

Prologue: Shang Du  
Chapter 1

The assassination went poorly.

I, Kog, had gathered with my seven comrades on the viewing deck of Shang Du. We'd arranged the couches to face east, and Seraphine sat at the center. Technically, she sat at her daddy Koru's side, but no one had come to this party to look at the King of Rats. She had pulled her long, beautiful legs onto the seat beside her, cocking her hips so she leaned toward her father. He hunched forward, elbows on knees, the only one of us watching the killing with hard eyes.

There was a drink with him. He didn't touch it. Everyone else was putting champagne away.

Mithrak sat as close to her as he could, one couch over. He sprawled, open legged, with his shirt unbuttoned down to his sternum. His face needed my fist.

On Koru's other side sat Astras, Koru's wife and not Seraphine's mother. I've wondered about Astras as long as I've known her. Did Koru simply have a list of appropriate credentials for a trophy wife and marry the first woman who passed the checklist? Or was there anything more to her than appeared? She had the credentials.

Those three couches held the center of the group I'd been allowed to attend. On Mithrak's right, Cole lounged in a deep seated, high-armed chair. His hands and forearms rested up above his shoulders, almost level with his eyes. By him sat Agammae; she shaved her head, wore a suit, and carried knives. Her chair was the same deep-seated thing that looked like it was swallowing Mithrak, so she perched on the edge of her seat and looked like she didn't belong here.

On a cushioned bench on Astras's other side sat Dr Simmons with a huge head on a tiny neck. He drank too much, talked too loudly, and laughed in a tense, shrill way even when things were going well. It was always hard to wrap my head around how that guy could be that smart.

With him sat Hoarfast. Hoarfast looked like a killer. He had the black suit, black shirt, black tie, and a bull's head on bull's neck. Hoarfast's main job this morning was serve the doctor questions. About five words in, Simmons would decide what Hoarfast meant to ask, answer it at length and volume, and laugh at his own jokes while the big man sipped champagne and waited.

Koru loathed Simmons. Astras claimed to enjoy his presence. No one

else paid him much mind save Mithrak, who occasionally took questions himself so he could throw out self-flattering compliments.

I tried to ignore them all. Simmons's voice made my jaw clench; Mithrak's made my knuckles itch. I sat next to Agammae on a divan. There was a chair open, but those things were horrible. The cushions sat in deep trenches, and the front of the chair formed a hard bar under woven wicker. Agammae must feel like she was sitting on an iron rod. This position put me slightly closer to Seraphine, and when Mithrak spoke to her, as he usually did, he faced away from me so I didn't hear him as much. I was ignoring Koru's daughter entirely.

I'd only come here because it let me see her, but since I didn't want to act like an idiotic puppy, I'd been polite but otherwise avoided her. She knew. I think she found me funny.

What I wanted to do was sit behind everyone, maybe toward the center, but Koru didn't want anyone behind him so we spread out in this absurd line. Simmons's tittering and giggling sounded shrill, Hoarfast's low, deep voice sounded like bodies being dragged through gravel, and Mithrak talked in the other direction. Agammae and I had nothing in common, nothing, and even if we did, Koru hated sidebar conversations around him. It made him think he was missing something.

I drank my champagne. Koru's other children ran across the ground, squeaking, and climbed over my feet. I hate rats.

The eastern sky began to warm. At first the high trees of Koru's estate blocked much of the sky. The palace stood on a huge granite spire, but the mountains to the east rose higher. Redwoods and sequoias rose above us. We saw hints of dawn through their branches. Morning over the ocean reached above the trees and started washing out the stars. The horizon turned red and blue. Three tall shadows stood like pillars of night, but these had heads and shoulders.

"Three of them," said Hoarfast. Whatever stupid joke Simmons was laughing at died. Koru might have been the only one focused on the horizon, but all of us were watching.

"Who?" asked Astras.

"So he brought friends with him," said Mithrak. He sounded angry. "It won't matter."

"But who did he bring?" asked Astras, and suddenly everyone had something to say.

"Probably Lumina and Tolos," said Agammae, leaning forward on her unpleasant seat. It had to be digging into her behind.

"No, no, no!" Simmons laughed, high and loudly. "He'd bring his brothers, not his sisters. If he brought his sisters, why wouldn't he have brought them all?"

Mithrak nodded. "It would be his sisters if there were four of them."

Agammae ground her teeth. She leaned forward even further and stabbed her finger out. "That's Tolos because she puts her hair back in a braid."

I couldn't tell.

Mithrak argued loudly with Agammae, saying she couldn't make out if one of the shadows wore her hair back. He turned his head toward her to shout, and now I got the brunt of his unpleasant presence. Agammae insisted. She kept pointing at the silhouette of the one on the right, the shorter of the three, and waving at it like she wanted to punch the air with just one finger. Simmons laughed like a screaming rabbit.

The three shadows stood above the peaks, and only titans stood taller than the mountains. Before them the sky's faint gray on black began to dilute into oranges, yellows, and hints of blue. The Sun himself hadn't broken the horizon yet, but his cloak appeared before him.

"Just be patient," said Astras. "We'll see soon enough. We'll be able to tell if they're wearing dresses before we can see their hair."

Mithrak and Agammae stopped arguing. They looked at her.

"What if the brothers are wearing capes?" asked Cole. "How will we tell?"

"I'll be able to tell a cape from a dress," said Astras.

Dr Simmons burst into loud, high-pitched giggling. Everyone but Koru stared at him, and that only made him giggle louder. I wanted to strangle him.

"We planned for this," said Koru softly.

Dr Simmons gagged. He might very well have shoved his fist in his mouth to make himself stop laughing.

Koru continued. "We planned out what to do if other titans came with Mallens. They just die too."

Everyone nodded, even me, but Koru lied. We'd planned for one other

titan with Mallens: his brother Otomo. At First Light last year and the First Light three years prior, Otomo had joined Mallens when the Lord of Creation had greeted the Sun.

But Otomo couldn't see well at night. That's why he delighted in the coming of the Sun after winter. We'd planned for one other titan and that he wouldn't be able to see in the dark. Mallens had never brought his sisters.

Dawn bled into the sky. Pink and orange seeped into the eastern horizon, but before the sky had turned any single color, the stars went out in the west. Low over the mountains behind us, a few glittered, but the rest faded even before the light seemed bright enough to wash them out. Koru leaned even further forward in his chair to hunch on the little bar at the front of the cushion.

Mithrak picked up his champagne and called, "To us!" Everyone but the King of Rats drank. I did too, but it galled me.

Dawn had barely brightened the horizon but already washed out the stars. In the constellation of the Mask, a black spot appeared like an ink droplet in water. Four of us called it out at once. Its nexus, a tiny spot of darker black among shadows against the night appeared in the darkest of constellations and swung east, moving fast and against the procession of daylight. But it was so little.

No one could see the little speck of darkness who didn't already know it was coming, no matter how well they saw at night.

The earlier speed of the coming sunrise froze, and now every moment stretched out. The speck of darkness passed the Gull and the Tower. It rose to the zenith of the sky and began to fall, diving swiftly to the east.

We looked at tall Mallens's head. He and his two sisters looked east to the coming of the dawn, but sunrise was now so very, very far away.

Dr Simmons made some cheer, but no one followed him. His toast thudded like dead weight into silence.

Mallens and his sisters stood still, facing the coming dawn. The Sun's painters created the first and most beautiful sunrise of the new year.

Everything was going according to plan. There was no reason any of them should look back, no way they could have seen Jermaine's Sunset Group on black horses of laurel, and no way they could have seen it as anything but a fleck of off-colored cloud if they did. I clenched

my teeth. Koru stopped breathing in anything but hisses. Dr Simmons giggled a hysteric whispered noise, and Hoarfast grabbed his shoulder, squeezing enough to drag the fabric into tight folds. The black speck dove like a comet. Jermaine rode for Mallens.

The little shadow on the left turned to say something to Mallens. Her shadow wore a thick braid. I could see hints of her form, a bit of hip and breast. She paused, raised her arm, and pointed at the sky behind them.

Mallens turned as well, and Lumina did too on the far side. The Sun outlined the front of her long dress. The King of Titans turned the rest of the way, and his eyes lit up the sky.

The eyes of the King of Titans burned as two white crosses, suddenly brilliant, brighter than the coming dawn, brighter than any of the stars had been, and bolts of fire and light leaped up to the sky. The black speck swerved, Mallens's lightning missed, and the spot of darkness, so small I could barely see it even knowing it was there, hesitated. I stopped breathing.

Everyone on the patio stopped breathing.

Jermaine went. The spot of darkness charged. The laurel horses rode on, and ink drops splattered the pale milk of the sky. I don't know who started it, but everyone on the patio was cheering. The assassins of Sunset Group fell on Mallens, their hoof prints were black splashes, and they left a trail of streaking shadow.

Mallens swung one hand and knocked them from the sky.

Another black spot, vivid against the dawn, leaped from behind him. Sunrise Group charged Mallens's back. Their blades moved, leaving streaks through Mallens like the butt of the hand drawn through handwriting before the ink has dried. The King of Titans burned. Plumes of smoke and fire rose from his back; splatters of blood splashed the heavens. The splotches of darkness overcame the coming dawn and turned the sky dark again. Mallens whirled on Sunrise, but Sunset had merely fallen. They'd not yet been destroyed, and now they spread out. Many black dots rode for Mallens.

Little Tolos, taller than mountains but the smallest of the titans, turned and fled. Lumina ran too. They left their king alone.

Mallens lurched sideways. We saw flickers of his eyes looking this way and that, now crosses, now three-bar hexes, always burning, as Sunrise and Sunset caught him between them.

The Sun crested the horizon and put forth all of his power. Mallens

lurched to the east and stood silhouetted. He swatted Sunrise Group from the sky, and they fell as Sunset had. The King of Titans was bleeding.

Sunset tried to circle, but Mallens struck again. He smashed something. The remainder moved left and right. Mallens flailed, stomped his feet, slammed his fists into the ground. The earth buckled. Splashes of water or liquefied soil shot upwards.

The riders of Sunrise split up too. They looped and soared, black flecks around the King's head. He struck at them as they cut him as wounds and blowthroughs erupted from his hands and fingers. Blood splattered his face; black on black even by daylight. I tried to count the assassins, and got less than half of them. They must have been moving too quickly for my mortal eyes.

Mallens caught something and struck it down. He caught another. Several of the riders tried to coordinate, but he caught one group and threw them down. The other group dove, either for cover or to flee, and Mallens leaped at them. His feet crushed the earth.

For a while he danced like a madman, all stomps and violence without music. And then suddenly he went still, leaning on his knees. His body shook.

We waited. My rear-end hurt. I looked down. I'd moved forward to hunch on the edge of the divan, and it was jutting into my legs.

I hated Koru's furniture. I stood up.

Mallens was black as mountain stuff, black as the rock underneath the oceans, rough hewn and poorly constructed. In him the early craft of the Clockwork Gods showed their initial inexperience. His face had no curves, just blocks and planes. He wasn't even a person yet.

And yet he lifted his arms, shook his fists, and screamed at the Sun itself. He scattered blood in all directions and turned the skies black and cloudy. He roared, and the Sun made obeisance and covered his face before the Lord of Creation.

I looked around. Koru stood with his arms crossed. Seraphine touched him on the side, but when he didn't react she moved away, crossing her own arms and hunching her shoulders behind them. Astras had one arm pressed against her chest and scratched her elbow with the other. Mithrak had a butterfly knife in hand and did slow tricks without looking. Hoarfast squeezed Dr Simmons's arm through the sleeves of his jacket. The good doctor was biting a knuckle. Agammae stood with wide legs, hands on hips with thumbs behind, and stared forward. The muscles in her jaw bulged. I just stood there and realized I'd become

aware of my arms. I didn't know what I'd been doing. The rats were fleeing the balcony.

In the distance, the treetops shook like waves rushing toward the beach.