Book II
The air was metallic white. Black posts stubbled the town’s lanes; the signs of the performance of the Black Riders. The town was electric with anticipation. The woman in the sandal shop, the boy with deep set eyes and red hair singing to himself as he fetches water, the young woman named Donnali amusing herself playing with her toes, everyone was as tense as an inhale awaiting the festivities. Wails of conch shells, the long notes bending sideways each time the sound concludes, wound through the streets. Outside of the pavilion Ayoli imagined that she could just hear the flutter of ribbons of black satin spinning around arms, hands, faces, legs, pelvises, feet, necks, as the Black Riders were preparing to fight.

She enjoyed gray days. To her the rain brought a tinge of romance and a day of impending rain, or even a day bearing the threat of rain, was gravid with the potential for feeling. She
felt awakened from life’s usual automaton functioning, the day made her aware of actions and words. She spoke lovingly to her parents and passionately, carefully to her friends. Her mind hung on the return of Jal-R, she never was the friend of a Black Rider before. Somehow she felt privileged at taking a step closer to their intrigue and mystery through Jal-R—she was the first one of her town to see him as a man. A handsome, bleak eyed man. She wondered and flung her mind to marvelous places trying to imagine his years of journey. She imagined herself leaving her town, women and men in bizarre shades of fruit pink, people four heads taller than even the tallest she has known, castles piled high upon themselves like drippings of sand. She had heard and read the stories, but to actually leave the town for so long and to go so far away! She would have asked the widow Molyppi more about the Riders, but she grew cold recalling their last exchange. Though time has passed, the wounds have set and solidified between the two women rather than fading. Enough of that! Settling her thoughts Ayoli decided to go directly to the source and ask Jal-R of the true preparations and hidden meanings of the festival. She left home in a blur and rushed to the pavilion much earlier than the festival’s start.

The manicured dirt of the pavilion grounds was a blond color. The history of bloody battle was long and privileged in this spot, revered among the town’s citizens. On that day it was filled with black shadowy motion as dark clad Black Riders walked, ran, and spun all throughout to ensure that everything was in order for the festival. A lust for battle and desire for pain did nothing to
dampen diligent regard for safety measures. No one would die in battle. The pain would be mighty, but all would survive.

The ground, patchy in areas with low blue grass, was marbled with veins of blood. Blood in all shades and states of desiccation. Brown dirt pudding blood, bright crimson just sprayed blood, dark ruby red jelly thick blood, blood strangely oranged in the sun. The horses reared up and whinnied at the horse bloodied breeze. The rag tag gang, black arm banded, cursing and mocking, performed foolhardy equestrian tricks. The coats of their horses were shaved in detailed esoteric patterns, artistic to those outside their circle, at the same time as they were cruel and crude. The men burst into their spontaneous songs, loud and tricky, the songs twisted in themselves deep beyond dusk.

The boy had been told to return with apples for the men, this in a land of peach orchards. Afraid for his life, probably irrationally, the youth returned only late in the evening having traveled far to obtain the fruit. When he opened the tent flap of the gang’s leader and found him sweaty booty out wound around a fleshy young woman—the assault was quick and harsh. Though time would rewrite the night to end the boy’s life there, really he left in a panic, apples spilled to break in the hard packed dirt, dodging an intentionally mis-aimed dagger throw that was meant to scare the youth. Days later the boy’s father, a stern man, orange eyes, brown pupils, brown skinned, destined one day to be an esteemed elder, would return atop a white mare dappled with gray. More blood was shed before the father returned home, the black banded gang remerged with the night. Spectres. Haunts riding on raggedy steeds, stretching their ebon abstract powers to encircle and constrict the town. The borders of the town constricted by
the width of ten homes, the town itself vomited the partially
digested remnants of town fare and stewed in its own juices. The
town was too sturdy to succumb. The spectre, unable devour the
town, instead possessed it. The town was shot through with long
strung out and deeply rooted bands of black worm-like demons.

“This is the Skvarr blade that coils the flesh, and this here
merely punctures, it is called a Zjute.” Ayoli gazed over Jal-R’s
shoulder at the row and rows of fighting implements.

“That one?” pointing at a silver skull handled knife.

“It is just a boot knife, we use those if disarmed as the
first resort before employing any of the needle blades on that far
table there.”

Ayoli marveled, the instruments were all familiar but she had
never known them by name. Jal-R seemed not to mind sharing his
knowledge, though he was preoccupied with preparing for his first
festival as a Black Rider. A hearty hand slap smacked his back,
startling both him and Ayoli. Valvr let a mirthful laugh and
inquired about Jal-R’s readiness for combat. Jal-R just glowered
as Ayoli tried to defend him (likely making matters worse): “The
question is are you ready, Jal-R is freshly returned to us and
inspired in his art!”

Valvr responded with the same mocking glee, “Oh, indeed he is
and I only jest, and your name my dear?” Jal-R muttered Ayoli’s
response for her and asked her to leave so that he could begin to
focus. She complied quickly, worrying that she had overstay.
Jal-R turned to the wide man Valvr who spoke before Jal-R could.
“She doesn’t understand our way, nonetheless it will be a show for her to remember.”

“She understands as well as the others.”

“What would they do without us! Har! But I am here to let you know that we shall meet in the first contest. It shall be a glorious bloodfeast homecoming for you!”

“Yes…so let us go to prepare now.”

“Ok, well met Jal-R, I await you when the sun falls further.”

“And I await you.”

At Valvr’s departure Jal-R began to resharpen his blades. He whet the long swords, the daggers. He honed the needles and oiled his gauntlets. He prepared the hatchet, though he preferred other weapons than that one. In all he readied over ninety instruments of pain, most of them black and silver, long, tapered, sharp.

The sun was not yet setting when long conch calls silenced the chittering crowds around the pavilion. The sound was chill and Ayoli whispered to Maoli that it could raise ghosts, who responded that it did. The wail quieted and slowly began to rise again. It was a rhythmic sound that created a swirling effect. The rhythms began to syncopate one another. The water rose symbol banner unfurled above the pavilion and in that instant the audience’s attention was split as the first of the Black Riders emerged to thunderous applause. Hulking, large toothed, grinning Valvr nimbly spun out to the center of the grounds and let a might roar. He was their champion. Shortly, Jal-R also emerged, his walk deliberate yet light-footed. His roar was quieter and higher pitched, a smoother and less intimidating sound. He appeared
confident though and the townspeople responded to the newest Black Rider with even greater volume. The conch sound now only receded and waxed over enormous stretches of time in mimicry of the ocean. In these tides the Black Riders began to stalk each other.

Jal-R drew blood first. In the unusual action of initiating attack with a carving dagger first he sliced the black ribbons from Valvr’s right arm. With no wind they drifted directly to the ground as Jal-R’s right hand weapon, his Skvarr blade, caressed along the length of Valvr’s same arm. It drew a long coiled skin stripe like a potato or apple peeled in one continuous strip. At this the audience members yelped with glee. First pain was an artful move. Jal-R dodged, softening the blow of Valvr’s puncturing boot spikes in his side. Valvr danced behind Jal-R and in a move rivaling the oddity of Jal-R’s first attack with a knife, he went directly to his long needle and pierced it deep in the center of the back of Jal-R’s neck. Valvr’s skill was such that it was no mortal blow, but the immense pain dropped Jal-R flat to his stomach to slip the length of the needle out from his neck. He was careful that the needle did not break off there. Leg sweeping Valvr to drop him also to the ground Jal-R removed a small trident from his breast plate to slice across Valvr’s left cheek. He left only two red lines as Valvr rolled away allowing both fighters time to withdraw a bit. The pause in the action brought the audience to their feet.

“Read it aloud for all of us!” he shouted at the messenger immobilized with fear. He did not quite pull off the act and it was obvious to his fellow men
that he was illiterate. Not so to the quivering man before him who was too preoccupied with his own fate. The captive messenger sputtered his message incoherently. Impatiently the shouter, the men’s leader, swiped the message from the captive’s hands and slapped the messenger across the face with the back of the hand holding the parchment. Unable to read it and not prepared to lose face, he screwed his face at the letter and improvised: “This! This is what they have to say! They imagine that because we have little we have no sense in our minds. We shall continue to abstain from our toil for their light.”

His response to the messenger was quick and brutal. The messenger was left to die, seemingly badly disfigured. He somehow recovered in the timespan of a quarter moon cycle though after being discovered by a group of his compatriots. The apparently skillful, nonfatal, startlingly violent attack was a clear response to their message that left resounding impressions. Evil, torture, yes, yet in those times a spark of art was seen in the act. A measure of respect was earned. The details of this incident were forgotten and drowned in the ground with the various fluids left leaking from the messenger.

Since the time of the brutal leader’s father’s father’s father they had gathered the manure of horses to collect into the large town vat to produce energy for them all. They were men who created light for the town. They collected the raw
materials at night amidst streets lit throughout the entire town by their own toil. Somehow years twisted the public opinion of these unlearned but highly skilled men from respected to tolerated to unappreciated. This was, at least, what he had been told. He was the one who initiated the darkening as they ceased their duties in a town too proud to assign others to the task. In darkness their banditry began.

The pride of these men would come to be remarked upon as being most aptly represented by the day called the Heralding. The story reads: A message of capitulation and contrition was sent to the light bringers. They replied with a message of artful violence that was undeniable. Their role in society would be that of shit pickers no more. They threw the village back into dim days where by night people read only by candlelight. That was a time of great fear and of conflict. The merciless nature of the these men was broadly remarked upon. The conflict drew on for four generations and by the time the men were reintegrated into society their roles, their conceptions of themselves, and the unilluminated culture they remerged with were irrevocably stained.

In a moment when the crowd had grown completely silent Ayoli’s sole partisan cheer awakened him. With a new ferocity Jal-R recalled himself. Amidst the chorus of Black Rider song he decided that he was there to dominate. His shinning blade skinned down to the bone as he peeled the flesh from Valvr’s shin. Hobbled, Valvr grasped at Jal-R’s boot. In an unprecedented move
Jal-R loosened the boot’s straps in one motion and in a second motion removed the boot. He swatted Valvr across the mouth with its hard wooden heel. Valvr’s lips swelled in a moment and he spat blood. His boot was replaced by the time Valvr regained his focus. In his final attack of the day Valvr drew a tiny lance from his gauntlet and aimed at Jal-R’s gut. It was a moment of artlessness, perhaps the champion was demoralized by Jal-R’s quick undoing of him, as it might easily have punctured an organ had it connected. There was no chance of that as Jal-R leapt into the air, black ribbons trailing behind him like two tails, and kicked with both stiff pointed silver reinforced toes directly into Valvr’s kneecaps. Valvr fell back and away. Townswomen and men rose in pleasure at the result of the first match. It was a rare and lovely game, full of unorthodox moves and skillful surprises. His neck paining him into a headache, but unable to reveal his pain to the audience, Jal-R retired to a seated position amidst the chorus of Black Riders and began bellowing along with them. Ayoli’s approval caught his eye, he smiled inside though his lips remained as thickly set and granity as before. The air had taken on an orangey cast as the sun had clearly began its waning arc.

Ayoli watched Valvr being carried from the pavilion’s central stage. She marveled at how thoroughly wounded he appeared though she knew he would be up and walking within seven days. The quantity of blood leaked seemed immense, yet it was the art of Black Riders to pain without lasting injury. Just then she saw for a first time the Eylieen employed. It was a weapon that necessitated an immense amount of skill. Two small cups on a soft
string, if used correctly, the chemically freezing contents of the cups could be launched into the eyes of an opponent temporarily freezing him blind. Of course some Black Riders specialized in blind fighting and all were trained in it. She saw skin shed, blood fountain, eyes freeze, limbs fail with fatigue, men fall in a variety of gorgeous patterns that day. It was the greatest festival she had ever witnessed. The sky turned a ripe tomato gray that night and remained that color well past the time when often it should be a deep black blue. Perhaps the small pyres lit in celebration throughout the city reflected back from above, or in a more unlikely case Maoli mused to her friend, some supernatural occurrence bloodied the sky that night. The girls went to the fountain together following the festival gossiping and reminiscing over the battled games they had watched only earlier that same day. They relived the most exciting moments in their speech. Ayoli talked a bit overmuch of her friend Jal-R in her excitement over his return. Later they split ways and walked to their own parent’s homes. Separately each of them continued to relive the day’s excitement and beauty well into their sleep.

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Seven days after the festival Ayoli returned home one afternoon to find her parents and a local elder wearing dour faces. Her father appeared especially glum. The elder spoke with more graveness than gloom.

“Young woman Ayoli. You should consider that you have been accorded a great honor—though it may not be the easiest of necessities to come by—you requested it yourself through your
actions.” Ayoli looked to her parents for help in deciphering the pronunciation. The elder paused significantly as Ayoli’s parents refocused their attention on the spindly man dressed in air. Ayoli’s mind for some reason raced back to the time when girls Ingvar and Greedle had come to stay with her from another land. They had been amazed that the elders wore no apparel except when the elements demanded it. The foreigners could not see that it was unnecessary for the station of an elder. The thought was erased by the elder’s continuing pronouncement:

“Some of your ways are not our ways as you are well aware.”

Ayoli’s heart beat the feeling of Silv’s embrace into her mind. She no longer openly conducted her affair with Silv and aside from Maoli no one should have known much of it. She thought of her incident with the widow Madame Molyppi. Her face heated with shame. Perhaps the elder alluded to those components of Ayoli’s life but what he spoke of was: “The Black Rider Valvr was wounded in the festival. His wounds should have healed but the nerves of one hand were severed as he attempted an attack with the Krurrkki blade at the newly incepted rider Jal-R. It was impossible not to ignore your sympathies during the game and it was seen that you gazed upon Valvr with ill intent and emitted an audible sound at the time when the slicing occurred. He will heal but the movement of that hand shall not be the same and not again will he combat as the man he was before. This is aside from the fact of what I must say to you. You are a sympathetic person and urged on your friend. You have strong attachments which can be wonderful. This is a parable spun by an old man, it means little. I have unfolded
this tapestry events only to provide a proper backdrop before which you can understand our pronouncement. It is an honor: in the next time of purification you are to be the purefactor. That is, by your sweat will we all be cleansed. You know of the ritual, but your role and the specific duties of the purefactor will be shared in time. It is an honor to be able to sacrifice in this way for the community at large…”

His words droned and blurred. The time of purification did not represent an honor to Ayoli. It did not occur with the season’s passing or the cycles of the moon but in times of tragedy. Some tales told of purefactors emerging as hollow beings having been tried and tested so by their ordeals. Some tales were worse. The tales told of criminals and fiends, of sorcerers in days long past acting as purefactors to cleanse themselves and the entire community by contagion. Ayoli thought no longer of the elder’s words as he spoke them. She imagined only. She imagined where she would be later that evening. Her envisioned scene was to become reality exactly as she imagined it. When she was crying and living her premonition a twelfth day later she did not marvel at this coincidence between foresight and lived experience as her life became her earlier thought image. She only sobbed and shook inconsolably in Silv’s arms as he did for her all that he could: he held her securely for the night to pass.
Duels and Uniqueness

Pumper Knell ladled himself and Mowl-R water from the fountain. They talked long about the girth of this woman’s behind or the foolish expression on that man’s face. Knell explained the unique new ideas he had for water pumping. The lighting effects that pumpers created were abstract, sometimes naturalistic recalling light effects in nature, sometimes alien and bizarre. To the exaltation of some (mostly the young) and the chagrin of many others (traditionalists) Knell had begun pumping anthropomorphic phantasms into his art. Not often, just occasionally, not detailed, only evocative. Mowl-R was one of those who really cared little one way or another. He was used to pure patterns of fluid and light but an occasional haunt did no harm and could spice the proceedings at dances. Knell, his throat a bit dry from talking offered more water to Mowl-R who accepted.
Mowl-R was looking into Knell’s eyes, listening to his words, when he heard a commotion and felt the water overflow the cup and roll over his hand. Knell’s attention had wandered toward the loud sound. Both men looked over at the noisy group that had just entered the area.

They were dressed in a rich variety of styles and colors, crimson and gray, plain and ornately embroidered. They sipped on flagons of a fruity brew and carried long narrow blades at their hips that were meant for thrusting and not slicing.

“But you see,” the first said loudly, “you have to reduce the issue completely and ignore your preconceptions. There is no reason why we should be governed as you describe. I believe that we must start from a position assuming that those trained in ways of leadership should lead. A small frequently circulating group. Not a group defined as elite by age, birthright, or material possessions, but who have passed a rigorous set of requirements to which any could apply herself or himself.”

“I say though!” the lady in rough gray interjected, “how shall the rights of the townspeople be preserved without their say in their leadership?”

The red clad man continued, “I maintain that the rule and values of the bulk of the townspeople are precisely what cause us trouble. The disapproving few always lose in this regard. By having a circulating group of people (and we could all apply to this group with proper preparation) no one force remains in force too long and the oppression of those lacking in quantity is often
avoided. Your proposal, rule by quantity of opinion, is merely the codification of mob rule."

Knell and Mowl-R knew that it was a mock argument simplified and performed for the benefit of those who happened to be nearby. The group had no name as they did not “subscribe to the rationale that would have themselves set apart my a specific label–they were only a group of citizens dedicated to performing the art of conflict and resolution.” In Knell’s lifetime they had consistently seemed to perform a set of political values and their resolutions seemed to follow a particular, and radical, pattern. Most people simply enjoyed the elegance of their duels. For his part Mowl-R recoiled at their language and did not flee only out of politeness to Knell and enjoyment of the physical aspect of their displays. Their long poking blades with cup-like hilts danced daintily when they fought. They laced their fleet battles with long winded didacticisms and monologues. They did not hesitate to draw outsiders into the conflicts and Knell and Mowl-R shrank slowly away from the fountain as the group members approached. They then watched the entertaining proceedings without fear of being incorporated into the act and perhaps stabbed.

The woman in gray listened to the sound of the wind arcing around her ears. They had performed variations of the dialogue so many times that it demanded only a section of her attention.

*She gathered up around her the ancestor whisper of Draylr into his longtime friend’s dead ears. “There are values greater than friendship and needs more valuable than loyalty.” Others*
nearby who had followed him this far were lost regarding their next moves. He had slain his ideological brother, their brother. They traveled together based on a passion for Draylr’s simplistic idea. Conflict arose because each human would rather have another toil for him or her than toil his or herself. Denying fulfillment of this basic instinct was what civilized humanity was about. So without pattern Draylr’s disciples began to act upon instances of this idea. Draylr did not name his group, he did not require loyalty, fealty, or blood vows. At times he scarcely seemed aware that others followed him, as now. He also seemed unaware that others answered to a different moral code than he did, as now, a man murdered by his hand at his feet. He had pierced the man straight through with a long rod used in stabbing averyne trees to drain the sap each year.

The followers looked long at the man and his deed. The decision to follow Draylr after the murder set in motion a path down which lay a value system in which death had less worth than conflict and resolution. As time brought trickier situations, new whispers were appended to the original whisper. New justifications filled the margins of the original ones. A taste for a combative art, in a society that already had begun celebrating elegant festivals of pain performed by a nascent group of dark men on horseback, developed as the emotional counterpart to the arguments the group performed.

*The whisper gave her the strength to lift her thin blade and aim to kill in every performance.*

Jal-R, brooding, watched the performance with interest. The fighting was crude compared to the graceful combat of the Black Riders. The words marked themselves deep into his mind though.
Watching the woman parry the crimson clad man’s thrust as she bellowed out a description for a model of justice and obligation intrigued him. So far as he had traveled no one had spoken directly to him of such issues. In his youth he had lacked the comprehension to make sense of the group’s rhetoric but now as a man it offered a counterpoint to the life of a Black Rider. There was nothing he could or would do about the ideas, he was meant to be a Black Rider and no casual event could buck him from that steed, but an itch began in the back of his brain. The itch had long existed but the scene before him irritated it immensely. Could he at least have an internal dialogue as he fought; from where came his value of pain as beauty? From where came the proscription against death in combat that he followed? Headstrong and willful, brave though sullen, Jal-R walked slowly to the fountain.

"...within the local community justice shall be executed by the council empowered by the non-partisan education they have received. The desiderata for the ability to question and to think in the best interest of the few and the..."

"Pardon me, I am Jal-R of the Black Riders, I beg a question of you."

A rage seethed through the air around the fountain. Jal-R had committed a wild indiscretion. It was an unspoken truth that a rivalry existed between those two fighting clans, the Black Riders and the group. It was not an antagonistic rivalry but a rivalry that was innate because of core ideology. The clans simply did not cross paths. Perhaps both were too blind in their
adherence to codes, their own moral senses admired but not shared by the society at large. In addressing the performers Jal-R questioned his ways as much as theirs. As a Black Rider he would not have been challenged had he walked in-between the duelists as they fought. He should not have challenged them—his own fights lay elsewhere among his own kind.

Jal-R continued in his quiet voice: “Why do you perform these ideas for us? Why not act to make them a reality and why do you present them against a backdrop of violence. Coarse violence not shown for art’s sake, but for the sake of conflict and instigation? When I fight I fight for love, for everyone. Why do you fight when you create neither beauty nor change in the modes you speak of?”

The fighting man and woman paused and looked directly at Jal-R for a length of time. They began slowly swinging their blades around them. The thin swords quivered with the motion. They began to circle Jal-R. Their comrades, at least eight others from the group were nearby though they were not performing, began to incite them to attack. The man in red spoke first:

“Sir Rider, respectfully, you speak of what you do not know. You enter traditions deeper and rougher than you are prepared to navigate. You see a tiny triangle of ice above the water and intended to plow through it while ignorant that the bulk of the mass lies beneath the surface.”

“You are mistaken,” Jal-R responded, “I do not mean to challenge you. I only offer a question. Any tone of challenge
comes only from an over-blunt tongue. I pose my inquiries in sincerity."

"Likewise you shall be answered in sincerity," the gray woman’s high voice chimed. "You could engage us appropriately only bolstered by the knowledge that is privy to our members. Perhaps you are not aware that our ranks are open to all—even a black fighter man. I wonder, because of your manner of speech, if you are already one of us in a way, just not yet privileged with the bounty of our ancient knowledge. You must understand that we perform only rough sketches of our concepts in public. It is meant to entice those intelligent and curious few to seek to learn more." The man flicked his blade at Jal-R, who stiffened. The woman continued, "Our precise formulae regarding the interaction of humans would be meaningless to you at this point. Even the intuition for the ideas is beyond you—do not argue I can see it is so from the questions you pose—we do not question, we conflict. Through the enmity of ideas, battles of words, old ideas fall and new ones grow. It is not only an intellectual war but a physical one."

She poked at Jal-R with her sword. He stepped to the side as a trained warrior would. Her companion began to expound upon her diatribe. Seeing that the battle was joined Jal-R spoke no longer but drew two daggers with which to defend himself. Upon each dagger’s hilt was the head of a nondescript animal cast in silver. The wind ruffled through his layers of black apparel. Jal-R dashed forward toward the man, feinted a blow, and fell off to the right to slip his leg behind the woman and trip her to the ground.
The back of her head thudded against the packed earth. Both were quicker than Jal-R expected, he gave little consideration to the fighting ability of those outside of the ranks of the Black Riders, and Jal-R found himself barely able to avoid the man’s rush and was nicked in the chest by the woman’s sword tip. Jal-R’s dagger sliced up the side of the man’s face opening it up bloody and red. The man’s mouth opened as he screeched, the inside of his mouth was bloody and red also. He had bitten his cheek. The woman lunged but Jal-R only spun around her to kick her in the kidneys and land her again upon the earth. She sliced open another nick on Jal-R’s leg as she fell, lightly this time, but was quickly back up. Jal-R anticipated this move and allowed the nick so that he could end the conflict swiftly. He kicked the top of his boot against her head and knocked her unconscious. With only the man to deal with Jal-R’s attention was able to wander a bit. He was impressed with their skill. They were graceful but they placed too much effort in going for the kill. Each of their moves was meant to draw death. That left their movements predictable to a cunning Black Rider.

Jal-R prolonged the battle for aesthetic reasons and so that he could investigate the thoughts engaging more than half his mind. The words about government and the words about intricate mysteries and codified knowledge chased through his veins. The specifics of the group’s arguments did not intrigue Jal-R. The fact that they fought for a completely different purpose, that their reasons for conflict were completely alien from a Black Rider’s did strike Jal-R. He felt that he should be able to
support his own values to himself and he could not. He also knew that the means of rational logic were flawed and trying to justify his art by those limited tools was futile. He had no other way to contemplate his ways and felt torn.

He caught a whiff of alcohol from the red man’s sweat as he threw the man over his shoulder to the ground. The man’s speech was more incoherent now due to pain. The red man drew a large vial from his tunic. Jal-R stopped questioning himself directly as his instincts filled him with caution—still the feathery feeling of personal doubt remained throughout him. He flung a dagger at the hand carrying the vial. The vial shattered and a sizzling meaty sound fried forth as the acid from the vial enveloped the man’s right hand. In a last desperate effort the man lunged that hand at Jal-R’s face. Jal-R’s black gloved hand caught the man’s hand as he threw the man down so hard he was sure it would be for the last time. The skin of the man’s hand slipped off and remained in Jal-R’s glove—he now held a raw skin glove as the man crashed to the ground to slumber for two days before awakening in a stupor. Jal-R flung both his own black glove and the pulpy skin glove to the ground to rest atop the man’s thigh. Both were smoking.

Jal-R left the area quickly, he was confused not from the battle but from questions multiplying and infesting his system. Knell and Mowl-R did not notice Jal-R’s quick walk. They were in awe of his prowess with daggers and combat abilities. They had witnessed the rare conflict between two leading art forms. They shouted out for someone to come who was skilled in medical
practices. An elderly woman arrived shortly, having been fetched by an urchin who heard their cries. That matter taken care of, the men resumed their conversation back at the fountain. For long it lingered upon, and frequently returned to, the fight they had witnessed earlier but mainly it revolved around Knell describing his latest water pumping creations and Mowl-R’s affirming Knell’s confidence and statements.

Jal-R had been pacing the town for a sixth of the day when he was awakened by a familiar and enthusiastic voice. He was certain that he had greeted some others as he walked that day but this was the first voice he responded to with a real awareness of his words.

“Ayoli, I am overjoyed to see you!”

She backed off a bit surprised at the rare emotional exclamation from her friend. “Are you okay my friend?” half jokingly.

“I am … fine. The day has been strange. I used my arts with a member of that group that spews rhetoric and conflict.”

“I wish I could have witnessed that. Their skills are something to watch. They are not like the riders but they are interesting in their own regard.”

Suddenly reticent to speak more of his thoughts, “Yes, well I hope they recover well. They forced me to the edge of brutality."

“I no longer live with my parents,” Ayoli changed the subject.

“I would have expected it sooner or later as you are a woman now. But you are a young one and settling is not what most would
recommend for you yet.” Jal-R was alarmed. Usually a woman only moved from her parents’ home when she decided to settle with one man and after her youth was mostly gone. Though men moved from home earlier, they frequently would return after they made brief experimental forays into life on their own and in effect often stayed home longer than women in total. Old morals outlive their reasons though and it was considered a mark of respectability for a woman to stay with her parents while she experimented, only settling down for one man when she was sure. Jal-R had suspected that Ayoli felt strongly for Silv, she mentioned him often, but the news that she may have settled with him disturbed him deeply. He did not want his friend to make an error. He worried over revealing his negative thoughts.

“The circumstances of it are strange. It has been something of an adventure living alone. Would you care to visit me now and I can tell you all about it?” Ayoli was cheerful. There was an underlying edginess to her that Jal-R was not accustomed to feeling from her.

He continued to act as if unbothered by her decision. He wanted her confidence. “Please show me the way madam!” They walked together through the lanes and alleyways and reached Ayoli’s small accommodations quickly. Upon arrival Jal-R saw that the runes on the exterior of her hut were outlined in charcoal but not filled in yet. They entered. It was a small warm hut. Most of the decorations were done in rich brown wicker as was much of the furniture. The dream pillow was carved from a deep dark wood. Fruit hung in bowls attached to the walls acted as a
counterpoint to the earth and woody tones. The fruit was colorful and the bowls bountiful. Jal-R took a peach into his hand. After taking a bite Jal-R burst with the thoughts that had been plaguing him throughout the day. “Why do you think that we, the Black Riders, fight Ayoli?”

“To share the beauty of the art with us I guess. You were so wonderful with the cestus at the festival. I was glad to see you defeat Valvr. Let me ask you a question, why do you think that I am living here alone now?”

Somewhat dismayed at Ayoli’s changing the subject matter before he had a chance to speak of his turmoil, thinking that she had moved in with Silv and wondering where Silv was, “I don’t know, please tell me.”

“I am to be purefactor in the Ritual of Purification.”

After hesitating: “I recall hearing of the ritual when I was very young but not its details. Have you seen many of them while I was away? What does your role entail?”

“There haven’t been any since the one in our youth. I remember that the old sorcerer who was purefactor left soon afterwards and my parents spoke of him with scorn. It is rare and I don’t know why there is to be one now. To be honest I am scared of it. It leaves a permanent taint upon those taking part in it. I have heard it is even dangerous for the purefactor and that there have been deaths before. They haven’t told me exactly what I shall have to do yet. I must perform daily rituals up until then to prepare myself and the day before the purification I learn what my duties will be. It’s overwhelming!”
Jal-R was relieved that his speculation that she had settled with Silv was wrong, but was alarmed doubly at her announcement. He still wondered if improper actions had somehow earned her the role. It was a sort of honor to hold the position of purefactor, but it also was usually reserved for those who had been suspected of an atrocious act or who were of questionable morality. It was an honor because it was a symbolic purification of the society that was enacted, but it usually left the purefactor as a pariah. Common belief held that the purefactor absorbed the sins of the public. The elders would clarify and confirm that nothing of the sort was the case, it was only an honor and did not reflect upon the purefactor. To most people that was a technicality though and while they were aware of it in some remote area of their minds it was easier to take the folk view of the festival. The festival was mostly a matter of legend. Most people would only see one in their lifespans, if at all. Perhaps because the elders knew the public sentiment toward the purefactor they tended to choose individuals of questionable morals who might be less injured by the role. That selection in turn reinforced the stigma that the role brought.

“That is an honor.” Jal-R’s word were subdued, unenthusiastic.

“You know it’s not, don’t lie! What am I to do? I can’t focus on anything. I don’t want to be the purefactor.”

“But you have been selected, we must work with that.” Jal-R imagined himself being assigned the role. He conjured himself as uncaring about the assignment and the stigma. If people thought
badly of him for something out his control he would not prefer to deal with those people anyway. He mostly kept to himself these days having made few friends since his return to the village. He and Ayoli had grown close and he reveled now and again with the Black Riders but usually he stayed alone either sleeping, upkeeping his weapons, or honing his fighting skills. If life in the village became unbearable he would leave. He realized that in another land being a Black Rider meant less and that he could not practice his art in the same manner as he could at home. He would use his skills somehow. He faltered here. It was hard to imagine remaking himself completely. Too many ways to live, ideas to embrace, ideas to reject. It was also too close to what he felt in his real life that day. Uneasy with his role in life but unable to reject any of it outright he had been reframing himself and his purpose the entire day as he walked...

Ayoli halted his thoughts and changed the subject for him. She smiled and slipped from her garments. “Let’s play Jal-R. Let’s play as friends at pleasure.”

He laughed, “You truly have become quite a woman.” Her body was blessed—her deep brown nipples stared back at him wide and large. Her arms were firm from her exercises and her neck was long and regal. He caressed tenderly down her side. She placed one hand on the back of his head and rubbed at his knotty hair. She ripped at his trousers eagerly and joyously. “Jal-R, I am happy to have you back here and as my friend.” She tugged and nipped at him teasingly. She admired his body. The years away had left him lean and muscular. She marveled at the line of his
hipbone that terminated into his hair usually hidden by trousers. Her hands seemed to be able to trace every single muscle of his back. They pleased themselves with each other, laughing, giggling and sharing. Both felt more at ease as they played slowly at sex. When it was over they sat nearby each other and continued talking, physically spent. Their union had a sense of danger and taboo to it. Friends shared themselves often it was true, but sex in the private home of a woman was usually reserved for couples soon to settle together. Though Ayoli’s situation was unique and there was no impropriety to their actions, their pleasure was amplified by the illicit feel of the circumstances. Neither of them needed to remark upon that to the other. It was apparent. Her fingers dawdled at Jal-R’s body as they spoke. It was much different than being with Silv. Jal-R was so sure and steady. Though she preferred Silv overall and therefore preferred his sexual motions, Jal-R possessed a rawer masculine power that set her senses afire. It was unlike the emotion summoned by Silv, but she was brought to mind of Silv.

“Maoli has visited me here but Silv has not yet. I can’t wait to show my place to all of my friends. At least there is some positive from all of this. Silv will love it. He is so bizarre! I can only imagine how he will react. Judging by your reaction this place has a favorable effect on men.” Ayoli was laughing.

“You speak much of Silv. Is there a special bond beyond the norm between you two?” Jal-R was genuinely curious but the frankness of his inquiry was due to the return of his internal
uncertainties. He was telling himself that he would synthesize ways of being and idea into his own concoction. He would find his own way. He was a Black Rider but he was Jal-R beyond that. His views would support who he was and offer him peace. He believed in his lifestyle but needed a richer foundation for it. He would create that for himself. Create himself.

“Jal-R, speak of this to no one. I know you will not, but I wanted to say it out loud to be sure. There is something between us. Since early days of youth I have treated him as the one that I would settle with. Only on infrequent occasions such as tonight have I shared sex with other men for years. Silv feels the same as I do. I know it must be hard for you to understand but it is something I have known. I just know it is right and I had even thought of settling with him very soon. Now I cannot because of the purification ritual but soon after that I hope that we may be joined and I can escape the curse of youth.”

“You will still be young, but you will be joined. How can you be sure that is what you want? That is a difficult decision and one you should not make for ten years yet.”

“I did not ask you for your advice Jal-R,” it was the first time Jal-R heard Ayoli speak forcefully and he realized that she possessed a strength that he was unaware of in her. “I told you because you are a close friend. Besides Maoli and Silv only you know. I am decided, I wanted to tell you.”

Jal-R was silent. He thought that others must have guessed at it the way she spoke of Silv. He thought further and realized that she probably spoke of Silv to him in the past so that he
would not be as surprised when she revealed her secret to him. It had worked. He was not overly surprised and though skeptical he could only offer support.

“I wish you well. If you need anything please let me know how I can help you.”

Ayoli now wished that she had not closed off the conversation so quickly and had instead taken the time to convince Jal-R of her choices. She could have convinced him she was right and when she asked him his opinion finally he would only offer his affirmation of her decision to settle with Silv. Instead she decided to rekindle the joy they had shared earlier. Each of them had gained a balance of energy back. She told him that he could help her as she slid her hand up his sinewy leg until it was stopped by a juncture in his flesh. She pulled him underneath her and they played again deeper and deeper into time.

Much later Jal-R left Ayoli. They had shared a great deal. Each felt they had left something unsaid but the foundation had been reinforced for more personal conversations in the future. At the peak of pleasure Jal-R gave thanks for having a friend such as Ayoli and promised himself to cherish her and to support her and Silv in their decision whether ill or well made. They left each other smelling of the other’s sweat and wearing the warm emotions of the other. Jal-R stepped away into the chilly morning.

When Ayoli awoke it was midday. She decided to go to visit Maoli and to invite her along with their other friend Artory to her new home to design patterns. She bathed and dressed quickly. The scent of her mixed with Jal-R was still in her room and it
caused her to smile. She dressed herself in white robes for the day. She was in an unusually glad humor when she left and was anxious to meet up with Maoli. On her ways she passed the Mowl-R who was walking and joking with Pewt-Mre, Lalor and Hobre. She still thought of the latter as young Lalo and Hob but they were men now and age had decorated them handsomely. The exchanged niceties and salutations. She asked them what new events had occurred in their lives. Mowl-R reminisced on the battle he had witnessed between Jal-R and the group members the previous day but knowing that Jal-R was a friend of Ayoli’s he did not want to take the time to explain the odd circumstances. He told her to ask Jal-R about yesterday and urged her to go to the dance that same evening. Before Ayoli could respond that she knew of Jal-R’s victory against the loquacious duelists the other young men chirped on and on about how Ayoli and Maoli would be sorely missed if they did not attend the night’s gala. They finally began to part ways. As they turned from each other Mowl-R shouted back at Ayoli, “Knell has some new effects he will pump tonight so you should go. And don’t forget to ask Jal-R about the fountain yesterday it was amazing. The usual characters were there but what a day! He is the Black Rider. Ask him!”