



CHAPTER 1

KIBURE

KIBURE SAT UP, RUBBED HIS face with his hands, then rose to his feet, frustrated that he could no longer sleep. The glow of the two moons illuminated the room enough for Kibure to see his way to the door of his slave hut. He tiptoed carefully to avoid waking the others who claimed their own crammed spaces along the floor; he would have hell to pay if he caused a disturbance that woke one of the elders in his hut.

Pushing gently, he cringed in anticipation of the squeak that, surprisingly, didn't come. *When did they oil that hinge?*

As Kibure stepped out into the night air, he noticed another oddity. The light he saw coming from the moons was, of course, limited; but even that partial lighting lacked the slightest semblance of color. He blinked, then reached up and rubbed his eyes; something felt wrong. Confused, Kibure swallowed hard and realized how acutely dry his throat felt. *Water. I need water.* He felt his heart thump, and started toward the nearby well.

He would have to be extremely careful to avoid waking one of the overseers who lived in the cottages beside the estate. Kibure stopped when he was only halfway there. The penalty for stealing a strictly

guarded commodity like water was no less than twenty lashes, and yet he resumed his movement toward the well.

Once there, he took hold of the rope and pulled nervously, and slowly, so as to avoid causing the pulley to squeak. He looked over his shoulder as he did so, making sure he remained alone. Slowly, slowly—the rope slipped from his hand. *Noooo!*

The pail fell and Kibure scrambled to catch the line. He didn't. The heavy bucket landed with a—silent—nothing. No sound whatsoever. Kibure looked from side to side, then leaned over the well. Something was very wrong here. Then it hit him like a lash to the back: his breathing, heavy as it was, made no sound, the door had made no sound, even his footfalls had been silent. He brought his hands up and clutched his ears. What was wrong with him? He turned and ran back to the slave shack as fast as his twelve-year-old legs would take him, his fear of retribution from the other slaves gone.

He threw open the door and ran to the closest thing he had to a mother, Berta, then stopped just before her bed. It was empty. Scanning the room, he recognized that he was completely alone; there was not a single soul in the room. He fell to his knees, closed his eyes, and cried out; only his cry was as silent as the pail of water at the bottom of the well.

Kibure shook as he knelt on the ground, uncomprehending and afraid. When he opened his eyes again, his vision was blurred by tears. He gasped; a rush of sensations returned, primary among them sound, and the sound was him screaming. But he was no longer kneeling, he was on his back staring up at the ceiling. So satisfied was he to hear his voice that the hand gripping him had almost no effect. Then a second hand slapped him, and he quieted.

“Kibure! What's wrong?” whispered Parvel, trying to cover Kibure's mouth with a hand. Parvel, who slept beside him, was a few years older, and much bigger. Kibure's face grew warm where he had been hit. He didn't care.

“I—I—” What could he say: *I was walking around outside and tried to steal water when I realized I was seeing no color and hearing no sound?* Parvel would think him mad. *Maybe I am.*

“I think I—” Understanding dawned on him. “I think I had a bad dream. I’m—sorry.”

Grumbles sounded throughout the shack and Kibure did not dare move or speak again for the rest of the night. Neither did he dare return to sleep.



Kibure’s concern over his nightmare faded with the resumption of labor the following day. It was difficult to worry about much of anything once back in the familiar monotony of exhaustion and routine. After a brief lunch, Kibure started back at his work, cutting the heavy, greenish-red drogal fruit from the stalk with the dull wooden tool barely sharp enough to do the job. He fell into a familiar rhythm of work and song:

*Toil, toil, in the field,
To Klerós we are bound,
Cut—THWACK—
Cut—THWACK—
The thin spot, don’t bruise the drogal,
Crack, crack, goes the whip,
Pick up the pace,
Cut—THWACK—
Cut—THWACK—
The thin spot, don’t bruise the—*

“Hey, what I tell you about that rippin’ singsong stuff?”

Kibure looked up to see Jarlax, a crotchety old slave, just a few trees away. “Sorry.”

The slave shook his head. “Yeah, always sorry, but still always singin’. Just shut it, already!”

The other slave returned to his work, mumbling under his breath. Kibure resigned himself to labor the rest of the afternoon in silence, *mostly*. He hummed the tune loud enough for only his ears. As the day progressed, Kibure worked his way along the edge of the field, away from the others, filling his bag with fruit ahead of schedule for once. He carried his bag to the next tree and set it down with a satisfying thump. The bag, nearly full as it was, caused him to lose his balance in the process.

Kibure landed atop the bag, then slid down to the ground and rolled over so his back leaned against the bag of hard fruit. Sitting there, he let out a loud, satisfying breath, then he yawned and his eyelids drooped, pulled down as if by some unseen force. *Should stand up before I—*

He did not stand up.

Pain exploded across his thighs and Kibure's eyes snapped open, his heart instantly pounding as if he had just sprinted full across the field.

"Sleeping on the job, are we?" Musco Zagreb's thick, full-figured body towered over Kibure's lounging, diminutive form.

Kibure could feel the burning heat where the whip had lashed his skin. There would be a welt, and perhaps a few spots of blood. He didn't dare look. He also dared not speak for fear that whatever he said might make things worse.

Zagreb shouted gruffly, "Up! Now! You know the penalty, and that first one don't count."

Kibure did know the penalty. Fifteen lashes—no small sum where Zagreb's heavy-handedness was concerned. But Kibure rose to accept the judgment. He had no excuse, and Zagreb would have heard none, anyhow.

Kibure removed his tattered shirt.

Zagreb did not waste a moment, and Kibure shuddered as the rough whip sliced his scarred back. Kibure bit his lip to keep from screaming, knowing that Musco Zagreb believed silence a penance, a revered act for a slave. Kibure remained in fixed a standing position for the next ten lashes. But with such effort fixated on keeping quiet, he faltered.

An attempt to regain his footing failed as another crack of the whip reopened old wounds.

His face crashed into the sand. *Now I've done it.*

His weakness would only serve to ignite Musco Zagreb's rage. The whip struck again.

"Don't count if you on the ground!"

Kibure worked shaky muscles, urging them to cooperate with his will, and managed to secure a kneeling position. He paused as he spotted a boy his age, one of Zagreb's children, a true-blood. The boy was cutting away at weeds with a stick along the wall of the estate.

Freedom, thought Kibure as he spat jealously. It was almost unfathomable, and still he tried to imagine it, wondering at escape, though he had no idea where he might go. As far as he knew, there were no free-folk within the Lugienese Empire besides those of the true-bloods. Kibure imagined a faraway land where everyone smiled and no one used whips. Could such a place truly exist? He shook his head. He wouldn't survive more than a few days alone.

The next blow returned Kibure to the sandy soil, and the present. His back became a cauldron boiling over with pain. Kibure turned back to his musco, eyes pleading him to stop, but he knew the man wasn't finished. A slave's weakness was defiance. His musco raised the whip even higher. Just as he readied to strike, a flash of movement above caught Kibure's attention, followed by a thick white substance, which suddenly oozed down Zagreb's face. If the man's previous expression had been one of contempt, this new one was pure malice. The man wiped his face, then looked at his hand, recognizing the pungent white goo for what it was. He turned his attention to the sky. Kibure breathed a sigh of relief. His master's anger had been redirected. This might just allow Kibure a chance to rise again and return to work, forgotten.

Zagreb scanned the sky where the flying lemur, a raaven, circled, cooing and cawing its approval at having hit its target.

Slowly, now. Yes. Still distracted. Kibure slowly crept beyond reach. *Yes, that's it.*

"Blast you!"

Kibure froze. *Oh no.*

“Dagnammit, you baggin’ winged rat!”

Kibure blew out the breath he had been holding. *He’s not talking to me. Keep moving.*

“When I get my hands on you, I’m gonna break every rippin’ bone in your body, then leave you strung to a post to rot! You maggot-laying, roach-infested, flying little grumpkin!”

Kibure was surprised at the creativity of Zagreb’s insults while the raaven disappeared beyond the walls of the estate. But he was mostly just glad to no longer be the object of Zagreb’s ire.

The young slave watched out of the corner of his eye as the winged, black lemur drifted out of sight, jealous of its freedom to come and go, something Kibure the slave would never know. He smiled nonetheless, imagining himself soaring through the sky, teasing the wicked, like Zagreb, just for the fun of it.

The raaven had been a fixture of the estate for as long as Kibure could remember, stealing whips and other tools as well as getting into the food stores. It was no secret that Zagreb hated the thing.

The slave master mumbled as he wiped the slimy, white substance from his brow with the rag he carried at his waist to dab away sweat. Then he turned back and spotted Kibure, who froze at the man’s stare.

“Thought I’d forget on account of your little friend’s distraction, did you? Come on back here,” he barked. “We need to finish your punishment, else you’ll never learn.”

Kibure felt blood running down his back from the most recent gashes. He returned to stand before his master.

“Only thing I forgot was where I left off.” Zagreb grinned. “Guess I’ll have to start over.”

“Twelve while standing, sixteen altogether,” said Kibure without looking up.

“What’s that, now?”

“Struck me twelve times while standing, and another four while on the ground.”

Zagreb tilted his head. “You trying to be smart, but it’s coming off real stupid. Gonna be twenty for you now. Any more numbers you wanna say?”

He lifted the whip to strike, not seeming to care that Kibure was still facing him. He swung, the whip taking Kibure full in the chest. This time he did cry out. And by the time the second strike came, Kibure had turned his back, his chest stinging intensely. But there was something else, too. Feelings Kibure didn’t even know existed bubbled to the surface of his consciousness and poured through his veins. And not just feelings.

Something was happening to him.

He set his jaw as another connection was made between the leather whip and his bare back. Kibure stood more upright, teeming with alien emotion, and *something* more. Zagreb paused, confused by the change in posture.

Another sense awakened in Kibure, a sense of certainty, and a sense of—defiance. Kibure squeezed his eyes shut. *No! No more.*

He felt himself straighten completely. Then he opened his eyes, slowly, resigned to allow his emotions to take control. His mind pulled away. He did not try to stop it. His body went numb, replaced by a deeper, nearly overwhelming sensation, as if he were suddenly connected to every particle of orange soil beneath his bare feet.

An instinctual awareness overwhelmed him and his body became an unfathomable vessel, acting of its own accord. *I’m going to do something very bad.* He shook his head again. *What do I care? I have nothing to lose.* He turned to face his master, who raised the whip to deliver another blow. Kibure’s body quickly closed the gap between himself and his master. Time seemed to bend as he moved, the seconds becoming hours, nothing going unnoticed. He saw the whites of Zagreb’s teeth as his grin became a snarl. He saw the dirt beneath Zagreb’s nails as he gripped the handle of injustice, preparing his swing. The man appeared still unconcerned about the frail slave who flowed toward him.

Kibure could hardly believe what he was doing. He narrowed his eyes and drew back his fist. Considering his small, slight stature, it was a vain attempt, but he was done caring.

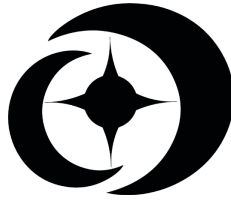
His arm swung to strike the much larger, much stronger man, who looked down at him bemused. Zagreb's inevitable retribution would come later, Kibure knew. But with shocking speed, Kibure's fist moved toward the target, Zagreb's chest.

A wave of heat washed over Kibure as his fist continued forward. But as his closed fingers approached Zagreb's body, a surge of—*something*—pure energy?—shot out from that very same fist. The strike never directly contacted Zagreb's body, but the energy sent the slave master hurtling fifteen paces through the air. Zagreb's scream radiated both shock and pain as the air was forced from his lungs. Then he slammed into the hard desert floor. Displaced dust floated into the air around his body.

All was still and for a moment, Kibure thought he had killed the man. He let out a breath when Zagreb groaned and rolled to his stomach, calling to the overseers for help.

Kibure stood there somehow buried to his calves in the rock-hard sand, which had become more like overripe drogal fruit, thick, mushy, and malleable. He pulled his legs free then fell to his knees. That was where he remained until two of Zagreb's true-blood overseers approached cautiously from either side to take hold of him. Kibure spotted Zagreb a safe distance away, holding his chest, hatred oozing from his expression.

The men secured the shackles slowly, hesitantly, but Kibure did not resist; he couldn't. Whatever otherworldly power had come over him in those moments of passion had fled his body the second he realized what he had done.



CHAPTER 2

GROBENNAR

GROBENNAR'S EYES FLEW OPEN AS a loud boom rattled his bed-chamber, rousing him from sleep. He immediately drew on the powers of his god, Klerós, prepared to vanquish the source of the disturbance. Then it came again: *THUMP-THUMP-THUMP*.

He sighed and relaxed, extinguishing his god's magic as he rose from the bed. Just a messenger. "Coming."

Grobennar instinctively snatched up the red-ruby pendant on his way to the door.

"Ooooh my. A missive so early in the morning? Whatever could this be?" came the familiar haunting voice in Grobennar's head, from the spirit trapped within the pendant, Jaween.

"I suspect we'll learn shortly." He shook out stiff limbs as he approached, rubbed his still sleepy face, then pulled open the door.

A palace soldier stood at attention, waiting respectfully for Grobennar to speak.

"Yes?"

The soldier gave a dutiful bow, face nearly touching the stone floor, and rightfully so in the presence of the High Priest. "The Lord King wishes to see you in his chambers at once, Your Grace."

Grobennar glanced out his bedroom window to confirm that it was indeed still dark outside. *A summons before dawn?*

Turning back to acknowledge the soldier, Grobennar grumbled, "Very well."

He strode across the room to his chest to retrieve a suitable robe, the one with the yellow embroidery, a subtle reminder of his position as Fatu Mazi, greatest among the priesthood. The God-king knew this, of course, but as his spiritual leader, Grobennar felt it necessary to always model perfected etiquette. The Lord ruler's endowed magical abilities were frighteningly powerful, but he lacked any feel for the formalities that came with leading the Empire. He had grown increasingly defiant in recent months, and Grobennar had resorted to simpler, indirect teachings through example.

"With the God-king's indignant mood as of late, perhaps it would be wise to stop at the kitchen for a pastry? Humans like pastries."

"Quiet," hissed Grobennar.

"Fine. Fine. I'm only trying to help. You know how much I like to be helpful."

Grobennar scurried down the narrow corridor toward the God-king's chambers, still dark but for the mystic flicker of red flames on either end. Grobennar's joints had shrugged off the stiffness that came with his thirty-seven years by the time he reached the guards outside the chambers.

The two men bowed deeply, then opened the massive oak doors to Magog's bedchamber, their expressions intense as they regained their positions at attention, prepared to dispatch unwelcome guests.

Grobennar entered and saw Magog seated at the edge of the bed, his bronze skin shaped by an imposing muscular body, shimmering with sweat, nude from the waist up. The God-king's long translucent hair hung wildly about his head, taking on the color of the flames around the room.

Grobennar bowed with minimal reverence, then continued his approach to stand before his Lord. "You requested my presence, Lord Magog?"

Magog's topaz eyes became narrow slits. They were surrounded by an increasing number of red scale-like growths mostly around his left eye, though a few had started around the right. These scales, reminders of his unusual birth and his growing power, were disconcerting and comforting at once.

He said, "I observed the crescent and the full moons crossing Lesante's gift this night."

Grobennar understood the implications of such signs. The founder of their faith, the last prophet, and her seers had foretold the Renewal, a purge of the unsaved world through force. This sign was said to mark the beginning. The crescent moon crossing its smaller counterpart at the center of the most well-known constellation was representative of the Lugienese Empire stretching their dominion to the ends of the world.

"You are certain of this?" asked Grobennar, skeptical as always. This astrological occurrence had been observed before, but the scholars had dismissed it, believing the location in the stars not centered enough within Lesante's gift to pass scrutiny.

Magog let out a breath of frustration. "Of course I am certain. The enemy has stirred. Last night I felt a presence, a *wrongness*. It was faint, but combined with these signs, the truth cannot be ignored."

Grobennar did not like the sound of this, for he had sensed nothing. "How can you be certain of what you felt? Perhaps your stomach simply did not agree with your evening meal."

Magog's frustration leaked through his voice. "I am certain! The Dark Lord's agent stirs; it is time to act!" He glared at Grobennar, daring him to disagree.

Grobennar knew better, yet the idea of rash action did not sit well with him. He was a believer. After having seen Magog's birth with his own eyes, how could he not be? And yet, these prophecies had been twisted over the years to fit situations that later proved imprudent. Grobennar remained straight-backed, knowing the importance of posture in projecting the credibility of his advice, something Magog had been less inclined to accept as of late.

“You are right to be prepared with the knowledge of the prophecies. You are, after all, the prophesied redeemer. Yet do these very same prophecies not speak of caution? Do they not speak of the importance of our preparations? I do not doubt your sincerity, of course, but perha—”

The words died in his throat as he felt the tingling sensation of magic, Magog’s magic.

He wouldn’t dare, I’m his—

A wave of power struck Grobennar like a line of fists and he careened into the stone wall across the room. The impact knocked his wind out.

Magog’s booming voice followed—“I am done waiting! I am the God-king!”—penetrating deep into Grobennar’s throbbing head.

Grobennar coughed and sucked in a deep breath of air. He crawled to his knees, angry at being attacked by the boy he had raised and trained from infancy. He began to rise to his feet.

“How dare you! I am your—”

Another blast of energy split the air. Grobennar used his own powers to deflect the blow, but the sheer volume of energy was too great and he was still thrown back into the wall again. He landed with a thud, then groaned.

“You are my servant!” Magog’s voice became a growl. “I am not yours to command. You have forgotten your place.”

Never before had Magog lashed out like this. His powers were as of yet still manifesting, still growing, but already he commanded strength unknown to any mortal man. Magog could easily kill him if he wished, and Grobennar now feared that in his anger, he just might. He forgot the physical pain of the attack on his body, and the great blow to his ego.

“I—I am sorry, My Lord.”

The voice in Grobennar’s mind interrupted his already strained thoughts. “*You’re not alone with the God-king. I sense the life-essence of another; a wielder.*”

Grobennar collected himself and rose, forgetting the danger posed by the unpredictably obstinate God-king. It was still Grobennar’s duty to serve and protect. Perhaps the God-king was right about the coming

of the Dark Lord's agent. Grobennar drew in Klerós's power. Then he spotted movement to his right. He summoned more, ready to strike—

“What are—how dare you!” Magog yelled.

Grobennar ignored the oblivious Emperor as a form materialized from the shadows cast by ceiling-high drapes in the corner of the room. Grobennar shouted, “Get down!”

Grobennar extended a hand, readying to strike. Just before he released a bolt of searing energy, the shadowy shape stepped into the light and spoke. Grobennar recognized the voice with revulsion, relaxing his magic with reluctance.

Mazi Rajuban. A member of the High Council and long-standing opponent of both Grobennar and his more conservative faction within the Council. “Peace, brother. I was asked by the God-king to be in attendance for today's meeting.”

Jaween spoke into Grobennar's mind, “*Have I mentioned that I do not care for this man?*”

Nor do I, thought Grobennar wryly to himself.

His own anger reignited. *That's what Rajuban wishes.* Grobennar forced himself to relent. “Of course. The God-king is wise to seek the wisdom of a member of the High Council. Yet perhaps this is a matter for the collective wisdom of the High Council to discuss in its entirety.”

The God-king bellowed, “The High Council is fickle, paralytic, and incapable of action!” Lowering his voice, he added, “You are right about assembling the Council. But it will not be to initiate discourse. You will *inform* them.” He raised his voice once more. “You will inform them that the time has at long last come to begin preparations for the Purge. The enemy stirs! We too must shed our idle position.”

Grobennar knew better than to disagree. He had somehow lost favor with the God-king, and Rajuban's attendance here served as an answer to the question of how.

“Yes, Lord. It shall be done.”

Rajuban smiled. “You are wise to see the wisdom of the God-king's words. He has been tightly leashed for far too long. The time has come for him to realize his true destiny as avatar to Klerós, praise be his name.”

“Oh he’s good. I can’t help but hate him, but his politics are praiseworthy. Perhaps we might torture and kill him later?”

Grobennar ignored Jaween, instead looking to Magog, nodding. The decision had been made. Rajuban had defeated him in this bout.

“Of course. This is well. Klerós guide the both of you.”

That *snake* had maneuvered behind his back to gain the ear of the God-king. He would need to tread very carefully.

Grobennar bade the God-king farewell, refusing to acknowledge Rajuban, then stalked out of the room as quickly as possible. He considered his next course of action, though there wasn’t much to consider. He had no choice but to call a full assembly as instructed.

Grobennar entered his own chambers and melted into the chair beside his bed, mentally exhausted.

“So. This purge. That means war, right? I will be able to persuade our enemies?”

Grobennar picked up a quill and ink from the small table to his left to begin writing out a list of preparations. “Yes, the Purge means war. I suspect you’ll have plenty of chances to persuade, you might even see some killing.”

“Ooh-ooh-ooh. Yes, persuading and killing! I know your mood is a touch soured from earlier, but this really does call for celebration. A small feast, perhaps? That might lighten your mood, as well.”

Grobennar ignored Jaween.

“Did you write that down?”

Grobennar continued to work on his list.

“Are you ignoring me again? You know it hurts my feelings when you ignore me.”

Grobennar reached up and removed the pendant from his neck and tossed it onto his bed a few paces away, limiting the strength of the spirit’s connection to him. “I need to think,” he said through clenched teeth.

He wondered if perhaps secreting the forbidden spirit from the debris all those years ago had resulted in more trouble than it was worth. He heard a sound in his head that was disturbingly not like weeping,

yet he knew from his time with Jaween that this was precisely what the spirit was intending to communicate.

He sighed. "I'm not ignoring you, Jaween. You can stop the crying. I just need it quiet in order to think."

Jaween's mood elevated. "*So that sounded like real crying this time, didn't it?*"

Grobennar rolled his eyes. "Closer than ever before."

It was going to be a very long day.