

The Herald

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For my wonderful parents.

CHAPTER I

The Herald Arrives

The Herald dismounted her horse, a faded red scarf covering the lower half of her face to keep out the dust, revealing only the intense gaze of searching brown eyes. She held the orange & blue flag of the Dagan tribe, sixteen days' travel to the South, past the Coral Desert, where the sun blazed the hottest. A small crowd began to gather; Dagan was a neutral tribe, neither friend nor foe.

The crowd kept its distance; they recognized the insignia on her sleeve as that of a Herald, and a Herald of the Dagan was not to be trifled with. Her business would be with the Duke himself, certainly. Would the subject matter be the existing trade agreements with the Dagan? Military protection?

Whatever it was, they hoped it was peaceful. Duke Maximilian Arman of Totem had a larger army than the

Dagan, but he would not send his troops to face them if he could at all avoid it: he knew very well that his superior numbers and armaments would not be sufficient to prevent significant losses against the Dagan. Neutrality was best.

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The Herald Damia Esmeralda Solarisa Hernandez dusted herself off, patted her horse, and took one of the remaining water satchels from her trek across the desert. Already the Duke would be sending couriers with refreshments to greet her, despite whatever misgivings he might have with her arrival, which meant a hassle, if not trouble.

The Herald's eyes were inscrutable as she walked, accompanied by four armed Totem guards, up the stairs of the Great Hall to her interview with the Duke. She seemed to take no notice of her escort, or the steepness of the steps. Her breathing was slow and deep, and despite her long travels, she did not appear to be the least bit fatigued as she

climbed the stairs designed specifically to soften visitors for the Duke Maximilian.

When she reached the top, the voice of the Duke boomed out, its volume not entirely successful at masking its unease.

"Welcome, Herald! To what do the Totem and I owe this unusual honor?"

"Your honor, the Duke," Esmeralda said, the softness and strength of her voice providing an uncomfortable contrast with the Duke's.

"I come before you on behalf of the Dagan people to request the assistance of the Duke of Totem," she began.

"A strange sickness has ruined the farms and villages of our southeast lands. Crops have not born fruit, and fish from the water have also been sick. The land is dying, and

we don't know why. Many families have been forced to flee their ancestral homes and crowding into neighboring villages."

"Those neighboring villages have also begun to be affected," she continued. "We Dagan are known for our hospitality, but there is tremendous pressure on the villagers, who can no longer provide for themselves or their families."

"I see," the Duke said, although he in fact could not quite see where this Herald was going, and was becoming increasingly anxious. Esmeralda, sensing this, cut short her preamble.

"The Totem have in your possession a Krystal amulet of great power, the Aunauri, which has been said has the power to grant its bearer vision of hidden things, and shed light on conspiracies of great deception," Esmeralda continued. "It is our suspicion that such a conspiracy may lie behind the poison." She took a breath.

"I have been sent here by the Elders of the Council of Dagan to request the temporary usage of this amulet so that we may learn to use its power, and to help us uncover the truth behind this growing threat."

This last statement was not entirely accurate. While the Elders had, in fact, ultimately agreed to send her on this mission, it was hardly unanimous: on the contrary, several Elders had argued that the whole thing would be a waste of time, that the Aunauri would have no such power, or, if it did, that they would have no idea how to use it, and that there was likely a prosaic explanation for the plague anyway that did not involve any sort of conspiracy. Several Elders had urged Esmeralda to instead stay home and help resettle the displaced villagers, and one even insinuated that with this quest, she would be fleeing from her responsibilities. That remark had stung, and still gnawed at her. And now, here she was, preparing to bargain for a legendary magic Krystal that might or might not help her save her people.

"The Water Krystal, hmmm," the Duke rumbled. "You wish to borrow it, eh? Surely the Dagan are aware of its great value. Are the Dagan prepared to offer collateral for such a token?"

The Duke Maximilian was secretly relieved that there was no request for him to take in displaced Dagan villagers, or to send labor to the Dagan lands, either of which would cause grumbling among his own people. He himself knew virtually nothing about his Krystal, other than that it was an extremely beautiful and valuable gem with a storied history sitting in his royal vault.

Esmeralda pulled out a small but ornate cloth sack, tied with a beautiful golden rope, from inside her tunic. She opened it, and poured out its contents into her hand.

"Twelve Greenstone amulets, sire, crafted by master sculptors and masons from Dagan, as a gift of appreciation to the great Duke Arman and the Totem."

There was silence in the court as Maximilian looked at the gems in her hand, followed by emphatic whispering.

"Ah, Greenstone," the Duke replied. "Very interesting." Most of his people had never seen it.

Esmeralda smiled. The Greenstone had been her uncle's suggestion, and a good one. He himself, among the greatest sculptors of the Dagan, had carved four of the twelve jewels, and in her opinion the best four.

Greenstone were powerful and beautiful krystals, the greatest of the Dagan's treasures, and both sacred and exclusive to the Dagan. Esmeralda herself wore a Greenstone pendant around her neck: it had been carved by her uncle Darad, who had put it around her neck at her Naming Ceremony. She had worn it ever since.

The Dagan used Greenstone for ritual purposes, and rarely, if ever, traded them. If the Duke recalled correctly,

they even performed a ceremony whenever they removed Greenstone from the earth, and using metal tools to extract it was strictly forbidden: instead Greenstone krystals could only be removed if they had broken off on their own. It was therefore extremely rare, and therefore, extremely valuable.

That the Dagan would offer these to the Duke now belied the seriousness of the situation. These were valuable, almost as valuable as the Aunauri, but...

"And if you lose or damage the gem?" Maximilian asked.

"We pledge two sacks of gold, sire," Esmeralda answered immediately.

Again there was a hush in the Duke's court. The Duke smiled.

"Then you had best not lose it, Herald Esmeralda of

the Dagan," he said. "I have considered the Dagan's request for the Aunauri. You may have it on loan for one full year, and I accept and thank you for your gift on behalf of the Totem."

Esmeralda was about to sigh a breath of relief when the Duke continued.

"I do have one condition, however," the Duke said. "I would like my nephew, Jack, to accompany you on your journey. He could, ah, use some time away from the Palace, and could also use the experience." The Duke did not add that his servants had declared his nephew to be next to useless at virtually every chore they had presented him with.

Esmeralda's smile faded. This was not part of the plan, and this Jack would be far more likely to hinder her quest than help it.

"My Lord-" she began.

"He's a good lad, Herald Esmeralda," the Duke interrupted. "Ever since his parents were killed five years ago, he's needed some... purpose. Consider this a favor to my court."

CHAPTER II

Jack

The Duke's servants informed Esmeralda, with a slight tut-tut, that she would most likely find the young Master Jack Cornelius in the stables. Clearly they disapproved of Jack's preferences as childish and unbecoming a member of the royal family. Esmeralda herself had no concern: she loved horses, and had as a teenager spent a fair amount of time visiting the Dagan stables. Any Dagan could visit or use the stables, with the expectation that they would, from time to time, help out there, however they could.

They had already given her the Aunauri, as a pendant, and she was wearing it under her tunic, around her neck. It was smaller than she had expected, but no less beautiful. She was not generally taken by jewelry, but she had to admit that a small part of her regretted that some day it would be necessary to return the gem.

Mitchell, a long-time Totem family servant, and two guards escorted her to the stables. Jack indeed was there, balancing on the fence around the pasture. He would occasionally look up to watch the horses gallop and play, and smile.

Esmeralda observed him a moment before approaching him, deciding what to say. Meanwhile, the horsemaster, Russell, opened the stable doors, letting one of the horses out to run in the field. Suddenly, Jack jumped off the fence and ran towards the horse. When it saw Jack coming, the horse cut across Jack's path, hard, to intercept him. Jack kept running, at a speed that impressed Esmeralda, to her surprise, almost catching up to the horse, who cut again, this time to the left, away from Jack. They were playing.

Jack was falling behind now, but the horse noticed, and galloped into a broad curve, giving Jack a chance to catch up. He did, and gave a friendly smack to his friend's

hindquarters. At this, the game was over, and the horse slowed to trot alongside Jack, who kept his hand on the horse's bare back. Esmeralda was charmed, and wondered, not for the last time, if anyone in Jack's family was aware of this particular talent of his.

"Uh, pardon me, madam," Mitchell said, apologetically. "I will go retrieve Master Jack."

Esmeralda stood with her hands folded as Jack, out of breath, came over.

"Hi! Jack's the name," he said with a grin. "What can I do for you?"

"Hello," she responded. "I am Damia Esmeralda Solarisa Hernandez, Herald of the Dagan, but most people call me Esmeralda."

"Nice to meet you, Es," Jack said, prompting Mitchell

to clear his throat.

Esmeralda went on. "I am on a quest of great importance to my people, and I am seeking to use this krystal, the Aunauri," she said, holding up the pendant, "to gift me with second sight, so I can investigate a grave matter that is troubling the Dagan."

"Wow," Jack said. "That sounds serious!"

"That, uh, wasn't all," Esmeralda continued. "Your uncle, the Duke Maximilian, has, uh, suggested that I, ah, invite you to accompany me as part of this investigation."

"Me? Come with you? Where?" Jack was excited. He had never before left the land of Totem.

"Well, possibly to the Dagan, at some point, to consult with the Elders, but first to Yellow Mountain, where there is a monastery with several scholars who have studied

krystals," Esmeralda answered. "My hope is that someone there will know how to use this, or at least direct me towards someone who does. Beyond that I am not sure."

"Wow," Jack said again. "Yellow Mountain." Jack had heard of it, vaguely. He looked down at his feet, then around at the horses playing in the field, as if to say goodbye.

"But what do you want me to do? And how does that thing work?" he said, pointing to the Aunauri.

"As far as the krystal goes, I'm not sure," Esmeralda said. "We Dagan have several incantations and meditations that we employ with the Greenstone, but those are limited to the Temple, and I doubt they would work with the Aunauri, anyway. I've never heard of a Greenstone vision." She paused.

"As far as you go, I'm not sure of that, either. Can you make camp?"

Jack shook his head.

"Cook?"

Again, no.

"But I can learn!" Jack said. "I've always wanted to travel, but my family never takes me anywhere. Honestly, they mostly kind of ignore me. Since my parents died." He looked down.

"Well, I'm sure you can," Esmeralda responded, after a few moments, not sure that she was being entirely truthful. "How long do you need to pack?"

"Wait, when did you want to leave?"

"I'd prefer to leave now, if possible," she said. "I am anxious to continue my quest."

CHAPTER III

Yellow Mountain

They did not leave immediately: Jack needed time to prepare, more time than Esmeralda would have liked. But taking Jack did offer her one unexpected benefit: the Totem opened up their food stores to her, providing more than enough provisions for the journey.

Esmeralda's horse, Sol, was stronger, and would carry the bulk of their supplies. Sol was getting along well with Jack's mare, Yika, with whom Jack had been playing in the fields. Jack himself seemed to be having too much fun packing for Esmeralda's taste.

"Awww, nuts! Got the nuts, Es," he said as he tossed the satchel of dried nuts into the pack. "Wool scarves, for cold weather, check. Baaaaa."

Esmeralda closed her eyes. This was not a good sign,

but at least Jack seemed enthusiastic. And she was getting to used to being called "Es".

"So tell me about the Yellow Mountain, Es. You got a cousin there?" Jack asked.

"Yes, Bevers. He studies at the monastery there. I'm hoping someone there can share some information about this krystal," she answered, touching the Aunauri around her neck. "Anything would help, at this point. I got surprisingly little information about it from the Totem scholars."

"Huh, I'm not surprised," Jack snorted, thinking of his tutors. Jack and school had never had a particularly good relationship. "How far is it?" he asked.

"It's far, but pretty easygoing until we get to the actual mountain. I would say six days' ride, at a good trot. And plenty of fresh streams along the way, so it should be

simple enough."

"Six days!" Jack said. He had never traveled overnight before. His farthest trip had been to his uncle's country house two hours away, and that had seemed far at the time.

"We can expect a warm welcome at the monastery," Esmeralda said. There are many Dagan there."

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As Esmeralda had predicted, the journey to Yellow Mountain was uneventful. As they rode in silence (Esmeralda's choice, not Jack's), Esmeralda thought about the Dagan family that had stayed with her parents: a young family, with two children, aged two and six. The children had both had a cough, and the younger one's had sounded serious. The father, Nazav, was also unwell, and rested often. He was looking for work, but he was weak, and he was far from the only Dagan refugee seeking employment in Dagan City. So the family had been largely dependent on

Esmeralda's family for their basic necessities, which Esmeralda's parents were able to provide. It was crowded, though, and truth be told, it influenced Esmeralda's decision to spend more time traveling, which she loved to do. And the sense of dependency was taking a toll on the family, especially Nazav.

She remembered the horror of Nazav's stories about how the beautiful forests, rivers, and lakes had degenerated into a barren, poisoned, gray wasteland; how the fish, animals, and birds had either fled or perished; how people began to get sicker; how the food grew scarcer, until the people were finally forced to flee, including Nazav, who had been a hunter.

She remembered all this, and was determined to put a stop to it. Her hopes were in the Aunauri to find out what was happening and why.

Meanwhile, Jack was having trouble sleeping on the

ground, and in turn kept Esmeralda up, getting up grumbling every hour or so. He also had a lot to say about the monotony of the food. But for all his goofing and complaining, he did learn fast, and turned out to be a surprisingly diligent assistant. He helped break down camp, forage for berries for breakfast, refill their water satchels, and load the horses. Again Esmeralda wondered if his family, who seemed to simply throw their hands up when it came to Jack, had ever seen this side of him. Or perhaps it was being away from home that motivated him.

When they finally reached Yellow Mountain, they did receive a warm welcome, including hot food, which by then Jack felt like he had nearly forgotten about.

"Porridge! Never thought I'd be excited for that!" Jack had to admit that even if the meal was plain, the spices were delicious, and there were at least one or two he did not recognize.

They arrived in the evening, and spent the night in the dormitory, which was one of several large rooms where the monks slept. The monastery was somewhat austere, and they had hard cots, but Jack relished a night sleeping off the ground, and was out almost immediately.

The next morning they spent time with Esmeralda's cousin, Bevers, who insisted on giving them a tour of the monastery. He had lived at Yellow Mountain for three years, and was excited to show them around. Esmeralda herself was anxious to make progress, but her appointment with Master Seki, the resident krystal scholar, was not until after lunch, and she was enamored with the monastic garden, and deeply impressed by the well-stocked library, where she took the opportunity to do more research about her mission, particularly the Aunauri around her neck. Bevers, who knew all about the situation in Dagan, was happy to help.

Lunch was more porridge, this time with fresh berries. Porridge was already starting to wear on Jack, and

even Esmeralda (although she would not have admitted it), but they were still glad to have it: they suspected that hot meals would be few and far between for the duration of their quest. They sat at large wooden tables with Bevers and several other monks, men and women.

Another Dagan monk at the table, a young man named Carlos, shared some of his family's story. It turned out that he was in the monastery partly to escape the dire conditions that had affected his family's village, where the poison had struck the stream that supplied their water. They could no longer support him, and reluctantly sent him to Yellow Mountain where he could study, work, and more importantly, have enough to eat. As Esmeralda looked around, she realized that Carlos' story was probably not unique: she had not visited Yellow Mountain in some years, but it felt more crowded, and with more Dagan, than the last time.

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The monastery had a dojo dedicated to studying krystal-enhanced meditations, techniques, and exercises, particularly those dedicated to the healing arts. The instructor, Master Seki, was the monastic expert on krystals, and had invited them to his class. Jack declined, preferring to play sports with the monks in the fields outside. Their practice emphasized joyful play and regular, vigorous exercise, and they were happy to include him.

Master Seki opened the class with a twenty minute moving meditation: the class, including Esmeralda, sat cross-legged on the floor, each holding a small quartz in their left hands, turning their hips slowly left and right, letting their arms gently swing around their bodies as they swayed back and forth. It was exactly what Esmeralda needed: her mind felt remarkably calm and clear. She had done some meditation in the Dagan temple, but this was something new and refreshing.

After the meditation, Seki lectured briefly about a

variety of different krystals, and different techniques appropriate to each. He mentioned Greenstone with a smile, apparently for their benefit, and discussed some of the Greenstone rituals employed by the Dagan. Esmeralda was familiar with all of them, but she had never realized that carving the Greenstone put sculptors into a trance-like state, filling them with the life force of the earth as they did so. Thus carving Greenstone was meant to be a devotional act; the greatest sculptors were exquisitely sensitive to working directly with the energies of Greenstone and the earth.

After the class, Seki took a look at the pendant. They were still seated.

"The Aunauri is a powerful Krystal, indeed, prama," he started. "Connected to the eyes, and the forehead, so you can see." He emphasized the word "see".

"But seeing is not enough. You have to see far, very far, and focus your gaze. It takes many, many years to

practice." Abruptly, Seki started laughing. "It's hard enough to see what's right in front of you!"

Esmeralda felt dejected. "But Master Seki, this is urgent. I don't have years to help my people!"

They sat for a minute in silence. Esmeralda wasn't sure if Seki was thinking about how to help her, or whether to help her. After a minute, he spoke again.

"You need a boost. The Fire Krystal is good for that - it will give you more energy. But maybe, too much. It can be dangerous."

"The Fire Krystal?" Esmeralda asked.

"It is from the breath of the earth," Seki muttered. "Very powerful krystal."

"Where can I find it?" she asked, standing up.

Seki looked away. He seemed to regret saying anything.

"Far from here, prama. Dangerous to use, dangerous to find."

He brightened. "But now, practice the Aunauri meditation. It will help you see."

Master Seki lit a candle, and motioned for Esmeralda to sit down before it.

"Study the darkness around the flame. Observe the different colors. Focus!" He paused, and took a slow, deep breath. "Focus to see. Practice, practice."

Esmeralda, deciding that it was not the time to push Seki further, and comforted that she at least had a lead, sat back down and stared at the candle for a few minutes. She wasn't sure what Master Seki meant, but she did see a slight

shadow around the flame's edge, and many different colors she hadn't noticed before. She realized that she had never truly studied a candle flame.

"Good, good," Master Seki encouraged. "Stay here - you're a good student!"

Esmeralda smiled. "Thank you, Master Seki. I wish I could! I will continue to practice, though."

CHAPTER IV

Farewells

"The fastest way to the Burning Rocks is across the Sea of Haelia," Bevers told Esmeralda.

She had told him of her decision to seek the Fire Krystal, to get the "boost" that Master Seki had spoken of. According to her research in the library, her best bet would be to look in the Burning Rocks, a fiery desert far away. By all accounts it was a brutal place, and most travelers took pains to avoid it. Seki would say little, other than to confirm this, expressing concern at the idea.

"It's dangerous," Bevers continued. "There are many traders willing to risk passage across the Sea, though, and one may be willing to ferry you across, for a hefty fee. You'll want to make sure your destination is Fellows' Port. I heard it's not a particularly friendly place, despite the name, but it's all business over there. Stay out of the bazaar if you can.

You look like travelers, and someone might try something. Burning Rocks should be just a few days north of there."

"Thank you, cousin," Esmeralda said. "For everything. We'll be vigilant. And I'll find out what's going on; I promise."

"Don't make promises," replied Bevers. "Not yet. You have a long road ahead. But I will pray you find out what is happening before it is too late. Losing our land was a sore loss to my family, and my father has not found work in the city. He's no mason; he loved to fish, and..." He broke off. "Do your best, cousin. Peace be with you."

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They packed for the journey down the mountain. Esmeralda took several candles with her, so she could continue practicing Seki's meditation for the Aunauri. She may not have years to learn how to use it, but at least she could start. Besides, she enjoyed staring at the darkness

around the flame. And the meditation was changing her somehow, even if she couldn't say exactly how...

Meanwhile, there was the matter of Jack to consider: she couldn't imagine that his uncle's request extended to something as dangerous as bringing him across the Sea to the Burning Rocks. She approached him in his dormitory shortly before they left.

"Jack," she started. "I want to thank you for accompanying me this far. You've been a great help, and I appreciate everything. I'm sure your uncle will be proud when we return home."

"But what about the Fire Krystal? We're not done with the quest," Jack replied.

"Uh, well, yes, I do plan to continue on once you're home safe," she said. "But it's far too dangerous--"

"Well, I'm coming with you," said Jack.

"Jack, Fellows' Port is too dangerous for you. And I have no idea what the Sea of Hae--"

"I don't care. I'm not going back," insisted Jack.

Esmeralda closed her eyes and said nothing.

"Look, my uncle sent me to help you on your quest. And that's what I'm going to do," Jack said. "I'm not going home until we're done. Okay? Anyway, Totem is six days away, and then you have to come back. You'd lose nearly two weeks if you took me home."

Esmeralda now had a difficult decision to make. Jack was right: she couldn't afford to lose two weeks taking him home. If she pushed very hard, the fastest it would take would be ten days, but even that... On the other hand, Jack could be a major liability crossing the Sea.

Ensuring his safety would be difficult enough, and if anything happened to him, not only would it be hard for her personally (she had begun to grow rather affectionate of the boy), but it would also put strain on relations between her people and his. She looked at him. He was smirking!

"I'm going to make your life miserable if you take me home," he said. "I'm going to wake you up at night, and play jokes... I'll slow you down even more!"

Esmeralda was shocked, too shocked even to be angry with him. Then something odd happened. She burst out laughing. She laughed and laughed, and Jack laughed with her, until tears were rolling down their cheeks. And Esmeralda had her answer.

"All right, Jack, you win," she said, to a cheer from Jack. "This may be the worst mistake of my life, but if you're going to slow me down, we might as well be going in the right direction!"

"Yeaaaaah!", said Jack. "You won't regret this, Es!"

But she wondered.

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Having made that decision, they chose, or more specifically, Esmeralda chose, to leave their horses at the monastery. Bevers offered to care for Sol and Yika until they returned, or to bring the steeds back to Dagan if they did not. Esmeralda was sad to say farewell, but the sea was no place for her noble companion. Flexibility was critical now. They would need to avoid the various raiders and pirates prowling the Haelia: the Zorners, Ahabians, Rexxians, Naiku; all were trouble. The Zabat Kin had military bases on both sides of the Sea, and ran massive, guarded caravans between them about once a week but generally did not extend their protections to outsiders, so their best bet was probably to get aboard a small, fast vessel, most likely a trader ship. That meant no horses, as much as they might wish for them on the other side.

Not knowing Bevers as well as Esmeralda did, Jack was more reluctant to leave his horse behind. But Yika was a stables horse, not used to adventure, and Jack begrudgingly admitted that she would be happier and better off at Yellow Mountain for the time being.

Bevers offered to accompany them to the port, with a mule loaded with supplies, but Esmeralda felt that the less they took with them, the better. Food for the journey, generously provided by the monks of Yellow Mountain, camping gear, spare clothes, maps, and of course, the Aunauri, was all she wished to take aboard. She also brought a small reference book on krystals, on indefinite loan from the monastery. Bevers wished them a fond farewell, and they thanked him for all his help and hospitality. Then they were off; slower than Esmeralda would have liked, for they were on foot now, but at last on their way to seek the Fire Krystal.