

Gods of Nabban

ALSO BY K. V. JOHANSEN

Blackdog

The Leopard

The Lady

Gods of Nabban

K. V. JOHANSEN



an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2016 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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Cover design by Liz Scinta
Cover illustration by Raymond Swanland
Cover design © Prometheus Books

Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr

59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228

VOICE: 716-691-0133

FAX: 716-691-0137

WWW.PYRSE.com

20 19 18 17 16 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Johansen, K. V. (Krista V.), 1968- author.

Title: *Gods of Nabban* / K. V. Johansen.

Description: Amherst, NY : Pyr, an imprint of Prometheus Books, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016012441 (print) | LCCN 2016019561 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781633882034 (softcover : acid-free paper) |

ISBN 9781633882041 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Gods—Fiction. | Demonology—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION /
Fantasy / Epic. | GSAFD: Fantasy fiction. | Occult fiction.

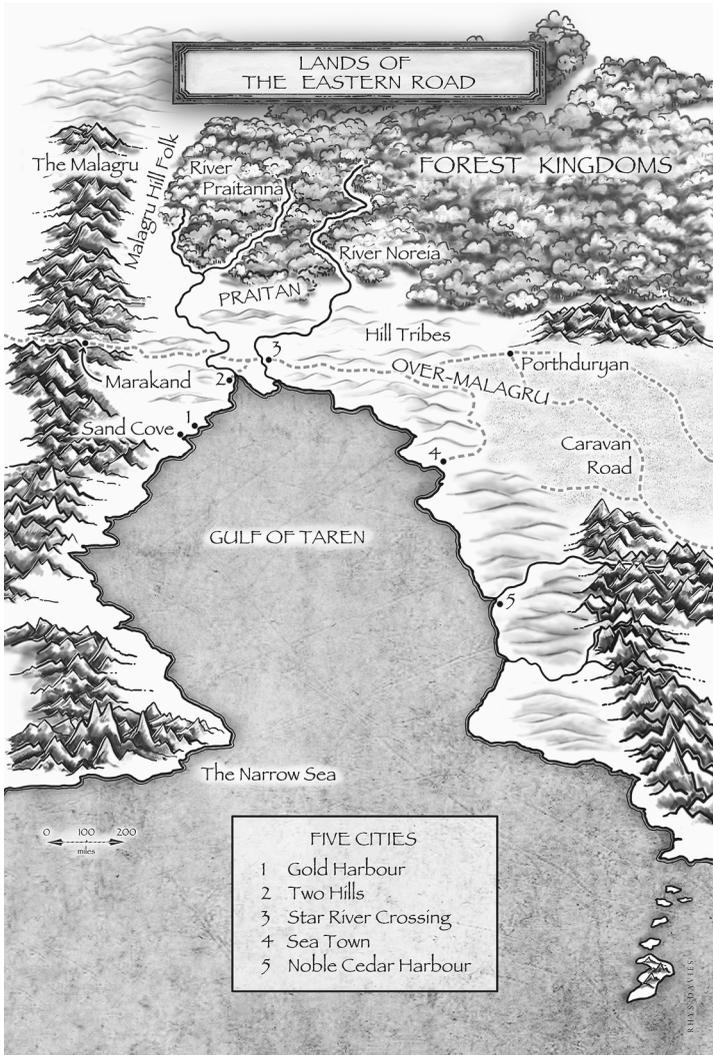
Classification: LCC PR9199.3.J555 G63 2016 (print) | LCC PR9199.3.J555 (ebook) |

DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016012441>

Printed in the United States of America

For Tristanne and Marina



NABBAN
AND NEIGHBOURING LANDS



On the nature of the demons, gods, and devils, from the common introduction to the cycle of histories of the devils' wars told and sung by the Northron skalds:

The demons—*Though the demons may wander all the secret places of the world, their hearts are bound each to their own place, and though they once served and once defied the Old Great Gods and are no friends to humanfolk, they are no enemies either, and want only to be left in peace.*

The devils—*In the days of the first kings in the North there were seven devils escaped from the cold bells where the Old Great Gods had sealed them after the war in the heavens, and their names were Honeytongued Ogada, Jasberek Fireborn, Vartu Kingsbane, Tu'usba the Restless, Jochiz Stonebreaker, Dotemon the Dreamshaper, and Twice-Betrayed Ghatai. And there were seven wizards, who desired to know yet more, and see yet more, and to live forever. The seven devils, having no place, had no body, but were like smoke, or like a flame. They hungered to be of the stuff of the world, like the gods and the goddesses and the demons at will, and as men and women are whether they will or no, and having a body, to find a place. So they made a bargain with the seven wizards, that they would join their souls to the wizards' souls, and share the wizards' bodies, sharing knowledge, and unending life, and power.*

The gods and goddesses of the high places and the waters—*As all should know, the gods and the goddesses of the earth live in their own places, the high places and the waters, and are bound each to their own place, and aid those who worship them, and protect their own.*

The Old Great Gods—*They watch and judge and cherish the souls of humanfolk after death and take no part in the affairs of the living world, save once only, when the pleas and prayers of the folk and the gods and goddesses of the earth themselves brought them into the world, to defeat and bind the seven devils . . . but afterwards the Old Great Gods withdrew again to their own place, to await the souls of humanfolk in the heavens beyond the stars.*

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

[Freeborn Nabbani are listed by their personal, rather than clan, name.]

Aoda (Daro Aoda)—A priestess of Father Nabban in Dernang.

Ahjvar—Former assassin of the Five Cities cursed to remain undying in the world; now a companion to his onetime groom and shield-bearer Ghu; also called the Leopard. A long lifetime ago, prince and king's champion (or *ribswera*) of the Duina Catairna in Praitan. See also Catairlau.

An-Chaq (I)—A wizard-talented daughter of Emperor Yao of Nabban who fled west; mother of Ivah.

An-Chaq (II)—Wizard, artist, stone-carver.

An-Chi—Yeh-Lin's daughter, a wizard who sided with her brother Min-Jan against their mother.

Anlau—See Rat.

Anri—Captain of the Wind in the Reeds, the imperial order of spies and assassins, under Emperor Otono.

Ario (Zhung Ario)—a banner-lord of Zhung Musan's army who defects to Ghu.

Attalissa—Goddess of the lake and town of Lissavakail in the mountains called the Pillars of the Sky, west of Marakand beyond the Four Deserts.

Awan (Shouja Awan)—A priest drawn to Ghu's service, who had helped him years before when he was a runaway.

Baril—Yuro's second-in-command over the horses and stables of the White River Dragon, a slave of Daro Korat's.

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- Barrast—An ox, possibly a demon aurochs, of Grasslander legend; a constellation.
- Baya (Dwei Baya)—A banner-lady, niece of Dwei Ontari.
- Big Yen—General servant and compound watchman at the Flowering Orange playhouse in the Golden City.
- The Blackdog—Formerly the guardian dog-spirit of Attalissa, now bonded to its last host, the Westgrasslander caravaneer Holla-Sayan, as a double-souled shapeshifter.
- Bolan (Lai Bolan)—High lord of Argya, rebel against Buri-Nai, self-styled prince.
- Buri-Nai—Princess, later empress, of Nabban and eldest child of Emperor Yao; full sister of Emperor Otono, half-sister of Dan and of An-Chaq.
- Buryan—Praitannec caravaneer (from the Duina Noreia); member of Kharduin's gang; cousin of Seoyin.
- Catairanach—Goddess of the Duina Catairna in Praitan, who cursed Catairlau to live as an undying host for the soul of Hyllau.
- Catairlau—A prince, wizard, and king's champion of the Duina Catairna roughly ninety-some years before this time; counted among the kings of the *duina* by the bards. See Ahjvar.
- Chago—A slave horseman of Daro Korat's; a contemporary of Ghu's.
- Chichi—An imperial slave; drummer for Buri-Nai's boat.
- Dan—Youngest son of the late emperor Yao; Traditionalist and rebel; sometimes uses his mother's clan-name Dwei rather than the imperial Min-Jan.
- Debira—Serakallashi caravaneer of Kharduin's gang.
- Deyandara—A Praitannec princess and singer; former student of Yeh-Lin's. Ghu calls her "the little bard"; Ahjvar looks on her as a granddaughter.
- Diman—An assassin of the Wind in the Reeds assigned to Princess Buri-Nai's household; later captain of the company.
- Dotemon—One of the seven devils, bonded with the Nabban wizard, empress, and usurper Yeh-Lin.
- Dolan (Dwei Dolan)—An old peasant woman met by Ahjvar and Ghu in a deserted village in southern Alwu Province.

- Duri—Slave house-master at the castle of the White River Dragon.
- Etic—A legendary Grasslander hero; a constellation.
- Evening Cloud—See Niaul.
- Father Nabban—God of the high places of all Nabban, who came into being when all the gods of the land became one to defeat Yeh-Lin Dotemon during the devils' wars.
- Faullen—A Praitannec warrior of Deyandara's household.
- Gahur (Hani Gahur)—A lord of the Hani Clan; General Zhung Musan's second-in-command.
- Galicha—Goddess of a spring in Denanbak, the deity of the chieftain Ganzu's folk.
- Ganzu—Chieftain of a tribe in Denanbak.
- The Gentle Sister—One of the three great rivers of Nabban; formerly also a goddess.
- Ghatai—One of the seven devils, bonded with the Grasslander chieftain and wizard Tamghiz.
- Ghu—Stray who followed an assassin home one day from the streets of Gold Harbour and wouldn't leave. Horseman, fugitive slave—saviour, so far as Ahjvar is concerned, and the dying gods of Nabban might agree.
- Gomul—Slave of the stables at the White River Dragon, who rescued the infant Ghu from the river.
- Gorthuerniaul—Praitannec translation of the name Evening Cloud. See Niaul.
- Gurhan—The hill-god of Marakand.
- Guthrun—Northron camel-leech, caravaneer of Kharduin's gang.
- Hadidu—Nour's foster-brother and widowed brother-in-law; priest of Gurhan in Marakand.
- The hag—See Hyllau.
- Haliya—An eastern desert woman in Kharduin's gang.
- Hana (Zhung Hana)—First Minister under Emperor Otono.
- Holla-Sayan—Westgrasslander caravan-mercenary. See the Blackdog.
- Huong (Zhung Huong)—Brother of Ti-So'aro; imperial officer; governor of Dernang under Ghu.

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- Hyllau—The ghost which possessed Ahjvar for much of his life.
- Ilbialla—A lost well-goddess of Marakand.
- Irtennin—A half-demon Grasslander hero of legend; a constellation.
His tribe was said to have settled the Western Grass.
- Ivah—Grasslander wizard, caravaneer, scholar, scribe; daughter of An-Chaq (I) and of the devil Tamghiz Ghatai.
- Jang—A slave in the castle gardens at the White River Dragon; becomes one of Yeh-Lin's pages and takes the Daro clan-name.
- Jasberek—The most mysterious of the seven devils; bonded with the wanderer Anganurth.
- Jian—One of the co-ruling sacerdotal queens of Darru and Lathi, who are also called the Wild Girls.
- Jilin (Lai Jilin)—Author of a classic treatise on the dramatic arts.
- Jiot—One of the two dogs who followed Ghu from Marakand; tan and black.
- Jochiz—One of the seven devils; bonded with Sien-Shava, a wizard from the islands in the ocean south of Nabban.
- Jui—Ghu's other dog; white and grey.
- Jula—Orphaned child adopted by Prince Dan.
- Kaeo—Slave-actor and singer of the company of the Flowering Orange; of Dwei Clan before his impoverished and desperate mother sold him. An agent of the rebel Prince Dan, and possibly a prophet.
- Kangju (Nang Kangju)—An imperial wizard of Plum Badge rank; he is a dreamer of true dreams.
- Ketkuiz—A shaman of Denanbak, belonging to the folk of the goddess Galicha.
- Ketsim—A Grasslander warlord who followed Ivah's father Tamghat until the latter met his end; then a mercenary in the service of the Lady of Marakand in the conquest of the Duina Catairna.
- Kharduin—A caravan-master, exile of a tribe of the eastern deserts; lover and business-partner of Nour; friend of Ivah.
- Kiaswa (Swajui Kiaswa)—An elderly priestess of the Mother. The Swajui clan-name is taken from the shrine of the springs of the Mother's rising.
- Korat (Daro Korat)—Kho'anzi, or high lord and border lord, of Choa

Province and head of the Daro Clan; a man of Traditionalist leanings; Ghu's former owner.

Koulang—Bithan-born son of Wolan; a caravaneer of Kharduin's gang.

Kufu—A slave in the castle gardens of the White River Dragon; becomes one of Yeh-Lin's pages, taking the clan-name Daro.

The Lady of Marakand—Late goddess of the city of Marakand.

Lau—Name under which Rat serves in Princess Buri-Nai's household.

The Leopard—The byname by which Ahjvar was most recently known when he was an assassin of the Five Cities. He has used it on previous occasions as well.

Liamin—Slave and personal attendant of Lord Daro Korat, trained as a physician's assistant.

Lin (Nang Lin)—name sometimes used by Yeh-Lin; quite possibly her original name, as the courtly "Yeh-Lin" is rather grander than the status to which she claims she was born.

The Little Sister—One of the three great rivers of Nabban; also the long-gone goddess of that river, who became a part of Mother Nabban.

Maka—An imperial soldier of Buri-Nai's household troop.

Marnoch—King of the Duina Catairna; betrothed to Deyandara.

Meli—A weaver; a former slave of the Kho'anzi of Choa Province; a rebel and bandit.

Mia—A slave and actress of the company of the Flowering Orange in the Golden City.

Miara—Ahjvar's lover, a widowed wizard murdered in Praitan long ago.

Mikki—A bear—sometimes. A Northron half-demon. Also a carpenter.

Min-Jan—Emperor of Nabban at the time of the devils' wars; son of Yeh-Lin. His descendants use Min-Jan as their clan-name.

Moth—Northron skald, storyteller, warrior, singer, devil . . . The name preferred by Ulfhild Vartu, q.v.

Mother Nabban—The one goddess of Nabban, who came into being from the merging of all the goddesses of all the waters of Nabban to defeat Yeh-Lin Dotemon during the devils' wars.

Mulgo Miar—Pine Lord, highest ranked of the imperial corps of wizards, under Buri-Nai; defected to Prince Dan.

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- Musan (Zhung Musan)—General serving Buri-Nai; victor in retaking Choa Province.
- Nai (Daro Nai)—A soldier of Lord Daro Korat's household.
- Nasutani—A young Grasslander woman in Kharduin's caravan-gang.
- Nawa—Eldest of the co-ruling sacerdotal queens of Darru and Lathi, who are also called the Wild Girls.
- Niaul—Dark bay Denanbaki stallion given to Ahjvar by Ghu, who did not quite steal him from Lord Daro Korat. Short for Gorthuerniaul, q.v.
- Nour—A Marakander wizard and caravaneer, lover and business-partner of Kharduin, whom he keeps on the straight and narrow, mostly. Close friend of Ivah.
- Ogada—One of the seven devils, bonded with the Northron wizard Heuslar. Rumoured slain in the north a generation or two previously.
- Ontari (Dwei Ontari)—A Dwei Clan lord, Prince Dan's right-hand man.
- Oro (Gar Oro)—A scout of Dwei Ontari's forces.
- Oryo—Captain of the imperial bodyguard of giants.
- Osion (Daro Osion)—A woman of Dernang who joined Lord Sia's rebels.
- Otono—Emperor of Nabban; brother of Buri-Nai, An-Chaq, and Dan.
- Raku (Daro Raku)—A Daro Clan lord, cousin of and military commander for Lord Daro Korat.
- Rat—A young woman of many talents; a Dar-Lathan or, as she would say, of Darru—or of Lathi. She may choose not to be specific.
- Rozen—A Praitannec warrior of Deyandara's household.
- Rust—A camel belonging to Ghu, or at least stolen by Ghu, which comes to the same thing.
- Salar—An eastern desert caravan-mistress.
- Sand—Another camel, also belonging to Ghu.
- Sanguhar—An emperor of Nabban.
- Sen—A slave of the stables at the White River Dragon.
- Seoyin—A colony-Nabbani man from Two Hills; caravaneer and cook in Kharduin's gang and cousin of Buryan.
- Shaiveh—Grasslander *noekar*, or vassal, of Tamghat's; Ivah's late bodyguard and lover.

- Shui—Young daughter and heir of the Denanbaki chieftain Ganzu, poisoned by Nabbani assassins.
- Sia (Daro Sia)—Daro Korat's son; an adherent of the Traditionalist philosophy, rebel against the empress and an ally of Prince Dan. Not, however, someone remembered fondly by Ghu.
- Sien-Mor—A wizard from the islands south of Nabban; became the devil Tu'usha; sister of Sien-Shava.
- Sien-Shava—A wizard from the islands south of Nabban; went to the north and became the devil Jochiz; brother of Sien-Mor.
- Silla (Yeon Silla)—A poet beloved of an empress.
- Sisu (Gar Sisu)—A young imperial wizard of Palm Badge rank.
- Snow—A white stallion born on Father Nabban's mountain. Belongs, so far as Ghu and the horse are concerned, to Ghu, whatever Daro Korat, the lord of Choa and legal owner of the horse, may have to say about it.
- Sohi—A Denanbaki woman, wife of the chieftain Ganzu and mother of Shui.
- Storm/Styrma—A Northron bone-horse, or necromantic creation made from the soul-memory and skull of a long-dead horse, of Moth's. Currently misplaced . . .
- Sujin—A slave of Daro Korat's stables who joined Sia's rebellion.
- Sula (Lai Sula)—An imperial general under Buri-Nai.
- Tai'aurenlo—A god of "the burning hills" in Lathi, father of the three Wild Girls who lead the tribes.
- Tamghat—Name used by the Grasslander warlord and devil Tamghiz Ghatai at the time of his conquest of the mountain lands of the goddess Attalissa; Ivah's father. His followers took the tribal name Tamghati from him.
- Tamareva—A woman of the southern islands living in Nabban; a dealer in mother-of-pearl and an agent of Prince Dan's.
- Ti—A slave from the castle kitchens of the White River Dragon; taken by Yeh-Lin to be her page, she gives him her clan-name, Nang.
- Ti-So'aro (Zhung Ti-So'aro)—A Zhung banner-lady; officer in Zhung Musan's imperial army who defects to Ghu.

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Toba—An elderly shaman of Dar-Lathi, counsellor of the queens.

Toi (Lai Toi)—A deserter from the imperial army.

Tu'usha—One of the seven devils, bonded with the Islander wizard Sien-Mor.

Ulfhild—A Northron warrior and wizard, sister of one of the first Kings in the North; King's Sword of Ulvsness; bonded with the devil Vartu. See Moth.

Urumchiat—A Grasslander shaman and hero of legend; a constellation is named after him.

Vardar—One of Kharduin's caravaneers; of the Malagru hillfolk.

Vartu—One of the seven devils, bonded with the Northron wizard Ulfhild. See Moth.

Vixen—Deyandara's dog.

Wey (Shouja Wey)—Owner of the acting company of the Flowering Orange, and of Kaeo.

The Wild Girls—Sacerdotal co-ruling queens of the tribes of the jungles and highlands of Darru and Lathi; human-born daughters of the god Tai'aurenlo.

The Wild Sister—The greatest of the rivers of Nabban, and the goddess of that river, absorbed into Mother Nabban.

Willow (Daro Willow)—Illegitimate daughter of Daro Korat's youngest daughter.

Wisán (Lai Wisán)—A wizard of the Plum Badge rank; the diviner who testifies at Kaeo's trial.

Wolan (Daro Wolan)—A Nabbani man in Kharduin's gang, originally from Choa Province.

Yao—Late emperor of Nabban, called "Bloody Yao." Father of Otono, Buri-Nai, An-Chaq, and Dan.

Yeh-Lin—A wizard of Nabban; formerly an emperor's wife, usurper, empress, exile, and conqueror. Bonded with the devil Dotemon.

Yuro—Daro Korat's slave-born master of horses and later castellan; the man largely responsible for what upbringing Ghu had before he fled.

Zial and Wujian—Legendary lovers in a quite-probably tragic Nabbani epic.

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

Something stalked him through his dreams. She was hungry, reaching . . . *Hyllau, reaching for him. The Lady of Marakand, but her face was burnt black, charred and flaking away like Hyllau's and she closed her mouth over his, pressing down on him, tongue forcing . . . He caught her by the throat, to choke and throttle, to end this one slavery, at least—*

There was more strength than one might think in Ghu's compact frame. He jerked Ahjvar's arms open, away from his neck, and pinned him to the ground like a wrestler. Ahjvar woke as his head thumped the earth and the ground hit him hard in the back.

Bunched muscles turned to water, as if he had run to the point of exhaustion. Ghu's fingers bit into his wrists, forcing Ahjvar's arms down as he leaned over him, a knee heavy on his chest. The blind dark of a cloudy night wrapped them; their fire was nearly smothered in its ashes.

"Awake?"

He couldn't answer yet. Breath wheezed and sobbed in his throat.

Ghu released his grip, cautiously, and Ahjvar rolled away, arm over his face, shaking, teeth clenched on the plea. He could not ask to be set free; he had promised, so he would not, not yet. But he had to swallow the words, choking on them. *Let me go. Let me die now. I can't do this.*

Ghu put an arm over him, pulled close and held him tightly, till

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his shuddering eased to mere shivering against a cold that was not the autumn air.

“Hush.” The command was hardly more than a stir of air against him. “Listen. I was going to wake you before long anyway. They’ve caught up. We’re watched.”

There was nothing to hear but his own harsh gasping, still too fast, too shallow, too loud.

“Shh, shh. It’s all right, Ahj.” A hand on his chest, breath in his hair. Encircled, safe. The Lady was dead. Hyllau’s very soul was destroyed. He caught at Ghu’s hand, gripped it, but didn’t push him away. Lay still that moment longer, being safe and trying to settle his breathing, to be awake and sane and of some use.

He remembered. They had been stalked through the hills all that day, since early in the morning. Six riders on horseback, never closing in, never letting themselves, they thought, be seen. Ghu had kept the dogs, white and grey Jui and dun Jiot, in close, though they had been alert and bristling, wanting to investigate. Most likely the six were after the camels and, if they had seen it, Ahjvar’s sword and the rings in his ears; they couldn’t think Ahjvar and Ghu had any other wealth, just two more masterless wanderers come east from the defeat of Marakand’s mercenaries at the Orsamoss. They might be ragged and growing gaunt with short commons, but to such men they would still be worth robbing. There was the gold and sea-ivory of the sword’s hilt and the camels were still in good condition, better fed than their masters. Ghu cared for them well and had stolen only the best to start with, not but what the Praitannec kings had owed him more than the price of two camels for their victory.

When no attack came by dusk, Ahjvar and Ghu had made their camp with a careful eye to the ground. Trying to outrace the dogged pursuit, when they had no safe fastness to run to, seemed futile, as did making any great effort to lose them in the hills. Besides . . . they had been fairly certain who the six were. If the brigands lost Ahjvar and Ghu, they would only go looking for other prey, less able to deal with them.

At Ghu’s insistence, Ahjvar had slept the first half of the night; he had insisted in turn that Ghu wake him, let him take the second watch.

Ghu had done so, and Old Great Gods forgive him, Ahjvar had slept. He did not even remember lying down.

He might as well be an invalid for all the use he was. His body healed. Wounds did, far more quickly than another man's might. He had only clean scars to mark his road from Sand Cove to Marakand and the Lady's well, to the battle at the Orsamoss and the burning tower at Dinaz Catairna. His mind, heart, soul, whatever, was another matter. A cripple. Even waking, there were long gaps in his days, as though his mind slept, or curled away small somewhere, leaving the body to manage the camel and the business of not falling. He would wake to awareness, though his eyes had never closed, and the light would be changed, the sun travelled several hours on its way, the land about them new.

Ghu should have known better than to trust him.

In some moods, he was strongly tempted to threaten to knock Ghu around the ears for treating him as a struggling child, letting him run, there to pick him up when he found he couldn't. Even for a grumble that would not be meant or taken seriously, he wasn't going to complain of the nursemaiding, though; it was Ghu who risked hurt, lying near to seize him back when the nightmares turned too foul. They might be only memories, festering unhealed wounds of the mind that he deserved to carry, not madness, no possessing ghost lurking in them, but even so . . . fast as Ghu was, the fading bruise on his cheek was Ahjvar's doing, two nights old. It was the murdered shepherd who had woken the dreams again, when he'd been a week without them. He turned over, face-to-face, muttered on a sigh, "Sorry." No atonement, and none for sleeping when he should have watched.

Bar himself from dreaming? He had attempted it, briefly, a few weeks back. The nightmares had leaked foul and vicious into his waking mind, or his half-waking; the periods where he lost time and place and self turned to horrors, and that . . . that was worse. To be mad in the daylight world . . . He had burnt the woven knot of herbs he had made against the nights, but the spell had been already failing, too weak to hold against the strength of the dreaming.

His sins; the dreams were his just punishment and atonement to

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bear for them, maybe, whether on the Old Great Gods' road, or Ghu's. He could not set them aside.

"Watched? Where are they?"

Neither dog was by them. He rose on an elbow to look. There. Pale, slinking wolf shape: Jui, just barely visible in the thinning night. The dog came up, keeping low, lay at Ghu's feet, watching the deeper darkness along the willow-lined bend of the coulee, just where a pool of water still lasted. That was where Ahjvar would have been. The rest of the slowly rising land was open of any cover but the night, grazed earlier in the summer, though no herds were near now.

"Four in the trees. Two up on the high ground, lying flat. They've been there a while." Ghu sounded apologetic. "You needed to sleep."

That someone had been keeping watch after all made him feel no less shamed for his failure.

"You get downstream, keep out of it." Old habit, to make sure the boy was safe out of any killing when he went about his work in the Five Cities. But Ghu was not that boy.

"And leave you alone? No, Ahj." After a moment, Ghu added, "We knew they were going to come on us sometime, once they started following. It may as well be now. These *are* the same who murdered the shepherd."

Ahjvar had been a king's champion once, and a king's wizard, too, a long lifetime ago. The king's wizards might divine truth from lie, when charges were brought for royal judgement, but those thus condemned might still appeal for the justice of the sword, a trial by combat within the circle of nine witnesses, which was generally only to have a more honourable death than the slow hanging that was the fate of wilful murderers and certain other most heinous criminals, the king's champion being the best sword of the tribe. He did wonder if Ghu had gone so far as to make the two of them bait, if he had on his own decreed a trial by deed, to give the justice the little chieftains of this land might fear to exact from the lordless mercenaries when they travelled in gangs. He could not be certain any more what Ghu might and might not do, but the man would do it quiet and clear-eyed and whole. His simpleton

groom—hah. He would trust Ghu's instinct for guilt or innocence over any wizard's divination, including his own, and Ghu's judgement, too, and set his sword to serve what Ghu appointed.

Two days past, they'd come upon a shepherd slain with her dog, her hut burnt and her ghost confused and lost on the hillside, what was left of her flock still keeping close, sensing her there. Six, she had told them. Foreigners, four men and two women, and they'd killed her the previous day for the bit of barley meal and cheese in her summer hut and a couple of sheep they could have driven off unchallenged. She had had more sense than to face them; she'd been hiding in the thorn thicket, she and her dog in silence, but they searched and found her and dragged her out . . .

Ahjvar and Ghu had buried the shepherd and the dog together, setting them free to take the road to the Old Great Gods, getting well away before her kin could come seeking her, to make mistakes about which wild and lawless wanderers might have done such a thing. The two of them could have been the warlord Ketsim's followers, Praitannecman and colony-Nabbani together, Ahjvar dressed in battlefield gleanings and Ghu, barefoot, having worn through the soles of his boots, in a too-tight caravaner's coat scorched and shredded to rags.

The road ran over a thousand miles through the hills beyond the eastern boundaries of the Praitannec kingdoms before it climbed to the dry uplands that became the eastern deserts, near enough now that sometimes the sun rose in the yellow haze of some distant, dust-bearing wind. These hills they travelled, though, were not so unlike Praitan, but wilder, emptier. There was dry scrub forest, the trees low and tangled, where reclusive demons, spirits of the land, watched warily as they passed: a blue-eyed stag, an owl, a white wolf without a pack. When they ventured into the shade of such woodlands, the camels paced crunching along paths drifted with past years' curled leaves, brown and leathery, smelling of resin. When there was a demon, it would trail them, unspeaking, attracted to Ghu, uncertain about Ahjvar.

For the most part, Ahjvar and Ghu had kept to the open lands, the rolling hills where lower scrub and autumn-yellowing grasses were grazed

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by wild goats and antelope and the sheep, asses, and camels of the semi-nomadic hillfolk. They were Praitannec kin, pale of hair and eye, skin an oak-tanned brown; Ahjvar could have passed for native here, but for his tongue. They spoke the same language, or near enough, but with a guttural desert-harsh intonation, not the singing lilt of the seven kingdoms farther west. They had no kings, only chieftains ruling tribes of a few families, which drifted seasonally up and down their hills between high summer camps and the stone and sod huts of their winter villages, nearly abandoned in this season, in the sheltered valleys. The goddesses of the shallow, stony rivers, like the gods of the hills, were quiet folk. If either had priest or priestess it would be only some gentle holy person living apart, half a shaman, or a wise elder who had settled to be companion of their god in their old age. Such gods did not always denounce Ahjvar as cursed or an abomination in their land, and sometimes the holy ones would offer them a meal and shelter for the night, drawn, like the demons, to Ghu. Sometimes they asked for the tale of the western upheavals and an accounting of why their lands, usually disturbed only by bands of young folk who took to caravan-raiding or an outbreak of reiving between neighbouring chains of hills, were so beset now with wandering bands of lordless foreign folk, desperate and rapacious brigands. Ghu would tell them of Marakand's war on Praitan and the victory of the kings of Praitan. Ahjvar left the talking to him.

Some of the mercenaries and Catairnan traitors, Praitannec warriors who had betrayed their queen, might be looking for honest work, hoping to find hire on the road or in Porthduryan, the town at the desert edge. Not many. The three cities on the coast south of Praitan would have been the better destination for such. Any who had come so far east as this were brigands now, even if they had not started out so.

And what was there to tell the folk of the land that Ghu and Ahjvar were any different? Only the god-touched holy ones saw otherwise. The brigands certainly did not.

Not long to wait now; enough light to see the shadow-shape of the dun dog Jiot, settling by the hobbled camels, who were likewise wakeful but chewing their cuds, unperturbed.

Ahjvar reached over Ghu, feeling for his sword. He wouldn't sleep with it within reach, nor a knife. He didn't trust himself. His hand found the hilt, ivory and gilded bronze, the pommel a snarling leopard's head. Northron work, very old. Lost heirloom of an ill-fated house. He slid it clear of the scabbard, laid it by his hip while he groped again and pulled his boots on, lay on his back. Ghu rolled over, chin on his arm, his forage-knife under his hand, that broad-bladed, angled tool that could cut a man's throat as easily as an armful of fodder. Ahjvar still heard nothing, but he was not sure Ghu did either, or if in some way he might perceive what the dogs did.

The trees along the coulee had solidified out of the thinning night. He could see them now, leaves hanging still, heavy against the windless dark blue. Mist crept off the pool, fingers of white snaking about the lower trunks. A shout. The trees birthed running shapes, a single figure pulling ahead. Ghu rose to one knee, ignoring them, watching up the hill. Ahjvar leapt the embers of the fire and went the other way. The woman in the lead was Northron tall, with an axe. Without a shield, he didn't much want to deal with that axe face-to-face. He dodged at the last, struck low as she tried to follow him, cutting across the backs of her knees, and continued around to drive the circling weight of his long Northron sword up and into the following man's belly, steel grating between the bronze plaques stitched to the man's jerkin, bearing him down. A second woman came at his unguarded side. He abandoned his sword and the dead weight on it, hooked her feet out from under her, seized the hilt and shoved the dying man clear of his blade with his foot, and had the sword free again as the woman flung herself up and closed in on him, grim-faced. He might have asked her why it took six of them to kill one unarmed girl. He might have offered quarter and told her to run, if for no other reason than to show himself he did not have to kill her but by his own choice, yet there was Ghu, with no better weapon than a peasant's knife. So that was his choice. They were convicted and dead anyway. His father would have hanged them.

She was a Grasslander with a horseman's sabre and the small buckler they used, and so was the last man of the four who rushed at him from the

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side, blade sweeping, braids flying. He had to turn between the two of them. Could have used a shield, yes, or a stick, or just about anything, really, to block that. It was a harried few moments, till he took the woman's head half off. The blade had dulled its edge, scraping armour and bone, and he paid in blood for that delay in jerking his sword free, felt the man's sabre skim and bite his warding arm, but it saved his face, and the man's savage grin gaped as he ran him through. No armour. He pushed him down and cut his throat, a mercy he likely did not notice, and killed the crippled axe-woman on the ground as she tried to drag herself away, before looking around for Ghu.

Both dogs were barking now, loud and angry, and Ahjvar, all unwilling, could hear the wailing of the confused and angry ghosts. No other human cries, though, now that the last woman was silent. A camel, finally, decided something was amiss and bellowed.

There. Ghu rose from where he had crouched, wiping the blade of his forage-knife clean on a handful of grass. *Someday I may have to learn to kill*, he had once said, and, *Not this day*. It seemed so long ago. A lifetime's journey. Even before that, they had argued over whether Ghu would learn to use a sword, once it began to seem inevitable that the boy was his, a stray cat that could not be driven off. Ghu had persisted in his refusal, but he surely had not tracked Ahjvar across half Praitan and hauled him from the Lady's hell in the midst of battle without shedding blood.

To mourn that sacrificed innocence seemed ungrateful of the gift.

No. What Ghu had set aside to claim Ahjvar from the curses that held him was not a child's innocence, but his freedom. A doom chosen before he would otherwise have done so, or one he might still have rejected altogether. He could have abandoned Ahjvar to the mercy and the death the devil Dotemon might have given him, and kept on his westward wanderings. But he had not, and so he was bound to the east, and Ahjvar would not abandon him. Not this day. That was all he could promise, yet. Each day anew—not this day.

Sometime, too, the starveling boy had become a man, slight, but with a muscular grace and power in movement that ought to be turning the girls' heads in some king's hall, not . . . Anyway, he should have a better weapon than that damned peasant's knife.

"We should look for their horses," Ghu called matter-of-factly. The torn ruin of the coat he had been wearing since Marakand was sprayed with blood. Not, Ahjvar trusted, his own, in that quantity, or he would not be standing. Ghu shrugged the filthy rags from his shoulders as Ahjvar crossed to him, frowned at the hand, still gripping his sword, that Ahj pressed to his left arm.

"Bad?"

"No," Ahjvar said firmly. It was only seeping.

Ghu made some exasperated noise. Ahjvar ignored him and warily took his hand away, but no great spreading of blood followed, so he had spoken truth. Shallow. He wasn't the only one with a dulled blade.

There were no ghosts hovering over the still humps of the dead Ghu had left. A man with his throat cut, neatly, if you could say that, and precisely. The other had been stabbed, a wide mouth of a wound ripping up through leather, between horn plates. They had carried Grasslander sabres and a spear.

"You shouldn't be getting in close like that. Great Gods, Ghu—"

"Once I am in that close, there's not much they can do." Ghu considered the smallest man and hauled off his boots, caravaneer's leather-soled felt.

"You can't take on a swordsman with a knife!"

Ghu's eyes flicked up at him, brows raised, but he didn't deign to answer. And the boots appeared to fit. He considered the taller of the two, who likewise seemed mostly dressed for the caravan road. Not Ahjvar's height, but large feet.

"No," Ahjvar protested.

"We're heading for the desert, Ahj. And winter is coming."

Ahjvar's footwear was a horseman's heeled leather, no warmth, and ill-fitting anyway. The last remnant of the Red Mask's gear, uniform of the servants of the Lady of Marakand. He should be glad to be rid of it.

"Robbing the dead. Fine. Take a sword, too, then. You need—"

"Ahj, you think you can make me a good swordsman before we come to Nabban?"

He had no idea what Ghu was capable of. "Maybe. Probably. Competent." Ghu would not be merely competent, whatever he set his

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hand to, but not likely they would have the energy, travelling hard, to spare for such things when they made their evening's camp. Ahjvar doubted he would, anyway. He wanted, right now, nothing but to lie down and lose himself in nothingness. A dream-free nothingness. "Probably not."

"Then don't bother."

"And what if you can't dance in and cut throats?" He crouched to clean in the grass his sword and the hand sticky with his own blood.

"I hide behind you." Ghu's smile down at him was that of the innocent of Sand Cove. "Put those boots on."

Ahjvar took an undamaged shield from one of the Grasslanders for good measure, one of Ghu's. He had stopped caring how he was hurt years ago, but it was Ghu going to pay, now, if he got himself laid out half dead in the midst of a fight. Half dead, or—whatever. He didn't feel up to peeling one of the better-equipped out of their armour and Ghu didn't suggest it.

No sign Ghu had flung even the token handful of earth over the brigands he had slain, yet by the time Ahjvar trailed him down towards the coulee, trying not to cringe at feeling the shape of a dead man's feet, the ghosts were silent and gone from the others too. A word from Ghu might be blessing enough. He supposed even they deserved it. Less blood on their hands than on his, whatever they had done, and yet theirs would be a long road to the Old Great Gods. It was unlikely the shepherd had been their only innocent victim.

He gave in to having his arm bandaged before they broke camp and set out to follow the dogs, who found the horses downstream, though regretfully they turned the beasts loose to be claimed by whoever might find them. Trying to trade them wasn't going to be worth the risk of being mistaken for part of some brigand gang themselves. They took what spare clothing from the saddlebags seemed a reasonable fit, and what gear would be of use, which was much of it. The greatest prize was a bulky Grasslander-style sheepskin coat, rolled tight and carried against the winter. Too small across the shoulders for Ahjvar, it was a loose fit on Ghu. They would be glad of it before they came to Nabban, he sup-

posed. Even such things as a whetstone, a flint and firesteel, the woman's axe—all might get them further on their road. A case of needles, which he dissuaded Ghu from trying out on his arm; it was really not all that bad. Blankets, food, a couple of purses of Marakander coin, a sack of barley, which the camels were going to need if they were to do more than meander, grazing as they went . . . Ahjvar left the looting to Ghu and went to sit by the stream, methodically working over his sword's edge with the stone. It had seen little use, all things considered, in the last ninety years or so. Just as well, no doubt, from its maker's point of view, or the blade's steel edge would have been taken back to its pith; his weapons in the Five Cities had generally been less honourable ones, knives and poison and the garrotter's cord.

His arm throbbed and still bled sullenly, his head ached, and he would have lain down to sleep again if it were not for fear of the nightmares or some local chieftain's handful of spearmen coming upon Ghu at his methodical robbery. Satisfied with the blade's restoration at last, Ahjvar leant his head on the bole of a willow and found he had shut his eyes anyway.

Nabban. Ghu was drawn east now as the geese were pulled north in spring. The empire was a land of what, in any other place, would be many gods protecting many folks. There were only two gods in all Nabban now—Mother Nabban of the rivers, Father Nabban of the heights—and they called Ghu home . . . but what followed on that?

“You'll like this.”

He had slept. The sun was hot, even through the willow leaves, climbing towards noon. Ghu dropped something at his side. A stirrup crossbow cased in oiled leather, and a quiver, six bolts left. Good Gold Harbour work. He recognized the maker by the patterning of ships on the stock.

“We could go back down to the Five Cities,” Ahjvar said.

He had lost track of time, the passing weeks and the phases of the moon; they had wandered far from the road, their course more winding than a slow river of the plains, and some days he had not been fit to travel at all. Days. Weeks, maybe. He couldn't say. He wasn't sure where they

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were, except well east of the kingdoms of Praitan, nearly to Porthduryan, where the eastern desert road began. There was a second land route to Nabban, a way that ran south of the deserts, north of the eastern forests, but it climbed high into mountains before dropping to the free city of Bitha. Not a road for winter. The third route was by sea from the former colony cities, a dangerous voyage, very long; the coast was savage and the sea beset by storms, and yet it would leave behind the assumption that they were more of the warlord Ketsim's brigands; Ghu, at least, would be in a known world on board ship. He had worked his way west from Nabban by sea. From here, the nearest port of the Five Cities would be Sea Town, far away south somewhere. Noble Cedar Harbour was seven hundred miles down the coast from there. It had been a long time since the Leopard had hunted in either. A lifetime, for other men.

"I could easily earn enough to pay our passage by sea."

Ghu's face went still, utterly without expression, black eyes dark as night, as ageless. "No."

Ahjvar hadn't felt much but weariness and fear since the battle at Orsamoss, but that woke some spark of anger. Difficult enough, what Ghu set out to do, but he made it worse dragging Ahjvar with him, and the desert . . . "You want to try to cross a desert you know only from caravaner's tales, in winter, with what we can steal from bandits hardly better off than we are?"

"You don't kill for me, Ahjvar. Not like that."

He looked away. Ghu crouched down by him, took his arm, turned it to look at the deep purple bruises blooming on Ahjvar's wrist. Brushed a thumb over one, as if to undo it. Or the rope scars beneath, and the mottled burns, livid, not yet fading to silver. "Besides, we still have your bracelets, remember?"

He did not. So many things lost, but the memories he would leave by the wayside he could not shed. But yes, hazily, he remembered. Thick gold rings with leopard's-head terminals, heirlooms, like the sword, of his house. Useful now and then over the years when he had needed to swagger as a noble of Praitan in some disguise about his work. Not robbed for the temple after all; they had been taken and restored; he

had been sent out wearing them, her captain, her—don't think of her. Bracelets. His. Gold. Wealth to outfit them for several journeys, but difficult to sell for anything near their worth. Difficult, in this land, to find anyone who could afford to buy, or who would want such killable wealth under their roof, in a land so brigand-plagued. In the cities, though . . .

"We could buy passage fit for most respectable merchants, once we came to a place to sell that gold, ragged as we are," said Ghu. "But Ahj . . . you want to be shut up in the close quarters of a ship? For months, if the season's bad? Dreaming?"

"No." He kept his eyes on the water. He dreamed of water, flowing into him, burning in the lungs like fire, the deep still water of the Lady's well. He'd gone into the sea once, long ago, when he had still hoped there might be a way to die and take his curses with him.

"Come away," Ghu said quietly. "They had still the haunch of a sheep. We might as well have the good of it, once we put enough miles between ourselves and this place to risk a fire. There's bread to eat till then. And you do need stitches in that cut if it's to heal clean."

Ahjvar nodded, trying to summon the will to move.

"It was the coffee I meant you might like, actually. Not the crossbow."

"Coffee?" He looked around at that.

Ghu laughed, shook a rattling cotton bag. "Nothing to grind it with, but there's bound to be stones wherever we camp. Now—come." As if he were one of the dogs.

The dying gods dream of salvation, a gambler's doomed hope. Do they see him? He thinks not. Their own dreams drown them: they dream of their child, cast to the winds—all their last and fading thought. Their hopes of him leak, and the prophets spill words of storm and a land made new.

It will be so, but not by the heir of the gods.

A gift to the emperor's daughter, an ambassador from far, far in the west, sent to great Yao of Nabban, famed even in distant Tiypur, with tribute of sea-silk and cameo-work in onyx and agate, and drugs and dyestuffs and poisons. A rough, barbarian thing, the gift, a trinket that drew her eye, hers out of all those

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who looked on it, displayed in the mother-of-pearl-inlaid chest with the greater jewels destined for the imperial treasury. He had made it so, like a caravan-mercenary's amulet, to prevent it being desired, and so lost to some imperial wife or favoured lord who would be no use to him. It would draw the one he sought: the lever, the stepping stone, the pebble of his avalanche. He had not been certain who it might be, but there was faint wizardry lingering in all Min-Jan's descendants, their foremother's legacy, and he had been certain the seed he sent would find some fertile ground in which to sink its roots.

A door, to be opened.

And so it has proved.