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Father of Gods

by Joe Williams

A clutch of ten small eggs, sheltered under a rocky ledge, sparkled with a sheen of dew. Gray-haired Korduan laid aside his walking stick, the one he used for overturning rocks and prodding holes, and knelt to peer into the shadows. Careful eyes darted this way and that, searching for a coiled shape or slithering movement. In the predawn gloom, he saw only the glistening eggs.

Come to me.

The whisper crawled across his mind. He rubbed his head, annoyed at the distraction. Under his wispy hair, faded blue tattoos covered his scalp in intricate whorls. He used to shave his head to display the tattoos to his disciples, a proud emblem of his authority. Now no one followed Korduan, and he allowed his hair to grow wild.

Hurry.

Korduan ignored the Father of Gods and concentrated on the eggs. Even hungry

as he was, he dared not collect them until he knew they were safe.

From their number and size, the eggs must have come from a manushi, a pit viper common to the steppes around the Caspium Sea. He'd seen them before in the Kopetdag Gershi, and knew from experience that their bite, while not deadly in itself, would cause temporary paralysis. Painful enough at night, in the heat of day it would be fatal.

With his staff, he knocked away the smaller rocks and pounded the heavier stones to startle anything that might be hiding under them.

A tan viper, no longer than Korduan's arm, darted from its hiding place. Korduan pinned its wedge-shaped head with the butt of his staff, applying enough pressure to hold it but not crush it. When he picked it up, the writhing tail, banded by dark brown rings, wrapped itself around his wiry arm.

Korduan dropped the serpent into an unglazed urn he used for collecting roots and whatever other edibles he could eke from the desolate land. The wooden lid he secured with a thong. Later, when hunger forced action, he would kill the viper and cook it.

Satisfied no further danger lurked in the rocks, he gathered the eggs in hands as coarse and brown as the bark of twigs. Sand whipped around his tattered goatskin sandals and ruffled the fabric of his tightly woven camel-hair cowl.

He prostrated himself on a ledge high up the side of a dried riverbed and prayed to the ancient Father of Gods, thanking him, despite years of failure, for guiding his unworthy servant.

Wake me.

For fifteen years he had tried to fulfill that command, and in all the turnings of

the season he had never succeeded. Gazing upon a god might blind a mortal, but he would gladly spend eternity in darkness if it meant one moment of pure light.

Sitting on a boulder, he licked the dew from each snake egg before popping it into his mouth. He bit down on the leathery shell, tasted the wet embryo filling his mouth. He chewed and swallowed even the shells.

The sun crested the eastern peaks, giving birth to a coil of shadow along the length of the wadi. Pale shrubs, twisted and dry, dotted the floor of the canyon like desert coral. In rocky crevices, the stubby barrels of succulent euphorbia bristled with thorns. Nothing stirred in all that expanse of sand and clay.

Except there, near an outcropping of rock. Newborn light reflected off a bronze helmet.

Korduan choked and coughed up the last half-chewed egg. Forgotten fears washed over him. How could they have found him after all these years?

He ducked, certain the soldier hadn't seen him. Should he hide here in the mountains, or flee back into the desert? But what about the Father of Gods, locked in his golden berth? Surely this soldier, if he were searching for Korduan, would continue his quest until he found either Korduan or his cave. And if he found the cave, he would find its secret.

A soldier could never conceive the sanctity of a god. He would see only gold.

Maybe he was overreacting. Maybe the stranger was just a nomad, lost and searching for an oasis. Korduan crept to the lip of the shelf and peered into the wadi. In the time it had taken him to recover from his shock, the soldier had almost reached the foot of the cliff.

From his perch, Korduan saw the red and peeling skin of the soldier's nose, the

flaking crust of his lips. Clearly, this was not a nomad, whose coppery skin shielded them from sunburn. His flesh suffered just as Korduan's had when first he fled to this scorched land.

There wasn't much to hunt in the Kopetdag Gershi, but Korduan often carried a sling in case he spotted a caracal lynx or, as he had last year, a desert monitor, a lizard almost five feet in length. How he had feasted then!

Korduan selected a smooth stone, leaned over the ledge and whirled the sling over his head. He sighted down at the soldier, but as he had never killed anyone, he could not release the stone until he moved his aim aside. No matter. A well-placed stone would drive the intruder away.

The stone whispered past the soldier and splashed in the sand. The soldier spun, hand on his sword hilt. His gaunt face looked one way and then another.

"I mean you no harm." His voice was harsh and full of phlegm, the sound of a man who hadn't spoken in days. "I am Tumak, a simple pilgrim. I ask only for a mouthful of water." To demonstrate his plight, he upended his water skin. Not a single drop came out.

Korduan, unseen on the ledge, almost laughed aloud. A pilgrim with a saber? Nonsense.

He released another stone, not caring whether he hit the soldier or not. The soldier ducked but the stone missed by a wide margin. His eyes snapped to Korduan's hideaway on the cliff.

The curved blade snickered from the soldier's sheath. "Your aim is off. Perhaps you should step closer."

Safe on his ledge, Korduan stood upright, loaded another stone and swung it over

his head. This time, he would not miss.

The soldier burst out laughing.

The young man might not have recognized him, but that didn't lessen Korduan's fury as he flung the stone. The soldier batted it aside with his saber. His laughter roared up the wadi.

Korduan, wheezing with outrage, opened and closed his mouth like a fresh-caught sturgeon. After so many years of silence, words could no longer reach his lips.

The soldier bowed with insolent familiarity. "Forgive me old man. My laughter is that of joy!"

The sun must have boiled his brain. "You laugh now, fool. But when the sun reaches its zenith, will you laugh then? For you'll get no water from me."

"Oh, I'll get water one way or another." The soldier lopped off the top of a euphorbia, then, mindful of the spines, picked up the cut piece and sucked on the mass of water-storing pulp. Juice dribbled down his chin and onto his tunic. When he had bled the plant dry, he chunked the piece to one side and wiped his clean-shaven jaw.

Korduan twisted his beard and cursed the plants that grew along the canyon floor. No one, not even a soldier from the Caspium Sea, could cross the desert without learning some of its secrets. The empty waterskin had been a trick, devised to lure him into the open.

Fists clenched, he turned his fury inward. "There, you've had your drink. Now leave me in peace."

The soldier looked around at the euphorbia and shrubs, the only signs of life for leagues around. "I have no intention of leaving. For months I've searched the desert for the priest of Badan. And now that I have found you, I won't just leave."

The hair on Korduan's neck bristled. How had this young man recognized him? Fifteen years of desert life should have disguised him utterly.

"Your eyes," the soldier called, answering the unvoiced question. "I saw you at the sacking of Badan. No man was born with such blue eyes as yours."

Korduan scowled, the memory of Badan, a fishing village on the north shore of the Caspium Sea, sour in his mind. "How much did the Khakan offer you?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"The Khakan! The sovereign of Khazar! What am I worth to him? A hundred goats? Five hundred?"

The soldier rubbed his jaw. "I don't know that you're worth anything to him. Everyone in Khazar believes you're dead."

Korduan scoffed in disbelief. "Come now, don't feign innocence with me. A man crosses the worst desert in the world, it must be for something. How does the Khakan want me? Dead like the rest of the poor folk of Badan? Or brought back alive so he can watch death fill my eyes?"

"I'm not a bounty hunter." The soldier sheathed his saber and lowered his head. "I'm a simple seeker of wisdom. If there's a price on your head, I know nothing of it."

"No price?"

"Not to my knowledge." The soldier tilted his helmet to fix one eye on Korduan. "But then, I don't know the Khakan. He might be willing to pay a fortune for your capture. But that's not why I'm here. I crossed the desert not to apprehend you, Father Korduan, but to ask your guidance."

Korduan wiped his hands on his robes and allowed himself a small smile. He hadn't been called Father in years, not since those wonderful days in Badan when his

disciples, a hundred strong, once cheered his name in the streets. Father Korduan!

Father Korduan! Messenger of the gods!

Wonderful days, ended all too soon. Silenced by the Khakan's soldiers.

His smile wilted, replaced by seething anger at this interloper who brought such unwelcome memories. He would not repeat the mistakes of Badan. "You cannot live for long off the bitter juice of euphoria. So stay here and starve for all I care. Or take my advice and return home. Either way, torment me no more."

Korduan turned, determined to storm off and end the dialog, but found his path blocked by a cliff on one side and a precipice on the other. The only path off the ledge lay downward, into the soldier's grin.

Chastising himself for his lack of foresight, he sat on his urn and crossed his arms. Let hunger succeed where his sling had failed. An empty stomach would rout the soldier.

Far below, Tumak pulled a snare from his belt pouch. He located a promising burrow and laid the snare on the dry earth in front of it, then hid in the shade of a nearby shrub. He seemed content to wait forever.

Korduan could wait just as stoically.

He waited through the morning. The sun turned the sky molten blue and the air rose like steam off the rocks. He watched, silent and grim, as Tumak tended a campfire made of glasswort branches.

The soldier hunkered there in his linen tunic like some huge boulder, elbows braced on his thighs, hands dangling between his knees. So vital not even the heat could vex him.

Strips of squirrel meat roasted over the fire, its scent carried upward by the heat.

Korduan thought of all the lizards and snakes he had eaten and his mouth watered at the wholesome smell.

He sighed at the inevitability of it all. With the aid of his staff, he picked his way down the hillside, the urn tucked under his arm.

Bluntly, he asked, "What do you want from me?"

Tumak paused to taste his meat before answering. "This is really much better than it looks. And there's enough for two."

Korduan denied his growling stomach. "I am not hungry."

"Suit yourself. I'll leave it here just in case." He planted a skewer of meat into the ground next to him, then speared another piece of squirrel and stuck it over the flames. Fat sizzled against the stones ringing the fire. "In Khazar, people still speak your legend. They say many wonderful things about you."

The compliment wrenched Korduan's attention from the cooking meat. "What do they say?"

"They say as a child you died in the cold winter sea." He glanced up, gray eyes unblinking in the eddies of smoke. "You died, yet you lived."

"So it happened." Korduan tapped his tattooed temple, a warm sense of pride filling him. "The sea goddess entered me and wrought her changes where no man may see."

Korduan didn't remember the day he died, but his mother had told him the story often enough that he thought he remembered. He saw the fishing accident, the freezing water lifting his hair in a lazy halo, felt the stillness of his lungs as his father hoisted him dripping from the gray waves. His father expelled the sea from his lungs, yet something of the sea goddess remained.

The soldier spat out a bone. “They say the sea goddess speaks to you.”

“Long ago she did. Hers was not a single voice but the wash of a thousand ripples. They told me where to fish for sturgeon and where to fish for herring, when to use nets and when to use lines. I merely conveyed her messages.” Korduan dropped the urn and sat next to it. “Now, why don’t you hand me that meat? I’ve forgotten most of my manners, but I do know it would be impolite for me not to join you.” He accepted a strip of squirrel from Tumak and savored it with smacking noises.

Tumak relaxed as though freeing a heavy pack from his shoulders. “Then it’s true. You’ve heard the gods, and know how to interpret them.”

Korduan knew nothing of the kind. To this day he wondered, did the sea goddess, fickle and ever-changing, want her followers dead? Is that why she made no mention of the bloodshed to come?

Or had he missed some omen in that babble of voices, a warning that the Khakan was sending troops to silence her followers? In that night of screams, gore-stained swords flashing in every shadow, he barely escaped with his life. A youth gave him a horse and he fled south, into the Garagum Desert, far from the sea and the goddess who had betrayed him.

Through lowered lids, Korduan studied the soldier. He had admitted to seeing Korduan in Badan. Had he been one of those bloodthirsty faces behind the swords?

Tumak broke the silence. “You and I have something in common. I too have died.”

The admission startled Korduan. He poked his walking stick against Tumak’s shoulder. “You feel solid enough to me.”

“I was left for dead on a battlefield.” He pulled aside his tunic to reveal a

puckered scar across his heart. “The battle went badly for us, as they always do when we fight the horsemen of Grand Prince Svyatoslav. I don’t know why I survived when better men than me perished. What meaning was there in this blessing? Or is it a curse to see so many die without dying?”

The soldier flexed his scarred hands. “Now my head is filled with dreams of blood and death. Just last night I dreamed of killing again. A small girl, this time. I squeezed her throat with my bare hands, squeezed until her face turned livid and her eyes bulged. Squeezed until she stopped fighting me.”

Korduan understood the magic of such dreams. “Tell me, did you gaze into her dying eyes?”

“I guess I must have looked in her eyes. I remember the whites turning red.”

“Good. There is power in death.” Korduan touched a crooked finger to the bridge of his nose, right between his eyes. “You can see it, here. And if you know how, you can tap it.”

Tumak frowned. “The dead people I’ve seen don’t seem very powerful.”

“Not in dead flesh, though there is a certain power there, too, for in eating flesh we stay alive. The life essence lingers in the meat. But there is greater power in dying. What is the difference between a dead man and that same man alive? That is the power of which I speak. And the healthier the man at the moment of death, the greater the power released. I am old and weak. I have never killed anyone. But you are young. A soldier! You have gazed into the eyes of the dying time and again. They fill you to overflowing, and that is why you dream as you do.”

“Please help me.” Tumak leaned forward, eyes sparkling. “The gods reveal their secrets to you. No one else can make these dreams go away.”

Korduan smoothed his downy hair. In some ways, he enjoyed Tumak's company and regretted what was to come. After so many years of hearing only the Father of Gods, it was good to use his ears again, to see that familiar, glorious need he had relished in the faces of the people of Badan.

He shook himself, reminding himself that the villagers had worshipped the sea goddess, not him. He was merely her messenger.

Korduan picked up the urn he had brought with him. "Dried dates." He shook the urn, lifted the lid, and held the dark opening to Tumak. The soldier smiled and reached inside.

With an oath, he snatched back his hand and leaped to his feet. Blood oozed from two pinpricks on his hand.

He knocked the urn from Korduan's grip. From it slithered a three-foot snake the color of sand.

With accustomed grace, Tumak drew his saber and chopped the snake in half. He caught a headless loop on the forward swept blade and threw it aside. Red-faced with rage, he turned on Korduan.

Korduan cowered, fearful of being maimed--not killed, never killed--and unable to finish his service to the Father of Gods. "Forgive me, Tumak! I did not know. That is a manushi. They hide from the sun in whatever dark hole they can find. The lid must not have fit properly."

Tumak sheathed his saber. "It surprised me, that's all." He studied his hand. "Already it's stopped hurting." He flexed his fingers, and a look of concern crossed his face. "In fact, it feels nothing at all."

"It will pass." Korduan straightened and took Tumak's arm. "Come with me. I

will tend to you in my cave.”

Tumak regarded him with stony eyes. “Will I die?”

“Not from the bite of a manushi. The poison will hurt, but it will not kill. It causes a brief stiffening of the limbs, nothing more. But if the sun catches you lying here helpless, it will bake you as hard as the desert clay.”

Tumak staggered. “Yet the world spins.”

Korduan slung the soldier’s arm over his shoulders and his bulk nearly crushed him. Tumak weighed twice as much as Korduan, all of it muscle turned limp by the insidious poison of the manushi. By the time they reached the cave, Korduan’s joints ached and his legs begged for relief.

Korduan struggled to get Tumak inside. “I have a cot below. It’s not much farther.” He raised a clay lamp in his free hand and started down the sandstone tunnel.

Over the years, Korduan had widened a natural fissure using stone tools of his own making. He had dug away at the earth until finally he had reached the source of the voice that now echoed in his head.

Hurry.

Here, at its deepest extremity, the shaft narrowed. Korduan stooped to guide Tumak through a rough-hewn passage to the chamber beyond. He laid Tumak on the ground and placed the lamp on a rock. The light reflected off a golden surface covered in intricate symbols.

Over the years, he had chipped the stone away from the shining orb. Brushed the grit from the twisted carvings. Polished it until it shone. Now it gleamed like gold, but was not made of any metal Korduan had ever seen. Nothing he did affected it. No fire would melt it, no steel would scratch it.

At night he would sleep in this chamber beside the monstrous golden egg, and in slumber join with the Father of Gods, sharing dreams of the age before the gods were born, full-blooded dreams of ten million dead in a heartbeat, their souls fused into one blinding flash. Such was the awesome power of the Father of Gods, the power of life from death. And such was the birth of his children.

Wake me.

The voice thundered in his eroded mind. He winced, hands covering his ears. This close to its source, he couldn't possibly muffle the voice exploding within his skull.

Tumak, lying on the sandy floor, stared at the egg. Even in the coolness of the cave, sweat dotted his forehead. "That's not a good thing." A dollop of droll escaped his lips.

Korduan wiped Tumak's chin with the hem of his robe. "The gods are neither good nor evil. Is a fox evil because it kills a mouse? Or the wind evil because it blows down a tent? Or a snake because it bites?"

Tumak trembled, his face straining. The poison ran throughout his system, stifling his struggles. He lifted his gray eyes to Korduan. "We are not gods, you and I. We're not like the snake that must follow its nature. We have a choice."

Korduan stepped back. "Your fate is not my decision. The Father of Gods summoned you here for a reason. How else could you have found me in all the vastness of the Kopetdag Gershi? And what the gods demand, we must provide." He pulled Tumak's curved yataghan from its sheath, felt the strange balance in his hand. "Is this the sword you used to slay the villagers at Badan?"

Gray eyes flickered at iron stained by the blood of a snake. "I was a boy then. I helped at the camp, tending the horses. I had no part in the massacre."

To Korduan, the massacre happened only days ago. But Tumak was a young man, and fifteen years ago he would have been a child. Korduan studied the rugged face, flush now from poison, and saw through the mask of brutal years to the face of a youth.

His breath caught in his chest and the sword drooped in his hand. “I see. You are the boy who gave me the horse.”

“I thought you were a god.” Froth bubbled on the edges of Tumak’s lips. “No one cared about the sea goddess. It was you the people worshipped. You the Khakan feared. You I followed.”

The floor shifted under Korduan’s feet, and yet, amazingly, in a world overturned he remained upright. His grip tightened on the sword. “You are wrong. It was the sea goddess. It’s not my fault they died.”

The lamp flickered and eager shadows clustered around them. Exhausted, Tumak closed his eyes. “Do as you will. I am at your mercy.”

Korduan knelt beside him, unstrapped his helmet and cradled his head in the crook of a bony arm. He turned the sunburned face toward the golden egg. “Gaze upon the Father of Gods, Tumak. Gaze upon the bringer of peace.”

Tumak opened his gray eyes.

Korduan rammed the sword into Tumak’s chest. Tumak winced, teeth gritted, eyes open and fixed on the golden egg.

He didn’t die.

Korduan, confused, pulled the sword out and plunged it in again, twisting it, trying to hit some vital part that would release Tumak’s life. But Korduan didn’t know where to strike. So he struck again and often and prayed for the Father of Gods to guide his shaking hand.

Tumak vomited crimson and his head lolled. Korduan held his chin until his body stopped its trembling and his lips stopped their breathing and his dead eyes stared empty and hollow.

Only then did Korduan realize Tumak's deception. At the last moment, before death drained them, those eyes had rolled in their sockets and met his own.

Korduan, dressed in Tumak's blood, pushed away from the shredded corpse. A numbing shock suffused him. That final gaze had been meant for the Father of Gods. Now the lives of those Tumak had slain overwhelmed him. A fire coursed through his limbs, a conflagration never meant for such a fragile shell. Life enough to wake the dead.

He jerked the sword free of Tumak's breast, braced the hilt against the ground and knelt over it. As always, he had no choice. He would release the lives he contained and thereby open the golden egg.

His eyes would not waver. He would see for one blinding moment the absolute light of the Father of Gods.

He looked though a sparkle of tears to the golden egg. A shape slid across its polished surface. In the subterranean gloom he saw... oh, yes he saw! Not the egg, but the reflection of an old man with a bloody sword held to his heart.

The End