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## *The Webmaster*

**T**he growing heat of the day drew a heady fragrance from the moist ground and mossy rocks, one Rhone might have normally relished. But just then, the mustiness of the forest was only a distant tug at the back of his brain. Something else had caught his attention: a vaguely bitter smell. The smell of money! In the dappled sunlight through a high forest canopy, he paused and sniffed again.

*Javian!*

The corners of his mouth hitched up, then his broad forehead furrowed. The spoor was old; a lingering scent. The spider was now long gone. Rhone moved toward the faintly tangy remnant in the air, ears alert, his brown eyes in constant motion. Many beasts had turned; it was hard to know which were still harmless and which were not. The Teeg'kits had changed—they were now called mansnatchers—and the hook-tooths, according to some reports. Change was in the air. A man had to tread cautiously these days—much more so than only forty or fifty years ago.

Filtered sunlight mottled the shadows around him, and broken glimpses of a soft blue sky flashed in the scattered leafy breaks two to three hundred spans above his head. Rhone had shed his shirt in the heat of the day. The long, sinuous muscles of his arms stood out like cords of rope, and his bronze skin glistened with

perspiration as he moved silently through the forest. He carried a sturdy shiverthorn pack over his left shoulder and a proj-lance in this right hand—though he still somewhat distrusted the new weapon. The long sword at his left side was a more familiar and reliable friend. In the top of his right boot resided a thin, sharp webbing knife. His dark mane of brown hair hung free about his shoulders, held only by a forest-green headband of cotton to keep it from his eyes.

At the edge of a small clearing, he stopped. His frown deepened at the sight of long silken strands dangling from the treetops, drifting in the slight breeze. He'd found the web. Abandoned, as he knew it would be. It wasn't the first.

The tattered silken funnel that filled the clearing was still anchored to the trees on several sides. Only a partial chimney, beginning fifty spans above him, still remained of the clever trap. From its wide mouth below, it narrowed upward, toward a swath of sky. Even though abandoned and in ruin, a score of tough anchor strands still held it in place.

As he studied the ragged chimney of silk, his head tilted back, disappointment became a nearly tactile thing. The web had a long tear down one side where some animal had chewed or clawed its way free. The once-glistening sheets of javian silk were now dulled with a layer of dust and the carcasses of moths and dragonflies unable to escape the sticky strands. A necklace of puff-pollen, beaded into precise balls of silk, lay like fine, silvery pearls around the outside slope of the funnel. The spider had left its food cache behind.

And that was the most puzzling of all. So many spiders had left their treasured gatherings of food behind. What had driven them off? Javian spiders never forsook their hoards unless driven from them. Some had even been known to attack humans defending a stash of puff-pollen. Were the spiders turning too? Was that causing this mass exodus? Were they being affected by the same forces that were affecting the beasts of the field?

Rhone shrugged off the problem, putting it aside to ponder later. Collecting had been a poor business this trip out. The single spool he carried in his pack was only three quarters full where by this time he should have filled two. Setting the pack aside, he drew out his webbing knife and began the task of separating the walking strands out of the web. The walking strands were the strongest and easiest to handle, having never been coated in the spider's sticky droplets.

It was the second hour of the first quartering, and dusk had begun to cool the forest by the time Rhone finished the job. He carefully wrapped the silk about a stick and put it into the pack with the spool. He'd been away from Nod City almost two months, and with so little to show for all that time he was tempted to stay longer and push farther into the Wild Lands, but Ker'ack would be expecting him soon.

He found a spring flowing from the cracks of a stone ledge and stopped in the cool of the evening to make camp. The forest darkened around him. The flames of his fire pushed the shadows back a comfortable distance as he prepared a dinner. With the sizzle of mushrooms, onions, peppers, carrots, and savots in his skillet, sautéing in sweet tarra sap, Rhone set about the business of cleaning the web. He split a soap reed, inserted the javian silk between its frothy pulp, and fastened an end of it onto his spool. Working in the firelight with the silk anchored beneath a smooth stick in the flow of water from the spring, he slowly reeled it onto his spool, drawing it first through the soap reed, then drying it with a cloth as it came up out of the water.

It took longer to clean old silk, but Rhone was a patient man. With one ear tuned to the night sounds, he let his thoughts drift. This rash of abandoned webs bothered him. He was nearly to the Illackin Mountains, and still the spiders were scarce. But then all of nature seemed to be changing; once-tame animals turned from men, even attacked them. Could it be because men had begun eating animal flesh? He shrugged. Anything was possible. Perhaps men were turning too.

He fed another stick into his fire then fished out his purse and

weighed it on the palm of his hand. It was light—too light for his liking.

*Go north, beyond Far Port.*

He had to locate fresh webs. Ker'ack depended on him, and others like him, to keep his business prosperous. Had other webmasters run across the same problem? Maybe he should strike out in a different direction. These eastern forests had been heavily harvested. Perhaps north? He could catch a boat or a sky-barge to Far Port and then set out from there. Why hadn't he thought of that before?

But first he would return to Nod City and sell his paltry gatherings.

Rhone finished cleaning the spider silk and bundled the spool carefully into his pack. He ate his dinner, then leaned his proj-lance and sword against a tree and drew his blanket over his shoulders. No matter how steamy the days, the nights always cooled, and in the morning a fine mist would rise from the moist earth and cover everything. That was the nature of things.

He leaned against the wide trunk and watched the flames struggle. He'd not offer them succor. He was tired, and anxious for the morning. The little stone cottage he let from Master Mav-duruc with its real bed and hot spring water beckoned to him now. He tried not to think of the dilemma of the spiders.

The fire faded. Darkness crept close. Still, sleep evaded him. Finally, he took his moonglass and book from his pack and unlatched the wooden case so the glass showed its pale white light upon the stained, maroon cover and faded gold letters. *Song of the Makir*. Pыр Torck's epic poem. He opened the book to one of his favorite ballads, *Elegy to a Fallen Warrior*.

The poignant verses still seemed fresh and thrilling after all these years. He read them as if discovering them for the first time, though in truth he could have recited the poem from heart. As he read, images of youth and home filled his head. The poem always conjured memories. Perhaps that was why he read it often. The stanzas ran on

page after page, but when he came to a certain verse, he skipped over it and went on. In spite of that, when he'd finished, his eyelids sagging with sleep and his heart heavy with memories, that one shunned passage came to him. He couldn't drive the memorized words from his head.

One has departed, another holds the throne,  
 Home and hearth are lost.  
 A war is over, a land in despair,  
 A grievous wage for kinsman to bear.  
 A people count the cost.  
 Bitter wails now fill once courtly halls,  
 With cries to redeem a shadow land.  
 Deliver us from beneath the tyrant's heavy hand!  
 Makir and shield bearers rally to the call.  
 The son had departed, a brother holds the throne.

Rhone shut the moonglass and forced himself to think of something else as he curled up in his blanket to wait for sleep.

A deep rumble shook the ground beneath his head. Then another. He glanced around his dark campsite.

The rumble grew louder and drew closer. Some beast of the forest was moving swiftly toward him. A branch snapped and frightened monkeys fled through the treetops. A cold warning finger dragged a nail up his spine and he sniffed the air. The breeze was coming out of the wrong direction. Had his fire attracted a turnling? He reached for his proj-lance.

*Don't linger in your blanket, Rhone.*

It occurred to him suddenly he'd be in a bad way found still curled up in his blanket. Throwing it off, he stood warily.

All at once, the night went silent. Nearby, the muffled rumble of deep breathing caught his ear.

Rhone strained to penetrate the blackness. The hairs at the back

of his neck seemed connected to needles. The few red embers remaining of his fire and the pale glow of starlight through the scattered gaps in the canopy gave off enough light for his keen eyes to pick out a shape here and there.

The creature sniffed. Rhone wheeled toward the sound. Leaves crackled beneath a massive weight. A shadow, only faintly lighter than the rest of the forest, suddenly loomed overhead.

He heaved the proj-lance and recoiled beneath the weight of the creature striking it. The weapon lurched from his grasp. The blow propelled him backward into the tree he'd been leaning against. His sword was there and at hand. Instinct replaced conscious thought and old training, long unused but still programmed into his muscles, took over. He swung out. The blade struck something hard and skittered along its edge. A roar shattered the air. Rhone glimpsed teeth like daggers, and a momentary flash of a greenish eye shine. A stengordon! The giant stood ten spans tall, and its hot, humid breath reeked of a garbage pit!

Rhone ducked. A snap and the clash of teeth cracked near his ear. Turning and crouching under the beast, he thrust the sword upward, his muscles straining when the point struck home. Lifting with his legs and driving with his arms, he punched his sword through the leathery hide and found hard muscle beneath.

Its howl shook the trees and sent sleeping creatures scattering skyward. The beast twisted, wrenching the sword from Rhone's grasp. A tail the thickness of a small tree trunk whipped around and drove him into the ground. The wounded beast howled again, and in the faint light Rhone saw it come at him. He scrambled back and his hand touched something hard on the ground. His proj-lance! The weapon leaped around and fired. A blinding flash, a whoosh, and the muffled boom of a proj detonating deep within the animal's body came all at once.

The beast swayed.

Rhone rolled to one side and sprang to his feet as small trees

snapped beneath the toppling monster's weight. The ground rumbled.

Rhone scrambled away and put a tree between himself and the creature, but the downed giant didn't move. Rhone leaned against the rough bark and slid down, sitting there, shaking and gulping massive drafts of air. His heart pounded in his chest and the proj-lance in his hands was slick with his perspiration.

Rhone waited for the creature's ragged breathing to cease and for its massive limbs to stop quivering before creeping back to the beast. A turnling? Sten-gordons had until now been shy and reclusive.

With no small struggle Rhone extracted his sword from the tough flesh. Had others of his kind turned too? There was no way to know for sure.



The next morning he examined the sten-gordon. The dark skin had faded in death, its once-bright scarlet and lemon stripes now rust and amber. A deep gash showed where his sword had taken a chunk out of one claw. Rhone frowned, sobered by how close he had come to death.

If he'd harbored any uncertainty the night before, this had made up his mind. He must return to Nod City. Others needed to be warned to keep a wary eye on the sten-gordon. With a final glance at the slain giant, Rhone slung his pack onto his shoulder and turned his steps toward home.



The great dragon, glinting gold and red in the sunlight, swept down through the city, gliding with wide spread wings above broad avenues, riding the gentle updrafts of the warming morning air. With a sudden flap, and a gust of wind that ruffled the colorful awnings of the vendors below, it climbed lazily toward the towering walls at the city's center. Another powerful lunge lifted it above the battlements.

Black, curved talons reached out and clutched a stone merlon and its bulk settled lightly upon the pink granite that encircled the paved plaza of Government House far below.

Rhone glanced at the dragon winging its way into the city and dismissed it almost at once. His curiosity, like those of scores of citizens hurrying with him, had been excited by the commotion coming from Meeting Floor. He joined the crowd moving toward the six arches of pink granite twenty-two spans high and almost ten wide, opening onto the Meeting Floor. The place was already packed with men and women craning their necks and lifting themselves on their toes for a glimpse of the raised platform at its center.

The dragon gave a shake, as if flinging dust from its ruby scales, ruffled its leathery wings, and folded them along its sleek sides until their tips reached back to enshroud a quarter length of its tail. Then it lowered its long neck, canted its head, and blinked golden eyes at the throngs below. Sitting there as if part of the stonework, it almost appeared to be listening, as if it could understand the angry voices of the milling crowd below.

Perhaps it could.

Rhone shifted the shiverthorn pack to his other shoulder and pushed into the crowd. He could see over the heads of most of the people, catching a glimpse of the polished onyx dais which lay in the heart of the plaza. An emissary wearing the official purple robes of the House of Cain stood upon the dais, reading a proclamation to the crowd. Sound mirrors around the perimeter of the Meeting Floor amplified his voice, yet angry shouts broke into his reading more than a couple times. With the interruptions coming more frequently now, the man looked to be reaching the end of his patience.

Rhone pressed on across the crowded floor in spite of protesters whose complaints invariably died in their throats with one look at him. He stood almost four spans tall. A life lived mainly in the Wild Lands had left him well muscled with shoulders that stretched a full

span and skin a warm hue of walnuts. At his side rode a blade forged of the finest steel. He carried his proj-lance in his left hand, held close to his body to keep it from snagging amongst the crowd that grudgingly gave way for him.

“... and this tariff, which the Lodath has most reluctantly requested, shall last only until the first temple is completed. At which time—”

“I’ve heard that before,” a voice protested. “His harbor pledge was only supposed to last until the temple docks were finished. That was nine years ago!”

A few of the Lodath’s supporters cheered the emissary on in spite of this new ploy to milk glecks from their purses. Voices of discontent swelled again.

The Lodath’s emissary scowled.

Rhone glanced toward the Government House. A curtain in a third floor window had briefly lifted then dropped back in place.

“Silence! Silence! Allow me to finish!” The emissary cast about the crowd.

The protests diminished to a mumbling undercurrent that never fully ceased.

“King Irad has given his approval for the tariff. The levy will be 3 percent of all items sold in the land of Nod. It will be collected on the last day of the month by agents of the Lodath’s Guards and deposited in the treasury of the House of Cain.”

Rhone worked his way nearly to the front of the crowd, three or four ranks back from where the onlookers pressed hard against the polished bronze tubes encircling the platform. He didn’t need to get any closer for a clear view of the emissary’s strained face, or the stern set of his shaven jaw, as he held the proclamation before him.

“The monies collected will be used to offset the heavy cost of erecting the Oracle’s temple.”

“After King Irad skims off his share,” someone shouted.

“Administrative costs only,” the emissary clarified, clearly at the end of his patience.

“Why do we have to foot the bill?” another demanded. “Isn’t the Oracle supposed to be coming to enlighten the world?”

The emissary glared at this new interruption coming from a man standing not far from Rhone.

“He comes for the benefit of the world, but we are the most fortunate people he has chosen to dwell with. You have all heard his teachings. The Lodath has revealed his words to you. How can you compare the small cost of funding his temple, his dwelling place among men, to the great honor of having the Oracle in your very midst?”

Rhone’s view shifted to a man and woman standing just in front of him. They weren’t from Nod City, or even any of the settlements nearby. Their clothes were foreign. *Lee-landers*. The faintest twitch tugged down the corners of his lips.

The man was tall, stiff-backed, and intent. He wore the practical trousers of a farmer: leather and wool, bearing pockets great and small, and split at the ankles to fit over his sturdy boots. A colorful woolen tunic covered his broad shoulders, falling to midthigh and gathered to a narrow waist by a wide belt.

The woman was nearly as tall—three spans or a bit more. She appeared younger than he, with a healthy glow to her attractive face. Her black hair, thickly braided, hung down to her waist where a loose plait of blue cord encircled her cotton-and-shiverthorn dress. Like the man’s tunic, the dress had been woven of green and brown and yellow threads. Its hem began within a hand’s breadth of the paving stones at her sturdy shoes, and ended in a tight collar at her neck. Very discrete and proper—very much in keeping with the traditions of *Lee-landers*. Its full cut revealed little of her shape beneath it, except that the woman was obviously with child.

He noted the occasional glance of disapproval the onlookers in the crowd directed toward these *Lee-landers*, particularly from the

Covenant wearers. Rhone was seeing more and more people wearing the Oracle's crystalline Covenant pendants.

The Lodath's emissary droned on about the necessity of the pledge and the wonderful benefits of having the Oracle among them. Rhone cared little about either. The nature of his work meant the tax would hardly affect him. And as far as the Oracle was concerned, he was just another charlatan who'd found a people with itching ears eager to chase after the latest fad. The Lodath claimed the Oracle was from the stars. Some even believed the Oracle was the voice of the Creator, though that notion never came from the Lodath. The stuff of stories. Tales told to young ears at bedtime. Yet, the man and his wife seemed riveted by what the emissary was saying, their faces stern and eyes narrowed as if mentally challenging each and every word.

Definitely Lee-landers.

Rhone wondered briefly what they were doing here in Nod City, so far from their homeland. Nod City did not often attract Lee-landers—especially these days. Probably came to gawk at the spectacle taking shape just outside the city's gates. Isn't that what drew most folks here these days? His eyes hitched toward Government House, but from here the ambitious construction project, which now apparently needed another influx of funds, lay hidden beyond the smoothly curving gold-and-pink stone walls.

Rhone's frown deepened. The Lee-landers he'd met in his travels were opinionated and clannish—difficult to barter with. He dismissed the couple and turned back to the man on the dais.

"The Lodath extends his most heartfelt thanks in advance for your continued cooperation, and for those of you who have already pledged their service to the Oracle, he pronounces a special blessing for bountiful harvests and many—"

"How can the mouthpiece of the serpent pronounce a blessing!" a voice boomed.

A gasp ran through the crowd. The emissary's face went pale. It

seemed to Rhone as if every eye there had suddenly fixed upon the Lee-lander who'd just spoken out.

The emissary stammered, "Th—that's blasphemy!" His eyes narrowed dangerously. "Such words can serve no useful purpose but to bring misery down upon you."

The onlookers gave way as the Lee-lander approached the bronze tube barrier.

The woman clutched at his sleeve. "Lamech!"

Lamech hesitated, clearly struggling, but something stronger than his wife's wishes seemed to urge him on. His face stern, his eyes smoldered as if a fire had suddenly been kindled behind them. "You speak of my misery but fail to understand your own wretchedness, or the destruction your folly will bring upon you and your children! Turn aside from this road while you still have time! Put your feet back on the way of righteousness before the Creator's wrath can be contained no longer!"

The emissary's laugh sounded strained. "Now you speak of fables. We've grown beyond those stories of gods and thunderbolts, meant only to keep people in subjection."

The rumbled agreement from the crowd showed the emissary he'd struck a favorable chord. "You can keep your ancient gods and musty legends. Maybe where you come from men still toil under the yoke of fear, but not here. Not in Nod City! Just look around at the marvels. Everywhere you look is a testament to the supremacy of man. We've conquered nature, and now with the Oracle's guidance, we will begin to conquer our final limitations—those we put upon ourselves. So don't think you can burden us again with your myths and fear-mongering! We'll have none of it here!"

The crowd surged toward the Lee-lander, but some of them seemed to hesitate.

*Go to them, Rhone.*

The woman grasped her husband's arm and cast about for a way out. Then her eye caught Rhone's. It was for only an instant that they

looked at each other before the woman's gaze jumped away, but in that fleeting second he could have sworn a shimmering light had filled the space between them. He shook his head and looked again, but the air had stilled. Without knowing why, he started toward the couple.

"You Lee-landers go back to where you came from!" an angry voice shouted.

"And take your dusty fables with you!" another snarled.

The Lee-lander was not intimidated, but his wife huddled near to him, her dark eyes in constant motion. He put an arm over her shoulder and drew her close. His voice was deep and resonant, and it boomed with a clear sound that overpowered the angry jeers. "Your hearts run to folly! If you permit this deception in your midst, you will surely bring about your own end. And that end will come swift and sure, and all remembrance of you will be cleansed from the world!"

"I've heard those threats before," the first man yelled. "Three hundred years ago your people were lamenting the end of all civilization. But look at us now, Lee-lander. See what we've built in spite of doomsayers like you? Where is our end? I ask you! Show me how bad off we are! You can see only clouds where the rest of us see the sun! You tell us we allow deception in our midst. Are the lofty words of the Oracle the deception you speak of? If so, then I'd rather be uplifted by what you say are his lies than smothered by the so-called truth your deity would force upon us."

What the emissary had not been able to do with his words, the Lee-lander had done with his contrary opinion. Nothing like opposition to unite people. Rhone threaded his way through the crowd.

The emissary had let the crowd speak for him, but now he stepped forward. "Away with those two! Run them out of the city!"

The crowd rallied. Someone drew a knife and lunged for the Lee-lander.

Rhone's fist shot out and caught his wrist. Standing a full head

taller than the man, he placed himself like a wall between the assailant and the Lee-lander. The man began to quiver beneath the powerful grasp, slowly folding under the irresistible force. His fingers sprang open, and the knife clattered to the stones. Rhone shoved him back into the crowd. For a moment, the Meeting Floor went silent, all eyes suddenly on him.

What was he doing? It was nearly as much a shock to Rhone to be standing there as it was to the sea of wide eyes that encircled him. “Since when are the people of Nod City afraid of ideas? Is that the way the masters teach their students—picking and choosing what they should believe? Or do they open up all ideas and examine them for truth?”

What was he saying? Truth? He no more believed in the Lee-landers’ brand of truth than he believed in the Oracle’s. His truth was what he could see and feel and smell; everything else was mere abstraction, something he had neither the desire nor the time to bother with.

“You stay out of this,” someone shouted, but when Rhone looked, no one owned up to it. Across the wide plaza, the Lodath’s Guards had begun to file out of Government House, starting down the steps. Rhone slanted an eye at the Lee-lander, keeping the other on the crowd. “Now would be a good time for you and your wife to leave.”

The man seemed to hesitate.

Rhone nodded toward the soldiers wearing the emerald green tunics and purple plumed helmets of the Lodath’s personal guards, filing out of the building. Each carried a proj-lance.

“Lamech.” The woman tugged urgently at his arm.

Lamech’s eyes seemed to ache for her even as his spine went rigid. But the struggle lasted only a moment. His gaze came back to Rhone. It was the intense, piercing look of a man of perception attempting to discern something. *And had he?* Lamech gave a brief nod.

The woman's dark eyes studied him as well, but not in the intense, surgical manner of her husband. They were wide, intelligent eyes filled with appreciation perhaps—or curiosity? “Thank you.” She tightened her grip on her husband's arm and the air gave a faint shimmer again.

Curious, now the crowd parted for them.

The emissary tried to recapture the masses' attention, while amongst the crowd, green-cloaked warders spread, searching for the source of the disturbance.

Leaning upon the long tube of his proj-lance, Rhone considered the faces glaring at him. But no one seemed eager to make the first move. Just as well. He had no desire to cause any more of a scene here than he already had. Turning toward the nearest exit, he threaded his way through the throng to the street.