

The Peace Speaker



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Prologue: An Age Old Rule

“Hey Thomas,” a voice called from behind me as I sharpened the edge of my blade “sorry, I mean captain.”

“What is it now Lue?”

“Elder Sansu wishes to speak with us.”

“Does it have to be now?”

“She said it was important.”

“I am sure it is,” I said putting down my whetstone and turning to face her “that wasn’t my question. I asked does it have to be now?”

“Sir we shouldn’t disrespect the elders.”

“It is no sign of disrespect, this blade of mine won’t stop dulling. If I am to be a captain, I must always have a weapon at the ready shouldn’t I?”

“She didn’t seem keen on waiting... You know how she gets.”

I sheathed my blade and pushed myself off of the stool.

“If you will excuse me gentlemen,” I said to the two sleeping comrades that were leaned up against the wall of the barracks “I have vague business with the elders, I must be off.”

“Always sleeping aren’t they?”

“Always drunk...” I muttered under my breath “only when you are around.”

The two men I was sitting with were two of my closest comrades, they trained with me. Lord Walden and Sir Pensire, two minor nobles of the area that have families with service records going back to before our exile. Walden, or Wally as we liked to call him affectionately was a slim man with a nose broken from one too many bar fights and the smell of fine scotch on his breath. He wore a blue overcoat that covered his ceremonial breastplate that he wore on special occasions, otherwise he wore a black noble’s coat with his house sigil, a dragon on it. Legend has it his ancestors were dragon tamers, but I honestly believe that to be folly, no one has

ever seen a dragon, no one has even left the walls of the city in two hundred years, so who is to say what really lies beyond. He has a leather hat that he wears all the time, it keeps the sun away, but it has seen better days. Everyone tells him it looks ragged for a noble, but he clings to it like it is his lucky charm. He even wears it instead of a full helmet when in training, how it would protect him from an arrow I have no idea, all I can remember was the sight of him freaking out as a squire tried to put a full helm on his head, he swung so wildly he almost took the poor chap's head off with a wooden sword. After that, he was known as Headhunter Wally, don't ask me why, he would more likely be headless wally if it ever came to a combat situation. To his right, Sir Pensire was garbed in full plate mail, ready for combat at a moments notice, only his cloak denoted his allegiance to lord Walden's house, he was his honour guard. His family had filled that role for generations, he was keen with a blade and even sharper with his wit. I don't know if Wally knows it, but he is the butt of many a joke of Sir Pensire's.

"Let's go then," I said "if Elder Sansu requires my presence it *must* be for a good reason."

Lue escorted me through the town, we passed Marko, our royal blacksmith at his smithy. He looked up from the blade he was hammering out, the dull clanging resonating through the square.

"Good day captain," he said waving his blackened iron hammer in the air "it's good to see you again in these parts. I fear our time may soon come to leave this place, so I am readying enough fine armaments for our royal guard, do you still not intend to answer such an honour?"

"No Marko," I said "the day I become captain of the royal guard is the day I resign. I have no will to pander to someone who has no guts to do what he needs to. I know we mustn't speak ill of his grace, but the council of elders is our master, not an outdated monarch who has no spine, and several chins."

Marko laughed, "spoken like a true patriot. I would expect no less from you, you did after all oppose the coronation most vehemently. It must have been an insult to be offered such a

position.”

“He obviously thinks so, or he wouldn’t keep offering.”

“Well then I shan’t keep you captain. May the elders grant you strength.”

“May they bless you with the same,” I said “Come Lue, let’s get this over with.”

“How long have you known him?”

“Since before the rebellion. He forged our steel in secret, I doubt his highness even knows about that to this day.”

“That must have been a dangerous job.”

“It was, he just enjoyed the coin too much to leave.”

We passed the central district and made our way to the chamber of summons, the place where the elders would meet with the public when summoned. The one who was to hold the audience would wait there, alone except for a few aids that had less of an idea about what was going on than the person summoned.

“Good day captain,” the honour guard standing outside the entryway said “we have waited for you to grace us with your presence.”

“I hope I have not kept the elders waiting too long.”

He nodded and removed his halberd from the doorway. His dark blue cloak rustled with the wind and his helmet’s visor glinted in the rising sun. He looked ready for anything, why was the council calling now of all times?

“You can’t follow him,” the guard exclaimed shoving Lue back.

“Anything the council has to discuss with me will be discussed in front of my aide.”

“I am sorry captain those are not my orders.”

“Then the elders can wait until the gates crumble from old age and the world itself ceases to exist. Are my terms not clear for you?”

“You dare!” he shouted raising his halberd.

“Enough,” a commanding voice echoed through the hallway behind him as a man clad in gray crashed through the door “dismissed.”

“But commander Yarren...”

“I said dismissed!” he shouted “or do I need to make an example out of you?”

“No sir.”

“Then off with you, go on.”

The guard left his post leaving commander Yarren standing before us clad in his silver armour and green cloak.

“I am sorry about that Thomas, our young ones can get tunnel vision and cling to exact instructions in grey areas where those instructions no longer apply. They mean well though, they are just too afraid to screw up.”

“Understood commander, all is forgiven.”

“Thanks Thomas. If you two would please follow me, time is of the essence.”

Commander Yarren was an older fellow, he trained many of the commanding officers that serve with me, including myself back in the day. Now he leads the Kushmaka, an elite force of troops that live in secret and prepare for the day when the gates open, though after two centuries, it seems highly unlikely that any mechanism would still work.

We walked through the dimly lit hallway, it was quite similar to that of a tomb, dead silent and vacant. Spacious and elaborate, it stretched far into the heart of the building before finally branching off in four directions. Dead ahead was the summoning chamber where the elders met, few entered here. The other passageways lead to facilities for the Kushmaka, though since I was not chosen to be among them, I have no idea what lies beyond those doors. They remain a mystery to all those outside the Kushmaka, destined to remain shrouded behind ceremony and secrecy until the end of times.

Once inside the summoning chamber Yarren shut the door and took to his knees.

“Summoned we come,” I said kneeling and motioning for my aide to do the same.

In the center of the dark room a candle was lit, it spread to several others.

“You are received,” Sansu replied “welcome Captain Thomas. I am surprised you had the presence of mind to bring your aide. What you are about to learn is not to leave this room, am I understood?”

“Yes.”

“Good, do you remember why we are locked in this fortress?”

“I do elder Sansu, but I am afraid I am not sure what this has to do with me.”

“Two centuries ago, humankind was locked in here to prevent the awakening of the Dadrahiim, many lost their lives to seal us in here until the time was right. The world outside is not a mystery to us Captain, we have known all along what awaits us when those gates open, or at least we thought.”

“What do you mean?”

“The elders have known about parts of the prophecy that are not common knowledge, parts that even commander Yarren of the Kushmaka are not privy to, no offence to him.”

“None taken.”

“You see captain, the time has come for humankind to rejoin the other races, the other eleven, and rebuild the twelve. Seven of us used to hold power back before we were sealed off. We need to make contact with the other six if we are to fulfill the prophecy.”

“And I am to do what? I have nothing to do with expeditions, that is the job of the Kushmaka is it not?”

“You will be the one to venture out of the city,” a young voice called from the darkness “so the blade tells me. It says you are needed out there, that the Kushmaka’s time will come, but not before yours Captain.”

“Who are you? Show yourself?”

“The blade takes offence to your demand,” the voice said “it says we are to be more cautious. It wants me to see you, so you can see who has summoned you.”

Sansu’s expression darkened as she motioned to the darkness behind her “come Bladespeaker, see the one you have selected.”

A frail young man emerged from the darkness carrying a sheathed blade, a relic. It did not look like it had seen combat in

ages.

“The blade wishes for you, Thomas, to lead an expedition into the world beyond the walls. The gate will open for your team at dawn on the morrow. Then and only then will the first humans be permitted to exit our exile. You shall be the one to choose them, so choose wisely. The world will not be a friendly place to us, or so the blade tells me, though it will not tell me why. I do not think that we shall all return from this journey captain. And the blade assures me that is fine.”

“This must be some kind of joke, surely this sword does not give instructions.”

“Silence!” Yarren shouted “it is the most sacred relic amongst the Kushmaka, it’s founder was the first chosen to hear it. It alone knows our course.”

“I am not the right man for this job, an expedition should be lead by the Kushmaka, Commander Yarren should be in charge of this.”

Yarren remained silent.

“The time of the Kushmaka is not at hand Captain. I will be the sole Kushmaka member to go along with you on this journey. That is what the blade tells me, that is what we will do.”

I looked at elder Sansu, she nodded.

“It is settled, assemble your team Thomas, you leave at dawn. Yarren will escort you out.”

“As the elders decree,” I said.

“Godspeed Thomas.”

Chapter 1: The World Beyond

“This is crazy,” I said as I approached my house “Lue, this Bladespeaker will make a fool of me.”

“I don’t think so Captain,” she said “I think it is a wonderful opportunity, to be in a place of such honour.”

“If it is a real chance why not send the Kushmaka? You saw Commander Yarren, he didn’t even believe that this would work, otherwise he would be fighting for the chance to lead...”

“He follows the Bladespeaker,” Lue interjected “have you not paid attention Captain? They want you to lead this, not Yarren. I’ll be damned if I let you pass this up.”

“Very well, I will get you a list of men by nightfall. Make sure they are ready at dawn, I would rather get this over with.”

“Remember to keep that list small Captain.”

“Yes Lue, I remember. You are diligent as always.”

“I know how you *are*,” she said “be thankful at least one of us is paid to remind you of things.”

She has a point there, I thought, that is her job after all, and does she ever come in handy sometimes.... She smiled at me innocently, okay, a lot of the time. She is quite invaluable to me now that I think of it. Better not let her know that, she thinks I don’t care for her that much, if she knows just how much job security she has... well we all know how that would end...

“I’ll be back at dusk,” she said “good luck Captain.”

My house door creaked as it slowly inched open. It was old. Too old. The hinges were rusting off and the wood had started to decay slightly— alright considerably— around the edges. I was fond of it though, it was the first one I had installed on this house, and I had hoped to keep it. Lue always reminds me of how I need to replace it, I think she kind of dislikes it’s plainness. It is just a simple, albeit aged,

I shoved the book aside, onto my lower desk on the left, papers scattered with it and my ink container wobbled precariously on the edge. I snatched it before it could spill over onto my drafts of letters still to be sent. Jebadiah did not follow me as he usually did. I pulled out my heavy armchair, another family heirloom, scratched up until the innermost layer of the wood was visible by Jebadiah, the finishing had lost most of it's luster. Many carpenters have offered to restore it for me, but I like it the way it is, like everything, aging and dying. It is not point to restore it, what am I going to do, pass it on to a nephew who hardly knows me? I think not, let it, like all, come to an eventual end. No point in prolonging that.

I pulled out my armchair from under the desk, it shuddered as one of its legs got caught on a rut in the floor, it hopped out and screeched as it settled in front of the desk. The cushion did nothing to provide support as I sat down, worn from too many long sessions seated upon it over generations, another heirloom that has been passed down to me. I pulled out a new sheet of paper and began to think of who I would take along on such a fools errand, I did not want to be made a fool of publicly.

Dusk

I had finished checking my gear for the second time when a sheepish wrapping knocked on my door.

"Captain," Lue said "I am here for the list."

"Come in. We need to talk."

Lue has been my assistant for almost a year now, she still is sheepish to come find me. Is my post that intimidating? Again, I have to maintain my distance, job security can be a killer to motivation and effort in the military, especially when we have nothing to do other than prepare for a war that we don't even know will arrive. For all we know, there is no world outside the walls, just a story the first elders cooked up as a sick joke. Maybe this is all there is and the walls are all that there is to prevent us from falling off the edge into an abyss bellow. But what do I know, I am not paid enough to think of these things, that is the Kushmaka's job, and from what I can tell, they follow the ramblings of a weapon,

not the best philosophy if you ask me.

The door jiggled in place for a moment before I went to shove it open for Lue. She looked at me embarrassed.

“Sorry sir, you know that door gives everyone trouble you need to...”

“If you tell me one more time that I need to replace this door,” I said knocking three times on its side “I will find someone else to take your post. Am I clear Lue?”

She paused, dumbstruck. Her lips quivered, trying to make sounds that escaped her mind, but nothing audible.

“Yes... yes sir,” she said regaining her composure “I meant no offence.”

“Come inside, as I said, we have much to discuss.”

It took me another moment to close the door once Lue was inside, she hesitated, and probably sensed me daring her to try to comment about the need to replace it. She was smart, she remained silent.

“You studied under a Kushmère before you joined the regular military, didn’t you?”

“Yes sir.”

“If I am not mistaken you were already in training to be an assistant, were you not?”

“I cannot discuss that.”

“I am not asking you if you were being groomed to take over Advisor Gharll’s position, that much is clear to me. I am asking what you learned.”

“How did you...”

“Do you think Yarren and I didn’t discuss your qualifications? Yarren was quite insistent on you becoming my personal aide, when someone of my stature at that time was lucky if he even got looked at by a prominent person in the Kushmaka.”

I paused, she began to sweat.

“Don’t get me wrong, commander Yarren and I go way back, but he is not one to play favourites. Something forced him to place you under my care. I am not stupid enough to ask why that was, for

I fear you do not know and if you did, you would not be able to tell me. I just want to know what you know of this Bladespeaker, you obviously had knowledge of him, he recognized you and was happy to see you were there. Don't take me for a fool, Yarren wanted you there, I am not an idiot, he wouldn't escort me personally to the chamber unless he expected the guards to give me trouble."

She stared at me, a deer caught in a hunter's stare, no where to run, no where to hide.

"I ... I..." she stammered.

I sat down and took a bite out of an apple on the table.

"So we are going to stay here until..." I kept chewing "I get some answers. You don't have to betray any vows. I just want to know how much power this blade speaker has, what exactly is this blade?"

"I can't tell you," she said sweating "sir I am really sorry but..."

"I am being asked to risk my career and my life on the whim of someone who says he can listen to a sword," I could see the anger building inside of her, she was no longer Kushmaka, but she still held their values "I mean no offence to the Kushmaka, I am trying to understand what is asking me to risk everything on what, as far I can tell, is a fools task," I offered her the apple "want a bite? We could be here a while."

Her entire body convulsed as I offered her the bitten side of the apple, her biggest weakness, being a germaphobe. She held her head in her hands, she was at a loss. She parted her brown hair back over her ears.

"I am sorry sir, you have a point. Though I thought you had books on this?"

"I do, but they never carry the full story. None of them mention a blade or a blade speaker, only a..."

"A Peace Speaker," she said finishing my sentence, her voice quivered "the blade belongs to her line. It has been under the protection of the Kushmaka since the last one left for what lies beyond the veil."

"The blade of a peace speaker you say. Now that is interesting."

"I shouldn't tell you this, but you have the right to know. The

blade is bound to the line of the Peace Speaker, it is the ultimate weapon against the Dadrhiim. It obeys only its master, since there hasn't been a Peace Speaker in countless years, it has spoken to a select person to guide the Kushmaka until a new Peace Speaker is to arrive to lead them against the threat of the Dadrhiim."

"So this isn't some kind of sick joke, this is a long held tradition?"

"Since the founding of the Kushmaka by the last Peace Speaker, before she passed on she trusted the blade to the first Bladespeaker. No one outside the highest levels knows about this sir, I hope we can keep it that way."

"I believe you, and I will not breathe a word of this to anyone. Tell me though, how is it that someone so esteemed amongst the Kushmaka, one to know all this, was suddenly assigned to my service?"

"I don't know sir," she said quietly, more of a whisper than a statement, if it could even be called such.

"I think you do know, I think that blade speaker wanted you here for some reason."

"You are smart Captain, very smart. But I would not be aware of that. You would have to ask Yarren that yourself. I will tell you..."

She paused to wipe a tear from her eye, "it is true, the Blade-Speaker and I were close, close enough that I knew his name. He told me I was destined for great things, I thought he meant..." she laughed "well something else if he is the one that sent me here. I think it far more likely that Yarren did not approve of our relationship and did not want me being his assistant. But keep that between us."

"I am sorry, I didn't know."

"You couldn't. But if I have earned any of your trust over the past year I have served you, if I haven't given you a reason to question my sanity or my judgement, then trust me when I say we can trust the BladeSpeaker. We can trust..." she stopped herself "sorry I shouldn't have... never mind."

"I trust you," I said motioning to the table beside me "here is the

list, you were at the top of it. Assemble the others discretely. We leave before dawn.”

“Yes sir,” she exclaimed smiling “thank you! You won’t regret this Captain, I promise.”

I began checking my gear once more. *I sure hope so*. It was a sleepless night for me, waiting for the inevitable. Dawn could not arrive soon enough. I wanted to get this over with.

She had not given me any reason to doubt her. I hoped this wouldn’t be one, she was a good assistant, one that was not easy to find.

When dawn finally graced me with its presence, I met my men outside the barracks. The BladeSpeaker stood among them, blade in hand like some giant trophy.

“Good day Captain,” he said cheerily “I am glad you joined us.”

“Let’s get this over with,” I said leading the way down the path out of the city.

We marched to the gates, nothing had changed, they remained as defiant as ever. We stood there for five minutes, time slowly slipping by. No one spoke.

“They haven’t opened in two centuries,” I said “I doubt the mechanisms are still intact, even if they are to open now. Let’s go, this is pointless.”

As I began to walk away the Bladespeaker turned to me “Have you no faith captain? The Blade tells me it will open, I assure you, it will open.”

With that he shoved the blade into the ground, hardly a sound was made at first as the blade pierced the thin layer of grass, followed by dirt, until it struck rock halfway down its edge. The gates groaned and creaked to life.

“You have got to be kidding me...”

“No captain, it is all as foretold. What you must learn captain is that this blade is a relic passed down from the last spoken mages, the ones who sealed us here. They would not lie to me. Come, we have much to explore before the end.”

“End of what?” I shouted after him as he marched fearlessly into the unknown black abyss outside of the gate.

“The day of course,” he replied never braking stride, my men stared at me.

“We have no idea how long these will open for,” I said “let’s follow him before he gets himself killed.” Lue smiled at me, she was excited, we all were. We were the first to leave our exile, what we would do next would shape the future for our race.

Chapter 2: First Contact

Outside the gates, a large clearing of rolling grasses awaited us. A few deer grazed on the grass, a buck stood guard by the forest's edge. A path led a winding way along a stream that ran along the eastern edge. The deer looked at us with great curiosity, these had probably never seen a human in their lives. As the last member of the team left the gateway, the gates began to shut behind us.

"Don't worry Captain, this is all part of the plan," the BladeSpeaker said as he cleaned off the blade and sheathed it "the blade tells me to follow your orders now. Good luck Captain."

"Ok," I said, stopping my voice from shaking "let's make for the woods, the path should lead us through them, at worst case we can make camp in there under the shelter of the trees."

"We weren't planning to spend the night," Lue said "I didn't pack provisions for more than a day or two extra at most, it would have weighed us down."

"Then we march one day, make camp and head back on the second. I assume most of you brought some of your own provisions?"

My team nodded.

"Okay, then we can establish a more permanent camp, have an extra half day of exploring before returning to camp to rest up."

Birds chirped merrily from the trees at the edge of the forest, they seemed to welcome us into this part of the world. To think that I am leading the first expedition outside with only two Kushmaka members under my command, what a twist of fate this has become.

I began to lead the way to the forest, Lue quickly matched my pace.

"Isn't this great Captain? Even though you didn't make the cut for the Kushmaka, you were the first one to lead an expedition outside. I can't wait to see what we will find today."

As we approached the edge of the forest the Bladespeaker spoke up.

“Captain, have you been trained in first contact protocol?”

“No.”

“Oh... Well I guess you will figure it out if we run into any.”

“You wait until we are outside to ask me this? Why didn’t you want Yarren to lead this?”

“Oh I am sure you will figure it out Thomas. You’re a natural, so I am told.”

“By whom?”

“Oh you know,” he said motioning with his hand and winking “it never lies.”

“I..” I bit my tongue.

“Don’t worry Thomas, it isn’t like you had a choice in all of this. Destiny speeds us ahead, it doesn’t wait.”

Lue smiled at him, he returned the smile, though his eyes hid sadness. Once inside the forest we were sheltered from the heat of the sun. We followed the path, three of the men under my command catalogued every new plant they found, as well as sketched every animal and insect they could as we kept marching at a slower pace. The rear guard, two girls that had just graduated from training, best friends since childhood chatted incessantly, unable to contain their excitement. They point at this, gasped at that, it was a nightmare for a tactical operation.

We had just finished setting up camp after a full day’s march, the sun had sunk too low in the sky to be visible from the forest. A dim haze spread over us.

“Get some rest men, I want watches rotating every hour. I will take first watch.”

“I will join you,” the Bladespeaker said.

At least I may finally get some answers out of him, maybe he is not so much of a nut after all. We are outside of the walls, and everything he said so far has checked out, so maybe there is more to this than I thought.

“I will too,” Lue yawned as she stretched.

“No,” I said “you need your sleep. Besides, we can’t have all the senior officers on watch at once, can we?”

“But sir...”

“Get some rest, that’s an order. Hell bunk up in my tent if you want, but get some sleep.”

“Yes sir,” she whimpered.

I pulled up a log by one of the fires we had made when we set camp, the Bladespeaker did the same.

“So why did you want to join the Kushmaka Thomas?” he asked after looking to the treelike for a few moments.

I laughed, was this some kind of joke to him?

“If you must know,” I said “when I was younger I thought I could make a real difference inside their ranks, take the vows, do my part to build a better tomorrow. Guess I just didn’t make the cut...”

“But look at you now Captain, leading the first expedition? Has that not satisfied some of your youthful curiosity? Don’t tell me that doesn’t still live inside of you.”

I paused, he was getting at something here, what does he know that I don’t?

“Well I would be lying if I said it hadn’t. It awoke something I thought was long dead inside of me.”

“And what would that be?”

“Wonder,” I said after a brief pause “to be quite honest, and no offence meant, when I first met you I thought you were a whack, that this entire,” I paused to contemplate my choice of words “quest, you have set me upon, was a joke. Perhaps a mean retirement joke, I have no idea, but I figured that this was all bogus, I began to question my long held values, my duty, hell even my sanity for accepting such a task. But now, now I know there is so much more to this world than I had first thought.”

He laughed, it was the first time I had heard him laugh, and it sounded...quite awkward to say the least, almost like the BladeSpeaker was never allowed to laugh. It sure didn’t seem like he was used to it.

“Captain,” he said “you have a destiny far greater than serving the Kushmaka, it is no surprise to me that you had not joined its

ranks, you are exactly where you are needed. My predecessor saw to that.”

“Your predecessor?” I said slightly bitterly, “what do you mean?”

“You see,” he said turning to face me after making sure no one was around to hear him, “the special ones, the ones that do something exceptional on the tests are brought to the BladeSpeaker for placement. At that time, my predecessor saw something in you, something that I see in you too. He knew that your place was not amongst the Kushmaka, at least, not in the way your heart desired.”

“What are you saying?”

The BladeSpeaker opened his mouth to reply, but he never had the chance. A low thunk echoed from the tree line and before either of us could react he was struck in the chest by an arrow. Stunned I made my way over to crouch beside him, blood pooling out of the wound. The arrow was lined with red and black feathers, a kind I had not seen the likes of before, I was in shock.

“Are you forgetting to do something captain?” he coughed as an arrow flew over my head.

“To do... oh...” I said snapping out of it I drew my sword, at this point the camp was in a panic “steel yourselves men. We are under attack!” I bellowed “to arms men, to arms!”

It was in vain, my troops were no match for our attackers. Before any of them had even steeled their resolve a mass of humanoid figures charged out of the brush, screaming guttural battle cries and swinging large swords and clubs. One of them crushed my tent’s holding post, it collapsed in on itself, whether or not Lue was still inside I didn’t know. I charged forth with what few men would dare to meet our attackers. It was a bloodbath. I had managed to wound two of my assailants before a large blunt object smacked me in the back of my head sending me reeling to the floor, dazed beyond comprehension, blood pooling out of the wound. I could not move even if I wanted to. The rest of the battle was a blur, perhaps because I didn’t want to see my men massacred, or perhaps because of the head wound I received, I have no idea.

I do remember seeing Lue pinned under one of the tent’s

support structures, how she freed herself I have no idea. I do know the first thing she did was rush to the dying Bladespeaker.

“Lue,” he coughed, the battle raging around him “you must take the blade I carry back to commander Yarren.”

“Don’t speak Alex,” she said putting pressure on the wound “we will get through this.”

“Have you no senses? We have lost Lue, all that remain here will be killed, that is not your destiny. You are too important to stay here for the likes of me.”

“Who can be more important than the Bladespeaker?”

Alex drifted in and out of consciousness, he must have known he was about to die. He seized Lue in his hand.

“Your destiny is far greater than mine Lue, I have seen it, I know what is to come, and I knew this would happen. You need to return this blade to Yarren.”

“You always tell me my destiny is so great,” she said “but I am no longer Kushmaka, Yarren saw to that, why didn’t you stop him.”

Alex coughed up blood.

“Listen to me,” he said “Yarren had nothing to do with that, he contested my decision. You’re place is not amongst the Kuhsmaka, you have a far greater calling child.”

“Your decision?” she shouted shaking him “what do you mean? You are the one who had me outcast? Why?”

“Not outcast,” he said wincing in pain “your service is far greater. I was the one who had you assigned to Thomas’s side, it pained me to do so but your place...”

Lue began to sob, she was as oblivious to the battle around her as the combatants were to her.

“Lue I have not much time, the veil is dragging me across. There is so much I wanted to tell you, so much I have failed to do. But there will be a time for that, now you must go back, you must bring the blade and tell Yarren what has happened. He will know what to do.”

“But Alex!”

“Go. Go now, you must survive to...”

“To what?”

Those pieces are all that I remember of their conversation, when I awoke it was the middle of the night and our attackers were looting my fallen comrades, they had probably thought I was dead as one of them looted a scientist lying a few meters away from me. My sword was no where to be found.

I now had the chance to observe our attackers for the first time as my eyesight returned. Three of them stood by the remnants of my tent, one cleaning fresh blood, the blood of my men, off of his blade. They were huge, at least six foot four in average height, with arms twice as large as any man I could think of. Black of hair they had eyes that pierced the darkness of the night, with pupils meant to see in the dark. They had a strong jaw structure, it looked like it had evolved to crush bone as well as mince meat. Brown of skin they would blend in in a forest or a plain.

The one in the center spoke, I assume the leader.

“So these are the mighty Whoomans,” he said “I thought they would be more challenging. We only lost five men, and those were Dushrat.”

“They have little of value,” the one on his right said “they are hardly worth the trouble of raiding. Three Dushrat would be too high a price to pay for this raid.”

“Shut it!” their leader bellowed “Whoomans are a menace to us, any Whooman’s blood is worth more than any Dushrat.”

Figures, of all the races to slaughter us, the ones who did were probably the only ones that still spoke High Common, the language of the humans, the language of diplomacy. What chance would we have stood against a race who had long since lost that language to time?

One of the looters approached me to check me for valuables, before I could think of how to react he sniffed the air.

“We have a live Whooman somewhere,” it said drawing it’s club “find it and put it down.”

I had not seen Lue’s body, I could only pray she had escaped. My leg twitched involuntarily as their leader approached blade in hand.

“I found it!” he shouted dragging me to my feet “he is mine.”

“Fatta,” a smaller figure shouted charging through the treelike “let me keep him.”

“What are you doing here?” he bellowed “get this Dushma out of here, he is barely out of the womb.”

The child threw both of the men that went to seize him to the ground.

“Fatta any other my age would be a Dushrat under you. You won’t let me fight even when I am ready, what will that say of our family that you let five other Dushrat die but won’t let your son fight?”

“You think you are ready?” he laughed “then here,” he offered him his sword “take the head off of this Whooman, prove it to me.”

“I want to keep him.”

“Whoomans are to be killed!”

“But think of what we could learn from him, think of how noble our house would be with a pet Whooman, my pet. All the kids would envy me, and the adults shower us with wealth as we brought back information on the Whoomans.”

“I am no pet,” I managed to say through the crushing grip on my throat.

Shocked the leader dropped me to the ground.

“The Whooman speaks OrkHai,” he said “what foul sorcery is..”

“OrkHai?” I managed to force a laugh “I have no idea what that is, I am speaking High Common, the language of our species.”

“High Common,” one of them laughed “High Common hasn’t been spoken in nearly two hundred years, he must be a Whooman spy, off with his head.”

Their leader stood beside me, blade in hand thinking.

“If you don’t have the guts I will do it,” he said approaching.

“Foolish Dushrat, it is not your place to dictate my orders.”

“If you won’t let me kill him I will first have to kill you, not that you would be a DrathMa for much longer anyways.”

“Dushrat I am warning you back off.”

The Dushrat charged at him swinging his club, the creature ducked under the blow and shoved his sword straight into his chest, turning it to make sure the assailant was dead.

He lifted the club in the air and shouted "This Whooman is coming with us, he will be brought in front of the tribal council as our prisoner. They will hear his tale. If any of you have a problem with that try me now."

The men were silent.

"Good," he said "night night Whooman."

He clubbed me once more over the head, I was out like a light.

The next thing I knew I was flying over the gates, Lue limped through holding the BladeSpeaker's blade in hand, tears in her eyes. Great, I must be dead, that Drathma must have clubbed me too hard.

Three Kushmaka members stood inside, waiting.

"What happened?" one of them shouted "where is the BladeSpeaker?"

Lue collapsed to the floor.

"Answer me!" he shouted.

"Get commander Yarren," was all she managed to breathe between heavy breaths.

"You dare swine? You are not Kushmaka, you have no right to bear that blade and no reason to summon our commander. I should..."

"Enough!" Yarren commander emerging from the tent behind the three Kushmaka members "Gabriel I thought you a better Kushmaka than this, I had even contemplated making you a Kushmere, I see how wrong I was."

"Commander why are you entertaining this thief?" Gabriel said "she has stolen..."

"She has stolen nothing!" Yarren's voice echoed "get out of here and leave me to deal with this before I do something we will all regret."

"Yes sir," the three said grudgingly saluting and heading back to town.

“Summon Sansu on your way back, and Master Shaway” Yarren shouted after them “tell no one else of this.”

Whether or not they acknowledged him I have no idea.

“Shaway is on his way my child,” Yarren said kneeling beside a sobbing Lue “tell me what happened.”

“He’s dead,” she cried “they are all dead... he commanded me to.. to leave him,” she sobbed harder “why did he let himself die for me, I am not even Kushmaka anymore...”

Yarren patted her on the back.

“Is Thomas dead as well?” he frowned.

“I have no idea sir,” she said “how could I have been so selfish.”

“You weren’t selfish,” Yarren said “you followed,” he looked around quickly “you followed Alex’s orders, his last request. He would be proud of you when he looks down upon us. We need to get that leg of yours looked at and you need to calm down.”

“I can’t!”

“Listen to me Lue, you may not be Kushmaka by title anymore, but you have no idea what your calling is. Alex wouldn’t tell me, but he forced me to assign you to Thomas’s detail, I say you would have been a great assistant to me, but he told me you were needed at Thomas’s side. I have no idea why, but he told me before he left that all this would happen.”

“You knew this would happen? How could you...”

“I followed his orders. If this world is to have any chance to survive, the expedition, and the BladeSpeaker would have to be sacrificed, so the Blade told him, so he told Sansu and I.”

“How could you be so cruel?”

“What would you have me do?” Yarren asked exasperated “it is the lives of less than fifty weighed against every living being in our world. I had no choice...”

She wiped tears from her eyes.

“My human heart has trouble understanding this,” she said “but the part of me that is still Kushmaka understands. I don’t know which to follow Yarren, and I am scared.”

“You never stopped being Kushmaka Lue,” Yarren said “Alex had your place reserved, a place of higher honour than you can imagine..”

“What place is that?” she asked “what did he die to achieve?”

I was abruptly awoken in a large camp as I was tossed to the dirt.

“Be more gentle with the Whooman,” my captor ordered “he is frail and weak. He will be judged by our council.”

“At least do me the courtesy of telling me who is my captor,” I coughed “what race do you belong to.. what is your name, you must have a title..”

The creature laughed “you are quite a funny Whooman,” he said “very well, I shall entertain our customs... I am..”

The OrCHai

Chapter 1: The Peace Speaker

“DrathMa Dumark of the Orcs?” I repeated slightly stunned “Well it is a bit late, but well met. I am Captain Thomas Freide of the Human race, I was sent to meet the other six in peace.”

Dumark laughed “Captain Thomas Freide of the Whoomans, nay you must be Thomas Freide DashmaKa.”

“DashMaka?” I asked “what is that?”

Dumark sighed “DashMaka... like... maker of peace? Do you understand it that way?”

“Ah Peace Maker, you mean Peace Speaker? You must have me mistaken.”

“That we will see Thomas, that we will see...”

He helped me to my feet “you are my guest, they may not like you, but for what it is worth, I follow the prophecy as do many of our kind. I believe you will be welcome, at least until your fate is decided by our council.”

“And what if they don’t like me?”

“Then we will put your head on a pike Thomas,” Dumark laughed “beautiful and simple is it not?”

“One of those two maybe...”

“What was that?”

“Nothing...”

He lead the way through the town, it was more of an encampment. Sturdy circular tents filled the sides of the pathways between palisades. Some tents were similar to longhouses in our waterside district. Campfires burned in front of three tents arranged in a triangle, orcs sat by them, talking, cooking meet and of course, observing me. Many of them reached for swords, but were quickly dissuaded from doing so. On our way to the center of the town we passed several dozen orcs butchering a large animal, I could not for

the life of me say what it was, it was missing too many pieces. All I can say is it would have fed the men under my command for a few weeks with what was left on the enormous bones.

“Draakma,” Dumark said pointing “adult drake,” he clarified seeing my bewildered expression “you know what a drake is right?”

“I think I read about them...”

“Good, then you know they are a pain to bring down. This one killed over twenty Dushrat and ten Dushlos and Dushlas. Tall price, but feeds the tribe.”

“For how long?”

“A week or so... Less if we feast, more if we ration.”

“How large is your tribe?”

“My tribe?” he laughed “I don’t have a tribe, not yet at least. I am only DrathMa, to lead a tribe... well that is beyond my status Whooman. I am sure there are more esteemed people in Whooman society than a mere captain?”

“That is true...”

He smiled “I lead a family of eighty strong and forty Dushrat. That is my responsibility, they are the ones I command, they are the ones I protect first and foremost...”

“That is a good number...”

“Bah... the tribe has over a thousand Dushrat and three thousand strong.”

“Now that is a lot of troops.”

“Those aren’t all troops Whooman, orc society is... complicated.”

I was lead through a gate guarded by seven heavily armored orcs, they jeered at me. Diplomacy never was my strength...

“You seem to be really sticking your neck out for me Drathma Dumark, I appreciate it. Though I am confused as to why my kind is so seemingly hated amongst the OrcHai.”

“Whoomans are not the most liked creatures,” Dumark said “many kings have bounties on human heads, us OrcHai had a blood oath sworn to strike them down... The elves even offer a small

fortune for human heads, an orc could make a lot of money selling human heads to the elves...”

“But why?”

“You don’t know what the humans almost caused not even two centuries ago?”

“I know we were locked away by the Peace Speaker of that time...”

“Do you know at what cost? Do you even know why you were locked away?”

“I am afraid not... but please enlighten me.”

“The Whoomans of that time threatened to plunge the world into a war so great that it would break the seals and awaken the Dadrhiim. The Peace Speaker, leader of the spoken mages could not let that happen, so she and the masters of the other arts of spoken mages sealed your kind in their place, where you have remained.”

“So what did it cost them?”

“Their lives. And it cost us spoken magic. And here you are, claiming to be the next Peace Speaker, you can see why some of my Dushrats have a problem with that, why many would have a problem with that.”

“I see... what do you think my chance of surviving this and smoothing things over is?”

Dumark laughed heartily, “for a Whooman you are quick. I am no betting man, but I would be willing to wager, if I were, that you have a fair chance. If you are deemed the real Peace Speaker that is.”

“What do you believe?”

“I am convinced you are, so much so that I would back you with my family. Your OrcHai is too flawless to be anything other than that of a Peace Speaker, unless you Whoomans only spoke our language in your exile. Then again, your OrcHai is that of now, only the elders can compare it to that of two hundred years ago. Though I am pretty sure it is quite different...”

He clasped me on the back “for what it is worth Thomas, many of us believe in the prophecy. There is nothing to suggest that the

next Peace Speaker isn't a Whooman, though there is nothing to say it will be either."

I was probably the most controversial prisoner that any orc had ever taken, let alone DrathMa Dumark. He seemed to not care in the least and lead on towards the center of the town.

"We are assembled here to discuss the fate of a Whooman," a commanding voice bellowed as we entered the central hall "I thought you wiser than this Dumark, we have a blood oath against Whoomans."

"Hear his story, he is DashMaka."

"Foolish DrathMa, the DashMaka lost her life to stop a war the Whoomans would bring upon us, what makes you think they would be selected for such an honour."

"If I may," I interjected "it would seem illogical that the previous DashMaka would seal us off only for a larger war to begin brewing. So tell me, what about us humans do you fear?"

For minutes the room was silenced, wether by fear or astonishment I did not know. They probably had not expect a human to speak OrcHai so well. Once their leader had regained his composure and stopped the whispering he spoke.

"You accuse me of being afraid of you?"

"No."

"You think the OrcHai value Whooman logic?"

"Probably not."

"Then why bring them up?"

"Because it is not the logic of the humans that tells me this, it is what a Peace Speaker would want, it is what I would want had I made that sacrifice."

The room once again went into a whispering frenzy.

"You dare compare yourself to a DashMaka?"

"If I am not DashMaka, then I have no idea what I am. To be honest, I am not sure you even know what DashMaka means anymore. You feud amongst yourselves, your race ruthlessly slaughtered fifty of my men without provocation, and you claim to do this in the name of a DashMaka? What kind of Peace Speaker

would want such a slaughter in his name? You should be ashamed of yourself, thinking you are on a righteous war to eradicate what for some reason, the last Peace Speaker gave his life to protect, as did several of your kind. What right do you think you have to dishonour them in that fashion?”

“Thomas be careful...” Dumark whispered tugging on my shirt.

I stepped into the center of the room amongst their murmuring.

“If you think this cause of yours is so righteous, then here I am, a human. Strike me down Drathmu’ Karr , fulfill your blood oath. Let the entire planet know that you, the mighty Urushma, struck down the Peace Speaker when he confronted you with your short comings. I assure you I am no match for an OrcHai, we were routed by Dushrats in our first engagement. It’s your choice.”

The room’s murmuring grew louder, Urushma raised his hand.

“You speak like a true DashMaka, you risk your lives for those you do not know. You would make yourself a martyr for a foolish reason. Your OrcHai is flawless. The council will vote on your fate Thomas.”

“DashMaka.”

“DashMaka.”

“A fraud.”

“DashMaka.”

“DashMaka,” Urushma finished the voting “four to one, it is settled, Thomas Freide is DashMaka.”

“DashMaka Thomas!” the members chanted.

Urushma raised his hand once more.

“Send a messenger to the other races, let them know that I, Drathmu’ Karr Urushma have found the Peace Speaker, a Whooman no less. Let them know the DashMaka lives amongst us, and we intend to let him do his work.”

“Dumark should get the credit for discovering him,” an orc on the right of him said “he was the one who took him prisoner.”

He turned around glaring.

“It’s alright,” Dumark said “I am just a humble servant of our Drathmu’ Karr .”

There was murmuring amongst the council.

“Mention Drathma Dumark in our memo,” he said “our advisor is right, he deserves credit.”

“If I may,” Dumark said stepping forwards “I would like to pledge myself and several Dushlas’s and Dushlos to the side of the DashMaka, I can show him our ways and advise him on our needs while away. I feel it is my place to serve the DashMaka. Will the council allow it?”

Urushma was about to speak when the others started voting.

“Aye,” they all said.

“Aye,” he said reluctantly “it is unanimous, go DrathMa Dumark, make our race proud.”

“Thank you,” Dumark said bowing “come Thomas, there is much for you to learn.”