

PROLOGUE

He lay before the gnarled foot of the lone belajoun tree, its roots striking deep into the rocky surface of the mountain. Barely visible, he stared at the sky between the tree’s arthritic branches. The cold pinpoints of starlight began to fade as the sky lightened from blue to indigo. The dark world became shades of gray until the first splinters of dawn shot from the horizon, and the gray world fell into color.

Still a drowsy shimmer on the ground, he flowed into the belajoun’s roots, following the tree’s sap upwards its ancient trunk. Exhaling, he stretched into the branches, into every dark leaf, feeding off the tree’s photosynthesis and mineral-rich sap. Finally waking up, he felt the full fire of the morning sun, which illuminated sea, mountain, and tree. By midmorning, he was awake enough to leave the tree. Even though he would prefer to stay within the security of his life-giving host, hard experience taught him that if he stayed any longer, he would lose himself in the tree’s soothing slow-time, so he flowed out through the leaves. He took shape upon the tree top, an angular dark bird perched upon the highest branch.

The glittering sea behind him, he glanced down and grimaced, for they were still there.

In a spreading clot on the bare, cold plain far below were the shambles of a fleeing people, the remains of yet another fallen city somewhere. From rough-woven, undyed wool to the richest emerald and cochineal-red silk, these people were refugees unused to being refugees.

He noticed them arriving two days ago at this silent, lonely location, far away from everywhere else. He noticed them, then ignored them, waiting for the throng to leave. But they didn’t break camp yesterday, nor today. Wary, he opened himself to their presence as his ethereal bird eyes peered closely, seeking why they hadn’t left by now.

After a brief assessment, he had his answer. *Typhoid*, he thought. *So stupid*. Perhaps he could just ignore them again –

But he had opened himself to them. He felt their desperation, their ragged fear. He saw the small lights of their lifeforce, weak and shrinking, consumed by the firestorm of *salmonella typhi*. He heard their begging prayers, their cries for their gods to save them as their lifeforce winked out, one by one, leaving only diseased meat for the carrion crows to pick at.

No, he protested, *no, not again, never again --*

He heard a man sob, holding his wife tightly convulsed in fever.

I can’t --

He heard a woman scream as her baby’s lifeforce winked away.

No, I -- He couldn’t shut out their cries. He closed his eyes, absorbing as much energy as the sun’s photons could give him in a short space of time. Then, with a great sigh, he jumped down from the mountain.

As he approached the perimeter of the camp, those who witnessed him first reared back in fear, screaming, “GodKing! GodKing!” Thus he realized he was visible, appearing like one of the conquering creatures who had invaded their land. He swore at his mistake, but it was too late. He winced as those broken people screamed and recoiled before him. But they were too weak to run away, and he had no time to explain, as death accelerated its sweep across the camp. Even though he had given up his previous life, old habits still remained. Reverting to battle triage, he saw who was still healthy, who was sick but could recover unaided, who was so ill that intervention was urgent, and who was so critical that death was inevitable.

Of the four conditions, he quickly reached one who was the latter – the convulsing wife – touched her forehead briefly, and moved on to the next, attending the urgent and the critical.

Like a bird visiting each opened flower, he moved quickly and gently. With each inoculation, he transferred energy that created needed electrolytes, hydration, and antibiotics in each sickened human. With fast healing, each patient sat up – wobbly, exhausted, and cured. When he had returned to his starting point, the camp had gathered around him, this time crying out in gratitude, “GodKing! GodKing!”

He exclaimed above their cheers, feeling his material form start to phase to ethereal again, “Two leagues to the east is a river with fresh water – bathe yourself, boil the river water to purify it, and only drink that boiled water once cooled! Do that, or your sickness will return!”

“Our savior! Our savior! Our GodKing!” they continued, deaf to this instructions.

He snorted in disgust. His morning recharge depleted, he phased into a diaphanous state that quickly slid as a shimmer unnoticed in the air. Hearing their alarmed calls of “Come back! Come back! We need you!” behind him, he drifted back to this mountain retreat, collapsing against the familiar comfort of the belajoun’s roots, far above the sheep-like humans below.

When he awoke the next day and glanced down, he saw that they were still there, waiting for their savior to return. He knew they would always wait for his return. He sighed, placing his hands on the old tree that had been his home. *Goodbye*, he thought.

Then he flew away, leaving the mountain by the sea and the people on the plain waiting below.

All of that was a long time ago. His name was Setebos, and he vowed he wouldn’t make the same mistake again.