

The Untouchables: Hyli's Story

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Prologue

The fire burned low, buffeted by desert winds. The forms around it huddled under cloaks made up of a variety of pelts. From furred to leather. A fowl – lanky and lean from desert life – roasted slowly over the fire, turned by a clawed hand. The ears of the furred figured that surrounded the small fire turned every which way. Their small camp lay in the midst of rolling sand dunes, only sparsely interrupted by low-lying flora.

“I hate this route,” a larger figured grouched, pulling his leather cloak in closer about his form.

“You’ll hate it worse if the deal goes wrong,” another responded, voice lighter and with a slight rumble of amusement.

“The Carr’an have always made the trip to deal with the Sirrau,” a larger male stated, getting to his feet. His legs bent in reverse, his knee lower. It gave him a slow, ponderous gait as he walked around the ring. “Or have you forgotten so easily? We have made the trip less in recent years, but do not tell me you have left your mothers’ teats so recently?”

A rumble of discontent rose from the others. Fur bristled on those nearest to the one that had stood.

“Honorable El-” the one turning the spit began, but was cut off by a hiss.

“Do not use that pandering, infantile language with me. We are traders. I demand respect, but I do not ask for such preposterous titles.”

“The clans have always used the titles,” another replied,

a feminine voice... but with the high register of one young.

“Yes. During formal functions and in the camps. We are on a trading mission in the Wastes. We must deal with the Sirrau. As disappointed as I am with all of you, I reviewed your skills personally. We are equals on the field of battle...” He returned to his seat, reaching out to tear a leg from the fowl that roasted. One of six.

“We continue bright and early,” the elder continued, “so eat well and sleep early.”

They awoke and continued just before full sunrise. The large pack animals they used were bred for the desert heat and provided ample shade in their long shadows. Unfortunately, their broad bodies moved slow lending to long days crossing the Wastes. A young Carr’an rode one of the beasts in a small, make-shift shelter amongst the packs, using a few complicated devices to plot their route.

As day progressed steadily towards night, there was a sudden halt called. A scout waved the elder to the front and unable to resist their curiosity, most of the others followed suit.

“What is it?”

“There’s something up ahead.”

“I would assume there is,” the elder said in a quiet voice that could be mistaken for amusement, but was more on the edge of annoyance.

“No... It’s... different than anything I’ve seen before. It... shines like armor or jewelry.”

The elder’s ears twitched, falling back. The others began to murmur amongst themselves and a nervous tension began to run along the line.

“We will make camp here. A few of us will go check it out in the morning before we continue. It could be the Sirrau have developed a new trap to ward off invaders.”

A night of rations and quiet chatter amongst the traders did little to off-set their nerves. The Sirrau were notorious for changing leadership and new leaders often tried to change the rules on traders. Borders shifted, laws changed, and one often never knew until it was too late. The Carr’an had peaceful trading treaties with the Sirrau for generations, but were always wary of a sudden change of mind on the part of the mountain-dwelling Sirrau; who were by nature distrustful of other races.

When the sun rose, they could delay no further and as they crested a dune, they saw what the scout had described. There was a brilliant glimmer, like one might see upon polished armor or a mirror. None wanted to go near it, but the elder insisted. One of the younger Carr’an finally had the bravery to brush away sand. The more he revealed, however, the more questions they had.

The elder finally had enough. “Leave it. We will report it to the capitol.”

They left the vast, gleaming sphere in the sand.

Chapter 1

The sun was just eking past the shutters when Hyli awoke, a sunbeam crossing her face. She tried rolling over, pulling blankets up past her head, but they were soon yanked from her hand as a shadow fell across her.

“I trust you do not intend to sleep through breakfast yet again?”

Hyli stifled a groan as the voice broke through her sleep-addled senses. She sat up slowly and ran a hand through mussed golden-hued hair, fingers catching on the various knots it held.

“Get moving. The Council is already meeting and I need to be ready for the Chosen One should they decide to brief me.”

Hyli began going through the motions of getting out of bed, moving slow in a daze as she struggled to wake. The woman continued to watch her, looking down a long nose set in a pinched face. Her hair was the dark gray of age and kept long due to her rank, but often tied up in a bun due to the unruly, curly nature. Hyli’s hair, by comparison, fell not far past her chin. A sign of her low rank in the eyes of the church.

“You will sweep the sanctuary and prepare the candles for the afternoon prayers.”

“But-“ began Hyli, pulling on the basic shift that she, like all Acolytes, wore.

“There will be no buts,” spoke Wilhelma Arvehen — a priestess of higher rank — in a manner that brooked no argument. Hyli sighed and pulled on her boots, lacing them

swiftly.

Satisfied, Wilhelma turned and began to walk away. At the door, however, she paused and turned to offer a final piece of advice: “And make your bed this time, Hylin. An unorganized room is a sign of an unorganized mind.”

-Or maybe the sign of a person too busy to even think-, Hyli thought to herself as she swiftly made the bed. Corners were left untucked, but she felt it would pass any brief inspection the Chosen One may choose to do. With a last glance to the room, she pulled the heavy wooden door closed behind her and rushed through smooth stone corridors to the sanctuary. There would be no time for a morning meal now if the Council was truly near to finishing their meeting.

The image of Suth set into the nook seemed to hold a concerned look on her usually smooth, but age-worn features today. Hyli reflected upon the image of her Goddess as she removed the prior day’s candles from her outstretched hands. She was on the verge of saying a prayer of her own when she heard voices through an open door nearby, that led to one of the many hallways within the large church.

“I heard from Tallen that they found something out in the Wastes,” said a young woman’s voice.

“They always find something. They’re scavengers.” The response was another female, but somewhat flustered in tone.

“The Carr’an are not scavengers,” the first speaker’s voice rose somewhat as she spoke, in indignation, “they are -merchants-.”

“Yes. Merchants who take whatever they can find and sell it back to you at exorbitant prices.”

“Well. This time they’ve found something big. Big enough to cause the Council to meet.”

If there was a reply, Hyli did not hear it for they had moved out of reach. She looked up to the face of Suth gazing down at her.

“What would be in the Wastes that would gain the Council’s attention?” she wondered aloud. The Council rarely met and when they did, it was often to dictate the tithes to the churches for the coming season. Or if a member had passed away and a new one was to be chosen.

With the candles replaced, Hyli hefted the bucket with the wax she had collected and headed for the storage caverns deep below the church. The wax would be melted down and used for future candles. Nothing, especially these days, went to waste. Though Hyli’s world barely reached past the church walls, she knew enough from those that came to pray that times were turning difficult. Minlh’s church, across the broad avenue, often had petitioners camped outside as they awaited one of the priestesses to tend to their wounds.

Though Hyli had never been to the other side of the city, where the temples for the Gods lay, she had heard similar stories from the women that worked in the kitchens. Petitioners coming from all of Rillen to plead with the Gods and Goddesses to help their crops grow, or to smile kindly on their children. She did know that the orphanage tended by the Priestesses of Minlh was seeking to expand for how many were left at its doors. This she knew because

Wilhelma often reminded her how fortunate she was to have been found by Suth and not be like her parents.

Hyli never knew of her parents. No one did — she was, like many, abandoned at the door of the orphanage deep in the night. It was an accepted practice by the people of Rillen, especially here in the city of Canth. Still, those it happened to were often marked for what it was assumed for their parents to be.

Untouchables.

Those that the Gods and Goddesses had no time for. Those that were deemed to not be good enough for the saints of ages past to bestow their blessings and powers upon. It was not a curse passed from mother to daughter, or father to son, but rather considered to be a sin of the soul. Untouchable parents who had hope of better lives for their children often abandoned them at an orphanage. Hyliin was one of those children and when she was tested at the age of five (as all citizens of Rillen are), she was found to be touched by Suth. The Goddess of Movement. All horses and carts were blessed by Priestesses and though she had never seen it, Hyli had heard tales of the vast fields and farms to the west where select Priestesses bred and trained the horses used across Rillen.

The most important thing, however, was the ability the daughters of Suth were given. The power to move objects with their mind. Hyli was not so fortunate as to have power as great as Wilhelm — who was the most popular choice to become Chosen once the current passed on —, but she had enough power to serve as an Acolyte in the church within the capitol. Hyli did appreciate her fortune, but she often

wondered how her life could have been otherwise.

Was being an Untouchable so bad? Yes, you served the citizens of Rillen, but would working in a field or a kitchen be as bad as the repetitive life she currently lived? The women who worked in the storage caverns and kitchens seemed content with their lives. Hyli had often heard them singing and laughing amongst one another, but never did she join in. Once she had tried, but the switching Wilhelma gave her left a mark greater than any physical one. She was a Citizen of Rillen and better: an Acolyte within the church.

Running a hand along the smooth walls of the caverns (shaped by priests of Cix in days long past), Hyli reflected on what she had overheard. The Carr'an had found something in the Wastes. She did not think of them as scavengers and had been present in enough of Wilhelma's meetings with the Chosen One (often to take notes) that she knew the Wastes were a dangerous place, because of the Sirrau who lived in the mountains. She had been described the lizard-like race many times in her history lessons, but never was able to properly imagine them.

The Carr'an were still often foreign enough in her eyes. So different they were from her people and yet they had a kindness in their demeanor that she could not deny. It was strange that many seemed unable to see that. The behaviors of so many outside of the church were strange to Hyli. She rarely left the stone walls, let alone interact with those in the city beyond. Wilhelma often reminded her that she had duties to attend to and could not afford distractions.

Within the storage caverns was a room where acolytes

made fresh candles. A girl was at work with a kettle melting the wax down when Hyli entered. Hyli did not know her well, she was a girl sent by her family to the church, barely into her teenage years. She was still under the vow of silence they often took in their first months. It was suspected, though not known for sure, that it was to make sure others did not learn too much of what went on in the world outside.

The girl nodded towards a spot, where Hyli placed the bucket of collected wax. Unsure what to say, she merely escaped and returned to the sanctuary, taking up a rush broom to sweep by the altar. The long table had a fresh cloth in pale golds over it, while the implements of the service — various bowls — were arrayed on it. The sun caught in each and Hyli found herself distracted, caught up in the colors. She was startled to hear someone clearing their throat, straightening suddenly and nearly dropping the broom in her haste to appear as if she were working.

“You have done suitable work,” Wilhelma said from a doorway to the side. Her pinched features were creased further in mild annoyance. Hyli cursed her luck briefly, but took slow strides from the altar towards the Priestess.

“It won’t take long to finish,” she began, voice pitched low with the hint of apology.

“No matter. I will have someone else complete it. I need you to come with me.”

Confused, Hyli returned the broom to a nook in the hallway off of the sanctuary, where other supplies were kept. She fell into step behind Wilhelma, shuffling somewhat to keep pace with the tall woman as she whipped

through halls and corridors on the way to her office. The behavior was strange, as Wilhelma often did not wait until she had someone in her office to berate them. The punishment was taken out in there, of course, but rarely were you taken there without knowing what you had done.

She went back over her morning in her head, but found no ill in her tasks. Perhaps she had not cleaned the wax to Wilhelma's satisfaction? Or had she been scheduled to aid in the kitchens and slept through it? She doubted that was the case either, for surely Wilhelma would have told her when she woke her. Hyli felt a lump growing in her throat as they grew nearer to the dark office the Priestess kept, uncertainty making her limbs feel weighted.

Wilhelma directed Hyli into the room ahead of her, pulling the heavy wooden door closed behind them as she did so. There was a sense of finality to the gesture and Hyli felt somewhat trapped when the thud of the closing echoed off down the halls. She swallowed and made her way towards a chair by the vast desk that dominated the otherwise small office. Hands folded in her lap, she watched the Priestess with wary eyes.

"Hyli, how long have you been with us?"

"It will be 13 Passes in a few weeks, Priestess."

Wilhelma nodded, as if the answer appeased her. She began sorting papers upon the desk, but the motions seemed to have a sense of distraction to them. Like she was moving by mere rote memory rather than with an actual purpose.

"How much of the world have you seen in that time?"

Hyli felt perplexed at the question. The Priestess knew as well as she did that she rarely left the church, let alone

the city. She reflected, however, that it was likely best to humor the woman.

“I have not been outside the city of Carth,” Hyli says, unable to contain the faint wistful tone that took up in her voice.

“Have you wished to?”

Hyli felt this was a dangerous line of questioning, but Wilhelma was too talented at detecting lies and the quiet tone the woman had taken was making Hyli nervous.

“Ye... Yes, Priestess, I have,” she finally answered, looking up past some errant strands of hair to await the woman’s response.

“You will have your wish, then. The Council needs a member of our faith to aid in an investigation and the High Priestess felt that you would be most suitable for the task.”

Wilhelma’s tone hinted at a disapproval, or perhaps even disagreement. Hyli restrained the hope she felt, but could not keep herself from sitting up somewhat straighter and lifting her chin a bit with an unfound sense of pride.

Before she could reply, Wilhelma continued, “I do not feel comfortable sending you alone, but I have been assured there are other Acolytes being sent as well and that you will be in good hands. Your presence will be missed here, but I have to keep the faith that you will return to us before long.”

“Where... will I be going?”

“To the Wastes.”

Chapter 2

Preparations for travel went swiftly enough that Hyli had barely any hand in them at all. She had assumed she would be packing everything she had need of on her own, but by the time she had stepped from her room with a pack in hand, she discovered that the kitchen girls had been set to work. In the yard was a horse hitched to a wagon and the wagon was near full already. She could tell at a glance that most of it was food.

A hand on her shoulder startled her and Hyli nearly dropped her bag. It was Wilhelma who stooped to pick it up. The woman walked swiftly towards the cart, putting the bag in with the rest.

“You do not have time to learn to ride a horse, but I have made sure this man can teach you how on your travels. We have selected one of our best mares from the stables as a parting gift to you.”

As the Priestess spoke, a stable hand was leading a dapple gray mare towards the yard. Hyli thought she was beautiful, but also felt mildly skeptical. It was true she did not know how to ride. She had never even been on horseback before. She had ridden in a cart once, when taken along to see how the kitchens handle purchasing supplies, but it was the sight of the horse that brought it home that she was leaving.

Though she would often lay awake at night, imagining what it must be like to travel Rillen, Hyli had never truly felt it would happen. Few Acolytes ever left the church and most Priestesses only left to the church they were assigned

to. Even in the great tales of past Eras, it was rare you would hear of a member of the Faith traveling the country. They played bit parts, as it were: providing shelter and food to weary travelers, offering bits of insight when a hero stopped in at their church.

Feeling her eyes well up, Hyli scrubbed at them with the back of balled fists. Wilhelma placed a hand upon her shoulder again and this time squeezed gently.

“I know you have never felt affection towards me,” the woman said, in a tone that demanded attention. “I have never been the motherly sort and it was Suth’s decree that I dedicate my life to serving her. It is true I do not think you have the talent for this venture and I would have recommended others, but you are the one the Council chose. I do know that you will do your best and you will represent the church well.”

Those words spoken, Wilhelma turned sharply and disappeared back within the stone walls of the church. Hyli found herself being herded into the back of the wagon, settled on a sack of some food or another. She tucked her feet up under her, enjoying wearing trousers rather than the usual shift of an acolyte. The strings of blue and yellow beads at her throat and wrists would indicate her as an Acolyte of Suth more than the clothing anyway. It was rare she got to wear such clothing and she had been provided with new outfits to best represent the church.

“Are ye settled in back there, miss?”

Turning slightly to regard the driver of the cart, Hyli felt her heart rise into her throat. This was it. She was leaving the church. She was leaving Carth. She would

even, in time, be leaving Rillen! Now that her dreams were finally turning into a reality, Hyli felt uncertain. She had little idea what she would be facing or who she may meet. Realizing the driver was still waiting for her, she nodded suddenly.

“Yes, I am,” she said, her voice wavering a bit. She cleared her throat, closing her eyes as she brought her breathing through the meditation often used by Touched to focus themselves. “May I inquire as to your name?”

“Jackey DeVin,” the man responded, though on closer look Hyli felt that perhaps they were nearer to age than she thought. In the church, time seemed to pass so slowly that she often still felt like a young girl. Not the woman of eighteen Passes she was soon to be.

“My name is Hyli,” she said, feeling the need to make introductions more official. His grin assured her that her thoughts had been right. He already knew who she was.

“Aye,” he said, making it reality, “I was told. I’ve seen ye in the kitchens sometimes when I make deliveries.”

Feeling bad that she had no memory of him, Hyli settled in and braced herself as the wagon began to move. Jackey clucked at the large draft horse pulling the cart and they went bumping over cobble stones. The cart passed from the church yard into the street and soon they were passing the other churches of the female deities. A similar cart departed not long after they, from Minhllh’s church.

“Are they coming as well?”

“Aye, miss. I hear there will be a representative of Rich and Cix as well..”

The way he trailed off made Hyli feel somewhat suspi-

cious, so she turned and leaned over towards the driver's bench, trying to catch a view of Jackey's face.

"Are there more?"

He swallowed, uncertainly, glancing from side to side. "Well, miss... Someone said that a Priest of Cant might be along also."

Hyli sat back to take that in, frowning somewhat. Few, if any, saw the members of Cant before they died. Children of Cant were often even identified before the usual age of five. No one knew how Touched of Cant worked, but they were few and far between. Everyone Touched by Cant became a member of the clergy. It was also the only path where both men and women could follow. She was uncertain what would cause them to send one of their own. No one even knew where their church was. There were no spires or chapels erected to Cant. None prayed at altars to the faceless god.

She thought perhaps this was the reason Wilhelma seemed so concerned for her safety. Even a Priestess as cold as Wilhelma is likely to fear the Children of Cant.

They traveled much of the day, though it was slow going. The streets of Carth were busy from sunrise to sunset and often into the night. Hyli watched with wide eyes the people that milled about. Nobles alongside Carr'an who in turn bumped elbows with the Untouchable. It was something she noticed quickly: the Citizens and Nobles avoided the Untouchables to the best of their ability, but

the Carr'an were treating them just the same as they might other people of Rillen.

She supposed merchants cared not who held the coin, so long as they paid the proper prices.

"Miss," Jackey called back and Hyli was brought out of a reverie by his voice, turning slightly to regard the young man.

"Yes?"

"Have ye ever seen the Council's Tower?"

"No."

"Well then ye may be wanting to look as we cross this bridge."

Hyli did as she was told and found herself gaping as they crossed one of the rivers. The bridge their horse and cart passed over was made of stone worn smooth by the years and was some distance from the Council's Tower, but it provided all the better view. She knew that seven bridges — one for each of the Gods and Goddesses, save Cant — crossed into the tower and she had seen the top spire from the avenue Suth's church was on, but it still did not prepare her for the view.

The Council's Tower was tall and winding. Something about the design nagged at Hyli until it hit her a moment later: the tower, visually, gave homage to all of the deities. Save, of course, for any overt relation to Cant, but Cant was in and about everything regardless. That is how the spirit world worked.

The white tower spiraled up from the ground, stone pulled up from the island it sat on, evoking Cix. Trees were there in the water that flowed through gardens on the lower

levels. Halle was felt in the way the tower became white and near disappeared into the sky, save for a flame at the center for Tam. The flame was said to be visible even from the bay and served as a lighthouse for ships that came to the capitol of Rillen. Her own Goddess, Suth, was evoked by the movement of bells that rang out with the hours. Rich and Minlh were not as overt as the others, but she knew the Tower contained a vast library and like Cant, Minlh was found wherever there was life... the balance to the Faceless God's world of death.

Hyli felt a faint pang of disappointment as they left the bridge into an avenue of trees. Large manors were set back from the roadway, largely hidden by trees and wrought iron fences. She leaned forward and touched Jackey lightly on the shoulder.

“What are those for?”

“Those, miss, are homes for the nobles and Chosen Ones.”

She frowned, faintly. There were so many; more than would account for the nobles that lived within Canth proper. She inquired as to this and Jackey shrugged, looking away briefly. She felt like perhaps the thought bothered him as well.

“Well, your own High Priestess lives in one, as do the leaders of the other Faith. Some merchants have homes here as well.”

“I thought members of the Faith were supposed to live without so much by way of material things. The High Priestess even has quarters within the church...”

“Supposed to and should matter little in the world of

politics, miss,” Jackey said, sounding somewhat wistful as he spoke.

“May I ask who Touched you?” Hyli inquired, desperately seeking to change the subject. The thought of politics made her head ache; it was so far away from the world she knew.

“Cix, ma’am, but I am Chosen-Touched I fear. That’s why I’m a mere driver.”

“Being Chosen-Touched is quite the blessing,” Hyli said gravely, recalling her lessons. To be Chosen-Touched took time from the Chosen One of your Faith and a small part of their soul to boot. Few Untouchables could even bear the process, so they were rare despite being below the rank of Citizen.

“Oh, oh no, I’m not denying that, miss,” Jackey said in a rush. “I am quite pleased to have been Chosen for the gift. My mother was never prouder than the day we heard back that I had been selected.”

Hyli drew herself closer, balancing in the hay with a hand on the back of the driver’s seat. It made it easier to have discourse over the rattling of the wagons in the train that was building to head out of the city.

“So how does it happen? They never explained the specifics to us.”

“Well, miss... First a Priest or Priestess reviews ye. Makes sure ye can bear it and ye ain’t completely Untouchable,” he said the word without the usual hushed distaste that Hyli often heard it in.

“If they feel ye can bear it, ye go on through schooling. Learn all about Rillen, the Faith, and all kinds of things.

They want to make sure ye are worthy, of course. Those who test highest then move on to the final stage where...”

Jackey trailed off and looked down to his calloused hands which held the leads for the horse that trodded along before their wagon.

“Where...” Hyli tried to lead him into speaking again.

“I’m afraid I ain’t supposed to speak about it, miss. Not sure I could anyway. It’s somewhat fuzzy, like a bad dream.”

“I see.”

Hyli gave up getting anything further out of him, even with a change of subject. The young man had become so forlorn she was not sure he would even want to talk to her. She settled back into the hay and opted for watching the scenery pass by. As they had conversed, they had left the avenue of manors and passed into the sprawling town that surrounded the city proper.