

# VISIONARY

Escartine Library, College of Errensea 3057.6.29

“Senile tommy-rot.”

That was Holander’s considered opinion. Statement made, he continued on his way with Seama trailing in his wake.

“Tommy-rot?”

“That’s what I said. Nothing more than that.”

“This is Haslem we’re talking about, you know.”

“Yes, yes, you’re right, I’m sorry: senile tommy-rot and no style.”

Seama could not quite work out whether Holander was being serious or not. Of course, anyone might read *The Song of Ages* and count it as *tommy-rot* very easily. Over the course of the last few weeks, in-between sessions with the healers, Seama had set himself the task of reading and re-reading every page, half-page or scrap Grek managed to recover. After drying, most of the sheets had been too brittle to hold and so Grek had her scribes indexing and copying till their heads ached and their wrists were sore. Grek would eventually have done as much for any damaged text in her precious library, but Seama’s obsession inspired her. Luckily for the scribes, of what was once a mighty volume less than one hundred pages remained. Seama carried a copy with him now, clutched to his chest with his bandaged left arm.

Struggling through a great deal of pain, the wizard had found his chosen task tremendously frustrating. With the conclusion and biggest part of the argument gone what he had left to work with seemed confused and nonsensical. The main body of the text left to them was in the form of a narrative history but clearly owed more to myth and legend than recorded fact. Taken at face value the words he read told the story of a Constant War, the curse of mankind, as it was in the beginning and how it progressed through time. The most recent events described were remote and strange and unknown. There were peoples, races and civilisations with names Seama had never heard. He was not completely sure the events described had occurred on this world he knew. He was not completely sure that this was anything more than a tale written to amuse the author and confuse the reader. And it failed to delight. The structure was ungainly, the prose unremittingly dull. If the Book had not called to him so insistently,

Haslem the Great or no, Seama would have left it to the ministrations of Grek and her students.

The only part that had any impact was the introduction. For all its confusion something in the words held him. Little of the discussion was specific. It spoke of old gods, of good and evil, of the never-ending strife between the two; it talked about The Ages of the Earth as though there were more than just the one; it pointed out key events of each of these Ages but in such a haphazard fashion it was difficult to be sure what came before and what came after. And yet there was something in it. There were names given that made him feel uneasy; there was a truth implied he could not quite grasp.

Holander couldn't see it at all, he couldn't feel it.

"Not only bonkers," he continued gleefully, as he pushed past a knot of students, congregating inconveniently as students will, in this case at the rear exit to the Great Hall, "but dull as last year's accounts. Honestly, Haslem could be writing about mayhem, murder and the end of the world and I'd still rather boil my head than read him. In fact, according to you, he *is* talking about the end of the world and how it already happened! I must have been busy or something and missed it." Holander shook his head in utter denial. "And you wonder I think it's rubbish!"

Seama found it difficult to argue with Holander on either point. The dullness was indisputable – mostly based in the confusion – and the complex jumble of themes and facts was maddening. But it couldn't have been *tommy-rot* or anything like it. Haslem was the greatest scholar and wizard Asteranor had ever known: powerful, dedicated, astute and unfailingly serious. Well, according to his biographers anyway, but then they were a dour bunch themselves. And it was a thousand years ago at that. Fashion, style and literature had moved on. The biographers close to the events of his life, contemporaries or near-contemporaries, were themselves now lost in the past, with only their words about Haslem remaining to prove they had ever drawn breath. And they were clearly men who knew their place, respectful and careful, mindful of their duty to conserve and glorify the Great Wizard's achievements, to record his legacy for the generations to come. Not very likely then to have concentrated on Haslem the man: on his drinking, his jokes, his womanizing. If, in fact, he ever indulged in any of those habits.

"Can you see Haslem as a boozer, Hol?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You know: "just as human as the rest of us", prone to bad jokes and heavy nights."

"What, you mean like you?"

Seama laughed. "Bang on the nail! No, I could never be like that but I know plenty who can. Take my friend Angren..."

"I'd rather not. Anyway, the answer is no. I suspect Haslem was a lot like you really are – and that's not flattery by the way."

"Hm. That's probably what I think too. So the thing is: do you think that *I* would write down anything *you* would call "senile tommy-rot."

"Well, no; but you're not senile yet."

"I don't think Haslem ever became senile. I think this little book here might well be the worst piece he ever put together but that's only because his subject is incredibly complicated. Trust me, Hol, he was deadly serious; I just wish I could understand what he was getting at. After you."

With his good arm Seama pushed open the swing door leading off the first landing of the main stair. They had come down to the Upper Stack, a mezzanine floor installed several hundred years back, between the Lower Stack and the Great Floor of the Escartine Library. That was one of things Seama liked about libraries: they could not help but grow and grow and that meant learning went on and on and there was no ending to it. An invigorating thought. But this continued accretion, accumulation, aggregation of the academic bricks and mortar of the College was hard to control and difficult to house. Even now there were plans in hand to build out behind the library back towards The Quays, using up a portion of the land given over to the lists – another cause of dispute between Fox Garner and the Master.

"I hate this floor."

"Is that why you always keep to your Crypt?"

"Could be, Seama. But then again, I don't like it groaning away over my head either. When I'm up here I always think I'm going to fall through the boards, and when I'm down there I keep expecting the whole lot to come crashing down on me." Holander eyed the aisle ahead mistrustfully. The mezzanine quivered before them. It would be impossible to advance without the whole suspended edifice moaning a protest, creaking a complaint. "I'll be glad when we can move the collection and rebuild the whole thing."

"Don't hold your breath, Hol. I think Waldin's got other things on his mind just at the minute."

Holander's head snapped round. "What makes you say that?"

Seama tried to hide his surprise at Holander's reaction.

"Oh, nothing specific. I saw him this morning looking as though the whole College was falling apart. Muttered something about the drains, I think."

“Oh. Yes. There’s always something. You coming through or are you just going to stand there?”

“Well, fine, yes.” Seama stepped through the doorway, letting the heavy door swing shut behind him, but then stopped, realizing he didn’t know where to go next. “Holander, you won’t mind my asking but what are we doing here?”

“Ah now, seeing as you’re so determined to have me think there’s something in this damn book, I thought it about time we found ourselves some proof. And I figured that if Haslem’s discovered some hidden history of the world, that we’ve somehow forgotten about, then probably someone else discovered it before him; perhaps even lots of people. He’ll need to have found the information somewhere. And so, Seama, my lad, we’re off to the *antiquities* and you’re going to be doing an awful lot of reading. How’s your Ancient Medean?”

Seama pulled a face. His Ancient Medean was rusty to say the least.

“Are you punishing me for something, Hol?”

“Not at all, Seama – I’m trying to cure you.”

“By locking me up with the Classics? Well if it doesn’t cure me at least it’ll bore me to death and that’ll be an end to it. Couldn’t we get a few students down here instead?”

“Would you trust them to find what we need?”

“And what do we need exactly?”

“Corroboration.”

“You make it sound like a crime’s been committed.”

“Now then, Seama, we’ve already had words about Haslem’s style...”

Oddly enough Seama found his task more rewarding than he expected. Once his brain accustomed itself not only to the grammar and lettering of the ancient Medeans but to the rhythm of their syntax and the style of their story-telling he actually began to enjoy himself. Better than that, Seama quickly discovered details in some of the older texts he’d already seen referenced in *The Song*. Perhaps Haslem’s much derided style had emerged from over-long exposure to these same classics. Seama couldn’t help picturing Haslem sitting at his desk, one thousand years ago, in the library of Banya’s Palace in the new city of Astoril, struggling with his translations just as Seama struggled now. How many weeks and months had he given to his task; how many blind alleys had he been led along; how many incomplete passages had driven him into a rage? And yet at last Haslem must have found what he was looking for: something to give order to his thoughts and body to his theory... but what? There were

elements from disparate texts that Haslem seemed to think important but in sum the picture they gave of a history unknown to modern times was fragmented and frankly unbelievable. It was nowhere near enough to satisfy Holander's quest for proof. It was not enough even for Seama. What were they expecting, one key text to give them all the corroboration they needed? There was little chance of that. But as the days passed, while the Chronicler became yet more sceptical, and indeed scornful, the wizard became convinced that the fault lay not in the absence of proof but merely in their lack of comprehension. The quest consumed him - he ploughed on undeterred.

When Grek ushered the poor man into his work room, the audible grumble of disapproval Seama produced was not really intended for Waldin's secretary. The gripe was simply a measure of his sudden frustration. Seama was aware of the irony even before the secretary began to speak but it had nothing to amuse him: for months now Seama had been desperate for Waldin to find him something useful to do, something that could relieve the boredom, something that would get him off the island for a while. And here it was at last, Waldin calling him to an executive meeting ordered by The Council, no doubt with some mission in mind. But why did it have to be now?

The frustration was still evident when he reached Waldin's office.

"You wanted me?"

Waldin was far too experienced an administrator to let bad behaviour put him off whatever he wanted to say. He sat behind his, to Seama's mind, overly large desk, in his large but only just large enough chair, and greeted Seama with a careful smile.

"Welcome, Lord Seama. Good of you to come so promptly. Very helpful, indeed." Sometimes Seama found the Master's clipped tones rather irritating. "How is your arm now? Septuagem has been telling me that your recovery has been nothing less than astonishing - for which we are all, most certainly, grateful."

The healing had gone well. Exceptionally well, in fact. There was general amazement. Seama's unprecedented ability to accelerate the growth of new tissue had all the professors in the school of medicine jumping in excitement. They were less than happy when he refused to let them investigate the process, and simply would not believe that Seama was as confused by the phenomenon as they were. He could only suggest that the Power within him had recognised a need to be ready for action. *Something* surged through his veins, obliterating the dead tissue and setting a fire in the cells of each nerve, muscle and tendon; the heat of it could be felt by anyone passing nearby, and in a darkened room his arm seemed to throw off a nimbus

of blue light that no one could explain. It was all hugely uncomfortable yet somehow felt right and good. In a few short weeks his arm was whole again, the skin unblemished though strangely hairless.

"It works well enough, Waldin. Thanks for your concern. I take it you need me fit enough to do something for you."

Waldin looked a little offended.

"Genuine concern, Seama. But yes you are right, we have a problem. Marat, could you ask them to come through?"

The secretary, now on the other side of a thick door, acknowledged he had *heard* by ringing a small bell vigorously. He had none of Waldin's finer abilities. It was only a minute or two, during which Waldin got up and started to pull chairs closer to the desk, before the secretary brought them through.

Sight was pasty-faced and blind to his surroundings, moving slowly under Holander's guidance. Holander shook his head slightly at Seama's unspoken question and favoured Waldin with a disapproving look.

"He shouldn't be out of his room, Waldin" he growled, "You know that. Not when he's working. To ask him to come down for a meeting..."

"Actually I asked if he might attend."

Two others had entered the room, the foremost of these smooth-voiced Aiden Peveril, current Leader of The Council, cool and collected as ever but at least apologetic.

"We needed to know what he has seen but I was not aware he was still in contact. Will this cause him pain?"

"Distress at the least - to be moved. He doesn't know he's here." Holander gently eased his friend into the security of a big leather armchair. "It is not a comfortable thing to be so far away from yourself for so long. This has been going on for hours now."

Waldin gave them all a somewhat sheepish look. "We will look after him when he returns to us, but meanwhile we have matters to consider. Seama, may I introduce Gosbert Lanvers. He is our..."

"Our man in Astoril. Yes, we met a few years back."

The fourth delegate was a lanky sort, clothes bespattered by recent travel and still sporting great riding boots as though he was ready for the off as soon as the meeting was over. Seama thought he looked a little uneasy.

"Gosbert. Good to see you. You're not often in Errensea."

"Thank you, Lord Seama. No, this is only my second visit. It's a... a wonderful place."

"But full of strange and scary people."

Gosbert managed a laugh. "I suppose I should get used to it. We don't see much in the way of magic back in Astoril. We're more to do with machines and engines than enchantments and... Well I don't know what."

Seama smiled sympathetically.

"Unknown territory for you, I understand. But our 'magic' is not so different from your science and mechanics. There's room for both approaches."

"And need for both too," Waldin wanted to get things moving. "Gosbert brings us news of one sort but it has taken him a long journey to bring it; Sight can give us detail with less delay. Aiden, will you begin?"

Peveril took his seat and indicated that others should do the same.

"Some of the time I think the issue rather clouded and complicated but actually it is all really very simple. Late last night a final piece of information was brought to us by Gosbert here. There was an emergency meeting of the Council. Whether because we were all tired and wanting our beds, or because the answer to our debate was very clear we came to a quick conclusion. We need to act and we need to act now.

"You will all know that Mador is fighting battles out in the East of Pars, has been since March. We consider the situation under control. Five of the King's armies are more than enough to contain the problem. Why the Sirdar should want to continue his attack is hard to fathom. The garrison at Aristeth was overrun more competently than ever his troops have managed before, and that's strange enough in itself, but in the general run of things after such success he would surely have withdrawn, point made. We know he uses the dispute as an exercise to blood new recruits: when they are half-decimated he brings the remainder back – he believes it gives Masachea an army of battle-hardened warriors - but there has never been any suggestion he might want to go further than that."

Seama stirred restlessly in his seat.

"You didn't bring us down here to talk about the Sirdar's brutalities. What has this to do with Astoril?"

"Well, you would think that with Mador so busy in the East he wouldn't be much interested in the West and yet two weeks past the King ordered Anparas and Temor to barracks just north of Riverport. Rumour was abroad that Jemenser had begun to requisition ships and supplies for an expedition. Up until last night we did not know why."

"And how is it I didn't get to hear about this?" Seama directed the question at the keeper of the Chronicle, who gave him a wry grin.

"Apparently you had too much on your plate already, Seama, what with your injuries and your studies. That right Master?"

"Yes it is." Waldin seemed a little peeved that Holander felt the need to confront him. "Seama's health is much more important to me than you suggest. Until we knew more there was no need to trouble him."

Seama considered Waldin's face for a moment and then decided they were being unkind. Waldin carried a great deal of responsibility both as Master of the College and Chief Officer of the Council, and to be fair he handled both of his jobs better than anyone else could have managed one, Seama included. He nodded briefly.

"Good point. I was, and am very busy at the moment. So, Gosbert, what news did you bring?"

"I got the information from Fel Awdrey," Gosbert began, "But to be honest the situation wasn't a secret anyway. Ever since King Sirl fell ill the Prime Minister's been trying to promote this ah... "Open Government" thing - basically it requires the Cabinet to put everything before the Assembly before they can make any sort of decision. As far as I can tell, all it means is that nothing gets done very quickly."

Seama nodded. "You'll find that Sirl's keen on the idea too. He insists it goes back to the Founding but somehow got lost along the way. Not everyone's so enthusiastic though. Some people think all this fairness and openness will lead to disorder."

"Well I'm thankful for it - it's a lot easier gathering information."

"And the information *is*...?"

"Aegarde is threatening war."

"War? With *Gothery*? Has Agwis gone mad?"

Waldin intervened. "As it happens, Seama, yes he has. Or at least that's the story his odious son's been putting about. Sight believes it is a lie and actually Agwis is under house arrest. We suspect drugs were used. The Aegardean Senate seems to have accepted Agwis is demented, dangerous even. They made Athoff regent and Athoff, now exactly where he wants to be, has sent an ultimatum to Sirl and is currently busy raising an army."

"But the regions won't go for it, will they? Not for a war with *Gothery*, there's too much trade at stake. What does this ultimatum have to say?"

"Well Seama," Gosbert leapt back in, keen to tell the story himself given he had travelled such a long way to tell it, "It's all to do

with The Black Company. They're criminals, a hundred or more, almost a small army. They're led by four *sorcerers*, if you can believe such a thing. Past month or so they've been raiding villages in the Skirt – over on the Aegardean side of the border, just north of the Saddle if you know it?"

Seama smiled and nodded. "I think we're all familiar with the geography."

"Well I'm not sure Athoff is. He's decided these raiders are based in Gothery."

"What rubbish. What do they do: swing down the cliffs on ropes? Utter nonsense."

"Exactly. But Athoff's looking for an excuse. He says that if Gothery won't do anything about this Black Company, then Aegarde will. Gothery must either pay reparation and execute the ringleaders, or Athoff'll bring an army into Gothery and do it himself. It's all a ruse. He's been making a case for claiming-back the plateau for months now - keeps bashing on about how Banya stole the land from Aegarde to start with."

"But that was more than a thousand years ago – and it's not true anyway: Banya bought the land with The Oath..."

"Well you may know your history, Seama, but there won't be too many who'll care to remember it. Not on the Aegardean side anyway. "A thousand years of insult" he calls it. What with all this new violence and terror, he reckons now's the time for Aegarde to put things right. He's been making speeches about it up and down the country. Not that he's any real interest in history of course. What he's after is Gothery industry and know-how and the wealth that comes of it. He's had enough of Aegarde being the poor neighbour."

"For national pride he threatens war? There you have a measure of the man. But does he really think he could win?"

"Well that depends on the size of his army and how Gothery can respond. Sorry, a bit obvious. What I mean is Gothery's in something of a state just at present. It's hard to explain why, but people aren't happy, not with their bosses, not with the authorities. We're having real trouble just trying to keep order. There were riots in Dreffield last week, machinery wrecked, looting. Of course they sent the army in and it may be they were a little heavy-handed. I'm ashamed to say there were some deaths - I'll not say murder, as nothing's been proven."

"But this is terrible, Gosbert," Waldin put in, clearly upset, "One cannot deny Gothery has a history of public dispute – the demonstrations, the rallies, all common enough. But riots Gosbert? How has it come to this?"

"Well that's the mystery isn't it. Everywhere you look there's something going on. All sorts of different complaints to start off with but all leading to the same result: trouble on the streets. It's become the fashion of the day."

"What's the government to say about this?"

"Not very much, Seama. The general idea seems to be that if they ignore it for long enough, things'll eventually settle down."

"Great plan. And what are they doing about this ultimatum? Ignoring that too?"

"Mostly they're just arguing among themselves. And that was the point I was trying to make. With the country in such a mess, and the government all but paralysed, well, it's all good news for Athoff's chance of success. He'll be reckoning up just now how *few* soldiers he's going to need. Ten thousand? Five thousand? He must think he can win quite easily."

Seama took a moment to think it through. It was not really Athoff's end of it that mattered just now. In Aegarde building an army was a long process. Nothing could happen very quickly. In the East, however, Mador Bhadrada was not so handicapped. The King of Pars had standing armies to command and he was not the sort of man to ponder his options for too long. He would not be happy with the thought of Athoff Ringsøyr some day soon sitting on Sirl's throne in the Palace of Astoril; he would not be at all happy with the thought of ten thousand Aegardean soldiers sitting easy on ground only the breadth of the Hypodedicus away from the Medean Part. It seemed very obvious to Seama what the Partain King would do.

"To secure his own borders against a possible threat from Aegarde, Mador's going to invade Gothery first."

"That is how the Council see it," Peveril agreed, "We expect there to be movement before the end of the month."

"Now look, I don't want to sound overly dramatic," said Waldin, "but we are on the brink of disaster. Unless we do something, and quickly, the whole continent will be at war: Masachea on the Partain border, Athoff threatening everyone from the west, and Mador, no doubt reluctantly, planning to take Astoril before the month is out. And right at the centre of it all Gothery: fine, innocent and vulnerable Gothery, likely to suffer most. We cannot have it gentlemen. Gothery is the future we need; Gothery is the progress we have been nurturing for a thousand years. We need her intact and independent and strong, and not some plaything of chaos."

Seama was both surprised and impressed by the passion in Waldin's words but he was not so sure of the analysis. "Chaos?" he said, "You use the word as if it could explain everything. I don't

believe it. This is no coincidence. It's strategy, from one end of the continent to the other. Though for what, or for why or by whom, I cannot think."

"Coincidence or strategy," said Peveril, "it makes little difference. The Council has decided it *will* take action. And the start of that is keeping Mador within his own borders. That achieved we may then turn our attention upon Athoff and the Aegardean succession."

Holander, who had been listening silently, more concerned with Sight's seeming agitation as he twitched and shivered in the armchair, spoke up at last.

"That's just the way The Council always thinks. It's all politics: how to keep things stable; go in at the head of government, control the state and the state will control the people."

"You speak as if we do these things for our own benefit." Peveril was annoyed. "What should we do? The people of Asteranor need peace first and foremost – it is our job to provide for that."

"That's not what I mean. What are you going to do about this Black Company? Leave them to get on with it while our lot are ponceing about in Garassa and Ayer? Chattering with Kings and Ministers isn't going to get anything sorted. We need to get our hands dirty."

Aiden looked as if the notion of "getting his hands dirty" was something deeply unpleasant and to be avoided at all cost. "We cannot solve all the ills of the world but we *will* give thought to the Black Company when Sight has spoken. Help can be sent. For now what is important is setting Seama on his way..."

"But what about the book?" It burst out of him. As Holander and Aiden crossed swords Seama had become distracted. There was a feeling building in him much like the head-spinning, gut-wrenching urgency the summons had provoked a few weeks ago, but all of it hung upon the word *strategy*. Suddenly Seama understood they were missing something vital, that there was something critically important he had to do. He had no idea what that might be but was strangely convinced The Song of Ages held the key.

Waldin pounced as though he had been waiting for the objection. "The book is a book, Seama, nothing more than that." Waldin looked around the room, challenging them all, "Does anyone here think Seama's book more important than acting to prevent a war and all the despair and agony that will bring?"

"It's not my book, Waldin, it's Haslem's. The same Haslem who created Gothery in the first place. The same Haslem who more or less invented that notion of progress you hold to. The same Haslem, just in case you've forgotten, who gave us our greatest spells. From

what I've read so far, Waldin, the Song of Ages may well look to the past but Haslem's message is all about that future you've been looking for. Our future. We need to find out what it means."

"Really Seama, that book has been sitting on a shelf in the library for nearly a thousand years – what makes it so important today rather than yesterday or five years from now? We have work to do. Mysteries can wait."

It was so desperately annoying. Seama felt as if he might explode like a Besma Ball. Obviously there was sense in what Waldin had to say but he just knew it was all wrong. Something about the Song screamed out for attention and nothing the Master could say would quiet it. "Look Waldin, the book was not burned a thousand years ago, the book did not summon me five years from n..."

"NO!"

It was Sight. He had thrust forwards, hands gripping the arms of the chair white knuckled. "You cannot!" he cried, "You must not!" He stood abruptly, quivering in outrage, his eyes fixed on a horror they could not see, sudden tears pouring down his cheeks. "No!" he demanded; "No, no," he sobbed. He pushed blindly away from Holander's reaching arms, staggered across the room as if trying to run away from the pictures in his mind, and then with a final wordless cry he collapsed. What Sight had seen had been too much.

Far too much.