

BERYLL & OSIRIS  
BRACKHAUS

# THE DEMON OF HAGERMARSH



SIR YADEN  

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VIRASANA EMPIRE

**SIR YADEN #1**

**THE DEMON  
OF HAGERMARSH**

**- READING SAMPLE -**

a Virasana Empire novel  
by Beryll and Osiris Brackhaus

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## Credits

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## Blurb

*"The Emperor cares for each and every one of his subjects."*

Many consider the catchphrase of the imperial Lotus Knights to be nothing more but well-polished propaganda, but for Yaden, it is a way of life.

A young Lotus Knight himself, his first mission in service of the Emperor sends him to the remote village of Hagermarsh, a suspiciously friendly place on a planet known for its inhospitable people. But how to uncover a demonist coven when nothing bad ever happens?

Getting to know the villagers only makes things more difficult - the motherly fishmonger surely isn't a demonist. Nor the gruff leader of the local militia. And definitely not the cute baker from across the street.

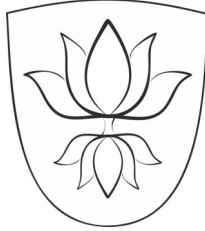
Or are they?

Come discover a dazzling, hopeful universe of knights and monsters, of psions, aliens and ancient deities! The Demon of Hagermarsh is the first book of 'Sir Yaden', an epic SF saga of grand adventure, queer romance, bromance and patchwork family, set in the multi-faceted Virasana Empire. It is a romantic adventure and can be read as a standalone.

## Table of Contents

Foreword.....	9
Chapter One – A Town in Grey.....	11
Memory One – The Lonely Boy.....	27
Chapter Two – Smiles and Grunts.....	41
Memory Two – Snowstorm .....	55
Chapter Three – A First Customer .....	63
Memory Three – The Fun Part .....	77
Chapter Four – Fake Scribba and Fake Rocks.....	85
Chapter Five – Traditions and Heirlooms .....	105
Memory Four – Spring Gardening .....	127
Chapter Six – Rebooted .....	133
Chapter Seven – Scribba Attack .....	143
Memory Five – Pebble .....	163
Chapter Eight – Vanishing Sheep.....	173
Chapter Nine – Miserable Timing .....	187
Chapter Ten – Cabbage Field Combat .....	205
Memory Six – New Horizons .....	223
Chapter Eleven – Homecoming .....	231
Memory Seven – Lotus Bud .....	263
Chapter Twelve – Home away from Home .....	267





## ***Foreword***

by Siva Quetzal

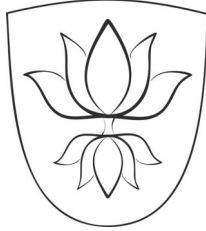
I come from a family of heroes.

My parents and siblings have saved the people of this empire more often than I can count. There are movies about them, comic books and theatre plays.

Most accounts of their adventures are correct, and yet I feel something has gotten lost among the action figures, TV shows and collectible mugs. They do risk their lives every day so we all can live a little safer, yes, but none of their heroics would have been possible without the love and trust that sees our family through all of it.

And while it feels odd to add yet another story to this ever-growing pile, please indulge me. Let me tell you of the time my father met the first of his husbands...





## *Chapter One – A Town in Grey*

The roaring of the truck's combustion engine died out with a deep rumble, and silence flooded the driver's cabin. After hours on the road, it was a relief.

“Are we there?” Yaden asked.

Their driver only grunted something not-quite-affirmative, opened his door and left his vehicle. Darios, who had been dozing in the passenger seat, turned around to Yaden on the back bench and shrugged.

“Might be,” he replied with a wry smile. “Hard to tell with all the fog.”

Yaden smirked back and slid towards the window on the driver's side to peer into the murk. In the ever-present grey, he could make out what had to be a village ahead – Hagermarsh, their new home, at least for a while. The walled section of the village sat on a hill, right in front of them, a dark, angular silhouette looming in the hazy light. The truck had stopped at a crossing, with the road ahead

seeming to lead up the hill, and the road branching off to their left descending towards the harbour. Right at the branch sat a big, squat building with a large front porch and adjacent smaller buildings. One of those looked like a mix of stables and garage, judging from the fact that it housed several oxen carts as well as what might have been farming machinery, as far as Yaden could tell. If he remembered the map correctly, this had to be the Hagermarsh trading station.

He closed his eyes and focused on his other senses. Not an active psionic effect, just opening his mind to get a faint sense of his surroundings. He could sense the fieldstone foundations and slate-decked roofs of the buildings in the vicinity. So the rest had to be built from wood, since Yaden couldn't detect it. He opened his eyes again. There was barely a discernible difference between the masonry and the wooden parts — everything was the same dark grey, a few shades darker than the sky. Even the moss growing on the roofs was grey and scraggly.

The truck driver came out of the trading station, hat pulled far down over his face. He climbed back into the truck with another meaningful grunt and steered the truck onto the road that led to the harbour. Yaden and Darios exchanged a look — so far, their driver matched the cliché of the taciturn Leichnami to a fault.

More buildings loosely lined the road, most of them two-storied, with shops and workshops on the ground floor, while the upper floor provided living quarters for the shops' owners. With a half-hidden smile, Yaden noted how much space had been left between each of the buildings, and how all of them were separated by sturdy, shoulder-high stone walls, which presumably also enclosed the yards at the back. Leichnami definitely didn't like strangers, and that very much included their next-door neighbours. So, nothing out of the ordinary. And yet, this was supposed to

be the one village where people were conspicuously friendly...

They passed a butcher shop on their left, at least judging by the wooden sign, displaying a large, oddly grey ham. Next, was a cobbler with a matching grey shoe sign. Did people here actively avoid using colour in everything?

The truck stopped again. On their left, a wide house loomed in the mist, the shutters all tightly closed and a board nailed across the door. The large sign above the door read 'General Store', so this would be their home for the duration of the mission. It looked particularly unwelcoming, and considering the surrounding town, this was saying something. Like all the other buildings Yaden had seen so far, it had a spacious, roofed front porch. Unlike the other building's though, this one was covered with grey moss and tiny lumps Yaden couldn't identify from afar.

When Darios opened his door to climb out, cool air wafted inside the cabin, heavily scented with sea salt and smoke. But there was something else, something rather delicious... Was that fresh bread? Yaden hurried to get out of the truck, to get his naked feet onto the ground and his nose in the air. Food was always a good thing. And sure enough, there was a bakery right on the other side of the road. Now that definitely was an unexpected boon. Maybe Leichnami were altogether hostile and their towns pretty drab, but their bread sure smelled great.

With a hungry grin, Yaden took a step in the shop's direction, but was caught short when Darios grabbed him by the collar of his tunic and pulled him back. Accompanied by an annoyed grunt from Darios, Yaden interpreted it as a 'work first, eat later' order, which of course was entirely correct.

So he helped the driver roll up the tarp that covered the truck while Darios removed the board from the door,

unlocked it with an impressively large iron key and disappeared inside. Darios didn't come back out right away, so the driver used the opportunity to pull out a small pipe from some inner pocket of his felt coat. He stepped onto the porch to be out of the rain, stuffed and lit his pipe. Leaning against one of the beams holding up the roof of the porch, he offered a postcard image of a Leichnami.

Yaden, in the meanwhile, allowed himself a closer look at the bakery across the road. It looked as sturdy and scrappy as the other buildings, but the two windows facing the road were opened a crack, letting that scent escape. It made Yaden wonder whether this was on purpose, a clever way of attracting gruff Leichnami without having to exchange a single word. He put the shop at the top of his list of places to 'investigate', even if there was very little chance he'd find any demonists in there.

Later, though. Stepping onto the porch, Yaden nearly slipped on the little lumps that covered it. Tiny snails, all of them, swarming all over the porch like an invasion. Really nothing one would want to step on, especially not when going barefooted like Yaden. So he carefully skipped over them to enter the store and check where Darios had gotten to. Inside, the air was even colder than outside, heavy with the smell of old smoke and musty wood. A backwater village like Hagermarsh didn't have electricity, so the store's inside was dark except for the yellow light of a single oil lamp at the back, mostly obscured by the shelves blocking Yaden's view. He heard Darios rummaging and moments later, another lamp was lit.

Getting light in definitely was a priority before they could start unloading the truck, so Yaden busied himself unlocking and opening the shutters of the front windows. Even the grey light outside was better than the gloom. Darios gave an approving grunt as he passed by Yaden, lighting the oil lamps mounted on the walls. Some of them

didn't work, probably out of oil, but bit by bit, they could properly inspect their new home. Sturdy wooden shelves lined the walls, several lower ones filled the room in three rows, providing plenty of space to display wares. All of them were dusty and had attracted a fair amount of mouldy spots. At the back was a wooden counter that looked like it had to weigh at least a ton, and a door leading further into the building. In the corner behind the counter was a big, pot-bellied stove, its pipe leading upward and disappearing through the ceiling. Yaden's sense of the foundations showed him that the stove was located roughly at the centre of the house, and following the metal of the pipe upward, he found a second similar stove on the floor above.

Since their driver was still outside, Darios relented on his silence. "Go check whether we have any firewood and start up the stove. If we don't have any, you can use it as an excuse to snoop around the village and find out where we can get some." He handed Yaden a heron to pay for the wood, in case he would have to buy some.

Yaden took a moment to familiarize himself with the house first. While the wooden parts were beyond his grasp, there were enough stone tiles and metal nails to give him an idea of the general layout. Behind the sales room, there was a corridor, several smaller rooms and stairs leading up to the second floor. On that one, there were more of the smaller rooms, one of which Yaden guessed to be the kitchen by the presence of a cooking stove. Whoever had lived here before had left most of their furniture behind. By small metal parts, Yaden thought he identified bed-frames, wardrobes and trunks. If there were any tables or chairs, they didn't seem to have any metal in them.

The corridor on the ground floor had another door leading into the backyard, nicely lined out in Yaden's mind by the fieldstone wall that surrounded it. There was a small, sturdy building which Yaden judged to be more

storage for the shop and a small, rickety structure that had all but collapsed, probably a dilapidated chicken coop. And another structure had to be the outhouse, judging from the deep hole dug beneath it. The yard itself was hard-packed dirt, while Yaden sensed that the backyard next door held the softer earth of a small garden. Just like their neighbours, they had their own water pump, reaching deep into the ground to where Yaden felt tickled by the sensation he associated with groundwater.

While Darios headed out the front again to convince the driver to help him unload the truck, Yaden took one of the oil lamps and followed the corridor to the back door. It didn't have a lock, just a simple latch, allowing him easy access to the yard. If there was any firewood to be found, it would probably be in the storage shed. Like all buildings he had seen on Leichnam so far, the shed's roof was pulled down far enough to shield the door from the near-incessant rain. This time, the door was secured with a heavy-duty padlock. Yaden considered it for a moment, and decided that using a tiny bit of psionics surely wouldn't draw attention. With a small gesture of his fingers, the lock opened obediently.

The door creaked badly when he pulled it open, and combined with the rain and the dancing light from the oil lamp casting odd shadows everywhere, Yaden had a sudden sense of being the careless teenager investigating a haunted house in a cheap horror movie. It made a pleasant shiver run down his spine and, for half a heartbeat, he almost hoped to find some sort of ritual circle, complete with black candles and a dead goat.

Naturally, the shed turned out to be entirely mundane and boring in its lack of contents. There were a few empty shelves, an ancient looking sack barrow and a heap of lumpy chunks that Yaden wasn't able to immediately identify, but no firewood. He was about to turn back when

something tugged on his memory. He stepped closer to the lumpy chunks to examine them more closely. They almost looked like earth, but he couldn't sense them. Peat. Naturally, the villagers of Hagermarsh would use peat as fuel when they had a peat bog right next door. That would also explain the heavy smell of smoke that clung to the entire village. Yaden had thought it was wood smoke, but now that he remembered that they were using peat, he recognized the difference.

Yaden picked up a piece of peat and was pleasantly surprised to find it entirely dry. Whatever one said about Leichnami, they knew how to build a rainproof shed. The peat had a sour smell that would probably get a lot stronger when burned. Not as nice as a wood fire, but it would keep them warm. There was no obvious way of carrying a load back to the house. Yaden shrugged out of his poncho and used it to bundle up several peat chunks. Which in turn had the added benefit that this way, he managed to get them back to the stove in the sales room without a drop of rain falling on them.

Darios and the truck driver were busy unloading crates and boxes, stacking them tightly against one shelf-covered wall. He and Yaden would sort through the contents later to figure out what was inventory for the store and what was their personal property, belonging upstairs.

A quick check of the stovepipe with his psionic senses assured Yaden that it hadn't become damaged in the time it hadn't been used. Hopefully, it wasn't blocked by some bird nesting inside, or a giant snail or something. Opening the stove, Yaden found that whoever had last owned the store hadn't bothered to clean it out before they left. As they had neither a fire poker nor an ash shovel yet, Yaden ignored the layer of old ashes and stacked peat chunks on top. He had plenty of experience with building a wood fire, and peat shouldn't work too differently. While his mother's

ducal fortress on Erys had electricity, the central heating had died centuries ago and had been replaced by huge, open fireplaces. While anywhere else, the son of a duchess probably would have scoffed at making his own fire when there were servants who could do it, on Erys, he had been allowed to help when he wanted, which served him well now.

The pouches on his belt held a box of matches, among other things, and he used them to light a fire in the stove, burning as merrily as peat possibly could. To Yaden, it felt like the old metal of the stove sighed with happiness at being in proper use again. He patted it and used a hint of his talents to smooth out some faults in the material. It never hurt to make even the smallest friends.

Next, he made his way upstairs with the rest of the peat to check out the other rooms. Like he had expected, he found a fair amount of furniture left behind by the previous owners, all of it sturdy, functional and entirely unadorned. The second big stove was located in what Yaden thought had been the central living room. There also were two small bedrooms and a large kitchen. Plenty of room for Darios and him. The house didn't have any plumbing, so there were no bathrooms, though a second check showed Yaden the unmistakable shape of metal rings that he associated with washtubs in one of the downstairs rooms. By the size of them, he guessed they could be used for people as well as for clothing, and the size of the room they were in suggested it was also used to hang up said washing.

Just doing chores and keeping the store running would be plenty of work. He would definitely have to multitask to present a credible front as a shop assistant and also complete his mission.

And he was determined to do a good job, after all, this was his first big, long term mission as a Lotus Knight. He



wasn't entirely sure whether he really was qualified to work for the Emperor as one of his most trusted representatives, a hero whose adventure would be published across the entire Virasana Empire. His psionic abilities allowed him to tame storms and earthquakes, yes, but making political decisions or even dealing with people weren't exactly his strong suit. At least in this mission, he wouldn't have to interact with any nobles. He was here in Hagermarsh to figure out why a faint demonic aura suffused the whole village and to make it stop.

Compared to that, he looked forward to the menial tasks ahead. It was immensely satisfying in simply setting out to do something, do it, complete it and have immediate, tangible results.

He'd never make a good noble, Yaden thought with a grin. But that didn't mean he wouldn't be a good Lotus Knight.

The remaining afternoon passed with plenty of work. Yaden found an old bucket and some rags and used them to clean out first the shelves downstairs and the two bedrooms and the kitchen upstairs after that. Quickly sanding them down would have been a matter of minutes, but that would have been an amount of psionics that would surely have attracted attention, so Yaden put a handful of dirt from the yard into the cleaning water and used the fine earth particles to scrub off stubbornly crusted stains with no more than a touch of his psionic talents.

He also opened all the windows for an hour, and while the constant rain was annoying, it at least mellowed the smell of the peat fires.

By the time he was done cleaning, the truck had been unloaded and the driver had left without so much as a goodbye grunt.

In a closet near the front door, Yaden found a tool like a flat spade, or a sharpened metal dustpan with a long

handle. At first, he had no idea what it could be used for, but when he glanced at the moss-covered porch literally crawling with snails, he realised that he was looking at a veritable snail scraper. So Yaden moved to the front porch and started clearing the snails so no potential customer would slip on them. By the well-worn wooden handle of the scraper, Yaden guessed that it was something he would be doing regularly from now on. And it was obvious why it should be done regularly – the snails he got rid of easily enough, but the slimy moss that had grown on the porch was stubborn and took real effort to clean.

At least, spending time on the porch offered a great opportunity to get a good look at the occasional villagers passing by. Felt cloaks, conical felt hats, deep scowls, all of it in perfect keeping with what he had thought a rather exaggerated cliché. Almost all villagers glared at him, the store and each other with equal measures of hostility, and some just ignored everything around them. None of them looked particularly demonic, but all of them looked disturbingly similar in their coats and hats of various shades of grey. Often, Yaden wasn't even sure whether he was looking at a man or woman.

By now, Yaden felt sufficiently sure he wasn't under an immediate threat of detection. So he cast out his senses a little wider, to get a better feel for the village, the land it stood on and the planet of Leichnam in general.

Like all other agents who had looked into the village, the first thing he noticed was a faint aura hanging over the place, dark and ominous and indubitably demonic. And just like them, he couldn't pinpoint its source. It was just kind of present. To him, everything he sensed with his talents manifested as some sort of bodily sensation, mostly scents. Theurgy was citrusy, psionics were spicy and the samples of demonic artefacts he had looked at had the disgusting smell of mouldy mushrooms. That was what he smelled

here, only much weaker and without a discernible origin. He would have to walk around town, his senses wide open to see if it intensified somewhere in particular.

Hagermarsh was built on a bedrock cliff above the bay, stubbornly withstanding the incessant assault of the sea, and those rocks felt in tune with the humans that lived here. Neither pretty nor kind, but unyielding, unchanging, and liking it that way. The bog to the west, on the other hand, felt peculiar to Yaden. As it was mostly water and decaying organic matter, he could just about tell that it was there, and nothing more.

The planet itself surprised him, though. He expected it to be as hostile as the people living on it, gruff and solitary. But it had a kind of healthy glow and felt content, happy, like a fluffy animal curled up with its nose buried in its tail, but eyes peeking out curiously. It didn't acknowledge Yaden in any way, of course. He'd have to stay at least a month or two for something as slow as a planet to even notice his presence.

It was so different to Erys, his home planet. He missed it and not a day went by that he didn't think of her and worry how she was doing. But he had done his best to calm her to a point where he could safely go away to learn how to heal her properly.

With his senses spread out like this, he only noticed someone stepping onto the porch when a pair of sturdy, brown boots stopped right next to him and someone grunted at him in greeting. Looking up, Yaden found a tall, haggard-looking man, wearing a heavy duster made from oilcloth, for a change, but the same felt hat as everyone else. His deeply lined face was dominated by a bristly grey moustache. Unsurprisingly, he was glaring down at Yaden.

“You the owner?”

Yaden's first instinct was to put on a pleasant smile and be helpful, but he caught himself in time. Instead, he glared

back at the man and pointed at the open shop door, wordlessly.

Apparently, that was the correct response, since the man stepped right past him. Unable to curb his curiosity, Yaden followed him inside into a barely contained chaos of opened crates and boxes. Darios was busy checking the content of each and carrying those with personal items up to the second floor. He was just coming downstairs and stopped behind the counter, frowning at their visitor with an expression Yaden had only seen on his face when he was deeply annoyed at someone.

“Ain't open yet,” Darios growled at their visitor. Being a tall mountain of a man, it was an impressive growl. He really was getting into his role.

The villager puffed out his chest, trying to make himself bigger too. “Am here to check your scribba fork,” he growled right back. “Fergus, Chief of Militia,” he added with the briefest of tips to his hat.

So that was why he had a different kind of coat.

Darios silently pointed at the huge staff with two sharpened metal prongs that he had put on its hook right next to the front door as one of his first actions after arriving. It looked like a giant, narrow fork, sturdy and highly functional, tall enough to suit Darios' massive bulk. Yaden got a good look at how the man's eyes widened in surprise at the size of the fork. He quickly glanced at Darios again, comparing the two and realizing that they fit quite well. Then he obviously remembered Leichnami manners and grunted. He took down the fork and examined it carefully, checking whether the prongs were sharpened and how solid the handle was. Finally he put it back on its hook with a grunt that might almost be called satisfied. He turned back to Darios.

“Ever fought a scribba?”

Darios shook his head with a negative grunt.

“Expecting you at practice then. Every Thursday evening, down at the harbour.” He didn't even give Darios time for an affirmative grunt before he turned away and walked out again.

Yaden looked after him for a moment, feeling in equal measures startled, amused and incredulous. He tried and failed to imagine what actually living out here for real would be like. What kind of mindset did these people have to be like this? Granted, the weather was atrocious, but apart from that, Hagermarsh didn't seem such a bad place to live. Especially not compared to his home on Erys, where each day could bring a new disaster. It simply seemed ungrateful.

He exchanged a look with Darios and found his guardian shrugging with a roll of his eyes. So at least Yaden wasn't alone with his opinion.

It took Yaden almost another hour to finish scraping the porch clean. By then, the light was getting low, his back hurt from working in such an unfamiliar position for so long and his fingers felt half frozen.

The sales room looked significantly more organized when he went inside and closed the door behind him, even though Darios was nowhere in sight. A quick check revealed the shape of his belt buckle in the kitchen upstairs. Taking two stairs at once, Yaden caught a whiff of baked beans in tomato sauce. Of course Darios would make it a priority to find edible food among the crates.

Now that they were alone and unobserved, Darios smiled warmly when Yaden walked into the kitchen. He was standing at the cooking stove and stirred the content of a large pot with an equally large wooden spoon. The table was already set with two bowls and smaller spoons. Two large crates sat against a wall, both opened and half unpacked. It was very rustic, but in the light of the oil lamps, with the smell of food and most importantly with Darios there, it already felt like home.

With a contended sigh, Yaden settled on one of the chairs, tugging one foot under him while leaving the other dangling and started rubbing his cold fingers back to life. Having run around barefoot all his life, it had taken him a while to start wondering why his feet never seemed to get cold while the rest of him did so in the normal way. Like all his other questions, he had brought it to Darios first. He had explained that, apparently, Yaden's special metabolism kept him warm when he was using his talents and he was constantly using them, at a very low level, to keep tabs on his environment through his feet.

“So what do you think of Hagermarsh?” Darios asked curiously.

“It's off the list for retirement.”

Darios chuckled. “Glad to hear that.”

He carried the pot over to the table and poured a generous helping of the thick mix into Yaden's bowl and nearly as much into his own. After working the whole day, the first spoonful was as delicious as the smell had promised. They were both hungry, so for a while, they ate in silence.

“Tomorrow, I have to go uptown and file my ownership at the town hall,” Darios said when they were both slowing down. “The briefing file said there is a farmers market on the town square so I'll see what kind of fresh groceries I can get there. I suppose you will want to get around town as much as possible?”

Yaden nodded, busy scraping the bottom of the pot for the last beans.

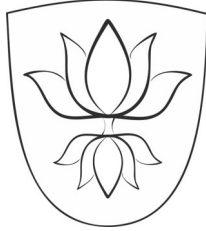
“How about you go down to the harbour and see what fresh fish is available? You can also ask where we can buy more peat and get that.”

“And check out the bakery,” Yaden added.

“It smells suspiciously good, doesn't it?” Darios asked with a knowing smile.

Again, Yaden nodded. “Definitely will have to do an in-depth investigation of that bread.”

They quickly cleaned up the kitchen, put out the lights and headed to their respective bedrooms, each accompanied by a large hot-water bottle to drive away the chill.



## ***Memory One – The Lonely Boy***

Two moments of my life will always stand out in my memories. Moments when everything that I expected of my future changed.

The first of those moments happened in the infirmary below the arena of a small town somewhere on Lopeia.

They had given me some anaesthetic, so despite the defeat I had suffered up on the sands moments ago, my body felt pleasantly numb. But the sombre faces of the surgeon and my owner, hovering above me, did not allow my mind to slip into that pleasant haze as well.

Apparently, my left leg had been crushed in several places, and at least one tendon cut. Repairing the damage was beyond my owner's means and, in all honesty, I simply wasn't worth the investment. I had been a mediocre gladiator at best.

Standing over two meters tall and built like a bear, I looked impressive enough. What I sorely lacked was the



aggression necessary to ever enjoy fighting and killing. A caring personality is not exactly what you are looking for in a successful gladiator.

So their decision was unanimous: I would never fight in an arena again.

Luckily, my owner was a rare breed of master — he felt a certain loyalty to his slaves. He knew I had never enjoyed being a gladiator, and had given his blessing for me to explore other subjects on the side. That included his permission to learn how to read and write and taking up studies in medicine as far as it related to gladiators — nutritional science, mostly, as well as bit of physiotherapy. Just the basics — how to give proper massages to loosen up sore muscles, what to feed a gladiator to bulk up or slim down as needed.

That day, his generosity paid off for both of us, when my owner decided to keep me and further my chosen second career. I became the handler for his younger gladiators, looking after them and their bodies, my size being a welcome advantage when it came to putting boys and girls into their place when they came fresh from the market.

I learned to walk again, first with a cane and later on my own, even though I kept a limp. I enjoyed my new position, much more so than slitting throats and crushing skulls in the arena, and I would happily have grown old in it.

But fate had another, much less likely twist in store for me.

I was sitting at my desk, writing down a diet plan for a new gladiator, when my owner walked in with a man I had never seen before. A sharply dressed man, alert, wearing a very expensive dark grey suit and a name tag identifying him as an employee of Samarkadia.

Now, not everyone has heard of Samarkadia, but I knew they were the shopping place for the wealthiest of the

Empire. People who didn't need to look at the price tag, ever. Samarkadia was more of a procurer than a trader, in a way. In our little gladiator school, we certainly had no one who would have warranted the interest of such illustrious people. I looked at my owner for pointers, only to find him beaming at me more happily than I had seen him in a long time.

“Darios, this is Don Sanders of Samarkadia.” He paused with ill-fitting theatrics. “They want to purchase you.”

If before, I had been confused why Samarkadia might want one of our gladiators, I now was completely at a loss. What could they possibly need a crippled ex-gladiator-turned-handler for?

“They are paying a fortune for you!” At least that explained the feverish excitement of my owner.

“But what do they want with me, of all people?”

My suddenly-previous owner shrugged. “Apparently, you exactly match the parameters set by some customer of theirs.”

So I watched while the deal was sealed, my previous owner thanked me for bringing all this good fortune to his family, and within less than half an hour, I was stuffed into a car that was to take me to my new life, sold for 'a fortune'. I never learned the exact sum. Just as I never learned what those parameters had been which made Samarkadia come to Lopeia and find me, of all people.

What Don Sanders did tell me was that their client was a noble, the Duchess of Erys. That didn't explain anything to me of course. Up until then, I had tried to keep out of the way of any noble and counted myself lucky that it had worked out so far. And all I knew about Erys was that it was some backwater planet on the other side of the Empire, deep in Quetzal territory. Erys was considered one of the most volatile planets of the Empire, wrecked by earthquakes, violent storms and erupting volcanoes.

Certainly not a place I wanted to trade in for calm and lush Lopeia.

Don Sanders also told me that the Duchess was buying me for her youngest son, which made me even more nervous. The Duchess was of House Quetzal, and what little I knew about nobles was that a Quetzal boy who wanted his own gladiator pet could only mean two things: either he wanted or needed a bodyguard to intimidate and beat people up, or he wanted a particularly exotic fuck toy. Having absolutely no power over what would happen to me, I was too caught up in my fears to realise neither of these assumptions made me a likely candidate to be sought out by Samarkadia.

Not that I had much time to think about anything. In flawless keeping with their image, Samarkadia didn't waste a second, but they did throw money on me that made my eyes water. Once in the nearest town with a branch of the Psions Guild, they commissioned their prohibitively expensive services for a direct teleport to Sarastro, our capital, and the main Samarkadia building there. It all happened so quickly I didn't even realise I had been transformed into pure energy by an incomprehensibly gifted human mind, relocated and re-formed in another place. Samarkadia staff swarmed over me, cleaned and dressed me, ran some health checks and various scans. They even took the time to inject me with something they assured me would, over time, fully heal my leg. I only later learned they had used nanites, something that even today sounds pretty much like sorcery to me. That single dose probably had been worth more than all the slaves in my gladiator school combined, maybe even including the actual school itself.

Before I could wrap my mind around any of this, I was teleported once more. Again, it took less than a blink, but I travelled literally to the other side of the Empire, to Erys.

Apparently, it had taken a while to find someone who fit the Duchess' specifications, and now they were anxious to finally deliver.

And it seemed the Duchess was just as anxious to view me. Don Sanders barely waited five minutes in the antechamber to the office of Duchess Vivaine before we were called inside.

Her Royal Highness Vivaine Quetzal, Duchess of Erys, was a short, strict looking woman who barely reached up to my chest. Dressed in some sort of dark grey military uniform, decorated with subtle embroidery of green feathers, she didn't fit the picture of a Quetzal noble I had made up in my mind. Which, admittedly, came from magazines and puppet plays, not personal experience.

Quetzal nobles were notorious for their lack of morals, penchant for chaos and sly political trickery. After all, they were the noble House which had managed to win the Emperor's throne after the extinction of House Virasana and they were still holding on to it after nearly 300 years.

House Quetzal was also known for their flamboyance and exotic tastes. From what I could get from my first, short glimpse of her face, flamboyance definitely wasn't a trait of hers. Of course, I tried to be the model slave and knelt immediately upon entering, keeping my eyes firmly trained on the floor.

Don Sanders probably had prepared a nice list of pleasantries to say, but he got no further than an elaborate greeting. I don't recall the exact words of the Duchess, but basically she asked him to cut the crap and tell her if I was the right choice for her son. Sanders switched gears admirably and reassured her that I matched all her requirements to the iota. She asked for my papers, signed off on some others, and more or less told Don Sanders to get lost. Which he did without a word, leaving me alone with my new mistress.

My head swam from all the sudden changes.

Duchess Vivaine got up from behind her desk, walked around me once and stopped in front of me. With a brief gesture, she ordered me to stand up, so I did, towering above her now. For a man my size, it is pretty much impossible to do anything but look down on people, but she didn't even blink. Instead, the Duchess studied me with calm focus and I couldn't help but notice that she looked harried and very, very tired.

“Did they explain why you are needed here?”

I wondered at her odd choice of words, and shook my head no.

“My youngest son is one of the strongest psions humanity has.” She kept her eyes firmly locked with mine. “When he was five years old, a strong earthquake ripped open a new volcano near here. We were all about to die. In the panic, his powers manifested, and he held back the flood of molten lava with nothing but his will. My tiny boy stood there, all alone in the face of destruction, wrestling down nature itself to protect this fortress, the town and its people. To protect us.”

I had no idea how to respond to such a claim. To my knowledge, psionic talents were rare, only manifested during puberty and had to be carefully trained to be mastered. But again, what did I know? All my knowledge of psions came from a play I had seen some years ago in a market, and rumours whispered around a cup of wine in the evenings. If what she said was true, her son was indeed unique.

“From that day on, his powers only grew. Yaden can control earth like no other psion before him. Maybe even the weather, but he isn't sure how he does it, he says. He is ... different. He tells me the planet speaks to him, and that Erys is in pain. He cries and I have to tell him he needs to be strong and concentrate and keep Erys in check. He is a

good boy. He has saved so many lives now. Our planet is safer than it has ever been.”

She turned away from me, steeling herself. When she continued, her voice rose with barely contained anguish.

“Yaden is twelve now. For the last few years, the Psions Guild has had representatives with him. They have studied him like a lab rat and I have allowed it, hoping they would be able to help him, but they... They are useless! They tried to take my son away. They had the fucking nerve to tell me, his mother, a *Duchess*, they had a right to take him!”

She turned back to me, her face grim, but with a determined glint to her eyes that gave me shivers.

“But all that is history. They won't bother us again. Never again.” She breathed deeply, rubbing her face. “Which brings us to you.”

She leaned against the side of her desk, clasping her hands.

“He is a special child. He needs help with many things. His tutors despair over not being able to teach him even simple math, and he struggles to read and write. He is too small for his age, too thin. You will figure out what is wrong with that, what he needs, what his body and mind need to function. You will help with his reading and writing. You are not supposed to teach him, do you understand? You are to do it *for* him. I don't care what those tutors say. He can just as well have a slave do those things for him if it takes one thing off his mind he needs to worry about. He has an entire planet to keep safe, several million people. That is the only thing that counts.”

This was so much not what I had expected. I had no idea why anybody might have thought I would be the right guy for this impossible task. But I was not given any time to process all that information.

“Come. I will introduce you. The sooner you start, the better.” She left her office at a brisk pace, expecting me to

follow. Which, of course, I did. Her boots clacked a harsh rhythm on the palace's stone floor.

Much too soon, we reached the living quarters of the fortress and the duchess pushed open a door to a spacious study and library. A beautiful room, really, but the little boy at the oversized desk didn't pay attention to it. He fit the description of his mother, thin and wiry, with an unruly mop of brownish hair. He had one naked foot tugged under himself, the other dangling down, swinging nervously, while he intently peered at a textbook, holding his head propped up in one hand like he was suffering from a severe headache.

He sat facing the door, so I got a good look at his face. It was not the face I would have expected to see on a boy his age. As tired as his mother's, haggard almost. Just as determined. And terribly sad.

His tutor stood nearby, watching over the boy. A rotund, middle aged man who managed to look at the same time bored and annoyed. His expression quickly changed when he realised that the person barging into the room was the Duchess. With an oily smile, he bowed deeply, while the boy glanced up from his book with a frown which changed to mild interest as he noticed me.

By then, I should have stopped expecting things to happen in a certain way. Still I was shocked when the duchess addressed the tutor with a brusque order instead of a greeting.

“Get out!”

The man seemed to be used to such treatment, however. He merely bowed deeply and withdrew.

The Duchess walked over to her son, looking over his shoulder. “Any progress?”

Yaden looked down at the textbook and quietly shook his head, looking small and desolate and neither noble nor powerful at all. This was supposed to be a uniquely gifted

psion? Someone who could hold together a planet by sheer force of will? He certainly didn't look the part.

"Don't worry about it," the Duchess said, turning back to me. "I have a present for you." She motioned me forward and I stepped closer. I should probably have knelt, but I was too confused to remember. My previous owner hadn't cared much for proper etiquette.

Yaden's attention returned to me and he looked up at me with puzzlement. Most boys react to my size with either awe or fear, but in his face I saw neither.

"This is Darios," his mother introduced me. "He is a gift for all your hard work. I know it's a little early and I said you couldn't have a slave of your own before you turned fourteen, but I've changed my mind." She pointed to the textbook. "He'll help you with your homework. And ... well ... he'll always have time for you..." She seemed at a loss on what else to say and I got the distinct impression that she was often at a loss on what to do with her son.

"Thank you, mother," the boy said politely and turned his eyes to me, curious now. "Hello, I'm Yaden," he introduced himself, faultlessly polite yet behaving entirely inappropriately towards a mere slave.

Certainly not something I would correct him for, considering he would be my new master. Unless the Duchess had my head chopped off for failing to fulfil her wishes, which didn't seem that unlikely.

"Well, I will let you two get acquainted and fire that tutor," the Duchess announced and left abruptly. I couldn't help but wonder if 'firing' the rotund tutor would include having him thrown into a convenient volcano. Quetzal were the type of nobles who might use such words literally. Duchess Vivaine seemed to have the right temper, too. I wondered what had happened to the members of the Psions Guild who had dared to suggest taking her son from her.



The boy, Yaden, was looking up at me, wondering what to say. Curiosity had put some life into his features and he didn't look so sad anymore. With a bit of dread, I realised I would have to say something. This was not some Noble playing a waiting game with a slave, trying to draw him out to punish him. This was a child with no clue how to handle the situation. Even though I was the slave, I was also the adult and I felt responsible.

“So, what have you been studying?”

Immediately, the frown returned. “Math.” He looked at the textbook with an expression I imagine I would have had when facing a superior foe in the arena. So definitely not a topic suited to cheer him up.

“Well, it doesn't look as if your tutor is coming back.” Probably never again. “Why don't we do something fun instead?”

The change in him was instantaneous as he looked up at me, his eyes suddenly sparkling with excitement, his face lighting up.

“Can we?”

An answering smile came to me easily.

“Sure. I have just arrived here. Want to show me the place?”

He was off his chair in an instant.

“Of course!”

Standing, the top of his head barely reached up to my hip. But it didn't seem to bother him at all as he grabbed my hand with his tiny one and pulled me toward the door.

“You are huge,” he stated while we headed down a corridor. “What did you do before you came here?”

I had to smile more at his innocent question. I hadn't seen many nobles in my life, much less talked to any of them. But they all had been like the duchess or even harsher, arrogant, dangerous. Maybe this boy wouldn't be such a bad master after all. Doing his homework for him

shouldn't be too hard. That left figuring out how to put some meat onto his thin frame and a smile on his face.

"I used to be a gladiator," I answered his question, "but I was injured in the arena and had to stop fighting."

"Oh." He stopped to look up at me, his face serious again. "Did you kill many people?"

Not with the excitement a boy his age would have usually shown at the prospect, but with quiet sadness.

"A few, yes," I answered, matching his seriousness.

"Did you like it?"

Strangely I was very sure the truth was exactly what he wanted and needed to hear if I wanted to win his trust.

"No."

"Good." He nodded, a small smile returning to his face and I felt like I was sharing some important secret with him as he tugged me further down the corridor.

The corridor terminated in a small balcony, overlooking a courtyard. A huge stone slab lay there, barely fitting, like some giant had dropped a toy. Yaden nimbly hopped onto it and looked at me, apparently expecting me to follow.

"You may wanna sit down," he told me when I stood beside him again, "most people have trouble keeping their balance."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but maybe it was some game he liked to play, so I obediently sat down, my eyes now coming level with his.

He stood with his naked feet planted slightly apart. His toes made a motion as if burrowing into the stone, as if he was pulling upward and the huge stone slab lifted effortlessly into the air, light as a feather. It hovered still for a moment and then moved forward. Somehow, I had managed to forget what the duchess had said about her son's psychic abilities. So this was but a tiny sliver of them.

"I'm going to show you my favourite places."

We were flying, at a sedate pace, and for the first time I

had a view of my new home — the ducal fortress, the surrounding town and the mountains beyond. Jagged cliffs in dazzling colours of red and black surrounded a town of red and yellow houses that looked like concrete boxes with rounded corners — bunkers, each and every one of them. The palace was built much the same, titanic slanted walls, few windows, nothing that could break off or catch fire. It looked very different to the lavish palaces I had seen on Lopeia, but at least it had a certain grace in its proportions. On the horizon, several volcanoes offered the only smooth shapes in the landscape, but the fact that three of them were smoking heavily was a clear reminder that this wasn't a hospitable place. Looking back at the city of bunkers below me, I realised that, indeed, people here were at war with nature. And Yaden's powers had to be priceless beyond words to them.

Only then did I notice that Yaden was watching me somewhat anxiously. "I hope you're not afraid of heights?" he asked belatedly, apparently realizing he should have asked that earlier.

I smiled at him reassuringly. "Not at all. The view is spectacular."

Once more his face lit up with his happy smile as he beamed back at me.

"It's the fastest way to get around for me," he explained, gesturing at the slab of stone under his feet. "I often have to be very quick to get to places in time. Though I like to be on the ground, to feel her."

"Her?"

He nodded. "Erys." He raised one of his naked feet, showing it to me. "I feel her through my feet. Her pulse. So I know when she will tremble or shudder."

I could not imagine what that would be like, but I nodded, pretending I understood.

Yaden's eyes grew distant and sad again. "She is in much

pain. Something is not right with her. She doesn't want to hurt the people living on her, but she can't help it."

"But you protect them, don't you?"

He looked at me with anguish much too deep for a boy his age. "I try," he said, "but I never seem to be able to save all of them." A shudder ran through his thin frame and through the stone slab as well. "I hate the funerals so much."

"They make you go to the funerals?" The horrified question was out before I could stop myself. How could anyone do that to this boy?

He shook his head. "No," he answered in a small, choked voice, "but I feel them digging the graves."

I stared at him in silent shock, trying to comprehend what this must be doing to the boy, feeling, counting every grave dug for those he did not manage to save.

I reacted without thinking, drawing him into a hug. For a moment, he was stiff in my arms, but then he suddenly relaxed against me, his tiny head hiding against my chest. The stone hung motionless in the air, and it took me a while to realise that he was crying.

I had met his mother and it was clear to me that she would certainly never hug him or allow him to cry. For her —no, for everybody —he always had to be strong.

So in that unquestionably most important moment of my life, I decided to care for that boy. To be his friend and his shelter, and to always be there for him without question.

***- End of Reading Sample -***

We hope you enjoyed your time in the Virasana Empire.

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