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THE PRIORY OF THE ORANGE TREE

NEW YORK TIMES
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SAMANTHA
SHANNON

BLOOMSBURY

THE
PRIORY
OF THE
ORANGE
TREE

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THE
PRIORY
OF THE
ORANGE
TREE

SAMANTHA
SHANNON

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Author's note

The fictional lands of *The Priory of the Orange Tree* are inspired by events and legends from various parts of the world. None is intended as a faithful representation of any one country or culture at any point in history.

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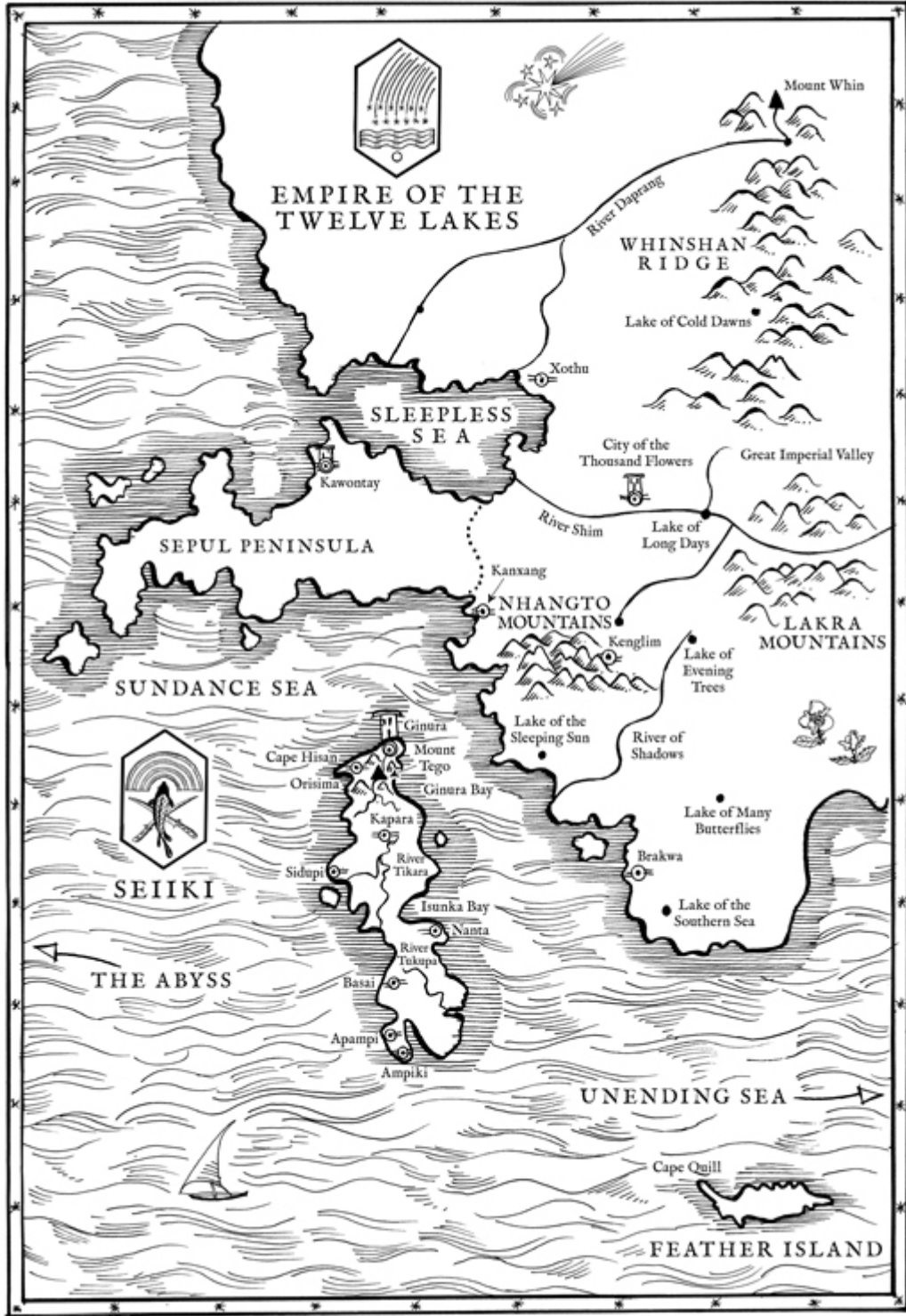
Acknowledgements

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I

Stories of Old

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.

He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended.

– Revelation 20.1–3



1

East

The stranger came out of the sea like a water ghost, barefoot and wearing the scars of his journey. He walked as if drunk through the haze of mist that clung like spidersilk to Seiiki.

The stories of old said water ghosts were doomed to live in silence. That their tongues had shrivelled, along with their skin, and that all that dressed their bones was seaweed. That they would lurk in the shallows, waiting to drag the unwary to the heart of the Abyss.

Tané had not feared those tales since she was a small child. Now her dagger gleamed before her, its curve like a smile, and she fixed her gaze on the figure in the night.

When it called to her, she flinched.

The clouds released the moonlight they had hidden. Enough for her to see him as he was. And for him to see her.

This was no ghost. It was an outsider. She had seen him, and he could not be unseen.

He was sunburnt, with hair like straw and a dripping beard. The smugglers must have abandoned him to the water and told him to swim the rest of the way. It was clear that he knew nothing of her language, but she

understood enough of his to know that he was asking for help. That he wanted to see the Warlord of Seiiki.

Her heart was a fistful of thunder. She dared not speak, for to show she knew his language was to forge a link between them, and to betray herself. To betray the fact that just as she was now a witness to his crime, he was a witness to hers.

She should be in seclusion. Safe behind the walls of the South House, ready to rise, purified, for the most important day of her life. Now she was tainted. Soiled beyond redemption. All because she had wanted to immerse herself in the sea once more before Choosing Day. There were rumours that the great Kwiriki would favour those with the mettle to slip out and seek the waves during seclusion. Instead he had sent this nightmare.

All her life, she had been too fortunate.

This was her punishment.

She held the outsider at bay with the dagger. Faced with death, he began to shake.

Her mind became a whirlpool of possibilities, each more terrible than the last. If she turned this outsider over to the authorities, she would have to reveal that she had broken seclusion.

Choosing Day might not proceed. The honourable Governor of Cape Hisan – this province of Seiiki – would never allow the gods into a place that might be fouled with the red sickness. It could be weeks before the city was pronounced safe, and by then it would have been decided that the stranger arriving had been an ill omen, and that the next generation of apprentices, not hers, must be given the chance to be riders. It would cost her everything.

She could not report him. Neither could she abandon him. If he *did* have the red sickness, letting him roam unchecked would endanger the entire island.

There was only one choice.

She wrapped a strip of cloth around his face to keep him from breathing out the sickness. Her hands quaked. When it was done, she walked him from the black sand of the beach and up to the city, keeping as close as she dared, her blade pressed to his back.

Cape Hisan was a sleepless port. She steered the outsider through its night markets, past shrines whittled from driftwood, under the strings of blue and white lanterns that had been hung up for Choosing Day. Her prisoner stared at it all in silence. The dark obscured his features, but she tapped the flat of her blade on his head, forcing him to lower it. All the while, she kept him as far away from others as she could.

She had an idea of how to isolate him.

An artificial island clung to the cape. It was called Orisima, and it was something of a curiosity to the locals. The trading post had been constructed to house a handful of merchants and scholars from the Free State of Mentendon. Along with the Lacustrine, who were on the other side of the cape, the Ments alone had been granted permission to continue trading in Seiiki after the island had been closed to the world.

Orisima.

That was where she would take the outsider.

The torchlit bridge to the trading post was guarded by armed sentries. Few Seiikinese had permission to enter, and she was not one of them. The only other way past the fence was the landing gate, which opened once a year to receive goods from the Mentish ships.

Tané led the outsider down to the canal. She could not sneak him into Orisima herself, but she knew a woman who could. Someone who would know exactly where in the trading post to hide him.

It had been a long time since Niclays Roos had received a visitor.

He was rationing himself a little wine – a trickle of his paltry allowance – when the knock came at his door. Wine was one of his few remaining pleasures in the world, and he had been immersed in breathing in its aroma, savouring that golden moment before the first taste.

Now an interruption. Of course. With a sigh, he uprooted himself, grumbling at the sudden throb in his ankle. Gout was back once more to vex him.

Another knock.

‘Oh, do shut *up*,’ he muttered.

Rain drummed on the roof as he groped for his cane. *Plum rain*, the Seiikinese called it at this time of the year, when the air hung thick and

damp as cloud and fruit swelled on the trees. He limped across the mats, cursing under his breath, and opened the door a fraction of an inch.

Standing in the darkness outside was a woman. Dark hair fell to her waist, and she wore a robe patterned with salt flowers. Rain alone could not have made her as wet as she was.

‘Good evening, learned Doctor Roos,’ she said.

Niclays raised his eyebrows. ‘I strongly dislike visitors at this hour. Or any hour.’ He ought to bow, but he had no reason to impress this stranger. ‘How do you know my name?’

‘I was told it.’ No further explanation was forthcoming. ‘I have one of your countrymen with me. He will stay with you tonight, and I will collect him tomorrow at sunset.’

‘One of my countrymen.’

His visitor turned her head a little. A silhouette parted ways with a nearby tree.

‘Smugglers delivered him to Seiiki,’ the woman said. ‘I will take him to the honoured Governor tomorrow.’

When the figure came into the light from his house, Niclays turned cold.

A golden-haired man, just as drenched as the woman, was standing on his threshold. A man he had never seen in Orisima.

Twenty people lived in the trading post. He knew every one of their faces and names. And no Mentish ships would arrive with newcomers until later in the season.

Somehow, these two had entered unseen.

‘No.’ Niclays stared. ‘Saint, woman, are you trying to involve me in a smuggling operation?’ He fumbled for the door. ‘I *cannot* hide a trespasser. If anyone knew—’

‘One night.’

‘One night, a year – our heads will be sliced from our shoulders regardless. Good evening.’

As he made to shut the door, the woman jammed her elbow into the gap.

‘If you do this,’ she said, now so close that Niclays could feel her breath, ‘you will be rewarded with silver. As much of it as you can carry.’

Niclays Roos hesitated.

Silver *was* tempting. He had played one too many drunken games of cards with the sentinels and owed them more than he was likely to make in a lifetime. So far, he had stalled their threats with the promise of jewels

from the next Mentish shipment, but he knew well that, when it came, there wouldn't be a single wretched jewel on board. Not for the likes of him.

His younger self urged him to accept the proposal, if only for the sake of excitement. Before his older, wiser self could intervene, the woman moved away.

'I will return tomorrow night,' she said. 'Do not let him be seen.'

'Wait,' he hissed after her, furious. 'Who are you?'

She was already gone. With a glance down the street and a growl of frustration, Niclays dragged the frightened-looking man into his house.

This was madness. If his neighbours realised that he was harbouring a trespasser, he would be hauled before a very angry Warlord, who was not known for his mercy.

Yet here Niclays was.

He locked the door. Despite the heat, the newcomer was shivering on the mats. His olive skin was burnt across the cheeks, his blue eyes raw from salt. If only to calm himself, Niclays found a blanket he had brought from Mentendon and handed it to the man, who took it without speaking. He was right to look afraid.

'Where did you come from?' Niclays asked curtly.

'I'm sorry,' his guest whispered. 'I don't understand. Are you speaking Seiikinese?'

Inysh. That tongue was one he had not heard in some time.

'That,' Niclays answered in it, 'was not Seiikinese. That was Mentish. I assumed you were, too.'

'No, sir. I am from Ascalon,' came the meek reply. 'May I ask your name, since I have you to thank for sheltering me?'

Typical Inysh. Courtesy first. 'Roos,' Niclays bit out. 'Doctor Niclays Roos. Master surgeon. The person whose life you are currently endangering with your presence.'

The young man stared at him.

'Doctor—' He swallowed. 'Doctor Niclays Roos?'

'Congratulations, boy. The seawater has not impaired your ears.'

His guest drew a shuddering breath. 'Doctor Roos,' he said, 'this is divine providence. The fact that the Knight of Fellowship has brought me to *you*, of all people—'

'Me.' Niclays frowned. 'Have we met?'

He strained his memory to his time in Inys, but he was sure he had never clapped eyes on this person. Unless he had been drunk at the time, of course. He had often been drunk in Inys.

‘No, sir, but a friend told me your name.’ The man dabbed his face with his sleeve. ‘I was sure I would perish at sea, but seeing you has brought me back to life. Thank the Saint.’

‘Your saint has no power here,’ Niclays muttered. ‘Now, what name do you go by?’

‘Sulyard. Master Triam Sulyard, sir, at your service. I was a squire in the household of Her Majesty, Sabran Berethnet, Queen of Inys.’

Niclays gritted his jaw. That name stoked a white-hot wrath in his gut.

‘A squire.’ He sat down. ‘Did Sabran tire of you, as she tires of all her subjects?’

Sulyard bristled. ‘If you insult my queen, I will—’

‘What will you do?’ Niclays looked at him over the rims of his eyeglasses. ‘Perhaps I should call you Triam Dullard. Do you have any notion of what they do to outsiders here? Did Sabran send you to die a particularly drawn-out death?’

‘Her Majesty does not know I am here.’

Interesting. Niclays poured him a cup of wine. ‘Here,’ he said grudgingly. ‘All of it.’

Sulyard drank it down.

‘Now, Master Sulyard, this is important,’ Niclays continued. ‘How many people have seen you?’

‘They made me swim to the shore. I came to a cove first. The sand was black.’ Sulyard was shivering. ‘A woman found me and led me into this city at knifepoint. She left me alone in a stable . . . then a different woman arrived and bid me follow her. She took me to the sea, and we swam together until we came to a jetty. There was a gate at the end.’

‘And it was open?’

‘Yes.’

The woman must know one of the sentinels. Must have asked them to leave the landing gate open.

Sulyard rubbed his eyes. His time at sea had weathered him, but Niclays could see now that he was only young, perhaps not even twenty.

‘Doctor Roos,’ he said, ‘I have come here on a mission of the utmost importance. I must speak to the—’

‘I will have to stop you there, Master Sulyard,’ Niclays cut in. ‘I have no interest in why you are here.’

‘But—’

‘Whatever your reasons, you came here to do it without permission from any authority, which is folly. If the Chief Officer finds you and they drag you away for interrogation, I wish to be able to say in all honesty that I have not the faintest idea why you turned up on my doorstep in the middle of the night, thinking you would be welcome in Seiiki.’

Sulyard blinked. ‘Chief Officer?’

‘The Seiikinese official in charge of this floating scrapyard, though he seems to think of himself as a minor god. Do you know what this place is, at least?’

‘Orisima, the last Western trading post in the East. Its existence was what gave me the hope that the Warlord might see me.’

‘I assure you,’ Niclays said, ‘that under no circumstances will Pitosu Nadama receive a trespasser at his court. What he *will* do, should he get wind of you, is execute you.’

Sulyard said nothing.

Niclays briefly considered telling his guest that his rescuer planned to come back for him, perhaps to alert the authorities to his presence. He decided against it. Sulyard might panic and try to flee, and there was nowhere for him to run.

Tomorrow. He would be gone tomorrow.

Just then, Niclays heard voices outside. Footsteps clattered on the wooden steps of the other dwellings. He felt a quiver in his belly.

‘Hide,’ he said, and grasped his cane.

Sulyard ducked behind a folding screen. Niclays opened the door with shaking hands.

Centuries ago, the First Warlord of Seiiki had signed the Great Edict and closed the island to all but the Lacustrine and the Mentish, to protect its people from the Draconic plague. Even after the plague abated, the separation had endured. Any outsider who arrived without permission would be put to death. As would anyone who abetted them.

In the street, there was no sign of the sentinels, but several of his neighbours had gathered. Niclays joined them.

‘What in the name of Galian is happening?’ he asked the cook, who was staring at a point above their heads, mouth wide enough to catch butterflies

in it. ‘I recommend not using that particular facial expression in the future, Harolt. People might think you a halfwit.’

‘Look, Roos,’ the cook breathed. ‘Look!’

‘This had better be—’

He trailed off when he saw it.

An enormous head towered over the fence of Orisima. It belonged to a creature born of jewel and sea.

Cloud steamed from its scales – scales of moonstone, so bright they seemed to glow from within. A crust of gem-like droplets glistened on each one. Each eye was a burning star, and each horn was quicksilver, a gleam under the pallid moon. The creature flowed with the grace of a ribbon past the bridge and took to the skies, light and quiet as a paper kite.

A dragon. Even as it rose over Cape Hisan, others were ascending from the water, leaving a chill mist in their wake. Niclays pressed a hand to the drumbeat in his chest.

‘Now, what,’ he murmured, ‘are *they* doing here?’