

STAR OF GYPSIES



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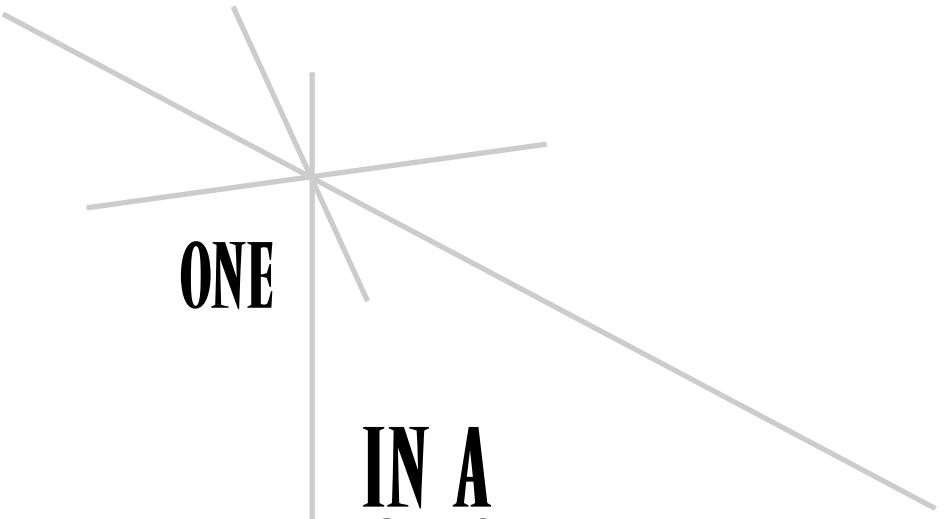
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for KAREN

*O Star of wonder, Star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.*



ONE

IN A
SNOWY
SEASON

These are the Three Laws:

What is holy is what is efficient.

**Those who live by common sense are righteous
in the eyes of God.**

The One Word is: Survive!

This is the One Word:

Survive!

1.

What had led me to abdicate in the first place was the realization that the time had come to drop everything and run for it. One of my favorite tactics, with which I have often had great success, is attacking by means of retreating. Passive aggression, you might call it.

And so in a snowy season I left Galgala behind, my throne and my house of power and everything, and went off to the world called Mulano, which means the World of Ghosts. What I was looking for on Mulano was nothing more than a quiet place to live—me, who always thrived on noise and bustle and excitement—and that was what I found there, in the middle of all the snow-white brightness. I was a hundred and seventy-two years young and so far as I was concerned I had never been King of the Gypsies in my life and I was damned if anybody was going to talk me into being King of the Gypsies ever again.

I didn't miss the throne. I didn't miss living in my house of power. I didn't miss Galgala. Except for the gold, I guess. Yes: I did miss the gold of Galgala. For its sheen. For its beauty . (Certainly not for its value. *What* value?)

On Galgala everything is golden. The cats and the dogs, or what you might have called cats and dogs in the old days on Earth, have liquid gold running in their veins. There's gold in the leaves of the trees, there are grains of gold in the sands of the deserts, there are specks of gold in the paving-blocks of the streets. That's right. On Galgala the streets are literally paved with gold. You can imagine what the discovery of a planet like that would have done to the galactic economy if we had still been on the gold standard when they found Galgala. But of course that quaint though sensible ancient idea had

been obsolete for centuries by the time the first exploration team landed there.

Gold is pretty much worthless everywhere in the galaxy now , thanks to Galgala. Even so, the stuff still has its fascination for us foolish mortals, despite the hatchet job that the discovery of Galgala performed on its value in commerce. Especially does it fascinate the species of foolish mortals that other folks call Gypsies. My people. Your people too, most likely: for I hope and believe that most of you who read this will be of my own kind. (By which I mean those who call themselves the Rom. Who have called themselves by that name since before Earth was.)

We Rom have always loved gold. In the old days our women used to festoon themselves with gaudy masses of gold coins, threading them on golden chains and letting them dangle down over their lovely jiggling bosoms like so much braided garlic. You practically needed a hacksaw to get through the gold to their breasts, dancing around under those masses of yellow metal. And we men—oh, what tricks we played with *our* gold, back there in Hungary and Rumania and all those other forgotten places of old lost Earth! The roll of gold napoleons wrapped up in a handkerchief and stuffed into your pants to make a bulge, so you'd look like you were hung like an elephant! Imagine the Gypsy lass' surprise when the trousers came off.

(But of course you can't really surprise a Gypsy lass, because she's seen everything already. And it isn't size that your clear-thinking woman looks for, anyway: it's craft and cunning, and some vigor.)

Well, I had given up Galgala and all its golden glitter forever and ever. My power and my glory were behind me now. And Mulano was my home.

Mulano was a good peaceful sort of world. It was chilly but it wasn't really inhospitable. There was a silence about it that I loved. I had plenty of ghosts and snow-serpents and even a doppelganger or two to keep me company . And then too there was the bird called

Mulesko Chiriklo, the bird of the dead. I think I never was happier in all my years. I had told them all to go to hell, all those who had never understood what I was driving at and what was driving me. You want a king? Good: go find yourself a king. I want to be by myself for once. That was what I told them. And even though I was by myself I was still as full of joy and mischief as ever: joy has always overflowed in me. And mischief. On Mulano I felt as sweet as a lamb that is sleeping in a carload of newly harvested garlic and wild onions. Chapite! Which means, in our old Romany tongue, It is true!

The day on Mulano is fourteen hours long and the night is fourteen hours long and also there is a time between day and night that is seven hours long, when both suns are in the sky at once, the yellow one and the blood-orange one. That time of day I called Double Day . I would stand outside my ice-bubble for hours, watching the warring shafts of light collide and crash and struggle until one had enfolded and transformed the other.

And there was always a time at the end of Double Day when the two suns dropped below the horizon in a single instant, so that the sky turned green and then gray and then black between one breath and the next. The stars would come out in that moment. And that was the moment of Romany Star . I would see very suddenly, blazing in the forehead of the sky like the torch of the gods, the great gleaming red ball of hot light that long ago gave my people birth. And I would drop to my knees wherever I might happen to be at that moment, and scoop up snow and rub it on my cheeks to keep myself from crying. (I don't mind crying for joy but it sickens me to cry out of sadness and longing.) And then I would say the words of the prayer of Romany Star . If there was a ghost with me—Thivt, say , or Polarca, or Valerian—I would make him say the words too.

And when we had spoken the words I would say, "You see it up there, do you, you Polarca?"

"I see it, yes, Yakoub."

"How far is it from here, do you think?"

And he would say, shrugging, "Six hundred leagues and then a mile or two."

And then I would say, "The journey of ten thousand years ends with but a single step. Is that not so, you Polarca?"

And he would say, "That is so, Yakoub."

And we would stand there in the cold red glow of distant Romany Star until we could feel the cold snow beginning to melt under our star's hot embrace; and then we would go inside and sing the old sad songs until the night was done. And that was how it was for me on Mulano, among the ghosts and the snow-serpents, in that snowy season, in that time when I had never had been King of the Gypsies and was never going to let them make me King of the Gypsies again.

2.

Being the king, well, that was my destiny I was marked for it. I was caught up in the kingship from my childhood on, the way a swimmer can be caught in rough surf and tumble over and over and over, altogether unable to fight his way free. What the swimmer learns is, you will never escape the turmoil of the waves unless you go slack and easy, and let the waves have their way with you, and wait for the moment when you can regain control. The same with being king: if you are marked for it, no sense struggling against it. Go slack and easy and let your unchangeable fate come up over you and take you where you are meant to go. That is what destiny is all about.

I knew I was supposed to be king because the ghost of an old woman came to me and told me so, when I was just a little Gypsy boy