

PLANET TOULAN

JOURNEY THROUGH THE SANDS

INTRO

You look up at the sky. The heat of the sun refuses to wane, and you curse your idiocy for trusting a sordid Insian low-life, one with a face like melted copper and a deep memory that's up for sale to the highest bidder. Still, if you can't trust the scum, you know you can trust his thirst for money, and he'll be wanting the second-half of his payment. No, this was definitely the right path to the oracle woman, and to the sacred history of the planet, kept secret for far too long. You have made it your mission to set free this history, and just as hope wanes, just as you feel consciousness slipping away under the desert sky, slender hands take you into a cool cave, and you know you've made it. When you come to, a hunched woman is pouring hot, strong-smelling coffee into a ceramic cup, the golden pattern along its rim worn out with years of use. When she turns around, there is a faint smile lingering on her lips, and she pushes back her veil for you to see the sparkle in her eyes. "Yes, you've found the Oracle," she says. "Well done. Now sit up and drink this, and we can start. There isn't much time." As she hands you the cup her other hand reaches into her robe and pulls out a small sac. She pours out a little of the translucent sand inside and quickly throws it into the fire – a flash of green light, a cloud of dense smoke, and within seconds the cave is back to as it was, save for the ominous emerald glow in the fire. "That'll ward off any eavesdroppers," says the Oracle. "Sit still now, and listen carefully to the tale of your forefathers, the tale of how it all came to be. I know you're a clever lad, if a little naïve, so you'll know that all I say is true. Good? Good. So let's begin..."

THE BEGINNING

“This twisted tale starts with a man of considerable power and considerable character, who valued the peace and prosperity of his land and people above all else – Qumran Badi al-Zaman. Don’t look at me like that, child. Qumran is no mere legend, any more than his forefathers were, and in your bones you already know this. Under his rule, he maintained the wealth and prosperity of this sultanate, increasing its riches of every sort: of wealth and knowledge and land. And in his realm we Insians lived in harmony with the Narians, those elusive, magical spirits who have plenty more brawn but less brain than we do. Wait, harmony is the wrong word to use... Narians and Insians lived side by side, though usually in separate districts with others of their kind. They worked together, ate together, built together... yet they did not like each other. No, they despised each other, the Narians for the weaker strength but sharper wit of their counterparts, and the Insians for the spirit people’s higher status in the land, and for their magical abilities to control Nawa. The lifeforce of this planet, of the very air we breath, Nawa is in every living and dead thing you see. It was also, at that time, great energy the Narians could bend to their will, but the Insians could not. Hence the Narians’ elite ranking, gained by the massive palaces they put up, the indestructible armies they created. But of course, with all this power, the Narians could have easily made the sultanate their own, save for the magic that held them in check.

“Qumran had in his service a book of great wisdom and understanding called the Book of Laws. It had guided the sultan and his ancestors for many centuries in the use of their otherworldly abilities to help in maintaining the balance of power between the two races. But this was not enough. Great magician as he was, Qumran was no match for the might of all the Narians, and it was the Three Mages (Wazeers) , those cloaked men who held in their hands the power over the state, the sultan, the Insians and the Narians – but not the Safians. No, certainly not the Safians. These mystical creatures, the children born of the rare love between an Insian and a Narian, were beyond the control of any and all beings. They were the absolute embodiment of the greatest characteristics from the two races, and they had complete authority over themselves. That’s not to say that they took part in the affairs of the realm, for their interest was not in the mundane workings of everyday life, but rather the complete harmony of the planet at large. To this end, the Safians had built in ancient times great architectures to help in the balance and cultivation of Nawa: The first was the Astrolabe, a genius work of engineering put together to allow the control of Nawa by concentrating its force on a specific spell or intention. The other creations were the Three Towers, or Abraj, great buildings that reached high into the clouds, guiding the ebb and flow of Nawa.

“Since the creation of these structures, the Safians had moved on from the planet, making the moon their home. There they built their Lotus Temple, a house of learning for all Safians, and left the running of the land to Qumran, the Mages and their shura, or parliament.

“During Qumran’s reign, the Mages put the Astrolabe to good use, especially when the sultan spent more and more time in his sickbed, his magical abilities waning as he slowly died of old age. Knowing that he had less control over their decisions, the Mages increased the amount of Nawa used from the Astrolabe and abused the magic to strengthen the Narians with it. Since they could control the Narians, the Mages wanted to make them into the masters between the two races, doing away with the Insian monarchy and turning the people into slaves. The Mages were intent on the destruction of the positive Nawa, and this black magic empowered the Narians, who began to mercilessly slaughter the Insians, and it seemed like only a matter of time before this violence made its way to the sultan’s bed.

“As he lay breathing his last breaths and bemoaning the plight of his people, it became more and more obvious to all in the nation and the sky that if the Mages were left to their own ways, the planet would no longer be a peaceful place to live. Someone had to intervene, someone had to help stop this treachery... It was this duty that brought me to visit Qumran at his sickbed. With me, I brought an unusual proposal: I would work with Qumran to perfect the Book of Laws, and create a text which would bind its sovereigns, magicians and all inhabitants to the rule of balance. Qumran

agreed, and the two of us together began incorporating Safian knowledge into the Book, and didn't finish until the first colours of the dawn began to trickle through the night. Among the many laws and commands put together, one was that of the creation of avatars for the royal family, animals which would always be connected to the planet, and would be able to communicate with their masters over the state of the nation, and its people. These animals would of course take on the characteristics of their masters, and Qumran's avatar came to him just as we were finishing the book, a majestic eagle who sat at the foot of sultan's bed, aware of his master's laboured breath and what it meant.

"Once we finished writing the Book of Laws, Qumran and I placed our right wrists on the top page of the book, and with a quick flick of my clean knife ran our blood along the jagged, yellow paper – an act which would bind the sultan and his people to this agreement and cease the rotation of the astrolabe, rendering the Mages' plan for domination useless. Of course, the balance could never be restored if the Narians stayed in our world – the destruction they raged and the liberty they took with the flow of Nawa had scarred the nation, and Toulan needed to heal without their presence. And so the Book of Laws would also put forth a burst of energy that served to rip out the Narians from their life on our planet and seal them behind a veil, effectively taking them and their influence into another dimension. The balance of the world was set right again.

"Alas, the Book could not heal Qumran himself, and the death of the sultan eventually resulted in the death of the sultanate. The once great land of vast riches and indescribable beauty turned into a world of scattered tribes, of bickering Insians only after their own interest and their own survival, completely oblivious to the strength of Nawa or of the Astrolabe. And of course, as you have probably already guessed, they turned into a group of people incapable of handling the awesome power of the Book of Laws. The Book stayed with me in this very cave, waiting for the master who could once again rule the nation."

THE AGE OF SINMAR

“Many generations passed, and the peoples of the nation played a game of control, until a small handful of tribes became more powerful than the rest. Of these, the tribe of al-Zaman had in their leader a descendant of the great Qumran, a strong and ambitious man called Sinmar, whose avatar was in fact a reincarnation of Qumran's own great eagle, and who dreamt of bringing back to life the legacy of his ancestor. It wasn't an idle dream, only one which lay dormant in the youth until life and its challenges made him the man he was always meant to be. It was a potential the Safians – not to mention myself – kept under close observation, for if the prophecies came true, Sinmar could very well be the man who would reunite the tribes and return the land to its former greatness.

“Sinmar did indeed prove himself to be our hero, and it wasn't long before he decided to seek out the Mages. Sinmar knew that he would need the Mages at his side for his quest to reunite Toulan, for the Mages would have something he was very much in need of: access to the Narians. Sinmar knew that the eminence of the sultanate depended on the Narians, for if he fought for the unification of the nation only with his Insian army, the battles would last many years, and the lives lost would be countless. To peaceably bring together the segregated tribes, Sinmar needed an army with such awe-inspiring might that it would crush any opposition before it started. With the raw power of the Narians at his side, he would be able to bring all the peoples of the land under his rule. The powerful creatures would also be able to use their Nawa to bring back – and even surpass – the glory of Qumran's reign, and so Sinmar started making plans to hunt down the whereabouts of the Mages. It was then that I sent out a call to Sinmar's avatar, the great eagle, and the future sultan quickly made the journey through the desert to me.

“When he arrived, it was to find me sitting to one side of the fire preparing sweet tea, with the Book of Laws at my side. Swallowing down the urge to panic, Sinmar sat opposite me and listened as I spoke about the future of the planet, about the importance of keeping the equilibrium of Nawa, and about his role in this balance of power. I would pass the Book to Sinmar, for with it the Mages may be traced and found. But before this could happen, Sinmar would have to bind himself to the great Book itself and take on its responsibility. Part of his duties would be to keep his pride at bay, to work for the good of the planet and the people, to achieve wonders for the sultanate through humility, and, most importantly, protect and nurture the balance of Nawa. Sinmar agreed, and as he slit his wrist on the first page of the book, his great eagle flying around him in excitement as he smeared the bright red blood, he could feel the supernatural energy entwining itself into his very being, merging its magic with his soul. There was no turning back now – which was just as well, since our brave leader would never have entertained such an idea.

“Sinmar took the Book of Laws and travelled across the land to the Mages. It was a treacherous journey – for the three of them had made it nigh on impossible for anyone to find them – and one which the conquering warrior had to take accompanied by only a few of his most trusted men. After a violent encounter with malicious bandits, Sinmar and his group found themselves taken in by the al-Nahar tribe of the Snow Mountain in the north, a people renowned for their healing abilities. Sinmar had been brutally injured in the skirmish, and as his tribal lineage and the severity of the wound dictated, he was taken to the amira Dia al-Nahar, the tribe's most gifted healer. While in her care, the two fell in absolute love, and once Sinmar was able to travel again, Dia travelled with him as his bride.

“It was many moons still before their hunt ended and the small group found themselves in the Mage's hiding place. ‘I want you to fix the Astrolabe,’ said our mighty Sinmar to these men of unimaginable power. ‘I want you to call upon the Narians to return as our equals, to make this land as great as it once was.’ I shudder to remember the arrogance in his voice, the self-importance in his stance... But then I suppose it was what drew the Mages out of their initial disdain of him – they could see the potential in the man for greatness, and they could sense the hold they would have on him through his pride.

“The Mages agreed to help Sinmar if he, in turn, agreed to making them his viziers during his reign, and that of all of his decedents. He must also be aware of the nature of the Narians, that they were a greedy race who would have a condition of their own for him to agree to, and so he must be willing to make a sacrifice. Sinmar sensed the voracity in the Mages’ voices, and he hesitated – he began to feel apprehensive about his plan, and about how much faith he could have in the Mages. His hand moved to comb through his inky beard as he decided whether or not to trust them, when his eye came upon the cut on his wrist. There he found his answer: if he kept his pride in check and his energy into maintaining the balance of power, he would be able to control the Mages and the Narians, and bring back the glory days of the land. He nodded his head in agreement, and his little party – now three mighty members stronger – headed on to Sabad, the old city, where the Astrolabe still stood, though covered with hundreds of years of dust.

“Once there, they wasted no time in putting the Astrolabe back to its old state, and soon had it ready to do their bidding. The Mages, still recovering from their long sojourn but quickly finding their feet, spent their time gaining more and more strength, until they felt ready to call upon the Narians. They gave a look to Sinmar to prepare himself, and unleashed a shrieking call to the other realm, bringing forth the heads of the Narian tribes. In the triangle the Mage’s bodies created, seven figures began to come into view: first in nebulous figures, then in more and more clarity, until the full glory of the Narian men and women could be seen. Their striking forms rendered the Insians speechless, even more so since the Nawa being used to bring the Narians to this plane gave them a burst of raw energy that made them feel especially voracious. They hissed and lashed out, frustrated at their inability to leave the triangle.

“The Mages – obviously enjoying this show of their magical superiority but well aware of the length of time spent having used very little of their powers – wasted no time in striking a deal with the Narians. ‘If you agree to come back to this land,’ the Mages said, ‘then you will regain your place of standing in our society, as well as in the government.’ The Narians would not, the Mages explained, usurp their fellow Insians, but would rather live with them in unity, and while their numbers would be controlled and their magic kept in check to protect the Insians, the Narians would be richly rewarded. Our seven elders smirked when they heard this, for although this was the opportunity they had been dreaming of, they knew that what they needed this time would be a foothold in this world, something that would bind them and their future to that of the Insians’. And so they all turned to Sinmar, and six of the Narians stepped back as the group’s speaker pronounced their condition. ‘Our stipulation is this: That Sinmar takes as his bride a Narian amira, who will become his queen alongside Dia.’ Of course, Sinmar had not expected this, and was for a split moment at a loss. He looked over to Dia, whose face was filled with a look of fear and a hint of anger, but who felt above all else resignation. She knew this to be her destiny, and she would not leave Sinmar’s side. Our hero looked back up at the Narians and agreed. A great shock wave made the city tremble, and a shrieking sound pierced the sky as the veil between the two world was torn open.

“The crusade that followed was in no way a fierce battle, nor were attacks and counterattacks made to unify the tribes. Instead it was a complete and total conquest for Sinmar with hardly a drop of blood being spilt, save for the executed tribal leaders. The mere sight of the advancing army, made up of battle-hungry Insians, bloodthirsty Narians, Nawa-boosted weaponry, spruced-up cavalry, all gleaming under the summer sun... who can blame the defending cities for simply laying down their arms and declaring Sinmar sultan? It was not long before this simple fact became absolute truth, and Sinmar did, indeed, become Sinmar Bani al-Zaman, Sultan of the land, ruler of its Insian and Narian populous, aided by his avatar the great eagle, the Three Mages, and by Insian Dia al-Nahar the Healer and Narian Badr al-Duja the Warrior.”

THE SISTERS

“Within the span of a few short years, Sinmar’s sultanate became a land of such vast wealth and splendour as to rival that of the great Qumran. The Narians established themselves quickly into society, putting their energy and their power into the creation of the awesome state. They also set themselves up in court life, easily integrating into Sinmar’s shura, and, of course, his army. They became the new upper-class of society, and their constrained numbers meant that there was plenty of wealth for the Narians to manage and distribute among themselves, while the Insians struggled to catchup. This isn’t to say that the Narians were totally satisfied with what they had gained – they still loathed the Insian race, and Sinmar himself for how he kept them in check. Even as they integrated themselves into society, they nursed this hatred, and allowed it to simmer beneath their air of indifference, to be brought out when the time was right.

“And the Mages were very much aware of the Narians’ contempt, and made no effort whatsoever to ease it – on the contrary, they helped nurture it, for they knew there would be a time when it would come to their aid. As was promised, the Mages did indeed become the viziers of the sultan and court, and so were at his side most every day. The Mages also had another unexpected advantage: Sinmar’s Safian daughter.

“With each of his wives, Sinmar had a daughter, born within weeks of each other. From Dia came the Amira Nairouz, a child blessed with her mother’s extraordinary healing powers and the magical attributes that came with it, and who had as her avatar the dove. A clever and thoughtful child, she easily assimilated herself to palace life, very much unlike her sister. The Narian Badr died giving birth to her daughter Nara, who also followed in her mother’s footsteps by mastering the warrior arts, and whose avatar was the midnight-black crow.

“Nara found it infinitely more difficult to fit into palace life for one very obvious reason: she was the only Safian living in the sultanate, for the rest of her people were hidden away on the moon. It would be difficult for any child to stick out so conspicuously, but it was doubly difficult for our Safian amira. She was all alone with no mother at her side, torn between wanting palace acceptance and fighting to prove herself on the battleground, something which seemed to be only accepted by the Narians of the palace and by the Mages. It was in this way that Nara became more and more attached to the Narians and to the Three Mages, for here she found the acceptance, if not the comfort, she yearned for from her family. That isn’t to say that Nairouz and Nara were enemies – as all children and especially with sisters, they were close to each other and trusted each other. Yet, as the years passed, the two princesses became more and more distant, and Nara found herself spending less time with the Insians of her world. All of this meant that the Mages had in Nara a potential ally for when the time came to dethrone her father and put into action the plan for domination which they had started so long ago.

“As the time passed, and the sisters became more set in their ways, the Mages also grew bolder in their actions. They wanted to empower the Narians and make the Insians serfs in the sultanate, there only to do as they were told. The Mages knew they would always have control over the Narians through the Astrolabe; what they would have to do was ensure that Nara took the throne after her father, and held the Book of Laws. As a descendent of Qumran, she would be able to bend and change the laws as she saw fit – or more rightly, as the Mages saw fit.

“Are you wondering what Sinmar made of all this? What could he see, except for the greatness of his act in uniting the tribes, in creating such an awe-inspiring sultanate? Sinmar was too proud of his triumphs, too pleased with the glories he achieved, to see how heavily he began to rely on the Mages and on the Narians. Not even his avatar could warn him, and so he turned a blind eye to the slight misuses of the Astrolabe, to the ever-increasing number of Narians that surrounded him in his palace.

“The Mages continued to slowly turn the tides of power to the Narians, until eventually, they voted a majority of the race into the shura, therefore enabling themselves to pass laws that would allow Narians more power. This act would break the old treaty, of course, yet Sinmar found himself

incapable of stopping the vote. How could he, when he was so outnumbered? When he was suddenly aware of the danger that threatened him, his family and all Insians? Incapable of trusting anyone and afraid of dragging his daughters into the politics – Sinmar was unaware of how close his Nara was to the Mages – the sultan decided to go on another quest for help. He would go back to the Oracle who had given him the Book, who had helped start him on this journey. And so Sinmar, disguised in nomadic robes, came to sit where you are sitting today and tell me of his woes.

“It was easy to see the treachery that would befall him from the Mages, how they were simply biding their time until they could make Nara the sovereign. Sinmar would have to detach himself from his emotions, understand the mistakes he had made – especially with the amiras – quickly declare Nairouz as heir to the throne and instil in her the importance of the balance of Nawa. He would have to act now, and to protect the book until it was passed on to Nairouz.

“Sinmar rode back swiftly, fearing to lose any more time. Once he reached the palace, he went as close as he possibly could to his daughter’s quarters – he was both pleased and frustrated that the security in the area was so fortified that he could not get past the guards without making himself known. He continued his search for Nairouz at a fast pace, wanting to speak to her before the Mages had a chance to suspect anything. It was a vain hope, for by the time the sultan sat down with his daughter, the Mages’ spies had already warned them of the sovereign’s suspicious activity. And as Sinmar explained the grave happenings to Nairouz, and told her the same story of the balance of power as I had told him years ago, the Mages were in the quarters themselves, hidden in the shadows so that they could hear the plans against them without being known. Their faces withdrew into calculating frowns as they heard of the intention to name Nairouz as Sinmar’s successor, how she would use the Book of Laws to restrict the Mages’ power and control, and make sure that the Narians remained equals to the Insians. This, of course, would bring an end to the Mages’ scheming yet again – something they would not allow to happen.

“Sinmar and Nairouz were not completely unaware of the presence of the Mages, for they had their avatars to warn them, and so father and daughter decided to act fast. But with Sinmar already calling for the city’s populous to be brought together in front of the Speaker’s Balcony for an important proclamation, the Mages in their turn had as their only hope black magic from the Astrolabe. What needed to be done, they decided, was to kill Sinmar and discredit Nairouz, so that there would be no question over Nara becoming the rightful heir. While the sultan prepared for the speech, the Mages kidnapped Nairouz and her mother, locking them away in the traitor’s cell. With their vast knowledge of dark alchemy, the Mages went to the Astrolabe and created a clone of Nairouz, an empty shell who only looked like the amira, but could never think for herself – no creature without a soul could. The clone’s sole task was to shoot an arrow into Sinmar’s heart as he stood speaking to his people, and indeed as the sultan began to tell the tale of the Mages’ treachery, the three men of magic poured Nawa into the Nairouz clone, and as she raised the bow held tight in her hand and shot the arrow into its target, there could be no question in the minds’ of the dumbfounded onlookers as to who was the perpetrator of this shocking crime, accusing Nairouz of killing Sinmar to take his throne.

“As the true Nairouz paced the floor of her small cell, her mother Dia sitting calmly on the cold stone, she could hear the commotion from above, and knew that the Mages had done what she had most feared: they had assassinated her father. As the noises above grew louder and louder, Nairouz and Dia could hear heavy footfalls coming their way; within moments gruff voices were yelling at the women to stand back, and the door of the cell exploded in a cloud of green and blue. Through the smoke Nairouz could make out the figures of the palace’s head alchemist and weapons master, beckoning the women to move quickly. The two of them ran after their liberators as the weapons master explained how he had come to find them, how Sinmar’s eagle had told him of the Mages’ betrayal and how the sultan would risk his life to name Nairouz his successor. The alchemist hurried them along, wanting to leave the palace before the blanket of panic turned into rage. The small group ran along the corridors with almighty speed, dodging guards and making for the underground tunnels and for freedom. As they neared the hidden door, the warning cries from

Nairouz's dove made her look up, and there was an intake of breath as she met her sister's eyes and saw the look of absolute malice in them. Before she could cry out for patience Nara had her bow cocked and ready, and she fired the arrow at her sister's heart – only to find she had hit Dia instead, who had saved her daughter with her own life. Before she could mourn the loss of her parents, the alchemist grabbed Nairouz by the collar and quickly pushed her into the tunnels, closing and blocking the door after the weapons master had come through. As the three of them ran through the musty passes, Nairouz vowed she would find a way to overthrow the tyrants and bring back balance into the world. Near the end of the passage there waited a group of five men and women, those who had worked closely with her father, and who were not completely blind to the Mages and their obsession with power, nor of their tricks. The company grabbed their few worldly possessions and started the journey to the one place they could think of where they could get help: to the Oracle. To me.

“By the time Nairouz and her company reached me, they looked like mere shadows of their former selves. They had been hunted down mercilessly, only narrowly escaping capture and immediate death over and over again. I housed them and fed them, and as each day passed they began to grow strong again, and Nairouz and I spoke more and more about what had happened, what was to come, and what she needed to do about it. It was only the two of us at the beginning, huddling around the fire and speaking over a warm cup of broth while the rest slept. But soon it was the entire group – Nairouz, the alchemist, weapons master, scholar and her most trusted guards – who sat down with us and listened to what would need to happen, with her dove keeping silent watch. This was not an easy conversation, for all had to set aside their emotions as they listened to what awaited their Insian friends and family still in the city.

“The Narians would of course waste no time in taking control of the palace, instilling Nara as the queen of the lands. Doing so would mean that the Safian princess would be keeper of the sacred book, and therefore responsible for how the Mages use the Nawa. The Mages naturally had stopped Nara from actually studying the Book of Laws, maintaining their control over what she understood was right and wrong. And since she so wholly believed that she saw her sister murder their father, Nara was too consumed with the thirst for revenge to pay much attention to what the Mages did anyway, giving them the autonomy they craved.

“And in fact, Nara would have had little interest in stopping them, for to her the Insians were a lower race of people, made great only by the grace of the Narians. Her father and sister were the exceptions, but with one dead and the other a traitor, Nara could release her hatred of the Insians, and her fury for having always been an outsider. In this way the natives of the land became slaves, alive only for the convenience of the Narians, to plough for Nawa nuclei hidden in the dangerous depths of the land. Those who could escape this horrid life ran off to far away tribes, and brought word of the treachery of the Narians. Yet even in remote places where they could not instill a viceroy, the Narians bought the allegiance of Insian overlords who were only too happy to enslave their own kind for the wealth and power it afforded them.

“After her time with me, I sent Nariouz and her party to her mother's tribe. There the child, then only 16, would learn how to fend for herself, how to perfect her magical powers... and how to lead a nation.”

THE BATTLE

“It will be another 15 years until the sisters meet face to face again. They both will have changed dramatically, in every way possible. As will have the empire...

“The Mages wasted no time in twisting the world into their Nawa-obsessed vision, where they became the de facto leaders with Nara as their puppet ruler. They allowed more Narians into the planet, and gave them control over the shura, the main businesses, the land – everything. That isn’t to say that the Narians did any actual work, for each passing day saw them relying more on the Insians for manual labour, especially for Nawa cultivation. The more control they gained over the Insians the less they had to battle, and the more lethargic beings they became, creatures only after their own comfort.

“It wasn’t only Sabad City that was affected, but all the surrounding towns and tribes. All the Insians were forced into slavery, and either threatened or bribed to work for the Narian overlords, who of course had taken complete control over all the surrounding trade... And through it all, did Nara remember the love she had for her Insian father and sister? Did she grow to see the villainous acts of the Mages and put an end to their treachery? Far from it, I’m afraid. Nara became so fully engulfed in her desire for revenge that she was only minutely aware of what was happening in her realm. This almost complete neglect on her part gave free reign to the Mages and the Narians to demolish the work that her father had spent so long to create, though she would never see it that way: to her, every waking moment was to be spent on honing in her warrior skills for the day she would meet – and kill – Nairouz.

“Which of course takes us out of the city and to the al-Nahar tribe that were Nairouz’s maternal ancestors. Like her sister, Nairouz was obsessed with a single goal: to reclaim her father’s empire for the Insians, and to set right the balance of Nawa. Unlike Nara, however, the healer was determined to learn as much as was possible from the alchemists and scholars that came with her, as well as the men and women of science, medicine and philosophy in her mother’s tribe. She knew she would need every resource on her side, for how else would ordinary Insians defeat the Narians? And Nairouz didn’t ignore her bodyguards – with them she spent countless hours honing in her fighting skills, learning how to be a true warrior. How to take life in her defence as well as heal it...

“In the bitterly cold fields of Snow Mountain, the palace’s alchemists found a people who treated science and its study a duty and honour. They came together with the al-Nahar tribe to solve the most immediate and dangerous threat against them: the Narians’ control over Nawa. With all that they were capable of creating and destroying, the Narians had a colossal advantage on the Insians, and the latter could hardly hope to win a war with the elementary weapons they had. So what was to be done? The answer, at least, was obvious, even if the wisemen had no idea how to make it happen: The Insians must learn to harness Nawa.

“As Nairouz set about enhancing her skills, the alchemists approached the question of Nawa-cultivation with the same voracity. They left no possible route unexplored, no clue set aside without examining its every prospect. Seven years after they had first run away, the alchemists found their answer, and the creation which would give Insians the strength to fight their enslavers. The alchemists had created the Nawa Core, an ingenious device that would warp Insian genetic makeup and allow them to manipulate the energy to their desire. This Core was implanted into the left hand, a messy and painful procedure, which slowly became more and more successful, though never less agonising.

“Nairouz also used this time to build alliances and calls for revolution with other far away tribes, who had in their underground guilds – groups of Insian freedom fighters, who never let go of the thirst for rebellion against the Narians, but who had no power to bring it to action. Together they began to build a plan of attack, to pool together their resources so that the fight against the Narians and the villainous Mages may have greater hope. Nairouz was able to communicate directly with these tribes with the help of her avatar, who quickly and secretly relied messages and commands. The dove was also able to travel as far as Sabad itself and bring back news of Nara and the Mages,

but this was an infinitely more dangerous task, and required much magical help from Nariouz and the al-Nahar medicine women to disguise the dove and ensure its safe return. While it was known that an avatar died shortly after its master slipped from this world, as Sinmar's great eagle had when the sultan was shot, none knew what would happen to Nairouz if her avatar died before her. And none were willing to take the risk and find out...

"And so, after 15 years of waiting, Nairouz, her advisors, philosophers and alchemists all agreed that the time to attack was drawing nearer. In anticipation of the great battle to come, Nairouz and her entourage sat with al-Nahar's astronomers, the wisest in the nation, and decided the day of kussoof, or eclipse, would be the best time to attack. The distorted light would better hide the Insians and affect the Narians' eyesight, blurring out the forms of the charging army. It would be just over a year until this day would come, and so no time was wasted in making a plan for the revolution to come.

"Along with her dove as her guide, Nairouz had a group of spies travel throughout the kingdom, keeping her abreast of all that was happening in her nation. This group also kept her in contact with the underground guilds. Had these guilds been found out, they would have each and every one suffered unspeakable deaths at the hands of the viceroys, meaning they were all incredibly versed in working quietly towards their goal under the very noses of their oppressors. With these guilds as her hidden strength, Nairouz's group understood the importance of spreading among them the formula for the creation of Nawa Cores. And so, Nariouz and her main army slowly, painfully made their way west closer to Sabad City and through the most treacherous tribes and territories, instilling in the oppressed Insians a surge of hope and conviction in their cause, and – most importantly – teaching them firsthand about the newly developed Nawa Cores. At the same time, the most capable alchemists made their way south into the desert and around the arid land until they reached the swamps, meeting guilds all along the way and showing their leaders how the Nawa Core can be attached to Insian hands.

"This preparation was for the planned simultaneous attack on every Narian stronghold. Since it would be impossible for any one guild or group to attack the Narians without raising suspicion, all groups would have to attack on the day of kussoof, overwhelming the Narians and taking advantage of their clouded sight and slothful ways. They would have one spring to ready themselves.

"On the promised day, small revolutions took place all across the nation. The guilds that had kept quiet for so long, that had silently readied themselves for the fight for freedom, now let their rage run rampant as they finally began to use the Nawa Cores on the enemy race. The Narians on their part simply could not fathom what was taking place – was it jealous Narians tricking them with visions of all-powerful Insians? How else could the weak race be capable of mirroring their Nawa manipulation? It was a question they failed to answer in time, for the rebellion spread like wildfire, and the Insians were finally breaking out of their chains.

"At the same time, nearer the heart of Toulan in the outskirts of Sabad, Nairouz let her avatar fly, sending out the signal to start the battle for the old city. The Narians there were quicker to react to the attacks, and as the slaughter of the Insians began, a small group of their soldiers, those who were most skilled at manipulating the Nawa Core on their hands, pushed catapults close to the gates of Sabad and sent great Nawa-boosted rocks hurling into the palace gates and the shura's hall. The Narians were completely staggered by these aggressive attacks, and were sent into a state of panic at the 'new' Insians who could manipulate Nawa to do their bidding.

"The Insians on their part fought long and hard, knowing that this would be their one and only chance at freedom. They used every tactic, every plan of attack, every idea they ever had for outwitting and outmanoeuvring their oppressors. And they were quickly adapting to their newfound magical abilities, swiftly learning from their mistakes – essentially – developing new methods of warfare.

The Narians, on the other hand, found themselves lost on the battleground, and unless they were specifically directed by Nara herself, they were no where near as clever as their Insian counterparts. This meant that Nairouz's army were slowly gaining more and more ground, and were making their

way to securing the palace and installing Nairouz as the rightful ruler and the keeper of the Book of Laws. The closer Nairouz got, though, the more the Mages grew nervous. They had been standing back during the attacks, confident that the Nawa Cores would be easily destroyed and the Insians put back in their place. It grew more and more clear though that this would not be the case, and as Nara slowly lost the struggle to keep the throne, the Three Mages made their way to the Astrolabe, where they would make the most of all the dark energy the war was creating and carry out magic that would rid of them of the Insians and even the Book of Laws itself. They encircled the Astrolabe, calling upon and drawing out as much black magic as they could, summoning the most twisted demon of the netherworld: the vicious Mazij.

“As they ripped apart the veil holding back the ravenous demon, the Mages could sense a disturbance in the Astrolabe, a shaking that was more than the machine itself buckling under the weight of the magic. It was an ethereal trembling, and moments after Mazij appeared in our world, the Astrolabe cracked into two pieces and let out such a burst of Nawa as to knock the Mages into the earth. It was an explosion that encompassed the old city and its surrounding districts before going on to the continent’s deserts and mountains, and giving off an outburst of raw energy that released unspeakable monsters from hidden realms, ones which set out to destroy the planet itself. “But that wasn’t all that the explosion did: the eruption of energy released such a warped level of Nawa as to pervert any and all living creatures within its grasp. Insians became melted creatures with no rational thought in their heads, mutated beasts now known as Jeefs, and Narians turned into dark, ugly monsters only after bloodshed rather than any personal comfort. All of this gave Mazij plenty of fuel for his thirst of blood. He quickly made his way across the old city, ripping apart any living creature he could grasp in between his four arms, macerating the others that fell under his eight venomous spider legs, and spreading dark Nawa even into the very earth he walked on.

“As Mazij and the other monsters raged, and the mutated Insians and Narians battled each other and their own race, the war turned from being a struggle between two forces into a general massacring of the planet’s inhabitants, and the Mages looked on with absolute glee. The armageddon that was taking place would create incalculable amounts of black Nawa they could use to rule the planet – and maybe even to attack the Safians themselves in their Lotus Temple. Nara found herself battling Narians whom she had come to think of as her own people, and Nairouz found herself in the same state, having to shoot down those who were once her soldiers but were now savage beasts. To those few who survived the blast, it seemed like the end of the war would only come with the end of the planet.

“And then the Safians returned. The balance of Nawa was thwarted well past a level they could ignore, and so they descended on this apocalyptic scene and immediately began to control, to stop, to preserve. Their first action was to absorb the excess Nawa being spilt into the world, to send the ferocious monsters back into their own realms, to calm the small amount of living creatures left; the second was to deal with the Mages and the Narians. For their treason, each of the Mages was locked in one of the Abraj: Burj al-Sama, Burj al-Hawa and Burj al-Noor. There they would remain for all eternity, incapable of using their magic nor of speaking to each other, instead forced to become part of the harmony of Nawa. As for the Narians, they would also be locked away with Mazij, but behind a magical door called Bab al-Thalam, on the tear-drop island of Safinaz, where all were bound to stay, never to return.

“Having returned the level of Nawa to normal, the Safians located the Book of Laws amidst all the palace rubble and folded it into a silken scarf, to take with them to the moon. They then searched for the two sisters, finding no evidence of Nairouz, but soon enough coming upon Nara, who was... undeniably different. The Astrolabe explosion, the betrayal of the Mages and battling her own sister had all served to open her eyes to reality, and not just her own twisted version of the truth. Her strengths and skills and power – now combined with her enlightenment – meant that Nara was the most powerful Safian. She would hold on to the Book of Laws until the next Insian ruler would come to rule the nations, and she would also lead the restoration of the land.

“The rebuilding of the sultanate was an unenviable task, to say the least. And no matter how much of their persons the few surviving Insians put into this remaking of their homeland, it could never be the same again. Introduced into their world now were the Jeefs, the warped and vicious Insians, as well as the Narians turned into giant bestial beings who could not be put behind the Bab al-Thalam with the rest of their race.

“It was a long and difficult path. And it was one which could never have been crossed without a radical new machine created by the Safians, a magical device that uses Nawa to give birth to Insians, who in turn would take part in the rebuilding of the empire, its homes and markets, streets, schools and farms. It took the Safians as much work to build this device as it had taken the Insians to perfect the Nawa Cores, and it was the same necessity for survival that drove them to come up with this creation. They eventually came up with this machine, which was almost a mirror of the now destroyed Astrolabe, and which they housed in their Lotus Temple on the moon. What's more, the new Insians it created had the Nawa Core technology built into their person, and so could more easily – and painlessly – cultivate Nawa energy.

“The re-unification of the tribes, though, was impossible, meaning the land was disintegrated back into separate tribes, each with one of the siblings as its own ruler. And so in the end all the struggle of Sinmar, his daughter and ancestors for a single, indestructible land came to an unfortunate end. Each of the sultanate's cities survived through its own powers alone, without a single ruling entity. “And so, in a sense, we became a rogue nation.”

MODERN TIME

“And so, my child, it has been 600 years since the separation of the land. Today the Insians roam this planet in search of hidden Nawa sources and the survival it will mean. The Jeefs and The Narian Animals are strewn across the world, sometimes hidden and keeping only to themselves, other times out to destroy whatever village or city they could find. In Sabad itself, still the biggest and greatest hub of activity, the new sits side by side with the old, and the ruins of these ancient times remain standing next to the modern buildings. The old traditions of the empire, the scholarly achievements, scientific experimentation and merchant prosperity, are all present in the tribes, both large and small, and offer a balance to the new trades and vocations.

“With the Mages safely locked in their towers, and the Narians kept away behind the great door – even if, once in a while, a few of them still manage to find their way to our planet through a crack – what we are most worried about today is the accumulation of Nawa, the maintaining of our strength so that we may survive this harsh land, and survive its monsters.

“You are part of the Safians’ latest batch of Insian colonisers, sent here to rebuild the sultanate to its past magnificence. Now that you know the story, now that you are aware of the absolute history, go child into Planet Toulan prepared to battle for your life. Know that your ultimate goal will always be to harvest Nawa, to give yourself strength over your fellow Insian. And keep your weapon at your side – for there is no question that you will be using it.”

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

The Deposit Number at The National Library

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