

DANTIAN
*
ALCHEMY OF FIRE

By
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*I know of no better life purpose than to perish in attempting
the great and the impossible.*

FRIEDRICH WILHELM NIETZSCHE

Dedicated to Tamara.

Province of Kharbenesh



PROLOGUE

One late afternoon, when the sun was only two or three fingers over the horizon, Illian was suddenly jolted out of his sleep by the sound of horses and men shouting, “We caught one! Stinky bastard. Tell the Magustus Supreme, we caught one!”

The young boy rolled off his hay bail, where he slept most nights, and scampered to the front of the horse stables. He was a slight child of nine or ten, depending on who was asking, and while he wore the same dirty rags each day, his matted hair grew only longer and more matted with the passage of time. Most of the city folk quickly dismissed the orphan boy as a “street rat”, though a good handful of them knew better. The truth was that Illian was extremely resourceful, as one had to be in order to survive in the alleyways of the great capital city called Catal. Throughout his life, he had learned well which pockets to pick and which ones would pay for things like information or favors.

He covered his brow with his hand to shade his eyes from being blinded by the setting sun, and began to see the sight come into focus. Amid a clattering cloud of dust, there were three horsemen trotting down main street, surrounded by a group of at least twenty other people. In the middle of the chaos, there appeared to be a man whom everyone in the crowd saw fit to scream and jeer at. His hands were tied in front of him, and he was being dragged behind the horsemen at the end of a rope, the opposite end of which was tied to the middle horse. From what Illian could tell, the man looked to be in utterly miserable condition. His face was caked with mud and blood, and it looked as though his ankle was sprained at the very least.

As the procession made its way past the stables, the boy was able to catch a few voices from out of the air. He gathered that the man had been captured while taking part in a raid only fifty miles or so south of Catal, near the shores of the Suphia Ocean. Apparently, he was knocked unconscious during the frenzy of the fight. That morning, when neighbors caught sight of smoke plumes rising from the smoldering ashes of what was once the settlement, they went rushing to search for survivors. The assailant had

been left for dead by his own men, and was found lying in a pool of blood. He was immediately apprehended and taken to the capital.

Everyone in the crowd kept screaming, "Dirty Maltruisian! Go back where you came from!"

Illian followed the crowd through the city until they reached the stairs of the Great Temple. As soon as everyone stopped walking, he snuck below the crowd's eye line to make his way around the side of the massive complex. The temple sat on top of what could be called a hill, were it not for the fact that it was more a series of stone walls, terraces, patios and stairs, all surrounded by an obtrusive iron railing, than it was a simple hill.

There was only one designated pathway to the main gate of the temple above, and that was up the main staircase in front of the complex. This particular peasant boy, however, knew of a secret, "undesignated" access point through the sewers that led up to one of the temple's side gardens. From there, he would be completely hidden from view of the city streets by a series of shrubs and fruit trees with low-hanging canopies. He followed the rabbit's path through the foliage until he reached the rear corner of the building. Just around the corner, there was a window that he had discovered some time before. It looked into the rear part of the sanctuary, and because it was tucked away at the very back of the building, and let very little light inside, Illian figured that the Magi had forgotten about it long ago. In any event, the shutter was unlocked every time he had ventured to the Great Temple, almost as if he were being invited to spy on what happened inside. Indeed, from his vantage point outside that window, Illian could clearly see the entire temple sanctuary.

Although he knew it was a crime to spy on the Chamber's official ceremonies and delegations, and would never risk getting caught for such an offense, public business such as this was different. Regarding public affairs, a select few citizens from Catal's upper ranks — merchant owners, landowners, and the heads of the wealthiest families — were frequently permitted inside the building to participate first-hand in the province's governance. Everyone else in Kharbenesh relied on accounts from someone who was actually there in order to keep up with any political developments that might affect their lives. The boy had therefore grown adept at being the first one back to the taverns before anyone else could even make it out of the temple sanctuary, let alone down the front steps. Not surprisingly, Illian's youthful speed and stealth accounted both for the success he had found in pedaling current events, as well as his ability to keep his secret window exactly that... A secret.

He gently pulled the shutter open just enough to fit the width of his ear, and then squinted to see inside. A moment later, he saw all the action unfold. The Magi burst into the room with their prisoner in tow. They dragged the man into the center of the sanctuary, where they fastened an iron chain to his shackles, midway between his feet. The other end of the chain was already fastened to an iron ring, which was securely mounted on the marble floor. Once the prisoner was firmly bound, the Magi offered him

some water and a few scraps of stale bread. They appeared intent on keeping him strong enough to stay alive, at least for the time being.

The prisoner looked up at his captors with a bony, sunburned face that was plastered in skepticism. His oily, dark brown locks fell messily over his face. He slowly reached for the plate, unsure of whether or not his captors were just teasing him. As soon as he took his first bite, though, a ravenous compulsion overtook his body, and he quickly inhaled the rest of the small meal with all the ferocity of a rabid dog.

When he had finished eating and drinking, the Magi began to strip the young man naked. They attached his handcuffs to another chain, which was then looped through a thick iron ring. The ring itself was mounted on the underside of the rafter above. Three of the Magi took hold of the free end of the chain and combined their strength to hoist their prisoner into the air. Soon, the man was suspended roughly two feet off the ground with his arms and legs stretched in opposite directions, but they didn't stop there. The three men continued to lean forward on the chain, pulling ever tighter, until the skinny man's shoulders could hold out no longer.

With a reverberating "pop", "pop", each of the prisoner's shoulders dislocated, and he let out a dissonant scream. Illian gasped uncontrollably, and ducked down below the wall to avoid being spotted. When he peeked his head back up again, he saw that the Magi were fastening the free end of the chain to a sturdy hook, adjacent to the iron ring in the floor. This held the chain, and therefore the prisoner, firmly in place. In that manner, the Magi left their captive naked, broken and stretched out, like a hide left to tan in the sun. All the man could do was whimper helplessly. The group of holy men then departed, until their official assembly could begin later that night.

Illian was aghast at what he had just seen, and quickly turned to make his escape from the temple grounds. Before he could take a single step, however, he was stopped dead in his tracks by what he first thought was a wall that had suddenly appeared out of nowhere. To his chagrin, it instead turned out to be one of the Order Guards. He was a burly man with a thick brown beard and leather armor from head to toe. The child bounced off the sentry's chest and stumbled backwards. Had the big man not caught him by the collar, he very likely would have crashed through the shudders and into the sanctuary below.

"His Reverence would like a word with you," the sentry said, glancing up at the window. "Now."

CHAPTER 1: BLOOD OF THE GUILTY

Illian squatted down outside his secret window behind the Great Temple of the Order. This time, he had the Magustus Supreme's expressed permission. It was just before midnight, and the world was as black as pitch. Though it was a cool night, the grubby boy was still hot from the day's events. He peered inside, where he could see the temple sanctuary. A gentle draft of warm air from inside the building flowed past his face, and he could faintly make out the smell of incense, mixed together with hot wax and damp stone. The moonless night accentuated the soft glow from hundreds of small candles whose light was dancing on the walls inside the great building, illuminating a faint mist that hung in the air. The scene was mystical, like something from within a dream, neither real nor unreal. There, in the center of the immense room, the twelve most powerful Magi in all of Kharbenesh would soon be performing their Petitioner's Ceremony, which occurred with each new moon cycle.

The young boy reached into his pocket to rub the cowrie shells that the Magustus Supreme had given him earlier that evening, as he remembered the great man's orders:

"You are to watch but not speak. Indeed, I expect you to be as silent as a ghost, but when I give the command, you are to fly away at once, careful to avoid my wrath should you stay a second longer. Go, and tell everyone what you see here tonight, and take care not to utter a word about this agreement to anyone else..." He held out the cowrie shells and dropped them into the boy's hand, and added, "Or I will not only take back this payment, but your life along with it."

Now, even though the public was already well aware that the Magi performed secret rituals, the details of such happenings were never made public. Instead, the community only knew what the Magi told them was important. Illian therefore guessed that the ceremony he had been invited to observe would involve some sort of routine ritual that he had heard the Magi talk about before. Perhaps they would ask for blessings for the upcoming lunar cycle, or offer prayers of abundance. He certainly never expected to see something far more sinister when he looked through the temple window that night.

In the center of the sanctuary, surrounded by every tenured Magus in the Order's Chamber, there was the prisoner, still bound in chains. It looked as though, after hanging from the rafters for hours on end, the man was about to become an unwilling participant in a sacrificial offering to the Gods. Illian recognized him to be the same man who had been brought into town through the main gate that very evening. He was in the same spot as he was when Illian saw him earlier that day, stretched between the ceiling and floor. From his vantage point, however, the boy could not tell if the prisoner was still alive, or if he had already expired.

The Magi were all clad in the full regalia of their lofty titles. Their ensemble included hooded white robes adorned with gold threads, and the shape of a dragon's head, which represented the Order's insignia, embroidered on the left side of their chests. A silk sash, dyed as purple as a flower from the deadly Belladonna was wrapped around their torsos, from their right shoulders to their left hips. Each man wore numerous rings on his fingers, some encrusted with jewels, and others carved from bone. Gold daggers with ivory handles hung from their belts, which were tailored from animal hide. Their feet were bare, except for leather straps, which were wrapped around and tied end-to-end at the front of their ankles.

Without speaking a word, the men began to perform various tasks. Three of them undertook the lighting of candles, while another lit the incense. One Magus went to the altar, and began to pour mead from a skull decanter into twelve crystal goblets. Another approached the prisoner with a towel and a wooden carafe full of water. He offered the man a drink before proceeding to wash his naked body from head to toe, releasing the stench of musty sweat into the air. When Illian saw the prisoner swallow, though, he knew that the man's blood still flowed.

The boy then watched as another Magus placed a large golden bowl beneath the prisoner's feet. The other four Magi were kneeling in symmetrical positions around the captive while the others continued to work. Their foreheads were touching the floor. As each Magus finished his designated task, he would proceed to kneel on the floor, along with the others. Soon, all eleven of them were kneeling on the floor, in a circular pattern around the prisoner, waiting in patient silence for the arrival of their leader, the Magustus Supreme.

Not five minutes later, a great figure appeared in the entryway. He wore a towering white headdress, which featured a large amethyst crystal in the center. The sheer height of his headdress made the man appear close to seven feet tall. His robes were deep purple to match the other men's sashes, but his own sash was made from luminous gold silk. It complimented the twisted rope belt around his waist.

His thick silver beard extended all the way down to the bottom of his broad chest. In his right hand, he carried a thick scepter, approximately three feet in length. It was elegantly crafted from ivory and bone, and featured a dragon mounted at the tip. The dragon's ruby eyes, which seemed to glow like fiery embers, radiated from the black

jasper stone from which the figurine was carved. As he entered the room, a loud thud emanated from each heavy footstep he took, which caused the prisoner to flinch quite uncontrollably. The captive began to sob, unable to hold back his fear any longer. At that time, the Chamber of Magi all stood to their feet, while the Magustus Supreme took his place at the front of the formation, and with that, the session was ready to begin.

According to the Order's dogma, of course, the Magi first had to prepare their own souls, lest the Gods confuse them with the sacrifice itself. To that end, the rite began exactly at midnight of the new moon. Each Magus occupied his assigned position around a twelve-pointed star, which was outlined in obsidian tile, and embedded in the temple floor. Unbeknownst to Illian, each point of the star represented a particular facet of the Order's dogma, as well as an individual God. Every one of the Magi served as an instrument by which that particular facet and God was made manifest.

To Illian, it simply looked like a solemn meeting of extremely frightening men, though he did find the ease and synchronization of their movements enchanting. Each Magus stood facing toward the primary point of the star, which the Order recognized to be the 'Guiding Star of Truth'. It was at the front of the sanctuary, and also happened to be Magustus Supreme's designated spot. In turn, the Magustus Supreme faced the rest of the men in the congregation, who had all been harmoniously chanting an inaudible incantation since the time of their leader's entry.

The Magustus Supreme, whose ordained name was "Abanai", raised his scepter into the air and declared in a deep and raspy voice, "Abanai makes himself known to you, oh Maargadarshak Taara. I bow before your greatness. All knowing sovereign of honor and truth, have mercy, for we seek the wisdom and righteousness of you, our eternal guardian and divine benefactor. Let your powers wash over me, as your humble servant."

In this way, each Magus took turns stating their ordained name and offering up a prayer. Every man knew his particular place in the order. While their words were unique, the theme of their worship followed a similar format. Speaking in an almost hypnotic rhythm, they each began with an homage to the God they represented. That was followed by a petition for mercy, and finally, an appeal for blessings of power. Those who were not actively praying were chanting in unison with the others, causing the air to vibrate in a quite visceral manner. After nearly fifteen minutes of unbroken chanting and praying, the sanctuary had begun to pulsate as if it were coming to life. Illian felt numb and entranced as he watched everything transpire.

When the last Magus finished his prayer, each man in the Chamber simultaneously turned inward to face the prisoner at the center of their ranks. Their chanting grew louder and louder, as the Magi willed their incantations to collide in the center of the twelve-pointed star. There, the man they intended to slaughter as a sacrifice to the Gods, was present to absorb their intent into his very flesh. The intensity of their voices continued to build, until it reached a crescendo that resounded throughout the temple halls. Then, without warning, the Magustus Supreme tapped his scepter on the floor, and

the Chamber's chanting came to an instantaneous halt. The only sound that was left in its place was that of the prisoner's heaving and forlorn sobs. All the while, Illian hardly dared to breathe.

After a minute or so of disconcerting silence, the Magustus Supreme stepped forward, until he was close enough to smell the prisoner's breath. He grunted in abhorrence, and then began to speak in a voice barely above a whisper. "And now, oh Mighty Ones, let your presence be known," he began. "Give us a sign that you accept our humble offering." The force of his voice increased with every word.

"Let your servants know that your will has been served! That we might march triumphantly upon the entrails of our enemies. If this be not your will, then speak through this man, who is held captive by our hands." By now, the great man's voice had become as powerful as thunder, booming against the sanctuary walls. "May he plead for mercy and move our hearts!"

Panting, and trembling in fearful anguish, the prisoner let out a bone chilling shriek, but nothing more. He knew that his fate was sealed, and so, he made no pleas for mercy, nor cries for redemption. The only fight he could muster was to spit in the face of the Magustus Supreme, who only returned the insult with a deadly glare. Illian stared as wide-eyed as anyone can imagine, afraid to blink, lest he miss the snatching of the prisoner's soul which he was sure to be the next thing that would take place. For, in the past few hours, the boy had quickly learned that the Magustus Supreme was far more wicked than he had ever thought before. He now understood why some people called him the 'Taker of Souls', among other things, behind closed doors.

To the boy's surprise, the Magustus Supreme, only wiped the spit from his face, turned around slowly, and gave a subtle nod to the Magus standing in the first position to the east of the Guiding Star before returning to his post. In response, that Magus drew his dagger from its sheath. He approached the prisoner, and without any hesitation whatsoever, proceeded to stab the man directly through his left kidney with near surgical precision. The prisoner's voice broke as he both cried and screamed at the same time. As the Magus wiped his dagger clean and sheathed it, Illian consciously stifled the urge to throw up. The young spy was only barely able to keep his eyes open enough to see the expression on the Magus' face as he returned to his position on the star. It was cold and blank, despite the continued whimpers coming from the man he had just stabbed.

Proceeding in the same order by which they had petitioned the Gods before, each Magus took his turn walking up to the prisoner and stabbing him with his dagger. They worked in a deliberate and methodical fashion, each taking special care to pierce one of the man's major organs in such a way that would delay the moment of death until their ceremony had been completed. Each wound they inflicted caused more and more of the prisoner's blood to flow out of his body, trickle down his legs, and stream into the golden bowl on the floor beneath him. With each stab, the victim let out a diminished groan until finally, he lost all consciousness. His head fell forward, and faced the floor. When the

eleventh Magus plunged his dagger slowly into the back of the victim's neck, at the base of his skull and into his brain, there were no groans left for him to release. The time had come for the final sacrificial mark to be made.

The Magustus Supreme gradually stepped forward, in approach of the victim. He calmly evaluated the man's countenance, and concluded that the Magi had executed their duties to perfection. For, even though the man had lost consciousness, he was still alive. The Magustus uncorked a vial which hung around his neck and dabbed a few drops of its contents onto a handkerchief, which he had produced from his pocket. He held the handkerchief up to the prisoner's nose. The strong smell of ammonia jolted the man awake. Though he was clearly too weak to remain conscious for long, and was otherwise devoid of any cognitive awareness whatsoever, he still screamed. The sound he made was like that of a madman who had no recognition of who he was or the world around him.

The Magustus Supreme then unsheathed his own dagger. As he drove the blade into his victim's heart, he prayed to the Gods, "Honor this night, oh Heavenly Protectors and accept this soul, we give unto you!"

The Magi responded in harmony, "Let it be so!"

The Magustus continued with his prayer, "May the Gods walk with us upon the fields of battle!"

And the Magi's reprisal, "Let it be so!"

"Let the blood of our enemies seep into the ground and nourish her soil!"

"Let it be so!"

"Heavenly bodies, grant us victory in our quest and righteousness in our glory!"

"Let it be so!"

The Magustus looked into the man's eyes and watched the life finally drain from his face. Upon seeing his soul depart, The Magustus Supreme took a step back, turned, and walked nonchalantly back to his point on the twelve-pointed star. The deed was done.

A few seconds later, the Taker of Souls began to address the Chamber, and said, "Tonight, we invoke the power of the great Gods to guide our actions, as we are mere mortals and know not the matters of infinity. Yet, through the Gods, we have become divine ourselves, and with divinity, comes infinite power. We must use this power wisely. Aabesh, step forth and retrieve the essence."

Aabesh, the last Magus in the ritualistic order, took one large sidestep toward the center of the circle and spun around to face the dead prisoner. He walked over to the corpse, knelt down, and picked up the golden bowl, which was full of the victim's still warm blood. With a steady movement, so as not to let any of the blood splash out, Aabesh carried the bowl to the altar at the front of the sanctuary, and placed it in the center of the massive tabletop. Then, he turned slowly and walked back to his assigned station. In an almost mechanical fashion, the Magus snapped back into place and pressed his hands together over his navel in the same way the rest of his colleagues had been standing throughout the ceremony.

As soon as Aabesh was back in position, the Magustus Supreme tapped his scepter on the floor as a signal for the congregation to gather around the altar. Again, according to the established order, each Magus started walking to their predetermined spot at the altar. All the while, they held their hands in front of their navels. The Magustus Supreme followed the procession and assumed the center position at the head of the altar. When they had all settled into their posts, the Magustus Supreme paused, and looked piercingly at each man around the altar until he had made eye contact with all of them.

He raised both arms into the air, his scepter clutched in his right hand. His eyes rolled up, to the highest point of the ceiling, and in a booming voice, he declared, "In accordance with sacred law, we have purified our souls. And so, we beseech thee, Eternal Guardians. Make each of your servants here tonight, tools by which your wills are served!"

The Taker of Souls then lowered his arms and looked down at a golden ladle that had been placed deliberately on the left side of the bowl. He reached down and picked it up with his left hand, dipped it into the blood, and then proceeded to pour a small amount into each of the twelve goblets. The blood mixed together with the golden mead that had already been poured. When the task was complete, the Magustus wiped the ladle clean with a silk serviette and then returned the utensil to its original place upon the altar.

Then he looked around at the rest of the Magi and said, "Let us partake in the elixir before us, as instruments of the Gods. We offer our humble gratitude for their blessings," and with that, each Magus picked up their goblet and drank all of its contents in a single swig.

Illian was dumbfounded to say the least. He found it difficult to believe that everything he had just witnessed was not just some strange nightmare. While he had heard about human sacrifices being made in the Great Temple before, he had never imagined that he would be present to witness one. A sense of shock numbed the boy's mind, and he grew increasingly uncomfortable with the prolonged silence, which filled the air after the Magi swallowed their elixir. Illian felt quite queasy as he continued to observe from the shadows.

Each of the Magi closed their eyes. A few of them rocked back and forth, as if they were in a hypnotic trance. Others let out a slight humming sound from in between their lips. Most of them, however, were as still and hushed as the corpse in the center of the twelve-pointed star. The unbearable silence continued to grow until Illian was sure that his own heart was going to beat out of his chest, and just when he thought he was about to jump out of his skin, the Magustus Supreme inhaled deeply.

The man held his breath for a few seconds, and then exhaled slowly. As he did, he directed his breath to flow evenly between his halfway open mouth, and upward through his sinuses. The resulting sound echoed audibly throughout the room, and Illian swore that within the sound, he heard the words, "Now go!" In any event, the boy was immediately thrown into action a moment later when the Magustus Supreme snapped his

eyes open, and looked so fiercely into Illian's eyes from across the sanctuary that for a split second, the boy felt as though he was standing face to face with the powerful leader. There was no question in his mind that his cue to depart had just been given.

He sprang to his feet and ran so fast toward the drainage channel that he was never quite sure whether or not his feet ever actually touched the ground. Indeed, for a split-second, when Illian thought he was already running with all his might, he stuck his belly out in front of him just a little further, and allowed the butterflies inside to pull him along even faster. He shuttled down, through the drainage tunnels, into the sewer, and finally back onto the streets of Catal. With each stride that carried him further away from the temple, the boy felt slightly safer from the penetrating gaze of the Magustus Supreme. He scurried into the nearest alleyway, where he knew a shortcut that would lead him straight to the Dragonfire Lodge, where he had some juicy rumors to spread.