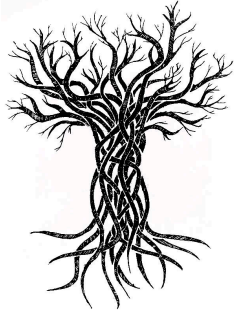


Chapter 1



For as long as Conata could remember, her only joy was riding on the shoulders of Father Arvis. She'd be sweeping, scouring dishes, or just sprawling on the rough-hewn Temple floor and catch the kind Priest's eye. At first he'd wince. But then he'd smile. Then with flushing cheeks and trembling lips (as if mumbling a silent prayer), he'd lower gently to one knee—and meekly drop his head.

It didn't happen often. Every few weeks if she was lucky. But once he'd offered his bony shoulders *he was trapped!* She'd vault atop his grey-robed back and clench his elephantine ears and squeeze her legs so tight around his neck she was surprised he never fainted—surprised *she* never fainted as the tall Priest stood back up and stained-glass windows blurred, granite archways plunged, and Temple floor beneath her raced away!

For a precious span of flying hours she'd be free—free of the Temple's silence, solemnity, and dust—her balding steed obedient to her command.

Tug his left ear he went left. Tug his right and he went right. She kicked her heels into his ribs to make him speed then drew back hard on both his ears to have him slow. If she wanted to dismount, she'd yank his earlobes downward till he stopped and folded his long, thin legs beneath him like a camel.

On these excursions neither Priest nor girl pronounced a word. He'd become her lowly *servant*; she, *High Queen* of some lost Kingdom of the South!

Older children, women, even men gazed up at her in wonder as she toured her vast dominion—a sight Conata relished as she steered her mobile living throne through crowded avenues and alleyways; public fountains, parks, and buildings; the cluttered aisles of shops and taverns' humid musk; even, on occasion, the open door of unsuspecting homes. She'd watch to keep her head from whacking a tree-limb or a lintel but beyond that never bowed, and fixed each startled gaze that caught her own with regal eyes.

And though at times his bald-spot flushed so deep it seemed to glow, the Priest always obeyed. His only stipulation was that she never take him from the Common Quarter—a condition to which Conata readily agreed. She'd long-since written off the other Priestesses and Priests who rarely took the narrow stair whose helix wound along a shaft of solid rock to reach the City far below. And even if they did it was always on some *Mission* for which small girls, they curtly told her, were not required. Yet despite his deep discomfort, Father Arvis let *Conata* be his mission.

She never thought to wonder why.

Then their last excursion came.

A flood of ice above the City had turned the sky a pale and glittering blue and falling crystals, as they hit it, made the Lake of Fortune steam. Yet girl and Priest wore just their rough grey simple robes for giant *Lamps* like towers wrapped in metal mesh kept the Common Quarter nestled in a shroud of endless Spring.

They left the *Citadel Mount* at dawn and took the Energy-powered *Ferry* across the Lake and disembarked on the south shore. With Conata firmly locked atop her Priest she sent him up the steep stairs leading from the wharf then spurred him toward a slender, long expanse of glistening water. The expanse's shallow

floor was tiled with golden plates saluting the inventors, artists, heroes, clerics, healers, mighty sovereigns and scholars of the *World that was Destroyed*. At one end hunched the statue of a haggard kingly figure representing the old world; at the other, a female marble shape—the *Victory of Covenant*—called the *Lost King* home with parted lips and open arms and giant dove-like wings.

Brushing past the frail King’s statue (and slapping absentmindedly its bare thigh), Conata drove her mount into the knee-deep sacred water. Gawking citizens and full-leafed trees splashed by till she emerged beside the *Victory* (which she ignored) and took the *Marble Road*, which led to *Union Quadrangle*, which is where the raucous *Millennial Bazaar* had been assembled beneath the ramparts of the towering *Final Wall*.

Here night and day industrious Commoners scurried, shouted, waved, bowed, and stiffly flexed their lips around their teeth in an attempt to capture metal disks called *money* from Knights stationed on the Wall as well any others who had fallen into their labyrinth of handcarts, barrels, stands, and colored tents.

Conata plunged into their midst, weaving sharply as she laughed down at the antics of the Commoners, flicked or yanked their pennants, poles, and awnings, and ran her fingers through the horsehair plumes of soldiers’ helmets. The Knights ignored them while the fermenting mass of fruit-pushers, coffee-peddlers, bread-mongers, sword-sharpeners, card-flippers, fortune-tellers, and dead-eyed tapsters (“*Heroes, oil your faulds!*” they cried. “*Oh guardians, grease your greaves!*”) looked up at her and Father Arvis with courteous disdain.

She stopped to gaze admiringly at a display of wicked-looking daggers on a rack. If only Priests used money she’d have Father Arvis buy her one! If only the daggers’ dagger-eyed attendant

had not been staring directly at her she would've tried to take one! (She'd taken things before—which, unfortunately, the stupid Commoners had realized.)

Perhaps—just for a second—he'd let her get away with merely handling one?

And Conata was just about to ask when suddenly a barrage of flying trumpets pierced the winter sky!

At the sound the squadron of Knights in the Bazaar almost leapt out of their armor. Half charged directly toward the Wall while others stumbled, spilled their drinks, or forgot their bows or shields so having sprinted halfway there they had to turn and sprint straight back. And whether Conata on some instinct shunted Father Arvis into their rush or the panicked Priest just bolted in that direction, before she knew it they were packed inside a *Carrier-lift* shoulder-to-shoulder with fifty armed and armored Knights!

The Carrier-gate slammed shut. The soldiers were too preoccupied with their weapons or dazed by the alarm to see the stowaways were there. All, that is, except for one young warrior, standing a couple Knights away in the rectangular, dim space. He was squinting at Father Arvis, the deep line between his eyebrows burrowing up into his helmet. On noticing Conata, however, his thin face slacked, his green eyes widened, and he gaped. Mimicking his flummoxed expression, Conata gaped right back.

It was a reaction she'd grown accustomed to. For every color, shape, and size of human being lived in Covenant—but *no one looked like her!*

Her roundish face and red-brown skin perhaps weren't so outlandish, nor her somewhat wider, flatter nose or full brown lips or thick and oddly whitish tongue. Not even her strange build, which was so muscular and broad-shouldered for a girl of seven

(or maybe eight, she didn't know) set her so decisively apart. Instead it was her otherworldly *hair*—an orange electric halo of rebellious energy crackling in a mass of frizzy curls around her head—and enormous, veinless *eyes* with the whitest of all whites and almost metallic yellow irises that made the people start and stare!

She loved these staring contests. The anxiety and surprise of others amused her and, feeling no urge to blink, she always won.

But now, before the youthful Knight could yield, the Carrier lifted, Conata's stomach plunged, and spears of light shot through the grating as they ascended the side of the great Wall. The sensation of flight engulfed her, and forgetting she still gripped the tall Priest's ears she balled her fingers into fists. Yet Father Arvis made no sound.

All-too-quickly the Carrier slowed, went dark, and with a loud clank shuddered to a halt. A second, less heavy clank came from their left; a side-gate opened to a flood of blinding light; Knights and stowaways, in unison, turned and marched out of the Carrier into the sun.

The brightness and a wall of roiling breath obscured Conata's vision as cold air struck her face. But then her eyes adjusted, the breathy wall dispersed, and a straight, colossal parapet composed of thirty-foot wide blocks of glittery light-grey stone and square-faced towers stretched before her.

Knights were everywhere, their weapons, armor, and crests of horsehair sparkling with frost. Three-hundred carried swords and spears and bows and manned the hundred-foot-wide parapet's crenellations. Another hundred in the towers serviced crossbows so titanic they seemed fashioned for the hands of giants. The parapet-Knights leaned forward with rigid heads and shoulders,

glaring at the base of the great Wall. Their comrades in the towers spun their crossbows' guiding wheels to shift their massive weapons left or right while using cranes to lower arrows the size of pine trees into the weapons' thirty-foot long grooves. Some of these huge missiles were tipped with spheres of *Crystal* packed with sharpened metal flakes and others by black metallic cones—but all were moving forward, or already pointed downward at whatever lay below.

Conata's attention fell upon a bear-like Knight whose black cape fluttered behind his armored shoulders as he walked. His thick red beard was flecked with ice and grey, and as he paced behind his soldiers on the parapet his hand fell to the hilt of a black sword.

Behind him hunched a brown-skinned, harried man in fur-trimmed leather armor with a metal crossbow on his back. A fantastic web of interlocking leather belts holding a dozen long curved knives covered his chest. Whispering intently, almost pleading, he pursued the bear-Knight with his head down just as Father Arvis did when speaking to Tertallian the High Priest.

Shouldering through the column of marching soldiers, Conata steered for them, curious to discover what the knife-bound man was saying. But then the bright unbounded vast horizon dwarfing Knights and Wall leapt to her eyes and yanking his left ear she kicked her heels into her Priest-mount's ribs to send him rushing toward the parapet's outer rim.

She'd never seen it up so close—the *outside world that Covenant left behind!* From the stained-glass aerie of the Temple it looked a distant, hazy picture, while from the Common Quarter streets she could see nothing but the Wall. But *now* she saw it plainly: a snowy plain as barren, wide, and level as a sea with giant mountains rising like dark islands far away. . . .

A rush of heat flushed up into her skin as Conata longed to step up into a crenel and charge straight off the Wall. *How Knights would gasp, believing she would fall!* But she *knew* instead of falling she would climb the frozen air and mount the bright blue shoulders of the sky and ride them to those mountains far away! So far away that Father Arvis could not see her once she got there! So far away the massive City—the only place she'd ever known—would be a black and soundless dot upon a plain of endless snow!

But approaching that fatal ledge a volley of disembodied shouts fractured the air, distracting her yet again. Father Arvis gripped her by the ankles, slowed, pressed his paunchy stomach against the Wall, and bent over its breastwork. Using the Priest's large ears to brace her arms, Conata peered straight down over his head just as an odor worse than garbage-wagons hauled by Tribals struck her nostrils.

Strung out in a long and ragged line along the Last Wall's base were several hundred men and women dressed in dirt-encrusted clothing, rags, and matted furs. The women slouched with bundles lashed onto their backs and men swayed in their harnesses tied to rough-hewn triangles or crosses with stout rope. A wagon with solid wooden wheels stood in their midst, the rusting ribcage of its frame partly exposed through ripped and tattered sheets of red and yellow cloth. Three women and three men stood by each of the long poles extending from the heavy wagon's front. The pinched, expressionless faces of perhaps two dozen children wrapped in blankets peeked from the framework of the crosses.

Conata laughed. She'd never seen a human being dressed in decomposing clothes, or a child whose face was grey and drawn as an old man's, or people so stiff and weathered they seemed a mass of cast-off leather dolls!

Yet the dolls she'd seen in shops and in children's hands were silent—these were *shouting* with cracking voices at the Wall and baring gapped and broken teeth in what Conata took to be a weirdly giddy grin.

As the people's shouts intensified the imposing Knight and his pursuer were drawing near the spot where she and Father Arvis stood. The bearded warrior halted. Lifting his black-gloved sword-hand, he sharply waved it at the air.

"I cannot answer all of them!" he rumbled, his lips and beard smoking with breath. "Ask them, *who's their Chief?*"

The fur-trimmed man behind him nodded, leaned over the Wall, and shouted gibberish at the people far below. To Conata's astonishment the people shouted gibberish right back as several gestured toward the wagon.

"My Captain, their Chief's *Qarassa*," the man replied. "They say he's dead there in that wagon."

"Oh-ho!" the Captain sneered, exposing sharp white solid rows of teeth. "*Dead* you say? Then tell them they may as well go pile in with him! A people without a captain are good as corpses!"

Conata blinked. A *corpse* meant someone dead. She'd seen a corpse just once, when Mother Auren died. They laid her out in wedding robes atop the *Altar of Ascension* in the *Temple of Fortunatus* atop the Citadel Mount. She looked peacefully asleep, but her hands were waxy, strange, and cold.

Conata looked down at the fur-trimmed man, expecting him to speak more gibberish. Instead he too looked down.

"*Translate, Kirit!*" the Captain snapped at him. "Translate me *exactly!* You think you're doing them a favor. But what does Scripture say about *the Hopeless?*"

"*Salvations 5:14,*" the man recited: "*The Hopeless choke on hope.*"

“Good—so stop choking them.”

Taking a deep breath, the man turned toward the parapet and, gaze still locked upon the icy flagstone at his feet, cried an almost groaning string of gibberish then fell silent.

At once the filthy people stopped their shouting. Many who were standing sat while those already sitting withdrew still farther into their rags till, with their breaths, they seemed just smoking piles of castoff clothes.

The soldiers kept watch over the people but relaxed their gleaming weapons. They hunched in silent clusters bundled in thick capes. Some stationed in a nearby tower passed an enormous steaming flask amongst themselves. No one in the towers or on the parapet appeared to notice Conata and Father Arvis were there.

In the sudden peace and silence Conata wondered who these people were and how they'd gotten outside the Wall. They looked a little like the Tribal servants of the Knights (a people known as *Telkepps*) while the nonsense of their speech reminded her of chants recited in the Temple for hours on end. *Chants* were songs composed of words that were not words that carried secret meanings from ancient lands and days. Words the Temple denizens refused to *translate* into normal-sounding speech but used (somehow) to address a thing they called *the Merciful*.

She'd heard the story several times from Mother Auren: how the founders of the Order of the Priests—led by the Prophet Fortunatus—had searched the northern wastes of death and ice and snow until they found the *Hearthstone* which had plunged from Heaven in answer to their prayers. An event which Mother Auren called a *miracle*.

This story, however, had never seemed quite real. Conata had never seen this *Merciful*, never felt it, never had an answer to a prayer. Not even beheld the Hearthstone which warmed and powered all of Covenant from its abode under the Temple deep inside the Mount.

Father Arvis had begun to shiver in his robe, but Conata felt quite cozy. The heat that filled her on beholding the horizon burned inside her still. Yet she could see the ragged people were not like her. They possessed no inner heat. Nor did they carry any sign of outer fire. She knew there was no *Energy* past the Wall. That the outside world was cold, and when the sun went down it would get colder.

How could they survive, she wondered, if no one lets them in?

As if this fear had just occurred to him, a tall thin man beside the wagon abruptly raised his voice. His face was like a mask or papered skull covered in sores.

“Let us in great Chief!” the translator almost wearily announced as the man below opened his arms. *“We will worship whomever you desire! We will even worship you!”*

“Tell them to keep quiet,” the Captain growled, then added with a grimace, “Wait—*worship*, you say? Mark that Kirit! These beasts prefer idolatry to death!”

“Why won’t you let us in?” the skull-faced man continued in a chanting, reedy tone. *“Who must we be enslaved to, who obey? We can choose now! We are free! Qarassa is dead!”*

Qarassa. . . .

Conata shivered as a strange cold hollow opened in her gut. Even before the interpretation came she felt she roughly understood what the skull-faced man was saying.

But the Captain shook his head.

“Tell them I don’t decide such matters. That’s the domain of the *Pentalian Senate*.”

“*What’s a Senate?*” the skull-faced man replied: “*we are starving!*”

The Captain shrugged, his blue eyes drifting along the line of filthy people then southwest to the horizon. Conata tracked his gaze: a long and winding trail stamped in the snow stretched off into the distance.

The Captain’s reddish, heavy brows converged over his nose.

“Have they seen a Devourer?” he near-whispered back to Kirit.

“*If we had, would we be here?*” came the translated reply.

“Perhaps not,” the Captain allowed.

“*Certainly not! But finding a Devourer—how we desired it before we saw this city!*”

“*Desired it?*” the Captain bristled, so astonished he leaned against the Wall to address the skull-faced man directly: “Plain-dog, you’re insane!”

“*But it’s sane to wish to watch your children starve?*”

“*Pah!*” the Captain spat, looking back to the horizon.

“*The world is dead,*” the man went on. “*Even the Devourers who took everything are gone. Perhaps they finally ate themselves? There are no cities. So little food. We eat now what we must. And so much cold. So all alone in all the world it seems this wall remains. But how, my Chief? How did you build it? You must’ve yoked the necks of Demons!*” The man’s voice sharply rose: “*OH GREAT CHIEF, QARASSA’S DEAD! QARASSA’S DEAD—LONG LIVE THE WALL!*”

The Captain seized the pommel of his sword and squeezed so tight his leather gauntlet creaked.

“Praise *Hieron*, Kirit!” he exclaimed. “Praise *Hieron* that we saved your heathen forebears from this life! Seeking Devourers, worshipping men, abjuring nothing to stay alive! Eating garbage,

begging, traveling with corpses, touching corpses, probably *consuming*. . . these are animals not men!”

“Yes, Lord Vyrdrathane,” Kirit sighed. “*Hieron be praised.*”

Conata’s heart abruptly quickened. Her already large eyes widened. She released the tall Priest’s ears and wrapped her arms around his icy forehead.

She *finally* understood! These wanderers were *just like* the ancient Priests who *also* wandered dressed in rags while plagued by winter, starvation, marauders, and exhaustion—even three Devourers which tracked them half the way. But then they found this very spot! The place where Covenant would be raised! They touched the Hearthstone’s unimagined Energy—*and were saved!*

So *if* the Merciful was real then shouldn’t it save these people too? Just like it saved the suffering Priests? Was she about to see a *miracle—not in worthless stories but for real?*

All at once a piercing wail jolted Conata, the Knights, and Father Arvis—who started so hard she nearly tumbled from his shoulders and dropped over the ledge! It even startled the waiting people who began to stir and stagger to their feet as if in answer to a summons.

It was coming from below, and as the wail swelled ever higher Conata’s heart kicked faster in her chest, her stomach clutched and shriveled, her skin went cold with sweat. Suddenly the half-decaying bodies and unwashed rotting clothes and gap-toothed broken grins and skeleton-like faces of the people filled her with a loathing so intense she couldn’t breathe.

“Oh, my Merciful!” Father Arvis gasped. “Oh my Merciful it’s a baby!”

“*Shut that up!*” the Captain bellowed down. “If your stench draws no Devourer your devil’s screeching will!”

“Who needs a Devourer?” a woman shrieked back in words Conata understood. *“We have YOU! Why not come down and eat the child yourself?”*

And the woman unwrapped a bundle of red cloth tied to her chest and, letting the fabric fall, she held a naked shrieking baby boy over her head.

“Beasts!” the Captain howled. *“Enough, Kirit—no more translations!”*

“Oh Merciful save the child!” Father Arvis screamed.

The Captain flinched. He looked in their direction. He saw the anguished Priest with the orange-haired girl atop his shoulders and his heavy jaw went slack. But at that very moment the Carrier’s side-gate clanged, a messenger dressed in golden livery appeared, and the Captain charged across the parapet in his direction.

“What’s the Judgment of the Senate?” he demanded.

“The Judgment’s given!” the pale-faced messenger replied, his gloved hand grasping at a pentagon of silver hanging from his neck. *“It is decided three-to-two! No outer-Carrier shall be lowered! No new Tribe shall breach the Wall!”*

“Hieron, Lord of Heaven!” the Captain exulted. Then drawing his great sword he cried, *“Oh, sons of God, upon your honor and your oaths your Order calls you now! In the name of Hieron Triumphant! In the name of the Paladar-King!”*

And now a great and rattling clamor echoed from the towers and all along the Wall as four-hundred armed and armored Knights came to attention and trained their weapons on the cowering people far below.

“Your destiny is your own!” the Captain roared at them, stabbing his blade up at the sky. *“Now leave! You won’t be told again! If this blade falls so do you!”*

Scattered, angry voices shouted at the Wall. A choking sigh moved through the crowd. But that was all. The rejected people did not fight—or even stay to let the Knights cut short their misery. Instead just as an icy wind arose they gathered up their wasted bodies and possessions and began to shamble off. The half-dozen near the wagon (including the skull-faced man) mutely raised the tattered wagon’s poles and with an unexpected surge of strength began to draw their Chieftain’s rolling mausoleum toward the snow-swept north horizon.

A sensation of relief so intense she nearly fainted swept through Conata. *The filthy people would not be entering the City! She’d never have to meet the skull-faced man or furious woman or naked wailing baby or their stinking rotting friends in the Common Quarter streets!*

Suddenly from beneath the jerking wagon a black and shrieking creature haloed in a cloud of freshly shaken frost sped out into the light. Leaping madly it snapped and howled, biting at the wind and at the legs of the six wanderers pulling Qarassa’s wagon. And seeing this deranged, outlandish creature Conata’s stomach spun with heat and sitting upright on the shoulders of Father Arvis she reached her arm out to the Captain, crying, “Oh my Captain, they said nothing about *a dog*—just *Tribes!* You can lower *one small harness!* One so small only the dog can fit inside!”

“Child, be silent!” Father Arvis begged her. “Babies, children, mothers—*all these people are going to die!* Do not supplicate for a *beast!*”

But Conata didn’t care. The frenzied creature was all alone but if they saved it she could take it to the Temple and wash its coat and give it food and it could sleep beneath her cot and lick her plate and bowl and follow her on her chores! *If not, the monstrous Tribals would devour the dog alive!*

In desperation she looked back down to find it. Instead an ancient grey-skinned woman who'd apparently been standing behind the wagon seized her gaze. Grey-white hair hung from her scabbed and scaly head in frozen plats and her emaciated torso showed through gashes in her mangy fur-lined robe. The crone was staring directly at Conata and as their gazes met she outstretched her withered hand upon a long and stick-like arm in the direction of the girl. And just as Kirit (to no-one in particular) translated the Tribals' final groan—“*we were a great people once—a people called the Khell*”—the woman's mouth split open to expose the toothless hollow of her jaws which splitting ever larger blackened as if to swallow Conata and all Covenant behind her!

A concussive force knocked Father Arvis off balance and spun them round. Conata screamed, fully expecting to find the cadaverous woman standing right in front of her.

But no—it was the Captain—nostrils flaring and blue eyes bulging with their whites veined red with blood.

“Priest,” he hissed, “get off my wall and back to your fellow *leeches* in your temple! And take this *cyst* that's sprouting from your neck! For this is *Hieron's* realm—the *Knights'* realm! *The realm,*” he whispered hoarsely, leaning in so close Conata could've yanked his ice-flecked beard, “*of MEN!*”