

The Gateway

The gateway of the ancient monastery had two towers of closely fitted stones. The old ones had been built with no mortar, using huge stones cut in eccentric puzzle patterns that fit together perfectly, as if they were the children's game of a race of giants. The gate itself was superhuman in scale; the current gates, imported from across the endless mountains and the high desert and built of oak that was black with age, rose only to the second set of hinges, four times the height of a tall man, but above that could clearly be seen a third set of hinges, made of some rustless black metal, stark against the pale stone, marking where the original gates had hung taller than twice the height of a human.

Monks hurried through the gate as if it held a curse. And they gave the pile of black rags by the northern gate tower a wide berth, as if it might have been the victim of the curse. All day, the black rags lay unmoving, and the monks scurried in and out, fetching straw from the farmers who scratched a living from the dry earth of the valley below, hauling bags of grain, bundles of firewood, leading recalcitrant donkeys piled high. Toward evening, when the bolder girls and boys of the village far below came up the mountainside to fetch their goats, and the goat-bells sang out over the deep valley, and the monks settled to their well-earned suppers, the pile of black rags shook itself, and gradually rose. The black was astoundingly black; not the faded, sun-bleached cotton-rag grey-black of the old women of the valley, but the black of the absolute absence of light. It took the shape of a slim person; tall, lithe, of no particular gender, but wrapped loosely in the very darkness of a moonless night, from turbaned head to slippered feet. The black rags had all but vanished against the aged black basalt of the dark road that led from

the gate to the valley below, the hundred switchbacks a ribbon of darkness even on a bright day. Even standing, the wearer of the black difficult to see.

They stretched, and the stretching took on a series of practiced motions; the motions became more extreme, almost like dance; rhythmic, precise. The pile of rags had evolved into a living banner of darkness, even as the sun sank against the distant mountains at the center of the world.

The dance slowed, the tide of practice receded, and the figure sank into an easy crouch, their loose-draped darkness drooping easily to cover their crouching form. And then they were still, as if they had never moved since the dawning of the world.

Goat bells clanked in the still mountain air, and long lines of animals could be seen coming down off the high fields, led by shepherds and harried by dogs. Below, in the valley, where it was already dark, the animals pooled in their byres and sheepfolds, dirty white against the dark earth and stone. When the wind blew, it carried, very faintly, the sound of chanting from across the valley, where the sun still shone off the high road from the distant Dai lands. The last orange light of day lit something golden so that it appeared to burn like a fire for a moment.

The fluttering darkness in the gate might have been heard to sigh, if any of the monks had been bold enough to come close and listen. But the monks were afraid, and they were right to be afraid.

The chanting continued, and the sound, if not the words, carried across the valley as the sun vanished behind the mountains and night fell slowly. The one in the gateway watched as the men chanting came down the road towards the village below. There were eight of them, visible in the last light, and they were carrying something.

A pale hand, covered in henna-coloured tattoos of minute hieroglyphs, emerged from the sable cloth, and made a single gesture. At their feet a tiny whirl of dust rose from the sand of the gateway and rose away into the still air.

The wind began to rise; first a whisper that rustled the dark cloth, and then a rising note that ran along the towers and slammed the Abott's shutters in the tower high above the gate.

The sound of chanting vanished, as did the sound of sheep bells, and there was only the sound of the wind whistling through the gate, and the snap of the dark fabric. Still, the dark figure watched the eight men until darkness hid them and they vanished behind a shoulder of the mountain. After a time of wind and inner stillness, they appeared again, climbing the long, black, stone-flagged road to the monastery.

They walked in step, their movements perfectly coordinated. And they sang.

The figure in the gateway stiffened like a hunting dog on a scent, but otherwise made no move, and the eight and their burden came up the mountain, switchback after switchback, and their chant tried to rise over the wind, but the wind rose too, so that the ancient hinge high above the waiting one began to slam at the tower like a miner attacking a rock face—crack, crack, crack.

At last, the bearers made the final turn and started up the steep slope to the gate, their bare feet slapping on the dark stones polished by an aeon of pilgrims, still in step, apparently untired, implacable, their pace unchanged.

The black-clad figure flowed to their feet. As the bearers marched closer, the ragged figure produced a long, curving black sword from their robes; a glittering line of black against the

night, slightly curved, surprisingly long, And they began to sing—a hum from deep in the chest, a war cry, a battle hymn, a prayer.

Above them, the monks cowered in fear; some hid in their narrow cells and some bowed down before the golden statues of their prophets. None of them leaned out from their high balconies or their shuttered windows to watch what every one of them had dreaded since the pile of black rags appeared in the gate, days before.

The watcher flowed forward; the wind rose to a howl, now carrying the sand of the not-so-distant high desert which burned against unprotected skin. The sword cut, high to low; a bearer fell in a burst of blue light, cut from eyebrow to hip in two terrible parts.

No blood flowed.

The sword cut back, low to high, and a second bearer fell without complaint, opened from groin to chin as if by dissection.

The lid of the wooden case they bore snapped open, and the thing that had not been a man for a very long time sat up, awake, aware—blue light flared, a dazzle, a single word into the wind.

The sword cut left to right; weakened, and slower, but no less precise. Another bearer fell, headless.

The sword's bearer was afire, a pillar of blue flame consuming the dark cloth and revealing the woman within, the agony of the flame revealed on her face. She cut back, her song rising to a scream.

The wind screamed with her.

The fourth bearer could not, even by inhuman effort, keep the wooden box aloft, especially when the sword cut away his hands on the poles. The box fell heavily and cracked open, revealing the feral figure within and his bed of scrolls and books and that spilled out onto the white marble road. But he rose to face her with a rapidity that belied his fragile appearance, his parchment skin and eyeless face.

He moved a single, long-nailed finger, and she was cut down, her intestines spilling onto the scrolls at her feet.

She screamed her death curse to the sky, as she had always intended. The mountain quivered above her; stone fell, and masonry. In a heartbeat, a portion of the monastery joined a shoulder of the mountain to plummet to the road below. The avalanche fell like a torrent, sweeping the necromancer and his undead bearers and the corpse of the tattooed witch over the parapet and down, to be buried deep in the valley below.

She might have smiled in satisfaction at a job well done, but she was dead. Still, for her kind, her order, death represented a kind of triumph of its own; a victory over the false immortals.

She, and her foe were buried deep, surrounded by half a thousand magical texts from the courts of the Shan and the philosophers of the Dai, in the arid dust of the high desert and the rocks of the holy mountain.

#

Lady Dafney Killeridge didn't precisely attend the prestigious Nannes Academy, as women were not allowed inside its hallowed Juniast precincts, where four monasteries and a cathedral

chapter had combined hundreds of years before to create the finest university in Callvier. But Lady Dafney, who combined money, aristocratic birth, and striking good looks with athletic prowess and an advanced sense of daring, managed, by a compromise worthy of the Old World's finest diplomats, to have a series of tutors *from* the Northern Continent's most prestigious institution come to her at the home she purchased just one street from the Abbey of San Xither; indeed, her house was, by law, within the sacred precincts of the university. She resided there, except for the fashionable seasons, for more than five years, so that by the time most of the women in her class were producing their first child, she was writing her first book, on her travels across the north coast of the southern continent, the magnificent city of Pursaris, the mysteries of Tanarind, and the secretive islands of Navin, where, by her own admission, she had spent less than a week before being ejected by the laws of that hidden land.

Because her book on the southern continent was both readable and brilliant, it sold; in fact, for a few months its sales rivalled Juniast religious texts in Anzand, Callvier and Vartstadt. She was invited to lecture. Naturally, as the furor died down, she began to look around for new opportunities.

Willm Jesser was a pale young man of Nazlan heritage. He was already famous at twenty-five, in certain circles, because he had proposed a system for the Dai hieroglyphs, and despite an enormous weight of criticism from his many rivals, his system seemed to work, at least for the very limited examples of long Dai inscriptions available in the north. It was almost inevitable, then, that the woman who brought back hundreds of new inscriptions from Nazand and lost Vurar on the Southern continent should be introduced to the young man who appeared to have some chance of decrypting them. They had nothing in common; Jesser wore old clothes, seldom tied his neck cloth, spoke in monosyllables and stared into space for hours. Killeridge dressed

beautifully even in the Southern desert, spoke quickly and earnestly, and cared a great deal for the opinion of the world, whereas Jesser didn't seem to know for sure that the rest of the world existed.

Nonetheless, their friends pushed them together. An occasion was designed, and social calendars manipulated.

People in Society wagered on how they would react to each other when it was revealed that they would meet at the Academy display of Lady Killeridge's original drawings. There was an appreciative audience of cognoscenti, a bored audience of beautiful young people, and an eager audience of those in on the wager. Jesser came in late. He paused, standing in the ornate doorway.

Someone said, 'He's forgotten his glasses,' and there was a wave of laughter. Jesser either didn't notice or didn't react. Instead, he walked to the nearest display. With no preamble, Jesser, looking at the exact representations of the Great Temple of Life at Horuk, glanced at Killeridge, leaned very close to the drawing, and said, 'You know, milady, I think the center of Dai civilization was in the mountains west of the D'r'ai River.'

Killeridge frowned. She was dressed in the full finery of a fashionable lady; a silk mantua over stays, a slightly daring neckline, hair piled atop her head and powdered a blue-white. Jesser wore knee breeches, but he'd forgotten the knee buckles and his shoes had been turned into slippers by breaking down the backs; he was unshaven, and he had, as usual, forgotten his neck cloth. He also smelled slightly of a shirt worn for too many days. His waistcoat might have been fashionable once, but it was heavily stained with an unidentifiable substance that might have been snuff, or blood.

She moved closer. ‘You are Jenner?’ she asked.

He leaned so far forward that his nose almost touched her drawing. ‘Are you sure this is correct?’ he asked.

She leaned in. Junius, she thought. He stinks.

He pointed a filthy fingernail at one hieroglyph.

She frowned. ‘Yes,’ she said.

He smiled. In fact, he glowed. ‘That is—wonderful,’ he said. ‘Was there power left in any of them?’

She sighed. ‘I have no Talent whatsoever, Mr. Jenner.’

He looked at her a moment, his large jade-green eyes flashing. They were a remarkable colour. He nodded. ‘Ah, no, you don’t,’ he said in a matter-of-fact voice. ‘A pity, as you’re a good copyist.’

‘Why do you say the Dai Empire was based in the mountains?’ she asked. She wasn’t sure whether he meant to be offensive; she didn’t think so.

He shrugged. ‘I’m guessing, really. But they fought the Shan along the D’r’ai. The great battles were all at the Breakers and down in the Middle Passes. We have Shan fortifications at Kabakak; indeed, probably the Shan capital. So where are the Dai? There are inscriptions in Vartstadt, but not many; a few in eastern Callvier, and three in Anzand. Hundreds on the north coast of the southland—but still, no major city—

‘Varur was a major city,’ she said. ‘I have seen it.’

‘With a Dai presence but not a Dai ruler. This right here is a dedication; see the cartouche? If I am correct, that’s a tribute sign, given to royalty, but the name in the cartouche isn’t Dai.’

‘You can read it?’

‘Not at all.’ He smiled. ‘I’m learning what some of the symbols mean. And Dai names are always in black. This name is in red.’

She smiled. ‘Fascinating. Where do you think we find the Dai, then?’ she asked.

Jenner looked excited again. ‘High in the central massif, what the ancients called ‘Kamira,’ there is a desert.’

‘A mountain desert?’ she asked.

‘Just so. Thousands of Li above sea level. Cold, and deadly dry.’

‘Junius, that sounds terrible. Why would the Dai live there?’

Jenner smiled. His teeth were stained with something—tobacco, apparently, and his breath stank. ‘It used to be better. More rainfall, several rivers, seasonal crops at the oases.’ He nodded at an acquaintance over her shoulder. ‘Before the curse.’

‘The curse?’

‘It’s only a theory. I have to go there to test it out. And see all the hieroglyphs of course. But what we really need is some diplomat’s mailbag.’

She nodded, understanding immediately ‘Someone who wrote a more modern language, but translated from Dai.’

‘You are correct,’ he said. ‘Or even a child’s teaching primer for some other language.’

‘And you want to go there,’ she said.

‘If I had money, I would leave tomorrow,’ he said.

#

She found his dirt and smell more than she could bare, but she took an indirect approach and hired him a valet, a former soldier with very strong views on cleanliness and crossbows. His name was Stibel; he could ride anything, or so he claimed, and he had been part of the New Anzand force that took Kabakak from Callvier years before.

‘I washed yesterday!’ Jenner said.

Stibel nodded. ‘Yes sir, and the rule is that we wash every day.’

‘Who made this rule, Stibel?’ Jenner asked.

‘Lady Dafney Killeridge, sir.’ Stibel nodded.

Jenner shrugged. ‘Ah, very well. A rule then.’ He glanced up. ‘A clean shirt as well?’

Stibel contented himself with a nod.

In fact, once clean, Jenner proved to be good company. He didn’t drink to excess, he was a fair shot with the latchet she bought him, and he was capable of real gratitude, which was endearing. He had no small talk and yet could be very interesting.

All of that was good, because the four of them, that is, Lady Killeridge herself, Jenner, Stibel, and Sortence, her lady’s maid, were the only Old Worlders on the expedition.

Killeridge had a sailing yacht and it took them into San Leone, the major port of the surviving Neu Callvier colonies. In San Leone she hired a caravan and guides, and a dozen local warriors to protect them as they started up the Malo River into the mountains. They, and the guides, deserted, one by one, or died, as they crossed a thousand leagues of mountains, lakes and rivers. Summer passed into autumn; Killeridge saved Jenner when his horse fell off an ancient road into an icy crevasse. A week later the last of their hired guides vanished on a moonless night in a high pass at the edge of the Kamira, and they were on the edge of winter.

‘We could turn back,’ Killeridge allowed. She was wearing a fur coat over a fur lined pelisse, with a massive fur hat, gauntlets, and fur lined hip boots. She hadn’t changed her clothes in nine days and worried she had lice.

Jenner had snow goggles made of bone fixed over his nose. He looked like an enormous bundle of rags. He was peering off down the next valley.

‘We’re close,’ he said.

‘We’re close to an icy desert,’ she corrected him. ‘I’m cold now.’

‘We’re close to bloody starvation,’ Sortence said, under her breath.

He shook his head. ‘I can feel the curse,’ he said. ‘I’m sure of it. So sure I can navigate by it. We cannot turn back now.’

Killeridge wasn’t sure she could imagine doing this a second time. They had already left the map of civilization and plotted a new path across hidden valleys and lost passes. Jenner would no doubt get the Blackpool Geographic Society’s gold medal. If she was very lucky, her presence would be mentioned. She would write a book—such a book!

She grimaced. It would be a much better book if she discovered some ancient ruins at the end.

Of course, she would have to live to write it.

The next morning, Killeridge found a cave near the top of the next pass, and Stibel shot a mountain elk across a small gorge, and then spent all day bringing the meat into camp. Jenner lit a fire of frozen wood by magery, which caused Sortence to hide her head, but the warmth was welcome, and the fire quickly warmed the little cave they'd found.

‘Who stacked the wood?’ Jenner asked.

Stibel shrugged.

‘Someone passed this way,’ Stibel said. ‘Someone of a fair size. A big lad.’

Jenner looked interested. ‘The Aborigines are reputed to be tall,’ he said.

‘Aborigines?’ Killeridge pronounced the word as if it was in Callvier. ‘We should thank them. This wood may have saved our lives.’

They were down to eight animals, all ponies, and the ponies were skinny. Stibel took his mistress outside into the starlit night, where it was suddenly very cold indeed.

‘My lady,’ he said. ‘If those ponies die, we die.’

She bit her lips.

‘I ain’t the kind that shirks, my lady, but if we don’t find fodder, tomorrow, we either turn back or die. Even then—mayhap we die.’ He shrugged. ‘Ponies will eat most things, but they won’t eat meat.’ ‘And by my reckoning, it’s two days to Yule.’

‘So it is,’ Killeridge said.

‘A damned cold, miserable Yule,’ Stibel said.

‘I understand,’ she said. She glanced into the cave, at Jenner. ‘I wish to try. Until Yule.’

Stibel nodded with apparent resignation, a good soldier.

‘If we get through this, Stibel, I’ll buy you a farm,’ she said.

‘Tavern,’ he said. ‘In Nannes,’ he added.

She smiled. ‘Done.’

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In the morning, they crossed the pass in thick mist that turned first, to snow, and then to a swirling rain and fog. Over the pass, they began to descend. Even as they went down, it grew warmer, and the air less thin. Twice, they heard the rumble of an avalanche high above them.

‘I would wager those are the tallest mountains in the world,’ Killeridge said to Jenner.

Jenner glanced at her with a total lack of interest. ‘We’re here, Killeridge. This must be the Dai heartland. I can taste the curse. Feel the wind!’

Indeed, they were riding into a growing wind—cold, and terribly dry. Lady Killeridge donned her own snow goggles, and they went down, switchback after switchback. The snow vanished. The wind, laden with ice crystals and sand, was abrasive; they tied rags over the heads of their ponies and then they had to lead them, slowly and carefully, the track widened to a trail, and the trail to a road, paved in black basalt.

Jenner knelt in the road. ‘Dai,’ he said, triumphantly. ‘It’s Dai stonework.’

‘Won’t feed the ponies,’ Stibel muttered.

Sortence glanced at him and away.

And then, as if by some miracle, the wind slowed, and they could see for leagues across the valley.

Even Sortence gave a gasp of pure awe.

Jenner grabbed for the monocular that was in a holster on his saddle.

There, visible leagues away in the clear air, were golden towers that seemed to be lit by fire, standing tall and slim above a massive wall of pure white. The black basalt road ran down into the valley and back up the far side, and then vanished where a terrible avalanche had taken out one mighty tower and cut the road by the gate.

Jenner shook his head as if to clear it, even as the wind started up again.

‘Incredible,’ Killeridge said.

‘Damn,’ Jenner said. ‘Not the capital.’ He paused. ‘There are people.’

‘What?’ Killeridge looked at him as if he was mad. In fact, she thought he was mad.

‘Damn it,’ he said. ‘It’s too small to be the capital. A fortress. Perhaps a monastery?’

Stibel leaned forward, holding her bridle. ‘What now, my lady?’ he asked.

Killeridge leaned forward. ‘There are people?’ she asked patiently.

‘At least a dozen. And goats.’

She looked at Stibel.

Stibel nodded. 'Forward it is, my lady.'

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They found the village at the bottom of the valley, where a trickle of water from a spring fed enough moisture to support a hundred villagers and their animals and agriculture, and the shoulder of the mountain protected the village from the worst of the wind, although it whirled about them like a live thing. Three women and a man came out to meet them, unarmed, and beckoned them by sign language to a small stone platform by the spring, where the wind was almost silent and they could water their ponies. They communicated in sign language, but the villagers seemed unafraid and willing to provide them with water and fodder for their ponies. Jenner handed over ten silver soldii to a village woman, who walked back to her small, whitewashed stone house and returned with change, which she counted into his hand.

It was while the local woman counted that revelation came—'penna, seyya, seda, yota, enis, tekna,' she said with deliberation. She thought he was slow.

Jenner's eyes went wide and his hands shook. 'Junius,' he muttered. 'Killeridge, did you hear that?'

She was looking at the freshwater spring. 'Not particularly, Jenner.'

'I think she's speaking Dai. She...the numbers...Dai.' He was looking at the woman, who was in perhaps her mid-fifties. She had a great deal of grey hair in an elaborate set of braids, and wore a simple sleeveless smock and a sheepskin coat with porcupine-quill embroidery in the seams. She wasn't tall, but she was slim, her hair jet-black, her skin so deeply bronzed by the

sun and the wind that it was almost the colour of Jenner's pony. She was obviously human, and cheerful, in a dignified manner.

'Ask her is there's an inn,' Killeridge said. 'I'd kill for a bath.'

Jenner scrambled in his saddlebags for a something, gave u, extracted a small tablet of ivory and wrote something on it—a sigil. The woman glanced at it and shrugged. 'Penna?' she said.

Jenner whooped, which startled the woman. 'Penna,' he said.

'Tavern?' Stibel asked.'

'Bed? Sortense muttered. 'Bath?'

Jenner took most things literally. After quite a long hesitation, he said, 'Po ernai ena pano'do(k)alo?'

The older woman looked at him, squinted her eyes, and shook her head.

'Damn. Must be my pronunciation.' He tried the same words again, more slowly.

She spoke several sentences, hands on hips.

'Damn, damn. I understood a few words—I think I did. Am I fooling myself with my own desires?' He tried again, this time substituting the word 'Ksenia do(k)alo.'

She brightened. 'Ah!' she said. Rapid fire instructions. Her demeanour changed, and she bowed to Jenner.

'Well, I understood that she wanted me to go left at the next building,' he said. He shrugged. Looking at the village woman, he said, 'Paskalo! Pare mio?'

The woman raised a hand, the universal sign for ‘give me a minute.’ She went inside her house, and returned leading a milking goat. Then she led the four of them down a gap between two buildings no wider than a mounted person, and in moments they were in a maze of close-packed houses that protected them from the force of the wind.

She turned a fourth corner and produced an elaborate key from her sheepskin coat, said something, and opened a solid wood door with a barred window. Then she led them in through what proved to be a gate and into a small courtyard. There was a stable with ten stalls, and a very small house with two rooms. The rooms were filthy, and things crawled on the floor.

She bowed again—to Jenner—an made what was clearly an apology. Then she shrugged and said something. She looked them over and handed Stibel the key, which made Killeridge laugh. Jenner seized the key and walked out into the light of the stone-paved yard. ‘It’s a Dai key,’ he said. ‘Junius. Straight shaft, with these complex patterns cut into the —oh, hells. This is incredible.’ He walked to the gate and began to disassemble the lock.

Killeridge left him to it. She took a long look at the rooms, kicked a pile of rotten straw and saw what ran out, and retreated. In the stable she found fresh millet straw laid down by Stibel, who was using a perfectly ordinary pitchfork to spread straw in every stall.

‘It’s much cleaner here than in that house,’ she said.

Stibel nodded.

‘How’s the loft?’ she asked.

‘Full of clean, soft straw,’ he said. ‘And there’s bales of green fodder—not green enough to go bad. Or catch fire.’

Jenner came in. 'I know how they work!' he said.

'What, Jenner.'

'Dai locks!' He looked around.

Killeridge nodded. 'We'll be sleeping in the hayloft,' she said.

Jenner nodded. 'Certainly,' he said. He was still grappling with the wonders of the village.

She leaned over to him. 'The 'spring' is a stone water pipe. It's all Dai stonework.'

'I missed that,' he said. 'You're much better on the physical evidence.'

'I don't even pretend to speak Dai,' she said. 'Am I to take it that these people are the descendants of the Dai?'

Jenner shook his head. 'I have no idea,' he said. 'But my guess is they are the descendants of Dai slaves.' He walked over to the water pipe, and began to examine the hieroglyphs. He shook his head.

'I can't read it, but there's the Royal Governor cartouche again. Or, I'm totally wrong about the cartouches.' He shook his head. 'No one knows how to speak Dai, Killeridge. I have scraps—by Sival, son of the Magnificent! I guessed at the formal mode.' He took out a lens and began to look more closely at the inscription. 'So this isn't the heartland of empire. If not, here, then where?'

That evening, a dozen villagers including some youths came with a bronze cauldron of stew; highly spiced, full of mutton, as well as some piping-hot unleavened bread and a lot of fermented milk. The youngest woman held out her hand, as if expecting payment. Jenner thought a moment and then tried 'Posto?' When she looked puzzled, he said, 'Poshto?'

The young woman, who wore a kaftan of what appeared to be silk with billowing silk trousers and very tight low boots under her sheepskin coat, looked into Jenner's face for a moment. Then she held up a single silver coin.

He handed over a soldii.

She then pointed at the stable, or the ponies, and said something that included the word he knew for 'straw.' Jenner nodded enthusiastically and, in the end, handed over another soldii for straw.

Then he fetched his ivory tablet and wrote on it. The young woman watched, and then spoke, and Jenner laughed aloud. 'Incredible,' he said. 'Well, the things I had wrong—'

Everyone smiled. Reserve seemed to die away; there was a babble of discussion, and a clay amphora of wine was opened, and some children appeared.

They all sat cross-legged on the ground to eat. A low table was set before them by the young people, and the food was served. Everyone present ate from the pot, and there was plenty. Stibel got the hang of eating with his hands and his bread almost immediately and got an approving glance from the woman in the silk kaftan.

She leaned forward, spoke to Jenner, and then looked at Stibel. Jenner wrote some symbols, and then had a low conversation with the woman, and then he turned to Stibel. 'She asks, are you a soldier. I said yes for you.'

Stibel nodded, and bowed where he sat. The silk-clad woman met his eyes boldly, but she didn't return his bow. She did smile, very slightly.

'Jenner, ask then if they have a bath house?' Killeridge asked.

It proved after some discussion that they had a large copper basin, and they set to heating a good deal of water.

‘But why silver coin?’ Killeridge asked. ‘Where do they spend it?’

Jenner wasn’t listening to her; his whole attention was on the chatter of the natives. He tried speaking with almost all of them, but the silk-clad woman understood him best, and was clearly the only one who could read his symbols, at least, read them easily. And Killeridge could see that Jenner bored the woman, who had eyes only for Stibel.

She’d have laughed, if she hadn’t been as interested in the translation of Dai as Jenner himself. But while Jenner bathed, under Stibel’s absolute orders, Killeridge tried her little Dai on the silk-clad woman, who was respectful, but neither could make any sense of the other, and they giggled with shared frustration.

Stibel bathed last, after he’d cut them a small pine from the hillside behind the town, and Sortense made a string of some red berries with her needle and strong thread while Stibel put his military cap badge on the top of the tree as a sign for Junius. Jenner, clean and fed, went back to trying his Dai, but the silk-clad lady was politely dismissive, and Jenner had to give up, leaving her sitting quietly with Stibel.

Sortense was hanging her garland on the tree when Jenner climbed up. He held a second lantern for her as she wrapped the tree.

‘Very—Juniast,’ he said.

‘Some of us are just that, sir,’ Sortense said.

‘Of course you are,’ Jenner said. ‘And very proper too.’ He looked at the tree as if he’d never seen one before. ‘Did your Saint Junius specify a red pine, Sortence?’

‘I wouldn’t know,’ the maid said, with some asperity, feeling that her religion was being challenged. In fact, she couldn’t remember anything about trees in the Book of Junius.

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That night, Jenner and Killeridge slept close, with Sortense on the other side of Killeridge and Stibel nowhere to be found. It had been cold when the sun went down, and Jenner reminded them that they were still at a high altitude.

Killeridge, clean for the first time in weeks, full of food, and having had a little bit of wine, rolled over to face Jenner, who lay on his back, looking at the spiders on the roof beams. She was warm and clean and interested in something besides intellectual conversation.

‘Did you know,’ she said, ‘that they placed bets on what we’d do when we met?’

Jenner shook his head. ‘Really?’ he asked. ‘I don’t always understand my fellow man. What did they think we’d do? You are a perfectly pleasant woman; what would I object to?’

Somewhere in the darkness, Sortense stifled a laugh.

‘How would you react if I kissed you?’ she asked.

‘Oh, as to that, I imagine I would enjoy it,’ he said, as if beautiful socialites asked to kiss him all the time. ‘You will have to teach me,’ though. I don’t have any experience in such things.’

Somewhere in the darkness, Sortense grunted.

‘Let’s see,’ Killeridge began.

#

Jenner was up with the dawn, and when Killeridge rose she found that he had spent the early hours trying his broken Dai greetings on various farmers. Stibel reappeared with breakfast, having ‘found other quarters,’ about which he seemed reticent.

Jenner sat down to eggs and bread in the cold courtyard. ‘We are very close to the source of the curse,’ he said. ‘I want to go to the source.’

She bit her lips. They’d made love in the dark-and this was his reaction? ‘Is that all you have to say to me?’ she asked him.

He frowned and wrinkled his nose, clearly puzzled. ‘Yes?’ he asked. ‘Ah! I apologize.’ He smiled. ‘A happy Yule to you,’ he said.

She blinked. Then she sighed. ‘And you Nazlans don’t celebrate Yule?’

He smiled. ‘It’ is a pagan holiday. Indeed, I imagine your forebearers celebrated it long before your Junius appeared.’ He shrugged. ‘But it is pleasant enough. The tree is handsome, and adorns the loft.’ He smiled.

She wanted to hit him, but this was hardly the first time. She sighed. ‘Must we go to the source of the curse?’ she asked, when it was clear he would volunteer no more. ‘We made it here. We can rest the beasts, feed up, buy supplies—’

He leaned back. 'If we can exorcise the curse—'

She looked at him. 'Let me posit a theory,' she said. When he tried to interrupt her, she bore down on him, her anger not entirely scientific. 'Let me state this. Listen, damn you. What if these people live here in peace *because of the curse?*'

He rocked back as if struck. 'Damme,' he said. 'Never thought of that.' He smiled at her. 'Well played, Killeridge.'

One of the things Lady Killeridge liked best about Jenner was that, despite being a man, he could be corrected.

He sat back and ate another bite of spiced egg. He spoke cautiously. 'I'd like to *see* the source, anyway,' he said. 'It must be—powerful.'

'You can talk to these people now?' she asked.

He raised a hand and flipped it back and forth. 'I can understand a very little of what they say, and they can understand maybe a half of what I think I'm saying.' He shrugged.

'Have you asked about the castle on the mountain?' she asked.

'Yes. It's the 'Old Monastery.' Only goats there now.' He smiled. 'I suspect that it is the largest intact Dai site we'll ever find. I'm considering asking you to leave me here. But to be honest, I'm not sure I could ever get home without you.' He paused. 'I'm really quite taken with you, Killeridge. I'm—that is to say—' He paused. 'That is to say, I should devote my whole mind to these people and the Dai language, and all I can really think of is you.'

She looked into his odd, jade coloured eyes. They were so close that she could feel the warmth of his face and smell the cardamom on his breath—a serious improvement.

‘Leave you here?’ she asked. She was shocked, and she was not easy to shock. And the intensity of his affection. Possibly—

‘You—’ she began.

‘I know—you didn’t bring me here to fail with he language. I won’t let you down. But I must see the ruins and the towers, and the source of the curse. Imagine the hieroglyphs at the monastery!’ He was smiling, so close his lips almost touched hers.

‘Leave you here?’ she said again.

‘With a Dai archaeological site inhabited by people who speak a decayed form of Dai?’ he said. ‘I was made for this.’ He smiled at her, a twist of his mouth that made him look handsome, for a moment. ‘We will be more famous than Talmides. Happy Yule.’

She looked into his odd eyes and shook her head.. But she leaned forward and brushed his lips with hers. ‘Happy Yule,’ she said. Then, sitting back, she met his eye and laughed. ‘I’m not sure they’d feed you when you ran out of silver,’ she teased. ‘If you stay.’

‘There is that.’ He seemed to take this a s a serious problem. ‘By the way, here is your change from yesterday—’ he handed over the five coins.

Killeridge was chewing on the comment ‘quite taken with you’ in her head as she took the coins. Something caught her eye--she glared at them and her head snapped back.

‘Jenner, look!’

They were Dai coins—late period in terrible condition. Three of the five were simply flat silver disks, but two had recognizable features of the Dai Dragon and one of the later emperors portrayed in profile.

‘How—’ Jenner asked, and then paused. ‘It must be the curse.’

Killeridge’s eyes narrowed. She usually squinted, when she was thinking hard. Her mother had often criticized her for it. ‘It affects time?’ she asked.

Jenner looked around. ‘I would have said that was not possible.’ He looked at the coins. ‘The seventh Dai-Shan War began in 760, or 761, by the Dai Imperial Reckoning. Right?’

Killeridge nodded.

‘The last Battle of the Breakers was, according to Li Shu, fought in 768, and the Breakers fell at last. The Siege of Kabakak began in the late summer of 771. The Cataclysm struck in spring 772.’ He looked at the two coins. Neither had a visible date. Dates and numbers were one of the aspects of Dai hieroglyphs that he felt he’d cracked.

‘So here we are in D.E. 1771,’ Jenner said. ‘Is it just coincidence that a thousand years have passed since the Cataclysm?’ He was looking up the mountain, where the usual storm of sand and ice crystals obscured almost everything. ‘Is the curse wearing thin? Are we breaking the curse just by being here?’

‘You are scaring me,’ she said.

Jenner nodded. ‘I’m scaring myself. These are matters of high sorcery, and far more than academic interest.’ He indicated the stables. ‘Let’s go have a look at the source of the curse?’ he suggested.

Killeridge felt her usual combination of excitement and fear. ‘After you,’ she said.

They climbed the black basalt road, switchback after switchback, for what seemed leagues. The wind blew like a hurricane; the ponies hated it, and if the road had not been wide, their whole progress would have been impossible. Even as it was, Killeridge was in constant fear of being blown right off the mountain, and it was unwise to remove any article of clothing or snow goggles for even an instant—the abrasion of the blowing sand was terrible.

But by mid-morning, they had reached the avalanche site.

‘Right here!’ Jenner shouted.

She knew he meant the curse. She felt nothing; she never did. She was absent the least shred of talent, so much so that she sometimes doubted its existence.

Jenner raised his left hand and said some words in Dai. He glowed with a beautiful light, a blue-white light like the heart of a good diamond, and the wind slowed, stopped for a few blessed heartbeats—and then roared back to life.

Jenner looked annoyed. He shouted something into the winds, and then sang, his mouth moving, his words snatched away. Again, the winds slowed, and she could hear his atonal song—and then, like a blow, the wind returned.

The ponies began to fret. Jenner dismounted, and his animal immediately broke free, turned, and ran off down the road. He raised his hands like a Juniast priest, and she saw that he had a baton or a wand, and he was signing in his odd, harsh voice, and he began to glow. She left him to it, and she turned her own mount, and rode back down two turns, to where his pony was huddled

against a wall. There was much less wind there, and she tied both ponies by their headstalls and walked back up.

Jenner was gone.

She never saw him again.

#

Her second book, ‘Discovering the Dai,’ was a monumental work, covering what was known of Dai history and then her own explorations of the Dai monastery. She undertook them in desperation, convinced the Jenner was trapped in the maze of corridors below the ancient ruins, but after fifteen days she knew he was gone, and by then she’d discovered the first of a dozen libraries, walled vaults full of scrolls. Stibel helped her, but none of the villagers would touch a stone.

Eventually she dug carefully at the collapsed road where Jenner had vanished. The soil was loose and easy to dig, and the wind, the ever-present wind, seemed to carry it away as if helping her to dig. Sometimes, as the evenings lengthened, she thought Jenner was watching her.

She only had to dig down a few feet before she found the first body, and then a text in Dai, a codex thicker and with more pages than anything she’d found in the libraries beneath the monastery. She hefted the codex in her hand and admitted to herself that Jenner was gone. It wasn’t a rational decision; it was an emotional one, but once made, she shouldered her spade, put her snow goggles back, and climbed out of her dig.

The villagers sold them food and fodder and six more ponies, and Stibel's 'friend' guided them back up the road to the height of the pass. But she wouldn't follow Stibel any further, and he did not desert Lady Killeridge. The native woman turned away without a tear.

By the time they made the port of San Leone, Killeridge knew she was pregnant, and she stayed the summer in New Callvier, bought a small farm and began writing. Her child, a daughter, was born in the autumn, and she used money and privilege to buy the child an identity as her *adopted* daughter. There were some societal rules she sought to appear to obey.

The codex from the avalanche was written on parchment, preserved by the cold and dry conditions, and the book was an ancient text—a book in Dai, with facing page translations in old Elenion, a language that she knew a little, as many of the classics were in it. So she could read the title:

για την πρόληψη του θανάτου

And she could translate it as 'On the preservation of Life'

The book was odd in other ways; written mostly in gold ink on purple, curiously heavy, and each time she opened it, she felt a pang of guilt about Jenner, which made no sense. But one day, she found her daughter playing with the book, an odd look in her eyes.

Althea had jade green eyes, and a certain way of holding her head that caused gossip. Still, it was years before the baby became a child, and the child a mature adult, and in that time, no fewer than ten expeditions attempted to retrace her steps into the central massif; academicians, adventurers, rogues. Of the ten attempts, only three reached the village she had described, and only one returned, having found the winds considerably reduced. Sir Gillin Folcroft reported that people of the valley were still there, and in good health; the monastery held signs of an

ancient massacre, with macabre desiccated bodies, and more murder was revealed on the dark road below when the avalanche was cleared away. He also reported a remarkable cache of manuscripts among the desiccated corpses, the largest group of Dai books and scrolls ever discovered, and he claimed that the corridors under the monastery probably went on for miles and planned a second expedition. Unfortunately, he was murdered before he could publish his own book; beheaded by a sword-wielding assassin. Most of the Dai manuscripts he had recovered were apparently destroyed when his country house burned with his body in it. A handful that he had loaned to fellow scholars, Reynard Youngblood and Hrad Botherby, became the foundation of modern Dai studies.

As her daughter grew, and studied, Lady Killeridge did indeed buy Stibel an inn at Nannes. Lady Dafney lectured extensively in Callvier, Vartstadt and Anzand. After the publication of her book on the Dai monastery, she looked around for new mountains to climb, at least metaphorically, and she chose Navin, the closed land of islands off the coast of the Southern Continent; a land of snow-capped volcanoes and magnificent deep woods. She'd snuck in once before, because she had wanted to see it and she'd been expelled. Juniasm was forbidden there.

'Perfect,' she said to Sortense, who, long suffering and yet devoted, had lost toes to frostbite and yet survived to become a lay sister. 'Practise your Navinese, my dear.'

Sortense grunted. 'Yes, your worship,' she muttered.