

Free Will

Biende labored with the other workers, helping to clear the drainage culvert below the temple side-entrance road. The smallest boys would pull the detritus free, crawling into the pipe because they could. The rest of them would toss what was passed out into the river flowing along the road, to be carried away by the current.

High above, several sentinels drifted on warm currents of air, leathery wings outstretched and compound eyes always watching. One sun was nearly down, with just a sliver of it casting orange light across the desert dunes, but the other, smaller one was still well above the horizon.

Their Overseer stood near the wagon that had brought them all here, his bird-mask pushed up on his bald pate and sweat streaming down his face. He held his bladed staff upright, and made the best use of the nearest staccato shadow from the colonnade marching along the stone pavement out to the Great Road.

Biende had moved through this day like every other day. He needed something, and so far it had not presented itself. He knew Aya was inside the temple in the slave pens, and would eventually be a sacrificed to the Ancient Ones that descended once each moon-phase to feed. Not that such a fate was any better than the Priest's ritual table.

He was running out of time, if he was going to get a chance to see his sister again.

Then, wrapped in a handful of bloody ritual rags encased in the slime that coated everything exiting the temple this way, he found a sharp sliver of metal. The bundle had been handed out to him by one of the boys in the clay pipe for disposal.

Now given a tool he had been hoping for, he didn't hesitate.

He extracted it, and then charged up the embankment, dropping the rags behind him. He knew speed was the only thing that would give him a chance, aside from his other ability.

The Overseer saw him coming, and brandished his staff, the tip starting to glow with the white energy they could conjure. He began his swing as the blade took on the white energy. Rather than the white beam the staff could project, he was anticipating when the bondsman running towards him would clear the top of the incline leading up from the river. He wanted a close-in kill, it seemed.

Biende shifted, and the world became a monochromatic version of itself as his body moved into what he thought of as the sideways space. He had been able to do this for as long as he could remember. He thought it might be unique to him, but he didn't know for sure. Then he leaped.

The charged staff passed through him with no resistance as he brought the metal sliver around and down. He willed himself back into the world, color returning to it just in time to slam the sharp end of the metal piece he held into the neck of the Overseer. Blood fountained outward as he collided with the big man, knocking him back against the wagon, his own mass fully present once more.

Biende was lean and wiry. The excavation pits had seen to that. His slight rebound off of the swarthy man now both drowning in his own blood as well as losing it out onto the stone pavement put him back on his feet. He snatched the staff from the man's weakening grip even as the bird-mask was forced down onto the dying face by his slide down the sidewall of the wagon.

He was moving again as soon as he'd liberated it, racing across the road to the steps up to the temple entrance. It yawned blackly in the late afternoon light. The single guard stationed there was in

motion as well, having observed what had just happened. His curved sword was out of its sheath, held before him even as the distance between them closed.

Biende was a slave. He had no idea how the Overseers made their white lightning. But he could throw. Granted, this wasn't tossing ore-rich rock fragments down into the transport wagons to avoid having to walk them the distance between. Yet it *was* like slinging wood splinters at clay targets in the camps, an activity that functioned as a tiny diversion from the horrific life each of his kind led. It was a game for the livestock.

One was strength, one was accuracy. The last was hatred.

He hurled the staff overhand with everything he had of all three.

It pierced through the silver breast-plate the guard wore just left of the center of his chest, and continued on, bursting out through the metal at the back. It nearly arrested all of the guard's forward motion, and he collapsed on the temple steps.

From up above, he could hear the keening of the sentinels, the sound of their cries growing louder as they descended. He imagined the Ancient Ones would hear them as well, and perhaps one or two of them would come down from their high place too. He doubted it though. The actions of a single rebellious slave would be left to the tiny beings that served them on the ground.

What did it matter? He only wanted to see Aya one more time before they were consumed by this terrible world. He knew his fate was already determined, but that didn't mean he wouldn't fight it.

Biende wasted no time. He scooped up the fallen guard's sword, and charged into the dim interior of the temple entrance. He could see the sunlight illuminating the huge, open Atrium located in the center of the temple glowing at the end of this high stone hallway.

There was only one other figure visible, but even in the low ambient light, Biende could tell it was a Priest. The black robe with the cowl over the head even in the afternoon heat was quite familiar to him. He felt fear for the first time, but his rage increased more than enough to hold it at bay. He was fortunate in that the Priest was walking towards the Atrium instead of him. The dark figure was holding his golden scepter upright, using it as a walking stick.

Biende sprinted faster, brandishing a weapon he had never used before, but had seen used against countless like himself. Bearing witness had become its own instruction.

The Priest must have heard the scuffing of his bare feet on the stone of the floor and started to turn, but too late.

The slave swung the sword as he reached the Priest.

There was a deep exultation in him now. He knew he had little chance to actually make it to the pens and see his sister again, but each step forward was his way to scream at a world in which he and those he loved meant nothing.

He put it all into the motion. Aiming for where the cowl met the top of the robe, the blade sliced through the thick fabric and deep into the neck within. It hit something solid and caught, Biende's momentum past the now-toppling body ripping the hilt out of his hands but helping to halt his own impetus. He kept his feet this time too, and reached down for the sword again even as the body hit the stones and blood ran black out across them. It would not come free, and he had no time to struggle with it.

Biende picked up the scepter instead. He had no idea what he would do with it, but it was the only thing available. As with the Overseer's staff, the knowledge of how the Priests could make the

jagged blue fire that was their caste's version of what they used to punish or kill was unavailable to him. It would be just one more thing to swing at an obstacle in his way.

Then he was running again, arms pumping and the scepter in one hand articulating the same motion. He could see the vast open floor of the Atrium, as well as the shadow of the closest sentinel growing in size on its sanded floor. It would land soon, and if he couldn't get to the stairs leading down into the lower levels before it did, it was over. The scepter slipped slightly in his grip, and he felt a depression in the round surface slide into alignment with his thumb.

There had been a few moments on his path through this adversarial life where he'd managed to convert intuition to action to his benefit. The first that he could remember had been using his ability to shift to limit the damage of the foreman's whip. Even as a boy, he'd had to work in the pits, though his parents were both scribes in the temple. The chattel of the Ancient Ones was made to fulfill whatever function those elevated above decided. He'd been able to diminish the pain of the lashings by partially easing into the sideways space. He couldn't escape it entirely, because blood was necessary to show evidence of their enforced incentive.

He and Aya did have the advantage of being able to understand the glyphs, because their parents had made sure that they could in the short time they'd been allowed to all live together. Families were labor farms, though, and thus short-lived. Biende had wondered many times if the understanding of anything in this world made any difference for someone in his lowly position. He didn't know for sure, but perhaps he was living that difference out right now.

Two temple guards rounded the corner into the hallway ahead even as the sand in the Atrium began to stir, and Biende could hear the wing-beats of the sentinel behind the alien screams it made. They each brandished the same type of sword he'd just used on the Priest.

There was nothing in him to halt, or slow. He'd meet this as it was.

Goodbye, Aya.

He thrust the scepter out before him, pointing the head of it at the two men on a collision course with him. He pressed his thumb down into the depression with all his grip strength, and hoped.

Blue filaments arced from the tip of the scepter, and intercepted the two. Limned in blue light, they twitched fitfully even as they crashed to the stone floor, sliding to a stop as each reached the end of their accumulated forward motion.

Biende didn't halt his sprint. He'd won this bit by luck, but two men were nothing compared to a sentinel, and he didn't think he had enough time. Even he knew the Priest's blue magic had no effect on the agents of the Ancient Ones. He thought to cast the scepter aside and retrieve another sword as he passed between the two fallen guards, but didn't.

He reached the end of the hallway even as the large serpentine form above passed below the top of the temple roof. Its taloned feet were outstretched to meet with the ground, and the nightmare face was orienting itself towards him as its wings blew sand into the air.

Biende knew he had seconds to make the turn, and cross the fifteen strides to the stairs. Hope began to fade, but he put what little was left into his pace. He turned the corner, and could see the broad stairs that led downward just ahead.

He had been able to plan this only because he was part of one of the temple work crews. He had been down to the pens before. When a pen had been cleared, its occupants herded off to the sacrificial

tables or an Atrium feeding of the gods of this world, what was left was their filth that had to be raked out and then new sand brought in. A virgin floor for the next group of souls already lost.

The sharp claws settled into the sand, and Biende knew time was up. The screeches of the sentinels were cautionary reminders while aloft, but once the beasts were in contact with the ground, they were deadly. He could hear the beginnings of one, and the pain in his head was instant.

He shifted, and the agony was gone. He continued his sprint through a gray version of what was ahead of him.

Biende had never been the focus of a sentinel's auditory ire before, but he had seen what happened when you were. There was paralysis and then death, blood running from eyes, ears, and mouth. It only took a few seconds, and could be delivered with incredible accuracy. He'd seen a single slave slaughtered this way, and those nearby unaffected. It was Ancient Ones' magic, he supposed.

He could only hold himself in the sideways space for five slow heart-beats before it cast him back. He did have the option to return by will alone before that limit, but knew he'd need to stay in it to the end this time. He had to get underground before he re-entered the world, or he would succumb to the fate the sentinel would impose on him.

That was an assumption on his part, though. His few observations of it indicated it was line of sight, but he could certainly be wrong. He'd know the answer quite soon.

He reached the stairs and began to descend even as he lost his grip on the sideways space, and was thrown back into the real world. As color washed back in, though muted in the shadow of the stairwell, the pain returned for an instant but then ceased as he continued downward. The sound of it did follow him, but it was the same as when they were in the sky above.

He'd made it, and he'd been right.

It was too bad that he wouldn't ultimately survive to pass that information on.

He was nearly to the bottom when the light dimmed dramatically in the stairwell, and he knew what that meant. The sentinel's body was too big to follow him down here, but the head would fit. He shifted once again, before the deadly cry began this time.

Then he was down on the slave pen floor, almost slipping on the sanded stone before he could turn aside, out of sight of the monster above and safe from its killing voice.

The chamber was large, and lit by glowing glass globes that dotted the high walls at regular intervals. There were five pens. Four equidistant, vertical stone walls rose to the ceiling, and ran to the back wall of the chamber, establishing the interior space of each one. Horizontal ironwood slats that were spaced about a hand-width apart fronted each the entire height of the chamber. All five pens had a large gate made from the same material.

Each pen contained about a hundred slaves.

Biende knew there were three Overseers that guarded the chamber at any one time. He was fortunate one more time, because the two closest were running towards him, close together. He raised the Priest's scepter, and forced himself out of the sideways space.

Blue lightning intercepted the two, and each duplicated what had happened to the two guards in the hallway above. He could see the third, farther away, raising his staff though.

Biende could feel himself weakening. Whatever chemical that filled his blood when fear or anger came was now depleted, and shifting did not come without a physical cost. He'd never done so much of it in such a limited amount of time. It felt like he'd been running forever, though he knew it had actually

been not that long at all. It was as if each step had grown slightly wider in succession, until his stride could no longer bridge the distance at his initial speed.

Yet there was only one more obstacle standing in front of him, and he would *not* be denied when he was this close. He *would* say goodbye to her face.

He shifted again just as the Overseer's staff spat its straight white line of fire in his direction. It passed through him as he held himself safely in the sideways space, still running as fast as his body would allow. He knew he just needed a second or two to not be in its stream, so he changed his trajectory to one side for a few steps and then instantly broke the other way.

He passed out of the beam, willed himself back into this awful version of the world, and used the scepter for the last time.

Several things happened at once.

The last Overseer, surrounded by the blue aura, began to crumple.

Where the blue filaments met the white beam, the intersection flashed red.

The scepter began to vibrate in his hand.

Biende reacted, casting the scepter aside even as he skidded to a stop. In mid-air, it exploded at the same time the Overseer's staff did. The explosions sent bits of each in all directions. Biende felt a host of tiny impacts on his exposed flesh. They were painful, but not enough to stop him. Not this close.

He forced himself into motion again, turning toward the pens.

Dirty faces were staring at him through the gaps in the ironwood slats, hands gripping the wood lower down. There was silence in the chamber.

The pen farthest from the Atrium above was for the rituals. These slaves were rarely fed, as only their blood was needed. The other four were the livestock. They ate well, until they didn't anymore. His work crew had been cleaning out the one next to the ritual pen when he'd seen his sister for the first time in more moon-phases than he could remember at the front of the center pen. She had recognized him, her eyes had widened, and her mouth was opening to speak when he shook his head slightly. Her mouth closed, and she nodded, though he could see tears forming in her eyes. She'd lifted one hand, palm out, but only visible through a gap in the slats. He'd given her the tiniest of nods. And so, the fire in him had been lit.

Now, Biende made his way as quickly as his exhaustion would allow to the center pen where he'd last seen his sister, calling her name.

"Aya! Aya!"

As he reached it, there was a commotion just to the Atrium side of the pen gate. He could hear her before he saw her.

"Biende!"

She appeared as two other slaves at the front parted to allow it. Aya held the hand of another girl, younger than her, and both looked out at him. Aya spoke.

"Brother! How-?"

He interrupted her.

"No time. I needed to say goodbye. Do you remember when Father showed us the forbidden book?"

She nodded, and reached her free hand out to clasp his. He continued.

"Maybe those glyphs are right. Maybe there's another version of the world after this one."

He could hear shouts and footsteps. He looked over his shoulder, and saw temple guards pouring out from the stairs and charging towards him, swords unsheathed.

He turned back to her.

"I hope it's true. I love you, dear sister."

"And I you, brother."

He wanted more time. More time for words. More time to hold his sister's hand. All the time a family might have if this life wasn't what it was.

He could hear running footsteps getting closer.

Then something occurred to him. He asked her, doubting she would understand, but it was all he had.

"Can you go sideways?"

Aya frowned at first, but then her eyes opened wide, and she nodded. He squeezed her hand.

"Now."

He shifted, knowing it would only give them another five long heart-beats, even if it worked.

He was wrong.

They were in the gray space only long enough for it to register that they were, but the resistance it normally held wasn't there. The force that always threw him back was absent.

Then, the temple was gone, and the three of them stood on the desert sand. The second sun was nearer the horizon now, but Biende could see the river and the ironwood trees that lined its bank. He looked up at an empty sky. No sentinels were circling, and no hazy, immense shapes drifted far above where they would have been. There was no Great Road, no extraction towers in the distance at the edge of the excavation pits that were no longer there either.

It was all gone.

He turned his attention back to his sister, and the girl she still held by her other hand. They were both looking around like he had been. He was still sorting the implications, but one thing was clear.

"Aya. I want you to stand right here, and do not move."

Both girls focused back on him. Aya asked,

"What? Why?"

"We need to mark this spot, so when we go back, we'll know where." He pointed at the other girl. "You *brought* her with us. Understand?"

He turned to his sister's friend, and smiled at her.

"Greetings, whoever you are."

The girl looked back at him, obviously confused. But she did respond.

"I'm Bey."

Biende returned his attention to Aya. She nodded that she did comprehend.

He went to the river and gathered some stones, then made his way back to the two girls. He placed a number of them in a line that ran just in front of them, extending as far as he could with the stones he had with the exception of two. These he placed on the girls' side of the line.

He stood. Aya turned to Bey, and said,

"Go to the river. Get some water. Bathe if you want. You're safe now. We'll return soon."

Bey nodded, still looking overcome by recent events. She stepped over the line of rocks, and started towards the river. She then hesitated and looked back, but Aya flapped a hand at her, urging her on.

Biende took Bey's place next to his sister, and grasped her hand. He spoke.

"We won't be able to save very many, you know."

Aya squeezed his hand and responded, sounding like their father.

"Any is better than none."

They shifted back.