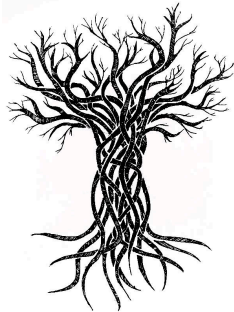


Chapter 2

In recognition of the fact that it discovered and first harnessed its Energy; and in exchange for abjuring the right to vote in the assembly of the Senate; and, finally, for consenting not to utilize its Output for themselves, the Priestly Order shall remain in perpetuity the ever-honored and undisputed Steward and Custodian of the Hearthstone, upon whose Mystery the life of Covenant depends.

—from the *Second Treaty of Covenant*, 420 Y.C.



For the first time in her life, Conata was relieved to be back inside the Temple of Fortunatus.

The enormous structure's barren walls embraced her with its strength; its scent of dust and stone was suffused with ancient calm; its heavy silence whispered all around her like a warm and soothing breath. Even its stained glass narrow windows which had always intervened between her curiosity and the world were welcome—for if she could not see *out* then nothing *out* saw *in!*

In a panic, Father Arvis had swung her off his shoulders, pressed her head against his chest, and ran. The whole way back his tears wetted her face and lips as the manic barking of the dog and baby's cries shook in her ears and scents of half-decaying bodies and unwashed clothes stank in her nose. In her frenzied imagination the toothless gaping woman and sickening skull-faced man tackled the dog and she was forced to *watch* them tearing at its fur to get a nail-hold on its ribs then pull the screaming creature

open as they buried their red, inhuman faces in its smoking flesh and guts.

Once they'd climbed the stairs and reached the *Temple Vestibule*, Father Arvis let her go and, covering his ears with both his hands, fell gasping to the floor. Conata wiped his cold tears from her face and left him where he lay. Her little closet with its dustpans, pails, and worn-out shedding brooms was calling. She sped off to the storage wing and found it. She went inside and lit a candle and shut the lockless copper door.

She'd had enough. She no longer wished to know the world outside the Temple, let alone outside the Wall. She'd stay right where she was—alone and safe atop the towering Citadel Mount which not even Devourers in ancient times could overcome.

After all, *why not?* What more could she desire? Her little room was heated by the Hearthstone's native warmth which emanated upward from a honeycomb of chambers and winding tunnels carved into the Citadel's four-hundred-foot tall mass. Chambers and winding tunnels that Conata had never seen, for everything exciting was forbidden.

It used to bother her. But now—*so what?* She didn't *need* the Temple's *Inner Sanctum*, or buried secrets of the Stone, or locked and silent Tower of Sentellion whose spike of milky Crystal lifted from a pillar of rock bound to the Citadel by a tantalizing isthmus. She'd *survive* not touching Energy, which poured out of the Hearthstone without ceasing. Could *ignore* the Priestesses and Priests who let her stay and eat and wear a robe the same as theirs but rarely spoke and never (except for Father Arvis) took her on their outings or placed a hand upon her head.

At last, it was enough! The simple cells her seniors slept and prayed in, the storage rooms and Vestibule, the refectory with its

attendant kitchen, sinks, and pantry, her little closet, the seven contemplative chapels! Spaces where she was free to lounge and wander, light or snuff out candles, help prepare the tasteless food, clean dishes, and wash the Temple's inside windows, walls, and floor!

With a sigh, Conata curled up on her cot to watch her little candle burn. Soon the horrid sounds and sights and smells melted away. She barely thought or felt. It was as if she'd been cocooned. As if nothing existed but the flame and dripping wax which rolled in slow white tears into the silver-handled base.

The dulcet tone of chanting echoed through her door. It was the *Canticle of Sunset*, which meant—outside—the light of the whole world was dying out.

But Conata didn't care about the world.

To her relief, the chanting ended. She used to like to hear it when she still longed to join the choir composed of all the Priestesses and Priests. Their intertwining voices rose and fell like wings of cloud and light! But then the High Priest told her no—she was *unfit* to sing the prayers of *summoning*, *grief*, and *love* which drew the Merciful to earth.

Without a word—or even knocking—a Priestess opened the door and said the High Priest wished to see her. To Conata's annoyance the woman didn't leave—just stood there waiting till she'd crawled out of her cot, picked up her candle, and joined her in the hall. Even worse, the Priestess made Conata follow (*as if she didn't know the way!*) through the curving maze of quiet, dim-lit hallways.

She'd been inside the *Outer Sanctum* twice: first when Mother Auren died and then soon after when she'd slipped outside the *East-Gate* and explored the top of the Citadel Mount.

Just the memory made her slightly dizzy. How she'd danced along the cliffside as Covenant revolved around her like a wheel! How looking down—*four-hundred feet*—to the *Grey Gardens* of the Priests, Tribal shanties to the north, and North Common Quarter's warehouses and streets had thrilled her into rapture!

She'd circled the whole Temple without incident and had just begun traversing the slender spur of rock to touch Sentellion Tower when a band of panicked Priests burst screaming from the *South-Gate*. They threw a rope tied with a noose at the far end and said to slip it under her arms and gently coaxed her back with lots of promises. But once they had recaptured her they forgot their promises (which made them *lies*) and dragged her to Tertallian, the rough rope pinching at her waist.

She and the Priestess arrived at the Outer Sanctum gate. Once again, Conata found the High Priest seated grimly at the center of the darkened, high-domed chamber on a throne of glass upraised on seven glowing Crystal tiers.

The Priestess bowed, then backed away into the hall. But Conata didn't bow. Instead she set her candle by the Sanctum's open gate and walked toward the throne. The High Priest monitored her advance with dark grey wary eyes and touched his beard so long and white that, from a distance, one couldn't tell which part of him was beard and which was ivory robe.

"Child, sit on my lap," he told her as she planted her foot on the first tier.

Conata scaled the luminous steps, mounted the High Priest's lap, leaned back into his overflowing fluff and firmly crossed her arms. As she waited for him to speak she focused on his ring of purple stone which had begun to glow on his right hand. The last time they had done this she'd been lectured on *community*, *duty*,

responsibility, boundaries, and was implored *to seek the Merciful in your heart*. All things she couldn't see, touch, taste, or smell. She only hoped this latest gentle censure would be brief.

“Both in the depths of my own heart,” the old man finally began, “and in the *Presence* of the Stone I've meditated, most unexpected child, on your origins and fate. Always tests and a long apprenticeship were required before a *Suppliant* could join our holy ranks. For *you alone* this rule was waived. We fed you, bathed you, taught you reading, taught you writing, gave you leave to be among us and observe our consecrated ways. And Father Arvis, whose voice melts solid stone, endeavored to train your throat to sing.”

The High Priest paused, his long, thin knobby fingers lightly gripping at the arm-rests of the throne.

“Yet in the seven years you've dwelt among us,” he continued, “you have remained ever a stranger. We offered you a cell: you preferred a *closet* far away. You do not read. You do not write. You neglect to follow in our steps or hang upon our words. Instead you poorly sweep the floors, and stare at walls, and press your face against stained-glass as if the wisdom that surrounds you were no match for childish reverie and sloth.

“And as for singing! Sound and harmony *in you* have never met! How the glass refused to crack against the onslaught of your wailing no mortal tongue can tell!

“*And now*—now Father Arvis reports that in this tragedy by the Wall your mystifying heart was finally summoned—not by the loss of hundreds of dearly needed souls—but *by a dog!* Child, what else can I conclude except that for our ways you are entirely untuned?”

Throughout Tertallian's increasingly judgmental- sounding speech Conata's fists and cheeks had warmed and tightened—now they fully clenched and burned.

"I don't *care* what you conclude!" she retorted. "Why should I when no one else does? You feel sorry for those people, good for you! So join the Senate and cast a vote to save them!"

"*Cast a vote?*" the High Priest marveled. "Child, we are the guardians, the advisors, the mediators and exemplars! *The Keepers of the Stone!* We don't descend to sterile disputations or haggle over Truth! So-called *politics* is a disease we must endure till all awaken to the Merciful's saving Light, which shines from their own hearts if only men will see it!"

Twisting in the High Priest's bony lap, Conata glared up at the old man's pained and watery eyes.

"There is no *Light!*" she sneered. "As for men, I've been inside the Common Quarter and all they see are *coins!* You accuse me but *the Knights*—they wanted those people dead far more than I! And they insulted Father Arvis, your whole Order—called you *leeches* to his face!"

"They wouldn't dare!"

"They didn't *need* to dare," Conata laughed: "*he cried and ran away!*"

Scrambling off the High Priest's lap, Conata cleared all seven stairs with just one leap and hit the floor.

"Impossible child, come back!" Tertallian exclaimed behind her as she briskly walked away. "You do not know your place!"

"I have no place! Only my closet! *And I'm going back there now!*"

But she'd only made it halfway to her candle when Tertallian, more gently now but loud enough to hear, pronounced, "Alas,

poor creature no—you are not going back. You shall never go back again. . . .”

Conata stopped and spun to face him.

“What does *that* mean?” she demanded.

“It means that it is time for you to go. We took you in under the most unusual circumstances. For you alone of all the souls of Covenant were not born inside our City’s walls.”

Conata’s cheeks and lips went numb. Her burning hands turned limp and cold.

“But—but I live here!” she choked out. “My room—the Temple—*this is my home!*”

“No child, you never *lived* here. Only your body dwelt among us. Long have I seen it, and pondered what to do. Yet now this. . . *incident* with the dog has given me the answer. For there *is* one Order which perversely places creatures—even blades of grass and trees—on par with humankind as if the life that fills them were the same. To this Order you must go—must go this very night. I already have informed them of your coming.”

For a moment Conata was terrified the High Priest meant the Knights—but, no, Knights didn’t care about *human beings* let alone dogs and grass and trees! *So who?*

“To the Druids,” Tertallian declared, as if reading her mind. “And do not be afraid. Instead let us remember how the paths returning to the Merciful must be numberless, and have faith that, in their alien Quarter, you will eventually find your own.”

Conata’s legs folded beneath her. Before she knew it she was seated on the cold, uneven floor. There she stayed until Tertallian with a sigh rose from his throne, came down his glowing Crystal tiers, and walked slowly to her side. He paused above her—then awkwardly sat down cross-legged on the floor.

“My child,” he offered, voice softening as his purple ring went black, “you will survive leaving the Temple. You have survived far worse. It’s why we named you, in the ancient language of Synnethia, *she who strives*.”

Conata hung her head, cold water abruptly trembling in her eyes. What did it matter how she was named? She was nothing. How could *nothing* have a name?

“Ah, *Conata!*” the High Priest sighed as, reaching out, he almost touched her hand. “Forsaken child! Before you leave us, you should hear the truth! You were discovered by an *Expedition* in a ruined city of the far South! They found you buried in a box made of lead with just a hollow reed to breathe through! The *Expeditionaries* heard you wailing. They dug you up and brought you back. And so. . . *peculiar* were the circumstances of your discovery and appearance it was determined you should stay here till your capacities and nature became clear. Alas, that clarity has not come. All that *has* is the fact you don’t belong here. Indeed, I suspect you’ll never know where you belong till you discover where you’re from.”

Conata’s eyes went dry. Her chest and limbs reclaimed their strength and heat. Looking up at the High Priest she stared directly at his eyes, which abruptly flickered with reflected purple light.

“I do not care,” she told him, her voice without emotion. “I do not care where I am from.”

Tertallian blinked, drew slightly back.

“No,” he admitted. “Perhaps not. But someday you will. Now, quickly, let us go find Father Arvis so he can take you.”

But Conata shook her head—her mind as clear and steady as her candle’s yellow flame.

“No,” she answered hoarsely. “If you’re sending me away, send

me away. I don't need your help. I never did. Your whole Temple's made of dust."

And with that Conata bounded to her feet, turned her back on the High Priest, and without retrieving her candle or belongings she abandoned the Sons of Fortunatus—and went to find the Druids on her own.