

BETWEEN THE SUN AND THE MOON

A Novel by
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PROLOGUE

The House of Divining stood deep in the forest, beyond the Northern boundary of the city. Here the woods were dense and wild, the small structure all but hidden by the encroaching undergrowth and entangled trees. *As if the forest means to devour it*, Rheon had thought, upon his first glimpse of this place. Dark, spiky tree-leaves, greedy and sharp, hung thickly onto the roof of the house and crowded against its walls; the ugly tangle of vines below had begun to creep up the walls, as if to consume them. Few people in Cardea knew the way here, or what transpired inside. Rheon was becoming one of the few.

This house, windowless and bare, had five guards at duty in and around it. *Bearing swords*, Rheon thought uneasily. *A sight never seen in Cardea. I much prefer that*. The guard inside the Divining Room led Rheon to the larger chamber at the front. Cold and steeped in shadow, illumined only by a single oil-lamp hanging from the ceiling, the room held a plain wooden table and a chair—a wide, exquisite chair of heavy wood, its arms and back lushly carven with the myriad shapes of Nature: animal and human, plant and tree, Earth, Air, Water and Fire.

Rheon's face, usually jovial, was at that moment haggard and grave. Icy-cold sweat drenched his hair and beard. The guard had stripped him of his robe, and he stood vulnerable and shivering, wearing nothing except a short-cloth across his loins.

"You must kneel," the guard ordered, pointing to a spot before the throne-like chair.

“There.”

Rheon obeyed, his face impassive as he lowered himself to the earthen floor.

The tall, spare figure of the Elder Khore entered the room. He settled heavily in the chair, his bony hands coming to rest on the elaborate wooden arms, his long grey beard hanging to his waist. The deep furrows upon Khore’s face appeared chiseled from immutable stone.

“The Diviner has shown you that which lies ahead,” he said to Rheon in his rasping voice. “Do you understand what you have seen?”

“I do.”

“Do you understand what you have been ordered to do?”

Rheon felt a terrible sinking in his stomach. “I do.”

Khore leaned closer. “In the one critical situation you have been shown...do you vow that you shall not intervene?”

Tears of anguish surged up in Rheon’s eyes, and his voice choked off in his throat. He wanted to shout, to scream. *How can I protect my people when you bind me this way? How, how? All I ever wished was to serve them....* But no words came out. He had been shivering just the moment before, but heat began to fill his body as his anger toward the Elders rose.

He knew not how long he knelt there, struggling with his fury; he very nearly decided to halt the Oath and be done. *But...if these things truly are to come...I must be there to give my people what measure of help I can. I must....*

“Yes. In the one matter only...I shall not intervene.”

“And do you vow to tell no one what you have been shown?”

His body grew hotter. *They ask these terrible promises of me, with no explanation of the reasons?*

"I vow to tell no one," he said through gritted teeth.

"Very well. We shall proceed with the Oath."

Khore stood, and the guard handed him a flask. He uncapped it, and the room was filled with the heady fragrance of spirits blended with the essences of sacred plants and flowers. Rheon swayed, a wave of dizziness sweeping through him. Khore sprinkled the mixture all around him.

"Do you vow to serve Cardea until the day your life shall end?"

"I do swear it."

"Do you vow to administer Cardea's laws with compassion and justice, and to protect always the mysteries of the Great Parents, the Mother-Father God?"

"I do swear it."

"And ... do you vow to kill no one in the course of your service?"

A bitter laugh nearly escaped Rheon. *You ask me this, even though the restriction you have placed upon me could result in deaths indeed?* His hands clenched into fists, heat now blazing through the whole of his body. He feared his rage would overtake him. But his decision remained the same.

"Yes. I do swear it."

Khore leaned even closer, and his words thundered out into the barren room.

"Do you vow these things freely, Rheon of Cardea, upon your own life and blood?"

The words came hoarsely from Rheon's throat. "I do."

Khore arose and stepped back; two husky guards came forward to move away the chair. Then the Elder Priest Elizar emerged from the shadows. Older and even more wizened than Khore, he glided like a wraith to where Rheon knelt.

Rheon offered up his left hand for the ritual Cutting. Holding the hand utterly steady, he watched, unwavering, as the old Priest drew his ritual knife from its sheath. The long, slender blade appeared viciously sharp, but Rheon did not look away—even as the knife sliced into his palm, bringing searing pain, and slowly tracing a perfect letter *C* in his own bright red, welling blood. Sweat streamed down his face. But he did not flinch when Elizar seized his bloody hand and thrust it down upon the cold earthenware tablet where the words of his oath were inscribed. Rheon had now sealed his oath with his blood.

Towering over Rheon's kneeling figure, Elizar swept his hands all about Rheon, in the gestures that clothed him with the power of the Elements. Then he called down the might of the Great Parents. The trees outside clamored in a sudden rush of wind, and the House of Divining shuddered. The earthen floor quaked and rumbled beneath Rheon, and he feared the House would crash down upon them all. *Is every Counselor's Initiation like **this**? I do not think so.*

Elizar appeared to notice none of it. He anointed Rheon's forehead and chest, and poured a stream of oil over Rheon's head in baptism. Then he fell to his knees, seized Rheon hard by the shoulders, and shouted the Word of Power into him in a thundering voice. Rheon felt and saw a blazing-white force crashing through him, and it crushed him to the floor. He could not breathe or speak or see. Then he heard a sharp, gasping breath, and realized it was his own. He had survived. It was done.

Elizar rose heavily to his feet.

“You know what is expected of you. Go forth.”

Rheon, sprawled face-down upon the floor, struggled up onto his knees and bowed his head to Elizar, as required. The Priest turned his back and walked out of the room.

Now the chosen attendant for Rheon stepped up. He offered Rheon water to drink; he reached out to hold the pouch for him, for Rheon could not. When Rheon was not able to rise to his feet, the attendant and the Elder Khore, who had never left the room, helped him.

After they cleaned and wrapped Rheon’s hand, they draped around him a long ceremonial shawl of white. He must now accept, into his hands, three items symbolic of his new office: the flask that had held the oil of his anointing; a folded yellow robe; and the leather volume containing the Declaration—the written record of the Diviner’s prophecies.

When Rheon, trembling, allowed Khore to place the volume into his upturned hands, tears flooded down Rheon’s cheeks; he could not stop them. His legs went weak, threatening to drop him to his knees again. The attendant and Khore held him up until he felt stronger. He did not know how long that took.

Now that the ritual accepting had been done, the attendant would carry the three items for Rheon, in a richly embroidered pouch, until the time came for the ceremony in the city. He handed Rheon a thick chunk of bread, so that he might begin to replenish himself; Rheon had, after all, come to the Initiation two days fasting. Yet Khore had to urge him to eat the bread before they started on their way.

As they moved on horseback along the narrow path through the forest—the guards, the attendant, and Rheon, with the Elders trailing ceremoniously behind—Rheon felt dazed and

entirely spent. The Divining, the Oath, the grievous things he had been shown. Soon, amidst great joy and feasting, he would don the yellow robe of Counselor, and assume a place of honor among his people. But he scarcely felt worthy of any of that now. He made a fervent prayer to the Great Parents that, in spite of everything, he might be able to do something of good for the ones he had sworn to serve.