

Dark Fire

Krisály's Chronicles
of Féyræ: Scroll 2

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Dedication

“I question, therefore I think, therefore I am.”

With extra special thanks to my editors, Patrick Walsh and Nick Pena. Without their busy red pens and often tough feedback, *Dark Fire* would not have become the exciting adventure I imagined.

This trilogy is dedicated to my parents, Ruth Duplain-Newcorn and Andrew Newcorn, my husband, Patrick Walsh, my sister, Jodi Newcorn, and to all my wonderful friends who have cheered me on and believe in my ability to succeed.

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Prologue

Long ago in the quiet of the world, the elven Ael, dwarf-Troích, and Féyree all dwelt in the woodlands and meadows of Lampion. Unseen in a parallel daemension was Nonetre, land of the fire daemiani. The Féyree descended from fragmented groups which survived the depredations of their tyrant Sôlon and the genocidal Battle of Sagád, and coalesced into isolated clans dwellings in caves. During these Days of Dimness were born the Twins, who would later become lawgivers and leaders. Over time, the clans outgrew the caves, establishing themselves in glens, dells and vales, each led by two Chief Taíns, and all ruled by the Lord and Lady of Féyree. The heart of Féyree was the Great Dell; its High Seat, the hilltop stronghold of Revelstoke. Beneath Lúnasa's sacred moonlight and guarded by the earth Mother who created Lampion, the Féyree lived in harmony.

In *Crossover*, the first Scroll of the *Krisály's Chronicles*, young féyree, known as sprytes, are born without wings and must earn them by surviving the progressively more dangerous initiation Rites of Krisálys. Under the guidance of brown-cloaked Mentors and their highest Loremaster, the Dolmen, the twenty-seven sprytes, collectively known as a pod, must acquire the skills and magic to crossover and become full-fledged féyree.

Among them are Danaí and her best friend, Pook. Danaí is unaware of the old legend that a féyree of silver skin, hair and emerald eyes is always a harbinger of great change. Pook can not know that the fire daemiani have prophesied his arrival to save them before they are extinguished by their own way of life.

Strange happenings surround Danaí. A chance encounter with the dwarf Tlarg leads to a journey to the dwarves' sacred emerald, the Anam, which reveals a tortuous vision. On the Truthing Well journey, Danaí rescues her injured podmate Tátia, only to be attacked by a fire daemon. She forms a bond with Argentyne, the Lady of the Lake, who bestows upon her silver shoulders that glow at impending danger. Her mischievous podmate Aaron captures her heart, only to break it when he makes a terrible mistake. The Dolmen, convinced she is a danger to the Fey Folk, will stop at nothing to eliminate her, even risking the entire pod by sending them to seek an ice dragon's tear. To her defense come her friends, Josen, Damon, and Rhytha, and her Aunt Triása and Guardian Toron.

Pook is terribly jealous of Danaí's adventures. When a fire daemon invites him to Nonetre, he eagerly accepts, setting in motion events that leads to his becoming the daemiani's Firelord, as prophesied by the Herald Eshel. When he lures some of his podmates into Nonetre, the Dolmen finally concedes trouble may be gathering, and advances the final Rites.

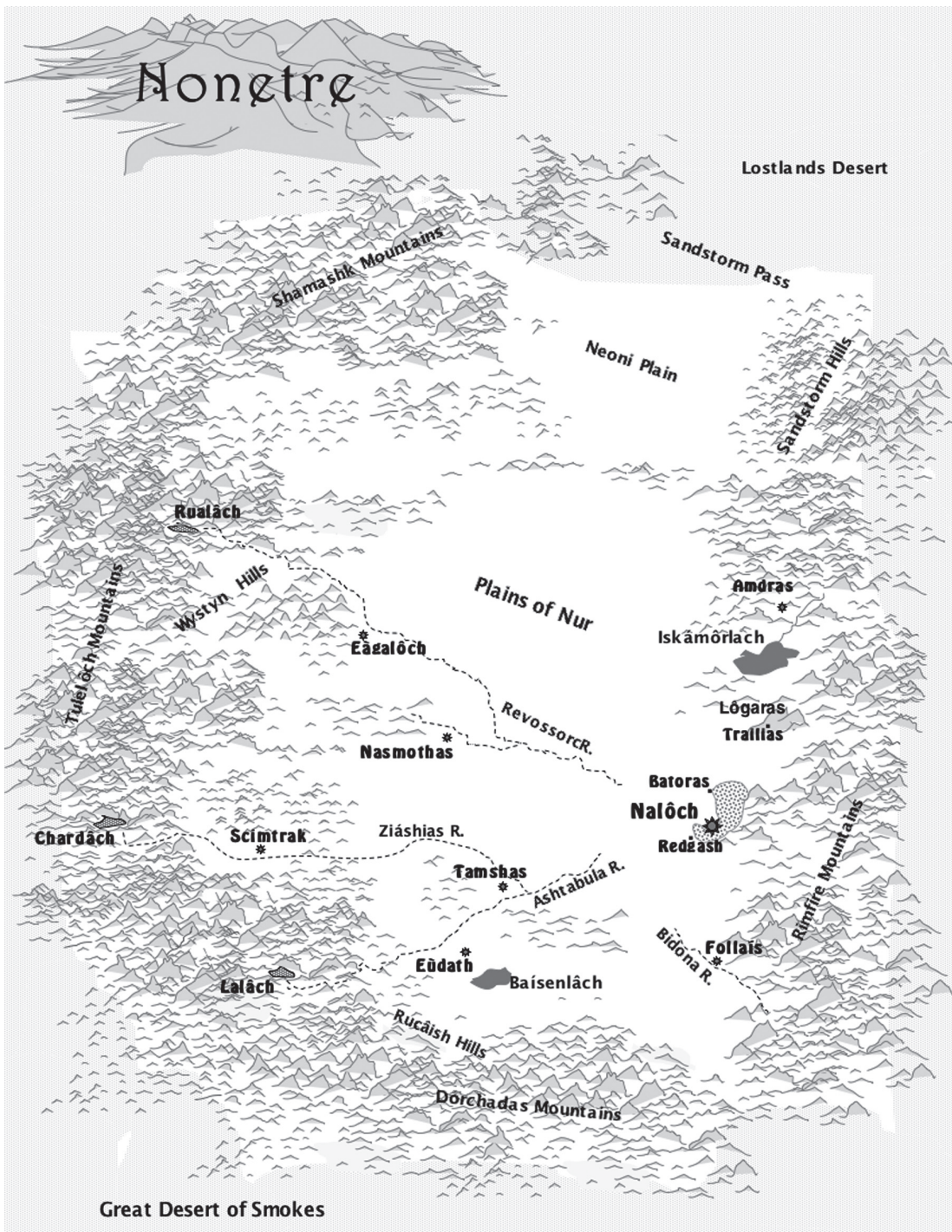
At Oísillon, the ceremony of the sprytes' fledging, Pook appears through a breach between daemensions, and the Lady of Féyree grants permission for him to celebrate with his friends. Torn between wanting to rejoin them and his desire for power and magic, he returns to Nonetre, where Eshel has many plans...



Lampion



Nongtrę



Ancient Prophecies of Lampion and Nonetre

Silver, silver, green.

In youth remains unseen.

*Winged, changes brings
future that has been.*

Féyree Teaching Skald Chant

Of lavender he will be made; of shadow his roots are wrought.

A questing mind unafraid of desire for what is sought.

Wingless born, winged be; a chasm he will span,

Féyree master, daemons' lord – he shall all command.

Fire Daemon Prophecy

Chapter I

Came the dark thunder of the drums.

Bronze gates groaned open on either side of the arena. From their rows of stone seats sweeping up the steep hillside, the fire daemiani leaned forward in hungry anticipation, their torch-like multi-hued flames flickering in the dwindling light. Excited murmurs flared to a roar as the contestants paced forth to meet in the center, two black shadows backlit by Kéothâch's heaving orange waves of fire. spurts of scalding yellow and scorched scarlet burst free of the fire lake's seething ooze, clutching at the sky's smoky brown pall, only to fall back in slurping gulps.

The drums throbbed a second time, the deep boom reverberating off the High Seat's blood red stone. Upon it reposed the Firelord, Tvashtar Tizón. From beside him, the Herald Eshel stepped to the edge of the dais and raised his arms, flickering gray flames outlining his familiar crook-shouldered figure. "Folk of Nonetre!" The rasping voice commanded immediate silence. "Behold the condemned! This eve they do battle for their offenses here in *Batoras*. To death, the loser. To the winner, life. Approach ye the Tvashtar!"

Clad in snug ebony tunics, the two féyree advanced to stand before the High Seat. The heavily muscled golden one, with deep blue wings, grasped his curved blade with practiced ease. The other, the green of a just-unfurled leaf, clutched the hilt with both hands, a tremor visible through her entire slender body. Her pale yellow wings seemed to shiver, Kéothâch's light flickering through them as sunlight through a tear. Both bowed before raising their blades to salute. Stone-faced, the Tvashtar gave a slight nod. The Herald clapped once. "To life!"

The féyree faced each other, blades up in brief salute. Then the golden féyree lunged. Blades clashed, edges screeching with a flash of silver sparks. Back and forth they slashed, amidst the crowd's groans and cheers. Vaulting into the air, soaring, plunging, tumbling over and around each other like ferocious dueling birds, then plummeting back to the ground to hack and strike. Threads of dark blood writhed down the green féyree's left thigh; her arms struggled more and more with each lift of the blade. With an ugly laugh, the gold féyree dropped to one knee and took a vicious swipe at her legs.

So swiftly she was a blur, the other sprang high. For a heartbeat, she hung suspended over him, hefting the blade above her head. Then down she hurtled, her weight adding to the slashing cut that sheared off his right wing. He screeched, dropped his blade, and crumpled forward, face crushing into the crimson dirt. Landing beside him, the green féyree stood panting, wings slumped, blade yet tightly clutched. Kéothâch vomited hissing flames.

Slowly she gazed up at the fire daemiani who had risen to shriek and cheer. Warily she lifted the blade above her brow in victory. The crowd stamped, trembling the ground so that pebbles danced. Something brushed her foot. She glanced down. "Kill me," begged the gold féyree. "For if you do not, they will cast me into Kéothâch, a death far more terrible than your blade's swift mercy. In the name of Lúnasa and the Mother, I beseech you, kill me."

Shuddering, she looked up at the exultant fire daemiani soaring skywards in spurts of flame, spinning and tumbling about like some grotesque mockery of a revel in her now-lost realm of Lampion. "May you meet the Twins beyond the Veil," she murmured, bringing the blade down with her last scrap of strength.

The Tvashtar gasped, amethyst-hued hands clutching his knees so tightly, the knuckles

gleamed lavender. He recoiled as she stared up at him, silver eyes brilliant with hate, even as exhaustion dulled her bodyglow. Her blade drooped, bloody tip propped on the ground.

“*Amsaras!*” The fire daemiani shrieks shuddered the air. “*Tvashtar, amsaras!*”

Eshel looked to Tizón, frowning slightly at the rigid face. “My lord? They cry that Andalorsa be awarded life.” He released a slit-thin smile. “At least until the next Batoras. Your decision?”

The *Tvashtar* swallowed hard. About his brow, the ring of tiny flames hovering just above a twisted circlet of red gold sputtered indigo sparks. He stood, black cloak writhing beneath golden wings, and advanced to the dais’ edge. He raised both hands, gazing at the féyree. The immediate hush was disturbed only by Kéoathâch’s belch and burble, its sharp reek threading the hazy air. “*Amsaras, Andalorsa. Well fought!*” Again he lifted his hands to quiet the bellows of approval. “And now two choices I give ye.” He ignored Eshel’s sudden scowl. “Will ye remain here as a warrior for Batoras, or will ye serve in one of the great gardens as thrall to the Firelord of Nonetre? Choose!”

Andalorsa hesitated. In the under-caves of Batoras where she had been trained for battle, she had been given to understand her only choice would be to fight over and over until, like Oros, she finally fell to another condemned thrall. That the *Tvashtar* was presenting her an alternative left her breathless.

“The *Tvashtar* has demanded an answer!” Eshel’s voice was harsh with coiled anger. He already guessed her choice. She should not be permitted to leave – her unexpected performance guaranteed at least one more good battle; he was loathe to let her escape. Why had the *Tvashtar* even offered?

“*Tvashtar Tizón, I choose the gardens!*”

A groan dribbled from many throats. The *Tvashtar* ignored it. “To Rualâch ye are condemned. Such is my order; such is my command. Now, return ye to the under-caves.” With a final salute, Andalorsa retreated.

“My lord, surely you will reconsider...”

Tizón whirled about, aqua eyes orange-embered with fury. But he kept his voice low such that it reached no further than Eshel’s ears; not even Falaise, Thrak or Ashnarg, who were waiting a short distance behind the High Seat, could catch his words. “She fought bravely. She fulfilled the conditions of Batoras. Be not so ready to fail in rewarding those who serve, for most surely you will regret such actions in the end.”

Inclining his head to conceal blazing eyes, Eshel gave a curt bow. “My lord is wise. It shall be so.” He faced the crowd. “It is finished!”

The drums thundered three times, then fell silent.

* * * * *

Tizón stared moodily over Nalôch’s ramparts at the incessant boiling fires, eyes watering slightly from the pungent gout of smoke that lurched free of Kéoathâch, the Cauldron of Smokes. Crouched on a rocky knoll that jutted thumb-like into the bubbling ooze, the hulking black stone fortress was dominated by the split-spired tower of the *Pirâsh*. About its roots clung smaller dwellings; coiling around all was a high wall. Dwellings clotted the nearby low hills, clustered around small glowing fire wells or smoking vents. Beyond sprawled the barren Plains of Nûr that bunched up against the Tulelôch Mountains wherein was cradled his realm’s life-sustaining great gardens.

He felt as restless as Kéoathâch’s heaving surface. Time unfolded differently here in Nonetre as compared to his former realm of Lampion, he mused, amazed that already two *lumnas* had passed. There was a never-ending current of tension, a hurrying urgency that he

often found grating. But this was foolish. After all, was he not Tvashtar? No longer Pook, the wingless sprytle struggling through archaic Rites to earn his wings. In this, his new realm, he had taken the name Tizón, Firelord of all Nonetre. His word was law.

Yet, he admitted, he was at times jealous of Danaí and his other sprytle friends who had successfully earned their wings by completing the nine Rites of Krisály after he had abandoned them and Lampion for Nonetre. His own wings, easily released by Eshel, drooped at the thought. And even though Lady Atelaí had graciously permitted him to join the festivities of *Oisillon*, and celebrate with the newly-fledged féyree, he had felt like an outsider, uncomfortable under the Lady's penetrating gaze and the Dolmen's barely veiled contempt. Did they suspect?

"Why so preoccupied, oh mighty Tvashtar?"

He felt Saía's too-familiar caress trail up his back, tug gently on a curl of his shoulder-length black hair, glimpsed her long scarlet fingers contrasting against his black tunic. Expelling an inaudible sigh, he turned to face her. "Just thinking about Eshel's plans to make Lalâch more productive. He says we need to lift more water up into the gardens, but because one of the crystals flawed nearly two sevendays ago, there is not enough heat. So we are at some point to journey there that I may better understand the workings and decide."

Saía quirked a golden eyebrow, pursing her full lips in what she knew to be a fetching pout. "But for uncounted seasons, Eshel has overseen the three great gardens."

"That was before I was crowned Tvashtar," Tizón snapped, nettled she presumed to question him. "Just because it has always been done in a certain way does not mean it is the right way or the best. You'd think Eshel is the Dolmen or something." Ignoring her surprised stare, he stalked back into the Pirâsh, his flame crown spitting angry scarlet sparks as he vanished down the tower's curving stairs.

She considered pursuing him, then instead reached out to her brother. "Syar? Syar, can you speak?"

'For a moment.' His voice felt reassuring, almost cool inside her mind. She savored his mental touch – none knew of this mind-link; it served them both well. 'I am nearly descended into Forgerôch. I plan to punish Taskmaster Crask for having let that dwarf thrall escape at the stone gate. The fool! Not that he will get far in the Tulelôch Mountains. At best, a new warrior for Batoras. At worst, bones. What tidings?'

'The Tvashtar questions Eshel's plans. They are soon to visit Lalâch. The Herald is greatly mistaken if he thinks Tizón will be little more than a figurehead.'

Syar's mental voice thinned, signaling distraction. 'You know Eshel deems Tizón as the only one who can claim Lampion for us. He is wise in the ways needed to shape our new Tvashtar.'

She could have sworn there was a slight sneer underlying his last words. 'Yes, but...'

'I have duties to which I must attend, dear sister. Distract the Tvashtar. If he is occupied, he will be less likely to make sparks.' The mind-link faded.

Saía frowned, her fingers twining waist-length golden tresses into snarls. Already she had discovered that the Tvashtar was not as pliable as anticipated – and she found that oddly exciting. Half fire daemon, half féyree, her sensuous beauty was such that few could ignore her. Eshel had early on recruited her to his inner circle, valuing her abilities, and had assigned her as consort to the new Tvashtar. Yet Tizón, while enjoying her company, was close-mouthed, keeping between them a barrier that she as of yet had not been able to breach. As of yet. She smiled.

"Lady Saía."

She did not bother to turn around, recognizing Analkar's cloying voice. "Yes?"

"Your presence is requested in the Firelord's Hall."

"Very well." Holding her golden wings tightly closed against the hot wind gusting off Kéothâch, Saía followed the flickering green fire daemon into the tower's dark archway.

* * * * *

Hresh bowed "My lord Herald, the new crystal has arrived from Lampion." He stood in the entry, not daring to step in. Never was the Black Chamber entered except by Eshel's explicit invitation.

Gazing through the crystal pane that overlooked Kéothâch, Eshel did not bother to turn around. "Let it be prepared to accompany us on the journey to Lalâch. Make it so!" The thud of the closing door reverberated dully along the walls, the sound tangling in a clutter of dried plants, powders, metal basins and flasks scattered across trestles and sideboards; the jumble of things used by a *Talushim*, a loremaster of Nonetre. It rattled a pile of bones heaped in a corner, causing one to slither and clatter to the floor. Eshel shook his head. Bones from a folk now dried and gone. As they all would be if his plans went awry.

So long had he toiled on them! Over five hundred winters, even as he watched time extinguish other fire daemiani. Ever since that terrible day when they had attempted to cross the barrier between daemensions into Lampion, only to be repulsed with such violent magic, that all but he had died. And even he had not escaped unscathed. Still could he hear her shrieking, see a whirling silver blur, feel the white-hot burst and excruciating impact as the spell hurled him and the others back. He rubbed his crooked right shoulder, felt the familiar tweak in his shortened left leg. She had sealed the rift, and long had it been before he was able to pierce the barrier anew. None were left who recalled that time, nor how the force of the blast had destroyed Dannôch. He had made sure any vestiges of his failure had been replaced by the tale of how the eruption of Kéothâch – that occurred soon after – had destroyed the Tvashtar and his stronghold. But somehow, in the end it had granted him absolute power. He was eldest, thrice the normal age of any fire daemiani. Why, he could not guess.

Turning, he glanced about the chamber lit only by the fire lake's flickers. He rarely lit the torch urns – only when the Tvashtar came to learn what he must be taught. His thoughts meandered to the glimmers of discontent he still sensed about his choice. At the outset, the *Cromosh* had spoken openly about their doubts that one who was not a fire daemon could lead as Tvashtar.

"What nonsense is this?" Draish had demanded. "We are all agreed that we must take Lampion, for little remains in Nonetre. At your orders, our newly-chosen warriors will soon assemble at Iskâmôrlach to begin training under the Firelord. Your spies have assured us that except for some insipid guild of Guardians, the féyree have no trained warriors, expect no attacks. Time has lulled them, the dwarves and the ael into complaisance. Like the ripest fruit, Lampion waits for us to pluck it. Yet you propose a féyree as Tvashtar, and an untried wingless one at that?"

Eshel had waited for the grumbling to die down, contemplating the twelve daemiani *Cromoshor* seated around the scarlet stone table. Well he knew the power of his presence as head of this High Council. Shorter than the others, with a face haloed by a silvery shock of flames, his head seemed too big for his thin, almost stick-like body. His skin was a dull ash gray, the mark of an extremely old fire daemon whose body fires were dimming. Yet his eyes still glowed the intense blue of the hottest flames. As the Herald, his word had been law. Until his prophecy had been fulfilled with the coming of Pook from Lampion. At last,

when it grew quiet, he continued. “In all these many seasons, never have you questioned my prophecy.

“Of lavender he will be made; of shadow his roots are wrought.

A questing mind unafraid of desire for what is sought.

Wingless born, winged be; a chasm he will span,

Féyree master, daemons’ lord – he shall all command.

“Why do you now doubt? Was it not my vision to create the great gardens, which prolong our survival even as Nonetre withers? Have I not established links within Lampion, seducing the hearts of those that we can use as needed? Have I not devised ways to replenish our thralls, capturing ael, dwarves and féyree with our *selgáich*, the barrier stalkers? I tell you, no fire daemon can lead us into Lampion. While the féyree’s fear of daemiani has dulled over time, their tales of Sôlon are yet taught, and it would take little for féyree, dwarves and ael to join against us.”

“So?” Malas growled. “So after our onslaught, there would be less folk. That means more for us!” Laughter roiled among the Cromosh, flaring their flames brighter.

“We have but this one chance to enter with our warriors, for otherwise the barrier breaches can not be rendered wide enough,” Eshel replied coolly. “If we fail, another three winters must pass before the chance arises again. And I doubt we have three winters left to us.” His voice rose. “Surprise is essential! As when we conquered Nonetre, we will need those who know how to live in Lampion to serve us. They will become our thralls, and so ensure our survival. A féyree leading us will seduce them into uncertainty; they will hesitate. Through our use of him, we will have the opportunity to acquire vital knowledge that we yet lack – and must have if our plans are to be successful. By the time they grasp the truth, we shall overwhelm them.”

“Think you they would not suspect one of their own?” Rakas wagged his head disbelievingly, pale purple flames darkening with irritation. “Those who we take from Lampion have never been permitted to return. Yet now he comes back? That will lay grounds for great doubt.”

“Of course he will be questioned,” Eshel retorted. “But at least they will give him a chance to speak. Were he a daemon, the barriers would be sealed – and that must not happen. It will take the power of all our Talushim to open the breach rifts wide enough. The wrong word, and all is lost. Including us.”

“But Tvashtar? Always has the flame crown been bestowed upon a fire daemon,” Nemish rasped; others nodded. “But since the strange drowning of Ìdras, at your prophecy, none have sat upon the High Seat. I have spoken with this Pook, and he is no empty-headed féyree. Even as your prophecy foresaw, he does indeed have a questing mind. There is an impatience to learn, to try new things; both weaknesses you can exploit. But push him too hard, and he will snap free of your control. Would it not be better to instead make him the highest leader, our *andástariq* among the warriors, and finally crown a true Tvashtar? Too long has the High Seat remained empty.”

Fools, Eshel thought, toes curling in his boots as he listened to the others’ agreement. All Lampion is within their grasp, and yet tradition binds and blinds them. He kept his voice calm. “Wise are your words, good Nemish. Yet were he to come among them overtly a warrior, would that not be cause for alarm? Whereas if he is presented as our Firelord, would it not imply our respect for Féyree – and convince both him and them of our, ah, good intentions?”

Sedaris nodded, drumming ochre fingers on the tabletop. “Ahhh, I follow your deception.

A sop to their doubts, at least enough to put them off track. But I agree with Nemish – he will not be content as figurehead. Forget not that if he is crowned Tvashtar, then he is the Most High – even over you, our Herald. Do you accept that risk?”

Except for the muted hiss and crackle of the daemiani’s flames, the Council Chamber was silent. Well did Eshel understand Sedaris’ real question. Would he accept relinquishing power, and the lesser role of influencing from within the Tvashtar’s shadow? It would be more difficult – but he would continue to do so. Although he could not deny Pook was less pliable than expected. Could he have erred in his choice? No – he would not believe that mistake of himself. A warped smile frayed his lips. “Let none here doubt my power. If I can not control a young féyree, then indeed I am a fading fire daemon.”

There was an uneasy quiver of laughter; all understood the implication. Eshel was indisputably the most powerful of all Talushim, and while in theory, if the other high loremasters chose to join in magic against him, they should be able to overcome him, none had any desire to put it to test. Now would be the wrong time. And if the Drying continued apace, they had little time left.

“It is then agreed by the Cromosh that you will support my pronouncement of him as our new Tvashtar? A show of sparks?” Eshel was pleased by the unanimous show of brief colorful bursts, yet carefully noted those that were last to vote.

“But by some other name, one befitting our Tvashtar,” Sedaris griped. “Pook. What name is that? It sounds like a hiccough after a bad meal or a belch from Kéothâch.” Several guffawed.

“I offer the name Tizón.” The smiles dissolved into sharp crackles of displeasure.

“You would name him after an ancient myth?” Draish said, blue flames edging black.

“Not a myth,” Eshel smoothly corrected. “The few scrolls salvaged from Dannôch’s destruction recount that Tizón was a great Talushim who lead us forth from Maalfet to Aretonsk and then to Nonetre, well over fifteen hundred winters past. What better name to choose for our Firelord than one who lead us to glory so long ago?”

There were several moments of silence, before Sedaris nodded. “Let his new name be Tizón.”

The brittle snap of firestone cracking on the hearth pierced Eshel’s musings. He recalled the thunderous roar of approval as he presented Tizón to the great crowd just two *lérvras* ago, as summer passed its height. It seemed just yesterday, but already sixty days had lapsed. Their joy and exuberance still gave him a heated flush of pride. Yet not long after, he had heard some were less than pleased. At first these had been easy to snuff out. But now they were hidden, like smoldering embers buried deep. No matter. There came another polite tap on his door. “Enter!”

An amber daemon bowed. “My lord, you are awaited in the Firelord’s Hall.”

“Tell them I shall be down presently.” His gazed out again at the sand swells sweeping up towards the Rimfire Mountains. He sensed little snow would fall this winter; without it, the great gardens would soon fail. At best, three winters. Let the restless ones grumble. They would behold the proof of his great wisdom when they wallowed in Lampion’s richness. And his name would be entered in the Scrolls as the greatest of all fire daemiani.

Soon. Very soon.

* * * * *

Tizón stood beside the High Seat in the Firelord’s Hall. Tall flame-shaped pillars of bright-burnished bronze twisted between the hammered copper floor and many-arched roof, inlaid with beaten metals patterned after the swirling colors of fire. Panes of sheerest

crystal had been secured between a final curved row of more closely-spaced pillars to enclose nearly a third of the hall, allowing the polished stone walls to shimmer with Kéothâch's fiery bursts. A large square, cut through the roof above the High Seat, permitted rays from the twin suns, ochre Ítasca and scarlet Aurums, to engulf it. For anyone gazing from the great bronze entry doors down the long chamber, it appeared as if the hall spilled out into the fire lake's seething cauldron, with only the Tvashtar standing between them and the flames.

Which, Tizón knew, was exactly what they were supposed to feel. He realized that behind the doors were already gathered those awaiting this day's decisions. He furled both fists. Judgment Day was one of the many aspects of Nonetre with which he struggled. The penalties were, to his mind, often too harsh, and he battled the favoritism he knew plagued the proceedings. In debates with Eshel and the Cromosh, Tizón had advocated a balanced and informed approach, such as was practiced in Lampion. It had gotten ugly.

"Punishment is the only way to prevent crime," Cromoshor Malas had insisted, speaking in the condescending manner that always grated on Tizón. "Through fear, we control. Through pain we produce fear. Do you think we could maintain our realm without such laws?" Behind Malas, seated in a half circle facing the Tvashtar, the Cromosh all nodded in agreement. "And yet, depending on the circumstances, we grant them chances for redemption. And in ways that entertain our folk."

"It is too coarse, too narrow." Tizón stalked back and forth before the High Seat, aware their embered eyes followed his every gesture. "What of the elements surrounding the event? What of the individual?" He held up a hand to forestall Malas' rebuttal. "I am not saying punishment may not be warranted – but I am concerned that it has grown too simplified... become more a judgment by opinion instead of fact."

Eshel waited until the mutters died down and the Tvashtar paused in his pacing. "My lord, what you say reflects a compassion and wisdom beyond your seasons. Yet you are also newly come to Tvashtar. Rather than debate and change, would it not be wiser to first experience why we do it in this manner?"

Tizón had ground his teeth to restrain an angry retort. How frequently he was presented with variants of this attitude! Strange how many of the daemiani were as resistant to change as the féyree. For all they advocated new ways of doing things when it served their needs, they disliked ideas that challenged their familiar ways.

And now Judgment Day had come again. Once every tércera it was held. This was his second. He shook his head – today he would make them realize he was a smart and capable féyree, and no fire daemon's plaything.

Three dull booms vibrated through the bronze doors. Tizón assumed the High Seat, squirming a moment to get comfortable. Artfully smythed from red gold, the throne resembled a spreading flame that embraced the Tvashtar, gathering behind him to peak in an ever-burning torch. The Firelord, crowned and surrounded by fire.

The doors groaned apart. Two blue-flamed guards marched in, curved naked swords raised before them. Eshel and Saía were next, he with his limp, she graceful as molten metal. Behind filed the accused, all in bindings, led by the pompous Cromoshor Draish. The victims and their speakers followed. Saía and Eshel approached, bowed, and then took their seats on either side of the dais. The accused clustered to the left, the victims and speakers to the right.

"First victim." Draish motioned forward a silver daemon and her speaker. Both bowed. "My lord Tvashtar," commenced the speaker, orange flames banked to a quiet shimmer. "Namurisi accuses thrall Imitri of attempting to escape, stealing gemstones to bribe her way

past the guards, and using forbidden magic to stun her pursuers.”

“Imitri, stand forth.” The hall’s design amplified Draish’s nasal voice.

Tizón had already guessed who she was. Tall for a féyree, Imitri’s scratched and bruised sand-hued skin still glowed, her chin lifted defiantly as she approached the High Seat, shuffling in the tight ankle bindings that pressed deep grooves into her flesh. She stared up at Tizón, dark brown eyes bright, face expressionless.

“Down thrall!” The flat of the guard’s blade whacked across Imitri’s shoulders, and she collapsed to her knees. Yet her head remained unbowed.

Tizón clapped once to prevent another blow. “How plead you?”

“I plead both innocent and guilty.”

A murmur rippled among the audience. Draish spluttered indignantly. “You can not be both!”

This should be interesting, Tizón thought. “Explain yourself.”

“My lord, I did indeed attempt to escape. I did steal the stones. What magic I know, I used to dazzle the guards. Yet my lord, I am a thrall. And not by my choosing. I was stolen from Lampion and forced to serve. Therefore the wrongs of which I am accused came from my pursuit of freedom, perhaps a chance to regain my realm. Where is the dishonor in that?”

Her gaze bored into him, challenging. Tizón pondered, fingers tapping his knee. She had broken the law, yet herself was a result of wrongdoings. He knew what Eshel or Draish would say: Iômask, the endless labyrinth twisting beneath Nalôch. To them, all that mattered were the facts. Yet Tizón could not deny that thralls were vital to Nonetre. Without them to perform their labors, much would remain undone, and the fire daemiani would be prevented from pursuing their preferred activities. If a thrall were permitted to attempt escape, to break laws, what precedent would that set? It was not his fault that some were taken from Lampion – although Eshel insisted there were those that came of their own choice. There was a need; thralls fulfilled it. And yet.... “Thrall Imitri. To the next Batoras are ye condemned.” He smiled inwardly at Draish’s scowl. “If you survive three, your wrongs shall be forgiven.”

“And my freedom?”

He knew the answer she sought, just as he knew he could not give it. “To Chardâch will you be sent, to toil in the great garden. It is forbidden for a thrall to return to Lampion. Guard! See she is taken to the under-caves of Batoras, and trained for battle. Be it so!” He watched as she was jerked to her feet, and half-shoved from the hall.

Tizón was relieved that as the petitions progressed, none were severe enough to merit the worst penalty. Some he assigned to hard labors. A dwarf was to be publicly flogged. Two ael were to be confined for a time in the gloomy *carcainic* beneath Nalôch, where Kéoathâch’s heat seeped through the stone walls to make breathing difficult, and forgotten prisoners were sometimes found desiccated beyond recognition. Slowly the hall emptied. Judgment Day was nearly done. The last speaker approached, his tall figure seething vermilion flames. Scorn shone in the maroon eyes as his gaze slid over the Tvashtar a moment before he bowed.

“Where is the victim?” Draish demanded.

“Cromoshor, she is dead. That thing there!” He pointed to a slumped figure. “That thing murdered my sister, pushing her into Baïsenlâch, holding her down, and smothering her flames. I speak for she that can speak no longer.”

“Stand forth accused!”

Tizón’s gut twisted as the figure stumbled towards the dais. Torn wings that might have

been silver trailed behind the rag-clad féyree. Dull white eyes almost invisible among mottled bruises gazed from a yellow face that confessed not the slightest shred of hope. She sank to her knees, staring at the first step. “How do you plead?”

For a long moment, the féyree remained silent. Then, without lifting her head, she whispered, “Guilty.”

Stunned, Tizón leaned forward. “You admit to murdering a fire daemon? You know the penalty?”

Her voice was muffled. “I know.”

She was not going to give him any out. A pulse pounded in his throat. “But why?” She did not answer.

Before he could prevent it, the guard cuffed her, knocking her over. “Answer the Tvashtar, thrall!”

Straining, as if every muscle hurt, she pushed back up to her knees. A thin trickle of blood leaked down her forehead from a cracked scab. “Come see your realm, oh Tvashtar Tizón.” Her soft voice was empty of emotion. “Come see the bad, come meet the truth. For those of us that live with the bad and the worse, we choose escape how and when we can.” She lapsed into silence.

Tizón saw Draish, Eshel and Saía gazing at him expectantly. She left him no choice. None at all. “Thrall, you are sentenced to death. You will be taken to Lôgaras, the Smoking Mountain, and sent into the burning passages of Traílias to be consumed by fire.” At least her death would come quickly, not the long drawn out suffering of Iômash.

“And the Tvashtar shall be present to see the sentence carried out,” Draish purred.

“I have other duties to attend to!” Tizón fought the urge to scrape the smug look off Draish’s face.

“Oh, but you must,” Eshel intervened. “It is the Tvashtar’s duty to witness the death of any he condemns.” He released an oily smile, gesturing to the guard. “Take her away.”

The féyree staggered upright, gazing at him a final time. To Tizón’s utter dismay, she murmured, “Thank you.” Then, thrust along by the guard, she shuffled away.

“Judgment Day is concluded!” Draish clapped three times, emitting a cascade of sparks, the sound crackling about the hall. He bowed to Tizón before departing, followed by Eshel.

“My lord?” Saía stepped towards Tizón, one hand uplifted.

“Leave me!” His eyes strained for a glimpse of the féyree maid, but she was gone. Saía bowed, her lips thinned in anger, then turned and hastened out. The doors thudded shut, the deep groan echoing through Tizón like the heavy drumbeat of the féyree death march.