

# **The Mirror of N'de**

## *A Novel*

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Kregel Publications

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## The Being

*Hadlay Mivana opened her eyes, and fought a momentary panic. This was not home. She was in a room, the strangest room she'd ever seen, with walls of glowing stone. She turned full circle, but saw no doors, no windows. No way out. She was trapped!*

*But then, set in the farthest wall, the stones began to smooth, to gleam. To change into a mirror unlike any she had seen. Its surface was smooth as standing water, clear as air itself. She walked to it, thinking if she touched it, her hand would go clean through. But when she tried, the mirror hardened.*

*She could not say how she knew, but she was certain that something she needed, something dearer than her own parents, lay beyond this mirror. And as its surface hardened, she felt a stab of grief. Whatever the mirror hid, her very soul longed to see it. She shoved, but the mirror would not give.*

*A sob wrenched up from her chest, and she pounded the mirror, trying to break through. She struck it, kicked it, then flung herself against it, to no avail. Exhausted, bruised, she dropped to her knees and wept. As her tears fell, the reflection in the mirror shifted, until the image she saw was no longer her own.*

*What—or who—he was, she could not say. But his beauty made her tremble. His form was like a very fine horse, but he glowed as if lit from within by a pure white light, and his movements rippled with the colors of a rainbow. He had wings of flame, and when they stroked the air, she could feel their warmth. His forehead bore a marking, like three gold rings intertwined.*

*Whatever he was, she wanted to look at him forever.*

*“You have not known me.” His voice flowed around her, refreshing as a cool evening breeze. “But I have loved you since the dawn of time.”*

*“Who are you?” she wanted to ask, but her lips could not form the words.*

*The Being (it seemed wrong to call him a creature) stepped closer, his eyes liquid and warm. “Choose me as I have chosen you, and I will give you all your heart desires.”*

*What did he mean? She wanted desperately to please him, but how? And why would he choose her? No one like this, so beautiful and perfect, would ever wish to know a lowly girl like her.*

*He seemed to see her doubt, for his eyes turned silvery with tears, and his image began to vanish.*

*“No!” Hadlay screamed, pressing her face against the mirror. “No, please! Don’t leave me!”*

*His voice now came to her as a whisper. “There is a key that will bring you to me, but you must first take hold of it.”*

*“Key? What key? Where can I find it?”*

*The voice faded even more. “Listen well, little love: On this day, your laughter will give way to fear. When this takes place, you will begin to grasp the key ...”*

\* \* \*

“Hadlay Mivana!” Her mother shook her shoulder until she stirred. “Out of bed, lazybones! It is the fourth time I have called you. The sky is light!”

Hadlay rolled away from her mother's hand. She did not want to wake. Her eyes, wet with tears, did not want to open. She hugged her pillow, pressing deeper into its softness. She wanted to go back, back to that room, that mirror, back to *him*. Who was he?

"Choose me ..." he had said. But how could she choose him?

"*Hadlay!*" Her mother's rebuke shattered her reflection. "Did you not agree to begin your apprenticeship at the Rakams' shop this morn? You have looked for this day since you were old enough for sandals, and now you're late!"

Hadlay's heart did a little flip as she remembered. Today she became an Initiate, beginning her journey to adulthood. She could try to return to her dream tonight. But this day was important!

She scrambled out of her bed, a wool-filled mat on the floor in a quiet corner of her home, and stretched her arms above her head to loose the knots in her muscles. Did she feel different now that she was nearly an adult?

Her mother poured water into a wooden washing basin. Slight and favored with a kind face, deep blue eyes, and a thick plait of light brown hair that dropped to her waist, Iaras Mivana was clearly of the Ramash people, a tribe of peasants deemed worthy of only the most servile tasks. But she carried herself with quiet dignity. Only the fine wrinkles carving themselves between her brows spoke of her fears and worries. She cast a reproving eye at yesterday's clothes, which were still on the floor beside Hadlay's bed.

Hadlay hurried to gather them up.

"Your best tunic," Iaras said with no little frustration, holding out her arms to receive them. "I had hoped you would clean and hang it for work today, but now you'll have to wear the other."

For a day as portentous as this, Hadlay wanted to look her best, and the other tunic was not nearly as nice. But she bit back the argument. She cared little if the clothing she wore was a bit dusty and wrinkled, but many arguments had taught her that Iaras Mivana cared a great deal.

"I'll not call you again." Her mother closed the curtain that separated Hadlay's sleeping space from the rest of their tiny home.

Hadlay washed quickly and positioned herself before a bit of polished tin that reflected her image. She could not help comparing it to the mirror in her dream. This was so hazy, so blurry. So imperfect. But then, so was she.

She was often told she resembled her mother, though she herself did not see it. She disliked the liberal dusting of freckles on her nose and cheeks, and her hair was paler than her mother's, marking her even more as Ramash. Oresed children pulled her hair and taunted her, and she often wished she looked more ... well, like them.

She had mentioned this to her mother once, and regretted it instantly. Her mother's eyes had filled with tears, and she'd drawn Hadlay into a tight hug. "It is no shame to be Ramash. Nor to look it. Never let anyone tell you otherwise."

It may be no shame, Hadlay thought, making a face at her reflection, but it was no honor, either. Not in Turris.

"I don't hear you dressing!" Her mother's reminder brushed aside her reflections like cobwebs.

Eyeing her hair critically in the mirror, Hadlay did her best to imitate her mother's even plait. Despite all her efforts, some curls sprang free, and no amount of spit would smooth them. She bound off the braid with disgust, wondering why she bothered. She hastily donned a frayed, slate-blue tunic with its matching girdle, then pulled open the curtain and entered the main room.

Her family's home was sparsely furnished. A three-legged table sat in the center of the room, with two squat stools beneath. The walls had recently been replastered with fresh mud, and looked less weathered than normal. Hadlay's father had rigged a reed thatch roof that could be raised in the daytime to admit light, so they needed candles only at night. A carved wood chair, their one good piece, sat beside her mother's loom.

Hadlay glanced up to the loft where her parents slept, then at the stable, which took up the south wall of the house, with a half wall to keep the horse from invading the family area. Her father was already gone.

Iaras gave her an apologetic smile. "He said to tell you he would be with you in spirit tonight. He wanted to stay for the ritual, but you know we can't afford even a day's delay. Other traders would pick off the good finds if they arrived at the markets first." The unspoken worry in her mother's blue eyes made Hadlay's stomach tighten.

Marba Mivana's work was dangerous. Only a very few, hardy men were willing to venture past the outer wall that encircled the fields where the city's crops were grown. The desert beyond was infested with monsters and Refa, terrifying shades that fed upon the soul like leeches, gripping the mind with confusion and fear. Hadlay's father braved these deadly foes to trade with the Nomads, the wild marauders of the desert.

Hadlay put on a brave smile and touched her mother's arm. "He'll be all right."

Iaras sighed and gave a tight smile in return. "I only wish he didn't have to risk it."

But it was that or let the slavers take their family. As it was they barely had enough to pay the rent.

At least, as of today, Hadlay would finally begin to earn her keep. She would earn little, but perhaps enough to help.

Iaras scraped the last bits of meat from a bone and dropped them into a kettle filled with fat drippings and vegetables from the garden. They had to make do with scraps from the butcher, but Hadlay's father vowed that the meat that clung to the bone was best anyway. "Remind the Rakams they are invited for evening meal."

Hadlay grinned, forgetting her worries for the moment. "And the ritual." Oh, she had looked forward to this evening for all her years!

Her mother handed her a piece of cheese and a crust of barley bread, tipping up Hadlay's chin with a finger. "Work hard, now! I don't want to hear you've been slacking."

## A Near Miss

Ringed by walls fifty cubits high, the city of Turris boasted a looming tower along its southern boundary. Made of kiln-baked brick and bitumen for mortar, the tower ascended to the clouds and cast the city in its shadow for much of the day. The position of the shadow told the time of day. She was indeed quite late. Hadlay rucked up the long skirt of her tunic and ran.

As she crossed the river that divided the city, her surroundings changed from the small, clustered mud homes of the cramped Ramash sector to sprawling houses of whitewashed brick and tile that became grander and taller as she went. Here lived the Oresed, enjoying ease and luxury, fed and clothed by Ramash labor.

She dashed round a corner without looking and was nearly bowled down by a running man.

His head was shaved, leaving only a single, pale lock that distinguished him as a Ramash slave. “Hide—quickly!” he whispered, scrambling away from her.

She barely had time to squeeze into a doorway before a furious Oresed man pounded around the corner. The man wore the gray tunic of the Tower service and carried the seal of Lawgiver in his hand. An authority! Hadlay shrank even farther into her niche, wishing she could become invisible.

The man shouted a strange word, and the slave stopped running. Or, more accurately, he continued to run, but it did no good. His feet now paddled uselessly in the air, as if something had grasped him by his collar and lifted him from the ground.

Another Oresed hurried up, breathing hard. “That’s him, Sire! That’s the slave who escaped—and he took my gold shekels!”

Hadlay cringed for the slave’s sake. Escaped slaves were usually just returned to their master for punishment, but thievery was another thing.

The authority spoke again, and the slave was turned upside-down and shaken. There was a clink as a gold ring clattered to the street. The Oresed snatched it up. “This is one of them, Sire, but there was another.”

Hadlay glanced down and was horrified to see the other shekel by her doorway. It must have fallen when the slave had run into her. If they found it there, they would find her too, and there would be no telling them that she was not involved.

“*Turrershu!*” the authority shouted, and the man was shaken again, even harder than before. “Where is it?”

Thinking quickly, Hadlay reached out from her hiding place and picked up the shekel, then flung it as hard as she could toward the unfortunate slave. It clinked beneath his head, which swung dangerously near the hard earth. She felt a twinge of guilt at adding to the evidence against him, but the first ring was enough to convict. Slaves could not even claim to own the clothing on their backs, and certainly no Ramash, free or slave, possessed gold of any weight. Her people bartered with goods and services.

“There it is!” The accuser pointed.

Hadlay used the distraction to slip from her hiding place. As she edged around the corner, she cast one final, guilty look at the slave, now lying on the ground, struggling as if pinned by a dreadful weight. He would be taken to the Tower’s dungeon to wait for sentencing at next midweek ritual. She didn’t want to think what punishment he’d face.

A chill swept her at the sudden thought that she might one day be in his sandals. Shivering, she hurried on, more careful now to look before she stepped around each corner.

## A Ziggurat with a Head

Most vendors were already open for business by the time Hadlay reached the row of shops and stands that made up the city's marketplace. Forgetting her caution, she raced the last distance to the shop managed by the parents of her best friends, Alila and Nomish Rakam.

The shop was stocked with items both practical and exotic: sturdy crocks and other cookware, beaded headdresses, vibrant bolts of cloth, slippers of the softest kidskin. The slippers had been purchased from Hadlay's father, who had obtained several pairs from a tribe of Nomads that excelled in leatherwork. Shelves lined the thin walls of the shop, and tables sat in neat rows through the center.

"It is good my parents are off trading," Alila chided as Hadlay rushed in. "Or we would have to dock you at least an omer of grain."

"What kept you?" Nomish's eyes brightened as he saw her.

Alila was a quiet girl with bronze-colored hair and moss-green eyes. Nomish was tall, with hands and feet that spoke of growth yet to come, and hair the color of flame. Her friends looked unlike the Ramash, but unlike the Oresed also. When Hadlay had once asked where they had gotten their hair, Nomish had winked and said it was rumored there was Nomad in their blood. Alila had later confided that, in truth, their grandmother was half Oresed, the by-blow of an Oresed noble and a Ramash servant. Of course, no Oresed would own the kinship.

"I had a strange dream." Hadlay took the broom Alila offered her. "It was difficult to wake from it." As she swept, Hadlay told them about it, more to pass the time than anything. But as she spoke, she felt drawn in again. She could still feel the warmth of the Being's flaming wings, see the kindness of his eyes.

"Do you suppose this dream has meaning?" Alila asked.

"Pah!" Nomish said. "Dreams are merely reflections of our thoughts and experiences. They have no meaning."

Alila rolled her eyes. "Pay him no mind, Hadlay. He jibbers like that horrid dung-throwing monkey your father bought on his last journey."

Nomish's face went fire red and he beat a hasty retreat behind a curtain to the rear of the shop.

There had been no formal offer, but everyone assumed that before their Initiation was over, Nomish and Hadlay would become betrothed. As a younger girl, Hadlay had hated the idea; Nomish was an irritating older brother, making mischief on Hadlay and Alila. But in recent moons, she had grown to like him well enough. Besides, she knew of no one else who'd want her; she had nothing of value to bring to a new family.

She was scraping a mound of dust towards the door when it opened, and two large feet tracked through the dust. Another pair of feet followed and tracked it further.

"I saw you thunder down the street earlier, Hadlay," came an imperious voice she knew only too well. "Has no one ever taught you how to behave among your betters?"

Hadlay gritted her teeth and bowed before her two least-favorite people, Ba'ar Sutram and her friend, Nemat.

Ba'ar was nearly a head taller than Hadlay, and beautiful in the Oresed way, with glossy raven hair loose over her shoulders and glittering obsidian eyes set in a smooth, oval face. Today she wore a white tunic with blue-green embroidery, and a hammered gold headband. Ba'ar's only flaws were hands and feet far oversized for her frame. She wore no rings or bracelets and

only black kid slippers to keep attention from these imperfections. Hadlay sometimes stared at them, knowing it annoyed her.

Nemat, though somewhat better dressed, was ill-favored with uneven dark eyes, a pug nose, and a chin that barely interrupted the slope between her mouth and neck. Were she not as unmannerly as Ba'ar, Hadlay might have felt a bit more kindly toward her. She often pitied the way Nemat trailed after her friend like a hungry pup, lapping up any attention that was spared her.

Ba'ar sniffed delicately, wrinkling her nose. "Honestly, you people smell like you live in stables. Oh, wait—you do!"

Nemat gave an obliging titter.

Hadlay gritted back the retort that came to mind. Ba'ar Sutram's parents owned many homes in the Ramash sector, including Hadlay's, and her family could barely afford the rent as it was.

Alila hurried to them, her eyes downcast as was proper. "Do you require assistance, Mistress?"

Ba'ar made a shooining gesture. "We will call if your services are needed." She glanced down and kicked at the dust she had spread about, scattering it even more. "If this is the best you can do with a broom, Hadlay, don't ask for work as a servant at my house."

As if she would ever! Hadlay set to work again, sweeping with such force she sent up little puffs. Her mother had told her many times to pay Ba'ar no mind, but she did not see how this was possible. Alila gave her a sympathetic grimace and went back to her task. No one knew why Ba'ar loved to single her out for this harassment, but it had been so since they were small girls.

The two Oresed girls passed slowly along the tables, picking up various items and casting them down again. It seemed to Hadlay they were intentionally putting them in the wrong spots. She and Alila would have to set things right once they left.

A cough caught Hadlay's attention, and she looked up to see Nomish gesturing her to join him behind the counter. She swept the dust outside, brushing it away from the door, then went around the counter.

Nomish made a show of teaching Hadlay how to record a sale, pressing figures on a soft clay tablet. But the words he wrote had nothing to do with sales.

*See that bird in the cage beside the entry?*

Hadlay glanced up and noticed for the first time a small, stick cage hanging from a chain attached to one of the roof beams. In it was a brilliant green bird, with a hooked beak and red patches on his head and wings.

*Father bought it from a Nomad trader, Nomish noted. It is a most talented creature. It mimics things it hears, and I've taught it something special.* After making a show of pointing out a few features of the sales record, he suggested that Hadlay practice with a fresh tablet, leaving her with a good vantage of the shop. He turned away and set to work stocking a shelf behind the counter.

Soon after, Ba'ar wandered near the cage, and Nomish emitted a little hiss, though he continued to look busy.

The bird gave forth a sharp flatulent noise, like the one Hadlay had once heard slip from her father after he'd eaten cabbage. She fought back a giggle and pretended to be absorbed with her work as Ba'ar whirled, looking for the source of the sound. Nemat, who was some distance

away, glanced at her, but seemed to decide that discretion was called for and returned to her shopping.

After a moment, Ba'ar went back to what she was doing. Nomish waited a little while, then made a small wiggling movement with his fingers.

This time, the bird erupted with a noisy, protracted belch. Hadlay had to hide her giggle in a fit of coughing.

Ba'ar turned again, looking about for the source of the noise. When she saw Nemat was staring, she flushed indignantly. "That was not me!"

Nemat struggled to conceal a smile, turning resolutely to browse once more.

Just then, Ba'ar's younger brother, Oren, entered the shop. "Pity us, Ba'ar!" he said, loudly enough that even passers-by on the street turned to hear him. "That frog-call startled a dog two streets away! What on earth did you eat this morning?"

Hadlay ducked her head, pretending to be absorbed with the receipts. Her eyes stung with tears as she bit her lip to keep from laughing aloud. A muffled noise behind the shelves told her that Nomish was fighting a similar battle.

Ba'ar's face turned nearly as red as Nomish's hair, and, after a moment of searching for an explanation for a noise that clearly came from her area and nowhere else, she huffed and flounced out of the store, her brother trailing close behind. Nemat stood back a moment, struggling to compose herself before she followed.

Hadlay and her friends waited until they were well down the street, then exploded with pent-up laughter.

"Ba'ar scowled so hard I thought her face would shrivel like a fig!" Tears streamed down Nomish's face.

"And poor Nemat! She could not decide whether to laugh or pretend she was deaf!" Hadlay said. "But Oren coming in like that was the best of it!"

Alila opened her mouth to add something, but then she froze. Her face paled and the smile vanished. Hadlay followed her stare, and her stomach knotted.

Asinus, Overlord of the Lawgivers, stood in the entry. Judging by his thunderous scowl, he must have witnessed everything. Of all the authorities to happen upon this prank, Asinus was the one they all feared most.

The overlord waddled between the tables with some difficulty, for his hips were wider than the aisle. He always wore grand black woolen tunics with elaborate, many-fringed mantles and a cylindrical helmet that came to a point. Hadlay's father had once said the man looked like a ziggurat with a head.

As always Asinus carried the staff and seal that were the symbols of his office. His round face might be mistaken for jolly if not for the thick, black brows, which shaded hawkish eyes and his pouting lips that looked moist as if he had just gnawed off a greasy bite of meat.

The three friends dropped their eyes, for it was never wise to stare at an authority, particularly an Overlord. They waited.

Asinus allowed the silence to stretch to the point of breaking before he spoke. "Surely you know it is illegal for the Ramash to make sport of their betters."

Previous encounters with Asinus had persuaded them that any answer would only increase his rage, so Hadlay and her friends kept their silence.

"You have violated the laws of Shungallu! I have repeatedly warned you that our emperor is an all-powerful *wizard*." He said the word with a terrible reverence. "Even though he is far away, nothing escapes his watchful eye. You should *tremble* at the thought of offending



him!” He punched the counter for emphasis, and Hadlay flinched. “Even the Nafal fear his wrath, and yet you have the audacity to laugh! You *Remesh!*” He spat the word with revulsion. Like many Oresed, Asinus called their people *Remesh*—a slight variation on the word Ramash, but this word meant “dregs,” the worthless, bitter gunk left at the bottom of a wine barrel after the good drink was consumed.

“Were it up to me, you would all be cast out to the mercies of the desert. However, His Majesty has seen fit—” He stopped short, as if thinking better of what he had meant to say. There was a long moment while he seemed to regather his wits. Then, clearing his throat, he continued. “Since you are minding this shop by yourselves, I must conclude that you are Initiates, old enough to pay for your infraction. You will appear at Gathering this Midweek to receive a Purgation.”

Hadlay’s stomach knotted.

“It was my fault!” Nomish startled them all with his outburst. “Hadlay and Alila did not know what I was doing.”

“Laughing at an Oresed’s humiliation is crime enough. They are equally guilty.”

Hadlay squeezed Nomish’s arm, signaling him to speak no more. Another word might bring worse than a Purgation.

Asinus turned and stalked away, pausing at the door to spear each of them with an ominous glare. “Do not fail to appear at Midweek Gathering.”

## Becoming a Better Person

“The stew was delicious, Iaras,” Mrs. Rakam said. “I hope you’ll give me your recipe for the bread.” She pushed away her empty platter and adjusted her position.

No doubt she was uncomfortable. The Mivanas’ table was much too small for company, so the two families sat on straw mats arranged in a circle on the floor, with a lamp to light their conversation.

“Thank you, Kera. I’ll teach it to Hadlay and she can share it with you at the shop tomorrow.”

As the pleasantries continued, Alila shot Hadlay a meaningful look and directed a small nod at their parents.

Hadlay shook her head slightly and frowned. Why did *she* have to be the one to tell their parents about their encounter with Asinus?

Seeing their silent argument, Nomish scooped up a last mouthful of stew with a piece of flatbread, then launched into the story of the day’s mischief. At the description of the belching bird, Hadlay thought she saw her mother’s eyes sparkle with repressed humor.

Daram Rakam snorted when Nomish recounted what Asinus had said to them. He was a tall, lean man, and the source of his children’s irreverent sense of mischief. “‘Violated the laws of Shungallu,’ hah! That pompous bullfrog makes up laws to suit himself. This one he made when old man La’ag laughed at him after he tripped over his own staff and sprawled into a pile of compost.”

Hadlay and Alila broke into giggles at the image, but were quelled by a fierce look from Mrs. Rakam.

A round-faced woman with an ample figure and flaming hair, Kera Rakam seemed always to be restraining the high spirits of her husband and children. “Hush, Daram. I’ll not have our children disrespecting authorities.”

Mr. Rakam winked when his wife stopped looking.

“Um ...” Alila spoke quietly, forcing everyone to be very still to hear her. “What kind of Purgation do you think he’ll make us do?”

Iaras exchanged a glance with Mrs. Rakam that did nothing to calm Hadlay’s fears, then gave them a tight smile. “It won’t be so bad. Every one of us here has endured at least one Purgation. They are difficult, but you get through them.”

“Nothing to be afraid of,” Mr. Rakam said. “No Ramash attains adulthood without at least one to his credit.”

“What your father means to say,” Mrs. Rakam shot a glare at her husband, “is that everyone makes mistakes. It is the mark of an adult to learn to atone for them.”

Hadlay’s mother rose to get some oil for the lamp, which was growing dim. It was only for company that the lamp was even used. Oil was expensive, and the Mivanas usually made do with tallow candles. “It is even better to make it right. The three of you should offer Ba’ar your apologies.”

Hadlay groaned. “But Mother! Ba’ar is a horrid girl. You’ve seen how she treats me! And the Purgation will be punishment enough.”

“An apology is not a punishment, Hadlay.” Her mother relit the lamp and returned the remaining oil to its storage place near the stable. “This is an opportunity to become a better person.”

Hadlay ground her teeth. "Becoming a better person" usually meant doing something odious, like tending the neighbor boy when he ate a slime mold and got the vomits. Now it meant apologizing to that screech owl Ba'ar. Sometimes growing up sounded perfectly awful.

"Come on, enough gloom." Mr. Rakam gave them an infectious grin. "It will be over before you know it."

"Consider it a valuable lesson," Mrs. Rakam said. "As adults, you'll have to think about the consequences of your actions. Especially as you deal with Oresed."

"What your mother means is it's well and good to have fun, just be careful who sees you have it." Mr. Rakam said, earning another glare from his wife.

Alila shifted and made a little sound that meant she had another question.

"Yes, dear?" Mr. Rakam asked.

"Do ... do you think it's true what Asinus said about Emperor Shungallu?" Alila's eyes darted between her parents. "Does he truly know everything we do?"

Now that Hadlay thought about it, the idea bothered her too.

Mr. Rakam rolled his eyes. "If he did, he would have struck me dead long ago."

"I wouldn't discount it so easily." Mrs. Rakam gave a little shiver, and her eyes cast about the room. "Shungallu has been the emperor of Turrus for as long as anyone can remember. My grandparents told me he was emperor when they were children, and their grandparents before them. It is said that he can appear and vanish at will and hurl objects without touching them."

"Pah!" Mr. Rakam snapped his fingers. "The authorities can hurl things, and they aren't all-knowing. Besides, no one has seen the emperor in generations. He's dead, long dead by now."

"Some say that the emperor is kin to the Nafal. And it is known that they live longer than we do," Mrs. Rakam said. "The one called Gader'el oversaw the foundation of this city many generations ago, and he is still seen from time to time."

The room went silent for a moment. The Nafal were giant, terrifying warriors, more than twice the height of men. It was said that just two of them could destroy a city overnight. They came to Turrus sometimes, and when they did, even the authorities scattered to avoid them. Hadlay had encountered one when she was small, and she could still feel the piercing chill of his eyes.

"Well, if the emperor does exist, where is he?" Mr. Rakam asked. "All we see are the overlords, and I am weary of their claims that they serve a greater power. They serve themselves, more like, and the emperor is just a great scarecrow meant to frighten us so we won't fight back."

Hadlay sensed that he would have liked to say more, but the look he received from Kera stilled his tongue.

"Nomish, would you like more stew?" Hadlay's mother asked, watching him swirl a piece of flatbread in his empty bowl. Second helpings were another rarity in the Mivana household, but no guest ever left their table hungry.

Even if it meant the family would not eat again for days.

"Thank you, Mrs. Mivana. This is wonderful." Nomish received an extra portion for his compliment. The way he ate, Hadlay wondered if Nomish had a second stomach, like the great horned beast her father had brought home and butchered after his last journey. Nomish began to say something, but seeing his mother's cocked eyebrow, he dutifully swallowed before he spoke. "Overlord Bonobos says the emperor has been visiting holdings in distant lands for many ages."

Bonobos also says he is not a *magical* wizard, but simply an exceedingly wise man who found the scientific ways to harness the elements. Perhaps he found a way to harness age as well.”

Bonobos, Overlord of Science, was the only authority Hadlay had heard of who ever had a kind word for a Ramash, and he was something of a hero to Nomish, who had a fascination for learning. Whenever Bonobos came to market, Nomish could be found nearby, hanging on his every word.

“Bonobos is entirely too impressed with his own thoughts,” Mrs. Rakam said. “All that nonsense about alchemy ...”

“What’s that?” Hadlay asked.

“Alchemy is a new science.” Nomish’s words came out in a rush. “For one thing, it’s supposed to be a way to turn common metals, like iron or lead, into gold.”

“And if there were anything to it, do you suppose Bonobos would be using that rusty iron claw for a hand?” Mrs. Rakam asked.

“I’ve always wondered how he lost that hand,” Iaras said.

Mr. Rakam’s eyes twinkled. “I hear he lost it to an angry husband—the man is known to be fond of women.”

“I hear he blew it off in his laboratory while ‘studying the flammable properties of fermented manure.’” Mrs. Rakam mimicked the overlord’s pedantic language with a satirical tone.

“Now, dear. We don’t want our young ones to disrespect authorities.” Mr. Rakam pulled a face, bringing a grin to Nomish’s face.

Mrs. Rakam blushed. “I apologize, children. I was carried away.”

“Bonobos dreams of a better world,” Nomish said. “How could that be wrong?”

“He’s not going to find a better world in a pile of manure.”

“Well, at least he would never require us to do a Purgation just for laughing.”

Hadlay sighed. “I dread learning what Asinus has in mind for us.”

Alila cocked her head. “Wasn’t that what your said? ‘On this day, your laughter will give way to fear?’”

Hadlay had not thought of the dream again since their confrontation with Asinus, but now that Alila brought it up, it did seem strangely predictive.

“What dream was this?” Hadlay’s mother asked.

Hadlay related the dream again, aided this time by Alila, who added some details she’d mentioned before but skipped in this telling. When she was finished, she looked up in time to catch a very odd look exchanged between her mother and Mrs. Rakam. “What’s wrong?”

The two women smiled—a bit too heartily, it seemed to Hadlay—and shook their heads.

“Nothing, dear,” Mrs. Rakam said.

“Nothing at all,” her mother agreed. “It’s a very interesting dream.”

“Do you think it means something?” Alila asked.

“Oh, no, dear. It’s just quite an odd coincidence, that’s all.” Mr. Rakam smiled, but it looked forced.

“Precisely.” Nomish didn’t seem to notice the strange behavior of their parents. “It was just a dream, for Nabu’s sake.”

“Nomish is right,” Hadlay’s mother said. “Such fanciful things are best forgotten.”

“Yes, forgotten,” Mrs. Rakam echoed.

“In fact, it would probably be wise never to think of it again,” Mr. Rakam said. “Or speak of it.”

Hadlay had a feeling that the adults were “protecting” them from something. She hated when they did that. She knew from long and aggravating experience that no amount of begging would persuade them to explain themselves.

What could be so troubling about a stupid dream?

## The Final Telling

The meal was long since finished and their platters cleared when darkness finally descended over the city. The two families gathered near the cookfire, whose dying embers would light the ritual that was to be performed this eve.

“You three, sit on the blanket.” Hadlay’s mother pointed. She and Mr. Rakam settled on the floor before them, while Mrs. Rakam went to the door and took an anxious look outside before she came to join them.

Iaras assessed each of the Initiates with a sober gaze before she spoke. “You know something of what will take place tonight. But now we shall tell you why you’ve had to wait so long for this.”

She glanced at Mr. Rakam, and he nodded, encouraging her to take the lead in this.

“In ages past, this ritual would have taken place during a full Gathering of our people, a grand celebration of this day, when all young people who enter their thirteenth summer begin the steps toward adulthood. But now it is forbidden for the Ramash to gather in groups larger than nine, or for our people to speak of our histories and teachings. It is said the emperor himself made this law.”

Mr. Rakam’s face was unusually serious. “You may be sure that what you hear tonight will be told in many Ramash homes in Turriss, but you must never speak of this outside our homes, for we have no way of knowing who, even among our own people, might report us to the authorities.”

“If they learn that we still speak of our history,” Mrs. Rakam cast another anxious look at the door, “we will be punished quite severely. This is why, until you come of age, the secrets of our people are not told to you. We must know that you are old enough to hold your tongues.”

Mr. Rakam looked at his children, first Nomish, then Alila. “Now, think on the story you are about to hear, the ancient bedtime tale passed on from our parents, and their parents before them. Like all Ramash traditions, it is forbidden as well. Have you ever told a soul that you know it?”

Both Nomish and Alila shook their heads, and at her own mother’s probing glance, Hadlay did the same.

Mr. Rakam smiled. “Well, then, we begin this evening as we have ended many evenings before, telling you the story of the Maze and the Mirror. You are no longer children as of this evening, so this is the last time you will hear this tale until you tell it to your own children.”

“But why is a silly bedtime tale forbidden?” Nomish asked. Hadlay sat straighter. She had wondered this as well.

“It is enough that it is Ramash,” Mrs. Rakam said, a note of bitterness in her voice. “I believe the authorities would forbid us to exist at all, if only they did not need us to do their slaving.”

Hadlay’s mother reached out to tease one of Hadlay’s unruly curls. “I’ve always loved telling you this story. It always seemed the best part of my nights.”

Mrs. Rakam let out a noisy snuffle, and her husband put his hand over hers. He cleared his throat. “Let us begin.”

Iaras drew a deep breath, and with a solemn smile, she spoke, “There was once a great and powerful king named Meshah. It is said that he knew all secrets, even the mysteries of the future. It is said that he could ball up the wind and hold it in his hand or command the sun to cease its movement in the sky. But Meshah was no magician. He had no need of secret words or

elixirs or Powers, as the authorities do. He was, quite simply, King. The very cosmos knew this and obeyed him.

“Meshah ruled over two peoples, the Khalam and the Shee. The Khalam were clever and powerful. They could take any shape they liked, and their skin glowed, reflecting light in all its colors. But where there was no light, then they were simply dark. There may be Khalam all around us in the night, but you would never know unless one *tickled* you.”

As Iaras spoke, Daram reached out and tickled Alila and Hadlay, and chuckled at their giggles and squeals. “Are you sure you are not still children?” he teased. “Perhaps we should save this ritual for another year.”

“No!” Hadlay cried.

“We are ready—truly, Father,” Alila said.

Daram winked at them and turned his attention back to Hadlay’s mother.

Her blue eyes shimmered as she continued. “The Shee were not so different from us. They were neither powerful nor wise. Rather plain, in fact, though Meshah thought they had a beauty of their own. Perhaps it was because the Shee had more need of him, but Meshah was especially fond of them, particularly their leader, Mada, who was his dearest friend. Meshah even built a home for them, a city called N’de.

“Every home in N’de was a palace, and every street was paved with gems that sparkled in the night like stars. And at the center of the city was a maze made of stones, each one glowing with its own inner light. Each turn in the Maze brought you to a new chamber, full of fresh wonders. One chamber contained a table set for a feast, with golden platters filled with every delicacy. The only vegetables to be found were the kinds you liked, and if you didn’t like any, then the sweets for dessert would be just as good for you.

“In another chamber, your feet would release their hold on the ground, and you would fly up, up, up until the sky was no longer blue, but black. There, you would see great spheres of flame with smaller orbs spinning like tops around them. You could paint shapes in many-colored clouds, and spiral into black whirlpools, where your body turned to rubber and time stretched, and then be shot out like a marble, bouncing through floating bits of stone, before gently setting down again. There were more rooms with even greater marvels, things no one who had seen them could describe, and no one who had not could imagine.

“The greatest wonder of N’de, though, was Meshah himself. Have you ever made a baby giggle? Held a kitten and heard it purr? The greatest joy you’ve ever known is only a glimpse of what it was like to be with Meshah. And no matter how much you loved him, he loved you even more.”

Iaras paused here, taking a long drink from her goblet, and Mr. Rakam took over the telling of the tale.

“But in a chamber at the center of the Maze, there lurked a danger far more terrible than anything we fear today. That particular chamber contained a mirror, the only mirror in N’de. You see, Meshah knew that mirrors had a way of corrupting people. Some would look at themselves and become vain, taking pride in silly things like the color of their eyes. Others would hate what they saw, and feel great shame. Either way, what a mirror always did was make a person focus on himself, and self-focused thinking is the source of every kind of misery.

“Meshah knew too that if one person looked into that Mirror, it would only be a matter of time before others did the same, until all N’de was governed by that Mirror, and by the pride and shame and jealousy it inspired. He did not want this, for he loved the Shee and wanted them to be happy.

“Many have asked why Meshah did not simply destroy the Mirror and eliminate the problem. But he wanted the Shee to have the most precious gift any king can give—freedom. Without freedom, one is merely a puppet, and how can a puppet be happy? How can a puppet love? Both true love and true happiness are not emotions, after all, but choices, and choices require the freedom to choose.

“So Meshah gathered all the Shee together and explained the dangers of that Mirror. Then he decreed that any Shee who looked into the mirror would have to leave N’de. This freed the Shee, for they could choose the mirror and leave N’de and Meshah, if they wished. But it protected those who chose to trust him and remain with him.

“The Khalam were wiser than the Shee, and should have needed no warning to avoid the mirror. But Lelyeh, their leader, sneaked a peek one day, and he very much liked what he saw. The more he thought about how beautiful he was, the more certain things troubled him. First, it bothered him that Meshah favored the Shee—especially that stupid Mada. If Meshah had made a place as grand as N’de for Mada and his people, then surely he ought to give something even better to Lelyeh!

“After a time, it even began to bother him that everyone loved Meshah most of all. ‘Why, look at me!’ He preened before his own reflection. ‘With just a little work, I could be more glorious than Meshah!’ These thoughts festered in Lelyeh’s mind until he could bear it no more. He devised a plan to avenge himself against his rivals.

“Now, among the Shee there was a female named Avakh. She was beautiful, but very simple, even for a Shee. Avakh loved to spend time in the chamber of the animals, for she had a friend there, a cheetah that purred loudly when his ears were scratched...

“One morning, Lelyeh went early to the chamber of animals, and he trapped the cheetah and tied him up. Then he took the cheetah’s form. When Avakh came for her daily visit, he bounded up to greet her. ‘Perhaps we could take a walk today. Would you like to visit other chambers?’ And so they wandered through the Maze, with Lelyeh in the guise of the cheetah guiding Avakh slowly to the chamber with the mirror.

“When they reached it, Avakh stopped. ‘I cannot go in there!’

“‘Why not?’ Lelyeh asked, as if he did not know.

“‘King Meshah says this chamber is forbidden to us. If we even pass through the door, we will change in terrible ways and be exiled from N’de forever.’

“You may have noticed that Avakh didn’t understand the decree correctly. Meshah decreed that no one should look in the mirror. It was quite all right to go through the door, though there was little reason to do so.

“Lelyeh realized that this gave him an advantage. ‘Are you sure? I go in here all the time, and I have not changed.’ Lelyeh stepped up beside Avakh and rubbed against her, pushing her nearer to the door. ‘Why don’t you give it a try?’ Before she knew it, Avakh stumbled into the chamber.

“‘Do you feel any different?’ Lelyeh asked.

“‘Not in the least! But why are we forbidden to enter?’

“‘Meshah doesn’t want you to look in the mirror because, if you did, you’d be able to make yourself as beautiful as he is.’

“This sounded good to Avakh—who wouldn’t want to be so beautiful? And nothing had changed when she entered the room, so why not go on? With Lelyeh encouraging her, she walked up to the mirror and saw her own face for the first time.



“At first she was a little disappointed. She didn’t look nearly as good as Meshah. But after a time, she decided she did look very nice compared to other Shee. All she needed was a few adjustments and she could outshine most of her friends. She spent many hours before the mirror that day, arranging her hair this way and that. Lelyeh even conjured up cosmetics for her to try. When she thought she looked her best, Avakh went looking for Mada.

“As she had hoped, Mada was impressed. ‘Avakh, you look so different!’

“Avakh turned so he could see her from all angles. ‘What do you think? Do I look fat in this tunic?’”

“Mada hesitated, sensing that the wrong answer would mean trouble. ‘You look fine. Why did you do your hair that way?’

“‘Well, once I took a good look at myself in the mirror—’

“‘You looked in the mirror?’ Mada asked, horrified. ‘When Meshah learns, you will be banished!’

“‘Why should he banish me? I’m the same as before, only better looking. You thought so too, a moment ago.’ She thrust out her lip in a carefully practiced pout. ‘Come and see for yourself. Why shouldn’t we know what we look like?’

“No one knows why Mada relented; we only know he did. And the instant he saw himself, Meshah’s voice echoed through the passages of the Maze.

“‘Mada? Where are you?’

“At the sound of that voice, all Mada’s courage left him. He raced from the chamber, seeking a place to hide, hoping Meshah would never find him.

“But of course it was no use. A troop of Khalam found them, catching both him and Avakh by the shoulders. The Khalam took flight, gliding through the Maze with their prisoners. Their outstretched wings flashed like lightning, and they sang with voices full of glory. Their words were unknowable, but Mada would remember the song for all his days.

“Meshah waited in the chamber of the mirror. He wore robes of pure light, so bright Mada had to shade his eyes. Dropping the prisoners at his feet, the Khalam surrounded their king, carefully keeping their backs to the mirror, their wings shielding their faces from its reflection.

“‘What have you done?’ Meshah’s voice cracked with grief. ‘I warned you about the mirror. Why did you not believe me?’”

“Avakh fell to her knees, trembling, and Mada prostrated himself beside her. ‘Have mercy, oh King!’

“‘How I wish that I could!’ Meshah said. ‘If only you could see what that mirror has done to you! Your corruption will spread to everyone you know, just as it has already spread from Avakh to you. If you remain in N’de, you will destroy it.’

“‘But I did not understand!’ Avakh cried. ‘I was deceived by the cheetah!’

“Now, the cheetah who had been Avakh’s friend had been brought to Meshah by another flight of Khalam. Mada rushed to him, furious. ‘Why did you deceive Avakh?’

“‘I did not,’ the cheetah said. ‘I was attacked and bound by another, who took my form.’ He lifted a paw to show the sores where the ropes had torn his flesh.

“‘Who did this thing?’

“The cheetah turned, searching the faces of the Khalam. He glimpsed the one who stood behind Meshah, trying to hide, and his lips curled into a fierce snarl.

“Mada followed his gaze and saw his foe. ‘Lelyeh!’

“Lelyeh sneered at them. ‘Do I not rival the King in my beauty? Yet Meshah preferred you! But now he sees your unworthiness!’ He turned to Meshah. ‘The Shee do not deserve your favor!’

“‘Silence!’ Meshah thundered.

“Lelyeh’s eyes flashed even as his voice failed him.

“Terrible in his rage, Meshah pronounced judgment on his former servant. He spoke in rhyme, for he wanted his words to be remembered:

“‘The victory you have won this day is fleeting as a breeze.

“‘You chose to turn away from me and act just as you please.

“‘I send you off to have your way, but you’ll never be at ease,

“‘For the weapon you’ve used to wound my heart will bring you to your knees.’

“At a wave of Meshah’s hand, a light came from the mirror, burning brighter and whiter until it swallowed Lelyeh, leaving a plume of pitch-black smoke and a scream that echoed through the chamber.

“Then Meshah turned to Mada and Avakh. They trembled under his fearsome gaze.

“‘You’ve already changed and cannot remain. I wish it were not so.

“‘You’ll live out your years in sorrow and fear, but I would give you hope:

“‘There is a way to return to N’de and end your years of woe.

“‘You must trust me—this is the key—become like me, or as you used to be, before you had to go.

“‘I have decreed that when you succeed, you’ll find the way back home.’

“When Meshah finished speaking, the mirror lit again, and Mada felt its heat sear his flesh. The next thing he knew, he and Avakh were lying at the foot of the mirror. For a moment, he thought that perhaps he had not been banished after all. But nothing was the same. The Maze remained, but its chambers were empty now and its stones were dark. And everything outside—N’de itself—was gone.

“Mada and Avakh built their home outside the Maze, and spent their lives seeking the way back to N’de. But try as they might, though they re-entered the Maze many times, they never again found the chamber with the Mirror. They died without seeing Meshah’s face again, and were buried by their children. Generations came and went, and the Maze itself—if it ever existed—disappeared beneath the sands of time. Somewhere, the children of Mada and Avakh are waiting still to find their way home.”

Iaras smiled as Daram finished. “So it ends, this children’s tale, told by Ramash parents to their children long before the Oresed came and conquered. We tell it still because, to us, it represents our people’s dearest hope. Just as Mada and Avakh were deprived of their homes and heritage, so our people have been denied as well. As they and their children lived and died hoping they would one day regain what they had lost, we Ramash hold that same hope.”

“And now you will learn the first of our people’s secrets,” Mr. Rakam spoke so quietly that Hadlay had to lean in to hear. “You see, the Ramash were once the keepers of this land, before it became the city Turris. In those days, our ancestors protected an ancient monument, and with it a riddle that would one day reveal its mysteries. Then the Oresed came and conquered, took our homes and freedom, and both the monument and riddle were lost to us as well. But the augurs, who led our people in the times before the Oppression, promised that the day would come when the riddle would yet be solved.

“The augurs foretold that, in that day, a shattering truth will go forth from the monument into all the lands, and with it a great leader who will guide us with goodness and justice, setting

all things right again. Every Ramash, when he comes of age, is charged with the duty of finding and solving the ancient riddle in order to bring forth that day.”

Mr. Rakam sat forward, his intent gaze taking in each of the children in turn. “And so this night we charge you, our children, who are now Initiates. Seek the riddle and its solution with all your heart, through all your days. For we all long for the Oppression to end.”

Mrs. Rakam pushed to her feet. “And now it’s time we took our leave. Even if you are Initiates, it is well past time you found your beds.”

Hadlay frowned, staring at her mother and Mr. Rakam. Was this it, the first of the secrets she had waited the whole of her life to hear?

Nomish seemed to be very much of the same mind. “So that is what we came to hear tonight? That we must solve some mythical riddle, without even the smallest clue what it is?”

“I don’t believe it is a myth,” Hadlay’s mother said. “I believe with all my heart that it is real.”

“But ...” Nomish gazed at her as if befuddled. “But it makes no sense! Even if there were a riddle, and even if we could solve it without knowing it, how would doing so set us free?”

His father tousled his hair. “Some of us believe that the riddle is simply a metaphor for the challenge of winning freedom for our people. What matters is that we never give up. Even in the darkest times, we must always cling to our dreams and seek out ways to bring an end to the Oppression.”

“Our dreams ...” Alila murmured. She glanced at Hadlay. “In your dream, there was a mirror too, and you wanted very much to pass through. Do you suppose your dream had something to do with the bedtime story?”

For a moment, the theory made sense to Hadlay. After all, she had heard the story so many times she could easily recite it herself. Perhaps in her dream, she had envisioned herself as Avakh, staring at the mirror, wanting desperately to pass through again to return to the wonders of Meshah and N’de. But what about the Being? The story never mentioned him.

As she thought these things, Hadlay nearly missed the tense look that passed between their parents.

Mr. Rakam gave her arm a squeeze. “Alila is right, exactly right. You just relived the story in your dream. Nothing to worry about.”

“Not in the least,” Mrs. Rakam said. “Best forgotten. Now, children, let’s be off.” She put an arm around Alila and steered her towards the door. “We have a long walk before we rest tonight.”

Hadlay’s mother saw them to the door and stood and watched until the Rakams had vanished in the gloom. When she turned back, she gave Hadlay a troubled look, then came and smoothed a hand over her daughter’s unruly hair. “It was merely a dream, Hadlay. You mustn’t worry about it—or the Purgation. Now, go to bed. Morning will come early, now that you must earn your living.”