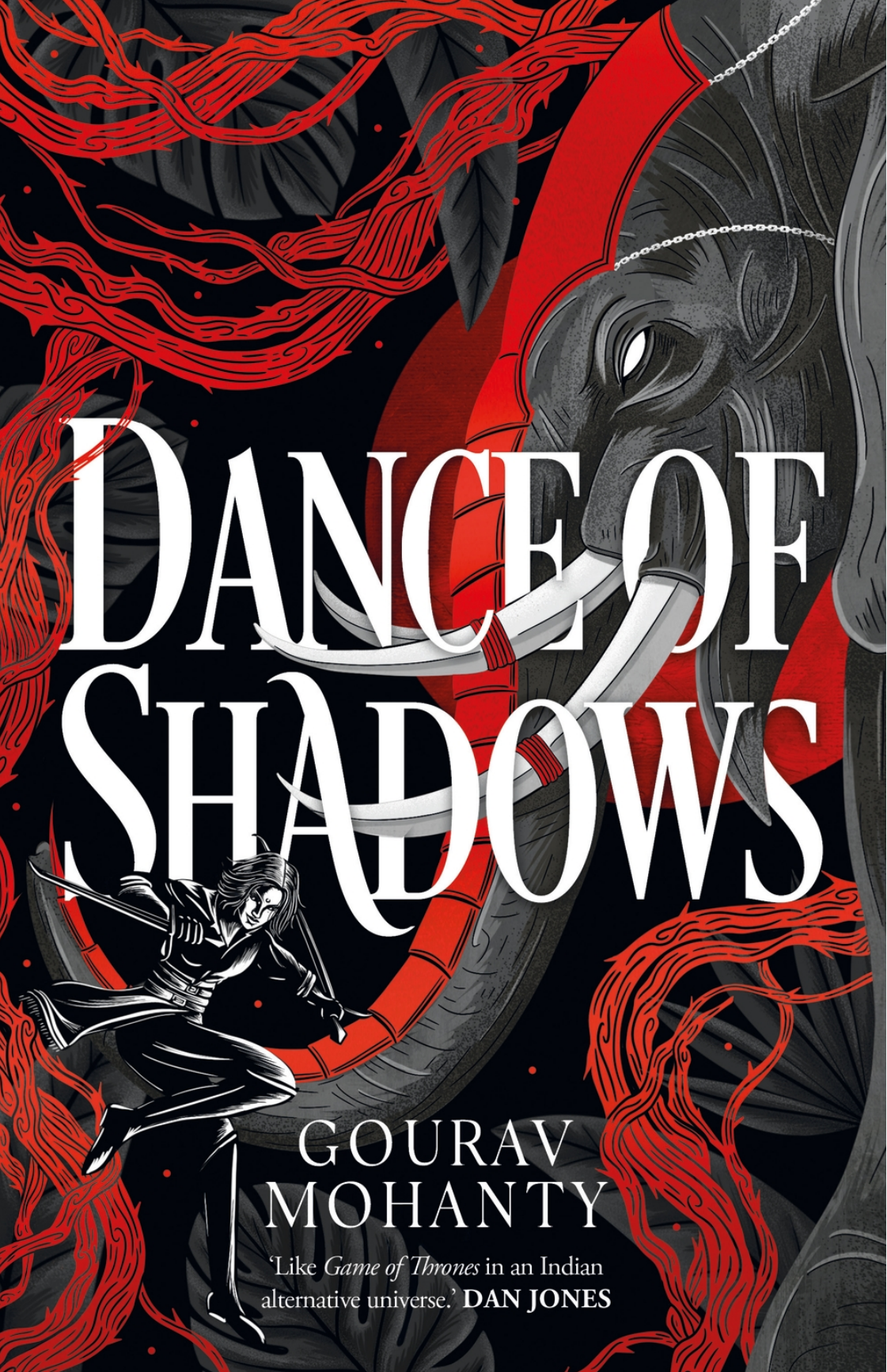




DANCE OF SHADOWS

GOURAV
MOHANTY

'Like *Game of Thrones* in an Indian
alternative universe.' **DAN JONES**

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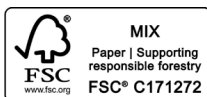
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PROLOGUE



I

Some soldiers forsake their oaths by fleeing the battlefield, some by unlatching the gates, others by seducing a superior's darling, but only the chosen commit treason by accidentally pissing on their king.

'They're ready, Sir,' whispered Asun.

Marshal Ethari withdrew his whistle and wiped it. Felt like the hygienic thing to do. 'I'm aware, soldier,' he said, hoping he had infused some nonchalance into his tone. Nonchalance, after all, earned a Marshal respect, or so his mother reminded him every day while she violently combed his unruly curls. 'I can hear them,' he added for good measure.

Judging by the noise behind him, there was a considerable number of spectators who'd been lured to the battlements – a considerable number that was steadily rising. It put Ethari in the mind of the mob's uproar back in the Day of Exodus: Seven Tribes, hundreds of voices raised in delighted devilry as they bid farewell to Iyran Machil forever. *Wonder if they'd survived. Wonder if they were up to something better than overseeing a piss-the-farthest contest.*

Ethari would have very much liked to follow the Seven Tribes out. They were bravehearts who refused to live any longer as ageless refugees in this realm and returned to the Surface at great peril. He wasn't without sympathy for their cause, after all. However, he didn't fancy the idea of drowning, either. Not to forget he had sworn an

oath to the Realmseer. Not to King Manu directly, of course, but, you know, he'd sworn it even so. He had been happy to swear it when he was rescued from the great flood, and supposed it would be rather unsporting to unswear it now simply because he was bored. What kind of a Vachan would it be then? His superior had assured him last week that Manu promised a new beginning, a new world where they would want to eat again. He missed eating. You never truly appreciate how negotiable starvation is until you've spent a few centuries without an appetite.

'Sir?' Asun asked.

Disturbed from his contemplations on digestion, Ethari glanced at his men and women spread thin along the walls of Iyran Machil. What a flimsy little blue line they cut. Perhaps thirty archers and ten spearthrowers. All useless. The wall was barely high enough for a fall to end in a fracture. Not the architect's fault, of course. Who do you defend the city walls from when your city is the only settlement in the realm?

Bored, Ethari whistled without overseeing.

With a hearty cry, he let forth the first stream. His comrades, not to be outdone, followed suit, and soon enough, like feeble spigots in a garden, waters of sunlit hues streamed down the battlements to the ground below. A windkeeper, captained by the Archmarshal, hovered in the air above – judge and jury of this ungodly contest. Someday Ethari would be up there in the sky, judging the arc of pees himself. *Any decade now.*

Meanwhile, the mirror clouds above the windkeeper cast their gaze on the wall in grand detail. Oh, how he loathed those clouds! Especially when they conspired to reflect his face, enlarged and uncomfortably close, as though the heavens themselves were holding a looking glass to his soul. It might have been tolerable if these clouds reflected the truth but he was firmly convinced that mischievous sprites lurked in the sky, who spun mirages of the mind, twisting and distorting reality. See, even now there drifted a mirror cloud, its reflections mimicking his every move until they showed him tumbling headlong off the walls.

A scream caused him to drop his whistle to the ground. The symphony of splashes from the bladder brigade now interrupted, some

of the contestants turned about in alarm, startling and showering their supporters behind instead. He, on the other hand, stuffed it inside his trousers, a growing patch of dark on the crotch the only evidence of his folly. But Ethari was past caring, his mouth turning dry as he deciphered the contents of the scream. His jaw, along with his trousers, dropped simultaneously when he confirmed it from the reflection on the sky.

They'd been relieving themselves on Manu, the Realmseer, their King, the Father of Mankind, by whose name the entire human race was now known. And Ethari had allowed this to pass.

Difficult though it was for him to admit, Ethari was having a hard time staying nonchalant. On the contrary, he was on the brink of squealing for his mother. He hadn't been trained for this. They don't train you for what to do if you accidentally douse your probably unconscious, probably sleeping, hopefully dead king with urine. Does he run? Does he call for help? Does he blame someone else? Does he blame Asun for rushing him to whistle?

Almost as if running out of time to decide, Ethari went with the evidently self-incriminating choice. 'On me! To the Realmseer!' His soldiers glanced at each other, stirring uncomfortably, but to their credit and his relief, they followed him down the steps.

Ethari heard the Realmseer before he saw him. Heard his heartbeat to be precise. How could he hear the Realmseer's heartbeat from such a distance! Was it his own? But the sound of the Realmseer's heart faded in Ethari's ears when his eyes saw the Realmseer's body.

Manu was lying face down. Wheezing and leaking red all over, his hair, his back, his arse, all seemed damp. Ethari hesitated, whispered a prayer, and then delicately turned his king over, and fell back in horror.

Arteries bulged out on Manu's face, much like they did on his sculptures. The Orb of Agan Mian, carved into a hole in the centre of the king's forehead, glimmered weakly, its shine dimmed. But it was Manu's eyes that petrified Ethari. Strange golden specks in his brown eyes, starlike, were merging into each other even as Ethari observed them.

Ethari had never seen Manu in such close proximity but he did not need prior intimacy with his king to know something had gone

horribly wrong. Was it because of the piss? The specks in his eyes were the same colour as it! *Oh Mother, I'm dead.*

'Summon the windkeeper!' Ethari snarled. 'Now, you bastards!'

Ow! Ethari rubbed his eyes. Perfect. Just the time for dust to make its entrance. Now his eyes would turn red, and his soldiers would think he was weeping. Of course, Ethari wanted to but he wasn't. He will be damned if he let his underlings see him so. Fucking ingrates that they were. Pissing off the walls! What kind of a soldier does that? Now he'll be blamed for their bladders!

While thoughts of fairness raged in the poor Marshal's head, the windkeeper descended. A heavily robed healer pranced out, followed by the Archmarshal.

'Report,' the Archmarshal, a short, diminutive woman with two slim swords peeking over her shoulder, commanded. The little fucker. Kaksi, her name was. Ethari would have followed the Realmseer into hell. But not this arsehole, this bitch with her wooden fragrances, her fine accent and her nonchalant jaw. *Why am I so... angry?* That question was, however, buried by the knowledge that he was glaring back at the Archmarshal.

But before the Archmarshal could take offence, the healer spoke. 'Clots in the blood vessels leading to his mind. He should've perished... but the Orb of Agan Mian, or perhaps the poison of Velas Kalein, is stopping him from—'

'Do you want to climb to the battlements and announce your lack of knowledge to the world?' Ethari barked, not believing the words coming out of his mouth. Why was he so angry? And why did his eyes hurt so? He turned back and looked down to find Kaksi nodding at him.

'We will take the Realmseer to his palace,' Kaksi ordered.

In this suspended state between sickness and health, Manu was carried by Kaksi and her men onto the windkeeper. The engines roared to life. Soon it would ascend over the walls of Iyran Machil, passing the floating mirrors and the flying D'rahis, to take the cloud street straight to the palace. Not once did Kaksi look down to thank Ethari. If she had, she might've saved herself from his dire fate. She might've even saved this world.

II

Manu was dying. Rupa looked at her husband's diminished figure, his eyes rolled back to reveal only the whites, his hands scrawling gibberish upon the parchment on his chest. His hair remained black as ever but his face was the colour of the linen he lay on. The orb on his forehead was still the brilliant red of cooling lava but with a touch of blue at its centre, like an ocean inside a drop of flame. It no longer shone as it had for centuries past. What other evidence did she need? She branded the thought on her mind again: Manu was dying. How could he abandon her to shoulder everything alone, especially now? For the grim reports she had received over the last three days since Manu was brought in painted a red picture of Iyran Machil. Even by conservative estimates, the toll of the unprovoked riots was far higher than it had been during the Exodus a century past. But what was worse was the uncertainty: why was this happening? What did they want? A wave of frustration crashed into her followed by another wave of rage. *Wake up, Manu!*

The deep current of sorrow beneath those waves sought to drag her under but Rupa clung savagely to the splintered plank of her anger. *He will rise*, she told herself, *he will rise and pull us through this*. Only then would she pause and permit herself to feel. For now, she dipped a cloth in warm, neem-infused water, and gently wiped his shaking arms. When they had first steered the ship of humanity through the Great Tears, her two palms had not been able to span the mighty arm of her husband. Now that arm was a limp twig wrapped in slack flesh. No. It was hard to find any trace of the man she had known and loved for centuries.

He stirred lightly under her touch but did not waken, his lips simply quivering those same words he had spoken when they had discovered him on the windkeeper, all his guards aboard, ripped to pieces. 'Make the Choice. Make the Choice.'

Rupa spat great, wet blotches of red betel into the spittoon, her teeth orange with chewing. What choice? No one knew. The only time Manu had risen from his tormented dreams, he had addressed her with veiled eyes and incoherent words. 'When I was in the sky, Rupa, caging this spider in my eye, I felt it weave a strange web of

iron threads and golden strings to pull my ears open and make me hear things. No, don't! Hear me, my love! You see, something whispered! I did not know the language, though the punctuations were full of suggestions. Anonymous in origin, apocalyptic in design. Awake in the dark, waiting for me to see them... maybe they were the future, my divination powers in play perhaps, I know not. But these visions, these suggestions... won't spell themselves till I blind myself to the care of the present – Oh, no, I can't! Iyran Machil needs to be saved!' It had been a long speech for a sick man. He had stopped to breathe, and then turned to her, eyes still trapped shut. 'If I do not use this new power to tend to the city now, it will be bruised, but if I do not see the future now, we will walk to it none the wiser till the world ends in ice and fire. My people or my race? How do I make that choice?' He had asked like a starving man might ask for food, and so Rupa had answered with what she knew Manu had wanted to hear.

'If this were my final day on this earth, my first act would be to plant a tree. A civilization grows only when leaders fell forests to shape lands they'll never live to see bloom into a city,' Rupa had said, realizing a touch belatedly that the metaphor did not quite suit Iyran Machil, a city that hadn't witnessed corpses for centuries. But she had pressed on, 'Do what you must! The world will see the value of your sacrifice when your deed becomes a memory.'

Manu had nodded weakly then, demanding a scroll and a quill, before slipping into his white-eyed slumber. That was three days ago, and his condition had not changed since. Suddenly frowning, she wiped at his beard. That clumsy daughter of hers, Akuti, had let him dribble kheer all over himself. It was as if the girl just didn't care to learn to be a woman. Akuti would ascend the throne one day, hopefully on the day when Manu took them back home. But a Queen who cannot manage her own house could hardly steer the dwindling remnants of the human race to a brighter dawn. Rupa had hoped seeing her father sick would spark the sense of duty Akuti needed but little changed. She obeyed orders she was given, but not with anything resembling grace or sincerity. Yesterday when Rupa had asked her to drip lavender drops in her father's eyes, Akuti had

looked stricken. She had shaken her head, fiercely and mutely, her eyes closed shut until Rupa had ordered her off. Perhaps Akuti was seeing how far she could push her, knowing Rupa would not leave Manu's bedside. Well, she'd find Rupa Vaivasvata of Iyran Machil was not a woman easy with the whip.

Rupa shook her head, and put Akuti and Iyran Machil out of her mind. She had other, more pressing matters to attend to. She left him to write in his sleep. It was all she could do for him now. Keep him clean, replenish his quill, and leave him to die.

Bitter memories of all the plans they had discussed together trickled unbidden: when they had conspired until sunrise as they flew the skies on their windkeeper, their helmets thrown aside, their faces flung open to their reflections in the clouds. 'I'm this close to finding it,' he'd promised her, 'finding a way to rid us of the poison of this foreign realm, of finding a way to harness the furies to help us build another civilization. Similar to Iyran Machil where we remain untouched by decay but different in that we can grow, where we can die, we can hunger, where we can be only half-deities, half dust.'

'Like the Daevas, the Children of Light?'

'Just like the Daevas, my love. Would you fancy that? A world a bit like theirs, a bit like this.'

'I'd rather return to the Surface,' she'd replied then, 'return home with you, have you beside me to see seasons pass. We only left to save what we could of humanity from the deluge. I know most of the continents are still under water but there are lands which remain, which have risen anew from the ocean's reign. We could join the Seven Tribes and help them rebuild. We could toil under the sun, where our reflections will be private, where we can be afraid of age and loss again so that we never take each other for granted, where we can tend to the trees with orange blossoms because we grew them from earth and not from magic, where we can be... humans again, mortal and flawed.'

'You want to return to the Surface,' he had asked with a bite in his words, 'where we will open our doors to disease, to decay, to death, where we will know suffering again?'

'Suffering is the only metric by which we can measure happiness. Either way, just divine us a way out. I cannot bear to see my girls

stuck in their pigtails playing with wooden toys for another decade. I want to see them wedded and start with their own families, ruling humanity alongside their husbands. And I want *my* husband on this bed till I'm heartily sick of him.'

Fate found a cruel way to fulfil her wish.

She sighed, moving silently into the anteroom to settle herself at her desk. She looked at the reports the Marshals had brought for Manu. Those poor soldiers. Over the last three days, their expressions had slipped from comfortable to anxious, and then to what Rupa had come to think of as petrified. A hundred different tales clouded the riot's beginning. Ethari's killing spree. A coup by the Seven Tribes. An assault by the D'rahis. A sudden shortage of this or a deficit of that. March of the living dead. Perhaps none of these things had occurred. Perhaps they all had. But the riot had destroyed half the houses on this far side of Iyran Machil. It had then somehow spilled into the grand libraries, where, judging from the smoke, it raged on unchecked. Manu's garrison had set out into the streets to launch a savage campaign of pacification. In times past, Iyran Machil had been easily cowed by a few dozen cracked skulls. But not this time. It seemed they had had enough, and they fought back. The reports went out almost as swiftly as they came in, and always it seemed like she was asking a Marshal to hold the city for another day until Manu recovered. Rupa realized she could no longer believe her own lie. It was time to take matters in her own hands. She unrolled the first scroll, its contents written in a small, imprecise hand. She bent closer still, frowning at the mention of the words 'plague' and 'eyes' when she shuddered. She could no longer hear the words '*Make the Choice*' from the other room. Was... he gone?

'Rupa...' Manu's voice was like a rusted hinge breaking free. At the first sign of his senses, Rupa rushed into the room, a river of curses spilling from her lips as her foot found a fallen quill. Ignoring the pain, she reached to fetch the opium, but Manu shook his head. 'I made the wrong choice, Rupa. I was meant to find a way, and I thought I had. But this... this is something else. I now fear this creature I tried to control. I have chained it in my eyes but it has gone through my mind like thread through a needle. Everything I

see is now stitched with its colour. It will soon escape and I can do nothing to stop it!’

Creature? What creature? What was he rambling on about?

‘I can’t control the visions, I can’t control the creature!’ Manu curled into himself, a sack of bones shivering, breathing in like a bellows and exhaling through clenched teeth.

‘I do not understand, Manu,’ Rupa said as she gently pulled the red-stained cover from over him and screamed. His chest was mutilated with a glass shard, defaced with words she dared not read. Manu suddenly seized her wrist, eyes finally open, eyes finally seeing her, one eye, the warm brown of the Manu she loved. The other, where the pupil had dissolved into a topaz ocean, that other eye belonged to a monster.

‘Please, Rupa...’ Manu whispered, his breath hot, his word cold. ‘Run!’

III

Slices of their conversation buried themselves in the back of Manu’s neck long before their footsteps reached the room. His hearing felt unusually alert. Nicked wide open by nerves, perhaps. It felt nice, a refreshing change, to feel this exposed, this alive, as he turned to face his daughters, who had escaped their mother’s captivity, their mother’s last desperate stab at keeping them safe... from him.

The orange glow of the fires in the reflections outside the window picked up the hollows of Akuti’s face even more starkly than usual. Manu sympathized with his daughter. So much lost. So much gone. Though he could not understand if it was sadness on her face. Anger, maybe. No... it was understanding.

‘You can sense it, can’t you?’ Manu smiled warmly. ‘Akuti, you have always been special,’ he said animatedly. ‘Is that why you neglected your poor father in his sickbed? Out of fear?’

‘Something infected you...’ Akuti confessed tonelessly, eyes still on the floor.

‘*Someone* infected me. A fatal mistake on their part – they thought it would end me, and it nearly did before it severed the chains that

bound my Chakras instead. And now the... pestilence is chained inside my eyes.'

'Why... did you not destroy it, Father?'

'I could've destroyed it but why destroy a weapon when you can wield it. Look at me. Look into my eyes, Akuti. I am a martyr. You still don't believe me? Just look around you,' Manu spread his bloodied fingers wide, gesturing to the walls dripping with red. Red runes, red words, red symbols, all gouged and clawed into every inch of available space. 'All this is nothing compared to what I have wrought outside the palace. Akuti, do you still not see? I did it. I turned their weapon against them. I saved the world. I see the future, and I will change the ending.'

'Your heart...' Her voice trembled.

'Yes, it still races faster than it should and that was a challenge but the Orb...' his fingers tapped the smouldering gem on his forehead, 'helped me wrest control back to save the future. The future, Akuti! Now all those corpses that litter the city are not wasted deaths, but sacrifices.'

Akuti's steps faltered, her mouth making soundless words. More shock than suffering. She clutched the side wall for support, its paintings now red-spotted, and made a wailing sound. More suffering than shock, this time.

Manu didn't blame her. Rupa probably didn't look like Maa now. She was propped against a wall. Her face, collapsed under his sledgehammer, looked like minced meat moulded into the shape of a bread. It certainly didn't look like a face that would be attempting to stop her husband from saving the future.

'Why have you scribbled all over the walls? You have dirtied them! You will be in trouble!' Prakruti said, in a sing-song voice. 'Oh, oh, this effigy is dressed like Maa! Can I smash it too!' saying which his younger daughter mimed the motion in the air with a 'Hiyaaah'.

'You can watch,' Manu said as he swung the sledgehammer to smash Rupa's face again. Prakruti cheered on.

'But if you are already infected,' Akuti said, 'that means... I am infected as well?'

Manu let the sledgehammer fall with a dull thud. He stepped toward Akuti, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, guiding her towards the mirror. But as she lifted her gaze, he found himself distracted – not by her yellowing eyes, but by his own reflection.

Had he aged in a day? No, there were no fresh wrinkles. Then why was his hair silver? It wasn't silver, he realized. It was bleached. So were his brows and his lips. The only thing of colour that remained on his body were his grey armbraces. And of course, the red slashes carved across his wrists and his chest. He ran a finger along the cuts on his chest, feeling the script etched into his skin. The mutilation was a poem in an ancient script all but invisible on the bleeding canvas. He wiped at the blood, clearing enough to reveal the words beneath. '*Son of Darkness?* Who is that?'

'Akuti!' Prakruti called her sister, her own eyes by now had yellowed like a sky catching up with the sunrise. 'What happened to her, Father? Why does she not move?'

Before Manu could answer, the floor shook. Something had fallen – or rather, been hurled – from the sky and crashed into the palace. The roar was loud enough to separate membranes in the middle ear. Paintings slipped from their nails. Toys drifted off shelves. The concussion sent the floor wavering beneath his feet, and Manu flung his arms out for balance. Out in the hall, the crystal pendants of the chandelier chimed madly. He sessed down the palace. Felt it tear off like a rotting plank in the hands of a carpenter, the pins exploding out in puffs of sawdust. No time to spare. He scaled the window sill and, facing the pyre of Iyran Machil, jumped.

He sessed out, palms stealing grey from his own armbraces, as he channelled Wind. Air surged up from the earth to cradle his dive, but it vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. The armbraces, now bleached of all colour, had given their final offering. The dive became a fall.

When the pain of fractures became familiar enough, he dragged his gaze to look up at the reflection of the palace ruins in the mirror clouds. *Oh*, he realized when he saw himself lying alone. He had forgotten to save Akuti and Prakruti. Little was the time to dwell on remorse, however, for through the sky above, Justice was making its

descent. The Seven Tribes, who had left Iyran Machil in the Exodus, had returned.

IV

Iyran Machil took seven days to devour itself. It was the seventh day.

Trisiras was impressed with Iyran Machil's resilience against his plague. The city thrashed endlessly in a futile dance of defiance, an immortal fish tossed alive onto a bed of hot coals. For far away, the purge raged. The vile and the virtuous burned together as vast sections of this diseased world were destroyed by volunteers from the returned Tribes. Heroes, all. Their sacrifices had been instrumental in chaining the plague to this realm. Just as he had predicted.

He would've still liked to witness their brave efforts but this was more important. The Judges from the Seven Tribes had by now drifted down to their tall vaikunshard chairs. Those chairs had been fashioned by a lost race to resemble the face of a creature, an aspect of the dead God. Eight aspects, eight seats, each facing the centre. The tallest seat, reserved for the Father of Mankind, remained unoccupied, as he himself was the one now chained on the floor.

'Iz the aa-oh nez-zery?' Manu rasped. Speech was still difficult. Understandable. An arrow lodged in your jaw did not lend itself to pleasant conversational skills.

One of the Judges continued his lament as if Manu had not interrupted him, 'You had a chance to stop it. You could've stopped it. Letting the present rot to save the future isn't my style, no insult to those that do. We all got our reasons. I try not to damn a man on his choice of goals to die for. But your own Codes, Realmseer... erm, I never was good at it. What was it, Janai?'

'*Dereliction's a toll*,' the woman named Janai said. She was the only one amongst the Seven who had done a neat job of blinding herself. The other judges had turned their eye sockets into hollows of horror. '*A derelict monarch foregoes the ring and bears justice's cruel sting*.' Her head snapped to the west. 'I sense uninvited visitors

approaching. Manu, Shepherd of Humanity, for your crimes against the Iyran Machil, we, the Seven, condemn you to—'

Trisiras was rudely startled by Manu's answering scream. He sessed zinth course through the madman's nadis in a bid to loosen his anguish on the world.

'I was told there was no colour,' one of the other Judges said. 'How is he drawing power?'

'From his organs,' Janai said. 'He is bleaching his lungs! Such raw power cannot exist.'

'And it will not,' the Judge replied. 'Now!'

Six arrows flew from six bows through Manu's neck, through Manu's chest and through Manu's waist to make a reclining throne for the Father of Mankind. And that was that.

Funerals and farewells, in Trisiras's experience, were like watching paint dry. He would rather return to the City and marvel at his art instead, and of course, meet the uninvited visitors Janai had keenly sensed. Fortunately, his cheeks were as dark as midnight, as was common with the race of Danavas, the Children of Dark. And midnight was a charming colour, not only to set off his purple eyes but to conceal him as he escaped into the Iyran's shadows.

He slunk down streets scattered with slaughtered children, disabled horses and strewn insides. Soon, rutted mud turned to straw-streaked dirt, to cobbled stones, to new paving, till he finally found a tower untouched by the carnage. When he reached its terrace to take in the sights, he was not disappointed.

Iyran Machil had become a city wardrobed out of a fevered dream. The carcasses of four D'rahis lay strewn in a ragged row, their wings torn apart. Where their blood had spilled out, it had fused with the lifeless soil to grow taloned roots of the largest tree in this realm. Perhaps a thousand reaches tall, its trunk stood mighty, a tapestry of intricate patterns on it resembling coiled scales, a legacy to the legendary creatures whose blood gave it birth. The marigold flowers on the tree, their petals brushed with hues of fire, fanned out in a reminder of the flames that burned down Iyran Machil.

Trisiras hummed a tune as he jotted down his observations for his manuscript on mankind. Occasionally, he paused to admire the sky, which hung heavy with clouds to serve as twisted mirrors.

He cut a stocky, stout, weathered figure in the reflections with his layered snowy hair but the star markings splashed across his face like freckles made him look very young and handsome, despite being eternities old. True, his shoulder and his neck were charred by the fire from Manu's staff when Trisiras had infected him, but it was a trifling price to pay to see how his invention would yield fruit. *Or flowers*, he chuckled as he absently sketched a marigold in the margin of the page. But his reflection did not chuckle back, rather it broke into tears. Disturbed, Trisiras returned to his manuscript.

From what Trisiras had gathered, the Seven Justices planned to sacrifice themselves after sealing Iyran Machil from the outside world. In the days to come, the trace of the plague would be erased. The ash-ridden winds would salt Iyran Machil's ruins. Nothing would be allowed, spirit or scribe, to speak of the horrors of this day to any passing bard. Survivors, if any, would perish out of starvation after Manu's death and death of that damned gem on his forehead, and with that, the destruction of Iyran Machil would be complete. A good plan.

Hopefully the Daevas, who he now sensed approach from behind, would feel the same way. Still... who approached? Faraladar? Merene? Vosei Rune? Curiosity made him turn rather than wait for the answer. *Interesting*.

Anyone acquainted with Thorin Drazheus, King of the Daevas, the Children of Light, would have pictured him hunched over his lunch directing at a blameless aubergine a look of such hatred that the poor vegetable would have sizzled beneath it. He had favoured mankind over other races of mortals after all. Therefore, it surprised Trisiras to see Thorin going about the place with a beaming smile and a spring to his step. Especially when his pristine white clothes were sheathed in the gore of the infected humans who had probably attacked him on his way. Only the marigold petals stuck in his hair gave any contest to the rest of the stink from him.

'Trisiras!' Thorin laughed. 'In a single night you have turned a city of promises into a pyre of carcasses. See what the Light and Dark can achieve together? How far back do you think this has pushed their civilization by?'

‘The pestilence, perhaps by a few hundred years. But the burning of books, scholars and acolytes ordered by Manu in his madness,’ Trisiras exhaled, ‘all the way back.’

‘All the way back,’ Thorin repeated, grinning. Trisiras could not remember the last time he had seen this wide an emotion on a Daeva face. ‘I like that. Your gamble paid off, I see.’

‘You may throw dice with their fates, Thorin. I play *Shatranj*, and that is a precise endeavour.’

‘Shatranj?’ Savitre Lios appeared. ‘May your Night be Bright, Your Grace,’ Savitre greeted Thorin before turning again to Trisiras, ‘Hope the others don’t find out you’ve been using two queens all along.’ His voice had that light veneer of humour that he used to avoid admitting how horrified he truly was.

‘I care not for the game but the result,’ Thorin declared. ‘Manu had known too much already.’

Trisiras nodded amusingly. ‘But it was Manu’s greed for knowledge, his thirst to know the future that came in his way, or else he would have undone my gift all on his own.’

Thorin raised his golden eyebrow in a blend of awe and anger. ‘Men and their filthy Chakras and their filthy Gems.’

‘Why don’t you deploy the cure now?’ Savitre prodded, the patterns tattooed on his lean ivory arms glowing faintly. When Thorin shot Savitre an odd glance, he hastily amended, ‘At this rate of destruction, there will be no one left to harvest.’

‘There is no cure,’ Trisiras said. ‘Besides, the Seven Judges have already contained it in the Chaining and the yellow dust I blew into Manu’s eyes was the only sample,’ he lied. ‘It will take decades to brew another.’ That part, at least, was true enough.

‘One time was all that was needed,’ Thorin said. ‘A push to guide these lost souls.’

‘This will force the mortals to forge alliances,’ Savitre warned. ‘They will war against us.’

‘They will lose,’ Thorin said. ‘With this,’ Thorin snatched the scroll that Trisiras had been scribbling on, ‘with their secrets exposed, we know now their weaknesses. Let them band together. It will be easier to destroy them in one great war rather than countless small skirmishes.’ He casually tossed the journal back to Trisiras’s lap,

missing the flash of rage on his face. 'All thanks to...' he turned to Trisiras, 'what are you going to name this beautiful plague of yours?'

Trisiras looked up at the colossal marigold tree's reflection in the mirrored sky, and just smiled.

The three sat there for a long time watching the city crumble. Iyran Machil, the cradle and now the grave of a civilization, was the evidence of the lie in the immortality of a world. Worlds, it seemed, could be slain.

Even the world of the Children of Light, Trisiras mused as he plotted to rally his Danavas against the Daevas in the future. He just had to bide his time.

But everything always goes exactly as planned, said no one ever.

Unfortunately for the Daevas, the mortal races did band together, just as Savitre had foreseen, and drove the Daevas from their realm in the Siege of Tyrants.

Regrettably for the Danavas, before Trisiras could unleash his plague on the Daevas, along came a descendant of Manu by the name of Muchuk Und to sever his head on Thorin's behalf. Thorin would later betray Muchuk Und, plunging both the plague and the warlord into the murk of legend. Alas, for the realms, legends had other plans, for they both were found again.