

THE SEPARATION OF BRIIN

A CHRONICLES OF ÁITARBITH NOVELLA

K.I.S.



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PROLOGUE

A *decoded letter addressed to Danai Denada (born Dansso ben-Himlen Srofson) at the Enddaian Town Inn, Pandi, from Lord Iansso Srofson, at the Cinnaen Royal Court, dated the 42nd day of the 2nd cycle, Year 1041 pera Áitarbith*

DAN—YOU cantankerous curmudgeon!

My lady wife bids me to send you her fondest love and warmest of greetings, brother, and it is only to please her (and because she is leaning over my shoulder to read this and has become much too adept at deciphering my codes while she should be minding our hellion son. She now tells me it is completely normal for a three-year-old to smash into all the furniture and create chaos in their wake. Well, we shall agree to disagree on that score. Though in all else her beauty and

wisdom render her words the most—she has thankfully left and I may proceed as I wish).

Back to my initial greeting, please note that **I** send no warm greetings and fondest wishes; you know how I feel about your completely self-assigned banishment to that backwater of a country and I shall therefore say no more on the subject. Do as you will (you always have, by the gods, and I am sure you inherit this trait from your sire—do not be cross for my mentioning it! It is far better to remove the sting from these things through casual acknowledgement, but again: you love to bury them deep and to let them fester. Unnatural child that you were—and now unnatural man that you are!)

Let me get to the business part of this missive before you lose patience and assign it to the fire—oh yes, I know that's what you did with my last one entreating you to return to Cinnae... I told you: my eyes and ears are everywhere. Even in that excuse of a town they call a capital. **THE WITCH-LINGS OF HOONDÆR!** See—I have thusly stayed your hand from casting my precious research into your hearth! But, in all seriousness, I think I may have located the missing part of the parchment which we have been seeking.

Our old friend, the Unnamed Prophet, seems to have travelled to the port city of Vrai at one point—when it was but a minor, developing fishing town and the Great Watchtower was still being utilised as a lookout and building of office. One of my agents has managed to ascertain that some illegible and badly damaged documents had been hidden in a hollow stone secreted within the very tower's outer wall. The

agent's description of said documents appears to coincide with what we know of the prophecy thus far, and luckily the half-dead curate of the local archive has left it on a pile in a corner to moulder, forgetting it there (perhaps till the end of time) and leaving it ripe for the plucking, as it were. And who better to pluck than we two?

I shall travel to the city forthwith and propose that you meet me there. We can plan our strategies once together, for this letter is already too long (as always, you force me to digress through your sheer bloody-mindedness). We shall therefore meet in, say, ten days at the Snagged Snail Inn on the outskirts of Vrai.

Before I conclude this note, I would like to reiterate (although I despair of you reading the entire thing now that I have provided the part you truly wanted to know): we are not our parents, nor are we impaired by the blood that flows through our veins. Whether your father was a Pandial deserter who forced himself on our mother, or a secret lover she just would not acknowledge, you are my brother, and I love you. Our mother loved you, as did our father (yes, OUR FATHER, for he did not see you as anything but his own, and would not have changed that view, had he known the whole of the sad tale of our mother's suffering). Do not let her deathbed confession ruin the life we have been given and do not continue on this quest to relinquish your Cinnaen self so fully. Return to us; you can do much good here.

There. That is my bit said, but I know you will do as you choose. You always have. I hope we have more luck with our

Unnamed Prophet—I wonder if he had a brother himself who annoyed him into an early grave through his obduracy.

I shall see you in a short while, you stubborn goat.

Ians

P.S. My lady has now returned and insists I include a description of your nephew for you (as you have not yet met the little beast), though the heavens know why. Even as his doting father, I can see he is not much outside the ordinary, being thoroughly mediocre, at best (Marisso has now stormed from the room in a pique carrying little Aksso, for she read those words and has taken offense on behalf of our offspring. I can therefore safely end this rambling piece of ridiculousness here. Pray the gods no-one else has the misfortune to read it).

BEES & HONEY

Truth might be bitter, but its outcome is sweet; falsehood appears to be sweet, but it is poisonous in its essence.

— IMAM ALI (A.S.)

“**G**et your cursed, crawling *things* away from my property!” the bellow hurt Briin’s ears. The bees that frequented his hives buzzed in frenzied loops, clearly highly disconcerted by the air palpitations of the blast of noise, if their deviation from their usual flight patterns was to be considered. Master Vern’s voice always did that because it was never pitched

at a reasonable nor comfortable volume. Briin had told him as much on multiple occasions.

Of course, that had had no discernible effect on the irascible neighbour whose property abutted that of the boarding house Briin and his brother, Hiirn, lodged at on the outskirts of Renaian, the port city recently designated as the capital of the newly formed Kingdom of Pandi. In fact, Briin's factual observations on the man's perpetually strident tones only seemed to elicit further shouting, as well as cursing. *It was quite curious.* Briin knew that, if someone had pointed out a similar deficit in his own articulations, he would make every effort to remedy the shortfall in expected and acceptable behavioural ways. However, this did not appear to be the case with Master Vern. *Very curious.*

"They are not on your property, Master Vern." There. Perhaps more specificity was needed? "And also: these are not *my* bees." *That* should solve this apparently negative social interaction. Though Briin could not truly fathom how the man was unable see the facts as they were: his hive was the logically required distance from the boundary line between the properties so as not to infringe on the safety of their neighbours, and the bees—well, bees were free to fly wherever they pleased. They could not be constrained by human-prescribed ownership. To try and assign a swarm of bees as property, not to mention stake a claim in terms of where they

were physically permitted, was clearly so completely irrational as to verge on the insane. And, as far as Briin was aware, Master Vern was not insane. Irrate and generally loud, but not insane. Though, his purpling face and bulging eyes seemed to render that fact less certain...

“How dare you contradict me, you little—” appearing to strangle his own words, the short, rotund man stared with what Briin suspected was plenty of intent, though intent of *what*, he was uncertain. Briin never could tell exactly what people’s expressions meant, despite Hiirn patiently explaining so often. If Briin were to guess, he’d say Master Vern was experiencing a sudden bout of constipation—or perhaps flatulence?—and was doing his utmost to withhold the natural consequence thereof.

“I know you be apprenticed at that there fancy Guild of Magic! I shall have a word with your tutor so I shall, young ruffian! What is his name, exactly?” Ah! This was more like it; Briin immediately felt relieved. Clearly, a discussion with Master Sirdai would solve this entire situation. Briin hesitated to call it a misunderstanding, even in his own head, for he was sure he had not misunderstood anything *this* time. Master Vern just wanted to confirm the facts with Briin’s master—and rightly so, although his use of a pejorative (and factually inaccurate) description of Briin caused a niggling doubt.

According to the documentation he had signed,

Briin was technically the direct legal responsibility of Master Sirdai (and indirectly of the Guild of Magic) until such time as he had learnt all the principles and achieved the ultimate title of Magister, or a qualified practitioner of Magic. However, to Briin's mind, 'Magic' was too intangible and inaccurate a term for the skills acquired and abilities wielded in this context. He was very much in favour of the more recent tendency among the younger practitioners of redesignating and quantifying this so-called 'Magic' as 'Commanding'.

Briin found this to be a much more accurate description of what he was dedicating his life to—not a nebulous, ill-defined art, but a clearly delineated science. Practitioners did not conjure immaterial ephemera from thin air; they acted as conduits that directed energy through themselves and controlled said energy with their carefully chosen words and constructed intentions. Briin was quite pleased with his own capacity to power "spells" (another term with which he took issue) for he harboured significant reserves of energy, but also knew he was far from perfect when it came to the veritable act of casting.

The verbal nature of incantations—an area in which Briin sadly did not excel as he tended to become flustered when constructing—meant that all his attention to detail fell by the wayside and his spells were mostly poorly formulated. He found he performed much better

when he wrote down and carefully planned his incantations, almost like a script to guide his intentions. His passion for diagrams meant even more pin-point accuracy and his final result never went awry in such cases.

Alas, Master Sirdai was not particularly impressed; not surprising, as he thought it time-consuming and fairly unwieldy, in addition to his being somewhat opposed to the movement of “what some might call debasing the art,” as he had once said of the new school of thought with regard to naming conventions.

“It is Master Sirdai, at the Guild Hall, Master Vern,” he supplied proudly, and rather helpfully, he thought. Master Vern seemed to inflate even more than before, causing Briin to silently marvel at the man’s capacity to expand so exponentially. It truly was an impressive phenomenon, physically speaking.

“Well! I shall call on him forthwith... He should be told about the sheer, brass-necked *cheek* of his apprentice, gainsayin’ his elders and betters, besides!” and with that, Master Vern flounced off, back into his home. Much to Briin’s dismay, for he had been on the verge of asking the man how he managed to physically inflate himself so significantly. A question for their next interaction, Briin surmised gloomily as he continued to hum soothingly to the bees while he checked the structural integrity of the hives.

Truth be told, Briin was concerned about this latest

in his usual assortment of everyday mishaps. He seemed to collect them like he did his stones (although that was perhaps a poor analogy, for he purposefully sought out different stones and polished them assiduously before placing them within the cabinet Hiirn had helped him build, whereas his collection of angry and annoyed people in most of his daily exchanges was very much unintended and unplanned). Master Vern's was just the latest in a long line of inadvertent mistakes on Briin's part. Briin's former good mood deflated.

He didn't want to make his brother's life difficult at this time, what with Hiirn's recent promotion and hopes for an ambassadorial assignment far from Pandi... He continuously waxed lyrical at the communal dinner table about the opportunities for diplomatic interactions offered by the newest efforts to unify the Cinn and Irie territories, and how he envisioned playing a key part in the process.

What little of Briin's sunny disposition had remained now vanished completely and in its stead a kernel of anxiety began to unfurl. He endeavoured to stymie its growth before it blossomed into unbridled panic (which was a very unpleasant experience for all involved, but thank the gods whose existence Briin seriously doubted that he hadn't had one of his full-blown fits since his early teens some years prior).

"Hiirn needs to make his own way in the world...

Hasn't he always given everything up to help you after our parents died? Besides, he won't receive an assignment for ages, and even then, he won't be gone for too long. You're making mountains out of molehills," Briin muttered to himself as he made his way back to their landlady's and their abode.

He had fallen into the habit of talking himself down from the precipice of his fears—in exactly the same tenor and rhythm as his brother had used throughout their lives. Briin even used his particular intonation and expressions, like the “mountains out of mole hills”, or his absolute favourite: “why borrow trouble before it's even offered its services?” He had just managed to calm the roiling tumult in his gut when he opened the door and almost collided with Mistress Drenka, their landlady.

Oh dear. Interactions with her never seemed to end in any other manner besides a black mark against his name, and after their last conversation where he'd somehow insulted her *again*, he was an absolute *persona non grata*.

“Ah! You frightened me half to death, Master Hii—oh... it's *you!*” why was it that her voice was always pitched at just the right frequency to send tingles down Briin's spine and cause his whole body to break out in gooseflesh? Most sounds at most volumes were an assault on his senses, and always had been since he

could remember, but he could no longer slap his hands over his ears, screw up his face, and retreat into a dark internal space of calm as he had done when young. No, he had to manage and interact without flinching. People didn't like it when your face or body implied *they* were somehow socially in the wrong.

Hiirn had explained that Briin clearly had highly attuned senses; together they had come up with coping mechanisms and techniques for Briin to use so his blessing (and curse) wouldn't cause him to make a scene and thereby embarrass himself and others. He employed one of these now by utilising his superior attention to detail and focusing on mapping the sparse wrinkles on the middle-aged woman's face and neck, all meticulously powdered. He always wondered why she did that—wasn't age equated to wisdom? (Fallacious though that was in reality, what with older Magisters at the guild and their preoccupation with bygone pomp as opposed to practical improvements)

Why would the woman continuously wear clothing more suited to a maiden and twitter ridiculously at his brother and one of the other boarders in the house, a scribe's apprentice called Rilder? Her behaviour toward the widow and the elderly cleric who also lodged with her was far more restrained, and towards Briin she acted with a brisk sharpness that was clearly differentiable from her manner towards the others.

When he had once asked Hiirn about this (what

Briin considered) anomalous conduct, his brother had laughingly said she “seemed to favour more tender flesh”, but Briin had failed to understand. She never ate different meat from her lodgers, and that was usually tough fowl (i.e., the bird was barely spared dying from ripe old age) or fish. If he could not deduce her meat consumption preferences from their actual meals, then he was astounded his brother could. Also, that response did not truly answer his question regarding the inconsistency of her actions; even trying to make it fit made his head ache.

“Well, aren’t ye goin’ to say something, or at the very least *move*?” Again, that sharp tone, with Briin making an effort not to wince and to stave off any negative repercussions, stepping smartly into the house and shutting the door behind him, only to find her regarding him with a look he could not discern. This happened to him very often—in fact, with every single person he came into contact with except his brother, whom he had known so well and long that he liked to think he could deduce most of what his facial expressions *actually* meant. Briin found, though, that if he remained silent, the other person would soon fill the void with words that he could then use to extrapolate what their preceding looks meant. It wasn’t a foolproof strategy, but it worked on most occasions.

“You are a strange one, and no mistake... I can never tell whether ‘tis you or yer brother when I first clap eyes

on ye, but then, he's all smiles and obligin', whereas you're..." Her eyes crawled all over him and her mouth pursed; that swooping sensation he usually experienced when he knew people were *looking* at him came over Briin.

"Aye... Identical like two peas in a pod, 'cept for the oddness of the one... Obsessin' over stones an' not bein' able to talk without insultin' ev'rybody," she mumbled, not merely looking, but dissecting and judging according to a set of criteria he had never been able to completely assimilate the way others seemed to. And he, inevitably, was found wanting by all. Except Hiirn—he never, *ever* looked at Briin that way.

"Many assume we are twins, Mistress Drenka, but that is incorrect. My brother is three years my senior, as you have been told, but might possibly have forgotten. Though, I grant you, we do look very similar. And as to my preoccupation with stones: it is only stones with particular properties that interest me, for experimental purposes related to blocking C— Magic."

He had decided to deal with her words instead of her looks, for he could at least interact on that level in a very literal way—their subtext, he was convinced, he was not equal to deciphering. When others, and his brother in particular, weren't present, Briin had noticed their landlady's words always became more cutting in their quality (though he had no tangible gauge to judge

them as such, but they always elicited feelings in his breast that he knew were shame and inadequacy).

“Well, I dunno nothin’ ‘bout no stones, so I can’ speak to tha’, but I can’t say as you’re wrong about them looks—yer parents were nobility, if’n I remember right? What must their cronies’ve thought of *ye* born to them highfalutin’ folk?” her chortle didn’t feel friendly, but Briin was too uncertain to be able to identify it as outright malicious. Also: how should he know how his parents’ peers had felt about his birth? He could hypothesise, of course, but to what end? *People were very strange.*

“Why, I can almost imagi— oh! Master Hiirndai! Welcome! You be home earlier than usual,” watching her demeanour shift from cackling *schadenfreude* to obsequious fawning was truly disconcerting to Briin’s mind, leaving him feeling both discombobulated and grateful that his brother had arrived to interrupt the interaction upon which he had no firm grasp.

“Good day, Mistress Drenka. Thank you for the warm welcome; I did not mean to interrupt you in the middle of what I’m sure was a highly immersive discussion,” Hiirn’s words were smooth and seemed to have their usual, friendly tone, but Briin noted a slight edge that his brother only reserved for people he disliked. Briin was very pleased at being able to pick up on the expressional minutiae of at least one person, and the

fact that it was the person he was closest to in this world made him even prouder.

“Not at all, sir... We was... that is, we was merely talkin’ of this and that,” her rushed words elicited no response from Hiirn except a lifted eyebrow (which he usually reserved for when he was being imperious or high-handed, Briin thought) and an air of waiting for something.

“Might we pass so we can go to our rooms? I assume dinner will be served at the usual hour?” Hiirn offered, again, his voice implying absolute politeness, but Briin was fairly certain Hiirn wasn’t in a particularly good mood. Upon catching Briin’s slightly worried eye as their landlady hurriedly and awkwardly responded in the affirmative and shuffled out of their way, Hiirn smiled. Even though it was a closed-mouthed grin, it was wide, and his eyes crinkled at the edges, a sure sign in Briin’s experience that all was well between them. Relief flooded him as they made their way up the creaky staircase to the second floor, where they had adjoining rooms that were sparsely furnished.

Hiirn always grumbled good-naturedly about how their family fortunes had changed so long ago, but Briin didn’t mind; he could clean his floors and walls much more effectively when there were fewer furnishings to move. Hiirn claimed to find his fastidiousness endearing, though Briin cringed upon remembering their landlady’s reaction to his fevered exertions at scrubbing

all the surfaces in her home. Luckily, Hiirn had managed to soothe her ruffled feathers (as he so often did on Briin's behalf), and now she appeared to suffer Briin's attention to cleanliness with stoic fortitude.

"So, how has your day been, brother?" Hiirn enquired as they both took seats at the modest dining table in their shared sitting room (it was miniscule, an aperture between the two shoebox rooms in which Mistress Drenka had somehow managed to wedge the table and two chairs). He and Briin always had a drink at the end of their day and before dinner—Hiirn said their parents used to do the same, but Briin could not remember it being so. He believed Hiirn though, for he was his most trusted adviser and helper, with no ulterior motives. Briin sipped his small cup of half ale (he disliked strong alcohol) before responding.

"I am unsure how I angered Master Vern earlier, but he was shouting at me about my bees and my 'barefaced cheek'." A look of resignation and some humour settled on his brother's face, and Briin wondered if he himself had a similar expression sometimes. He doubted it, but they looked so similar, he was sure he could replicate it (like he had taught himself with so many other expressions throughout the years by using his brother as a model and a narrow sliver of mirror to aid his endeavours).

"Alright, we'll get to that in a minute, but first tell me how the day as a whole was, Briin. Was it good, enjoy-

able, successful? Or not? And then we can focus on specific parts that influenced how you experienced your day..." he drank from his own cup of mead as he waited. Briin often wished he liked the taste of honey, being such a proponent of beekeeping, bees, and the beneficial uses of their product, however, he found the taste cloying and unpleasant. *A great pity.* He mentally returned to the task at hand: summarising his entire experience of his day in a few measly words.

"Good enough. Not wonderful, not particularly enjoyable, but well enough." At Hiirn's quirked mouth (a subtle sign they had agreed on so many years ago that Briin should expand on what he meant), Briin elucidated.

"Well, before I attended my tutorial with Master Sirdai, I was able to run a few more experiments on the stones in my collection—the ones I told you about that seem to have a strange obstructive capacity when it comes to 'Magic'. One stone in particular, that I traded for with a Smullian travelling salesman, is very strong and does not allow any kind of 'Magical' energy to pass the field it casts." Hiirn nodded, drinking.

"What do you think the ultimate use for such pieces will be, other than interesting oddities? Most are not particularly strong, are they? You have only found the one in all these years that fully blocks Magical energy," Briin always appreciated Hiirn's incisive questions; they

pushed him to consider other angles to his own, hyper-focused methodical ones.

“Yes. Strong blockers are exceedingly rare, I believe. However, judging from the type of rock they all consist of, I do not believe it occurs naturally Pandi. I suspect, as all I have collected come from the Smul River area, that the source of these stones might be in the Uurgonna Mountains, and that they have been washed down into the Smul farmlands by the river.

“This is pure speculation, but it is possible much larger samples with greater obstructing capacity might be found at the source. Their uses could be legion, but I would need to run many more experiments...” Hiirn’s eyebrows were drawn into an expression Briin identified as a frown of concern.

“Perhaps, considering the far-reaching effects such a discovery might have, we should tread with care when discussing it? Maybe withhold sharing the information with anyone else?” Briin felt relief wash over him. He had thought the very thing, considering the dubious actions that had been taken historically by the various guilds of Magic throughout Áitarbith. ‘Discretion was the better part of valour’, as Hiirn had taught him, and a secret shared between them was the safest kind.

“Agreed. I would not feel comfortable allowing others to ruin my research in their usual ham-fisted way... Better that we keep it between the two of us until the information

is ready to be shared.” Hiirn lifted his cup at this, so Briin hurriedly did too—they were toasting each other (Briin still did not fully understand the whole point of uselessly lifting glasses or tapping them together, but it made more sense when he and Hiirn did it, so he thought the practice necessary to make it make more sense to him.).

“I had a very fruitful meeting with Master Sirdai regarding my hypothesis on the applications of theoretical formulations generated by those knowledgeable in the tenets of Co— ‘Magic’. He was very excited about taking my initial notes to the other masters—perhaps even to the council—for he said it would allow the guild to expand its operations beyond anything heretofore imagined.”

He saw what he recognised as pride on his brother’s face, but he had also seen that Hiirn had noted his near misstep with the controversial, emerging terminology for his science.

Though Hiirn knew Briin’s every thought and conviction on said subject, he had strongly encouraged Briin to play his cards close to his chest in this as in most other subjects beyond the mundane.

“You must use subtlety to achieve your goals, Briin... The old masters have not attained their positions in the cutthroat world of the Guild of Magic by being laissez-faire and accommodating, but through sheer will and grit, and no small measure of self-aggrandising machinations. These kinds of

personalities don't respond well to being shown their own inadequacies by a mere novice...

"So, my advice is: humbly suggest your ideas to Master Sirdai, and Master Sirdai alone. Try to focus on the possibilities and profits to be gained from your changes; do not use twenty words when seven will do, and, whatever you do, DO NOT use any adjectives or descriptors to outline the failings of the current system, nor any of the current masters. One must navigate egos in these instances as much as promote the benefits of your own ideas—and your ideas, Briindai Farrendian, are worth fostering and promoting."

Hiirn had always understood human nature better than Briin could ever hope to, and he was quite capable of convincing others the sky was, in fact, not blue; his brilliance a kind of cozening assurance that engaged people to such an extent, they were unfazed by the possibility of being taken in. His wide-eyed sincerity could not be resisted, apparently.

Briin was rather proud of the fact that he had never seen his brother lie outright, but he had noted as a child how Hiirn had navigated the truth in a masterful (though to young Briin's binary mind, duplicitous) way. When he had grown older, Hiirn had tried to imprint the need for care when expressing truths to others, his words engraved on Briin's mind from so long ago.

"There is a cost to things, Briin. Even you should know that... And truth is the most costly, the most hard won of them all."

Above anything else, truth is expensive to the one who purchases it without confirming the consequences of the bargain beforehand, for it is at his expense that the cost is eventually tallied."

"I think you mean 'costliest', not 'most costly, actu—"

"I'm not concerned with the finer points of the grammar now, Briin, but rather with the spirit of what I'm saying... Do you understand?"

This had been a bit abstract for Briin at thirteen, but once Hiirn had explained that unforeseen results of truth-telling could be just as damaging as lies, with specific examples, naturally, Briin had understood and had tried to apply these considerations to his own actions and words. But he and Hiirn never applied this care when communicating with each other.

There was always unvarnished truth; even when it came to Briin's failings at living (such as his struggles with basic human connection), he and Hiirn had been partners who navigated these issues and tried to find solutions through honest discussion.

"Well, that's excellent news, Briin. I knew you'd be able to convince him. He's a reasonable man who has the power to implement the changes you envision, if you cultivate the relationship properly. Just keep effecting the techniques I've suggested so you can achieve this goal you're so passionate about," Hiirn's eyes crinkled again, "I'm really proud of you, Briin."

He grasped Briin's shoulder, and although he usually did not enjoy being touched, his heart picked up

to almost double speed, enhancing the swooping feeling of giddiness coursing through his body.

He did not always feel worthy of his brother's endless patience and goodwill—his brother who was so talented and ambitious, and who could have achieved much without the weight of a younger brother who constantly caused “incidents”—but today he felt it. It was a wonderful experience, and he was greedy for more. Did other people feel this way all the time?

His mood suddenly soured when he considered his other news to impart.

“Well, that is the end of my triumphs for the day, I am afraid...” Again, the rueful face from his brother, his dark eyes, identical to Briin's, sparkling despite those words.

“I assume this is where the incident with Master Vern will feature in your tale?” he nodded despondently while Hiirn chuckled. “Well, tell me what happened—with as much detail as you wish—and we'll discuss what he *might* have meant with what he was saying.”

So they proceeded, as they did every day, to discuss their experiences, and Hiirn explaining to Briin what both his and Hiirn's interactions with others meant below the surface of sound, sight, and touch. The deeper meanings that somehow escaped Briin, despite his acute senses, keen mind, and absolute desperation to understand these apparently mundane things as others did.

The usual, lacklustre dinner followed, after which he and his brother once more sat for a short while and discussed what would, in all probability, happen the next day, should things go as they planned. Again, this was a tradition borne of the realisation that younger Briin managed much better when he had a frame of reference on what to expect of the immediate future. Hence, they had instituted it as a permanent practice in their lives.

“Are you sleeping well enough, Briin?” his brother asked as he opened the door to his tiny room just before they bade each other goodnight. Briin’s stomach twisted with the overwhelming dread of not wanting to answer the question, yet knowing he had to, considering he and Hiirn never kept things from each other.

Still, he did not want to alarm his brother with the restless nights he suffered due to the most horrifyingly vivid dreams he had begun to have. A circumvention of the truth, then, which had always been a challenge for literal-minded Briin.

Briin nodded, but realised it was not convincing enough when Hiirn cocked his head and then his eyebrow. Unlike the single lifted eyebrow which said “Tell me more”, this combination of gestures said “Tell the truth”.

“Well. I am not sleeping *well*, precisely. I am having a few... dreams, but once they pass, I sleep adequately.” He hoped that met the honesty benchmark required. *Do*

not use twenty words when seven will do. And, whatever you do, DO NOT use any adjectives or descriptors...

“So, the dreams are worse than before?” Hiirn appeared perturbed, lacking his usual pleasant nonchalance when faced with Briin’s habitual peccadilloes.

“Not... worse, precisely. Just very detailed. And realistic,” he refrained from mentioning the debilitating fear that permeated his very being during his night terrors. The feeling of certainty that what he was seeing and feeling were real events, despite having no clear memories of the incidents unfolding in his dreamscape. What felt like real deaths seemed to dance at the edges of his consciousness, unconfirmed but having a definite influence on his psyche.

Upon noting Hiirn’s intense frown, he ameliorated: “But they’re basically about the same things as ever. Perhaps I am just too concerned about my upcoming examinations and manifesting that anxiety through these nocturnal, subconscious delusions.” He was pleased at the flippant, unconcerned tone he managed to use. Hiirn seemed unconvinced, but wished him a good night and left.

Briin took great care in preparing for sleep and avoiding thinking of actually lying down and shutting his eyes in his narrow little bed (with pristinely clean sheets and perfectly made up, thanks to his constant efforts). Once done, he could no longer avoid it, gingerly settling on the creaking planks and thin mattress, then

stubbornly revising the endless lists of scripts as well as their instructions to try and elicit a deep sleep *sans* nightmares—and finally managed to drift off. All for naught.

He was in a forest.

Stygian and ominous, it was swathed in an eerie fog in which he seemed to float. Despite knowing there were only trees, other verdure, and lesser fauna (perhaps also larger animals, but nothing he couldn't ward against with Commanding), the feeling of all-encompassing dread that pervaded him persisted.

He noted that he was not alone either, for a cloaked figure moved ahead of him, the mist swirling around its furtive movements. The person, for it was definitely human, seemed careful—trying to avoid detection by someone (or something).

At the loud sound of a branch snapping deeper into the trees, the figure's head turned sharply and Briin realised it was a girl. Her face appeared pale in the stark light and shadow of the night-drenched treescape; her expression beyond fearful.

She was absolutely terrified, and rightfully so, judging from the rushing sound of paws charging through the brush. A herd of some kind was storming toward her, so she began running in the opposite direction, careless now of the noise she might make.

Feeling an immediate need to somehow assist (it seemed cosmically imperative, somehow), Briin tried to catch up. But

he was not able to, for he was not in a physical body, but rather seemed to be observing the entirety of this scene from an abstract beyond—not a participant in the action, but a spectator apart from it. Frustration and impotent anger filled him.

Then a baby began to cry.

Large, beastly forms broke through the undergrowth—some on four paws, others running upright on two legs. All with flashing teeth and claws, glowing eyes, and lupine bodies. Gruxhoon! He was seeing Gruxhoon, as they were described by the great historians of the Áitarbithian Continental War. Monstrous creatures of death and destruction, animalistic in their attack but humanoid in malicious intellect, and unseen in the last four centuries since their expulsion from the continent.

They snapped and snarled, scenting her direction and careening after, the screams of the child drawing them like flies to a carcass.

This girl was carrying a child and trying to escape wild beasts that were hunting her. There was no way she could outpace them, and they knew no mercy—not for innocents, nor children.

Briin tried to follow, to will himself closer than the intermediate distance he seemed to maintain from her during her flight. It did nothing. He could only bear witness to whatever befell her and her baby.

Navigating a lead ahead of the troop of Gruxhoon, but only marginally, her body was battered in her headlong rush

vaulting tree roots and scraping along trunks. Her headscarf was ripped from her by grasping branches, pale, golden hair following suit, left behind in hanks as were been torn from her head and swaying on the branches in the wake of her passing.

Still she continued, frenziedly, holding the still crying bundle to her chest protectively. There were six of them, and only one of her.

The Gruxhoon caught up to her as she reached what seemed to be a clearing, bloody and torn from her flight, her bundle unscathed but howling loudly. As she stumbled to a halt, the creatures did not fall upon her, but rather spread out, appearing to enjoy the terror she exuded, her whole body heaving from her effort to survive until this point.

Hopeless.

Briin wished he could look away, wished he could shut his eyes for this next part that would inevitably follow. Then one of the things spoke.

“Give... give... babe. Us.” The hysterical fear on the girl’s face was heartbreaking to see, yet she clutched the child closer to her, trying to turn her body so she was between them and the baby. The one that spoke growled threateningly, then:

“Not. No... kill...you. Give... babe.” But she did not concede, remaining in the same position and shuffling her feet as the noose the Gruxhoon formed around her drew tighter. She was surrounded, but her petite frame vibrated with tension and defiance.

A branch snapped.

They all lunged as the girl twisted herself in a protective ball around the child.

And then Briin awoke, somehow knowing all was lost.

The specifics of his vision, however, faded with preternatural swiftness and abandoned him to suffer a sweat-soaked emotional episode thereafter in complete ignorance of what he had witnessed in his dreamscape.

