

THE HEAT BELOW

(Prolog)

During the period of technological advancement and relative peace in the Gorst Hills (present day Agorsha) prior to the Blessed Desert Wars, primary sources tell of sixteen temples to the ex-Pantheon god Thune.

The ruins of five are visited today by pious men, scholars, and even school children. The remains of eight others have purportedly been excavated, though regarding those, debate continues in some camps as to their provenance (in particular the ruins beside the Bor River bridge, which predates the rise of Thunic Cansim).

Of the remaining three sites, no compelling archeological evidence has been unearthed.

Based on written accounts of daily life, those ancient temples were ordinary in any number of ways; that is to say, similar to modern day Canistic religious houses. Pious men took on sacred roles as fathers and brothers, their lives filled with ritual, study, and hard labor.

From those institutions emerged a number of technological advancements, perhaps most notably in the area of fruit horticulture and the boratic distillation techniques used in the production of the potent fruit brandy made from the pemberry—that being the precursor to our modern Pim spirits. However, it is unknown how similar Pim is to those ancient libations considering the extensive advancements in distillation processes over the last 800 years; the now-common herbal supplements added to such brandies; and the numerous pemberry variants indigenous to Agorsha and surrounding lands.

-Nesquite's Post-pantheonic Sorbanthi History, 2nd Ed. p. 239.

Chapter 1

(Day One)

Colly reached the monastery before the rain. She marked that as a good omen, tapping twice, discreetly, on the empty glass bottle hidden in her traveling cloak. She wasn't really a superstitious person, but this wasn't the time to worry about that.

The stormfront had been a faint ribbon on the eastern horizon when they'd woken at sunrise. It had chased the sun most of that morning, racing towards the two traveling companions, but at the last hour the dark clouds had finally taken the lead. The storm was nearly upon them now at mid-morning, and the sun well obscured in the southeastern sky.

The last leg of their journey had been on foot, and after what felt like twenty miles—all uphill—her legs were tired and her feet were feeling worse. She and the old man, sharing the burden of her modest baggage, had rounded a bend in the mountain path, as typical as all the others, to emerge at long last into a clearing with flat terrain. The narrow strip of dirt marking their path was still dry, but the air was moist and heavy, rich with earthy forest smells and a faint hint of smoke.

Without speaking, the traveling companions, barely more than acquaintances, stopped to take in the sight before them. While the old man gazed in recognition, perhaps even longing, Colly's eyes were full of appraisal. Less than a hundred feet ahead and very real was her new home: Vestra Monastery, the isolated mountain home of an enterprising order of Canastic monks. And of course the women that keep it running. Normally a thought like that would give her a sliver of self-righteous satisfaction, but the feeling evaded her now, probably due to the manifestation of her new life staring her in the face.

It wasn't what she'd expected. The compound was clearly old, as she'd come to expect, but not in an impressive way like the ruins of the Lodrid Athenaeum that she had visited two summers ago with her brother. This place just looked worn, drab. There was no majestic air of hallowed grounds, like at the Breckendell Monastery they had stayed at three nights ago at the start of their journey.

Visible within the confines of a crumbling outer wall was a turreted structure, perhaps a bell tower, its right angles slightly askew. She could also make out two longer, broader buildings, their brown-tiled roofs partially obscured by a giant deciduous tree—an oak she thought—in full summer foliage and looking out of place in this mountain hideaway. There were no cathedral-like spires or shiny obelisks, as at Breckendell, though she did note a sooty smokestack, not presently in use. She could imagine the compound before her being a private homestead or a rustic trading outpost for trappers or a safehouse for smugglers, though that last one was a little too on the nose.

While the lack of grandeur left her feeling a touch deflated, she shook it off. She was determined to play her role to perfection. Today at the very least, she thought, recalling Grandma's old adage about first impressions.

Bob, her escort on this last leg of her journey, was a spritely old man (a “sworn brother” he'd told her) who liked the sound of his own voice. When not speaking, he gravitated toward forceful humming, which he'd been at moments before but had abruptly stopped now that the monastery was in sight. He had pressed her to hurry for the last hour, due to the threat of rain. Not that she'd needed any prodding—arriving cold and bedraggled was the last thing she wanted. Still, he had set a surprisingly brisk pace for a man older than her Gramma.

“And here it is at last,” he said with pomp. He dropped his slender arm around her shoulders and gave her a playful jostle. “Ah, but I thought perhaps they’d have a fire burning for you in welcome. Though sure, it’s too warm today.”

Colly nodded her agreement, trying not to think of her sweaty underclothes, or the warmth of his arm around her.

“But in my day,” he continued, “we always lit a fire to mark the arrival of a pretty new girl, no matter the weather. But it was cooler then, sure.” He turned down to look at her, a broad grin on his lined old face. His expression then shifted, almost solemn. “You really are such a brave girl.”

It was the second time he’d called her brave in the three days since they’d met, the third time he’d called her pretty. Colly kept her eyes forward, fixed on the door that marked the end of their trek and dressed her face with the smile he was expecting.

“I feel quite excited really,” she said. It was close to the truth.

“And as you should, my girl, as you should. You’ll fit right into the fold here. I’m quite sure of it. Let’s go in now, shall we?” He gave her shoulder, which had begun to itch, one last squeeze before removing his arm. He then readjusted the strap of her traveling bag across his back, and strode across the clearing. Colly glanced behind herself for just a moment and was struck by the blue of the sky in their wake. But turning back was not an option, regardless of rain. She took a slow, fortifying breath and walked toward the precipice of her new life.

Moments later, standing in the shadow of the decrepit door barring their entrance, she watched as Bob knocked hard thrice with what looked like a large iron spoon. The resulting reverberations mimicked the pounding of her heart, and were joined by the soft humming of a now-familiar melody.

As the moment stretched, so did the tune, and she realized that it wasn't coming from the man beside her as she'd first assumed, but from within the walls, from mouths she couldn't see. This particular melody had an odd cadence, but she found the key and resolution rather pleasant. Of course she didn't know the words yet, but she would. She'd learn this song, along with all the others they sang, to perfection. It wasn't her appointed task, but she'd do it anyway, just for the fun of it.

With a grinding whine of old hinges, the door opened towards them, pushed from within by a man enveloped in a brown robe, not much younger than Bob. "Welcome," he said as he beckoned them to enter with a sweep of an obscured arm.

With a focused mind, and Bob on her heels, Colly stepped over the threshold onto hallowed ground. She had come to this hidden monastery to steal. Not a physical treasure, nor a sacred artifact. She was after something more lucrative. She had come for their secret. And she'd succeed. She'd find the recipe and be away from this dreary place well before the fall of autumn.

* * *

Daia cleaned the room hastily, in a dark mood. The room was hers, sort of; she'd shared it with Sartha for many years, up until a few days ago. She wasn't prone to existential contemplation, but she could see now in clearest hindsight how happy she'd been in this place. And today her peace, already cracked by the departure of her dear friend, would be dismantled by the thrust of someone new into her home.

The room was rather small, like all the rooms in the women's house, but there was space enough for two narrow beds, two matching chests of drawers, and the table and chair nestled together near the window. That window, the only one in the room, was also

small, but facing east it let in abundant morning light, despite the Great Tree looming in the garden outside.

Tave the steward had stopped by a quarter of an hour ago to bring news of the new girl's arrival and that this complete stranger would be living here with her. He'd be bringing her by shortly, after her meeting with Father Sivas. No more warning than that. She'd expected something like this would happen someday, in an academic sort of way, but she'd have appreciated more notice, more time to prepare—both the room and herself. And in truth she still held a sliver of hope that Sartha would return.

Before he left, the dour steward had looked at her room in disapproval and suggested she put some effort into tidying up. "Cleanliness at hand is the mark of a sanitized soul, after all. And we both know this mess doesn't reflect you."

She had almost laughed in his face then, though looking back she thought she'd have rather spat. But despite herself, despite the hurt and brimming anger, she'd gone ahead as bidden, rushing to make the room presentable.

It wasn't really all that much work; the room was small and she had few possessions. Assorted trash and a scattering of dishes had accumulated, as well as her soiled clothes and linens, which she hadn't bothered taking down to the laundry in several days. Sartha's clothes were folded neatly in her chest, as they'd been the day she'd left. Daia removed these now, placing them with the few possessions her friend had left, now tightly bundled in Sartha's cherished blue blanket (hand knit by her mother a lifetime ago). Daia had expected her to return for her belongings, but now was not so sure. Not knowing what else to do with the items, and definitely not wanting the new girl rummaging through them, she hid the bundle in the confines under her bed.

As she finished a cursory sweep of the slate floor (not bothering to move the worn rug by the fireplace) she noticed how dim the room had become and glanced out the

window at the dark morning sky peeking through branches. Normally she'd light one of the ensconced lanterns, but the idea didn't suit her today. So she sat in the dim room and waited. She was glad the men weren't presently at chants—that Sartha wasn't at chants. The silence was like a salve, but one that would soon wear off.

It turned out she needn't have rushed in her work. She sat there waiting for half an hour at least, stewing. It began to rain, the suddenness of it surprising her out of grim reverie. She hadn't been expecting rain that morning. Had Brother Yand not forecast it? He was never wrong in his predictions. More likely she just missed the forecast.

As she thought back, trying to retrace her steps that morning from seemingly missing memories, there was a knock on the door followed immediately by the door opening and Tave walking in. And behind him strode the new girl: young, with blond hair tied back in a braid and wearing a simple gray cloak that looked too big for her. She carried a leather satchel over one shoulder, and Tave carried a larger, traveling bag, which he now half-dropped on the floor near the entrance.

Daia rose from the chair, more out of instinct than courtesy.

“Here is your room, where you'll sleep from now on,” Tave said to the girl. “This is Daia, you'll be sharing with her.” He then turned to Daia. “This is Colly, she's just arrived and has had a long journey. I trust you'll do all you can to make her feel at home. Well then, I'll leave you two to get acquainted. Daia, after she's settled, take her down to Marsha for assignments.”

Daia acknowledged him with a curt nod. He considered her for a moment, then smiled politely to the girl and was off, to do whatever inane tasks he undertook between chants. Tave wasn't one to stick around for a bit of idle chitchat, and she was glad for it. She expected there would be plenty of that in store for her later.

Just the two of them now, Daia openly stared at the girl. What to make of her? For her part, the girl stood there with an amiable smile, looking at ease. She wasn't as young as Daia first thought, eighteen, perhaps older. And though small, she seemed hale, and admittedly rather pretty.

Neither of them spoke, and the moment grew awkward. Daia was pleased when the girl's smile faltered a bit.

"So this is it. I wasn't sure what to expect, but it's nice," the girl said, unfastening the toggles on her cloak and observing the surroundings. "Oh look, it finally started raining. I was worried the storm would catch us. Didn't fancy showing up with wet hair, you know."

Daia just looked out the window and nodded, as if pondering the rain, but said nothing.

The girl stepped over to Sartha's bed, now stripped bare, and considered it a moment before sitting. "The bed feels comfortable. I thought I might have to share one. I mean, that would have been okay, I shared with my sister for years. But I like this arrangement much better." She turned to Daia, looking her in the eyes. Daia was afraid she was going to keep talking about beds. Instead she asked: "How long have you lived here?"

Daia opened her mouth to respond, and bit back the rude comment that struggled to escape. "Ten years or so."

"Wow, that's a long time. So . . . how old were you when you came to live here?"

"About your age I suppose."

The girl nodded, and Daia imagined her doing the math in her head. "Well, you must be an expert on what makes this place tick. I guess I'm pretty lucky to have a roommate that knows the ropes, to show me around and all that."

“Yes. Right.” Daia broke eye contact, turning towards the door, eager to be about her business. “I’ll go and fetch you some clean bedding. And some tea, I think. I’m sure you’d like some time to rest, some peace and quiet.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you,” the girl said to Daia’s retreating back.