

The Tama Pass

By Chris Rogers

Kitra woke to another of Mag's tricks.

It was cold, though this high up in the mountains it was always cold during the night. He had taken refuge in a copse of twisted pines encircling a spring. The large, pale moon called the Mother hung low and large in the early morning sky. The pale bark of the trees looked withered and dead except for the occasional thick bunch of pine needles at their tips. A few ragged prayer flags hung limply from the limbs closest the water. Up the rock face, just an hour or so on foot, was the bare scree of the Tama Pass, high enough in the mountains that nothing grew larger than tufts of corpse grass and some lichen. It was a decidedly different desert from the hot, flat sands he had just escaped—a desert of glaciers and windswept chasms—but it was a desert nonetheless.

“Good morning, brave warrior,” the innocent-looking maiden said, shyly covering herself as she emerged from the clear spring. She was pale, too pale for life, and the steam rising off her body didn't look quite right, twisting like smoke from a snuffed wick. A careful observer would notice her thighs didn't quite touch the water, that her eyes lacked even the pale pupils of the Urugal, and that her hair seemed gently swept by wind even though the early morning air stood still.

Kitra waved vaguely in her direction. “Enough, shade, I'm in no mood for your games.” The Abbess had bound the spirit to him, promised it would serve him as guide. So far, however, she had been... unhelpful. Almost from the moment they escaped the burning wastes of the southern deserts, they ran afoul of Gudanna patrols. Luckily his Golem, bolstered by the spells he'd long wound about it during his campaigns, could match the undisciplined outer patrols' speed.

After that he did as much as he could to hide his travels, and while he had rarely shied away from a fight in his life, this contract required a certain anonymity. He flew low, scraping against the trees and rocks, and stopped often to watch the horizon. Barely a day had gone by that he wasn't forced to hide and watch as yet another band of Gudanna scoured the landscape. It wasn't the first time he had been forced to rely on stealth, but after years of travelling with a pack of bloodthirsty murderers at his back, Kitra was unaccustomed to skulking about. During those long, tense waits, the spirit would pretend to be sitting on a nearby rock, or leaning against a tree, and would pester him incessantly. It made the strained drudgery of hours spent hiding all the more arduous.

Twenty-four years ago, the lands they had travelled were virtually uninhabited. Then, he could not have imagined the Gudanna Dominion spreading this far. He couldn't even have imagined

why their mad Khan would want to conquer and claim such an empty land. That and much more had happened during Kitra's imprisonment, it seemed.

The spirit changed her form as she left the water. Instead of a shy maiden, she now played the voluptuous wanton. Her hands dallied sensuously over heavy breasts as she swung her hips with each step. She bit her lower lip, watching him through half-closed eyes. Kitra scowled. "Still nothing, handsome?" she asked in a husky voice.

Then the attack began. She flew off her feet, shedding the assumed form. In its place was a laughing skeleton, held together by only a few dessicated tatters of flesh. "That old priest was so much more fun!" she cackled, and in the space of a heartbeat she swept up from the shore and flew into his chest like a wind made of white fire.

Salt air flooded his lungs. He was flying toward the shore from over the sea again.

He knew this place. He recognized it immediately, even though it was the dead of night, even though it was a memory from years ago. This was from before the mercenary company, before he was the ferocious leader of the Forsaken 500. His Collector's wings beat once, twice, and on the third time he pulled them into a tucked position. Below him winked the campfires of the assembled Gudanna host. They spread for leagues, little dots of orange, and lurking just outside of each fire's glow was a cluster of hulking shadows. The blood Golems, the conquerors of Eretsu. Nothing, it seemed, could stand in their way.

Kitra railed against the sudden delve into his past, trying to throw off the memory's hold. In earlier attacks the spirit had been forced away by this act of will. This time, however, he remained trapped in the nightmare of his past. *He was still flying.*

He waited until it looked as if he might smash into the ground before opening his arms and flexing his hands. The Golem responded, its own leathern wings spreading and filling with air. He was racing along the ground now, having to dip out of the way of some of the larger Golems in the assembled host. If he could make it halfway to the walls before the alarm was sounded, he would have a chance. He grit his teeth. Just a little while longer.

Then the first cry went out, as it always did, always had, always would. Behind him a flare shot up into the sky. He had been seen and his flight became a race. He threw himself into coaxing more speed from his Golem. Could he make the walls of Bhira before the Gudanna could pluck him out of the sky? He strained to fly faster, and waited until the last moment before traveling up the wall, half flying, half scampering up the featureless Durani stone. As he cleared the top of the wall a spell hit, bathing his Golem in flame—but he had reached safety finally.

Over the ramparts, he quickly tore off his burning cloak. Only then did he notice the cheer that had gone up from all those around him. Urugal Warriors and Durani Sentries clapped him on the back, and while the Zikia Rangers kept to themselves, one nodded in a gesture of respect.

“My Lord Kitra,” said a Durani, with the singsong cadence of their people, “thank the Ancients! You have arrived at our hour of need!” He offered Kitra a bowl of water.

He didn’t have time. “Find Iksate Nimala. I have returned,” he growled, hardly recognizing his voice.

And then it was over. Kitra was on his knees, panting from the exertion it took to pry the spirit away from his memories. She sat on a rock a few feet away, looking like a harmless old woman, albeit one wrought of white fire. “So, where will our aimless wanderings take us today?” his guide asked, innocently.

The wayhouse perched upon a resting point in the mountains, a small grassy plain between two steep cliffs. Kitra circled back away and landed in a small sinkhole near the edge of the cliff, and dismounted to continue on foot. Out here in the wilderness a Golem was a rare sight, and he would draw attention to himself if he landed outside the building. Kitra had known the land well, once. There was little refuge up here, and those who chanced an early or late crossing ran the risk of being trapped in snow drifts taller than men. There had been a Durani convent on the northern slopes of the pass in Kitra’s day, but whether it still stood he couldn’t guess.

By the time Kitra reached the inn, it was a bright mid-morning. The sun felt hot, but in the shadows a surprising chill still clung to the air. The wayhouse was a lonely place. A few chimes swung in the light breeze, but otherwise there was little sound. On the hard stone peaks above them, that breeze grew into a blistering gale, sweeping dusty plumes of snow up into the cobalt sky. Meanwhile behind him was a steep stone stair, marked with towers of stacked rocks for when the deep snows came: the Tama Pass. A small flock of long-haired goats grazed next to some of the outbuildings.

The inn itself was a ramshackle affair built against the side of the cliff face, lashed together from rock and wood. No Zikia or Durani work here: this was a building made with sweat rather than the magics of any Arcanum. Three stories tall, it was almost of a height with a middling Golem. For all its disrepair, the place looked well-larded against the heavy snow that would soon blanket it. Rows of firewood were stacked all around the walls, and hides were nailed over the joinery to keep out the bitter wind. Kitra could also see Urugal fetishes dangling over the lintel, and he took that as an encouraging sign. Had he finally outflown the reach of the Dominion?

The spirit walked alongside him. “Why stop *here*? Is your plan to knock on every door in Eretsu?”

“Stop your pestering. I need more supplies and more information. I’m tired of flying blindly, and bumbling across potential enemies every time we land,” Kitra muttered. She couldn’t be seen by others, he had found, but his answers to her incessant questions had drawn suspicious glances more than once from the traders and townsfolk he had dealt with along their route.

The common room was empty except for a man he took to be the innkeep, a woman, and a young girl. Kitra assumed they were the man’s family. The girl, at least, had the man’s look. They knew he was coming, had watched him walking up the pass after he’d hidden his Golem nearby. They eyed him suspiciously.

“It seems the finer points of hospitality are not well known here,” the spirit whispered in his ear.

Kitra didn’t blame them. The innkeep would be wondering if trouble or custom had just walked through the door. Kitra’s purse looked fat on his belt, he knew, but the scabbards hanging from his hip were covered in the salt stains and weathering that could only come with long use. The family only relaxed after Kitra reached into his purse and removed a few bronze Talons. Then the boy and woman left the common room for the kitchen, and Kitra flashed the smile that had won him easy friends, long ago. “Let’s have some wine.”

The innkeep was a taciturn man, ordinarily a trait Kitra appreciated more than most. He gave up his name, Salun, as if it were some great treasure. As long as Kitra was spending, though, he would answer Kitra’s questions.

Once he had his wine, Kitra started with the obvious: “I have been... *away*... for quite some time. Who controls the pass?”

“Since the treaty? No one, mostly. There’s plenty of trade between the great powers, salt and gold. Up here it’s handled by smugglers who operate with a bit of a nod from both sides. Aside from the occasional outriders from one or the other, we don’t see much in the way of control. We don’t ask questions, the Durani don’t ask questions, the Gudanna don’t ask questions. It’s a good system, traveller. That’s why I won’t ask your business in these parts.”

Kitra ignored the rebuke and took a long drink from his bowl of wine. *Treaty*? Before his entombment, the Gudanna were still tearing chunks of land away from the Durani, pushing deeper and deeper into the Empire’s most fertile farmland. Most of the Durani lords were feckless nobles who had inherited their commands. The Khan had brought each to bay in time. “Ask him,” the spirit urged softly. Kitra disregarded her.

“And the peace has held?”

“What do I know, sat up here on top of the world? One hears of skirmishes, this lord reclaiming ancestral lands, that one pursuing bandits across the border. Mostly, though, well, I wouldn’t call it quiet—but its quieter than when I was a boy. Quiet enough for a man to open a hostel for they that can pay for their drink.”

“Ask him, we must know,” he heard the spirit whisper in his ear, half a challenge. *Does she suspect something? Perhaps he had heard something here, in his remote perch?*

Kitra decided to risk it, setting down another bronze Talon before he began.

“You didn’t ask, but I will tell you my business anyway. I’m looking for a holy man, or perhaps a woman...” He trailed off a moment. “I’m looking for someone called, or perhaps,” he fumbled for the right way to word it and finally gave up: “... a Deliverer.”

That brought a humorless smile to the innkeep’s lips, “Aren’t we all?” His eyes flicked to Kitra’s swords. “But you don’t have much of the look of a pilgrim, friend.”

Kitra laid yet two more Talons on the board between them. The Abbess had furnished him with plenty of money. “I’ll have some meat and a skin of wine, but I won’t need a room. I will move on before nightfall.”

The other man took the coins. “We have some mutton and onions ready for the fire.”

Then Kitra asked the question that he had troubled him the most: “These lands were once claimed by Clan Vhal...”

The moment Kitra mentioned that name, Salun hissed loudly. Then he spat twice over his right shoulder, an old superstitious gesture to ward against an Ancient One’s curse. “Do not speak of those vermin!” he said. “They are gone, ground into dust, and the world is a better place. Now, I have some business to attend to. The girl will bring the food when it’s ready.”

An icy cold filled Kitra’s veins. It wasn’t hatred, not anymore, but it wasn’t sadness either. It was simply a feeling of emptiness. “Have her bring a second skin of wine as well.”

As he was led through the streets, Kitra saw deepwoods Zikia, living moss woven into their beards, conferring around a campfire built against the battlements. Savages—normally their sort would hunt you as game if you so much as stumbled upwind of them, but they seemed content enough for the moment. Over the rooftops he saw a Durani Preserver standing guard,

its pinions reflecting the torchlight from the streets below. And he saw his own people, even the wilder clans, setting aside their normal ways to camp within the city.

Bhira was in better condition than he could have hoped after a month of siege. The entire outer city had been converted into a fortress. The camps were laid out in an orderly fashion with lanes wide enough for Golems to pass through. Mixed squads of sentries walked the streets. The city looked well-stocked, supplies were distributed in small caches throughout the city, and kept under guard. The Lord Commander here was no amateur: he had reconciled the peoples of Eretsu to resist the Gudanna threat. There was a fastness here, with the sea to the west and the Wildwood to the east and north, leaving approach open only from the south. The Khan could be stopped here, crushed here, if the deep-desert clans would join the fledgling alliance. This city could not be taken by siege, not without a much larger force... or treachery.

Suddenly Kitra was overwhelmed with exhaustion. He stopped to wipe the sweat from his brow. Where was Nimala? He had to find him quickly.

The young Durani page leading him through the streets buzzed about him like a fly. The boy couldn't hide his excitement. "My lord, we all thought you were lost. So far you are the only scout who has returned. Have you seen the others? Were you able to find the desert clans? Will they fight with us? An Urugal host behind those demons would push the Khan into the Sea!"

When Kitra turned and glowered at the boy, he performed his duty with a stiff formality: "The Lord Commander requests your immediate presence. He awaits at the gates of the inner city."

Before Kitra could answer, someone called out his name.

"There you are! Thought you had ended up torn to pieces over the dunes of the southern deserts by the Khan's dogs," a light voice said, teasingly. Kitra turned to find Nimala behind him, hand on his hip, smirking. Nimala's eyes, however, looked near tears and his smile was brittle. Kitra recognized the relief there. Nimala had always worried... not too much, perhaps, but too deeply.

Laughing, Kitra embraced him as a brother, letting his hand cup the back of Nimala's neck for just a moment, just enough. "Not dead yet," he answered with a thin smile. "I see you've kept safe and warm hidden away from behind these walls."

"It's amazing, isn't it? This Durani, Sudhamra, has done the unthinkable, uniting the peoples of Eretsu against the Gudanna vermin. He will want to meet with you, of course."

"He's been waiting for months. He can wait a little longer."

They left the page in the street, unsure of what to tell his Lord.

Too much wine. The room took a moment to settle after he lifted his head. And it was dark; he had stayed later than he planned while he'd mourned. Kitra had retreated to the shadows in a far corner of the inn to drink and brood—and drink. Bunches of drying peppers and roots swung from the rafters as a cascade of sparks flew up from the fire pit. A few local customers were suddenly nervous. Instinct made Kitra slip back into the shadows even further. All eyes turned to the entrance now.

Golems had arrived outside.

Kitra sat up to see the spirit Mags sitting on the opposite side of the table, smirking—at least in the sense that the ragged, curdled flesh pulled up and stretched along one side of what had been her lips. She observed him intently. She was close to discovering him now, close to the part of him he had drowned in blood as a mercenary captain. Her attacks were getting more powerful, and this was a fight he had no idea how to win. He had been trapped inside the memory, unable to escape, not even aware it *was* a memory. It had been a worse hell than his entombment, and this time it had only been the sudden shaking of the ground that had jarred him free.

Three Durani soldiers stepped in, two men and a woman. They wore only light armor by Durani standards, long scale shirts over maille. Light though it was, Kitra's blades would just slide harmlessly across the metal in a fight unless he could manage a substantial thrust. A golden mask covered the face of one man. The other man smiled cruelly, a smile Kitra recognized well enough: it was the face of someone who knew he was about to make someone hurt. The woman—the commander, judging by the wings on her helm—just glowered.

“Master Binda,” she said, not loud, but loud enough that everyone could hear her. “Wine. Keeping these lands safe from Gudanna brigands and whatever...” she didn't quite turn her head toward Kitra's direction, “...other unsavory sorts might wander into this dungheap is thirsty work.” Her voice was crisp and precise, rising and falling with the musical inflection of the Durani.

One by one the herders began to slip out. Smart men; the Durani were angry, and looking for a target, any target, for their anger. Gently, deftly, Kitra fingered the grips of his swords, feeling their looseness in their scabbards. Whatever was starting here would end in blood; Kitra could feel it. Old Salun felt it as well: his hands shook as he poured three large bowls of wine.

The wine sat untouched. “There is a Gudanna patrol in the area,” the commander said. “Have they stopped by here? Did you aid them, old man?” her eyes passed over the stairs and the kitchens. “They would have been sorely wounded.” Kitra noticed the masked Durani held a glistening wet hand against his side under his cloak. The Gudanna weren’t the only ones who ended up wounded in the fight.

“Please, we have seen no Gudanna for half a season,” Salun said.

“I think he’s lying, my lady,” said the cruel-looking Durani.

The woman stared intently at Salun the innkeep as she sipped from her wine bowl. For a long moment she said nothing, then spoke in an cool, even tone. “Find the girl.” The last of the herders slipped out of the door. Smiling, the cruel Durani tromped off up the stairs.

Kitra made ready to escape as well. He had no particular appetite for what was coming. Angry, hurt, confused, the Durani were looking for some revenge. They would start slow, but the rage at their defeat would take over. There was no doubt in Kitra’s mind that the inn would be smoking ruins by the morning, the only question was how many charred skeletons the returning herders would find in the cinders. They would not find Kitra’s, at any rate. The best time for getting free would be right now, before the Durani had figured out what they really meant to do here.

That didn’t mean it would be easy. There would almost certainly be more of them outside, waiting by their Golems. On foot, he might land ten solid cuts against his opponents before they took even a single wound. Meanwhile, in a cloak and light jerkin, he might as well be naked, ready to be sliced apart like a goat for the spit. If he could make it to his hidden Golem, though, he could fight his way free. Mounted, there were few who could stand against him.

The big Durani dragged the girl down stairs by her hair. He shoved her carelessly into the common room so she fell at the feet of the Durani commander. Kitra pulled his hood down and pushed his bench back. The Durani lashed the girl’s hands together, tossed the rope over the rafters, and pulled her up off her feet, then tied off the rope as she hung by her wrists. Kitra stood up slowly. Then, the big Durani struck the girl with a viciousness that surprised even the famously merciless Vhal Kitra. She swung back and forth limply, spinning slightly.

In all the poet’s tales, anointed champions fight for a night and a day, trading attacks until one momentous strike, blessed by an Ancient One, decides the battle. A lifetime of war had taught Kitra the truth about violence. It wasn’t poetic, and it was almost never between two evenly matched foes—at least not if you were doing it right. It didn’t carry with it any great lesson about the virtues of heros. It was like this, a vicious strike to an innocent that left her gasping for breath as her toes dragged across the bare wooden floor of her own home. The sudden threat of her death filled the room.

It was time for him to escape. So why hadn't he left?

Kitra felt a tingling touch on his shoulder. "We must stop this!" the spirit whispered in his ear. Her spectral breath was cold on the back of his neck.

"Why? Is the girl the Deliverer I was paid to rescue?" he whispered under his breath.

The Durani woman lifted the girl's head and asked about the Gudanna. Sobbing, she swore she knew nothing. The big one moved in again, crushing her jaw with a mailed fist.

In agony, Salun the innkeep looked at Kitra with a silent plea. *Fool. He doesn't know how desperate he is if he's hoping for me to play the champion. Would he still plead, even if he knew I was of Clan Vhal? If he knew I was the reason that name was cursed? Probably. A drowning man will reach for any hand.*

"Quiet!" The girl's whimpering died down at the rebuke.

The spirit appeared in front of him. "Save the girl." Mag's milky eyes held his gaze. Gone were the jokes and jibes. Instead she stared at him with a cool regard, not quite pleading, but urging.

"You have the wrong man, shade," Kitra hissed. "I'm a mercenary and a killer, and I'd gladly put down a few Durani if the price was right, but this doesn't concern me or my current contract. Go ahead and stop my heart, for all the good it will do the girl."

He did feel the spirit try to hold him, but he was used to her influence now. She might be able to infiltrate his memory, but he could better resist her influence with his waking mind. Kitra's feet felt like lead, but still he edged to the door. The questioning continued behind him.

And it was hot. He found himself as a child in a high tower, a blooming desert plain outside the windows. Inside the chamber was beautiful, the floor covered in thick rugs and the walls hung with rich tapestries. On an intricately carved table rested a crystal ewer filled with water flavored with mint. His shock and wonder dissolved into fear, however, as he realized a tormentor was coming, a tormentor whose attacks would not stop until...

And as suddenly as the vision had started it stopped. That had been no memory of his own, and Kitra shook his head as if he were caught in a net. "Is that meant to sway me? You misjudge me. I've seen too many terrible crimes to balk at the sight of one more. I am no hero."

"Perhaps not. Yet you are all that is at hand. Are you sure we can't append a side agreement to your precious contract?"

Behind him, Kitra heard the Durani commander start asking questions in a sharp tone.

“I kill for profit and power. I see no reward here, only an uncertain fight against greater numbers.” Surreptitiously, Kitra swept the spirit aside as if waving away smoke. She immediately reappeared.

The spirit swirled around him, pressing at his chest. “What if I agreed to stop prying at your precious little secrets?”

“Your attacks will cease?”

She nodded. “I will leave your sordid little memories untouched. I swear it.”

Tempting. “How can I trust you?”

The spirit only shrugged, but her eyes watched the torture playing out in the inn with a fervent intensity.

Kitra turned to look over the scene near the bar. Then he looked down to see his hands already on his blades. He realized he had wanted an excuse, after weeks of running, to turn and fight. The blades slid free noiselessly.

“Long odds, one against three.”

“No,” the spirit hissed in his ear, “two against three.”

Everything depended on speed. Using the length of the inn to build momentum, Kitra hopped onto a table and jumped over the fire pit to drive his blade through the wounded Durani’s back. With all his weight behind the thrust, he pierced the armor and drove the sword clean through the man’s chest. He fell, pulling the sword from Kitra’s hand. Kitra spun in time to parry the hacking swing from the big Durani. He was faster than Kitra expected. The force behind the strike drove him back to the edge of the fire.

“Stupid Urugal vagrant!” the Durani barked in his heavy accent. “You’re going die along with these other pigs!”

Kitra kicked a bench at the big Durani, knocking him off balance. As he did so, though, he caught sight of the commander racing out of the inn. If she made it to her men, or worse, to her Golem, before Kitra could break free, then the whole fight would be over before it really began. Kitra ducked a vicious slash from the big Durani, but instead of following the commander, he raced up the stairs that circled the edge of the common room. Taking them

two at a time, Kitra gained a small distance between himself and the Durani crashing after him.

“Where are you going?” the spirit snarled.

“If I don’t to make it back to the camp before they mount, you’ll be looking for a new soul to torture, witch.” He shouldered his way into an empty room. “They’ll be expecting me to come out the main door.”

He jumped through the shuttered window and slid down the roof onto the woodpile below. He saw the inert forms of a Preserver, looming over the entire inn, and four Harpies crowded around it. The Durani, two more of them, were on him almost instantly. Kitra scrambled up and jumped back to avoid the first cut. Then he was running, leaping over the edge the cliff to a shelf of rock below.

“The girl! What about the girl?” Mag pressed. She appeared as comet of white fire next to him, though she seemed to give off no true light on the rocks around her.

“The moment we attacked, she was forgotten. We’ve drawn the Durani after us. If the old man has an ounce of wit he’ll be escaping with his family in the opposite direction. She’s much safer than we are at the moment.” Kitra’s lungs already burned at the exertion of the flight.

No moon had risen, and beyond the light of the inn’s braziers the landscape quickly fell into deep shadow. He found a small defile, hoping to throw off the pursuit as he scrambled down the ravine. The canyons were carved by the spring’s rushing snowmelt, when the water would gather in deep channels that would eventually end in waterfalls spilling into the vales far below. In the darkness there was a danger of taking a wrong turn and ending up sliding off the edge of the mountain.

The shadow of a Harpy passed in front of Kitra suddenly, wheeling after him. Its talons scraped the ground, sending up a spray of gravel.

The cry went up as he was spotted, but they were too late. Kitra jumped into the low cavern where he had hidden his Golem. Power rushed into him as he scrambled across the top of its neck and into the saddle in its back. With a flex of his shoulders, its wings opened and he sprang into the air. Kitra smiled as his Golem charged onto the rock outside the pit, and the pursuing Durani tried to flee. He dispatched the two Harpies easily, and when one knight managed to leap free, an idle swat of his Collector’s claw sent the man careening over a cliff.

Then the Preserver arrived, leaping toward him, its massive scythe swinging downward. Kitra leapt into the air, his Golem flexing its wings to climb up and away from the attacker. Below, the massive titan turned to look at him, its eyes burning, and for just a moment Kitra could see the furious face of the cruel-looking Durani he had fought inside the inn.

Kitra didn't have time to devise a strategy—the other Harpy was out here somewhere. That last Golem would only close the gap and attack once he engaged the Preserver, hoping to catch him unawares.

So he had no choice but to attack the Preserver. He leaned back in his saddle and his Golem swept its wings forward. He darted behind the Preserver now and charged it with all his might just as the Preserver started to turn. He tackled the stone giant, and while his smaller Golem couldn't completely topple it, the impact did force it to one knee. While it was down, Kitra raked furiously, digging at the stone and gilding surrounding its rider. When the Preserver forced his Golem away with a sudden push from its right hand, Kitra saw the opportunity to end it once and for all: his clawing attacks had reduced its face to blind rubble, and above it the knight sat exposed and exhausted. It was a better opportunity than he could have hoped for.

Kitra focused on a spell and a strange fire kindled in the empty sockets of his Collector's eyes. He saw the big Durani staring him down defiantly as his Golem raised its scythe. It would be too late; Kitra's spell would melt the flesh from his bones and the scythe would fall, useless. Smiling, Kitra shouted a curse and, at the same moment, his Golem spewed a sudden torrent of spectral fire.

The missing Harpy attacked in the instant before the spell could reach its target. Its talons raked across his Golem's left wing and dug into the bones of its chest. Kitra saw his spellfire arc wildly into the night, passing over the wings and shoulders of the damaged Preserver. Then he was dragged over the ledge and sent tumbling off of the cliff. As his Golem fell into the void, the Harpy had to let go, lest she be pulled down by the dead weight. Any ordinary knight would've been undone by the Harpy's drag and drop tactic, spiralling into the hard rock below. Kitra, though, managed to regain control.

The Harpy followed him in flight, its face a stone snarl. Riding it with a deadly grace was the Durani commander. While Kitra had struggled to right himself and reverse his Golem's descent, she had readied some sorcery. Blue-grey smoke spilled from her hand, and she gave Kitra a malicious smile before opening her fingers. Suddenly a spinning blaze of sparks leapt from her grasp and shot through the gap between them.

A relic! Kitra managed to raise his Golem's hand in time to swat at the thing, but the impact shattered it. It wasn't true pain, but Kitra could feel a numb ache in his own left hand. When he looked over at the Durani commander again, she was throwing another of the things at him. Kitra managed to dodge, but it hit the canyon wall in front of him. The eruption of rock shards and dust cut him in half a hundred places on his right side.

Still more blue smoke billowed from the commander's hand. Wounded and exhausted, Kitra had no defense to raise. He'd been a fool to try and fight such an overwhelming force. Still, better to die out here than languish in the prison that had been devised for him.

Before the commander could throw another of her relic bombs, Kitra felt a stirring deep within himself. The spirit spilled forth from him, ghostly fire erupting from his body. She assumed a horrible appearance. While she'd often appeared to Kitra as a rotting corpse, he saw that guise had been merely something of a dark joke. She now appeared as something much worse: a demon with needle-like fangs for teeth and long skeletal claws. She crossed the gap between the two combatants quickly, like a long, striking snake. When she reached the Durani, Kitra felt a strange pulling, almost as if someone were impossibly stretching his body. The spirit loosed a scream at the Harpy, enveloping it in phantasmal flame.

The Durani commander was distracted only a moment, but in that moment her Golem struck a pillar of rock and exploded in a blue gout of escaping mana.

Kitra was able to guide his wounded, limping Golem back to the inn, although with difficulty.

It turned out the big, cruel-faced Durani *had* been hit by the spellfire, and though it was just a glancing blow, it had been enough. His whole left side had been burned until his skin bubbled. It wasn't an easy thing to look at. As Kitra approached, he heard the injured man's breathing speed up into a ragged, uneven cough, till it suddenly fluttered and collapsed to a light shallow whimper.

The spirit stood beside him in the darkness.

"Death is inevitable, but it will be a long time coming. He will suffer unbearably from these injuries."

"First you want me to mete out vengeance and now you cry for mercy?"

"Mercy?" The spirit turned, fading in the dawnlight, but her voice remained strong and cold. "I never said anything about mercy."

It was early morning again before he returned to the inn. He found the ruins he had predicted. He also found Salun the innkeeper and his family, but if he had thought to expect their gratitude, one look at the father's angry face put an end to that. The girl was wrapped in robes, injured, leaning on her mother. They all watched Kitra's approach with sullen defiance.

“Before the big one went after you, he smashed and burned our inn. It was an act of pure malice. There is nothing left for us, and we cannot rebuild before the snows.” The innkeeper’s gaze accused Kitra.

“Even if your place still stood, you’d need to flee,” Kitra answered. He picked through the rubble for his missing sword. “When that Durani patrol fails to make its report, this entire mountainside will be crawling with those stone monsters, looking to bring answers to their Emperor. They’ll little like the tale they find here. You’d best be well away before that happens.”

“I do not know how we will survive.”

Kitra threw his purse at the innkeep. “For the girl.” *What made me do that?* he wondered. Was the spirit influencing him in subtler ways?

“I won’t thank you. All that lies before us is suffering and want. On the open road I’m not sure how we can live, so deprived. It might have been better just to die last night.”

“It might have.” Kitra said. He couldn’t argue with that. He found his sword, the white bone of the grip blackened by the fire and soot. He wrenched it from the charred body of the Durani soldier and returned it to its sheath.

“It has been many years since someone of Clan Vhal set foot on these slopes,” the woman said.

The weariness of the battle fled from Kitra as if he had been splashed with cold water. He looked up at the woman suspiciously.

“There is a man, a preacher, in the alleyways of the city of Prishta. He is no true healer, if the tales can be believed, but his reputation is growing. Ausin Tal is his name. They say he is favored by the Ancient Ones.” She shrugged. “That is where I would search for a ‘Deliverer.’”

The family left soon after, while Kitra stayed behind. The site of a battle, after all, was a good place to mend a wounded Urugal Golem. The spirit had been mostly silent, yet Kitra could feel her brooding within him. It was a melancholy morning, and the bright sunlight did nothing to alleviate the oppressive mood hanging over him.

Prishta. How he hated the place. This time, his mind turned to his past of his own choice, not the spirit’s interference. Let her see, let her see it all.

Nimala's room was small, a dark apartment with only a tiny window set high in the wall. With the door shut behind them, Nimala wrapped Kitra up in his arms desperately. Their kiss was full of longing, but also reassurance, the press of their bodies together proof against months of anxiety and despair. War made all reunions uncertain, but Kitra's mission had seemed beyond hope, destined to end in his death or capture. For a few moments, Kitra pushed aside the dread that always shadowed him and lost himself in his lover's embrace.

"You came back," Nimala said, his voice cracking.

"I came back for you."

"This is the end of the Khan and his monstrosities." Nimala's eyes were glowing with excitement. "With our combined might holding Bhira, and the Sunu sweeping up from the south, the Gudanna will be crushed like serpents underfoot." When he saw Kitra's face, he faltered. "The Sunu are coming, right? Kitra?"

Kitra nodded, "They are."

Nimala nearly danced. "The poems they'll write about you! You're going to be remembered as the great hero of the age! Clan Vhal will be buried in honors." He caught himself for a moment. "But you must tell me everything. How did you avoid capture?"

He looked so eager in that moment, still so innocent, waiting to hear one of the great tales of adventure that the poets sang about. Kitra hadn't realized how hard this would be.

"I didn't." He said in nearly a whisper.

A shadow passed over Nimala's face. "I don't—I don't understand."

"They caught me, the Khan and his Spider. You call them monsters, but you don't understand how right you are. They're without mercy. The dungeons of Prishta... they break men there, it's an art of theirs. In the end, they only released me because I promised them I could be useful."

"The Sunu?" Nimala still looked hopeful.

"Are coming, yes. They will join their strength to the Khan, crush this alliance, and scatter the armies to the wind."

Denial welled up in Nimala. "No, even against the Sunu, the defenses of Bhira will prove insurmountable."

Somehow, Kitra held his gaze steady. "The Khan thought so as well, so he decided to send his agent to sabotage the defenses."

Nimala dropped onto the bed.

"Nimala, everything I have done, everything I must do... it's to save you. It was you who kept me alive while I was trapped in the dank cells of Prishta. Please..."

He reached out, but Nimala pulled away.

After a long, still silence, Kitra could only plead once more: "Please..."

But Nimala did not answer.