

GUARDIANS OF DAWN

AMI

S. JAE-JONES

TITAN BOOKS

May your good deeds return to you
thousandfold.

—*Way of saying thanks
among the Free Peoples of the West*

P A R T



THE PILLAR



On the eighth day of the osmanthus month, Ami's fairy tree unexpectedly produced a miniature flower.

It was the fragrance that caught her attention first—a rich, subtly musky perfume that brightened the heavy animal smells of livestock and overripe humans in Kalantze's village square. Ami set down her begging bowl and picked up the tiny brass vase containing the fairy tree. She touched a gentle fingertip to the delicate white petals, letting her magic mingle with the plant's ki. "Little Mother," she murmured. The tree shivered and shimmered as another minuscule bud emerged, quivered, and blossomed in the blink of an eye.

"Doom!" Beside her on their shared woven blanket, Ami's father preached his usual dire prophecies to anyone who would listen. "Doom upon all the world!"

Although the villagers of Kalantze had long since learned to ignore Li Er-Shuan's dire rantings and ravings, a few pilgrims who had come to pray before the Pillar eyed him askance. Nearby, a handful of castle guards on

their rounds paused, ever watchful for signs of unrest.

“Shush, baba,” Ami murmured, eyeing the guards. “Not now.” She picked up her begging bowl once more and adjusted the wooden sign propped up against her legs. SCRIVENER, it read, in three different languages—the syllabary of the common tongue, the alphabet of the Azure Isles, and the Language of Flowers. Beside her, Little Mother produced another bloom.

“Rinqi?” Li Er-Shuan sniffed the air in surprise. “You haven’t worn that perfume in years, darling.”

Ami flinched as her father’s gaze met hers and flitted away again without recognition. “Ami, Ami, I’m Ami,” she reminded him through clenched teeth. “Mama’s been dead for twelve years.”

A misty expression crossed Li Er-Shuan’s face as he struggled to reorder his mind and find the correct moment in time. Ever since the two of them fled Zanhei, he had become increasingly unmoored from the present, forever wandering the halls of memory or the branching pathways of the future. “Oh,” he said vaguely. “I forgot.”

Ami pushed her glasses up her nose and sighed. “Alms, alms for the needy,” she called, tapping the side of her begging bowl with her knuckles. She nodded her head at the passing pilgrims, trying her best to ignore their pity.

There wasn’t much use for a scribe’s services in the remotest parts of the Zanqi Plateau—the Free Peoples had their own systems of writing, if they were literate at all—but it was all she had left to sell. Most refugees from other parts of the Morning Realms had not stayed long in Kalantze, either young and able-bodied enough to travel with the nomadic clans as apprentice or itinerant magicians or else skilled in some way aside from magic that allowed them to adapt or assist with the way of life in the outermost west. Woodworkers. Weavers. Herbalists. Healers. Hunters. Only the very old, the very young, the

disabled, the infirm, and the useless were left behind to survive on charity—begging for grace in the village square. Like Li Er-Shuan. Like the orphans of the Just War.

Like her.

“Doom!” Li Er-Shuan bellowed. “The Guardians awake and demons walk among us!”

“Baba,” Ami pleaded, looking toward the castle guard once more. Their increased presence in the village set her teeth on edge, the memory of black wings etched onto leather sleeves ground into the over-tight muscles of her jaw. But these guards were no Kestrels; they were merely dispatched from the nearby fortress-monastery of Castle Dzong to protect villagers from the growing crowd of restless pilgrims come from far and wide to pray before the Pillar.

“When the Pillar blooms,” Li Er-Shuan called, “the end of the world is not far behind.”

One of the pilgrims, a tall yak-herder with a gold devotional shawl about their neck, gave the astrologer a sharp glance. At their feet, a small child peered at Ami with a curiously flat gaze that lifted all the hairs on the back of her neck. Her magic tingled, itching like a rash. “The Pillar has bloomed?” the yak-herder asked fearfully. “But the sacred tree has not blossomed in over two thousand years!”

A ripple of anxiety fluttered through the crowd. “The Pillar, the Pillar,” the pilgrims murmured. “Why won’t the Qirin Tulku let us pray before the Pillar?”

For the past several weeks, the gates of Castle Dzong had been shut to any and all supplicants seeking solace before the most sacred relic in the realm. The Pillar was the only living sapling of the mythical Root of the World, also known as the tree of life. Stories and rumors had run rampant throughout the streets of Kalantze as to the reasons why, and the mood of those encamped in the

village was tense and volatile, like tinder just waiting for a spark.

“Proof!” Li Er-Shuan moaned. “We need proof.” He clutched a leather folio filled with papers and notes to his chest. “For though it is written in the stars and in the book, we must see the Pillar for ourselves!”

The crowd murmured in restless agreement.

“Ho, beauty,” said the nearest guard. Raldri, one of the youngest members of the castle guard, and the only one she knew by name. He was a familiar face around the refugee shantytown after sundown. “Keep that old man of yours quiet lest we arrest him for disturbing the peace.”

Ami bowed her head and kept her gaze lowered. “Of course, Excellency.”

Raldri said nothing, and she could feel his eyes on the back of her neck like the burning rays of a too-hot sun. “No need to be so formal with me, beauty,” he said in an entirely different tone of voice.

She didn’t respond. She never knew how to respond in the proper way and had learned long ago that silence was better than erring.

The guard stepped closer and knelt down before her. “Business is slow, I take it?” he asked. “Tell you what, I’ll give you a coin in exchange for a kiss.”

Ami furrowed her brows. “No.”

“You’re no fun.” Raldri pushed out his lower lip in a pout, but his eyes were hard. The mismatch made everything he said and did feel like a lie. It made Ami squirm with discomfort, her magic writhing in her chest in warning. He crouched down beside her with a grin, teeth flashing white. “Don’t you find me handsome?”

He was so close she could smell the sharp stink of old sweat and stale beer beneath the champaca and cinnamon perfume oils he wore. “I acknowledge that Raldri’s features are symmetrical and balanced,” she said, leaning back and

trying to create space between them without having to get to her feet, “which other people find attractive.” It wasn’t a lie, and Ami didn’t think Raldri would find offense in the statement.

“You’re an odd one.” His smile grew wider, even as his eyes grew meaner. “Beautiful, but odd.” He reached for the spectacles on her face. “And you’d be prettier without those on, owl eyes.”

She ducked her head, partially to avoid his touch, partially to hide the green-gold glow blooming about her cheeks. “But I can’t see without them.” Ami picked up Little Mother’s bowl from the blanket, turning it round and round and round, letting her overworked magic unspool into the fairy tree’s ki pathways. Three more miniature flowers blossomed in Little Mother’s tiny branches, bursting like tiny fireworks against a dark green canopy.

“Raldri.” A gloved hand came down hard on the guard’s shoulder and pulled him aside. “Enough.” A short, slim youth in the nondescript brown tunic and trousers of the castle barracks stood behind him, a stern expression on their scarred face. “Your attention is unwanted.”

Raldri scoffed as he got to his feet. “My attentions are always wanted. It’s not my fault you have a face like a cowpat.”

The left side of the stranger’s face was mottled and twisted with uneven flesh, a crescent moon of burned tissue curving down from above the brow to end at their lips, pulling one side up into a perpetual smirk. Theirs was not a beautiful face by any objective standard, but neither were they displeasing to the eye. The stranger caught Ami’s gaze and smiled. It matched the kindness in their gaze.

“And it’s not my fault you have the personality of yak cud,” they said, pushing Raldri down the path ahead of them. Although the scarred youth stood nearly a head shorter than the other guard, they radiated such a sense of

calm authority and charisma that Raldri complied without protest. "Go. We've got rounds to make." They gave Ami a wink as they left.

She set down Little Mother and picked up her begging bowl again. "Alms, alms for the needy."

"Here." The tall yak-herder dropped a few coins into her begging bowl. "May the Wheel turn and fortune smile upon you again soon." Their eyes slid to Li Er-Shuan, who had ceased preaching and was now frantically scribbling notes on the pages in his folio.

Ami lifted the bowl and pressed it to her forehead as she bowed. "A thousand, thousand thanks, kind stranger."

The yak-herder shook their head with a soft laugh. "We don't hold with that fancy hierarchy nonsense the rest of you lowlanders like to sprinkle into your speech," they said. "Be easy, friend, and take care of yourself."

Back home in Zanhei, she had been too blunt. Here in the farthest reaches of the empire, she was too formal. "Thank you," Ami said again. "May your good deeds return to you thousandfold." It was the customary response among the followers of the Great Wheel, and one she was still getting used to.

The yak-herder smiled. "Come along, Chen," they said to the child clinging to their legs. "Let's see if the Right Hand will grant us passage today, lah?" They glanced up at the fortress built into the outcropping of rock above their heads, the golden flat-topped roofs glinting in the late-morning sun. "Perhaps today will be our lucky day."

"Not today," Li Er-Shuan muttered. "The stars say my luck is crossed today." He squinted into the clear, cloudless sky, as though he could read the heavens hidden by daylight. In a world long since gone, her father had been an imperial astrologer, interpreting the heavens in order to make sense of the events on earth. But the night he fled the imperial city all those years ago, the night he broke

his vow of loyalty to the Mugung Emperor and stole a fragment of *Songs of Order and Chaos*, had shattered his sanity like a flawed vase in a kiln, leaving him a ranting, raving, rambling wreck ever since. "Proof," he said to himself, frantically scanning the papers spread out before him. "I need proof."

"Careful, baba." Ami grabbed several loose sheets before they fluttered away in the breeze.

"Shush," Li Er-Shuan said impatiently. "I am deciphering the commandments of the gods."

Ami closed her eyes against the sting of loneliness and resentment burning her lower lashes. She might have lost her mother when she was only four years old, but her father had been lost her entire life. To the stars, to the labyrinth of his fractured mind, and to the past. She carefully tucked the pages back into their folio, a faded leather wrap inscribed with a bisected symbol of concentric circles, half embossed, half engraved.

"Hold!" A deep, booming bass voice rumbled over the crowded square. "I said, *hold!*"

At the foot of the 888 Steps of Meditation that led up to Castle Dzong, the crowd of pilgrims pressed against an enormous black-skinned man—Captain Okonwe, head of the castle guards—demanding entrance to the fortress.

"The Pillar!" they cried. "Why won't you let us in to pray before the Pillar?"

"The Qirin Tulku will hear everyone's petition in due time, never fear." Beside Captain Okonwe was a slim, stooped figure draped in the sage-green colors of a cleric and a heavy badge of office on an enormous wooden beaded chain. The Right Hand of the Unicorn King, the highest-ranking official in Castle Dzong. "He only asks for everyone's patience."

"Patience?" said the tall yak-herder. "My daughter is dying and you ask for patience?"

“Ami-yah,” Li Er-Shuan said. “Hide your light.”

Panic ran ice through her veins as she yanked her magic back beneath her skin, holding it close to her bones. Moments passed, but no Kestrels came to drag them away. All magicians were free in the lands protected by the Unicorn King, but the instincts of a lifetime of terror were hard to overcome.

“Let us in!” the pilgrims demanded. “Why are we left out in the cold while a blight ravages our lands?”

“Blight?” Li Er-Shuan stirred, nervously picking at the skin around his nails. “No, no,” he murmured to himself, “not a blight. A curse. But it’s not in these pages. It’s not in these pages.” Without warning, he scattered the pages of his leather folio in a rage, sending the leaves fluttering in the mountain breeze. “Useless!” he cried. “It’s all useless!”

“Baba!” Ami scrambled to her feet and scabbled for the loose sheets before they blew away. The notes on *Songs of Order and Chaos* were Li Er-Shuan’s life’s work, and the only thing holding the last of her father’s sanity together. “Please!” she called to the nearest guard as the papers fluttered down the street. “Raldri!”

Raldri took one look over his shoulder, paused, then continued on as though he had not heard nor seen her. The deliberate, spiteful way he met her gaze, then turned away struck Ami like a slap across the face.

“Here.”

Startled, she turned to find the scarred guard behind her, the scattered pages in hand. Their cheeks were bunched in a smile, evening the mismatched sides of their face into temporary symmetry. They were handsome when they smiled.

Ami gathered the offered pages together with a bow. “May the kind stranger’s good deeds return to them thousandfold.”

The scarred stranger laughed.

She looked up. "Did I get it wrong?"

Their eyes twinkled. "No. It's just that we're not so formal here in the outermost west."

"I know," Ami said. "I keep forgetting."

The stranger tilted their head, eyes flitting to the painted sign advertising her services propped up on her blanket. "You would think someone who speaks so many tongues would have a better grasp on different customs."

She cringed. More times than not, Ami found herself on the outside of social customs, struggling to understand a tongue everyone spoke but her. "Pardon, pardon, a thousand pardons."

They frowned in confusion. "Why are you apologizing?"

"In case I've offended the kind stranger." It was easier to apologize than keep pretending she understood everyone else's language. She caught herself. "I mean . . . in case I've offended you, friend."

The scarred youth smiled. "Friend," they mullied. "I like that."

"Is that not the right word either?" Ami asked in dismay.

Their smile widened. She liked their smile; it felt honest. "There is no right or wrong," they said. "Friend." They bowed. "My name is Gaden."

Ami returned their courtesy. "Ami," she said shyly. "Li Ami." She smiled back.

The tips of Gaden's ears turned pink and they quickly looked away. Ami remembered to avert her own eyes. People often found her gaze too intense. Just another thing about her that made others uncomfortable, and another reason she preferred to keep her glasses on her face.

"Is this yours as well?" Gaden held a piece of leather in their hands—the folio in which Li Er-Shuan kept his notes.

"Yes, thank you." Ami tucked her father's pages into the leather, rolling everything up and wrapping it with a

frayed suede cord to keep it closed. She caught sight of Gaden studying the symbol on the folio's cover.

"That sigil," Gaden said quietly. "I've seen it before. What is it?"

Ami was surprised. "You have? Where?"

They said nothing at first, their gaze searching her face for some answer to a question she did not know. She tried not to show any discomfort; too often people read her discomfort as smugness or hostility, especially if she didn't understand what was wanted of her.

"In the castle library," Gaden said at last. "There is a text with this symbol stamped into its cover, just like this."

All the hairs stood straight on the back of Ami's neck, tingling in anticipation. "And the pages? What do the pages say?"

Gaden frowned. "I don't know," they said. "I can't read it." Their eyes flicked to the painted wooden sign boasting SCRIVENER in three different languages. "I know a little bit of the Language of Flowers, but the writing on the pages seems older. More stylized, perhaps."

The tingles spread down Ami's spine and limbs. "It is the Language of Flowers!" she said excitedly. "Oh, I would love to see what it says!" The scarred guard took a step back, before Ami remembered to rein in her zeal. She could be overwhelming at times. "Sorry."

"It's all right." They smiled at her. "I find your enthusiasm charming."

It didn't sound like a lie. Warmth kindled in Ami's chest. "May your good deeds return to you thousandfold," she said, and this time she was certain she had gotten it right.

Gaden bowed, then met her gaze as they straightened. They were both of the same height, she realized, and their eyes were level with each other. Gaden was the first to look away again, and with a sheepish shuffle, they hurried to join the other castle guards patrolling the market square. Ami

tucked the folio beneath her arm and headed back to return it to her father, excited to tell him that another fragment of *Songs of Order and Chaos* had possibly been discovered in the library. His life's work, and by extension, hers.

Only the blanket was empty.

"Baba?" Ami looked around, unease creeping up her neck, muffling her ears with ringing dread. She rarely left her father unattended, as he had a tendency to frighten those who were unaccustomed to his manic behaviors, but neither was Li Er-Shuan inclined to wander far. "Baba?"

Her father was often easily overwhelmed by a mass of people—their smells, their sounds, their textures, their closeness—unable to handle the tide of sensations that frequently threatened to drown him. The last thing Ami needed was the castle guard arresting him for disorderly conduct again. She had had to borrow butter from one of the barley aunties to pay the bribe last time, and she didn't want to be any more of a burden on them than she already was.

"Baba!" she called. "Li Er-Shuan!"

But no one responded. No one even gave her a second glance. Ami swallowed, trying to find her voice. She had spent so long hiding that she had not realized how hard it would be to be seen again. Her magic writhed in her chest, but she resisted the temptation to use her power to rifle through the ki of those around her for her father's.

Hide your light was his oft-repeated refrain. As much as Ami loathed hearing those words, they were the only times he was present with her. *Hide your light, lest the others discover what you really are.*

She had been called many things her entire life—odd, eccentric, unusual, strange, different—but those words only ever got at the barest hint of what she truly was. The thing that kept her distant and apart from everyone around her, even other magicians. Ami picked up Little Mother

from the ground, turning the vase round and round and round in her hands. More and more blossoms bloomed as her power entwined with that of the little tree.

Unnatural.