

# ON MOUNT KAN'JI

## PART I - Sunrise On the Mountain

Eoroal looked up from polishing the mont'nanal—*small war blade*, and paused to contemplate his last sunrise on the mountain. Sitting still in the pre-dawn darkness he could already smell the pungent fragrance of the desert flowers. Even before the first photon of morning light had touched their petals the flowers: orange sage, purple thyme, and the red cactus blossoms. Eoroal had worked all night by the light of a small oil lamp hanging from the ceiling, and now that work was now almost done. He took the knife in one hand, and in one smooth continuous motion, wiped along the edge with an ultra-fine grit stone. Now he washed the blade with water, drying its mirror-like surface with gentle dabs of a white silken cloth. Next he took a tiny cloth satchel of talc and lightly tapped it across one side of the one side of the blade and then the other. The last step was to take a yet another silken cloth, a blue one this time, and again wipe down the blade. Finally he slid the blade it to its plain wooden sheath; which it went in with a small '*click*'. Eoroal contemplated his actions of the previous night and wondered if his friends would understand why he did what he had done. Would they ever know just what he had *intended*? Would they ever know just what he had *meant* by it? And would they ever be able to *forgive* him? Eoroal—*Ghillie* or *The Little Squire*, now placed the mont'nanal next to the one already lying by his side.

It was time to begin his morning meditations. Eoroal placed the cover on the oil lamp to extinguish its flame, and slid open the rough wooden door with its coarse paper screen. Next he sat down upon the straw mat at the entrance of his tiny cell. The cell faced east, so as to align its occupant to the correct direction and energy for meditation and contemplation. And so properly aligned, Eoroal now took out his prayer rope and began the recitation of the Five Sutras of the Tau'va—*The Greater Good*. As he sat reciting his prayers, Dal'yth's setting moon filled the desert landscape with the last of its silver light; while the rising star of Dal'yth Prime turned the jagged outline of the distant horizon a deep red. Above this dragon teeth of black mountains, the sky above was turning from red to purple, then to blue, and then finally to black. Eoroal closed his eyes and letting go of all his thoughts and desires, allowed the prayer to guide his meditation. Half a dec later he opened his eyes, and keeping his body and mind focused, let his spirit to return to the present moment.

Eoroal removed the cover and then relit the oil lamp. Now reaching down he took a small sprig of tiny white flowers from the stone water jar which he kept by the door. And picking up one of the polished knives, he

tied the sprig of flowers to its wooden sheath. ‘*Silver-white for T’au,*’ he thought to himself. Then he returned it to its place; and he picked up the other polished knife. This time taking a sprig of fire-red cactus flowers from the same stone jar, he tied them to the knife’s wooden sheath. ‘*Red for Vior’la,*’ he said, the words coming soundlessly from his lips. Eoroal returned the knife to its place alongside the first. Now he placed the talc satchels, silk cloths, and polishing stones in their carrying case, and tying them up, placed them in his bag. Eoroal now looked around his small rock cell for the last time; it having been his home for more than a tau’cyr. Assured that that he had swept and tidied it sufficiently, he then he blew out the small oil lamp for the last and final time. Looking out from the now darkened cell, he sighed his good-bye and stepped outside.

In front of his cell, lying together in a drunken stupor, where his two closest friends: Temu’jin—*Forged of Iron* and Li’xiu—*Wild Pine*. In the near darkness of early morning, he could see red coals of the still smouldering brazier, and the steel cook bowl empty and overturned. Several empty stoneware bottles and drinking bowls were strewn about the entrance. His two snoring friends were also strewn about, each of them having somehow lost the blankets Eoroal had so diligently and carefully covered them with the night before. Li’xiu was on her back asleep on top of her blanket; while Temu’jin laid face first on stone, having kicked his off entirely.

“Hard to believe isn’t it, that any of us have just become high ranking members of the Tau fire caste?” said Eoroal softly to no one in particular. The sun was now on the verge of cresting the broken mountain tops, turning the eastern sky a turquoise colour. The upturned hemisphere of the sky then changed colours from the turquoise blue in the east, then then fading into a deep sapphire blue in the west. The western sky was still blazing with white stars though, but it was also filling with clouds; which promised rain and another burst of desert flowers.

Eoroal now dressed himself for the journey, putting on this half-coat over his knee pants and tunic. He looked down on two sleeping companions and said softly, “Here are my final gifts to you Li’xiu’saznai and Temu’jin’saznai.” Kneeling down between friends he placed one blade besides each of them. The white flowered blade next to Li’xiu; and the red flowered blade next to Temu’jin. Satisfied that everything was as is it should be, he stepped out from beneath the reed awning of his cell. Then shouldering his bag and water bottle, he picked up his walking staff and turned to hike down the long, long trail from Mount Kan’ji. “T’eh, I’d better be off then, before they wake up and find out just what I’ve done to them!”

“And just what did you do to them Eoroal’kan—*Mr. Ghille?*” came a voice shrouded in the dark shadow of a tall red cactus.

The voice was unmistakable for it was none other than that of Acaya Qan'tel—*Master Puretide*. Even in the dimness of the early morning light, Eoroal could make out the unimaginable shape of the once formidable fire caste commander. Acaya Qan'tel was a thin stick whose skin had been sunburnt to a dark blue. He stood perched upon one withered and bony leg; while the hoof of the other leg rested upon the knee of the first. Qan'tel's racked frame was completely naked, except for the large mass of long silver white hair that covered his head and face. He had neither shaved his head or beard since becoming an *upt'shoh'la—mountain hermit* for the Tau'va. Worse yet, he had neither bathed, nor otherwise cleaned any part of his body since that time. Dabs of different coloured paint covered his body, one colour for each of the castes: red, yellow, blue, green, and white. Qan'tel's only belongings were a long gnarled wooden staff, and a small bag and bottle combination that hung across one shoulder. And although he was a revered figure among the fire caste, in terms of the normative tau cultural experience, Acaya Qan'tel was a demon, a barbarian, and an outcast who lived beyond the pale.

This did not phase Eoroal, a.k.a. *Shas'El'Dal'yth'Lynu* in the least, as he had spent the greater part of the last tau'cyr atop the Mount Kan'ji under Acaya Qan'tel's tutelage. Otherwise the smell alone of his teacher's body would have bowled him over. Eoroal stopped, shifted his weight, and looking at his teacher and said, “I-I have done something that you would not consider...well, not consider c-c-correct behaviour!”

Eoroal bit his lower lips, rolled his shoulders, and looked back at his fellow students asleep under the cell awning. “Namsai—*Teacher*, I meant to... *t'oh please forgive my impertinence!*” He dropped to his knees and bowed so as to touch his forehead to the ground.

“Eoroal'kan, what was not correct behaviour...xhmm? By the way...*t'oh*, would you please get off the ground. I can't talk to you if your face is in the dirt,” The old firewarrior's voice was weak and gravely, but still powerful in its authority.

“Yes, Namsai,” said Eoroal getting back onto his hooves.

Qan'tel moved slowly from where he stood under the cactus, and proceeded past Eoroal, to the where two other drunken students lay snoring. Getting down onto his haunches, Acaya Qan'tel looked closely at the two sleeping students. “What did you do to them Eoroal'kan? And what exactly have you done to their hair?” he said pointing at the two sleeping students.

Eoroal dropped down onto his knees next to his master. “Namsai I...*xhmm*...well I...*t'eh this is harder than I thought*...well, I've tied their queues together,” he said letting out a great sigh of relief.

“*You tied their queues together?*” The countenance on Acaya Qan'tel's face was as curious as his question.

“I take it this isn't some kind of academy prank is it?” Eoroal nodded his head 'no'. “Nor is it some kind of Trial-By-Fire hazing ritual either, am I correct?” Eoroal again nodded his head 'no'. “Xhmm...xhmm...well, then it must be a...*lesson* of some sort?” queried Qan'tel softly.

“YES! Yes y-y-you c-c-could, say that. *T'ah...xhmm...that's w-w-what I intended* anyway at least Namsai,” said Eoroal looking up at his teacher.

Qan'tel meanwhile was tracing one long strand of red hair that came from the top of Li'xiu's head, and followed its path along the ground, to where it was joined to a strand of Temu'jin's black hair. Then at the top of his head, another separate strand of black hair left to join another red strand of hair from Li'xiu's head. “Looks more like you braided their queues together? But why did first split each of their queues into two different pieces?”

“Namsai, technically speaking, I spliced their hair together. Xhmm...yes...well that would be the correct terminology. To say that I spliced their hair together. You see it was required by the '*decision ritual*' to first split each of their queues into two separate strands of hair. That is, before beginning the actual splicing process namsai. However, I wasn't just simply braiding the strands together was I? That is to say one from Li'xiu's queue, with one from Temu'jin's?” Eoroal regained his confidence as spoke about the process of 'splicing hair'; becoming quite animated while explained the procedure.

“Rather I was splicing the strands together; and that required that each of the strands had to be first *braided*. So after I had gotten each of their queues split into two large strands, I then had to separate each individual strand into four smaller strands, which I then braided all the way to the top of their heads...” Qan'tel listened as he held up one of the spliced pieces hair and counted the number of strands. “...which, makes for a total of sixteen strands in total. T'oh, and it was at this point that I began the actual splicing process.” As Eoroal described the splicing process, he demonstrated by making motions with his hands to simulate the splitting, weaving, and crimping of the hair.

“First I took the right-side strand from Temu'jin, and then the left-side strand from Li'xiu. Then I took one of the four smaller strands of Temu'jin's braid; which I had previously marked with separate coloured bands, and then...and then spliced it with the appropriate coloured strand from Li'xiu's braid. It would be like...take the small 'red' strand from Temu'jin's braid, and weave it together with the small 'red' strand from the Li'xiu braid. Then the small 'blue', 'green', 'white', and so forth. I used a single sharpened quick stick as a splicing tool, weaving each individual strand 'over-under-over' its corresponding coloured strand. Then I repeated the process...”

Acaya Qan'tel turned and gave Eoroal a hard look at from beneath his shaggy silver hair.

“T'ahhh...so to finish quickly...I repeated the process for splicing the other coloured strands, until I had completely spliced the first two large strands together. Then I crimped the two ends of the splice with the small metal bands from the used food bags, which I had saved for this purpose. Next I trimmed the excess hair from around the crimp, and then repeated the process for the other two large strands of hair. That's it namsai, that's what I did.”

“Must of taken you most of the night to do this... *xhmm*? But then again, you did have the full desert moon to work by.” Qan'tel's eyes burned with curiosity as he stared at the intertwined hair. “Come again about why you had to first *split* the queues?”

“It's part of the ritual to split the hair into two strands. It allows each of the participants a freer use of...a freer use of...their knives,” Eoroal looked straight ahead, his face like a death mask.

Acaya Qan'tel looked at Eoroal from the corner of his eye, and then carefully reached over the sleeping Li'xiu to pick up the mont'nanal with the white flowers. Lifting up the knife, he drew it from its plain wood sheath; but then lifted it higher, so as to catch the light of the morning sun. Examining the blade closely he said, “Did you polish these blades yourself and if you did, how long did it take you?”

“Yes I polished both of them myself. It took me the better part of the two days to do both of them...as I am not an earth caste sword smith,” Eoroal sighed heavily as he answered, his eyes still fixed forward. “But I did the final polish just within the last hour, for both of the knives.” Eoroal paused and pointing to the knife in Qan'tel's hand added, “They were originally meant to be going away gifts for Li'xiu and Temu'jin, namsai. The knives I mean.”

“Xhmm...two days to polish the war knives. Most of the night to split, braid, and splice the hair...But then you probably had plenty of practice...used your own hair I suppose...Then there there was the end of the fast celebration; which you obviously had planned for...what with the cooking pot and drinking bowls. And I count... one...two...three... four empty bottles of local red kuris wine...xhmm.” Qan'tel re-sheathed the blade and then returned it to its place next to Li'xiu. But then he picked up an empty bottle and smelled its uncorked mouth. He sniffed it two or three times before dropping it to the ground, “I smell a hint of genju berries in the wine...and so you used dried genju berries?...Had to collect those yourself probably...not in season...so you did your collecting, what would that have been...this past fall I suppose?”

Eoroal made a motion as if to speak.

“Don't say anything I'm not done yet...genju berries when dried, crushed, and brewed in tisan are a great analgesic. I use them myself for my back pain. But when dried genju berries are crushed and used with alcohol, especially red kuris wine, they increase the sedative effects of the alcohol...which explains why you had time to splice their hair together. All-in-all this took quite a bit of planning and organization...definitely a Kauyon-Patient Hunter operation. Am I right Eoroal'kan?”

“Yes, namsai...I mean yes, acaya.”

Just then Li'xiu stirred and rolled her naked blue body next to Temu'jin's, mostly naked blue body, and while still asleep, somehow managed to push and wiggle herself up under his sleeping frame. Temu'jin mumbled something and then rolled over onto his side. Li'xiu then reached over and pulled his arm around her like a comforter. The two snored in unison.

“T'oh I see...,” said Qan'tel looking over at Eoroal. He then reached over and took Li'xiu's blanket and quietly draped it over the sleep pair. Turning back to Eoroal he said, “Let's you and I go and sit on top of the rocks behind your cell, they should just be staring to warm up now. Though we may have to scare off a few tchulia lizards and golden viper or two, but I'm sure by now you're on a given name basis with all the poisonous fauna around here?”

“Ha-ha-ha namsai that I am, that I am. Indeed I know each and every one of them personally!” For the first time since meeting his teacher that morning, Shas'El'Lynu or Eoroal felt like himself.

The two walked up the slope above his cell to where the largest rocks where; and of course they found them already occupied. Eoroal had to first remove a sluggish golden viper he called, Xutkal'jun—*Miss Little Fang*. Then he had to remove a not so sluggish, O'la'kan—*Mr Big*, the tchulia lizard. Acaya Qan'tel was quite impressed that his student was in fact, on a given name basis with all the poisonous local fauna. Now teacher and student sat down and faced east and the warmth of the morning sun. Both teacher and student took the opportunity to mediate while absorbing the life giving light of the Dal'yth star. They sat and listened to the gentle sound of the south wind beginning to blow across the valley. It was Eoroal who first to break the silence.

“I don't know what the ancient name for this tribal ritual is, only what the scholars call it today. It's certainly not any contemporary custom of our own Dal'yth fire caste. Apparently this particular ritual was just one of a larger set of rituals that were integral to the ancient nomadic way of life. In any case, today this kind of ritual is called a kiv'rai't'xa or *decision ritual*.” Then Eoroal took in a deep breath and letting it out slowly and said, “This kind ritual would have been performed when the conflict between two individuals became so severe, that it

upset the family, tribe, or clan. Whether the conflict was between two friends or two relatives; if their conflict threatened the harmony of the tribe, then this ritual would be performed. However, only after the two participants absolutely refused to be reconciled, and if...now this is the important part, if both of them refused to then leave the tribe! Well then at that point the two would be forced to participate in the decision ritual.”

Eoroal stopped and Acya Qan'tel wagged his head to indicate he was listening, so continuing he said, “The two people in question were seized and bound and then brought together. In other words they were involuntary participants in the ritual. First their queues were split into two strands, and then braided together... something like what I did to Temu'jin and Li'xiu. They would then be untied and each given a knife or an axe by an elder of the tribe. Each of them would then be offered the following three choices: reconciliation; antagonism; or violence.

If they chose reconciliation, then each would take one strand of the braided hair, and cut it just below where the two queues were intertwined. The remaining short strand of hair was then braided back together with their own queue. So that each participant now carried with them, a portion of their *former rival's hair*. This was a sign of their newly formed bond between themselves and the rest of the tribe. It would be much like the ta'llissera scar is for us today.

If they chose antagonism, that is to say they still refused to be reconciled; then each of them would cut off their queues. Each participant would then take one of the strand hair and throw it into a fire. The burning of the hair symbolizing their absolute separation from one another and from the tribe. As you know, to be without a queue or scalp lock meant the individual was now an *outcast*, being forever *dead* to the tribe. Both participants were then exiled, being sent literally away in opposite directions. Finally they were to never to speak with, or interact with one another; or with any other member of the tribe, for the rest of their lives.

The third choice was *violence...*” Eoroal swallowed hard and was silent for a moment. “The two would be left alone to decide the outcome, and if one was unfortunate enough to win...well then, he or she was forced to wear the loser's queue as a belt. Not as a trophy mind you, but as a mark of shame. It was as if to say: '*See this man or women refused to be reconciled and then murdered their kinsmen!*' Sometimes the queue of the vanquished rival still carried its severed head. The conqueror being forced to wear the stinking skull as a further punishment. The conqueror might be temporarily shunned, or could even still be exiled. There you have it namsai...that's the jest of the ritual.”

Acaya Qan'tel was breathing so softly that he seemed made of stone, but then opening his eyes he said,

“What peculiar customs and traditions our people have? I never heard of this one at all; but then again there are so many strange and various customs among all of the castes past and present. So many that I’ve never ever heard of before.” Qan'tel leaned sideways to get close to his student and whispered in a conspiratorial tone, “*Did you know that among the earth caste, women often swap husbands?*”

Eoroal glanced side-to-side, blinked twice, and then thought to himself, ‘*Did he hear anything I just said?*’ Eoroal looked at his teacher and nodded his head 'no'.

“Well, it's like this. A fellow gets up in the morning and before he leaves for the factory, office, or laboratory, the wife hands him a packet with a change of clothes and the habitation address of the woman he's supposed to stay with that night. No words are exchanged, because he's supposed to act just like everything is normal. Then he gets to work, where's finds another fellow with his own packet of clothes and the habitation address of *his* wife. *AWK-WARD!* Now an earth caste husband is supposed to have the right to refuse; but the fact is, he had better just go along with the whole arrangement. If for nothing else, than for the sake of marital harmony and also not to get a hoof to the back of the head!” Qan'tel's eyes were wide and he spoke animatedly, his fingers twitching and poking the air as he spoke.

“Yes, there are many peculiar customs...” replied Eoroal wagging his head. “Acaya shall I unwind their hair or just cut off the parts that we're woven together?”

“Why would you do that? It took you hours of work to...xhmm, you know...to splice their hair together like that? By the way where did you learn to splice knots?” said Qan'tel as he swatted at a large yellow sand-fly that was attempting to land in his beard.

“T'ah...*at the academy?* Yes, I suppose that's where I learned it? T'eh, didn't they teach *Basic Patherfinder Skills*, when you were at the Academy? Stuff like knot tying, rock climbing, repelling down cliffs and underwater demolition? You know all those fun things that made you want to be a firewarrior in the first place?” Eoroal scratched the back of his head, as he watched his teacher's ongoing engagement with the sand-fly.

“T'OH YES! I really loved all that stuff: knot tying, practising hand-to-hoof combat, learning to camouflage yourself and your mates! And all those confidence courses with all those rope ladders that you had to climb, and doing land navigation—*at night!* Boy was that a hoot! T'oh, t'oh, t'oh, and I especially liked it when we got to learn how infiltrate an enemy position. The best part was when they taught us how to sneak up and cut a sentry's throat from behind! T'eh those were the days weren't they Eoroal'kan? *Heyaaah, damn sand-fly!*”

“Namsai? You do know those things bite don't you know?” said Eoroal as he leaned backwards to avoid



the attack of the now enraged sand-fly.

“T’eh? YAOW, THE LITTLE BASTARD JUST BIT ME! Nasty little bugger...T’oh, look now it’s dying. Serves you right, t’eh? You just couldn’t stand the taste of my dried-tight old blue skin could you? That’s what you get for skewing the flesh of a Sword Saint of Dal’yth!”

The two firewarriors watched as the large sand fly, buzzed, twisted, and spun around, as it tried to get off the ground. But just as it managed to finally get airborne again by kicking off with all of its eight legs; a long neon-green tongue snapped the fly right out of the air. O’la’kan—*Mr Big* had returned to get himself breakfast. With a loud hiss and spray of noxious spittle in their direction, the big red and green tchulia lizard then scurried off as fast as his six legs could carry him.

“As I was saying earlier namsai. Do you want me to undo their hair? Cut it off maybe?” asked Eoroal.

Acaya Qan’tel wiped the poisonous venom from his legs and arms, ignoring the tiny bluish blisters that immediately appeared where the drops of spit had landed on his body. Bending over to examine his legs and hooves, his mass of dirty silver hair shook as he swung his head from one side to the other.

“No, I don’t want you to do anything...yet. I still don’t know what you intended by doing this *decision ritual* as you call it. What made you do it Eoroal’kan? T’oh, you didn’t get any spittle on you, did you?” asked Qan’tel looking up.

“No, you seem to have gotten the brunt of his attack. O’la’kan knows better than to try that with me.” Eoroal handed his teacher a medi-wipe from his medical kit. “It’s a long story namsai. You do know that I’ve known Temu’jin and Li’xiu, since I was first at the academy on Vior’la? I will try to be brief though and not tell you every tiny grim detail. But to put it simply...I just wanted them to stop!”

“Stop what?”

“EVERYTHING! Stop the sniping, the bickering, the fighting, and the lovemaking. Their fighting is so much worse when they share a bed; because that’s when it becomes down right physical! I wanted them to stop the constant and endless competition with one another, to stop their obsessing over one another, to stop ignoring each one another, when one of them finally get the other one’s attention...*I wanted it all to stop!*” Eoroal face was stern when he began to speak; but by time he got to the end, his face was in hands and he was crying. Acaya Qan’tel didn’t say anything, but reached out and put a hand on the younger tau’s shoulder. They sat this way for several raik’or.

“Maybe Younger Brother was just upset that Older Brother and Older Sister were fighting all the time, t'eh? Played a trick on them to show them how much he was upset? Maybe that's your reason why Eoroal'kan?”

“Perhaps namsai, perhaps...”

“Eoroal'kan, just what was your *desired* outcome for this ritual?”

Eoroal stopped sobbing and turning around to face his teacher, looked him hard in the eye. “Namsai, please believe me when I say I want them to be reconciled. Really, that's what I want the most, but if they can't do that; then what I want is for them to do is finally go ahead and get it over with! To go ahead and...” Eoroal stood up and balling up his fists he said, “...Finally kill each other!” His face flushed a deep blue as he spoke his words through gritted teeth plates.

Daly'th's early morning sun bathed the top of Mount Kan'ji in heat and light. Various birds now made their morning whistles and calls, several Ur'hui'la-*Quick wings*, shot in and out of the tumble-thistles, and leapt on to rocks or cactuses, announcing by their trilling calls; that this particular terrain feature was theirs, and theirs alone. A new day had come to the mountain.

Acaya'Qan'tel did not look surprised at Eoroal's answer, but simply shook his head to acknowledge the statement. Eoroal sat down again, his face grim as he faced the morning sun. Master and student now both kept quiet, but it was Qan'tel who broke the silence this time.

“Xhmm, are you hungry Eoroal'kan?”

“T'eh, namsai?”

“Are you hungry?”

“A little, but drinking all that alcohol and eating so much meat after that long fast, it was hard on both of my stomachs.”

“Xhmm, well I'm famished I don't suppose you have any food on you?”

“Let's see what I have in my shoulder bag...red kuris balls...a little dried fruit...T'ah, I have fresh cactus bits, seasoned with blue garlic!”

“Here,” said Qan'tel.

“Xhmm?” replied Eoroal as he stopped scrounging around in his bag to look up at the bright pink and white metallic rectangle that Qan'tel was offering him.

“What... *smack*...do ya... *crunch*...think it is?... *smack, crunch*...” said Qan'tel munching down on a similar, but unwrapped rectangle.

“This a protein energy nutritional supplement bar? Where did you get them namsai?”

“The same place you got...*smack*...the wine. By the way you can just...*crunch*...say, '*Is that a proenutsup bar?*' You don't have to say the whole title...*crunch*. T'oh, and take it slow will you? Don't down it all at once! You've been fasting and your system is going to have a hard time with so much concentrated protein.”

“Wh-what...I mean...h-h-how were you able to get proenutsup bars out here?” asked Eoroal unwrapping and then taking a small bite of his protein energy nutritional supplement bar. “Wait, weren't you fasting like the rest of us? *Xhmm, this is good!*”

“No, why do I have to fast? After all I'm the one living in the desert on top of a mountain? You lot came to me for enlightenment; but I never said anything about fasting myself! When any of you decide...*crunch*...to go sit on top of mountain...*smack*...then you can decide if you want to fast or not. But until then...*stuff it!*” Qan'tel finished his proenutsup bar and said, “*T'ahhh that was a direct hit with a fusion blaster!* By the way if you don't want all of your proenutsup bar, throw the rest of it my way will you?” said Qan'tel crumbling up the wrapper and stuffing into his bag.

“I believe I'll finish...*xhmm*...this one namsai.”

“Eoroa'lkan I saw the special delivery drone drop off your package two days ago. But did you really need four bottles of wine? Drinking that much wine will have them sleeping till mid-rotaa!” asked Qan'tel pointing down the hillside toward the cell.”

“I had only two bottles of wine namsai! Temu'jin brought a bottle of eighteen tau'cyr old Vior'lan single-malt vi'ky'husa. Li'xiu surprised us with a bottle of a fifteen tau'cyr old T'au kryn't'car; which came from her father's estate no less! It seems her father has become quite the vintner in his retirement,” said Eoroal finishing his proenutsup bar. “It appears you just picked up the wrong bottle to smell!”

“Vi'ky'husa and kryn't'car! In that case they'll be asleep for four or five rotaa at least!” Qan'tel skewed his face one way and then then the other. Then he stroked his beard, looked sideways at Eoroal and asked, “Don't suppose there would be any of that a...single-malt vi'ky'husa left do you?”

“Any left? Not when those two are drinking! You'd have better luck milking a kweegee-beest, than finding a drop in any of those bottles!” Eoroal laughed as he leaned his head in the direction of his cell. Then getting close to Qan'tel he said, “Since I was making sure to keep sober...I only got a single shot of each them

myself. T'ah, what a damn shame too. You would have loved both of them namsai!”

“Now, let me guess...you probably filled your drinking bowl with water or mostly water? And you kept pouring wine to keep their bowls filled; so that neither of them noticed you weren't getting drunk, t'eh?” Qan'tel squinted at Eoroal while grinning from beneath his beard.

“Something like that, *well actually* the two of them are so competitive, that once I brought out the wine; they hardly noticed if I was drinking at all. They were so focused on each other, that most of the time I don't think they even knew I was there!”

Qan'tel turned and looking serious asked, “Eoroal'kan, did you really mean for them to kill one each other? Or was there something else you intended by getting them intoxicated? What is the weapon you're concealing, t'eh? *Is there a jade dagger hidden under your cloak?*”

Eoroal let go of the smile slide off his face, and scratching the side of cheek, looked back at his teacher. When he replied it was in a quiet, steady tone. “You guessed right there is something else. Something else I intended. I was wondering...hoping actually, that I might be wrong. I thought maybe that they'd finally chucked it all out the airlock door! So I had to be sure that they were still going at it. You know...that they were still obsessed with each other; enough so as to be a danger to themselves and others,” said Eoroal looking earnestly at his teacher.

“However, as much as I want them to stop their never ending competition, they never will. But they won't kill each other either! Well, then again I shouldn't speak for Li'xiu; she just might go ahead and gut Temu'jin anyway? Temu'jin however, is much too much the gentlemen to slit the throat of a former lover. He'll be a gentlemen to the end; and will probably go ahead and let himself be gutted. You know just to, *'go ahead just give her what she wants'.*”

“Xhmm, since their hair is now spliced together and you've left them the sharpened mont'nanal. I can therefore safely assume that you weren't wrong after all, and that they failed the test?”

“Yes namsai.”

Acaya Qan'tel now wrapped up his legs to take up the correct sitting posture for meditation, “But Eororal'kan since you were intending to leave early this morning, did you also fail the test?”

“Yes, namsai,” said Eoroal his face turning a pale grey.

“Go on you may continue.”

“I failed. We all failed.”

Eoroal shifted and rolled his shoulders, as he watched his teacher close his eyes and begin his rhythmic meditative breathing. The student paused for contemplation of the moment, as the far western horizon began to fill with clouds, and the smell of rain was carried by the gentle southern breeze. Nocturnal animals like the vi'maral–*pygmy red deer*, began to move off to find shade; while others like the doe'guxtal–*yellow hedgehog*, also sought the coolness of the large rocks and thick tumble-thistles to avoid heat of the coming day.

“At the Academy Temu'jin and Li'xiu were a tau'cyr ahead of me and so naturally I looked up to the both of them,” said Eoroal breaking the silence. “As matter of fact we all did, any of us who were junior to the two of them, I mean. That made them Saznai–*Mentor/Senior* and me the Xohnai, the *Junior* or *Protégé*. Temu'jin'saznai and Li'xiu'saznai were always looking out for me Eoroal'xohnai. Each of them took time out of their own studies to help me with mine. They were both that way with me their protégée. I think...*no, I know*, that each of them had special relationships with all their xohnai, and my relationship just happened to be one of them.

For instance it was Temu'jin who really taught me how to play t'xa–*tau chess*. I knew of course the rudimentary aspects of the game; but playing him at t'xa, and having him coach me for competitions, is how I truly learned to play the game. Which is why I have in my cell the t'xa board I made from the old cactus stump, and why Temu'jin has the other t'xa board I made.

Li'xiu was my teacher for the r'nan'riika–*art of the long sword*. She wasn't the chief instructor of course, but only a senior student.” Eoroal sighed and looked down the hill toward his cell. “And she was absolutely, positively, the most brutal teacher I ever had! She could make you feel ashamed for even daring to show up to class, and it was worse when you didn't get the lessons right. Yet, she loved all her students, and outside of the training hall she was always gentle and supportive. Li'xiu worked tirelessly with myself and others as we practised our art.”

“And the two of them were supportive even in the littlest things. I remember once during a r'nan'ike bout being hit with a split cane sword so hard, that my mask flew off and my head was cut open. There was this big hullabaloo and everyone was rushing about to see if I was alright. Well, there was Li'xiu cradling me in her arms, sopping up all the blood with a big bandage...” Eoroal began to laugh.

“Excuse me namsai, it seems funny now; but as a kid I thought I was dying. *Ha-ha-ha!* Anyway, there is Li'xiu comforting me while holding the bandage to my forehead; while telling me, *ha-ha-ha*, that the other kid wasn't trying to kill me. That in fact that she really fancied me. *Ha-ha-ha!* Like that's a real conciliation to a ten tau'cyr old boy, telling him that the girl who just sliced his head open, is in love with him. I think I said, ‘*Saznai I*

*don't care if likes me! She tried to kill me!"* Eoroal stopped to laugh out loud and nod his head.

"She did fancy you, didn't she? The other student I mean?" asked Qan'tel opening his eyes.

"T'oh that she did! Fancied me quite a bit actually."

"What was her name again...Xux'yi wasn't it?"

"Yes Xux'yi—*Blue Flower* or *Blood Flower*. In fact, in our senior tau'cyr, she asked me to be her consort for Honuxla'o—*First Night*. Quite a big deal that was too! The presentation with us all in our antique dress uniforms, with all those brass fixings, silk cords and such. She was from Sac'ea, so her cadet uniform was a brilliant fiery orange; which went surprisingly well with the dark purple of my Dal'yth cadet uniform. I remember her hair was all done up with curls, bangles, and orange ribbons. Her hair was so lovely with all those ribbons, it's a shame that we have to shave our heads. T'oh, and the food and wine were incredible! And then there was the dancing...and...the three rotaa alone...with her...in *The Bower*..." He voice trailed off until he finally stopped talking.

"You married Xux'yi right?"

"T'eh, what's that namsai? T'oh, yes, yes I did...well she married me is more like it. I had to stop running sometime, so of course she eventually caught me!"

"Two, or was it three children?"

"Three, two girls and a boy."

"Not hard to guess, but your boy's name is Temu'jin and one of the girls is named Li'xiu? Correct?"

"Yes, you guessed correct namsai; but my other daughter is named for my wife's best friend Bork'erri—*Snow Mane*." Eoroal suddenly turned and bowing to Acaya Qan'tel said, "I apologize namsai, I was reminiscing and wandered off topic."

Eoroal now stood up and pointing down the trail said, "Before I wandered off topic, here is what I was trying to say... Namsai you see that cell southwards down the trail is Temu'jin's cell. And now if you look to your left, higher up on the cliff side to the north is Li'xiu's cell. And it's the same distance from my cell to each one of theirs, taking approximately the same amount of time to walk to either of them."

Qan'tel opened his eyes and looked at Eoroal who was pointing along the hillside to his left. "That's intentional. All the cells are equidistant from each of the adjacent cells on the trail."

"T'oh? W-w-well, I-I-I d-didn't know that...my, my, my point being that I arrived before either of them. So I had got my cell first; however when Temu'jin arrived he chose that one," said Eoroal pointing down the hill

to the right.

“And when Li'xiu arrived she chose that one,” he said pointing up the hill to the left. “And you see that's puts me in the middle again! Here again we still have the two mentors looking out for their protégée; that is to say the two senior students are still looking out for the junior student, who is me.” Eoroal pointed with his little finger at himself. “And just like the way the two of them are still seeking to outdo one another, for accolades and recognition. Here I am, still seeking their approval, still seeking their guidance, and trying to keep...to keep them...to keep from tearing each other apart. I-I-I apologize namsai. I'm getting emotional again.” Eoroal stopped, and dropping his head, once more began to sob.

Acaya Qan'tel waited a raik'or and then stood up, and with all the power and authority a former Shas'O yelled, “Tch, tch, tch, crying like a child of divorced parents! Upset are you that 'mum and dad' won't be sleeping in the same bed are we?” Acaya Qan'tel's voice grew stronger and louder as he spoke. “I agree you have failed! You have failed not just your ta'lissera—*covenant* brother and sister, but yourself as well. Now Shas'El'Lynu, focus your *ni-life energy* on your centre point; bring mind back to the present; and accept your destiny. As Sha'El you are not allowed the indulgence of breaking down. This cannot ever happen while you are in command. Whether you are at the front, or at headquarters in the rear. You cannot ever be seen being emotional. *And you know this already!*” Qan'tel's his eyes now blazed with blue fire.

Then standing on one leg with his arms out stretched he shouted, “The three of you have all failed. All of you have kept some part of yourselves in adolescence; but now Shas'El'Lynu, tell me how your brother and sister have failed. And then tell me how you have failed them!”

Eoroal straightened his back and sat down on his knees in the traditional manner. He turned first to his teacher and bowing low enough to touch his forehead to the rock said, “Please forgive me Acaya Qan'tel. Please forgive my emotional outbursts and my loss of control.”

Now turning in the direction where his sleeping companions lay, he bowed low again saying, “My covenant brother Temu'jin and my covenant sister Li'xiu, please forgive my transgressions and failure to...”

“Admonish and correct,” said Qan'tel dropping slowly down into a seating position opposite his student.

“Admonish and correct both of you my ta'lissera brother and sister. And for failing to be your equal and brother to you both.” Eoroal's face showed no emotion as he turned back around to his teacher.

The Daly'th sun now bore down upon the rock on which they sat, so that Eoroal paused and had to cover his head with the hood of his half-coat. However there was some small relief from the tall red cactuses that cast long wide shadows over where student and teacher both sat. Perched atop one red cactus was a xux'alag'anuk'la-blue hawk; it sat there as still as death itself. Then the raptor spread wide its dusty blue wings, and with a single thrust, lifted off to soar down the mountain towards the valley.

“When I arrived at Righteous Strength Academy, Temu'jin was already one of the top five students of his class. He was tall with broad shoulders, and when you combined his dark sapphire eyes with his sable black hair, and his rough Vior'lan looks; he was uncompromisingly handsome. Temu'jin moved with the smoothness of wrestler, and the grace of a dancer; carrying himself at all times like an ancient T'au equestrian. He was an academic high achiever, athletically gifted, and known for his supremacy at t'xa. But most of all he known for his unwavering self-confidence. And the girls at the academy all adored him, whether they were from Vior'la or from off world. Now that I think about it, a third to a half of the students at Righteous Strength Academy were from off world: Sa'cea, D'yanoi, Bork'an, Dal'yth, Fal'shia, Vash'ya and T'au. Anyway Temu'jin would just give a girl one of his signature half-smiles, and a mere word or two in his Viorlan brogue, and she would melt like ice dropped on hot steel. He was definitely the *lead stallion* at the academy, that's for sure.”

“As I mentioned his greatest skill was at t'xa, where he played at three levels above his peer group. Temu'jin was known for his mastery of the technique Kauyon-*Patient Hunter*. So deeply did he understand his opponents that he seemed to know what moves they were going to make, before they did themselves! It was as if he were able to see inside of their heads. Sometimes before a match, Temu'jin would describe to a friend what strategy an opponent would most likely take. Then he would describe what moves the opponent would be; and then how many turns it would take himself to defeat his opponent. Temu'jin was rarely ever wrong, and with such a reputation he earned the academy name of Esav'oh-*Foresight*.”

“Now that's how things were up until the arrival at the academy of this extraordinary girl from T'au. This young cadet had eyes like orange flame, and she went by the name Li'xiu-*Wild Pine Tree*. What a strange and wonderful young woman she was too? It's not like there weren't any red haired females with orange eyes around either, still Li'xiu was quite extraordinary. Her looks just seemed to reach out and seize you by the throat! First off Li'xiu was tall for female from T'au and her complexion was a deeper blue than most. But when you add that 'Y' nasal slit of hers, to her flame red hair and those piercing orange eyes...well she seemed downright exotic! But also there was the way she moved, Li'xiu had this powerful yet graceful stride, which always seemed packed full



of energy. Like she was an athlete at the starting block; or a yolwas–*tiger* poised to strike its prey. I remember a senior student referring to it as her yolwas’a’yebegeli, her *tiger stride*. Then there was the manner of her behaviour. In public she was quiet, unassuming, and ever differential to others; but in private, she was talkative, opinionated, and a force to be reckoned with.”

“Eoroal’kan, I know this already, or did you forget I was a professor at Righteous Strength Academy?”

“T’oh, a momentary slip namsai, my apologies!” Eoroal once again bowed to his teacher.

“As I said earlier Li’xiu was a student of the traditional martial arts; and her speciality was the r’nan’riika–*art of the long sword*, but she also excelled at the sport version of the art, r’nan’ike. Her signature technique was the Mont’ka–*The Killing Blow*. She knew exactly when and where to strike, and when she did, it all over. It seemed her competition bouts never lasted the full regulation five raik’or...xhmm, seems they never lasted more than two or three raik’or at the most? Anyway it was like they were over before they even began; and if you blinked twice, well you’d miss the whole thing for sure. I can recall seeing her win a bout in a mere thirty raik’an after the Aun’Ui dropped the fan. It was like: ‘*Begin*’ and then it was ‘*Wham*’, and ‘*Point for Shas’Saal Li’xiu!*’ ...‘*Begin*’ and again ‘*Wham*’ and ‘*Point, for Shas’Saal Li’xiu!*’ ...‘*Begin*’ and once more, ‘*Wham*’, and ‘*Final point and match to Shas’Saal Li’xiu!*’ It got so that only half of the girls, and none of boys would step into the combat circle with her. Of course it didn’t help that she had knocked unconscious three of her opponents and injured several others!”

“So whether it was in the heat of a r’nan’ike tournament, or on the athletic field playing vel’u–*tau rugby*, or in the class room in an academic contest. Li’xiu knew when and where to strike, and once she decided to strike, she struck hard. So aggressive was Li’xiu that the local Vior’lan girls, for a little while anyway, gave her an honorary membership in the Vior’lan sept. In a very short order she had climbed to the top of her class in academics, military science, athletics, but especially at vel’u r’nan’ike. In almost every endeavour at the academy she dominated. Then the unthinkable happened! Just as Li’xiu had done everywhere else at the academy, she now stormed the t’xa tournaments. Li’xiu entry into the academy’s competitive t’xa circuit took Temu’jin completely off guard. In only a couple of weeks Temu’jin’s standings at t’xa quickly plummeted from third place to 45th in the ratings.”

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“What was it that made Temu'jin lose in concentration? Was it her strange orange eyes? Was it her ‘tiger stride’ when she walked into a room? Was it her unrelenting pursuit of victory in the classroom, or on the athletic field? Whatever it was it seemed to knock Temu'jin right off his hooves, and it wasn't just at t'xa either. He began to drop in everything: academics, sports, drill and ceremony, rifle marksmanship...everything. Temu'jin was completely bowled over.”

“I remember this one day watching the boy's team for his class loose at vel'u the girl's team led by Li'xiu. That day Li'xiu literally bowled him over with an illegal hit, slamming into him and knocking the ball right out of his hands. Which I may add the Aun'La line referee never saw! Temu'jin then had the further indignity of having his face planted into the turf. I can still see the look on his face as he sat there on the ground, his face smeared with purple with grass stains. He looked in my direction, then he took off his helmet and he just nodded his head ‘NO!’ I thought for that at any moment that he was going to cry, but of course he didn't.”

“Now Temu'jin was a keen competitor and that very moment while he was sitting on the ground; he decided the situation had gone on long enough. Temu'jin threw himself head long into everything: military science, academics, and sports; but especially at t'xa. I can still see him doing his early morning physically fitness routine; which we junior boys would sometime join him in, just for encouragement. And didn't he seem like a hero from bygone days to us in the junior grades! Then there were the late night study sessions, extra practice session at the rifle range, and the endless rounds of t'xa played before classes, between classes, and after classes. And soon enough he was again one of the top five students of his class. Oddly enough though, he stayed away from t'ka competitions for some time; taking full advantage of his absence from the competition to study Li'xiu's playing style. When Temu'jin finally did return to the competitive t'xa circuit, he knocked Li'xiu right off top of the standings and regained his primacy as the t'xa tournament leader.”

“It was an intense and exhausting game the day when he finally defeated Li'xiu at t'xa. I can't ever remember him ever being so focused. Li'xiu matched him with her own stoic concentration and all absorbing intensity. There were several elderly t'xa players attending the match, and as the game dragged on for a three decs, more elderly t'xa player kept arriving. I clearly remember hearing a couple of old time players saying it was like watching a Grandmasters Tournament. Wow, what a match that was! I think later Temu'jin said it was the longest game he ever played; and from the games I've seen him play, I'd have to agree. I can still see him and Li'xiu standing before the t'xa committee, and both of them being congratulated by several of the elderly players. Yes, what day that was!” Eoroal paused to take a drink of water from his bottle and feel the breeze cool his face.

“Anyhow, now he on top again, but t'ah, then didn't he go off and surprised us all! Out of nowhere, he decides he to compete at r'nan'ike! Never his strong suit, still he had learned something of the sport from watching Li'xiu compete. He told me later that it was that day of the ve'lu game, when he was sitting on the turf with the red-purple grass in his mouth; that he decided he had to beat Li'xiu at her strongest endeavour. So he went and secretly practised with a master from one of the local martial art studios in the area. Once he did join the r'nan'ike competitions, it was only an only a matter of a couple of rotexi-weeks before he was right behind Li'xiu in the standings. What a day that was when he finally beat her in a competition!”

Eoroal stopped and looked back over his shoulder and far off to the west rain began to fall, which was revealed by the line of small pink dust clouds rising up off the desert floor. Nearer to Mount Kanji gentle gusts of wind preceded the coming rain, and far to the east the tops of the mountains burned a brilliant orange-red in the heat of the morning sun.

“The competition dome was packed with every student, senior student, professor and staff member there, as well as many of the local people from the surrounding area,” said Eoroal speaking excitedly. “The two stepped onto the combat circle wearing their sport armour. They turned and bowed to the Aun'Vre referee, bowed to Aun'La judges, and then to each other. Then they put on their masks and entered the circle. Temu'jin stood with sword held aloft like an ancient warrior; but contrary to her usual aggressive style, Li'xiu waited with her sword held at the guard. She stood there with all the calm and serenity of a mon'tau sword master. When they made to strike, it was not the primary, or secondary, or even tertiary attacks that scored, but the counter-attacks into the attacks. Temu'jin and Li'xiu both had scored two points, when Temu'jin invited an attack by dropping down into an earth caste wrestling stance. You may not know this, but Temu'jin had spent many a day wrestling with the earth caste boys of his estate and so knew every move of their art.”

“Li'xiu had never seen such an un-orthodox move, so she never saw it as the 'invitation' that it actually was; but rather, she saw it as a lapse on Temu'jin's part. So not hesitating to strike, Li'xiu launched an attack. When she moved forward to the attack, he side stepped, dropped to his knees, and came up under her attack, striking her in the abdomen with his blade. He struck just at the moment, she brought down her blade for the mont'ka strike. The result was that Temu'jin's attack struck with all of the momentum of her attack and his combined. She was knocked completely off her hooves and tumbled end-over-end, flying entirely out of the combat circle. Which of course gave him the match point. Though I don't think he even heard the Aun'Vre award him the victory?” Eoroal looked genuinely puzzled as he said this.

“You see Li'xiu lay on the floor with the wind knocked out of her, and the whole crowd went, 'HE-YAAH!' But before anyone could move Temu'jin was rushing headlong out the circle, forgetting to removing his mask, or to even bow to the Aun'Vre referee! When he got to her, he flung off his mask, and knelt down to take her by the hand. I remember all of this because I was on the first responder team, so I was right next to her with the stretcher drone. The crowd went wild with their hoof stomping and shouting as he helped her to her hooves. Temu'jin then helped her removed her mask and asked her if she was alright. Then Li'xiu did something I have never seen her do before, or since in public. She giggled, put her hand to her mouth, and blushed the deepest shade of indigo. And at that moment you could hear the enter competition dome give out one long hushed, 'TEEE-AH!' And that was the first time any of us knew they were in love. The crowd went just as crazy with more shouting and hoof stomping.”

“Yes, I remember that bout Eoroal'kan...”

“I did it again didn't I? Forgot you were there too. Why didn't you stop my recollection then?”

“I just like hearing you tell a story I think? Go ahead and finish,” replied Qan'tel smiling.

But just then Qan'tel made a sign for Eoroal to pause his story; and then from the brush came the loud sounds of grunting, high pitched squeals. Teacher and student both could hear the grunting and snuffling sounds the xagh'li—*wild boar* as they were moving deeper into the waist high chaparral. The animals couldn't be seen; but their loud thrashing and crashing about the brush, and their noisy grunting gave away their presence. Then there came the high pitched squeals of a baby xagh'li lost somewhere in the purple chaparral. There followed louder sounds of crashing and thrashing as the mother xagh'li searched desperately for her lost piglet. The tau men listened intensely as there came a loud squealing and grunting, as the mother and her other offspring found the lost piglet. The mother ly'xagh now led her reunited family noisily away through the underbrush. Qan'tel and Eoroal were quite until long after the grunting and squealing faded off into the waving purple chaparral.

“Everybody's alright then? T'ah, were did I leave off?” said Eoroal looking at the chaparral. “Well this was of course Temu'jin's and Li'xiu's time of Ol'erue—*Bright Rivalry*. None of us knew it at the time, but the two of them were old friends. Apparently they had first met as very small children, when Li'xiu's mother was travelling to Vior'la to visit her old cadre sister, Temu'jin's mother. I guess they got reacquainted the first day Li'xiu arrived on campus. Temu'jin related to me once that he looked up, and saw those piercing orange eyes of hers from across the academy's reception area; and even though it had been seven tau'cyr since he last seen her, he was sure he knew who she was. So walking up to her he asks, '*Is that you Shas'onei—Flame Eyes?*' Li'xiu of course remembered him and responded with '*Is that you Kinuit'bojuxu—Bucket head?*'”

“Li'xiu didn't call him that, did she?” asked Qan'tel giving Eoroal a questioning look.

“They were both...very young namsai,” said Eoroal laughing. “Apparently he like to put a child's pail on his head and pretend it was a helmet; but she didn't know the word for helmet so she called him 'bucket head' instead.”

“In any case by the time any of us found this out, they were already very much ‘hooves in the air’ in love! The two of them had gone as far as making a First Night commitment to one another, as well as a commitment of *sav'ta'lissera—marriage engagement*. However, when the rest of the academy found all this out...well there was an uproar!” Eoroal stopped and got a silly grin on his face.

“Actually, only the Vior'lan girls at the academy were in an uproar. They didn't like it that one of the top Vior'lan boys at the academy was already spoken for, and by some foreign girl at that!” The grin disappeared from Eoroal's face and then he said, “But that was soon rectified by the two ill-fated lovers themselves, when their bright rivalry eventually became a *Da'erue—Dark Rivalry*.”

Eoroal paused to drink some water before resuming. “Well their *Ol'erue* lasted more than a *tau'cyr* which was such a joyful time for all of us at Righteousness Strength. Seeing the two of them together made me feel I was part of something momentous. I don't know why, but I do remember feeling like that. When I would see the two of them together it was like I was in presence of the Empress and her Consort. I remember the thrill if I'd ever see the two of them strolling down the promenade, or sitting together at the mess hall, or attending a *vel'u*. Whatever the occasion, it was more exciting if Li'xiu and Temu'jin were there together. The energy around the two of them made everything feel like it was something unexpected and extraordinary!”

“Li'xiu brought out the best in Temu'jin, who was far more aggressive in everything he did when he was with her. Temu'jin was more competitive and took more risks when he was with Li'xiu. He was especially more daring at *t'xa* and sports. Of course he did the same for Li'xiu, when she was training, she was as hard as ever on herself and her students; but she was kinder and more giving of herself than before. And she was a far better instructor than she had been before. During her time with Temu'jin there was a love and enthusiasm to whatever she did, and you always knew how much she cared about you. So that was the way things were with the Empress and Emperor of the Righteousness Strength Academy.” Eoroal half-chuckled to himself. “Until things went bad that is... You remember that time don't you namsai?”

“T'oh, do I ever! They were such a lovely couple together, but I seem to remember it rubbed quite a few of the *T'au* boys the wrong way, as much as it did the Vior'lan girls?”

“Xhmm that it did!” answered Eoroal smiling.

“But not as much as some adults from T'au,” said Qan'Tel.

“T'eh?” asked Eoroal looking back at his teacher.

“Never mind El'Lynu, please continue.”

Eoroal looked down at the rock and his face became serious. There was now sadness in his voice when he spoke, “Xhmm, what you must understand is that Li'xiu never truly understood Temu'jin; and for that matter he never really understood her either! Temu'jin had that certain Viorlan way about him, that sense of chivalry and gallantry that is so much of the Viorlan fire caste. It was what Temu'jin called the *Vior'lan Way of the Equestrian*. For instance he was always magnanimous in victory, and would have the most gentle and kind words of for any defeated opponent. And if he lost, then he was gracious and joyful in defeat. He would artfully and nonchalantly laugh off a loss at t'xa, or at sport, or even at an academic trial. Not that Temu'jin didn't take a losing seriously, he very much did; but it was that, *Way of the Equestrian* again.”

“He told me more than once that, *'A Bentu'cea'la—a gentlemen, never gloats over his defeated foe. He must always be gracious in victory and likewise humble in defeat. Remember to respect your foe, for you never know, but tomorrow you maybe allies? Who knows, but tomorrow you may find yourselves anda ta'lissera—covenant brothers!*'

“I can remember on more than one occasion, seeing Temu'jin coach, train, or tutor another student, who was in some way or another his rival. Whether it be at academics, sport, or military science, Temu'jin never seemed to care about the cost to his own achievement; but rather he would prefer to see a rival achieve success. He truly took joy in the achievements of others. *'Be ready to sacrifice oneself for others'*, was another one of his maxims and he really took that to heart. Temu'jin would also take the blame and the consequences for another's failure or misdeeds. Once when some of us junior students had an unauthorized game of vel'u, and banged ourselves up quite a bit; which all by itself was a cause for penalties to be assessed. Temu'jin, without us asking him to do so, went ahead and said he had authorized the game. He took full responsibility for the outcome. Temu'jin went so far as to cut his forehead and muss up his uniform, just to convince the other upper classmen that he had been playing too. He then led the cleaning details and study groups for us miscreants. None of us ever forgot that, not one of us. Then there was of course Temu'jin's defence of Shas'saal Tutu...”

“T'ah, there was the time Temu'jin stood before the academy review board to defend his fellow student Shas'Saal'Tutu—*Salmon*. I remember that because I myself was on the review board,” said Qan'tel thoughtfully.

“You know that's when Temu'jin truly got noticed by the academy? We wondered why he would put himself out for such fellow like Saal'Tutu, who was so obviously lacking in academic skills, or motivation for that matter. Taking on the role of tutor and mentor to Tutu, so as to help him graduate. Even though Tutu's failure would have meant Temu'jin's expulsion, as well Tutu's? We couldn't believe anyone would be that foolhardy!” Qan'tel nodded his shaggy silver head in disbelief.

“But Temu'jin did it, didn't he? And Tutu ended up graduating with honours and in large part because of Temu'jin's efforts!” said Eoroal letting out a joyful sigh. Eoroal's voice was now strong and his spirit seemed to lift as he spoke.

“What an expression of the Tau'va is the Vior'lan *Way of the Equestrian*. Since that time, I have tried, as best as I could, to hue as close to it as possible to its precepts. Especially that precept which state one must value others before one's self, and to be always sensitive to the feelings of others. And what I think what is most noble of all, is the concept that one has to be ready at all times, if necessary, to suffer the humiliation and degradation in order to protect the pride, dignity, and honour of others. To follow the *Way of the Equestrian*, is to be ready to even lay down one's own life for another. To give one's last full measure of devotion in the service to Tau'va—*The Greater Good*. Yes the *Way of the Equestrian* is to be the very embodiment of the Tau'va: self-sacrifice, honour, nobility of spirit, and above all the willingness to serve. What noble sentiments! I say again, what an expression of the Tau'va!”

Eoroal stopped to look up at the sky as the first clouds began to pass over the two tau men. A cloud's shadow shaded them momentarily, but then was gone. Far away in the east the blazing orange mountains now seemed in some way closer to them. While the western skyline somehow now seemed farther away. Insects were buzzing and hopping about the brush, suddenly becoming active in anticipation of the rain. Eoroal picked up a handful of pebbles and dropped them one-by-one into his lap.

“Li'xiu could never comprehend any of that. In fact she hated the way he was gracious to a defeated opponent, but she especially didn't like his apparent nonchalance attitude about defeat. For her to lose at anything was shameful; which had to be rectified by redoubling her efforts. And if after her renewed efforts she failed again; then this led to terrible self-doubts, and brutal self-criticism. Li'xiu was vicious in questioning her own self-worth, and she was forever second guessing her actions. She went as far to denigrate and belittle her own abilities, motivation, and commitment. While at the same time she physically tortured herself with endless drills, practices, trial examinations, and late night studying. Whatever it took to achieve her goals she did it, but such strenuous

effort was often without a sense of balance or even joy. When she was defeated she was inconsolable, and no words of encouragement could reach her. When she was victorious she took no joy in her victory, rather she took the opportunity to critique her opponent, with not a few hard words of admonishment. Though she never did so publicly, rather took the 'defeated for' aside to berate and chastise them privately.”

“This was the T'au *Way of the Warrior*. And I can remember Li'xiu was ever preaching to me and her words still ring in my ears: '*Each victory is only a step to a greater goal; but even a single defeat can unravel everything one has accomplished. The individual's feelings in the matter are of no consequence, but keep to your duty and persevere in your efforts. Only the final outcome matters.*'”

“All of this appalled Temu'jin of course. How could anyone treat their fellow students the way she did? He questioned why it was that every set-back, or minor mishap, was taken as major tragedy? Why was any success scrutinized as if it were somehow a defeat? But what he truly couldn't understand was how she could be so hard on herself to the point of emotional self-flagellation, even when she was victorious?”

“I have only come to understand later, just what the virtue there was in *The Way of the Warrior*. All of this demand for stringent self-examination, for the severe questioning of one's motives, and for not accepting anything but perfection. Most of all however, for its over-arching focus on achieving the end goal. All of this combined together, creates in the practitioner a purity of spirit and a clarity of intention. To that end, the T'au firewarrior sets aside his or her own feelings, desires, and needs. There is of course sharpness where as it concerns the needs and feeling of others. Even a seeming indifference to the feelings of others, but at the same time, *The Way of the Warrior* demands the same disregard for one's own feelings.”

“All of this is terribly effective at tearing down the ego. This abrasiveness cuts away the self, shears the flesh from bone so to speak, and breaks down any identity or attachment to one's personal achievement or accomplishment. Thus like a furnace removes the impurities from metal, so too does *The Way of the Warrior*, remove the stumbling block, i.e. the self, from the path of the firewarrior. It creates in one, although brutally so, the proper relationship between the self and society. It creates humility, selflessness, a correctness of behaviour; in other words, it is a firewarrior's direct expression of the Tau'va—*The Greater Good*.”

“So Temu'jin with all his Viro'lan gallantry and courtesy, could not stand up to Li'xiu's brutal pursuit of excellence and her absolute certainty of purpose. The two it seems were destined to fall out and become bitter rivals. But never as young cadet, could I have imagined that their rivalry would continue to this today! And yet strangely, the strength that each displayed while at the academy, has become the other's strength afterwards. Li'xiu



is now the greatest proponent and advocate for *Patient Hunter*; while Temu'jin is the foremost proponent of *The Killing Blow*. Each had listened, watched, and debated with the other, and competed with the other for so long, that each one eventually became the other. In effect, each of them, have become their enemy.”

Eoroal dropped his face and nodded his head. He breathed in deeply and then lifting his head looked out across the desert. Qan'tel and Eoroal watched the huge billowing thunder clouds, soaked with rain, racing overhead and across the valley towards the mountains. There were tiny sparks of lightning flashing off to the west. “The desert has its own way of cutting to the quick, of burning away what is chaff, and leaving only what is essential,” he said.

Now turning back to his teacher he continued, “I haven't yet told you how their Mont'erue–*Dark Rivalry* began, but it was only two tau'cyr, after she arrived at the academy. There was an academic competition in mathematics between classes of Temu'jin and Li'xiu's grade. And it was no surprise when their class won, and very handily at that. When the class was assembled in their home room, there was the usual celebratory activity: mild shouting, hoof stomping and head butting. I think that Li'xiu was leader and Temu'jin class vice-leader that semester, I believe so anyway, but in any case, just as everyone is getting excited about the victory, Li'xiu goes and throws a dampener on it.”

“Apparently, the boys of their class did not score as well as the girls, although on average they still had done better than the other classes. Li'xiu said the boys should not be celebrating since they hadn't scored as high, and that they should be in a study group that night to ‘improve their test scores’. The whole class was in an uproar, everyone wanted to celebrate the victory together and not divide up the class.”

“What would have the celebration been that evening? Green tokee fruit yoghurt and everyone getting to stay up half-and dec later than usual?” asked Qan'tel nodding his head.

“That's exactly what it would have been namsai,” said Eoroal pointing to the ground.

“Well, Temu'jin points out this fact, but to no avail. However Li'xiu then goes ahead tosses another photon grenade, by saying the class would in effect ‘be gloating’ over the other classes if they celebrated. This little spinner Temu'jin catches; and then lobs it right back into her lap, by suggesting that they ‘invite’ the loosing classes to their celebration. But this suggestion only gets Li'xiu angrier! She insists that the lower scoring students should instead take the extra half-dec to be studying. Another student, a girl from Au'taal, points that some of the *girls* in the class had scored lower than some of the boys. Temu'jin then verifies this fact, when he looks up the total class results and the individual student rankings. Then *he* points out that the class vice-leader, i.e. himself,

had scored third place over all; while the class leader, that is Li'xiu, had scored only fifth. *That's when the knarloc shite hit the engine intake!* And it got pretty acrimonious, pretty quickly, with most of the class siding with Temu'jin and against Li'xiu.”

“Li'xiu then lets loose with accusations that the boys, especially Temu'jin, aren't taking their studies seriously, considering their 'lower academic performance' vis-à-vis the girl's performance. Ever the gentlemen, Temu'jin tries; but can't get her to come to some arrangement, that would allow at least some of the class to have a celebration. Li'xiu will have absolutely none of it. Now there's more of a raucous mood in the class and Temu'jin and a couple of other students, have to get in between Li'xiu and another girl from T'au, when the two started to square off. Each of them were calling the other a lot of ugly names, and throwing out all kind nasty insinuations about the other's character. So, just as he and the other students are trying to keep the two girls from throwing a hoof at one another; out of nowhere Li'xiu turns around and verbally assaults Temu'jin! She starts in on him with name calling and insinuations. He of course does not respond to any of it, but then like, '*A lightning Bolt Out of the Eternal Blue Sky*', she suddenly goes and challenges him to a 'point of honour'. Because she says he has undermined her authority as class leader. Still the gentlemen, he thinks that this maybe the way out, so he graciously accepts her challenge.”

“*“Shas'Saal Li'xiu I do not agree, that am in any way challenging your authority as class leader. Be that as it may, I see too much contention here in our classroom Red-123. In my opinion we should be pulling together as a class and not be so ready to find fault with one another. However, in order to bring harmony back to our home room, as the class Vice-leader, I accept your challenge on behalf of all students who did not meet the 'required score' Class Leader. However, I if I win, we still all get our yoghurt and half-a-dec of extra time. If I lose, then I gladly lead all the students who placed lower than the top four students, with their mathematics study for the next raik'rotaa. Fair enough Class Leader?”* Temu'jin says this of course with all of his Vior'lan charm, good humour, and nonchalance. But Li'xiu is having none of it and flatly refuses his proposal; because it would have in effect meant she too would have to be studying.”

“*“Vice-leader Shas'Saal Temu'jin know that you must accept my conditions as previously stated.”*”

“Temu'jin still hoping to change the atmosphere of the classroom accepts her conditions. Strangely she request to settle the point of honour by nan'ka'tuk'ike—*combat fighting sport*. This caught everyone off guard as it was not her strongest sport, but it was one of his? Temu'jin paused for a moment and then said he accepts, but he request that they must fight immediately and adds very cheekily, '*I still want to eat my yoghurt tonight!*' So it was

agreed that the question of honour would be settled that evening after classes were over.”

“As you know Namsai, it was the academy's tradition, which students were allowed to settle ‘points of honour’ without supervision of professors, staff, or any of the academy's ethereals. It was decided that they used the small close combat training dome on campus. At the time it seemed the whole school as there, but in reality it was just the students from Temu'jin's and Li'xiu's home room class, plus a handful of students who were allowed to be present from the other grades. I was the class leader for my home room at the time, so I was one of the few privileged enough to attend.”

“Senior students stood in the place of the ethereal referee and judges. Winning was determined by scoring more points than your opponent in the time allotted for the match. Points were awarded by landing clear and unambiguous hits on your opponent, with either your hands, hooves, or a ke'nan–*split cane sword*. Or by any number of pins, take downs, or throws. Xhmm...I believe the total allotted time was fifteen raik'or but I can't remember exactly...*t'ahhh!*” Eoroal looked over at his teacher. “Sorry namsai why am I telling you this for, you already know how this works?”

Qan'tel smiled and shook his head once and then Eoroal bowed and resumed his story.

“T'eh, so it was pretty much like any other...any other nan'ka'tuk'ike bout, except faster and more aggressive. Temu'jin came out more forcefully than I had ever seen him, hitting and throwing a Li'xiu a couple of times hard in the first round. Both of them kicked, punched, and struck each other repeatedly. Li'xiu fought incredibly hard, kicking and throwing Temu'jin, as well as painfully pinning him several times. Well it went like this for a while until Temu'jin, ever the gentlemen, had the bad manners to up and loose!”

“And true to his Vior'lan character he gallantly and chivalrously congratulates her, ‘On your hard and well fought victory.’ This is of course is absolutely incendiary! But then as if to ‘piss in her soup’ he turns to the rest of the class and says, ‘*Sorry everyone all those who failed to meet the required score, you will be studying with me later...I guess we won't be getting any yoghurt tonight?*’ Temu'jin wasn't trying to be insulting, but Li'xiu took it that way nonetheless. So now she's livid! She fumes, she stomps around, and she is absolutely outraged! I can't say I ever saw Li'xiu so angry, and her eyes went from their normal blazing orange to a deep violet blue. I distinctly remember Temu'jin looking totally befuddled and saying out loud, ‘*Hoi, she's mad? She's really, really mad?*’”

Eoroal paused and looked over at his teacher, “I can still see Li'xiu is standing there shaking and showing her teeth plates, and then with her mask and ke'nan still in her hands, she walks right up to his face and spits out:

*'Shas'Saal Temu'jin do you ever take anything seriously? Is this all just a joke to you? Have you absolutely no sense of honour? How dare you insult me only moments after giving me satisfaction in the combat circle! I would answer the insult to my honour, my family's honour, my caste's honour, and my sept's honour, but I will not from one is without honour. Shas'Saal Temu'jin you are nothing but dras'la to me!'"*

“Now I was there and I can tell you the whole training dome went silent as tomb when Li'xiu called him that.”

“T'ach, so that's what she called him dras'la—*outcast*? I heard rumours about what she had said something terrible to him; but none of the other academy staff from Vior'la would ever repeat exactly what it was she said!” Qan'tel gazed skyward with a pained look on his face.

“Temu'jin let his mask and ke'nan fall to the floor, and he stared back at her with a totally blank expression. This time Li'xiu had gone too far! She had used the one expression that regardless of caste, will set any Viorlan's blood on fire. Temu'jin stood there without saying anything for what seemed like ages; but then he reached down and picked up his ke'nan and mask. He looked away from Li'xiu for a moment, and then turns back and shakes his head in the affirmative.”

“Temu'jin then he replied with his own challenge: *'Shas'Saal T'au Li'xiu...I...cannot...let stand this insult...to my caste... to my sept...to my family...and to my person. Although to thee I am unworthy, I ask of thee satisfaction in the honourable fashion of our caste.'*”

“I remember how strange it felt to hear him speak to Li'xiu in that formal court dialect. But the effect was to make it all seem so deadly serious. Then as they say, Temu'jin *'put the sword through her throat'*, and without the slightest hint of emotion in his voice says:

*'Shas'Saal T'au Li'xiu, to thee I have made an exclusive commitment. I have promised to thee myself, before the time of courtship to be thine one and only consort on your First Night. And I have promised to thee a lifetime commitment by a sav't'alissera—a betrothal of marriage. I have met and shared tisan, with thine own honoured father Shas'O'T'au Kiru, and he hadst given his own heartfelt approval of our intention to marry. Furthermore Shas'Saal Li'xiu, I have known thee since we were both very young, and from the very first day we met as a small children, to the day when we met again at the academy, unto to-this-very-moment, I have loved thee. And know that I will love thee always and forever! But also know this Shas'Saal T'au Li'xiu, I now break all my commitments to thee. There will be no more exclusive commitment to thee. No First Night with thee. No marriage to thee. Between us there is nothing but wind, dust, and rocks without life. Between us Shas'Saal T'au*

*Li'xiu, there is nothing but the dry coldness of death!”*

“Li'xiu's face turned a deadly grey, but she was silent and stood there with her own blank expression. I heard the girl from T'au, the one with whom Li'xiu had almost come to blows with earlier, began to cry. The girl turned and begged Li'xiu to ask Temu'jin for forgiveness. Everyone else there was speechless, but Li'xiu just wagged her head in the affirmative and then said, *'Let it be so Shas'Saal'Vior'la Temu'jin. Let it be so.'*”

“Now the whole training dome erupted in shouting and crying. One of Li'xiu and Temu'jin's classmates later told me, that at this point most of their class were crying, including himself. Such was the impact of both Li'xiu's insult and Temu'jin's response. Temu'jin then quietly asked for another nan'ka'tuk'ike bout, but this time with fal'nan—*wooden swords* and with no time limit or points awarded. Victory would go to was the one still standing. Li'xiu agreed to this without hesitation, and then went further by saying she would fight without a mask, wearing only her cloth half-helmet. *'So as to give thee a greater chance of regaining thine honour from one so unworthy as myself,* ' she said. Temu'jin agreed and added he would forego his mask and cloth helmet as well.” Eoroal's face blanched and he let a small groan before continuing.

“Xhmm...so it was a duel then?” said Qan'tel.

“T'ah, yes it was. Worse thing was that we were all so afraid, some even whispered that we should go get an instructor; or at least an ethereal, but I don't know if anyone ever did. I myself was too paralysed with fear to do anything to stop the fight. In any case no one else did either, and the student judges brought out several wooden fal'nan. Li'xiu and Temu'jin each selected three to use for the duel.” Eoroal's face turned a dark grey and he looked frightened and he took a couple of deep breaths before going any further.

“After all my years of combat, I still get cold chills when I think of that fight. I have never have been so scared of anything, or been made sick by anything, then by what I experienced that night! As I recall they fought for over a dec, and no matter how many times either one of them was hit, kicked, thrown, or struck with fal'nan; neither one of them would yield, give in, or surrender to the other. Temu'jin early on had her pinned to the floor his feet and spurs, but Li'xiu would not yield. He soon afterwards slammed her head first into the clay, an earth caste wrestling move, that we all thought would have knocked her out, but she somehow still staggered to her feet. She just wouldn't give in. Li'xiu for her part kicked, punched, and struck Temu'jin repeatedly with her wooden sword. Temu'jin threw her at least four or five times in total, and head butted her at least twice. Li'xiu in turn kicked him in the both of his knee caps, the groin, and in head.”

“Each of them broke two swords, and both of them were bleeding from their head, face, and the

extremities. There was no surrender, no quarter asked for or given, and no mercy shown by either of them. Finally, she threw him to the ground, and quickly had him in an arm and shoulder lock, holding on to his left arm with both a hand and a leg spur. At this point we knew that if he didn't yield, she was going to dislocate his shoulder. Li'xiu demanded Temu'jin surrender to her; but Temu'jin's only reply was to scream 'NO!' So Li'xiu, twisted his arm and dropped to one knee; and there was this loud, wet popping '*crunch*' sound, and Temu'jin let out this horrifying guttural cry. Li'xiu had both dislocated his shoulder blade and broken his arm. Everyone began screaming and shouting for the fight to stop. Li'xiu calmly let go of his arm and stood up, and it flopped to the ground like a thing made of silicon. She turned her back on him and stepped away saying, '*I have won Shas'Saal Vior'la Temu'jin, whether you yield or not!*'"

"At this point it was total insanity in the training dome, with everyone running forward run past the safety line. Some even ran straight into the ring. I was one of those that got in close; and then I saw the thing, the thing that I hope I never see again for the rest of my life!" Eoroal paused closed his eyes and nodded his head slowly.

"Both of them...each of their eyes...I mean...both Temu'jin and Li'xiu...their eyes had gone completely a deep indigo blue! Both of them were so deep into their anger and rage, that they were lost in the midst of the Tenxer'suam—the *Sapphire Flame!*"

"The shocked student referee stood there frozen, unable to do anything; but then Temu'jin rose from the ground like some war-demon from an ancient myth. He sprung up right up onto both of his hooves, and came at Li'xiu from behind shouting this terrifying loud war cry. Li'xiu though exhausted and injured, spun to counter his attack; however, Temu'jin's struck her within this incredible blow that shattered both her fal'nan and wrist in one go. I can still see the moment of impact, as if it were stopped in time. First the wooden sword exploded, and then her wrist snapping and wrapping back on to itself in an unnatural angle. Temu'jin then spun completely around on his hooves, bringing down the mont'ka—*killing blow* to the left side of her head. There was...this...this awful, awful sound which I will not forget unto my dying days. A kind of a '*cracking thump*' sound along with the simultaneous sound of splitting wood. Li'xiu went straight down, hitting the clay ground with another sickening '*thump*'. We all thought that if her skull hadn't been crushed, then surely her neck had been snapped. Li'xiu lay in a heap and not moving, or even seeming to breathe, as Temu'jin sank to the floor in agony. The image and of him down on his knees, clutching his broken shoulder and screaming in pain, will forever be burnt into my memory. I remember at that point screaming that we needed to get an ethereal. I looked around to find the referee and saw the poor fellow abandoning his post. Was he running out to get help, or was he just running to get away, I don't

know? Later on someone told me there were sirens and emergency beacons going off; while a message of some kind was being broadcast telling everyone: *'To stay put, as help is on the way'*. I don't remember any of it.”

Eoroal stopped his story and wiped the sweat from his face, but he shivered like he was naked in the middle of a mid-winter's eve.

“You know namsai, it still makes me sick to both my stomachs when I think of that fight. Li'xiu was in the same kind of trance as Temu'jin was, and though she wasn't dead, she lay on the ground as if she were. Temu'jin then dropped completely to the ground as if he were dead, though we could tell he was still conscious... If you can call that kind of altered state he was in being conscious? Submerged as they both were into the *'Sapphire Flame'*. Never thought I'd ever see such a thing! In any case, no one dared get close to Temu'jin, as he still seemed capable of lashing out somehow.” Eoroal stopped and motioned to his teacher to help him, “Namsai, may we move to the shady side of my cell, the star of Dal'yth is rising in the sky and it's getting hot?”

Acaya Qan'tel put an arm under Eoroal and helped him stand up, but noticed that Eoroal was shivering. “Are you alright Eoroal'kan? Why don't you drink some water?” asked Qan'tel offering him his bottle.

“H-h-how is it t-t-that with T-t-temu'jin and L-L-Li'xiu everything always s-s-seems to be epic and mythic? Around b-b-both of t-t-them the legendary seems to s-s-somewhat become real?!” said Eoroal his teeth plates chattering as sweat poured off his body.

“Xhmm, didn't think that kind of thing was real, t'eh? The tenxer'suam?”

“W-w-ell, n-no I knew it was real. I-I-I j-just think it d-d-didn't to happen in our day and age; w-w-what with the Tau'va, the ethereals and such. It's like s-s-something that you'd read about in ancient history, or might find in some heroic tale; but it's not something that you expect to see in everyday life,” said Eoroal taking a drink of water.

**On Mount Kan'ji**  
**Part I: Sunrise on the Mountain**  
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