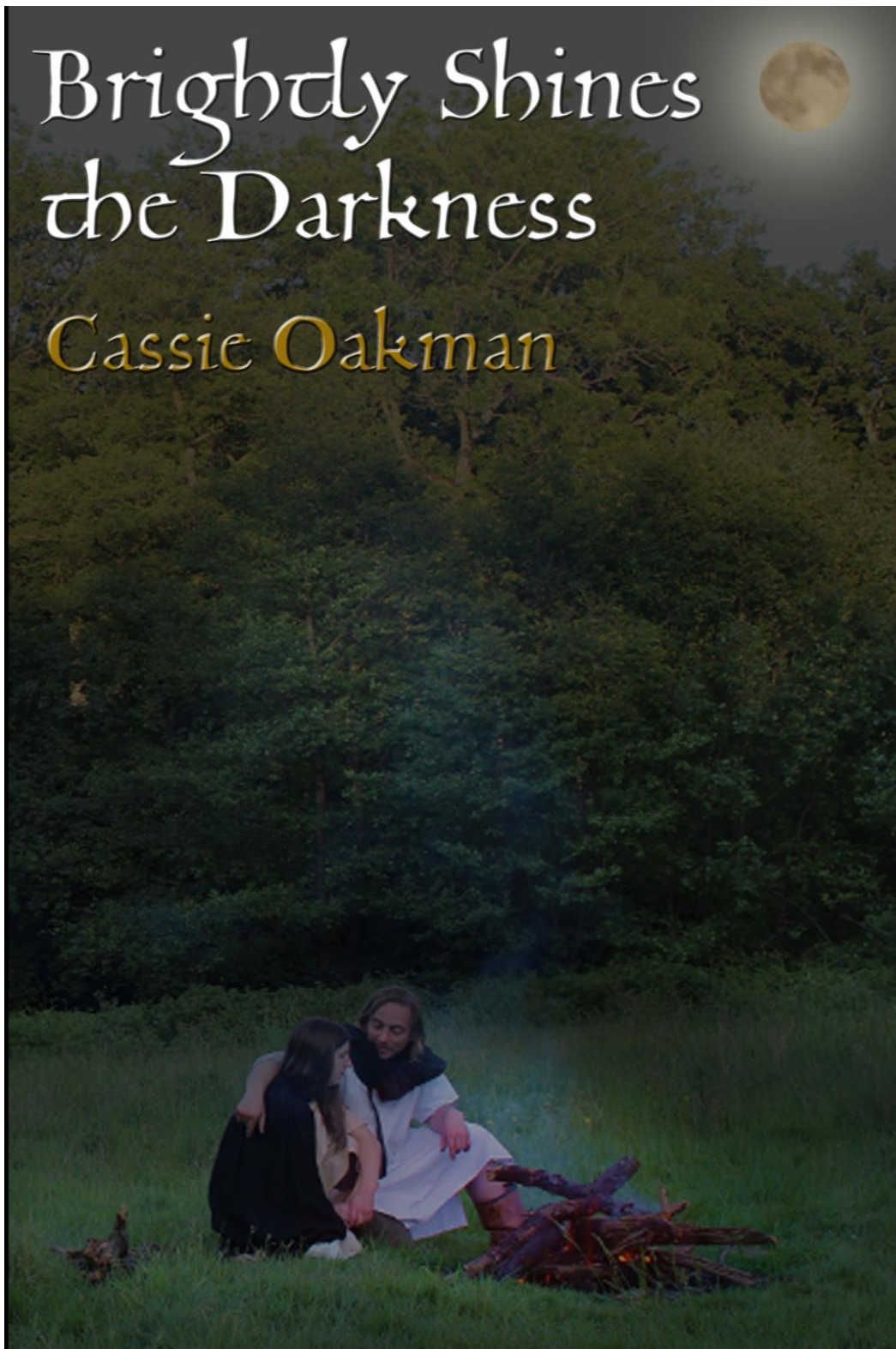


Brightly Shines the Darkness

Cassie Oakman



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Prologue - Ninth Cycle, Day the Third, after dark

At Passenda's suggestion, the most severely injured priests had been brought to one of the side-chambers of the roundhouse where they had been incarcerated, and she was doing what she could to ease their pain. This was little enough; the warriors had taken away her medicine-bag, and there was not even any fresh water to clean their wounds and cool them. She could do little more than cover them with the cloaks and ceremonial skins of her companions to keep them warm, and use her healing touch to soothe their suffering. Two others who were also healers had seen her efforts and come to assist her, but she knew that several of the wounded would die before morning.

Passenda had not heard Pero approaching, and she faltered in her work when he addressed her. "I must speak with Dhoban or Serin," he said, "To tell them what has happened, and what they must do."

"You can't spirit-walk with those warriors watching us! If the sunservers see you following a moon practice, they'll kill you."

"Do you really think they're going to let us go?" he asked bitterly. "We're all going to die anyway; I must try to protect our youngsters from harm." Seeing that his wife was still not convinced, he edged past her into the angle of the side-chamber, where the mud-packed ash and hazel wall hid him from the warriors guarding the only entrance to their prison. "Let me move up some of your patients," he continued, "And lie down amongst them." He did so, then picked up a sharp stone from the channel that ran along the perimeter of the packed earth floor. "Cut my forehead, so that blood flows. If any should ask, I am merely one of the wounded."

Passenda recognised that further argument would serve no purpose, and contented herself with suggesting, "Tell them to abandon the priesthood. They don't know how fanatical these sunservers are."

"Nor did we. Beseech the goddess that one of them is spirit-walking, and will be able to hear me." He passed the stone to Passenda, and closed his eyes as she carefully cut his skin.

* * * * *

After his abortive attempt to interrupt Serin's dreams, Pero watched impatiently as Dhoban put away the tools he had been using to clear the undergrowth from the path and lay down, wrapped in his cloak, on the freshly turned earth. As soon as Dhoban's face began to settle into the innocent repose of sleep, Pero gently tugged at his spirit. Such haste was bad-mannered and invasive, but at any moment Pero might be recalled to his body; he could not afford to wait courteously.

"We have been taken," he said abruptly when he felt he had the young man's attention, "No, don't question me. Pay attention, and let us beseech the goddess you remember this as more than a dream.

"You and Serin must not attempt to carry on without us. You are too young and inexperienced; besides, the new sunservers are fanatics, and employ warriors to enforce their beliefs. Sooner or later they will reach our little village. So you must both renounce your priesthood. The proper way to do this is by asking a senior priest, preferably one of your own lineage, to unbind you. In case you later need to convince the authorities that this has been done, the ceremony should be witnessed by an elder beyond reproach.

"You were initiated by myself and my wife, but we are to die, and so we can't unbind you before witnesses. It was your mother and her partner who taught us to Lead. You should try to find one of them. Your mother went across the sea. Ask Ronil Merchant if he has heard

news of her in his travels. You may trust him; he is not a Follower, but he wouldn't betray you. If you don't feel you can trace her quickly enough, go with Serin to Rorbik. Seek out an inn set under the cliffs behind the port, with a ship painted above its door. Take rooms there, and hold a calling ceremony. The priest who partnered your mother until her marriage lives nearby - at least, he used to - and if he is still alive and in the area, he will hear your call and know where to find you."

Dhoban's attention was wandering, and the link between the two men was weakening. Pero faltered, uncertain that his beloved apprentice had appreciated the importance and urgency of what he was trying to convey. But there was no other way. Discouraged, he continued, "If he doesn't answer within a quarter-cycle, then seek out any grey-haired priest, and ask him to unbind you before the elders."

"The Way must always be Followed," muttered Dhoban.

Cheered at this evidence that the youth had at least heard him, Pero replied, "Yes, it must. But not by you and Serin. Not openly, and not as priests. In your hearts, you will Follow. But you must no longer Lead."

"You and Passenda Lead."

"We have been imprisoned; we won't return. You and Serin must disassociate yourselves from the Way." Pero's view of Dhoban blurred, and he realised that their time together had come to an end. "I can't maintain this link any longer. Don't grieve for Passenda and me - give our deaths meaning by following my advice one last time."

Passenda heard his groan as he regained consciousness above the moans and cries of their companions in misfortune, and she abandoned the wounded man she was attempting to console to kneel at his side. "Did you reach either of them?" she begged him for news before he was truly awake.

Pero shook his head and stretched to dispel the cobwebs. "I had to take them as they were; I had neither the composure nor the energy to bend time. Serin was asleep, but unapproachable. I caught Dhoban just as he was lying down for the night. I explained everything to him, but he was this side of the veil. If he remembers it at all, he may dismiss it as a dream."

"You did your best," she consoled him.

"Let's hope it was enough. If I can, I'll try again in the morning. Perhaps they'll be more receptive as their spirits move towards awakening than they were as they fell asleep."

"You won't be allowed the opportunity. While your spirit was gone, the warriors who are guarding us were gloating about the magnificent offering they would be making when their god next appears."

Pero understood at once. "And their god is the sun, and their offerings are sacrifices by fire."

"Yes. Hence the distress you hear around us. We are all to burn at dawn."

Chapter 1 - Thirteenth Cycle, Day the First, evening

Sharn whistled as he strode out of the village in the direction of the old mill, where he was harvesting the reeds to dry for thatching. He carried his scythe balanced on his shoulder, hoping to convince anyone who might see him that he was on his way back to work. Although it was nearly dusk, this was entirely plausible: he was a hardworking man, and the other villagers would expect him to take advantage of the last precious hours of daylight.

Moreover, he had a pretty but discontented wife, and many of the other young men sympathised in silence with his desire to provide an ever better lifestyle for her, even though she never seemed to appreciate his efforts. They had, however, long since learned not to commiserate openly with him, for Sharn would not allow any criticism of his beloved Vetia.

Luckily, the village's more curious souls were all indoors at this hour, and those that saw Sharn pass were busy with their own affairs. So there was no-one to notice the change in his demeanour, once he had walked towards the old mill for a further few hundred paces after crossing the ditch that marked the boundary of the settlement. As he branched off into the woods, his whistling ceased, and the jaunty, carefree air was replaced by a furtive manner that seemed out of character.

Creeping stealthily deeper into the undergrowth, he soon reached the clearing where the old oak had fallen during the early storm a cycle ago. He approached the hole where the roots, now chopped for next year's fires, had lain, and placed the scythe next to the two large bundles of reeds that he had hidden there earlier that day. As he continued on his way, the absence of this tool of his trade seemed to have removed the last vestiges of his confidence, for now he tiptoed with great caution from the shelter of one tree to the next. In this tortuous way, he gradually approached the woodland hut that was his goal.

* * * * *

Dhoban was starting to get a trifle exasperated with his sister. "This is supposed to be a calm communion with the spirits that I'm preparing! It'll be easier for me to relax if you don't hurry me away," he gently chided her. "It really doesn't matter if I take a bit longer to get ready."

"You said you needed to leave straight after supper," Serin reminded him anxiously, "And you know you prefer to set up your hide while you can still see what you're doing!"

"But we've only just finished clearing up after our dinner, and you wouldn't have liked me to go without tidying away the things that I used in the Followers' ceremony this afternoon. Besides, this is a full-moon meditation, after all, and as long as the clouds stay away, I'll be able to see all night." Although his voice was mild, his sister could hear the edge in his words, and knew better than to continue harrying him.

"I just want it all to go well tonight," she explained. "It's vital that we choose our apprentices wisely, and we do so need the spirits' help."

"Well, I'm sure they're aware of that. And they're not likely to refuse to advise us on such an important matter. Are you sure you won't come with me, if you're so concerned that the session should go well? The two of us might receive more guidance than I can get alone."

"No, I'll meditate at home, as usual," replied his sister, "But I thank you for being willing to share your vigil with me." Knowing how much he preferred solitude for his all-night sessions, she was touched by his offer and regretted her earlier shrewishness. She stroked his cheek tentatively with her finger, in her customary way of asking forgiveness, and he, recognising that Serin found it hard to apologise in words, accepted the gesture by covering

her hand with his own. They resumed their preparations in silent harmony, and Dhoban was nearly ready to leave when a firm knock on the doorpost took them both by surprise. Serin brushed past her brother in her haste to draw aside the curtain and reveal their visitor. "Master Farren! Master Ronil!" she exclaimed. "Do come in."

Dhoban respectfully ushered their guests to the only two chairs. "This is a great honour," he said. "May I prepare a drink for you?"

"Nay, lad, we've come on business, and the sooner we get down to it, the sooner we'll leave you in peace." Farren pushed his chair a little further from the table; he felt that his prosperous figure gave him a dignified air that matched his position as chief elder in the village, but it demanded plenty of room to be comfortable.

"If you'd prefer to speak to Dhoban alone," said Serin, "There's plenty I could be doing outside."

"Nay, sit down, both of you." When the two young people were perched on the edge of Serin's altar, Farren continued, "Ronil and I have come, as the two most senior elders in the village, to ask you both to reconsider your decision to take on apprentices." He held up a hand to forestall their objections, and explained firmly, "When Pero and Passenda left for the Priests' Gathering, of course they said you could hold services during their absence – you were their apprentices, after all! And then when we heard, a cycle or so later, that foreign sunservers had murdered all the moon-priests when they were supposed to be under Mikon's protection ... well, that was a bad time for our community. We needed time to grieve. The Followers needed comfort – we couldn't have taken away their spiritual support. But times change. From what Master Ronil hears on his travels, these new fanatics have established a firm base in our country, and we've got to think about how we can best protect our village."

"But that was such a long way away!" exclaimed Serin, but her brother interrupted with a more reasoned argument.

"The deaths of Pero and Passenda were a terrible tragedy, I agree; even more so for my sister and myself than for anyone else. Like you, we lost our spiritual leaders, companions on our paths, and most esteemed friends. But we also lost those who brought us up. Pero and Passenda had been like parents to us, ever since our mother and father abandoned us so long ago.

"So we too grieved their passing," he continued. "We wondered how the spirits could have allowed them to accept Sunserver Mikon's invitation, how so many of their most faithful servants could have been killed without omens to guide them to safer choices. But, after much thought, meditation, and communion with the spirits, our position is this.

"Sunserver Mikon sent messengers to invite the noblest and most devout Moonfollowers to attend a double ceremony, for his solstice and our full moon. The two don't often coincide; it would have been an especially powerful time, in both our religions. He wanted to take advantage of this conjunction to forge links that would enable the two main religions of this land to stand united against the threat posed by the Tarkan fanatics."

"They are no threat to Mikon!" interjected Farren, "For they also follow the sun."

"And perhaps that makes them even more dangerous to Mikon than to us," countered Dhoban smoothly. "As Pero explained to me, the sunservers run the risk of their beliefs and practices being gradually corrupted, precisely because at first glance they resemble the newcomers.

"Anyway," Dhoban picked up his thread, as if the interruption had not occurred, "Pero believed that Mikon was sincere. When you, Master Ronil, first brought us news of the tragedy, I did wonder if perhaps the sunservers had invited so many moonfollowers just to make it easier for the fanatics to murder them all at the same time. But having thought it over carefully, I have to say that I believe that it was a devastating blow, that so many of our fellow priests were in Jentok when the fanatics arrived, but that it was a tragic coincidence, rather than a plot conceived or assisted by Mikon."

"Nevertheless," Ronil Merchant pointed out, "You moonfollowers lost your most experienced leaders. And the fact that the fanatical newcomers were able to take everybody unawares, even their fellow sunservers, shows that they are a dangerous and unpredictable force."

"That's true," acknowledged Dhoban, "And Serin and I weren't sure, at first, what we should do. That's why no services were held for a full cycle after we heard of our mentors' deaths, except for their mourning ceremony. But then we held a conference, to which our Followers and the elders were all invited. You, Master Farren, were present at that meeting in both capacities." In spite of Farren's seniority, Dhoban held up his hand in a deliberately imitative gesture to forestall interruption, and went on, "It was decided that the way should still be followed, and that Serin and I should lead it. This was in spite of the fear that the Tarkan fanatics might gain an ever more secure foothold in our country. Indeed, in my opinion, the greater the threat, the more essential it is that we continue seeking the cooperation of the spirits. At the meeting, you and the other elders present all agreed that they have treated us well. Our harvests are always good, and our soil and growing conditions suit a wide variety of crops. We're close enough to Levrik to be able to get city prices, and yet far enough away that they don't really interfere with us. We may not be as wealthy as Carshak, but our river never lets us down, neither by flooding nor by drying up, and what use is gold if villagers be drowned or dying of thirst? We all agreed that we had many reasons to thank the spirits, and that we shouldn't risk angering them by refusing to acknowledge them. If the times are dangerous, then we need their goodwill more than ever."

"We have only your word that the spirits want us to continue following the moon," grumbled Farren.

"You may be a greybearded chief elder, and I merely a youth of seventeen years," retorted Dhoban, "But I am Master in my profession, and deserve respect!"

"You're right, lad: I was over-hasty. We did, it's true, agree that you and Serin should lead the way, provided that you took certain necessary precautions. But taking on apprentices is a step too far."

"It's an essential part of leading the way; priests must have started training their successors by the end of the year in which they become Masters."

"But one of the reasons that you were allowed to continue as priests was that only those who lead forfeit their lives if the fanatics catch them!" shouted Farren. "They don't kill believers, only priests."

"And that hasn't changed. We've known since the summer, Serin and I, that the fanatics may kill us, if ever they sweep this far east."

"But now you want to take on apprentices, and risk their lives, too!" Like Dhoban, Farren had risen from his seat, and both were glaring at each other, unmindful of their respective positions as lords spiritual and temporal within their community.

Serin touched Dhoban lightly on the shoulder, and he obeyed her unspoken command to sit down. She then walked slowly over to Farren, and stroked his upper arm consolingly. "I think that you no longer speak here as chief elder," she said gently. "Else why didn't you object when we first appealed for applicants to work with us, over a cycle ago? If I may say so, you're allowing your personal feelings to cloud your professional judgement." Farren slumped back onto his chair, and lowered his gaze, defeated. Serin continued, sure that she had his attention, although he was not looking at her, "We recognise, Dhoban and I, that leading the way has become a dangerous profession. Nevertheless, it must be done. And if the spirits are to rid us of these Tarkan usurpers, it must be done well. We must therefore honour the moon in all her phases; we must keep vigil for her; and we must start to train our apprentices. We will, of course, continue to take all possible care: Pero himself taught us to vary the time and place of the moon ceremonies, and, like Passenda, I keep our sacred herbs in my dispensing stores, amongst the remedies and medicines that the community relies on me to produce. My altar is a bare shelf, except when I'm actually using it for sacred purposes, and Dhoban's vigil hides are plain shelters, such as any itinerant might build in the woods."

"And how will you minimise the risk to your apprentices?" demanded Farren hopelessly.

"We will do all that we can," intervened Dhoban. "Our best weapon in fighting off the newcomers is the support of the spirits, and to get that we need to preserve the traditional ways. We must, therefore, have apprentices, and we must present them to the Followers. I suggest, however, that we don't register the apprenticeships with the council of elders. In that way, all that is necessary for the spirits will be done, but their secular training will be the only one on record, should strangers meddle in our affairs."

Farren still had a dejected air, as if the young priests had not offered enough, but he made no reply. After a concerned glance at his friend and colleague, Ronil therefore brought the meeting to a close. "It is something, at least, that you both acknowledge the dangers," he said. "But in my travels as master merchant, I shall test the mood of other villages and towns, and report back to the elders and to you. If circumstances change, we may need to confine your activities further."

"I do hope not," retorted Dhoban, as Serin brushed past him to hold back the door-curtain for their guests, "For I am sure that the village would be more likely to suffer in the future, if it were less well protected by the spirits."

"Then let us hope that your spirits drive back these Tarkans before such a decision becomes necessary." Ronil nodded his farewells, and followed Farren from the hut.

"That was unexpected," mused Dhoban quietly, as he watched their guests walking back towards the village. "It was clever of you to make it clear that you had understood why Farren was really concerned, without betraying moonfollowers' business to Ronil."

"It needed doing." Serin was facing her altar, as if preparing herself to commune with the spirits, so that Dhoban could not see her face. "You know, even though we'll have to talk about what the elders were saying at some point, it shouldn't be now. It's late, and we've both got important work to do tonight."

"You're right. I should go to my vigil hide, and you should start your meditations. Are you still happy to stay and work here alone?"

"If we're likely to get opposition from the elders, it's even more important for us to be sure that we know the spirits' will. So we'd better each try to contact them in the way that suits us best."

"Then I shall be on my way. I shall be back in the morning." Dhoban was puzzled when Serin lowered her face to his cloak and stroked his cheek as he hugged her. He would have asked her why she was asking his understanding or forgiveness, but she turned quickly from him and lit the sacred flame on her altar. He dismissed his surprise, and hurried away through the dusk.

As Serin stood watching him go, she glanced at the woods, hoping that Sharn, who must have been waiting for some time, was well enough hidden to escape the notice of someone as observant as her brother. She quickly set out her powders, so that she could commence her ceremony straight after Sharn's departure. She had barely completed her preparations when a light scratch on the knocking post heralded the appearance of her lover.

Dhoban, the elders, the spirits, all instantly forgotten, she raised her hands to smooth her long dark hair as she ran to the entrance, in an age-old feminine gesture of a vanity she rarely seemed to possess. Impatiently brushing aside the door-curtain, she twined her arms around Sharn's neck and started kissing him as he crossed the threshold into the tiny dwelling. She ran her hands down over his body and lifted the hem of his tunic to reach the smooth skin of his back, as he undid the bows at the back of her shift and gently pulled her down onto the rug in front of the blazing fire.

Later, as they lay drinking blackberry cordial together by the glowing embers, Sharn broached a subject he would not have dared to raise except at such an intimate moment. "Now that the full moon is here, I suppose you're busy choosing your new acolytes," he began tentatively.

"They're called apprentices, like in any other profession," Serin corrected him gently, "But yes, we do need to start preparing them, in case they should need to take over from us unexpectedly. If something should happen to Dhoban or me, there must always be two who can lead the Way. And even if we just need to be away for a few days, it's better not to leave the community unattended. Dhoban is hoping to walk with the spirits tonight and learn who should be chosen."

"We're such a small group here," Sharn continued carefully, "There can't be many applicants."

"Only three," sighed Serin, giving away more information than was customary in this unguarded moment between lovers, "And we don't even have any girls to choose from. It's so much better to have both male and female energies in the priesthood."

"Who has applied?"

"Now you know I can't tell you that," Serin chided him gently, "There's a right way of doing things. You and the other Followers will be introduced to the new apprentices when they undergo their initiation at the next full moon."

"I do have a reason for bringing this matter up with you," said Sharn, attempting to justify his breach of convention. "Young Ardil has been dropping hints around the village that soon people will have to show him some respect, and it seems to me that you should know about his loose tongue, if you're considering him as one of our future leaders."

"Yes, discretion is not one of his strong points," conceded Serin, not bothering to deny that Ardil was one of the applicants. "If the spirits guide us to choose him, we'll have to teach him when to keep his mouth shut."

"Who you choose is up to you. But as a Follower, I wouldn't want some silly apprentice putting our lives in danger," Sharn pointed out. His concern was somewhat overstated, for

both knew that, whilst priests had been killed for Leading the Way, Followers had never been more than despised for their beliefs by the sunservers. Anyway, no sign of the fanatics had been seen outside the western sunserving strongholds.

Judging that he had said enough and that Serin would brook no further interference, Sharn reluctantly stretched, rose from the rug, and put his tunic back on. "Talking of loose tongues," he continued, "Vetia will have plenty to say about how late I've stayed out: it's much too dark for reed cutting. I'd best pop in to see my parents on my way home, so that I can tell her that I visited them. That'll justify some of the time I've been gone."

Knowing that Sharn would not allow others to criticise his young wife, Serin merely gave him a smile of commiseration as she rose to bid him farewell. "You should have brought your cloak," she told him. "It'll be chilly now the sun's down."

"I'll have to run, or no excuse will do. That'll keep me warm." He clasped Serin to him and added, "You take care. It's risky business you're doing, and I couldn't bear to lose you."

"I'm always careful, you know that, although there's very little danger out here in the countryside. If the Tarkan sun-followers ever move further east, they'll surely concentrate their efforts in Levrik and other cities."

"And once they've got the towns under their thumb, they'll move on to the villages."

"But that may not happen for years, if at all," Serin dismissed his fears, "And in any case, the Way must be followed, even if the times are dangerous." She adjusted his collar and gave him a kiss, then continued, "You take care, too: you're a kind and good man, whatever others might have you believe."

Sharn recognised that this was a reference to Vetia's discontentedness, but as her name had not been mentioned, he felt no need to defend his wife. After a final farewell hug, he slipped away into the night, to collect his reeds and scythe and to return to the village.

Serin sighed as he disappeared from her sight: she always felt flat and somehow empty when Sharn left. Glancing up at the moon, she tried to put herself back in the right frame of mind for her invocation and returned indoors to her altar. Although sexual relationships were certainly not forbidden to priests of the Way, she was fully aware that going straight from her lover's arms to her devotions was hardly conducive to crossing the veil and walking with the spirits.

Kneeling down, she decided that making an offering would be inappropriate in her spiritually weak frame of mind, and opted to go straight to the meditative part of her ceremony. She mixed the powdered leaves and roots in the correct proportions and scattered them on the altar flame. Closing her eyes, she inhaled the resultant smoke deeply, hoping that the plants would overcome her melancholy mood and help her walk with the spirits, who would be waiting to give her guidance. She followed the full-moon ritual exactly, sitting, breathing, and chanting as she should, but her mind was badly tuned, and thoughts of Sharn kept creeping insidiously around the edges of her concentration. Throwing more powder onto the fire, she started the sequence again, trying to grasp the elusive single-mindedness necessary for her task.

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"That'll do," snapped Farren irritably, as his wife bent to offer Ronil a cake to accompany his ale, "Leave the plate here: we'll help ourselves. Ronil is here on elders' business." He waited until Arka had left the room before leaning forward and continuing, "Although that's not actually true. Now that we've dealt with our young priests, the other thing I wanted to discuss with you is personal."

Ronil took a second cake, and ate it, waiting patiently for his host to be ready to broach the subject that was troubling him. "I'm keen to see my younger son settled," Farren announced at last, "And I wondered if you're any nearer a decision. What if I paid you a training fee? I could get one of the other elders to come and witness the agreement, and you could take Lorjak back with you as your apprentice tonight."

Ronil considered carefully, for he was not one to turn down a profit lightly. He was seeking an apprentice to relieve himself and Jorbat of some of the heavier work, and he had expected the extra pair of hands to be his only reward for the training he would give: he might even have been prepared to pay Farren a small sum to recompense him for the loss of his son. However, he reluctantly decided that he needed to find out more before discussing any financial arrangements. His merchant's brain, used to weighing up customers' motives and needs, leapt straight to the conclusion that the urgency Farren was expressing was linked to their visit to the priests, but decided to play along with his friend's evident desire to hide such a connection. "Why are you in such a hurry to conclude this business?" he asked, "You know that Lorjak is my first choice, and that I have made an offer to him. The boy has not yet given me his answer, so it's premature to discuss starting his apprenticeship tonight. Besides, before the harvest, when I first raised the matter, you were loath to consider a merchant's trade for him. What has changed?" He put down his ale and, as Farren made no reply, he continued, "You must see that this haste bothers me, however much I need an apprentice. Do you find Lorjak difficult to live with? Is that why you want him gone? Or has he perhaps been associating too freely with one of the village girls?"

"That is hardly your business!" snapped Farren.

"Or perhaps it is," retorted Ronil, not at all afraid to contradict the chief elder, who was also his closest friend. "I must understand why you are suddenly so eager to settle your son on me. If he's bucking your authority in the home, or if some maid's angry father is making life here difficult for him, there may not be a problem. But if you are trying to foist him on me before I can learn of some greater misdemeanour ..."

"He's done nothing wrong!" exclaimed Farren, rising from his chair and standing over his guest, "He's easily the most hardworking and competent lad in the area, and you should be glad to have him!"

"As indeed I will," replied Ronil mildly, "If Lorjak comes to me himself, and accepts my apprenticeship willingly."

"So you won't help me? There's nothing we can do to get him settled quickly?"

Surprised at the depth of Farren's despair, which only served to confirm his suspicions, Ronil tried once more to draw out his friend. "What has upset you so much? Not so long ago, you scorned an apprenticeship with me, for you were determined that Lorjak should be sent to Levrik to serve the administration. You wanted him to gain the experience that would fit him for an elder's post here in the village in the future. You need only wait patiently and hope that he turns me down to follow in your footsteps." When Farren was silent, Ronil realised that he would have to push yet harder if his friend were to confide in him. These religious secrets and taboos were always so tricky, he mused, and tried extreme provocation in an attempt to overcome them. "Or has he done something that may render him unfit for that path?"

With none of his previous irritation, Farren responded heavily, "Nay, he's a good lad, and he's done nothing wrong. For all that he hates marking time on the land until he can learn a profession, he's not one to spoil his chances for the sake of some foolishness. No," he continued tentatively, "I'd not be so worried, if I felt his choice lay only between your path and mine."

"Whose, then, could he follow?" asked Ronil, feigning puzzlement and hiding his relief that Farren was at last approaching the real reason for his distress. The only answer was a helpless shrug, and he mused aloud, "As son of the chief elder of the village, he could hardly become a metalworker or a builder - although, of course, Sharn did. But knowing Lorjak, I think I can safely say that he wouldn't follow in his brother's footsteps and choose an ordinary job. He's quick-witted and industrious, and knows only too well that he's destined for better things than most of the villagers. He'd not be content with a future that lacked position and respect within the community. But what else would serve, other than elder or merchant?" When he saw that Farren still could not break his silence, Ronil finally took pity on him. "He's applied to be priest, hasn't he?"

"Now what can I say to that? You know I can't discuss the Way with one who doesn't follow it."

"The path I take is my own business," Ronil stated without rancour. "In my position, I cannot be seen to be partisan." Knowing full well that his friend's prevarication had confirmed his guess, he tried to draw out some of the background to this predicament. "I wouldn't have thought that he had the inclination. What has made him choose such a profession?"

"Who but the goddess can tell what goes on in a youngster's mind? I almost wish that we lived in some forsaken fishing village like Barnak, where children have no choice of occupation to worry about, and where in any case they know that they'll have to do whatever their parents tell them to." He got up and threw another log on the fire before continuing, his face turned away from Ronil to avoid making his need too obvious, "I just thought that, if you were to demand an answer of him tonight, it might encourage him to choose the better option."

"No, I'll not do that. I've made my offer: I'll have the boy when he's ready, or not at all. But in the long term, would it really be so bad? True, these Tarkan fanatics are an appalling menace. But it may be true that they threaten our own native sunservers' ways. Mikon runs a strong and faithful community, and sun-priests as far away as Borlei on the west coast owe him allegiance. If there's a power struggle going on, he may very well drive out these newcomers. And they will not in any case spread themselves too thin by sweeping eastwards unless they have a secure base in the Jentok region. If this unrest is only temporary, well then, priest is a worthy occupation, and well respected. He could do far worse."

"You don't believe that, though, do you? That the foreigners are a short-term problem?" asked Farren.

Ronil shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "I suppose I don't. There really didn't ought to be any cause for concern: after all, Mikon's position has always seemed unassailable. That is what really worries me. The sunservers were totally secure, and yet the Tarkans were able to round up and massacre Mikon's guests without suffering any consequences! They are brutal, and they must have been certain that they had nothing to fear. I keep wondering what such confidence can be based on, and it worries me that it doesn't seem to be misplaced."

"My main concern," said Farren slowly, "is the timing. It used to be that religious allegiances were wider-ranging than political ones - it's not been long, after all, that we've had a national government, rather than several regional ones. Sheruflag as a country is a new and uncertain entity. Lawgiver Benelus - you may remember that I served part of my apprenticeship with him - was concerned, at the last Elders' Assembly in Levrik, that not all the provinces are as settled under the new regime as ours. For us, after all, there has been little change - Levrik's always been our regional capital, and calling it a national capital seems to us to be merely a change of name. But it appears that other areas are less pleased with the

changes. In Borlei, for example, they worry that a government that lives and works in the prosperous south-east of the country can hardly understand the concerns of their mountainous western region. And then there's the question of religion. Most of the regions of Sheruflag follow the sun, but Levrik is right at the heart of the moonfollowing area. Even when Benelus spoke to me, long before the massacre, he was worried that people would find it difficult to respect a government that didn't share their beliefs."

"So there is more to it than just a disagreement in Jentok?"

"Oh, yes indeed." In spite of his preoccupation with his son, Farren was almost animated, now that he was talking about his own professional concerns. "In fact, it gets even more complicated, when you realise that Tarka is the most powerful nation in the world, and it also follows the sun. I haven't been to Levrik since before the Priests' Gathering in Jentok, but it wouldn't surprise me if the two are linked – Tarkan fanatics murdering moonfollowers, so soon after our regions became united into one political entity, I mean."

"In which case, they might not be isolated zealots," mused Ronil, stroking his beard. "I begin to see why you are worried on Lorjak's behalf."

"That's not my only worry," admitted Farren wryly. "It would be bad enough if it was simply a bad time to choose to work towards being a priest. But there's also that an apprenticeship can only be as good as the skills of the master who offers it."

"You think, then, that Dhoban will make a poor tutor?" queried Ronil with interest, for he loved to know the village gossip, although he would never pass it on. He justified his curiosity by considering that a good merchant should have both a thorough understanding of the communities he served, and the trust that only comes from total discretion.

"It's not that he's unskilled, of course," Farren defended his spiritual leader, "But he's inexperienced, and very young. At his age, most are still apprentices themselves. Yet here are Dhoban and Serin, masters of one of the most respected professions, setting themselves up to train others. Their qualities as our Leaders have hardly been tested yet: how can we judge their ability to pass them on? And we need particularly skilled hands right now: we don't just need spiritual guidance, but also people we can trust to be vigilant, alert to subtle changes in attitude in the village and beyond, and quick-witted under duress. Should a dangerous situation arise, I wouldn't expect that pair to see it coming, much less know how to deal with it! And who of their Followers would suffer most? Why, their apprentices, of course! No, it's not what I want for my son."

Ronil had been aware of voices in the kitchen while Farren had been talking, and now the door opened to admit Sharn. "Good evening, father. Good evening, Master Ronil. I wasn't aware that you had company, father. I'll leave you in peace."

"No matter," stated Ronil, rising from his chair, "I must in any case make my way home. There is much to do before my next trip, and I must be in the warehouse early in the morning. I shall think on what you have said, Farren, although I doubt I can do anything to help. Stay with your father, Sharn, for I shall interrupt his evening no longer."

"I shall see you out, Master Ronil, for I also must be off home. I've spent longer with my mother than I meant to, and Vetia will be waiting for me. Are you going to Carshak in the near future?"

"Probably," said Ronil, "After our trip to Levrik."

"In that case," continued Sharn, following the merchant through the kitchen towards the entrance door, "Perhaps you would take a message to my wife's family there? I'll ask her what she would like you to tell them."

Once they had left the house, Arka came to clear the mugs and plates. "Sharn didn't stay long, then," she remarked to her husband. "He only arrived a moment ago."

"That lad's always in a hurry," complained Farren. "Never takes the time to do anything properly."

"That's not so," Arka disagreed. "He's made a lovely job of rebuilding his house. Even Vetia was pleased - for a while, at least."

"Building's no profession for a son of mine," grumbled her husband. "How he managed to miss the wits for a respectable trade, I'll never know." As his wife left the room, he pondered irritably on the shortcomings of his elder son, and reflected miserably that the younger no longer afforded him much consolation.

Chapter 2 - Thirteenth Cycle, Day the Second, morning

The sun was already over the horizon on what promised to be another sunny day when Dhoban approached the hut once more. He took care to make no noise as he gently moved aside the curtain in the doorway, for he did not wish to disturb Serin if she was still walking with the spirits. He regarded her closely and listened to her breathing as she lay on the floor, then, satisfied that she was sleeping off the effects of her herbs, rather than still beyond the veil, he entered the hut and made up a fire in the hearth, ready to prepare a reviving hot drink for her when she awoke. While he waited for the water to boil, he unpacked his bags, and then started to tidy the floor of the hut. As he straightened the rug, he noticed an empty phial underneath, and he picked it up to replace it on top of Serin's dispensing cupboard, ready for refilling. Glancing idly at the pictogram scratched on the lid, he saw that it had contained the potion she made for those women in their community who were not yet ready to welcome a new spirit into their bodies.

When his sister started to stir, he made them each a hot drink and sat down at the table to wait for Serin to awaken fully. He tried to marshal his thoughts, ready to tell his sister about his night's meditations, and then decided that he should first ask Serin what she had learned. He knew that she looked up to him in spiritual matters, and he wanted to avoid influencing her by giving his own opinion first. The events of the night had led him to a very definite conclusion, and he considered that she would not want to tell him of her feelings, if they seemed to contradict his own.

It occurred to him that Serin was taking a long time to come fully to her senses, and he wondered if she had perhaps used more herbs than she usually did, or had had an exceptionally long walk with the spirits. As she stumbled across the room and sat heavily on the bench opposite him, he started to question her. "Are you ready to talk about what you saw?" he asked gently.

"I saw very little." Serin cleared her throat, and gulped at the hot blackberry cordial he had prepared for her. "And nothing very useful. I somehow couldn't get in the right frame of mind, so I used a second dose of herbs. I saw some confused and menacing images of flames, which may simply have been the altar fire, and then I fell asleep."

"What a shame!" Dhoban commiserated. "You were so hoping for a productive session. I'm sorry you were unsuccessful at such an important moment."

Somewhat embarrassed by these sympathetic words, and a touch resentful at the hint of smugness in his tone, Serin brushed his comments aside. "It doesn't matter, as long as the spirits walked with one of us. And I can see that you have something to tell me, even though you were courteous enough to give me first say."

"I certainly do," said Dhoban, savouring the anticipation. "I prepared my circle, chewed the full-moon root, looked up at ..."

"Don't keep me waiting!" his sister pleaded. "I can tell that you had a fruitful walk. What did you see?"

Taking pity on her, Dhoban moved on to the heart of his meditation. "After I crossed the veil, the spirit of the yew took my hand, and led me to a beautiful valley, full of fruit trees, with a silver stream tumbling through it. All around the valley were bleak, menacing hills, but down by the water the yew and I were safe and happy. You too - I don't know exactly when you joined us, but you were there, and so were a group of likeminded people, although I couldn't distinguish their faces. Probably they were Followers. Anyway, we sat on the bank of the stream, and I leaned over and splashed the cool water on my face, while the yew let down his

roots and drank long and thirstily. For a whole day we sat there, you and I and the yew, communing with each other, at peace with the world.

"Then a beech tree that had been planted near to our resting place got up and walked up the hill behind our backs, returning as the sun set with the spirit of the dragon. The beast was angry, and breathed his wrath over the whole valley with one contraction of his mighty lungs, scorching the grass and destroying the fruit trees. His fire made the stream boil, and damaged the roots of our companion. So the yew tree gathered us both up in his branches, and limped to the top of a barren hill. Here he told us that we must return to the valley to live out our lives amid the desolation, but that it was no longer the right place for him, and he therefore had to leave us. He hobbled off towards the horizon, leaving us alone, for somehow the Followers had disappeared while we were away on the hill, and although we tried to follow him, some invisible force was blocking our way. We stumbled through the darkness, back down to the valley, where the dragon now reigned unchallenged. I was full of regrets; somehow I knew that we had caused the disaster that had overwhelmed this idyllic place. We stayed close to where the stream had been, reflecting sadly on the happier times that we had spent there with the yew tree.

"So my walk started in such joy, and yet ended in despair," he concluded.

"That doesn't seem like a very good omen, given that we were hoping that the spirits would help us choose our apprentices. Let us hope that it was a symbolic vision, rather than a prophetic one. How do you interpret it?"

"To me it seems very clear. But I don't want to impose my views on you. Tell me first, how would you read it?"

"Well, the yew tree is generally seen as the symbol of the Way," said Serin tentatively, "And the Tarkan fanatics apparently use the dragon to represent their so-called One Religion. I would start by assuming that these two symbols hold their usual meanings. So your walk seems to suggest that the warriors of this foreign god will rampage through our lands. Yet you and I were still there in the valley, after the disaster." She shook her head, as if to clear it. "Let's see. At the start, we walked hand in hand with the Way, as we do in this world. Then the foreigners came, drove away the Way, somehow got rid of the Followers, and took control. But they let us live. Sorry, there has to be more, but I can't see clearer than that. What have I missed?"

"Who brought the dragon into the valley?" prompted Dhoban.

"The beech tree. But who or what is the beech tree?" Suddenly, she sat up straighter and her eyes glowed. "The beech tree is the miller's symbol! And Ardil is the miller's son! But that would mean that Ardil will fetch the dragon. Or rather, that he will bring this new cult down on us, and cause the disaster. That would explain your feelings of responsibility for the calamity, too, because our choice of Ardil as apprentice would have started the whole chain of events. That's why the beech tree in your vision is so close to us and the yew tree: it shows what would happen if we allowed Ardil closer to the Way, by training him to Lead."

"There's more," interjected Dhoban, unable to resist giving his interpretation, now that his sister had reached the same conclusions as he had. "The stream flowing through the valley represents the spirits that walk with us on the other side of the veil. They cleanse and nourish our souls, and renew the Way on this world, as the water refreshed us in the vision. Once the dragon came, we not only lost the company of the Way, but the spirits evaporated as well. It seems that choosing Ardil as our apprentice would stop us being able to cross the veil, although apparently we would still be alive."

"But how could that happen?" asked Serin, now wide awake and ready, as usual, to question Dhoban's judgement. "We know that everyone's capable of walking in the otherworld. Once we've learned to develop these skills and use them properly, how could we go back to not knowing how?"

"I don't know. But remember that neither of us is very experienced in leading the Way. Pero and Passenda couldn't have known they'd be called by the goddess so young; I expect there's a lot we hadn't been taught yet."

"I still don't understand why the spirits didn't warn them not to attend the Priests' Gathering! They must have known that the warriors of the One Religion were going to raid it." This point had caused Serin much distress since the death of their masters, and she could not help returning to it once again. "Come to that, you'd have thought that the spirits would have prevented the Gathering taking place, knowing that so many of our Priests would be taken and murdered." Aware that Dhoban would find plenty of ways to defend the spirits, and that he would do so at great length, she returned hastily to the real subject of their discussion. "Anyway, if you're going to use our lack of experience to explain that we could lose our powers, even though we don't know how this could happen, you've got to admit that we might not know enough to interpret your vision correctly. Perhaps the stream doesn't mean the spirits we walk with; come to that, perhaps our whole reading of your walk is flawed."

"That's possible, of course," said Dhoban, "But how else are we to read it? Both you and I leapt to the same conclusion: we both read the walk as advising us not to take Ardil on as an apprentice."

"And yet, until yesterday, I was pretty sure that he ought to be one of them." She pondered a moment, and then continued, "I'm not convinced that we should be making such an important decision. It was already difficult when we just had to choose the best two out of three applicants. Now that your walk has shown what could happen if we get it wrong, it seems much too much responsibility for a pair of new priests who weren't even able to complete their training! We shouldn't place too much confidence in our reading of your walk: our interpretation may be far too simplistic, and it's such an important matter. Do you suppose we could discuss it with some more experienced Leader before we make up our mind?"

"What would some stranger to our community know of our applicants, or of our spirits?" countered Dhoban. "We have no choice: we've got to choose our apprentices for ourselves."

"And yet, in the summer, it was you who suggested that we should get advice from another priest before we set ourselves up to Lead the Way," objected Serin.

"I was very distressed, when Ronil told us that the Priests at the Gathering had been captured, even before we knew that they were all dead," agreed Dhoban.

"No, it started even earlier than that," his sister claimed. "We'd barely started looking after the community on Pero and Passenda's behalf, when you first started worrying. And once Ronil passed on the news he'd heard from the other merchants, you really didn't feel happy about taking our Masters' places. You kept trying to think who we could ask for advice; it was only when you couldn't think of a higher authority to approach that you told the council we would follow custom, and take on their roles."

"That's true; I was uneasy from the time they left us. And then, if you remember, Farren asked me to clear the path to Ruafor, and Sharn wasn't available to help me, so I had to do it alone. It was the first time I'd slept out in the open, away from home, on my own. Such strange dreams I had, that night." He reflected a while, and then continued, "I woke up really uneasy,

and the fear stayed with me all day. But when I got back, and told you how I'd felt, we decided that it had been too much, going off pathfinding on my own, as well as having to Lead the Way. So I'm sure my disturbed night was mostly because it was a new responsibility, and because I was worried that Pero's tools might be stolen if I slept too deeply."

"That's what we thought, certainly," agreed Serin. "Although when we knew that Pero and Passenda were dead, you didn't only think about seeking the advice of some more experienced priest; you also spoke about looking for our parents."

"And now that I look back, I don't need your interpretative skills to understand why I felt like that. With such heavy new responsibilities to shoulder, it's no surprise that I was uneasy and wanted to appeal to a higher authority. Or failing that, to hide myself in a mother's embrace."

"If our mother had been the maternal sort, she would never have left us," muttered his sister, "So it was hardly logical to expect her to comfort you then, ten years or so after she abandoned us. Anyway, this is hardly relevant. You're right; we can't expect another priest to take responsibility for our decision. We must choose our apprentices ourselves. But how? Although your vision seems to suggest that we should avoid training Ardil, it seems very negative advice. I would've preferred some indication that Lorjak and Ojan are pleasing to the spirits."

"I don't know that we can impose conditions on the counsel that we're offered. I suppose that all we can do is our very best. Have we both done everything we can to obtain guidance?"

"The offerings!" exclaimed Serin, and went on, "I didn't make the offerings last night. It felt right to try to walk first, and by the time I woke, you were back."

"Do you want to make them now?" asked her brother, surprised at this deviation from her usual full-moon ritual, but happy to discover that there was something left that might assist them.

"Yes - it's necessary anyway, to complete the service, but all the more important, given that I'm feeling so indecisive! After such a muddled night, though, I shall go and bathe in the stream first."

"Then I'll prepare some food for us both: I'm famished after my night's vigil, and you must be, too."

With something practical to do, and an avenue yet to explore, the pair felt their worries dissipate, and both set to their tasks with a lighter heart. By the time they had eaten, it was nearly noon, and Dhoban was concerned that the offerings should be made without delay, so that they would be within the same night-cycle as the rest of the full-moon ritual. Nevertheless, realising that Serin's happier mood was fragile, he took care not to hurry her, and concentrated his efforts on protecting her from distractions. His offer to sit outside their home to ward off interruptions from villagers seeking remedies from his sister was gratefully accepted, and once more Serin lit the altar fire and prepared herself for her devotions.

She decided to forgo burning the full-moon herbs, having used more than usual the previous evening, and she stared into the flame as she chanted, opening herself up to the spirits. Whilst her preparations helped them both when they chose to leave their bodies and walk with the spirits, either in their own domain across the veil or through the futures that their paths were approaching, Serin now concentrated on unfolding her defences, so that the spirits could enter her mind and impart the knowledge she sought.

She then pared her fingernails and trimmed a lock from her flowing brown hair, placing these offerings on the altar flame. As the smoke drifted through the hut, she lay down on the rug, closed her eyes, and let her mind empty, ready to be filled by the spirits.

