



# NEOEXODUS

LEGENDARY TALES

## The Shield of Ignorance

BY JOSHUA COLE

**NEOEXODUS LEGENDARY TALES:  
THE SHIELD OF  
IGNORANCE**

**JOSHUA COLE**



**✶ LOUIS PORTER JR. DESIGN INC BOOK**

# **NEOEXODUS LEGENDARY TALES: THE SHIELD OF IGNORANCE**

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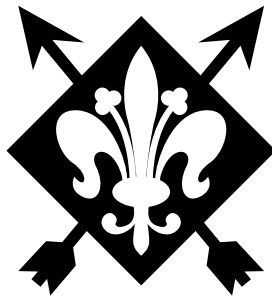
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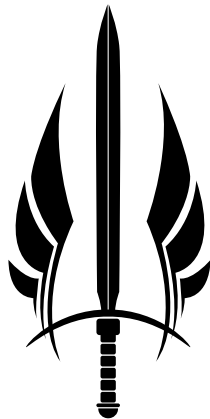
# EMPIRES OF NEOEXODUS



## THE DOMINION



## THE REIS CONFEDERACY



## THE IMPERIAL ALLIANCE

## CHAPTER ONE



“Who passed away?” Riss Al’adon asked. She didn’t pay the black sash tied around her colleague Paray’s waist another glance.

Her attention remained on the circular obsidian tablet on her desk. Markings had been engraved in it, presumably the usual cosmological stuff the ancients ascribed so much significance to. If so, where were the familiar celestial bodies?

Riss had brought rubbings of the tablet to scholars all over the floating city of Anidem. She’d seen more of the sky, above and below, than she had in years. As a member of the Sihr caste, Riss expected answers when she asked questions. Her power came from knowledge, and all the Dominion bent to give it to her.

To no avail. No one in Anidem knew more about the tablet than Riss.

She supposed she shouldn’t be surprised. She thought herself the city’s second-greatest authority in arcane archeology, and if she could consult with the greatest she would not have been so desperate to puzzle out the tablet.

Gradually, she realized that Paray remained standing opposite her desk. Riss looked above her colleague’s white robes, gold equipage and—of course—that damnable black mourning sash, up and up, for Paray was a tall woman, coltish still at twenty-five but coming into the elegance that was her birthright. In that respect she was a better representative of their Sihr caste than Riss, who, shorter and darker, could have passed for a commoner. Paray’s upper lip poked above her high collar, looking darker than its natural brown as it contrasted the white silk. Her expression looked darker still.

Riss raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“You know the answer to that question.” Paray had hidden the rawness around her eyes with subtle cosmetics, but she couldn’t hide it in her voice.

“Oh.” Riss rubbed the back of her neck. “You’ve given up as well.”

“It has been eight weeks without word.”

“Until the day we invent a written calendar, you will always have your place.” Riss supposed Paray flinched at that, and rightly so, but Riss’s gaze had returned to the tablet. Riss took a deep breath and exhaled her tension. “Speaking of which, does this look like a record of time to you?”

“Riss, you have to stop.” Paray reached across the desk to touch the sleeve of Riss’s robe.

Riss opened her mouth to snap at her.

Stopped.

Always careful about touching, was Paray. Always conscious of formality, propriety. Born to the Sihr caste but without a dram of magical talent, she clung desperately to the forms of the function she could not perform. Her garb, her diction, and her movements were always impeccable. Above all, she did not touch. Even though that taboo came from the spells most Sihr could discharge with their hands, or perhaps especially because it did, Paray obeyed it stringently. The brush of her fingers on Riss’s arm was like an embrace, or perhaps a grapple, from someone else.

“She’s my mentor.” Riss’s voice softened. Gently, she touched Paray’s hand and waited for her to remove it. “And your mother.”

Paray did not remove her hand. She squeezed. “That is why I believe Mother is gone. She would have sent word if she could.”

Her mother, Hadassi Al’meram, was the head of their department. She had taught Riss everything she knew, and Paray everything she was capable of learning. If there was a finer scholar in the Dominion, Riss did not know her.

Eight weeks ago Hadassi led an expedition into the Wildlands of Bal, seeking a city claimed by the jungle. Those she left behind had heard nothing since.

Riss refused to trade her red Sihr sash for mourning black. In the face of death, all the Dominion’s castes were equally attired—but they were not equally equipped to avoid it. Riss didn’t believe Hadassi would die in a place like that.

Until today, Paray had agreed.

“Even if Hadassi is dead,” Riss said, “there is still hope if her body can be recovered. She had a strong spirit.” Priests of the Sanguine Covenant could sometimes reverse death, given an intact body, a powerful soul, and a generous donation.

Paray looked down. “They have searched for her. They cannot even find the ruin she was looking for.”

“The Reis Confederacy has no reason to find a Dominion mage. I have little faith in their motivation and less in their skill.” Riss lifted her colleague’s chin and summoned a grin more confident than she felt. “I have skill and reason both.” The tips of Paray’s mouth quirked above her robe’s high collar, but she forced the smile from her face. “You speak of reason. These past weeks, when hope and reason could coexist, you gave me the former. But neither persists beyond life, and I would not have yours end, too.”

“You think I have taken leave of my reason?” Riss jerked her hand away.

The trace of a smile vanished from Paray’s face. “I think you are not allowing it to rule you.”

“Scholar Tehya would agree.”

Kynon Tehya, a prymidian, was the only other remaining member of their department. He had eyes on Hadassi’s seat, but no grasp. It would go to Riss when it was confirmed vacated. Paray had the blood and the knowledge; Kynon, the knowledge and the power; but in Riss were mixed all three, and more of all of them.

Of course, it would not be vacated any time soon.

Paray’s hands fidgeted. “Kynon has little to say to me.”

“Little is not nothing.”

“This is not a departmental fight! I have lost my mother. I don’t want to lose you, too. Is that so much?”

“If I were missing, and there were any chance I could be found, or even that what I was looking for could be found, would she even think to do ought but come after me?”

“No.”

“Then neither can I.”

“It would be Mother’s responsibility as your instructor. It is not your responsibility as her student.”

“It’s my responsibility as her friend.” Riss held her hand out to Paray. “And yours.”

Paray took neither the hand nor the words. “Instead of asking what she would *do*, have you considered what she would *want*?”

“Of course I have.” Riss touched the obsidian tablet. “The find this led her to was important enough for her to risk her life for.”

“But not ours,” Paray said. Hadassi had refused to let her senior students accompany her to Bal. “Even if my fear won’t sway you, maybe this will:

“The department needs you, Riss. Now more than ever. I am a theorist, but I do not have the gift. Kynon has the gift, but his grasp of theory is unsound. With Mother missing you are the only one of us who has both.”

“All the more reason for me to bring Hadassi back,” Riss said.

Paray massaged the bridge of her nose. “Will you at least admit that you do not have to do this?”

“Yes.”

Paray blinked in surprise.

“You’re right,” Riss said. “This is not something I must do.” Riss’s equipage jangled as she drew herself up to her full height, less impressive than Paray’s but still the stature of a Sihr. “It’s something I choose to do. As Hadassi’s student, as her friend, as yours, as a member of this department. And above all, because I am the only one who can.”

“Riss...” Paray’s hands dropped to her heart. A little smile crept onto her face. “Please be careful.”

Riss tapped one of the wands at her belt. “When am I not?”

As a girl, Riss had played in Anidem's hanging gardens, climbing over open air where none of the other children dared. More than once she'd dangled from a vine thinner than her fingers while Paray wailed for her to climb back up. Riss had never listened. She lost her taste for such games as she grew, not because her dignity as a Sihr demanded it, but because she learned to fly and they ceased to be dangerous.

Striding through the gardens now, she couldn't help but remember. It made her smile. She knew it shouldn't.

Riss had never fallen.

Paray had been wrong.

*Fear is the only thing I have to shy from*, she told herself as she came to a stop under a tree—one that could never have grown naturally in Anidem's hot, thin, dry air. Watered and shaped by clever gardening, sorcery, or both, it formed a living gazebo over the platform where Kynon Tehya waited for her.

He stood by the railing, his big crimson hands clasped behind his back. He wore traditional prymidian robes, complete with uncovered head and a ponytail of coarse black hair hung down his back. His attire was faintly scandalous in the Dominion, where the sun and tradition alike demanded full wrappings, but that was the least of the reasons Riss disliked him.

"Scholar Al'adon." He didn't turn to address her.

Riss inclined her head, determined to show politeness for once, if only to show up her rival. "Scholar Tehya."

"You have come to request funding for an expedition to the Wildlands of Bal," Kynon said.

"You're well informed."

"You're predictable."

"I should say rather determined," Riss said. She joined Kynon at the railing. A thousand feet below, dunes gleamed in the desert sun. "Have you reconsidered?"

"I have not." Kynon glanced at her. Apart from his crimson skin he might have passed for a large human, but his features were subtly off—oversharp bones beneath rubbery flesh.

"Then we are at an impasse," Riss said.

"Are we?" He chuckled. "It seems to me that you have nothing I want. Only *you* are at an impasse, Scholar Al'adon."

"Do you want me to go to the Seven Scholars with my plea? I could have your hands pried off the department's purse strings. They might just decide to take a hand as well, if they were to conclude you had misused the contents of the purse."

"Scholar Al'meram left me charge of our finances," Kynon snapped. He mean Hadassi, of course, not Paray. "You know that." This fact was a more important reason Riss disliked Kynon. "Is that why you don't want her found?"

"I told her not go, just as I tell you."

Riss expelled her anger with her breath. She needed this man's aid. Even if she won an appeal to the Seven Scholars who controlled Anidem's university, it would take months.



Hadassi might not have months. “What is it about this expedition that frightens you so much?” Riss said.

“The disappearance without a trace of the head of our department is not reason enough?”

“No,” Riss said, “because you warned Hadassi off as well.”

Kynon clicked his tongue in annoyance.

Riss leaned sideways over the railing so she could meet his eyes, dark and deepset. “If you know something, *tell me*.”

“Know?” He tugged at his beard. “That tablet you’ve had your hands on these months, have you seen its like before?”

“No. Neither had Hadassi.”

“Mm. And did you note the depth and angle of the incisions?”

“Deep,” Riss said. “Angular, cut almost straight into the stone.”

“Yes...” Kynon straightened up and beckoned Riss follow. “There’s something you must see.”

It rankled to obey him, but she needed to know.

She followed him through the gardens, under the boughs of magically shaped trees and archways decorated with looping designs in gold and lapis, and finally the wide blue dome of his study. He strode to one of the glass cases within and spread his hands on it.

Riss peered around his broad frame to a block of obsidian. It was about the same size as the tablet on her desk. Instead of having an elaborate pattern flecked with the remains of gold inlay, this one was unmarked but for roughly chipped fissures. “Tell me, have you ever tried sculpture?” Kynon said.

“My work and my hobbies are one.”

“Some would say that is unhealthy.”

“Some would say you should get to your point,” Riss said, “but allow me to preempt you. You weren’t able to duplicate the carvings.”

“The most expensive sculptor in Anidem was not able to duplicate the carvings,” Kynon said. “He said it was within the realm of natural craft, if the craftsman were very strong, very skilled, and very *lucky*. Absent any of those, obsidian will chip. What’s more, the angle of the incision used, though possible, was uncomfortable for a human wrist.”

“It was carved with magic?”

“Or by inhuman hands.”

Riss waved at Kynon’s, overlarge for his frame and covered with crimson skin.

The prymidian drew them into his sleeves. “If my people dwelt in Bal two thousand years ago, it would be news to me.”

“Why two thousand years?”

“The humans of Bal do not carve that way,” Kynon said. “The enuka do not carve at all.”

“You believe this is a relic of the First Ones.”

“I believe,” Kynon said, “there are some things better left undiscovered. Ignorance can be a shield.”

Riss hesitated. Prymidians valued knowledge no less than the Sihr of the Dominion. Kynon had not come by his position or the respect of his peers—prymidian and human alike—by embracing ignorance. She knew he wouldn’t say so lightly.

Yet...

Riss set her jaw. “It is not a shield I intend to hide behind.”

Kynon sighed. “You are young. Too young yet to have tasted failure.”

“Do not patronize me, Scholar Tehya,” Riss said. “I am old enough to know there is no wisdom in ignorance. If I am wrong, on my head be it.”

“There are worse things to lose than a head.”

“Including self-respect—which I would sacrifice if I did not try.”

“Then try, Scholar Al’adon,” Kynon said. “I can’t stop you.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You agree to the expedition?”

Kynon shook his head. “No. You’ll drag no more students to their deaths, nor even servants. If you go to Bal, you go alone.”

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Riss took a long, deep breath of Anidem air. The atmosphere was thin so high above the ground, but it was rich with the scent of sand and spices and sweat. Men and beasts and stranger things flowed around her, giving her just enough distance to keep with propriety without impeding their progress. Silk awnings broke up the sun shining on her face. Wind whistled up through elaborate grates in the ground, showing the wide-open skies below. Merchants and mummers called to her—her motionlessness an invitation. It was not an invitation to the thieves, though; none were bold enough to approach a member of the Sihr caste. Ahead shone the silver of the Nexus Gateway to Awenasa, capital of the Reis Confederacy. Hints of jungle air from a thousand miles away teased her nose.

Riss closed her eyes and smiled.

She missed her city already, and she hadn’t even left yet.

She would soon, though.

“Alone.” She laughed. She ought to thank Kynon. Riss never liked being responsible for anyone but herself.

Paray might have said Riss never liked being responsible at all.

She laughed again.

She opened her eyes and swept one more gaze over the grand bazaar of Anidem, then another over her equipage. One gold chain from it could have bought her half the bazaar, but when she planned to go into danger, she would not have sold it for the world. With defensive spells woven into every piece of her equipage, no thief would dare chance her pocket.

Riss almost pitied anything that made itself her enemy.

*Hadassi's defenses were stronger still.*

Her laughter died. She rubbed her temple. As true as that reminder might be, something about it felt wrong. Alien.

Had Kynon planted a magical suggestion in her head? Riss chanted a spell against enchantment just in case, but her doubts remained.

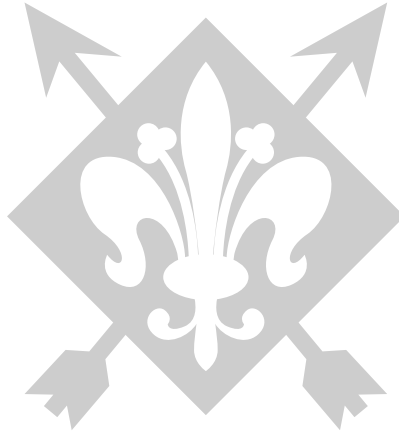
Perhaps they were her own, and she just wasn't used to having them.

They would not stop her.

She swept forward into the Nexus Gateway.



## CHAPTER TWO



*I could go into the jungle alone*, Riss thought, *if I wanted to die*. With every mosquito that found its way beneath her robes, it grew more tempting.

Awenasa had not been so bad. In the capital of the Reis Confederacy, every street she walked had been a wide boulevard, shaded by tall trees and cooled by canals that, as criers had eagerly informed her, were literally endless. Riss had wanted to inspect one of the enchanted fountains that spilled into the canals in an attempt to prove the criers wrong, half from national pride and half from academic curiosity.

She'd thought she didn't have time, though, and only stopped in Awenasa to take her lunch. Twelve hours later, the pleasant sting of peppers had faded, replaced with pangs of hunger.

She didn't want to eat in Miska, though.

It was not one of the Confederacy's great cities. It only qualified as a city because it had walls to keep the jungle at bay. No cool, clear magical water here, just rain that sizzled on the rough stone streets and the sweat it failed to wash away.

Riss's Sihr caste robes were not meant for wet heat. She would have broiled in them if her gold equipage had not included a charm for enduring the elements.

Unfortunately, it did not include charms against insects or smells.

Nor did it include a charm to convince one of the hunters who clustered near the Miska walls to act as her guide. Riss had prepared a spell that could do so, but she didn't intend to use it. She would have to spend at least a week in her guide's company; if he realized she'd used a magical compulsion on him, she didn't expect to survive the trip.

The best intentions, she thought, can lead to hell.

As she fought the urge to slap at another mosquito, she wondered if she'd already arrived.

She approached another group of hunters. Crouched in the shadows of the city walls were two Enuka who could have passed for beasts of burden if they'd worn fewer weapons, four gray-skinned Caliban whom Riss hoped were at least semi-civilized Kalisans, and as many humans of the bronze-skinned, black-haired local type.

They were already muttering and laughing when she spotted them, but that didn't mean it wasn't directed at her. Riss wondered if they were sharing a joke at her expense. She strode into the middle of their semi-circle and repeated the words she'd spoken so many times. "I am looking for a guide."

Silence.

"I will pay well. Gold."

One of the Enuka snarled something in an unintelligible language or accent and shambled off. The rest of the hunters hesitated. Riss thought she might have at least one, but then the most weathered of the humans gave a little shrug and followed. The rest went with him.

She watched them and tried not to scream.

A man's voice at her side left her too startled to stay angry. "You look tired, lady."

She turned, forcing herself to seem calm.

The speaker was human, rangy, with green-and-brown strips in his hair she assumed were dyed and tattoos covering every exposed part of his body, which was almost all of them. He had a spear slung at his back, a knife strapped to his leg, and a string of bone fetishes and feathers on his neck. His equipment radiated enough magic that Riss was sure she'd have sensed it without any spells or charms.

Riss noticed the fading aura around one of the bones, which she recognized from carvings as from a jaguar's paw; she knew that however stealthy the man was naturally, he hadn't crept up behind her by entirely natural means.

"What is it to you?" she asked.

"I am thinking," he said, "you would like to stop looking for a guide."

*I would like, Riss thought, to leave this cesspit and never come back. Burning the moisture out of it is optional, but preferred.*

What she would like didn't matter. No amount of discomfort or local intransigence would keep her from finding Hadassi.

"Perhaps," she said.

"Then you are lucky," he said. He flashed a golden smile. It might have been a display of wealth, but Riss could only wonder if who or whatever had knocked his original teeth out was available to serve her. More interesting were his eyes, dark but twinkling in the fading light. He had the look of a man with a secret he could hardly wait to tell.

"Fortune has been known to smile on me," Riss said, "but you're going to have to explain how it has done so."

"Because the great Quelpa is at your service, lady," he said.

Riss raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Are you his herald?"

He laughed. "The lady is bright as well as beautiful."

“The lady is *busy*,” Riss said. “If you want to compliment me, you can follow while I look for someone who wants to help.”

“Apologies,” he said, not that he looked the least contrite. “It so happens that I am myself the great Quelpa. I will be your guide.”

“Where I come from,” she said, “an employer usually decides whether or not to hire someone.”

“The lady is not a fool, so I already know she will hire me.”

“In my studies of divination,” Riss said, “I have discovered an interesting fact.”

Quelpa’s grin didn’t fade at this apparent change of subject, but he cocked his head.

“Knowing the future inevitably changes it.” She gave him a thin smile and stepped past him.

He was laughing by the time her back was to him. Since his laughter didn’t fade into the rain, she knew she hadn’t chased him off. She put her smile away even though it threatened to turn genuine. Quelpa seemed capable, quick-witted, and equipped with expensive magic—exactly the kind of guide she wanted, provided she hired him on her terms.

She needed to know more before she did, even if it meant staying in Miska.

He didn’t try to get in front of her, even though his legs were long enough to. It seemed he understood the place she expected him to occupy. “The lady is a seeress?”

“I’ve been known to make predictions from time to time. Do you want your fortune told?” His equipment said he would see through parlor tricks, but equipment could be inherited—or stolen.

“I would settle for being paid a fortune,” he said.

“You have a very high opinion of your worth, ‘great’ Quelpa. Most people as confident as you are fools.”

“Are you?”

“What makes you think I have a high opinion of myself?” It wasn’t that he was wrong, or that Riss took offense. *Most* were fools. The few who weren’t had earned their confidence. That Quelpa recognized Riss’s confidence gave her hope his own was justified.

“Because the last one of you brought dozens with her. You came alone.”

Riss froze.

She knew she shouldn’t have shown that he got to her, but she was a scholar, not a spy. “The last one?”

“That is why you are here, is it not?” Quelpa remained at her back. Suddenly, his position felt more sinister than servile to Riss. “Chasing the same ghosts the other Dominion woman was?”

Riss whirled. She had to regain control over the conversation, but she couldn’t manage to master herself. “What do you know about Hadassi?”

“Her name, now.” Quelpa was still grinning. Before Riss could snap at him, he spread his palms and continued. “That her party disappeared into the jungle eight weeks ago with five of the best guides in Miska. That none of them returned.”

“Leaving the rest of the guides spooked,” Riss said. “Except for you?”

“I am braver than any dozen men,” Quelpa said.

“Which has nothing to do with why you’re willing to take my coin.”

He gave a little bow. “I am also cleverer than any dozen. I knew those guides. Any one of them might have made a mistake and died for it. No one is perfect, not even me. But all five? No. Whatever happened to them, it was not in the jungle.”

“You think Hadassi found what she was looking for?” Riss asked.

“Was she looking for something bad and dangerous? Because I know that must be the thing she found.”

Riss thought of Kynon Tehya’s warning. “Sometimes ignorance can be a shield,” he’d said. He’d believed the ruins she was looking for were left by the First Ones. If what little historical record remained of their rule held any truth at all, then “bad and dangerous” didn’t begin to describe it.

Riss said, “It’s possible.”

“Then when you reach it, the great Quelpa will wait outside.”

Riss didn’t bother to claim she wasn’t going to hire him.

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Riss glanced over her shoulder. “You’re really staying here?”

Quelpa spread his hands. The motion was the only reason she could see him. Even when she knew where to look, his tattooed body disappeared into the jungle. Six days together and she wasn’t sure if his camouflage was natural or magical.

“The lady must have something to inspire her return.” His grin gleamed from the shadows.

Riss cracked a smile; a man who could swagger while he cowered deserved at least that much. Besides, she didn’t blame him, as he was probably the wiser of them.

“Then I’ll see you shortly,” Riss said.

“Something much to be hoped for.”

*Certainly*, she thought, since it meant he had not abandoned her.

Between Quelpa’s knowledge of the Wildlands of Bal and the map Riss had pieced together from Hadassi’s notes, they’d made good time through the jungle. The trip could as easily have taken months—or lifetimes. Riss had no illusions as to her chances of returning to civilization, or even Miska, without her guide.

Before she concerned herself with returning, though, she had to find Hadassi.

She turned back to the walls.

They were shorter than Miska’s, but cut from similar limestone and only a little more vine-choked. Riss had half-expected the whole city to be carved from obsidian, like the tablet she’d left in her study in Anidem. Only the carvings, the same deep, straight, angular carvings, told her the city and the tablet were of the same origin.

That, and the fact Hadassi and her party had disappeared inside.

Riss picked through the underbrush to a gap in the walls. Mud of a different color from the surrounding terrain marked where adobe bricks must once have sat. Riss found no foot- or handprints. Either Hadassi hadn't come in through this gap or the daily rains had washed away signs of her passing.

The wall surrounded a wide outer courtyard. It might once have held structures of wood or brick, but time and weather had wiped them away. Nothing remained to obstruct her view of the central structure, which looked—well, not quite like a pyramid. Unlike the step-pyramid temples and palaces Riss had seen in Awenasa, Miska, and countless books, the structure at the heart of this city was round. Four limestone terraces, of a height—if not a floorplan—similar to those she was used to, formed the lower layers. Atop those sat the obsidian she'd been looking for, a single too-tall terrace, like a great black beetle overlooking the city.

Riss shuddered. Something about the vista tugged at her mind, but she couldn't figure out what. She glanced back at Quelpa again. He might not come inside, but she could at least get his opinion.

She could have if he were visible, anyway. He didn't wave this time.

Had he left?

No. She had not been fool enough to pay him more than a retainer. To make the kind of coin he had to be accustomed to, he had to find her when she emerged from the city.

She couldn't emerge if she didn't enter first.

Riss slipped through the gap in the limestone wall. She dropped half a meter to a floor that had turned to dirt ages ago, and to mud with yesterday's rain.

She realized what had bothered her when she first looked through the wall. The courtyard should have been distinguishable from the jungle only by the wall's presence, but all she saw inside was bare dirt, ruined buildings, and patches of limestone and obsidian flooring. No growth, no life. "Bad and dangerous," Quelpa had said. Riss hadn't doubted it. Seeing the evidence firsthand shook her in ways speculation had not.

This wasn't climbing over the skies of Anidem or chasing rumors in its streets. It wasn't opening burial grounds claimed by families even more exalted than hers. It wasn't even running into the jungles of the Reis Confederacy with only a glib-tongued guide for company, following in the footsteps of a mentor who had to be dead and gone by now.

Riss had always taken more chances than her colleagues were comfortable with. But for all that, she'd never chanced anything worse than death.

This was worse.

She felt her hand close on the limestone of the outer wall.

And then, she yanked it back.

This city was a scary place, a bad one and a dangerous one. Perhaps even, and Riss did not use the term lightly, an evil one.

But it wasn't what was frightening her.



She straightened up and faced the empty courtyard. “I did not come this far,” she called out, “to turn back now.”

Quelpa’s voice came from directly behind her. “That is a shame. I did not want to kill you.”

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Riss understood several things the instant she heard Quelpa’s voice.

If he was native to Miska, he’d left it long ago, because he’d picked her up in Anidem and followed her through two Nexus Gateways. He wasn’t a hunter, at least not of beasts, and he certainly wasn’t a guide. His mental powers had almost discouraged her from pressing on; they *had* kept the real guides from taking her custom.

And now he was going to kill her. She felt the impact of his spear on the shield she’d raised with the same breath she had used to call out her challenge. Even blocked, the blow sent her reeling to her knees. Her shield didn’t so much shatter as fade, dispelled or absorbed by whatever enchantments his spear held.

Riss rolled onto her back and flung her hands up, conjuring not a shield—that obviously wouldn’t work—but a wave of flames. If she’d landed on stone instead of soft dirt, it might have jarred her concentration too much, but as it was she managed to keep hold of the spell.

Quelpa ducked beneath the blast, hardly losing momentum. Riss hadn’t expected to hit him; she did it just to buy herself another breath, another spell.

Quelpa whipped his body upright, muscles gleaming in the evening sun, and spun his spear toward where Riss lay.

He pierced the illusionary duplicate she’d left there. It didn’t surprise her that his spear sucked away her invisibility as well, though she’d dared to hope it wouldn’t. She gasped out another spell, audibly this time since stealth had failed her, and lifted into the air a few meters from him.

He smiled sadly. “You should have gone back, lady.”

Under the circumstances, she couldn’t exactly disagree. “I suppose an explanation is too much to ask?”

“I trust you to understand,” Quelpa said.

Riss suspected she did, but she wasn’t about to devote time to thinking about it. “What is understanding worth at spearpoint?”

He shrugged. “You are the scholar, not I.”

Riss tried to thrust her hand forward in an arcane gesture. Her body refused to obey.

Quelpa tapped his temple.

If Riss could have nodded, she would have. She understood, all right. The power he wielded wasn’t magic, not as she practiced it. She could have shielded herself against his psionics if she’d prepared the proper defenses, but considering she’d had a telepath

meddling with her mind for days at least, was it any surprise doing so hadn't occurred to her?

Quelpa's expression hardened, and he pulled back his spear.

Then obsidian swallowed him.

The black stone erupted from thin air. Before Quelpa could dodge, it snared his arms and legs. Before he could fix on its source, it covered his eyes and mouth. He must have been too surprised to scream.

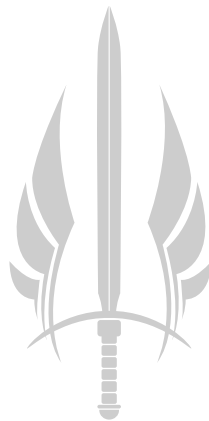
The obsidian seemed to compress, wrapping itself around the telepath's rangy frame. In seconds, only the crackle of energy in the black stone indicated it was anything but a crude statue.

Released, Riss stumbled to the dirt. She looked up at the terraced structure at the heart of the city. As she'd expected, her rescuer was descending its steps.

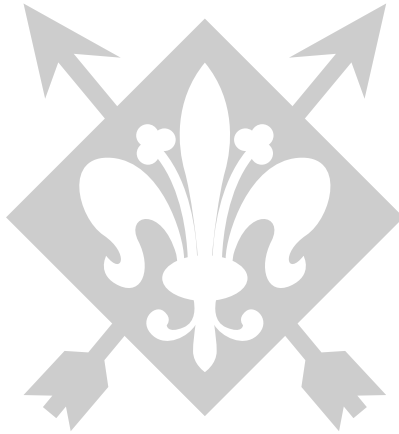
Riss didn't recognize the spell. It wasn't the kind that mages broke out in casual contests. It didn't matter.

She recognized the caster, though.

The afternoon sun at her back and the purple energy limning her outstretched hand cast weird shadows across her face. Her headscarf was missing, her skin was drawn tight over her high cheekbones—but she was unquestionably Hadassi Al'meram.



## CHAPTER THREE



For a breath that seemed to stretch afternoon into evening, Riss stared at Hadassi.

Against the backdrop of the black pyramid, lit by the purple lightning that crackled across her still-outstretched hand, uncovered hair blowing ragged behind her, Hadassi looked more at home in this ruined city than she would have in the floating gardens of Anidem. She regarded the obsidian statue that had been the psionic Quelpa with cold eyes and a hint of a smile.

Nonetheless, Riss's every instinct was to throw decorum to the wind and rush to her mentor. Call her name, clasp her hands, even embrace her. Not only was Hadassi alive, but Riss as well, thanks to Hadassi's intervention. Surely those were reasons enough to discard Sihr caste reserve, if only for a moment.

Instead, Riss dismissed her levitation spell, bowed slightly, and said, "Thank you, teacher."

Hadassi's brow furrowed. She turned to Riss for the first time and cocked her head.

Riss frowned. "Hadassi...?"

"Scholar Al'adon." Hadassi waved the lightning from her hand. Without its eerie illumination, her face fell into shadow. "I did not expect you."

"I'm sorry I didn't lead you to," Riss said.

Hadassi was silent for a moment, and then, abruptly, she laughed. "That is like you. Come, there's something you should see."

Riss shot another glance at Quelpa. His presence and his powers disturbed her, even if they couldn't hurt her anymore. She knew of only one place humans could train to master their minds in the way Quelpa did: the fortress-monastery of Aremyhk, home to the Imperial Alliance's Janissaries. Riss owed her allegiance to knowledge first, her homeland

the Dominion second, and the Alliance a distant third, but she'd never thought of its agents as her enemies.

So why had one tried to kill her?

"Hadassi, wait—please." Riss held up her hand. "What happened here? Where have you been? Where are the other members of the expedition?"

"It's best I show you." Hadassi beckoned to the maw of the obsidian temple behind her.

Riss did not want to take one step closer to it. If her mentor believed she needed to see for herself, though, there had to be a good reason.

*And is that, she asked herself, a reasonable thing to believe?*

The situation made no sense. Hadassi had disappeared for months, yet here she stood, gaunt and disheveled but apparently unharmed. A man who might well serve the Imperial Alliance had tried to keep Riss from finding her.

Riss would follow. She'd come too far to do otherwise.

She wouldn't follow blindly, though.

She strode across the courtyard, head lowered, holding a spell upon her lips and weaving others as she walked. She'd finished casting before she set foot on the first of the black steps. She could have cast another suite of protections in the time it took her to climb to the top of the pyramid. Each step rose higher than even Hadassi or her daughter would've been comfortable with. Riss, with shorter legs than the Al'merams, found herself breathing hard. Riss was athletic by Sihr standards; field work like hers demanded it. Even so, she added a strength-reinforcing spell to avoid becoming completely breathless when she faced Hadassi at the top of the pyramid.

She found the breath to gasp when she saw her mentor's face up close. Hadassi had looked haggard from the ground, but Riss hadn't realized just how gaunt her mentor had become. The elder Sihr's eyes were deep-set, her skin stretched paper-thin and wan over her cheekbones. Her lips were cracked and dry, no small feat in the oppressive humidity of Bal. When she lifted her hand in greeting, it looked almost skeletal.

Though she could have passed for starving and had been lost in the jungle for months, Hadassi's expression remained as calm as it had ever been in a classroom. It almost put Riss at ease.

"Here," she said, digging into her belt pouch. "I brought plenty of provisions."

Hadassi waved her off. "That won't be necessary. I haven't exhausted mine."

Riss wondered why she hadn't. The expedition had included Khepri clerics who could create food from the air, and their guides might have hunted, but Riss couldn't imagine that Hadassi or most of her students would prefer such fare to what they'd brought with them from the Dominion.

She said, "Then you've been too busy to partake of them."

"You're probably right," Hadassi said.

"For my sake, take a little at least. Paray would never forgive me if I brought you back looking half-starved." Riss supposed that was an absurd statement. Only dignity would keep Paray from weeping for joy to see her mother alive at all, regardless of her condition.

Hadassi's expression didn't change, but she sounded like she was swallowing a sigh. "Very well. For your sake."

Riss handed over her water bottle and a bag of spiced, fried seeds. Hadassi took both. Parched appearance or no, she ignored the water and popped a few of the seeds into her mouth. She coughed, but spoke as though she didn't notice. "Very good. Thank you."

Riss liked spicier food more than did her mentor, and even she wouldn't have eaten those seeds without a drink first.

"Now," Hadassi began, but a cough cut her off. She frowned—more in confusion than discomfort, it seemed to Riss. She glanced down at the water bottle, uncapped it, and took a tentative sip.

"Why don't you show me what happened to the others," Riss said. She knew now something was very wrong with Hadassi. Perhaps accompanying her into the temple was suicide. Nonetheless, Riss had come too far to turn back.

Not that she ever would have.

"I was just about to suggest the same," Hadassi said. "Follow."

Doing so was the most natural thing in the world to Riss.

She had spent much of her life following Hadassi. In many respects she'd been closer to a daughter to the older Sihr than her actual daughter could be—Paray could only watch while Riss mimicked Hadassi's spellcasting gestures and only listen while Riss learned Hadassi's magic words. Even academically, Riss had been the brighter student, and she'd taken to field work even more enthusiastically than did Hadassi herself, while Paray preferred a library to a dig site. Sometimes Riss wondered how Paray didn't hate her.

She didn't. Riss could never repay her for that.

She might make a start today, though.

She followed Hadassi into the darkness of the temple. The obsidian walls seemed to swallow the sunlight, until they descended a flight of stairs and there was none to consume. When Riss missed a step, Hadassi paused and conjured a ball of purple magelight—at least, that's what Riss called it. It wasn't entirely unlike the light spells she knew, even if it crackled and twisted like a trapped creature straining against its bars.

She didn't recognize the spell any more than she had the one that had turned Quelpa to obsidian. Unlike that spell, though, she *had* seen Hadassi call up light before.

Riss wished to be surprised, but at this point these spells were just supporting evidence for the hypothesis she'd already formed.

The stairs wound downwards, their angle sharper and their steps higher than anything she'd seen elsewhere in Bal. Hadassi took them easily, either because of her height or because she was used to them. Her body enhanced by magic, Riss had no difficulty, but she almost had to hop from step to step to keep up.

Soon, they descended into a larger chamber. The light in Hadassi's hand seemed to expand to fill its volume, giving Riss a good look.

The single chamber seemed to occupy almost the entire interior of the pyramid. Unlike the outside, which had been unrelentingly angular, it was round, a circle as close to perfect as Riss could determine with a glance.

The tents of Hadassi's expedition waited at the base of the stairs. They must have set up inside the structure—perhaps to get closer to its contents, perhaps just to get out of the rain. Either way, Riss doubted it had been a good idea, but she also doubted their decision mattered at all.

The other expedition members, forty-odd men and women, stood rank-and-file in front of their tents. Riss recognized some of the students and visiting scholars who had accompanied Hadassi. The others were a pair of diplomats who'd smoothed the expedition's passage, a local archaeologist, and the three guides Quelpa had mentioned.

All turned to obsidian, of course.

Riss slowed her descent. "Is this what you wanted me to see, Hadassi?"

Her mentor stopped. "It is. Do you recognize the spell?"

"I would have to be blind not to. It's the same one you used on Quelpa."

"You've never seen it before that?" Hadassi cast a bleak look over her shoulder. It was the most human expression Riss had seen her wear since they'd been reunited.

Riss shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I had never seen it before I came here, either. I've studied it since the accident, but..." Hadassi sighed. "It's easier to learn than to dispel."

Riss faltered. "Accident?"

"Yes. One of the students must have triggered a trap beneath the pyramid—we had unsealed two more layers, but there may be more—and this curse he unleashed took the expedition before we could begin to mount a defense. I have been attempting to undo it since."

Riss looked down at the expedition. She bit her lip. "You were the only survivor?"

"My equipage protected me," Hadassi said.

"Why didn't you go for help, Hadassi?"

"Pride." Hadassi spread her hands. It struck Riss that she'd hardly gestured at all up above. This was much more her mentor's usual self: constrained body movements but hands ever in motion. "And fear. The longer a spell holds, the more difficult it is to undo."

"Our magic is not as powerful as the Khepri caste's when it comes to breaking curses," Riss said. "Why not call on one?"

Her arm snapped to the side. "Their magic is supposedly better at defending against them, but that did not help the priests accompanying the expedition? It was an arcane problem. It admitted an arcane solution.

"At least, that was what I believed." Hadassi's arm fell. She looked down at the obsidian statues that had been her colleagues and students. "It seems I was wrong."

"Why not at least tell us you were alive?" Riss reached out and laid a hand on her mentor's arm. "Why not at least tell Paray? She thought she'd lost you."

Hadassi didn't answer.

If her hands had fidgeted, Riss would have known she was searching for an answer and couldn't find one that sufficed.

She didn't move at all—whatever was searching her thoughts wasn't Hadassi.

Riss smiled. It was not what she'd hoped for, but she'd abandoned reasonable hope already. It was far better than what she'd feared.

"Thank you," Riss said.

Hadassi's face turned to look back at Riss, but the eyes set in it were not her mentor's. "For what?"

"Showing me what I must do." Lightning shot down Riss's outstretched arm.

Hadassi's body shuddered and tumbled from the steps, only to freeze in midair as Riss spoke another levitation spell.

Riss lowered her and jumped after, landing in a crouch on the obsidian floor. She hadn't released the electricity coursing through Hadassi's body, but kept it weak enough to avoid hurting her, at least permanently. Just strong enough to keep her body twitching helplessly, unable to cast or strike.

"Riss," Hadassi—or at least her voice—gasped through her chattering teeth, "what are you doing?"

"I knew you weren't Hadassi," Riss said. She rose to her full height. "From the moment I saw you alive, a part of me knew. Hadassi Al'meram might have gotten lost. She might have been injured. She might have been sealed up by a spell. She might have even died."

Hadassi twitched again. "Please! Stop this!"

"But she would never," Riss finished, "forget that her daughter was waiting for her."

She balled her hand into a fist, causing Hadassi's body to double over. Riss prayed the real Hadassi wasn't feeling what the imposter was.

"At first, I feared you might have simply killed her." Riss strode forward until she stood just in front of where Hadassi hovered. "That you were a shape-shifter that had devoured her and stolen her face, or some kind of parasite that hollowed out her body and dwelt inside it. But that can't be the case, can it?"

Even if the thing controlling Hadassi's body had wanted to answer, Riss doubted it could.

She didn't need it to. "All through our conversation, you were searching her memories. At first, you could barely emulate her at all. But by the time we got down here, you were starting to get the hang of it. The only reason you couldn't maintain the charade was the last question I asked, one the real Hadassi wouldn't have had an answer for."

Riss flattened her palm, and Hadassi dropped to the obsidian floor.

"Because I am kinder than you," Riss said, "and to spare her whatever pain she might feel from my actions, I will give you an opportunity."

Hadassi's head rose. Her eyes shifted toward Riss's.

"Leave her," Riss said, "and I'll let you crawl back to wherever you came from."

Hadassi's eyes flashed, but by then Riss had already looked away. She felt a flash of heat and a malicious presence brushing against her mind, then a pulse of frustration.

She sighed. "It seems we'll have to do this the painful way."

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Anidem's evening breeze, cool and dry and rich with the smells of home, blew a strand of Riss's hair from beneath her headscarf. Immediately, she tucked it back and tried not to laugh at her own self-consciousness.

It wasn't as though Hadassi or Paray were paying any attention.

Riss leaned over the balcony to drink in the breeze and to get a better view of their reunion: Paray, trying her damndest not to hug her mother in public. Hadassi, tears in her eyes, throwing decorum to the wind to wrap her daughter in her arms. After a moment's startlement, Paray folding into the embrace.

A deep voice at Riss's shoulder interrupted her reverie. "I must apologize, Scholar Al'adon."

"What for, Scholar Tehya?" Riss had no intention of tearing her eyes from Paray and Hadassi to address Kynon Tehya, not even for the pleasure of watching him eat crow.

"I was wrong," he said. "Ignorance did not shield you."

Below, Paray and Hadassi parted. They waved up at Riss.

She waved back. Soon, she would join them.

To Kynon, she said, "Ignorance would have been a shield. You weren't wrong about that. It would have been far safer for me, and maybe for all of Exodus, to hide behind it."

"Is the great Scholar Al'adon admitting she takes too many risks?"

In answer, Riss vaulted the railing. The winds came to her call before she hit the ground, and she drifted to the sandstone steps beside the Al'merams.

Too many risks?

If she had not taken them, Hadassi would not have been saved. Her whole expedition would have been lost, instead of freed from their obsidian curse. She and Hadassi had even dispelled it from the Janissary Quelpa—though, considering how unapologetic he'd been about trying to kill Riss, she almost regretted it.

No, she thought, *the great Scholar Al'adon did not require a shield*. She preferred to let her knowledge be her sword.

