

True-dark was very close when the nondescript drudge crept down the narrow, winding passage, and pressed its cowl against the thick wooden door at the end.

It knew it should not be spying on any of the Councillors, especially the Blue, but it was hungry, and getting more desperate by the moment.

As a Timekeeper, it was the drudge's responsibility to keep the Blue's timepiece working, but very soon now the intricate mahkinah on the other side of the door would run dry, and then all the twirly bits would stop.

Re-filling the timepiece with water would not take long, but re-aligning it with the master timepiece on the other side of the Settlement could take an hour, and the evening feed was due to begin very soon...

...damned healers!...

Drudges received just one meal a day, at true-dark, and there was never anything left over, so those who missed out had to stay hungry until the next meal, not a pleasant prospect for a drudge who was always hungry anyway.

Nothing seemed to be stirring on the other side of the door, but the drudge knew the thick wood was a barrier to all but the loudest of sounds. The only way to know if the Blue was still inside would be to try the door. But that was forbidden.

All of the other Councillors were blind to the drudges, and allowed them to come and go as they pleased, but not so the Blue. It was obsessive about its privacy, and had banned the drudges from entering its quarters whenever the door was closed. Not even Timekeepers were exempt, despite the strict schedules they had to keep.

Easing away from the door, the drudge hugged the precious starrock ladle that marked it as a Timekeeper, and tugged on its cilia.

What to do, what to do?

If it handed the ladle back without completing its assignment, all would be well for this feed, but what of the morrow? If the Blue complained to the Master Timekeeper, the Master would become even angrier than usual. And when the Master was extra angry it always reached for that little crop it liked so much...

Fingering one of the many scars that ridged its face, the drudge leant in towards the door once more. Perhaps if it just pushed the door a little, just to see if it was barred from the inside? Surely that could do no harm?

Cheered by the thought that perhaps the Blue had simply forgotten to leave the door open when it left, the drudge raised its free hand. It was gathering the courage to give the door a timid push, when a deep *bong* thrummed through the passage.

Having grown up in the Settlement, the drudge had heard the gong announcing true-dark every day of its life, and should have been expecting the bone jarring sound. This time though, it was so intent on its problems that the gong took it by surprise. It leapt backwards in fright. One foot tangled in a fold of its wings, and then it was falling. Its wings flapped wildly as it tried to regain its balance.

The ladle flew from its hand and hit the door with a dull clang. Ricocheting off the wood, the ladle hit the rock wall of the passage with a sound like thunder, and fell to the sand.

The drudge hit the sand as well. It landed flat on its back and its cilia whistled helplessly as all the air was forced from its wings. It rolled onto its side, and was desperately sucking air into the limp sacks of its wings, when the door screeched open. Looking up it saw a tall, thin shape filling the open doorway.

Some years before, one of the younger drudges had likened the Blue to a taptoh, because of the spider-like length of its arms and legs, and the predatory look on its face as it stalked through the Settlement. Many of them, the Timekeeper included, still called the Blue 'Councillor Taptoh' behind its back, but there was nothing funny about 'Councillor Taptoh' now.

Backlit by the light streaming from its quarters, the Blue seemed to loom over the hapless drudge like a real spider, and the aura of menace it exuded was only accentuated by the eerie blue gem that hung from its neck.

Time slowed to a viscous crawl as Councillor and drudge stared at one another.

The moment of mutual disbelief shattered when the Blue stepped through the doorway and snatched up the ladle. Its cilia pumped the acrid scent of outrage into the narrow passage as it raised the ladle. It took a step towards the drudge.

The young Timekeeper's eyes grew huge as it tracked the path of the ladle and then, finally, it leapt to its feet.

Sand pattered against the Blue's legs as the drudge turned and ran.

"**You!**" the Blue bellowed as it waved the ladle in the air.

It rarely swore, considering any form of profanity beneath the dignity of a Councillor, but this latest incident was just

too much, especially on top of what it had already had to endure.

Brandishing the ladle like a club, it stalked back inside. Dust flew from every crack and crevice as it slammed the door shut.

Once inside, it tossed the ladle onto the ground, and stomped over to the high table set invitingly next to its perch. Snatching up the jug that rested there, it poured the last of the pipa juice into a bowl, and drained the sweet, lightly-fermented liquid in one long swallow.

The juice eased the dryness of its throat but could not quench the fury simmering within. Replacing the fine ceramic bowl with a careless *thunk*, it began pacing.

Apart from the unwelcome intrusion of the drudge, the Blue had been pacing without cease since returning from the Council meeting an hour before. Now its restless feet took it from one end of the main cavern to the other, tracing and retracing an interminable loop that arrived nowhere and solved nothing.

It knew it should rest, but every time it stood still, the rage would well up again. Even now it could not believe the Council would do something so...so...

"*Stupid!*"

Every single member of the Council knew what was at stake. They knew how badly things could turn out, yet despite every reasoned argument to the contrary, they had still voted to have a fully-grown Vokh killed.

And why? Because they were terrified the Six might be an abomination like the Rogue!

The message brought by the junior healer of Needlepoint had, of necessity, been cryptic, a simple code devoid of details, so all any of them really knew was that the Six had made some sort of discovery, and its senior healer thought it *might* be an abomination.

Admittedly, that healer was a Raised Senior, and unlikely to make a mistake on such an important issue, but still, even if the Six was an abomination, that did not mean it was a dangerous one.

But of course the members of the Yellow faction had never made any distinction between harmful abominations and harmless ones. The Yellows saw all abominations as evil, and while the Green voted with them the Guild would continue to follow their lead.

The Blue faction had been working hard to bring the Green over to their side, but now all hope of that was lost. The

threat of another abomination like the Rogue had sent even the members of the Blue's own faction scurrying for cover...

Coming to a halt in the middle of the cavern, the Blue stared at the far wall, but did not see the luminous folds of rock that made the cavern such a restful place to be. Instead it saw years of frustration, and powerlessness.

It had the proof. It had had the proof for ten years, yet the Yellows still resisted all its arguments, dismissing every proof as 'tricky numbers'.

Of course the proof was in the numbers! But there was nothing tricky about them. They were based on generations of careful observation. Close to two score healers did nothing but memorize records dating back to the time of the Rogue!

Any healer with half a brain, and the ability to tally, could check those records for itself, but of course none of the Yellows wanted to waste their time on *numbers*.

Nonetheless, even they could not avoid knowing that the healers assigned to the Vokh were in danger like never before. Nor could they avoid noticing that the regular trickle of refugees coming to the Settlement was fast turning into a flood. *Those numbers they acknowledged, but Takh forbid they should connect those numbers to the 'tricky' numbers that proved the Vokh were becoming more aggressive with every generation.*

No, no, the numbers relating to the Vokh could not be acknowledged because then the Yellows might also have to acknowledge that all their problems stemmed from the Guild's own meddling with the Vokh bloodlines!

Initially, the Guild had only weeded out those young Vokh who showed signs of being dangerous abominations, like the Rogue. Over the centuries however, that distinction had been lost, perhaps because it was easier to kill all aberrant vokhling than wait until the nature of their abomination became clear.

Whatever the true reason for this change of policy, the results were glaringly obvious, at least to the Blue. By weeding out all the harmless, placid abominations along with the few dangerous ones, the Guild had ensured that only the most aggressive bloodlines survived. Now the Vokh were so violent, and unpredictable, that they posed as much of a threat to the Guild as they did to each other.

Every Councillor knew a crisis was looming, especially with the coming of Pah H'akh, but none were prepared to do anything about it, because admitting they were part of the problem would shatter their illusion of being the 'guardians of life' on Vokhtah.

"Pah.."

That the Yellows, and even the Green, refused to see reason did not surprise the Blue, but seeing the members of its own faction siding with the Yellows had come as a devastating blow.

"Fools! Craven fools all!"

Few in the Blue faction were as familiar with the numbers as their leader, however all of them could tally well enough to know the numbers did not lie. They knew things would have to change. Yet despite that, they had allowed themselves to be cowed by the Yellows. Huddled on their perches like cornered ipti, they had raised no protest as the Yellows spun horrific predictions of the devastation that would result if an adult abomination were allowed to fly the skies of Vokhtah.

Only the Blue itself had had the courage to note that this particular abomination had already been flying the skies for some thirty years without doing any harm at all...

A deep flush crept over the Blue's chest, rising from chest to neck to face until the whole of its upper body was an ugly, mottled yellow-grey.

And then those same, faithless Councillors had averted their eyes, so they would not have to watch as the Yellows rained contempt upon their leader's head.

A sudden sweep of the Blue's arm sent everything on the table crashing to the ground. The glow-worm flew out of its bowl, and drew an arc of light across the wall before landing on the sand and going dark. The thick ceramic dish in which it had rested broke in half, while the delicate jug and matching bowls simply disintegrated into shards and splinters.

Face devoid of all expression, the Blue bent and picked up one of the larger shards, holding it gingerly between finger and thumb. The jagged break glowed white between the inner and outer skins of rich blue glaze.

Some Potter had spent a lifetime learning how to make such fine ceramic: how to fashion it from the rare white clay, how to fire it without breaking, how to mix the glaze to achieve this rare shade of blue. All that work, all that learning, all that *effort*, gone in one moment of anger.

The Blue's face remained expressionless as it folded its fingers around the shard and began to squeeze. A droplet of blood oozed through its clenched fingers and fell, staining the white sand with pale yellow as more and more droplets followed.

Long moments passed before the rigidity of the Blue's face finally softened into a grimace of pain. Opening its fingers one by one, it let the bloody shard drop. Its expression was now

thoughtful - apparently some things became more dangerous broken than they ever were whole. There was a lesson to be learned from that; the Yellows had broken its power in the Council, but in doing so they had unleashed something new, something that might yet be their undoing.

All its life the Blue had venerated the Council, obeying all the rules, no matter how much it disagreed with them. Even its campaign to change the Council's position on abominations had been according to the rules.

Yet what had it achieved? Nothing. Nothing but humiliation. Worse, it was starting to see that if it really did believe in those 'tricky numbers', and was sincere in wanting to save the Guild from its own stupidity, it would have to do what Kii had advocated all along, it would have to wield power from the shadows.

Thinking of Kii left a bitter taste on the Blue's tongue. As a young healer it had sacrificed much to claw its way to the top of the Guild hierarchy, convinced that once it reached that pinnacle of power it would be able to bring about change from within.

Kii had helped the Blue achieve its ambitions, but had always warned that the Yellows were too deeply entrenched to ever change without a good, hard push.

After what had just transpired, the Blue was forced to admit that Kii had been right all along - becoming the second most powerful Councillor in the Guild had not been enough to bring about the change they had both worked so hard to achieve.

A quarter of an hour passed, and another, as the Blue stared inwards, facing the cold hard truths of its life.

Emboldened by the long silence, an ipti poked its head out of a crevice, bulbous nose twitching as it sniffed the scent of blood in the air. The small scavenger was just squeezing the rest of its body through the crack when a hissing sigh sent it scurrying for shelter once more.

Over by the table, the Blue had reached a decision. It lifted the heavy chain of office from its neck and laid it on the table. The cold, blue gem glinted in reproach as it settled to the tabletop amidst the shiny links of starrock.

The Blue had worn that chain for close to thirty years, and its neck and chest felt cold and naked without it. Yet as the former Councillor stared at the chain, it felt its spirit soar at the new freedom, even though it was still largely symbolic.

Wrapping itself in its wings, the Blue began pacing again. As it paced, it sucked absently at the cut on its fingers, eyes

narrowed to two vertical slits as it thought through its options.

Saving the Six was out of the question. The order had been given, and carried the full weight of the Council behind it. There was nothing a lone Councillor could do to countermand it now. At first light, the junior healer who had brought news of the Six would join the last caravan of the season and return to Needlepoint. In eleven days, twelve at the most, it would deliver the Council's decree to the senior healer of its Triad, and after that, everything would be in the hands of fate.

If fate was kind, all would go well and no one would ever suspect the Six had died of unnatural causes. However, if just one, tiny thing went wrong, and the Six survived the attempt on its life, the Guild would be in terrible danger.

The Yellows had assured the Council the Raised Senior at Needlepoint would be more than capable of killing a Six, however the Blue feared the Yellows were underestimating this particular Six. They expected it to be cunning, but failed to appreciate that any Vokh capable of discovering something new would be more than just cunning, it would have to be *intelligent* as well. And there was nothing more dangerous than a Vokh who knew how to question and think. Such a Vokh might not kill all its healers at once. Such a Vokh might think to question them first, and its questions would not be gentle.

A Raised Senior might be capable of withstanding such questioning, or at least killing itself before it could betray the Guild, but what of the others? Juniors did not even know how to stop their own hearts, and few Seconds were skilled enough to try...

The Blue knew that if its life was to have any meaning, it would have to do something to stop this potential disaster.

But what could it do? If the Council had seen reason, it would have had the time to arrange for the Six to be mated. As a female, the Six would die when the birth took her life. Death would be delayed but still inevitable. But manipulating the Vokh safely took a subtle touch and a great deal of time, time the Blue did not have.

The only other option was to go to Needlepoint itself. If it could find some plausible excuse for being there it might - just might - be able to help. Unfortunately all those 'ifs' meant its presence could easily do more harm than good.

Wandering over to a stone ledge near the tally frame, the Blue allowed itself to be distracted from the frustration of its thoughts by the row of sealed pots that rested there.

Grabbing a small red pot, it blew away the dust of decades, and scraped away the wax sealing the lid. Holding the edges of the lid with the tips of its claws, it lowered its head and sniffed, taking care not to allow any of its cilia to touch what lay within.

The pungent aroma still smelled fresh, despite the passage of so many years. Kii had been a perfectionist, even when it had been trying its hardest to appear incompetent.

To show the Masters just how unfit it was to become a healer, Kii had made a series of potions with diabolical effects. The ointment in the harmless-looking red pot looked like antiseptic salve, it even smelled like antiseptic salve, but Takh help any creature foolish enough to try it!

Despite the gravity of the situation, the Blue could not help trilling with amusement as it remembered the aftermath of that particular prank. The Master of Acolytes had been the first of Kii's victims. It had made the mistake of testing the salve on itself, and had paid for its foolishness by itching unbearably for days! The Master had been much more cautious after that, convinced that Kii was a dangerous fool. The other Masters had taken a little longer to arrive at the same conclusion.

Resealing the pot with care, the Blue replaced it on the shelf, and ran its finger along the line of pots until it reached a faded blue one. Its eyes took on a far-away look as it tapped the lid with one claw. If memory served, the blue pot contained the tonic that had made the Master of Initiates vomit so badly it had ruptured a hernia. Despite its own skills, and the skills of the other healers around it, the Master had been unable to stop vomiting until Kii's 'tonic' had finally worn off.

Tap, tap. And this white one contained an analgesic salve that had caused explosive diarrhoea in two drudges.

Tap, tap. Now this yellow one had had the opposite effe...

The Blue's finger froze in mid-air as its eyes opened wide in delight.

"Takh be praised!"

Hurriedly grabbing the white pot, it broke the seal and yanked the stopper out. The salve inside seemed fresh, but there was no way to know for sure without trying it, and that was something the Blue had no intention of doing, at least, not on itself. It would just have to apply the salve and pray that it worked as well on the Junior from Needlepoint as it had on those drudges long ago.

With luck, the Junior would wake to find that scuttling to and from the waste pit was as much travelling as it was capable of doing, for quite some time. And while it was...*indisposed*, the caravan would be forced to leave without it.

An expression of almost feral joy stretched the Blue's lipless mouth into a thin, hard line. The Trader Caravan would not be completely bereft of passengers however.

Brimming with renewed energy, it replaced the stopper on the white pot and hurried over to the tally frame. Beads clicked in rapid succession as it estimated distances and times. Assuming the caravan encountered no major difficulties along the way, it would take roughly twenty-five days to travel to Deepwater, the farthest point on the Northern Trade Route. The return trip should take about the same length of time.

Fifty days. A great deal could happen in fifty days. Kohoh officially began in fifty-two days, and although the torrential rains would not begin in earnest for some time after that, none of the Trader caravans ever ventured out once Kohoh began. So if the Junior missed the last caravan, it would be stranded at the Settlement until the start of Tuhoh.

...*if*...

The Blue was realistic enough to know that so much good fortune was highly unlikely, but its mood remained buoyant. All it truly needed was for the salve to stop the Junior from leaving with the caravan. With enough of a head start, it knew it could do what needed to be done in the time available.

Thanks to their isolation, the iVokh of the eyries craved news from the outside world almost as much as they craved food, so every stop along the trade route would provide an opportunity for the Blue to drop a word here, a word there. Soon every iVokh in the north would be buzzing with speculation. Not that they would care a great deal about what the Six of Needlepoint may, or may not, have discovered, however they did love a good story, especially one that showed the healers in a poor light.

Most healers imagined themselves to be objects of veneration to the common iVokh, but the Blue had never had the luxury of that particular delusion. Kii had made sure of that by gleefully reporting all the scurrilous stories it overheard while out amongst the other drudges of the Settlement.

The common iVokh might *need* the Guild, but few enjoyed what they saw as the healers' arrogance, so all of them would take great pleasure in hearing of a healer so inept it could not even cure itself of the runs!

Yes, the news of the Junior's unfortunate malady would spread far and wide, and soon even the Vokh would take notice, because

woven into that story would be news of the Vokh the young healer served. None of the Vokh would be interested in the plight of a junior healer, but all of them would pay attention to the gossip about one their own declaring for the Sagehood.

That news should raise the status of the Six high enough for one of the other Vokh to mate it, especially as it would be a very easy mating. Any Vokh with a modicum of cunning would quickly realise that knowing when the next caravan was due would allow it to trail the Junior back to its eyrie. After that it would just be a matter of catching the Six by surprise.

The only question that still remained was who to tell. The Northern Trade Route was sparsely populated, so the number of Vokh likely to take the bait was far fewer than along the eastern, or southern routes. Still..

Striding over to the other side of the cavern, the Blue bent over the map table, and peered down at the rocks, pebbles, and coloured beads that represented its world. The blue bead marking the location of the Settlement was near the centre of the map. The red one marking the location of the trading gather at Needlepoint was almost due north of the Settlement, however the actual route the caravan would follow meandered east, then west, before finally heading north.

The first destination of the caravan would be the Five Rocks gather to the east. This gather was used exclusively by a very powerful Seven, and the eyries in its domain. That Vokh would be very unlikely to want to conquer an eyrie as far north as Needlepoint, however there was a Six to the west, in Claw Valley, who might be interested. That Six had been sharing Claw Valley with one of the Seven's eyries for some time, and must be feeling the strain of being so close to such a powerful Seven.

Oh yes, the Six of Claw Valley would definitely benefit from capturing the eyrie at Needlepoint, but would it be capable of overpowering the Six who ruled there, even with the element of surprise?

The Blue leant its elbows on the edge of the map table as it peered more closely at the map. The Six of Claw Valley had been in that location for many years, yet in all that time it had not increased its territory by even one eyrie. That did not bode well.

More than a little discouraged, the Blue was about to look more closely at the eyries along the southern route, when its eye was caught by a red bead partly hidden by the jagged stones representing the Spine of the World.