

Cloudwalker

I

The desert. A blank canvas. An unending world of possibilities that swirled in an expanse of nothingness. Samuel stared out over it, as he had often done, struck by its vastness and the melancholy that emptiness gave him. He pushed back his cowl, scratched his bald tattooed head. The skin was dry and rough; not a single bead of sweat gave his cracked fingertips relief. He needed to find water soon.

Years of wandering the desert meant he no longer had to squint against the unrelenting brightness. He scanned the horizon, hungry for a sign of movement or activity, a splash of color. It did not come. He was alone, floating in eternity.

He unfurled a small scroll of well-worn papyrus. The ink inside was brown and yellow, whole paragraphs of it lost to time and the punishing sunlight. The words were runes and small pictures, directions for a weary traveler to find his way home. One sand dune looks like the next, so there were no tangible landmarks to guide one anywhere. Instead, Samuel looked to the sky. Clouds circled and whirled in intricate patterns overhead. His people had long ago learned the names of the clouds, each one unique, each a guide this way or that. It was an ancient secret they had learned to navigate the ocean of sand, given to their ancestors by the gods. Only monks of the holy temple could “see” the clouds. Years of sacrosanct rituals and tutelage, complete devotion to the temple, the destruction of the flesh; only after such sacrifices could one become a holy figure, a *deja'tul*. Like Samuel.

He slipped his cowl back over his head and picked up his staff, trudging through the shifting ground towards the East. This is what the clouds had revealed to him, and he would listen.

Words and phrases from the holy writings came and went through his thoughts, flowing in and out like the water his body so desperately needed. He had not brought a waterskin with him. He believed the gods would provide any necessary sustenance. Water was also scarce in the temple, and usually was only used for important rituals or for the older monks. As the youngest *deja'tul*, Samuel was rarely provided with any amenities. It was the way it had always been, and he did not question it. He didn't mind relying on the total protection of the gods. It made him feel closer to them, closer to himself.

The dryness of his throat threatened to despair him. He felt around in his satchel, withdrew a smooth blue pebble, and put it in his mouth. It was warm, but soon saliva formed around it, rejuvenating his mouth and his spirits. He swallowed hard, forcing the liquid down into his body.

Time always escaped Samuel. He had no accurate measurement of it, only the abstract idea of time. The sun's patterns changed so frequently there was no reliable way for his people to calculate it. Sometimes it would burn bright then flicker to darkness in mere moments like a poorly made fire, other times it seemed the daylight stretched on for eternities upon eternities. Wiser men had studied these patterns and argued for centuries over their theories with no consensus. As soon as any one opinion seemed the correct one, all of nature seemed to change to disprove it. Samuel believed that was the point: they were meant to journey through life by trusting the gods, not trying to understand them.

The sun was a deep orange when the familiar cliffs came into view. Towering umber walls rose like obelisks to meet the sky, utterly obscuring the land beyond. The sun was setting behind

them in the East, casting a golden glow that bathed his face in gentle warmth; unlike the heat of the day, this fading light felt like being washed in a warm river.

Samuel threw back his cowl, disrobed, and laid naked on the ground, eyes towards the heavens. Not far off, other monks returning home were performing the same ritual. The sensation crawled across his body, warming him and reminding him of the grace of the gods. He meditated on it, felt it pulse through every vessel and blood cell. But soon it was over. A chill replaced it, spreading up his body from his feet to the crown of his head and reminding him that the ritual was over and he wasn't yet home. He stood and clothed himself before continuing on.

When he reached the rock wall, he looked up. It seemed to lean over him, threatening to fall onto him and crush him. Along the walls were dots of candlelight like thousands of orange stars shining through the rock. He could not see the watchman from this perspective, but he knew he was there. No doubt the sight of Samuel's robes were what allowed him to approach without question. He entered a small carved-out doorway at the base of the cliffs.

Inside was a narrow passageway that sank into darkness. He placed his hand against the left wall, felt the familiar grooves, and began to walk further in. The carvings were designed to lead each person to his proper place by following the correct pattern. The markings that led to the temple were twisting and curly, a physical representation of the clouds. Samuel closed his eyes and followed the path. He heard no footsteps but his own. It was night, which meant most people wouldn't be venturing out into the desert. After a while, the walkway became more and more narrow, then the ceiling began to bend downward. Samuel crouched, knelt, and eventually crawled until finally the passage gave way to an opening. He crawled out, and stood, stretching his limbs and looking around.

The temple was located in a round courtyard, open to the sky. The surrounding rock walls rose even higher, enclosing and protecting the temple from the rest of the community. Wooden poles with little fires on them decorated the plateau, illuminating the base of the temple in the darkness of night. The temple itself was made of a brilliant alabaster stone polished to perfection. It was rounded, but had four sharp points pointing towards the sky. It seemed to glow in the darkness, its edges soft and ethereal. Samuel again removed his cowl and set his staff against the wall nearest him. He knelt down and uttered a short recitation, a bit of holy scripture, before rising and entering the temple.

The interior was one large room. All monks were required to live inside the temple, in total community with each other. They each slept on a pads made of soft wood which were clumped together in the center of the room. At the far end was a shrine of sacred relics and old baubles, beneath which was a gold basin for sacrifices and offerings. An older man with a long, fraying gray beard approached Samuel. His robes were a deep orange, the symbol of the high priest.

"Samuel," he said, his voice as dry as the desert itself. "How were your travels?"

Samuel bowed out of respect before speaking. "Revelatory," he said, still bowed. "My heart has grown ever more faithful to the gods. I've seen the light, my priest, and it was hot as the sand underfoot."

The old priest chuckled. "I see you studied your holy scrolls while you were gone. What did they teach you?"

"How fleeting our lives are. But that our consciousness will live on in the clouds and in the earth."

"And you believe that?"

"Yes, Markis," Samuel said. Markis nodded.

“It sounds like you’ve had a good pilgrimage,” Markis said. “Carry these lessons with you all your life, Samuel.” Samuel nodded. “Have you brought an offering from your journey? A tribute for your prosperity?”

Samuel nodded again, gesturing to his satchel.

“Very good,” Markis said. “Go in peace.”

Samuel bowed again and walked over to the shrine. He knelt down before the basin and set his satchel on the ground. He opened it and lifted out of it a small, jagged piece of bone.

“I give a representation of my own fragility,” he said softly. “Take it and devour it, break it, reduce it to its essence. Spare the life of your servant.”

He dropped the bone into the basin. It made a small clang as it hit the bottom. The sound reverberated off the walls, echoing in the small space. He looked around; only a few of the other monks had stirred. He turned back to the shrine.

“Thank you for your undeserved protection. I commit myself to you.” He bowed in silence for a long while.

Finally, he stood and found a cold pad to lie on. He curled his body, trapping in his own warmth. Suddenly he remembered that he had yet to drink any water and his lips were chapped and covered in dry blood. He didn’t bother getting up and looking for any; it was probably gone by now, and they wouldn’t get more until morning. Instead he recited scripture in his mind, quenching his thirst with the cool comfort of language and rhythm, putting fleshly thoughts out of his mind. They were only nuisances to him, deterrents from fully relying on the gods for his protection. If the gods had wanted him to die of thirst, he would have already done so out in the cruelty of the desert sun. But they had spared him, and he had no reason to believe they wouldn’t spare him a little while longer. With those thoughts in his mind, he began to sleep and to dream, lucid dreams of flowing water and masked strangers, of a beautiful woman and of war. His mind wandered from one image to the next, and his half-conscious brain didn’t know how to decipher any of it. So he gave in to it, let it wash over him, leaving the explanations until morning.