thoroughfares—wide dirt avenues that form a junction—and is overlooked by a plateau with steep rock faces. Where one of the roads diverge, there are fields and, in an adjoining direction, a footpath that leads to the Burning Palm Hermitage. It is late summer, the fields are full of wheat, and the breeze is spontaneous and warm.

When you arrive in the evening, the din of pilgrims and tourists is at once a relief and a worry. Pandemic has gripped the world since early last year. Perhaps, you wonder, disease hasn't yet struck Hebron. The air smells of smoke and ash, the char of cooked pork. The village is preparing for their Fire Festival, held once every eight years when the twin moons are full. Tables line the street. Fire-breathers walk among the crowds. A huge bonfire is lit at the village center; its flames must be fifteen feet high.

You make your way to the last available table and sit down. A waiter soon appears, but pauses as the bard begins to speak.

The bard wears a wide-brimmed hat. He has a big grin that reveals missing teeth and one with luster. The bonfire casts his pale skin in an orange blaze. “In the beginning, there was the Fire Mother and the Cold Father.” He throws his hands in the air and the bonfire behind him grows. “And in the steam of their union, were born the gods—of the ocean and mountains, the children of the desert and forests.” The milling crowd drowns out the rest and the waiter returns his attention.

“What can I get you?” He opens a thick tablature and begins to list the many drinks available.

“Whatever they want,” a monk approaches you and sets gold pieces on the table. The waiter hurries away. The monk is bald with a long brown beard. You know he is from the Burning Palm Hermitage because he has the distinct tattoos—black palms and forearms as if wading in oil waist-deep—and attire—a thin red robe with black pants.

“You look strapped to the teeth,” he smiles. “I think you can help me. My name is Jeron. The festival, you see, depends on the rededication of the temple to the Fire Mother. It's part initiation, and the king pays us. He's superstitious. And paranoid.” A creaking cart of bodies in white shrouds is wheeled through the street. “West Rock has outsourced their dead to us. I'm not sure what it means. Part of me thinks they just don't like the unsavory work of cremation.”

Jeron focuses his attention on you and leans close to the table. “My point is. People have gone missing outside the village and I don't want to be among them. Will you keep me safe?”

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You follow Jeron up the hill and into the Burning Palm Hermitage. The compound sets atop a flattened plateau ringed by low timber walls with merlons; trees rise above them. There are four

stone buildings with clay tile roofs. He points to the symmetrical two-story one with smoke rising from chimneys at either end. "That's where we sleep. The order isn't very big and not all of us monks. My family stays there."

Jeron leads you through the vegetable garden to the stable. He asks you to wait outside a moment. When he returns, he is leading a mule and cart. "This is Abraham," he pats the mule on the shoulder. "Brought him with us when we left."

The cart is loaded with two barrels of oil and kindling. "These are part of the rededication," he says. "All temples to the Fire Mother have a lumber frame, but its core is stone. In years past there were sacrifices. We don't do that. Effigies maybe, but we also use the ceremony to cremate folks that asked for it."

Jeron walks alongside Abraham and begins to lead you back down the hill and out of the village. At its gate along the main road, a watchman stops you. He wears black, strapped leather armor and an ill-fitting kettle helmet. He carries a spear in one hand like a walking stick. "I take it you're going to the temple? Can you do me a favor?"

The party responds.

The watchman adjusts his helmet, "It'd be a big help if you brought back something for me. It's a wooden figure in the shape of a horse." He holds out his hand. "It can fit in your palm, real small. It belonged to a friend of mine." He looks down and reconfigures his posture. "I would really appreciate it."

The party leaves the village.

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The road just outside the village is a dirt path ten feet wide; it winds through woods and understory, before opening up to the large main road a couple miles away. There are tributary footpaths that go to family homes or small pastures with wattle fences.

"I know what you're thinking. If folks want to be cremated, how do they wait for eight years? Those that can afford it, or who can convince the clerics, have a spell cast called gentle repose. It stops the decay for some time. It's a necromancy spell though, which many frown upon."

Where the road narrows and bends there is another path that leads toward a hillside. To its right is the temple's large wooden gable and, to the left, in profile further down the road, is the opening to the electrum mine.

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