

# THE AWAKENED CITY

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## CHAPTER TWO

### SUNDIT'S JOURNAL

Last night I had the dream again.

It began as it always does. I stood between a pair of gilded pillars. In my hands I held a wooden box, its cover closed. Behind me lay a vast dark courtyard; before me, a wide room pulsed with light, though there were no windows, and no lamps burned.

Inside, so far away I almost could not make out their faces, my Brothers and Sisters stood in their present bodies, gathered as if for council--all of them, even those who were reborn into Arsace during Caryaxist times and thus were lost to us. Near each, crowded close as if for comfort, a host of shadow-presences drifted: the many flesh-shells each of us has worn, the changing bodies that have ferried our undying souls across the centuries.

Only I, solitary between my pillars, was absent from that gathering. Only I had no huddled shadows to bind my present form to the blood and bone and sinew that first housed me. I felt small and lonely, unmoored upon the flow of time.

I remembered the box. I fell to my knees and removed the lid. Within lay a heap of beaten-metal discs: mirrors, twenty-nine of them, one for each of my incarnations. Each, when I lifted it and held it close, filled up with my face, but when I lowered it again grew blank. That made me angry. It seemed to me they should reflect me even when I was not before them. Were they not my mirrors?

How dared they show me emptiness?

In rage I hurled the box aside. The mirrors spun into the light, flashing, so that for a moment I was blind. When my vision cleared, I saw that my spirit-siblings had turned toward me. Shoulder to shoulder they stood, ranged in the original order of their birth, their shadow-lives lined up behind them. There should have been a place for me, sixteenth in the succession of Marduspida's children. But they had left no gap, no space into which I might insert myself.

Terror seized me. For my shadows were absent and my mirrors were gone, and there was only this one self, this singular Sundit, to challenge them.

Then I was awake, sitting bolt upright in bed.

After a moment I rose and wrapped myself in my stole and went to stand at the window, whose screens I had left open to the chill spring air. It was nearly dawn; gray light filled the little garden in the court outside. I performed breathing exercises, seeking calm. But as sometimes happens the dream was slow to fade, and I was still by my window when the sun crested the tiled roofs of the Evening City and the bells of Baushpar began to ring for Communion services. How many times, I wonder, have I dreamed this dream? Someday I must go back through my journals and tally its recurrences. It seems to me that it has changed since it first came to me in childhood, though I cannot quite remember how.

Perhaps I shouldn't dwell so much on such personal matters, which rise not from my immortal soul but from its present shell of flesh (for my journals do not record this dream in any of my other incarnations). We are meant in these pages only to make a record of the actions of our lives, so that future incarnations may more easily regain the wisdom gathered in other bodies--to memorialize our debates and decisions, not our fears and fancies. Yet I believe that there is value in a fuller portrait. Our souls endure, but our bodies change, and the vessel shapes what it contains. Should I not set down the odd experiences, the rogue thoughts, the unsettling dreams, if only that my future selves may better distinguish what is immortal in them from what is merely body-nature?

Or perhaps it's symmetry that compelled me to start this account as I did. I began the day in dread, and in dread I end it.

Vivaniya dined with me tonight. I did not suggest it; he came to me of his own accord to ask if he might join me. I was pleased, thinking it another sign of Dādar's loosening hold on him, another step in the campaign he seems to have been waging, since his return from the Burning Land, to mend the rift between us.

He was late, which irritated me. When he arrived he plumped down on his cushion with barely a word, and shoved food into his mouth as if he did not

taste it--which irritated me more, since I had taken trouble with the ordering of the meal.

“Where are you, Vanyi?” I asked at last, sharply. “For plainly you are not here with me.”

His eyes rose to mine, guilty. “I’m sorry. It’s...I’m remembering yesterday.”

“The council meeting,” I said, imagining I understood. “We have all, I’m sure, been preoccupied with that.”

He picked up his goblet, set it down again. “This so-called Next Messenger...it’s obvious he is no ordinary heretic.”

“To put it mildly. But we already suspected that, or we wouldn’t have sent our agents to spy on him.”

“One of whom chose to join him.”

“Yes. Clearly he is convincing. And clever.” This had struck me very forcefully in yesterday’s council, as I listened with growing dismay to the remaining agent’s report. “To claim that it was he who brought down Thuxra prison, as the act of destruction foretold in *Arata’s Promise*, with everything that cursed place meant--there’s a kind of genius in that.”

“If it is a lie.”

I looked at him sharply. “Of course it’s a lie. There can no longer be any doubt that he is an apostate Shaper, but no Shaper is that powerful. Even in the days when Shapers went untethered, there’s no record of such an act. Thuxra City was destroyed by earthquake.”

“Oh, Sunni, Sunni! I am a wretched sinner.”

The despair in his voice shocked me. He turned away, pulling his body inward and clasping his hands between his knees--the same pose he used to adopt when he was a child and had something terrible to confess.

“Vanyi.” Over the past months I’ve been careful not to press him; but tonight felt different. “I know things are not right with you. Do you think I haven’t seen the change in you since you came back from the Burning Land? Something happened there, didn’t it? Something you haven’t spoken of. I may no longer be your guardian--we may not be close as we once were. But you can speak to me. You can tell me anything. You know that.”

“I came here tonight to tell you. But it’s hard.”

I waited. I could hear the hissing of the lamp wicks. He sighed, rolled his shoulders.

“We did a terrible thing in the Burning Land.” He did not look at me. “Dâdar and I.”

Again, I thought I understood. “You mean what happened to the people of Refuge.”

He began to shake his head, then changed his mind. “That, too. I dream about it, Sunni. The way the manita made them choke and weep and cough. The way the soldiers walked among them while they were helpless. Dâdar and I were waiting at a distance, but we saw everything. Every arrow shot. Every sword thrust.”

I felt the weight of it--an atrocity none of us intended, not even Kudrâcari and her supporters, for all their bitter hatred of Refuge’s heresy. “You aren’t to blame,” I told him gently. “Your decision was forced by circumstance. You weren’t to know that it would turn into a massacre.”

“No?” Now he sounded angry. “Would it not have been a massacre, even if they had spared the children and the elders as we asked? Only their Shapers were supposed to die. We were to bring the rest of them back with us alive. I know...that the situation had changed. I know there was no other way to make sure of the Shapers, since we had no way to tell the Shapers from the rest. But I can’t forget that they were human beings. Human beings. And we spoke a word, Dâdar and I, and on that word more than two hundred people perished.”

“We are forced sometimes to terrible things, in service of the charge our father gave us. It’s one of the reasons for our Covenant. So that we may do what we must without fear.”

It cannot be comfort. Nor should it be. But it is the truth.

“Yes,” he said bitterly. “We whose souls will never feel the agony of Ârata’s cleansing fires, and thus need not dread the darkness our actions bring upon us.” He raised his swimming gaze to mine. “But Consciousness is the Fourth Foundation of the Way, Sunni. We must also live with what we do.”

“It will fade, Vanyi. If not in this body, then in the next.”

“Like all the other evil memories I’ve gathered in my lives, which mean no more to me now than dry words written in the pages of my journal. Perhaps that’s why I cannot let this memory go. It stands for all the rest.”

It surprised me. Not that he suffered, but that he considered his suffering. Vivaniya is ardent, impetuous, brimming with restless vigor, but he has never been reflective, and even less so in this incarnation than in many of the others.

He turned toward me, striking the table with his knee so that everything on it jumped and clattered. I used to hope he would outgrow his clumsiness,

but he is as awkward as a man as he was as a child. “Do you ever think of the apostate Gyalo Amdo Samchen?” he asked. “About how different things might be, if we had never sent him into the Burning Land?”

“Sometimes. But we had to send him, Vanyi. We knew there were refugees in the Land. How could we not try to find them, to bring them home?”

“So much came of it. Not just...the massacre. The discord. We’ve always disagreed on the issues of our rule, we Brethren, but now we are in factions. And there is the rift between us and the king...and the king’s blasphemy, his mining of the Burning Land...”

“You forget,” I said with old bitterness. “The mines aren’t blasphemous--we Brethren have decreed it so. Vanyi, what’s the point of this? Why this dwelling on what cannot be changed?”

“There’s something you don’t know.” He drew a breath.

“What do you mean?”

“When Dâdar and I came back from the Burning Land, we told the council that we found no Cavern of the Blood where Gyalo Amdo Samchen claimed it was. We said we conducted a thorough search to make sure it wasn’t located elsewhere, or hidden through some Shaper trick. We said there was no question that Samchen had lied, that the Cavern did not exist. Do you remember?”

“Of course I remember.”

“Well--it wasn’t so.”

I felt a prickling of all my skin, as if some huge presence had slipped up behind me. “What are you telling me, Vanyi?”

“We didn’t find the Cavern. That’s true. But we didn’t search. We knew the Shapers might have concealed it, but we agreed to accept the evidence of our senses, and turn away without looking further.”

I stared at him. I could not speak.

“As we drew near to Refuge, we saw a light rising above the cliffs at night. It was just as Samchen described--a great golden light, not like firelight, not like torchlight, not like any light I’ve ever seen. And yet I recognized it, Sunni, for it was the same light that burns inside the crystal of the Blood that hangs from our father’s necklace.”

“Vanyi. Vanyi, what are you saying?” He and Dâdar had spoken no word, last year, about a light.

“It was there the night we marched on Refuge. I saw it even through the

smoke of battle, when their Shapers attacked us. But in the morning, when the battle was won and Dâdar and I went up into Refuge, the light was gone and there was no sign of anything that might have made it. Ah, Sunni, I'd dreaded finding the source of that light. I never wanted Samchen's story to be true. I never wanted to find Ârata's empty resting place in Refuge. When we reached the place Samchen had described and saw only a blank cliff, I was relieved. Relieved.

"Dâdar said it was the light that had been the trick, an illusion or distraction created to confuse us. The Shapers had fled along with the rest of Refuge, so of course the light was gone. Obviously, he said, there had never been an opening in the cliff. Part of me understood what he was doing--he wanted Samchen to be a liar even more than I did. But the rest of me...the rest of me wanted to believe him. So when he declared that we had seen all there was to be seen and need do no more, I agreed. Do you understand, Sunni? I closed my eyes to the truth I knew and embraced the truth I wanted. Because it was easier. And I was afraid."

I said nothing. Even now, hours later, I can scarcely say what it was I felt.

"So we came back, and told the council half the truth. We didn't mention the light--why speak of Shaper tricks? By that time, I understood what I'd done. But I was too cowardly to stand against Dâdar, or to confess myself a liar before you all. I salvaged my conscience by telling myself that we might have been right. That if we were, our lie didn't matter, because Ârata was still sleeping; and if we were wrong and he had risen, his Messenger would come, lie or no. But after yesterday--" He leaned toward me. "Sunni, I can't stop thinking about it. We don't know what's in those cliffs, not for certain. If Gyalo Amdo Samchen told the truth--if there really is a Cavern of the Blood--then this pretender with his miracles and his act of destruction and his fiery crystal that our agent swore on his life was the true Blood, he may be--he may really be--"

He caught his breath, unable to say it.

For a moment there was silence. I sat like a stone, my mind refusing the implications of what he had just told me.

"Sunni." His voice was quiet. "What shall I do?"

I swallowed. My mouth was like a desert. "You must tell the truth."

"Dâdar will deny it."

"You mustn't involve him. You must go directly to Taxmârata."

"Will you come with me?" he asked, like a child.

"Yes. Yes, I will come with you. We'll go tomorrow morning, as early as

we may.”

All his features seemed to tremble. “How you must despise me.”

“No,” I said, though I was not sure what I felt.

“I despise myself.”

“Ah, Vanyi.”

He pushed to his feet. He came round the table and sank to the floor in front of me and laid his cheek upon my knees, as he used to when he was a boy. For a moment I could not respond, my mind still caught in the awful thing he had told me. Then my love for him rose up, bruised and angry but impossible to resist. I’ve always loved him best, my first spirit-ward in my present incarnation, who came to me when he was three and I was twenty-two. I bent over him; I kissed his forehead, and stroked his shaven scalp.

At last he drew away, and rose.

“Tomorrow,” he said. He was composed again. He looked drawn and weary, older than his thirty-one body years.

“Tomorrow,” I replied. “We’ll make it right, Vanyi.”

“You are the best of us, Sunni. I don’t deserve your love.”

He turned before I could answer and left the room.

I don’t know how long I sat over the remains of our meal. At last I summoned Ha-tsun to clear the food, then went to look in on Utamnos. He woke at my step, disoriented and fearful, and I stayed until he slept again. How I miss him--Utamnos in his previous body, that is, my confidant, my friend. It is wrong, I know; the flesh-shell comes and goes, and we are not supposed to mourn it. When he is old enough in this shell, he will be my friend again.

I sought my own chambers. There I have been sitting since, thinking, like Vanyi, of the apostate Gyalo Amdo Samchen. It was for his piety that we chose him, five years ago, to go into the Burning Land in search of refugees from Caryaxist persecution. We knew they might have untethered Shapers among them--how else could they have survived the harshness of the sacred desert? But we thought that Gyalo, with his pure faith, his shining devotion to the Doctrine of Baushpar, would resist all temptation.

We were wrong. In the desert he cast aside his manita and broke his Shaper vows, using his shaping to call water from the earth. True, it was an unintended apostasy, born of the disaster that overtook the expedition, and he saved not just his own life but those of his companions. True, he voluntarily resumed the drug and the strictures of his vow on his return to Arsace--

something only a handful of apostates have ever had the will to do. True, when he came before us he confessed the whole of his sin, sparing himself no condemnation. But apostasy is apostasy, and apostates, even unwilling ones, cannot be trusted. Even if he had not broken his vow, how could we have accepted his outlandish claim--that the people of Refuge, wandering deep into the Burning Land, had discovered Ârata's empty resting place, this so-called Cavern of the Blood? That Ârata had risen; that the Age of Exile was at an end and the time of the Next Messenger was at hand?

He did offer proof, of a sort: the testimony of Teispas and Diasarta, the two soldiers whose lives he saved; the word of a heretic of Refuge, a woman named Axane, who for reasons we did not entirely trust had chosen to return with him. And a crystal of the Blood--the true Blood, there was never any doubt--which he swore had been taken from the Cavern--where, he said, there were thousands of them, an ocean of them, as indeed there must be in the place where Ârata lay down to sleep. Some few of my spirit-siblings believed him utterly: Baushtas, Artavâdhi, Martyas. Others, Kudrâcari and what is now her faction (Vivaniya is right to name it so), were inflexibly certain that he lied. More--they claimed that because he had brought the Blood out of the Burning Land, as Ârata's Promise says the Next Messenger will do, he had come to believe himself the Messenger, embracing the same blasphemy as the people of Refuge, who, when he arrived among them out of the emptiness of the desert, mistook him for Ârata's herald.

I did not agree. I saw no sign that he believed himself the Messenger. Nor was I one of those who accepted the claims he did make. Even the Blood, which all our lore and scripture tells us exists nowhere but in Ârata's resting place and in our father's necklace, did not convince me. Yet it raised questions, that crystal, too many to be rejected out of hand. And there were other concerns: the need to cleanse the sacred Land of the taint of Refuge's heresy, the threat of Refuge's untethered Shapers, which even at such a distance we could not leave unaddressed. A second expedition was necessary--though had I been Blood-Bearer, I would have found a way other than the one we took. I would not have chosen Dâdar to search for signs of Ârata's awakening. I would not have sought Santaxma's help--or if I had, I would not have paid the blasphemous price he demanded for his soldiers. I would never have granted him official sanction to mine the Burning Land, whose riches should be beyond the reach of human greed.

Maybe then the heretics would still be alive. Maybe Vivaniya would not have brought back a lie. Maybe I would not be sitting in my chambers, writing the word "heretic" by long habit, thinking as I shape the letters: What if I should call them something else?

Ah, there is a thought to chill the bones.

We desire the coming of the new primal age, we Brethren. Of course we

do. But it means the end of us, the extinguishment of our souls. That is what Gyalo Amdo Samchen told us when he brought the Blood of Ârata out of the Burning Land: that we would end. That's the fear that lives in Vanyi's and Dâdar's lie. We all felt it, even Baushtas and Artavâdhi and Martyas, who believed. Even I, who waited judgment on my Brothers' return, could not deny my relief when they swore the Cavern of the Blood did not exist. Or earlier, when we learned that Gyalo Amdo Samchen had died in imprisonment at Faal...

Nothing is certain, I remind myself. As Vanyi said, we don't know what was really in those cliffs. Nor does it necessarily follow from anything he told me tonight that this pretender in the mountains is the true Next Messenger. It's as likely that he is precisely what we decided yesterday, on the evidence our agent gave us: a charlatan, a madman, an apostate Shaper with a cunningly crafted simulacrum.

But again...nothing is certain. If he is what he claims...Ah, I can hardly write it. If he is, what might that mean for us, who turned away from word of Ârata's rising?