



A TYRO'S CRUCIBLE

By Douglas Seacat

Part One

Below Shaelvas, Ios, Autumn ^4571 (604 AR)

The novices who inhabited the Third Chamber's underground complex lived with no true concept of night and day. The monastic order followed a strictly enforced regimen, with every hour planned. The short sleeping period was disconnected from any awareness of the state of the sun, the moons, or the stars.

Elara woke early as she often did, heeding her keenly intuitive internal clock. In an instant, her eyes were open and her senses alert. She lay upon one of the six low wooden benches that served as beds in the room, each barely wider than the shoulders of an average adult Iosan. Novices of the Third Chamber learned to sleep as still as the dead to avoid the shame of falling to the cold stone floor and awakening their sisters and brothers. Other than these simple benches and a small footlocker for personal effects, the chamber was unadorned.

The room was quiet as a tomb, with only the whisper of rising and falling breath. Even this the novices trained to do quietly. Senior initiates would stand vigil over a room of sleeping novices during

their first year and punish any utterances with a stinging slap to the face. The novices learned to sense those with whom they shared a room, becoming attuned to their natural rhythms. At the age of eight novices spent a month sleeping in a cold crypt, lying shivering near the shrouded and recumbent dead. It was an exercise in respect for the state of death and also served to help them understand the void left in the body by the passage of the soul. Ten years later that lesson still felt fresh to Elara.

Her waking had been noticed by her friend Jyress, who slept on the adjacent bench. Elara saw Jyress' eyes sparkling in the dim glow of the shuttered lamp sconce above the door. Jyress gave her the smallest smile and closed her eyes again. They were each used to this routine. Elara stood and dressed in silence and then crept slowly from the chamber, closing the door behind her with similar care. She did this not to deceive her peers but to avoid waking them. None were as sensitive as Jyress. During the autumn season, novices were allowed only five hours of sleep each night, and all but Elara treasured that time. Their instructors pushed them to their limits every day and night, and any hint of distraction was punished. Sleep was a brief interval of oblivion between long hours of calculated suffering. Each season had its own training focus but this season was harshest, for autumn was when they felt the eyes of their goddess most directly upon them.

Elara was different from the others, easily refreshed by only a few hours of rest. It was another imperative that woke her early and pulled her from her chamber and through the narrow, dimly lit halls. Day and night were simulated in these chambers by ancient flameless lamps adjusted at precise intervals by their tenders to approximate the cycle of the surface world.

When she met two of the black-robed initiates assigned to patrol the halls, they simply inclined their heads and let her pass. Her

routine was known to them. So long as she limited her path to the nearest shrine, they let her be.

Several shrines to the goddess Lyliss were scattered throughout the underground passages. The one allocated to the novices was the humblest, without ornamentation or even the simplest comforts for those who knelt there. Elara preferred it for precisely this reason, finding its small, intimate space well suited to her attempts to commune with her goddess.

The order of the Third Chamber was located immediately adjacent to and occupying some of the same underground chambers as the ancient Fane of Lyliss, which had been built shortly after Ios was founded. This house of worship had once stood at the heart of Shaelvas, at one time called the City of Wind but now just an overgrown ruin. The holy presence of the goddess was no mere abstraction or distant comfort, for she herself had once walked these very halls, or ones very similar to them. In the ancient days of Ios the gods had walked among their people, and each of the eight members of the Divine Court had a fane and city built to honor them. Shaelvas had belonged to the Nis-Scyir of Autumn, Lyliss the Merciful Whisperer.

This simple shrine was best, with its small alcoves for each of the gods. Most held only the symbols of the Vanished, but two had small figures carved in stone to represent a pair of goddesses, each an embodiment of a different season. Elara lit a candle first to Scyrah, Nis-Issyr of Spring, who had returned to Ios to look after its people but who suffered a mysterious malady that sapped her strength and left her slumbering. Scyrah was Lyliss' sister and counterpart. The two shared a special bond, for one stood at the doorway to life, the other at the threshold of death. Elara prayed for an end to Scyrah's plight, but her true devotion was reserved for Lyliss, to whom she lit the second candle.

“Lyliss, hear my prayer in these last hours before dawn. Grant me the clarity to understand my limits and the will to exceed them.” The words she spoke aloud were only a pale echo of her true prayers, of the feeling in her heart, the doubt that was eating at her. Elara knew she was guilty of many sins—impatience, lack of focus, jealousy toward Jyress for whom the lessons of their order were so easy. Sometimes this jealousy was so bright it eclipsed her love for her friend.

She was particularly anxious about her recent failures in training. For almost a year now, she had faced a wall during her exercises. Where once she had excelled, now she faltered, finding it hard to achieve the proper state of mind to fight her best. She had begun to wonder if she was too flawed a vessel to fulfill her function, to become a slayer of the enemies of Ios, a holy assassin pledged to avenge the Vanished. She could not comprehend what such failure might signify, but she could feel it threatening, like a reminder of that tomb she had slept in as a youth, of the mummified faces of those who had died before her and whose souls suffered in the ruined palace of Lyoss in the Veld, forever keening for the return of lost gods.

Elara pressed her forehead against the cold stone of the shrine and prayed for the serenity to become a dagger in the hand of Lyliss, who was absent but not forgotten.



Jyress collected Elara at the appointed hour, and they descended together to the central gathering hall. Novices earned their right for the first meal by fighting in the sparring rings. Elara's stomach grumbled, and hunger gnawed at her. The morning duels were always hardest.

Dozens of novices stood in a line near the outer perimeter of the hall. With its high vaulted ceiling, it was one of the largest open