

Toxic Parley

Tension gnawed at Jaco. The alley was dark, and the desert wind was hot and burning on his skin. He fidgeted with his camera, waiting. The baleful wind snaked around him and he paused to adjust his sandshades. The last thing he needed tonight was razor-edged grit in his eyes.

“Are you ready, Beltrus?” The whisper came from his left. R’chelle Darlos crouched beside him in the filthy alley, clutching a microphone in her diminutive fist. She flashed him a reassuring grin. “We’ve covered stories in sketchier locations than this.”

“It’s not the location that bothers me.” Jaco took a steadying breath. “Have you ever confronted a Forest Prophet before?”

“Don’t you mean a *back-alley* prophet?” R’chelle replied, using the unflattering nickname favored by most Caorranians. Her shoulders rose and fell in a casual shrug. “They’re more annoying than dangerous. Nobody takes their doomsday theories seriously.”

Jaco kept his opinion to himself. The back alleys of Caorran were familiar territory to him. He’d grown up in the tenements adjacent to the industrial Traig-Saogal District; she hadn’t.

R’chelle craned her neck. “I hear footsteps.”

Jaco rose to his feet, pasting his left eye to the camera viewfinder. A solitary figure shuffled toward them under the silvery light of the twin moons. R’chelle edged in front of Jaco, eager for the surprise interview. He wished he could shield her behind his body, but he knew better. R’chelle Darlos was fearless, a feisty journalist who liked to live on the edge.

A tall figure came into focus, muffled in the tawny robes of the Forest religion. His head was covered by the coarse-woven cowl traditionally worn by the Forest Prophets, oddly coupled with a pair of modern sandshades like the ones worn by Jaco and R’chelle. The robed figure halted abruptly as he caught sight of them. He kept a wary distance, the fingers of one hand clenched around a long wooden staff.

Jaco took three long strides forward, and R’chelle darted in front of him, aiming her microphone at the cowed face.

“R’chelle Darlos, Channel Five News.” Her voice raised a hollow echo in the alley’s narrow confines. “I’d like to hear your thoughts on the new bylaw restricting back-alley prophets from the public square.”

“Channel Five News?” The prophet lifted the edge of his cowl and spat on the pavement. “The media are pawns of the Assembly—the howling dogs of your blind leaders. Traitors, all; you have forsaken the Forest.”

Jaco kept filming, but placed a cautionary hand on R’chelle’s shoulder. “Easy, Chelle,” he said *sotto voce*. “They call themselves *faidh*, not back-alley prophets.”

His words seemed to incense the faidh. “How dare you address her in such cavalier fashion? You are her Left Hand, nothing more. I forbid you to touch her again!”

R’chelle barked a humorless laugh. “Jaco’s not my Left Hand; we’re co-workers—equal partners. Your repressive caste system has been dead and gone for over a decade. And good riddance.”

The faidh leaped at her with an inarticulate cry, snatching the microphone from her hand. Jaco shoved between them, and the faidh brought his staff down on the camera with a sickening *crack*.

Jaco had expected such a tactic, and allowed the camera to slide from his shoulder, using its momentum to spin in a tight circle. His boot caught the faidh in his unprotected midriff. The back-alley prophet collapsed to the pavement, trading his outraged howl for a series of wheezing gasps.

His staff slipped from his fingers; Jaco kicked it out of reach. He whirled to face R’chelle. “He may not be alone. It’s best if we go.”

She grinned as if nothing had happened. “Did you get a good close-up? We got some great sound-bites.”

Jaco shook his head, in equal parts worry and admiration. “You’re incorrigible.”

R’chelle winked as she retrieved her microphone from the grimy pavement. “All in a night’s work.” She wiped the microphone against her trousers and sauntered back the way they came.

Jaco scooped up his camera bag and snugged the camera inside. He stole one last glance at the fallen faidh—hunched on hands and knees as he emptied his stomach on the concrete—and hurried after R’chelle.

Spy for Hire

“Do you understand the terms of your assignment?” Senator Adrán’s haughty expression was the perfect match for his imperious tone.

Daenag Sarko kept his face carefully neutral. He was a career *glausadan*—a listener-in-secret—and well-versed in dealing with the arrogant attitudes of those who paid for his services.

“Yes, of course,” he replied smoothly, with a carefully-cultivated nod. Senators like Lor Adrán—the Assembly’s Public Relations spokesperson—could be won over by subtle signs of deference. Hence Daenag’s calculated nod. “It’s a natural extension of this afternoon’s exercise at the Alternative Energy Research Center.”

Adrán watched him closely. “Ah, yes, you visited AERC today, didn’t you?” The Senator’s question was rhetorical and Daenag knew better than to respond. “Do you have anything to add to Meyrad’s report?”

Again, those watchful, calculating eyes.

“Nothing beyond what Meyrad’s already told you,” Daenag replied, clasping his hands behind his back. He elected to focus on the bare facts. “The researchers on the second floor are compartmentalized; they have no idea or interest in what’s being done with their work.” He dared a casual shrug. “I’ve been there several times, and built connections with several of them. I haven’t heard any suspicions about the project. No guarded inquiries. No whispers around the water cooler. As for the project itself . . .”

“Go on,” Adrán said when Daenag hesitated. “What do you think of the project?”

A nervous spasm shot up Daenag’s spine. *Be careful.* “The project remains unknown to me, sir.” He caught the shrewd look Adrán shot his way and dared to confront the older man’s suspicions. “I’m a seasoned *glausadan*, sir. You don’t last long in this profession if you can’t follow the rules.”

Or keep a secret, he added silently.

Adrán’s probing gaze was unchanged. “Are the main floor workers as disengaged as the researchers?”

Daenag was prepared for the question. “All proper non-disclosure protocols are consistently followed.” He hesitated again and Adrán was swift to pounce—just as Daenag had hoped.

“But there’s something else. What did you pick up on, Sarko? Disloyalty?”

“No, sir.” Daenag shook his head, exhaling slowly. “Fear.” He left the word dangling between them for a deliberate moment. “The harnesses and safety protocols are strictly adhered to, but it appears to be common knowledge that some scientists will never return to their former jobs.” He schooled himself to meet the Senator’s gaze without flinching. “The project remains unknown to me,” he repeated firmly. “But I can tell when people are scared.”

The door to Adrán’s office opened to admit Tehl Meyrad, the Senator’s most recently-hired consultant. Daenag considered himself an expert at finding connections with people—it came with the job—but there was something about Meyrad that put his nerves on edge.

Also blatantly obvious: Meyrad had no use for him, either.

“It’s time for the interview.” Meyrad came straight to the point. “Channel Five News is waiting in the office next to the press room. It’s their hotshot reporter—R’chelle Darlos—and her cameraman.”

“Jacotan Beltrus,” Daenag said quietly. He caught Meyrad’s irritated glance. “They’re my assignment; learning their names is just common sense.”

Senator Adrán cleared his throat. “Let’s not keep Channel Five waiting.”

Meyrad pivoted on his heel and left the office. Adrán turned at the door to favor Daenag with an imperious glare. “R’chelle Darlos and her Left Hand are your most important assignment. Don’t screw this up, Sarko.”

Daenag allowed himself a confident smile. “Don’t worry, Senator. You’ve hired the best.”

Mar-Kryn of Dilleag-Lusán

“You seem troubled, Mar-Kryn.” Árd-Shagar’s gravelly voice interrupted her reverie. He peered at her with obsidian-dark eyes, one gnarled hand wrapped around his wooden staff.

Mar-Kryn lifted her head, gazing at him through half-lidded eyes. Among the Forest Prophets, she alone was tall enough to look the Árd in the eye. “It was a memory, Shagar, of an era long past.” Her hands tightened in a painful spasm around her bonemask. “Before the Desert Spirits set their teeth against Leaf and Branch.”

The wall-mounted torches lit the Árd’s face in a flickering pattern of light and shadow. His head dipped in a solemn nod, and the lines in his weathered face seemed to deepen. “And what did the Forest reveal to you, Bearer of Memories?”

Mar-Kryn swallowed with difficulty, battered by a sudden desire to be in the Forest’s central glade. Not in this accursed cellar. Not near the venomous black mist hovering just above the room’s earthen floor.

“I stood upon the slopes above Caorran,” she said, her husky contralto raising a faint echo. She closed her eyes, recalling the vision’s details. “Long before it became the capital city. Caorran, then only a small village on the shores of Saogal Bay.” She inhaled deeply, scenting the malodorous rot emanating from the mist. “I heard a voice behind me. I was powerless to turn and see who spoke, but the words ...” A tremor ran down her spine, like one of the quick-footed desert lizards. “It was the ancient war rune,” she said hoarsely. “The Eve of Battle—proclaimed aloud for the very first time.”

Her face hardened. It was all she could do to restrain herself from spitting at the malevolent mist. “The dark portal of What Lurks Below was there, as well. The ancient battle was won ...” The words caught in her throat.

The Árd donned his bonemask, peering at her through the carved eye slits. “And yet the mist has reappeared.” He clutched his staff, the veins in his hand standing out in sharp relief. “Caorran’s contempt for the ways of the Forest has invited its return.”

Mar-Kryn glared at the odious mist, resisting its hypnotic appeal, its attempt to lure her into its flesh-eating embrace. She spoke, her voice tinged with resolve and bitterness. “The Caorranians shrug and say it is ‘only climate change.’ The fools have no idea what they’ve unleashed.” She met Shagar’s gaze and slipped her bonemask on. “I will not yield our Realm without a fight.”

Árd-Shagar smiled grimly. “All of Dilleag-Lusán stands with you, Bearer of Memories.”

Chapter One

The unnatural color of the sky caught Jaco's attention the moment he stepped outside. The saffron-tinged sunlight threw everything within sight—clouds, buildings, foliage—into sharp, brassy relief. He paused at the foot of the Legislative Assembly's wide steps, gazing at the buildings on the opposite side of Darrasan Way. Sunlight glared back at him, reflected in each and every window, like a searchlight probing for fugitives.

He raised a hand to shield his eyes. His reflexive gesture had little effect.

The climate crisis is only getting worse, he thought, squinting between his fingers. He shifted the camera bag's weight on his shoulder. A vague sense of foreboding gnawed at him, adding to his frustration over their failed interview. *The Assembly refuses to admit or confirm anything, but people aren't stupid. Everyone knows this isn't just another "unfortunate dry season."*

"Jacotan Beltrus, are you *trying* to go blind? Why don't you get yourself a proper set of sandshades?" The half-serious rebuke came from the top of the steps behind him. He glanced over his shoulder at the familiar voice, bemused to hear the formal version of his name.

"Hey, Chelle." He acknowledged her with a tired nod. "Are you offering me yours?"

R'chelle Darlos raised a hand to her face as a wind squall snaked around them, burning hot and desert-dry. "Get your own," she replied, her voice already hoarse. "One of these days the damage will catch up to you."

She pulled her fangtop over her thick hair as she jogged down the wide portico. Jaco ducked his head as the scorching wind raked his skin with a layer of razor-edged grit. *Another symptom of the crisis.*

R'chelle cupped one hand beside her face, tucking her hair inside her fangtop with the other. She shot a glare over her shoulder at the colonnaded Assembly.

"How did our interview turn into a propaganda piece?" She faced him squarely. "Or did our silver-tongued Senator Adrán manage to convince you there's no—what did he call it—ecological emergency?"

Jaco shook his head in disgust, slipping his sandshades on. The brassy glare was reduced to a jaundiced discoloration, and the muscles around his eyes relaxed.

"I'm not as gullible as Adrán likes to think," he replied, his voice mild in contrast to the annoyance he felt. He tugged his fangtop lower, grateful for the tough fabric protecting the back of his neck. "And if it's not an ecological emergency, I don't know what else to call it. 'Crisis' comes to mind. Or maybe imminent catastrophe." He waved a hand at the nearest building across the scenic boulevard: the central headquarters of Caorran's police force, the Longbow Division. "Look at the sun's reflection. That's not the color it used to be. The atmospheric changes aren't going away. If anything, they're getting worse."

R'chelle followed his pointing finger, her gaze lingering on the statue of an ancient longbowman, traditional guardian of the old feudal aristocracy. "Changes? What changes?" Her voice sounded less hoarse. "Are you contradicting Senator Adrán again?"

They'd worked together long enough for him to know when she was being sarcastic. He shifted the camera bag on his shoulder. The camera's weight was manageable, but the lighting stands and paraphernalia added up. Their employer, Channel Five News, was generous in supplying its journalistic teams with state-of-the-art gear, but the bag was heavy.

"What a waste of time," R'chelle said, not waiting for his response. "It was like shooting arrows at a stone wall." She threw her hands up in disgust. "The climate crisis was the only reason for wrangling a meeting with Adrán in the first place. Why else would we interview the Assembly's Public Relations spokesperson?"

Jaco faked a cough to cover his laugh. "I think you meant to say 'mouthpiece of bureaucratic stonewalling.' In my off-the-record opinion, of course."

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "I wasn't expecting him to spill everything he knows. But I was hoping he'd at least give me *something*. I tried every angle I could think of ..." Her voice trailed off as another gust of wind strafed them with stinging force.

Jaco resisted the urge to wipe his face; he'd only scrape the grit deeper into his already-raw skin. "It's like the Senator knew what you were going to say before you'd asked a single question." He shook his head, irritated by the memory of Adrán's condescending attitude. "He probably employs a whole team of office drones, like his 'consultant' Meyrad, to anticipate and obfuscate."

R'chelle hunched her shoulders against the wind. "I wish I could say you're being paranoid, but you're probably right. And don't let Meyrad get under your skin—he's a pompous jerk. I heard him call you my 'Left Hand,' as if the caste system still existed."

Jaco replied with a self-deprecating shrug. "Just because I carry the gear, while you conduct the interview ..."

R'chelle took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "C'mon, let's get out of this wind. I want to take a look at the footage you shot."

Jaco gestured to his right, pointing out the nearby Traig-Saogal District. "How about one of the alehouses down by the docks? I heard there's a new one—just opened—where they bake their *bonachais* fresh every day. They say it's the best cheese-bread in Caorran."

The bayside district was a fixture from his childhood. The thought of a loaf of fresh-baked *bonachais* by the Stórren Sea awakened a twinge of nostalgia.

R'chelle laughed, shaking her head in mock exasperation. "I'm not getting caught in the after-shift zoo in the Traig. I enjoy the ocean as much as anyone, but I can do without the exotic scent of dock workers after a long day in the hot sun."

Jaco conceded with a grin, facing the opposite direction. "Let me guess. You're about to suggest the Talking Tree?"

R'chelle adjusted her sandshades with a satisfied look. "You know me so well." She stiffened, her cheery demeanor fading. "We'd better move. It's about to get ugly about a block from here."

Jaco glanced over his shoulder, curious. On the far side of Darrasan Way, the cause of her concern was immediately obvious. Two members of the Longbow Division, their dark green garb easily recognizable, faced off with a solitary individual. The fugitive's tawny robes and masking cowl stood out in sharp contrast to the Bowmen's uniforms. Pedestrians darted out of the way, giving the confrontation a wide berth.

"Another back-alley prophet." R'chelle made no effort to hide her annoyance, assigning the colloquial—if unflattering—nickname to the robed troublemaker, now gesticulating wildly with both arms. "I'm sick of them harassing people with their doomsday prophecies. It's about time the Longbow Division did something."

"The Bowmen will enforce the new bylaw," Jaco replied, his voice and expression neutral. "The Division is serious about keeping the *faidh* in the back alleys."

"Where they belong," she muttered, scowling behind her sandshades.

The dispute drew attention from a parade of brightly-painted taxis. Many cabbies slowed, honking their horns to protest the Division's treatment of the back-alley prophet. Jaco shook his head, unsurprised. The self-proclaimed mystics enjoyed a favorable reputation among the common folk—the *chaesáni*—which only complicated matters.

He shifted his camera bag. "Is it worth shooting some footage of this?"

R'chelle considered his suggestion for a half-second before shaking her head. "Another story about how annoying the back-alley prophets are? That's been old news for months. Channel Five won't air it. Let's get out of here."

They turned their backs to the clash between Bowmen and *faidh*, ducking their heads against the wind-driven sand.

Chapter Two

Mar-Kryn pivoted in a slow circle in the Forest's central clearing, studying the highest branches. The sleeves of her robe slipped down her up-held arms, and the desert wind attacked, lacerating her hands and wrists with stinging grit. She ignored the pain, continuing her circle ritual without flinching. She was a *faidh*—a forest prophet of Dilleag-Lusán. She refused to cower before the fangs of the desert.

“Leaf and Branch.” Her husky voice carried above the punishing wind, the rustling leaves, the groaning branches. The traditional words carried power—she felt it in her bones. “Leaf and Branch, reveal the wisdom of the Forest. The desert spirits advance, their fangs ravaging the Green Earth.”

A pang of grief stabbed at the priestess as she surveyed the damaged trees. The highest branches told the somber tale of gradual deterioration—the desert spirits whittling away at the Forest, season after season. Mar-Kryn shared the Green Earth's pain as the Forest shrank, year by year.

She shuffled her bare feet as she resumed her circle ritual, finding a measure of comfort in the lush grass. She squinted through the narrow slits in her bonemask, listening to the razor-tipped wind as it hissed against her traditional garb.

“*Coillé kord-ach*—Forest, protect us. Koriad the Devourer threatens all life on the Green Earth. Send your life-giving rains upon Dilleag-Lusán once again.” She lowered her arms as she completed the invocation, her hands now protected by her long-sleeved robe.

The wind tugged at her cowl, but the spiteful sand failed to penetrate the coarse fabric. The cowl was a concession to the adversarial climate, but her bonemask represented a long-held tradition among the *faidh*. The intricate design of her bonemask was symbolic of her one-ness with the Forest. She'd invested hours in its precise carving, using the traditional tools of her ancestors.

The common people—the uneducated and superstitious *chaesáni*—whispered among themselves, conjuring all manner of dire omens to explain the design she'd chosen. Their foolish imaginings were of no concern to her.

Mar-Kryn shuffled her feet, pivoting to face each point of the compass. Her gaze never left the treetops. Dark messengers whispered on the wind, voices she dared not ignore.

She continued her gradual revolution, absorbing the sights, scents, and whispers of the Forest. The desert spirits mocked her in the hissing wind, taunting her as they feasted upon the Green Earth, leaving a barren wilderness in their wake.

She paused at the end of her second circuit. The burning wind had succeeded in muzzling the Forest's voice, stealing from her the wisdom of the Green Earth. She balked at the bitter taste of defeat, fists clenched in silent frustration. She had been an accomplished athlete before joining the monastery. Even

today, she stood taller and stronger among her peers, a fierce competitor turned crusader. Her inability to pierce the desert's smothering cloak was galling.

She was aware of the young novice behind her, watching from the cover of the underbrush. He'd crept closer during her circle ritual, not realizing the mere scent of his animal presence had betrayed his approach.

"I sense you, young one." Mar-Kryn's voice resonated like an ocean wave breaking on the shore. "You disturb my ritual—why?"

"I meant no disrespect, Mar-Kryn," the novice replied hastily. She did not need to turn to know he bowed his head as he spoke. His act of deference was appropriate when invoking her Title.

She recognized his voice—Keros, a name he'd been given when he first arrived at the monastery, as was their custom. Mar-Kryn had never revealed her true name to him. Many years had passed since she'd spoken it to anyone.

An uncomfortable silence followed. She waited for him to remember that the faidh never asked any question twice. If he failed to learn even these basic things—Mar-Kryn had little patience for the foolish.

"The desert spirits creep ever closer," Keros said at last. His voice quivered, reminding the priestess of a mouse's frightened squeak. "Surely the gnashing of their fangs is not hidden from you."

She lowered her head, her bonemask allowing her only a truncated glimpse of the green carpet beneath her feet. *The desert spirits.* Her mouth twisted to form a humorless smile. She was both amused and annoyed by his undisguised anxiety. *The desert spirits are only the harbinger of what is to follow.*

Mar-Kryn angled her bonemask until she caught sight of him. Keros sheltered beneath the trees, shielded from the worst of the wind. Unlike the Titled faidh, his bonemask bore no runes. His cowl was pushed back, and the bonemask did little to conceal his fearful expression. He would not venture to join Mar-Kryn in the clearing without her invitation.

She was not inclined to extend it to one so consumed by cowardice.

Keros ran a tongue over his parched lips. "The cities—even Caorran itself—feel the fangs of the desert." His voice was unsteady, and Mar-Kryn thought she detected a matching tremor in his hands. "Many travelers have said so. Can you doubt it? Long has it been since I have seen anything green and growing beyond Dilleag-Lusán."

Caorran. Mar-Kryn chewed on the bitter thought. *The ancient capitol city. Corrupt refuge for those who have forsaken the ways of the Forest—the faithless brathad.*

Caorran's leaders had grown increasingly brazen in recent years, abandoning and then despising the teachings of the forest prophets. Despite their apostasy, the sprawling capitol remained a symbol of stability and permanence in the minds of the common populace. That the desert spirits would seek to lay

claim to Caorran was the source of much hand-wringing among the novices. They remained gullible and superstitious, barely removed from the chaesáni.

Mar-Kryn pivoted to face Keros. Her sudden motion caught him off-guard. He stumbled back, almost falling over his own feet.

Mar-Kryn took note, displeased. “The desert spirits seek ever to consume the living.” She watched without sympathy as he blanched. “They are but forerunners of their master, Koriad the Devourer.” She spread her arms to signify the Forest and beyond, lamenting her dire words even as she spoke. “What was once a vibrant grassland, stretching from the Críochan Mountains in the east to Caorran in the west, is now fodder for the desert spirits. Even the Stórren Sea—the very source of life itself—will not escape unscathed. Have you sought me out, interrupting my ritual, only to speak again what is already known?”

Keros took a deep breath. He exhaled slowly, managing to control his trembling hands.

Promising. Mar-Kryn revised her judgment in tight-fisted increments. *There may yet be steel in the boy’s spine.*

“I have walked the Forest, Mar-Kryn.” Keros straightened his shoulders, his voice firmer. “The entire circumference, as you and Mar-Dosjé taught me. I do not hear the voices of the Forest as you do, but I am not a simpleton. My journey is shorter, each time I complete it.”

“You’re rushing.” Mar-Kryn paced toward him, step by ponderous step, every physical gesture controlled, contained, weighty. “You will not learn the ways of the Forest by racing through it like vermin in the grass.”

“No, Mar-Kryn.” Keros stood his ground as she towered over him. “I follow the ritual, as I was taught. I take no shortcuts, nor do I lengthen my strides to finish faster.”

Mar-Kryn tilted her head lower, until her bonemask was mere inches from the young man’s newly confident face.

He knows. Mar-Kryn hid her astonishment. *The youngster has discerned the signs. Perhaps there is more to this novice than meets the eye.*

Keros did not break eye contact, his unadorned bonemask nearly touching hers. Mar-Kryn detected a curious mixture of alarm and resolve in his voice. “The Forest is smaller than before. The desert spirits are consuming this holy place. Our monastery—and the Forest of Dilleag-Lusán surrounding it—is under siege.”

For a long moment, neither moved nor spoke.

“Yes,” Mar-Kryn said at last, her voice and heart heavy. She looked to the brassy sky, heard anew the blistering wind, the hiss of its biting grit. “Koriad presses his advantage.”