
Opening Extract from...

City of Stairs

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And Olvos said to them: 'Why have you done this, my children? Why is the sky wreathed with smoke? Why have you made war in far places, and shed blood in strange lands?'

And they said to Her: 'You blessed us as Your people, and we rejoiced, and were happy. But we found those who were not Your people, and they would not become Your people, and they were wilful and ignorant of You. They would not open their ears to Your songs, or lay Your words upon their tongues. They would not listen. So we dashed them upon the rocks and threw down their houses and shed their blood and scattered them to the winds, and we were right to do so. For we are Your people. We carry Your blessings. We are Yours, and so we are right. Is this not what You said?'

And Olvos was silent.

Book of the Red Lotus, Part IV, *13.51 – 13.59*

Someone even worse

Bulikov, 1719

'I believe the question, then,' says Vasily Yaroslav, 'is one of *intent*. I am aware that the court might disagree with me – this court has always ruled on the side of effect rather than intent – but you cannot seriously fine an honest, modest businessman such a hefty fee for an unintentional damage, can you? Especially when the damage is, well, one of *abstraction*?'

A cough echoes in the courtroom, dashing the pregnant pause. Through the window the shadows of drifting clouds race across the walls of Bulikov.

Governor Turyin Mulaghesh suppresses a sigh and checks her watch. *If he goes on for six more minutes*, she thinks, *we'll have a new record*.

'And you have heard testimony from my friends,' says Yaroslav, 'my neighbours, my employees, my family, my . . . my *bankers*. People who know me well, people who have no reason to lie! They have told you again and again that this is all just an unfortunate coincidence!'

Mulaghesh glances to her right along the high court bench. Prosecutor Jindash, his face the very picture of concern, is carefully doodling a picture of his own hand on the official Ministry of Foreign Affairs letterhead. To her left, Chief Diplomat Troonyi is staring with unabashed interest at the well-endowed girl in the first row of the courtroom seats. Next to Troonyi, at the end of the high court bench, is an empty chair, normally occupied by the visiting professor Dr Efrem Pangyui, who has been more and more absent from these proceedings lately. But frankly, Mulaghesh is only too happy for his absence: his presence in the courtroom, let alone in this whole damn country, has caused enough headaches for her.

'The court' – Yaroslav pounds on the table twice – 'must see reason!'

I must find someone else, thinks Mulaghesh, *to come to these things in my place*. But this is wishful thinking: as the Polis Governor of Bulikov, the capital city of the Continent, it is her duty to preside over all trials, no matter how frivolous.

'So you all have heard, and you must understand, that I never *intended* the sign that stood outside my business to be . . . to be of the nature that it was!'

The crowd in the courtroom mutters as Yaroslav skirts this sensitive subject. Troonyi strokes his beard and leans forward as the girl in the front row crosses her legs. Jindash is colouring in the fingernails on his sketch. Mulaghesh finds herself wishing once again that the polis courtroom had a much different design. The room is spare and stern, more the setting of a military tribunal than a civil court, and it harshly divides the two audiences: the Bulikovians and other Continentals, being citizens of the occupied nation, are seated behind the railings; the Saypuris, being the occupying force, are all seated behind the high bench, towering above everyone. (*Though can we really call ourselves occupiers*, wonders Mulaghesh, *if we've been here for nearly seventy-five years? When do we graduate to residents?*) The whole place is so forbidding, she finds, that the Continentals must expect every sentence handed down to be death by execution. She once submitted a formal request asking the design be reconsidered – 'At least divide us less,' she told them, 'as we're so brown and the Continentals so pale, we hardly need to have a railing to tell us who is who' – but the Saypuri Ministry of Foreign Affairs only made one adjustment: they made the court benches three inches higher.

Yaroslav summons up his nerve.

Here it comes, thinks Mulaghesh.

'I never *intended*,' he says clearly, 'for my sign to reference any Divinity, any trace of the celestial, nor any god!'

A quiet hum as the courtroom fills with whispers. Mulaghesh and the rest of the Saypuris on the bench remain unimpressed by the dramatic nature of this claim. 'How do they not know,' mutters Jindash, 'that this happens at every single Worldly Regulations trial?'

'Quiet,' whispers Mulaghesh.

This public breach of the law emboldens Yaroslav. 'Yes, I . . . I never intended to show fealty to any Divinity! I know *nothing* of the Divinities, of what they were or who they were . . .'

Mulaghesh barely stops herself from rolling her eyes. Every Continental knows *something* about the Divinities: to claim otherwise would be akin to claiming ignorance that rain is wet.

'. . . and thus I could not have known that the sign I posted outside my millinery unfortunately, *coincidentally*, mimicked a Divinity's sigil!'

A pause. Mulaghesh glances up, realising Yaroslav has stopped speaking. 'Are you finished, Mr Yaroslav?' she asks.

Yaroslav hesitates. 'Yes? Yes. Yes, I believe so, yes.'

'Thank you. You may take your seat.'

Prosecutor Jindash stands, takes the floor and produces a large photograph of a painted sign which reads: Yaroslav Hats. Below the letters on the sign is a largish symbol, a straight line ending in a curlicue pointing down, yet it has been altered slightly to suggest the outline of a hat's brim.

Jindash swivels on his heels to face the crowd. 'Would this be your sign, Mr Yaroslav?'

'Y-yes,' says Yaroslav.

'Thank you.' Jindash flourishes the photograph before the bench, the crowd, everyone. 'Let the court please see that Mr Yaroslav has confirmed this sign – yes, *this* sign – as his own.'

CD Troonyi nods as if having gained deeply perceptive insight. The crowd of Continentals mutters anxiously. Jindash walks to his briefcase with the air of a magician before a trick – *How I hate*, Mulaghesh thinks, *that this theatrical little shit got assigned to Bulikov* – and produces a large imprint of a similar symbol: a straight line ending in a curlicue. But in this instance, the symbol has been rendered to look like it is made of dense, twisting vines, even sporting tiny leaves at the curlicue.

The crowd gasps at the reveal of this sign. Some move to make holy gestures, but stop themselves when they realise where they are. Yaroslav himself flinches.

Troonyi snorts. 'Knows nothing of the Divinities *indeed*.'

'Were the estimable Dr Efrem Pangyui here' – Jindash gestures to the empty chair beside Troonyi – 'I have no doubt that he would quickly

identify this as the holy sigil of the Divinity . . . I apologise, the *deceased* Divinity . . .'

The crowd mutters in outrage; Mulaghesh makes a note to reward Jindash's arrogance with a transfer to somewhere cold and inhospitable, with plenty of rats.

'. . . known as *Ahanas*,' Jindash finishes. 'This sigil, specifically, was believed by Continentals to imbue great fecundity, fertility and vigour. For a milliner it would suggest, however peripherally, that his hats imbued their wearers with these same properties. Though Mr Yaroslav may protest, we have heard from Mr Yaroslav's financiers that his business experienced a robust upturn after installing this sign outside his property! In fact, his quarterly revenue increased by *twenty-three per cent*.' Jindash sets down the imprint, and makes a two with the fingers of one hand and a three with the other. 'Twenty. Three. Per cent.'

'Oh my goodness,' says Troonyi.

Mulaghesh cannot bear it: she covers her eyes in embarrassment. *I should never have left the military*.

'How did you—' says Yaroslav.

'I'm sorry, Mr Yaroslav,' says Jindash. 'I believe I have the floor? Thank you. I will continue. The Worldly Regulations were passed by the Saypuri Parliament in 1650, outlawing *any* public acknowledgement of the Divine on the Continent, however peripheral. One may no more mutter the name of a Divinity on the Continent than write their name in bright red paint on the side of a mountain. One need only make any acknowledgement – *any* acknowledgement – of the Divine to be in violation of the Worldly Regulations, and thus incur punishment. The significant financial gain does suggest that Mr Yaroslav installed the sign with both knowledge and intent . . .'

'That's a lie!' cries Yaroslav.

'. . . of its Divine nature. It does not matter that the Divinity the sigil referenced is dead, and the sigil could not have bestowed any properties on anyone or anything. The acknowledgement is made. As such, Mr Yaroslav's actions incur the formal punishment of a fine of' – Jindash consults a note – 'fifteen thousand drekels.'

The crowd shifts and mutters until it is a low roar.

Yaroslav sputters. 'You can't . . . you can't possibly . . .'

Jindash retakes his seat at the bench. He gives Mulaghesh a proud smile; Mulaghesh strongly considers smashing it with her fist.

She wishes she could somehow bypass all this pomp and pageantry. Worldly Regulations cases usually only go to court every five months or so: the vast majority of all WR infractions are settled out of court, between Mulaghesh's office and the defendant. Very, very rarely does anyone feel confident or righteous enough to bring their case to court; and when they do, it's always a dramatic, ridiculous affair.

Mulaghesh looks out over the packed courthouse; there are people standing at the back, as if this dull municipal trial was grand theatre. *But they are not here to see the trial*, she thinks. She glances down the high court bench to Dr Efrem Pangyui's empty chair. *They're here to see the man who's caused me so many problems*.

However, whenever a WR case does go to trial, it's almost always a conviction. In fact, Mulaghesh believes she has acquitted only three people in her two decades as Polis Governor. *And we convict almost every case*, she thinks, *because the law requires us to prosecute them for living their way of life. How can they defend simply being who they are?*

She clears her throat. 'The prosecution has finished its case. You may now make your rebuttal, Mr Yaroslav.'

'But . . . but this isn't fair!' says Yaroslav. 'Why do *you* get to bandy about *our* sigils, *our* holy signs, but we can't?'

'The Polis Governor's quarters' – Jindash waves a hand at the walls – 'are technically Saypuri soil. We are not under the jurisdiction of the Worldly Regulations, which apply only to the Continent.'

'That's . . . that's ridiculous! No, it's not just ridiculous, it's . . . it's *heretical*!' He gets to his feet.

The courtroom is dead silent. Everyone stares at Yaroslav.

Oh, excellent, thinks Mulaghesh. *We have another protest*.

'You have no right to do these things to us,' says Yaroslav. 'You strip our buildings of their holy art, loot and pillage our libraries, arrest people for mentioning a *name*—'

'We are not here,' says Jindash, 'to debate the law, or history.'

'But we are! The Worldly Regulations *deny* us our history! I . . . I have never been able to see that sign you showed me, the sign of, of . . .'

'Of your Divinity,' says Jindash. 'Ahanas.'

Mulaghesh can see two City Fathers of Bulikov – their version of elected councillors – staring at Jindash with cold rage.

'Yes!' says Yaroslav. 'I was never allowed such a thing! And she was *our* god! Ours!'

The crowd looks back at the court guards, expecting them to charge forward and hack down Yaroslav where he stands.

'This is not exactly a rebuttal, is it?' asks Troonyi.

'And you . . . you let *that* man' – Yaroslav points a finger at Dr Efrem Pangyui's empty seat – 'come into our country, and read all of our histories, all of our stories, all of our legends that we ourselves do *not* know! That we ourselves are not *allowed* to know!'

Mulaghesh winces. She knew this would come up eventually.

Mulaghesh is sensitive to the fact that, in the full scope of history, Saypur's global hegemony is minutes old. For many hundreds of years before the Great War, Saypur was the Continent's colony – established and enforced, naturally, by the Continent's Divinities – and few have forgotten this in Bulikov: why else would the City Fathers call the current arrangement 'the masters serving the servants'? In private only, of course.

So it was a show of enormous negligence and stupidity on the part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ignore these tensions, and allow the esteemed Dr Pangyui to travel here, to Bulikov, to study all the history of the Continent: history that the Continentals are legally prevented from studying themselves. Mulaghesh warned the Ministry it'd wreak havoc in Bulikov and, as she predicted, Dr Pangyui's time in Bulikov has not exemplified the mission of peace and understanding he supposedly arrived under: she has had to deal with protests, threats and, once, assault, when someone threw a stone at Dr Pangyui but accidentally struck a police officer on the chin.

'That man,' says Yaroslav, still pointing at the empty chair, 'is an insult to Bulikov and the entire Continent! That man is . . . is the manifestation of the utter contempt Saypur has for the Continent!'

'Oh, now,' says Troonyi, 'that's a bit much, isn't it?'

'He gets to read the things no one else can read!' says Yaroslav. 'He gets to read things written by our fathers, our grandfathers!'

'He is allowed to do so,' says Jindash, 'by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His mission here is of an ambassadorial nature. And this is not part of your tria—'

'Just because you won the War doesn't mean you can do whatever you like!' says Yaroslav. 'And just because we lost it doesn't mean you can strip us of everything we value!'

'You tell them, Vasily!' shouts someone at the back of the room.

Mulaghesh taps her gavel against her desk; immediately, the room falls silent.

'Would I be correct in thinking, Mr Yaroslav,' she says wearily, 'that your rebuttal is finished?'

'I . . . I reject the legitimacy of this court!' he says hoarsely.

'Duly noted. Chief Diplomat Troonyi – your verdict?'

'Oh, guilty,' says Troonyi. 'Very much guilty. Incredibly guilty.'

Eyes in the room shift to Mulaghesh. Yaroslav is shaking his head, mouthing 'no' at her.

I need a smoke, thinks Mulaghesh.

'Mr Yaroslav,' she says. 'If you had pleaded no contest when initially charged with the infraction, your fine would have been more lenient. However, against the recommendation of this court – and against my *personal advice* – you chose instead to bring it to trial. I believe you can understand that the evidence Prosecutor Jindash has brought against you is highly incriminating. As Prosecutor Jindash said, we do not debate history here: we merely deal with its effects. As such, it is with regret that I am forced to—'

The courtroom door bangs open. Seventy-two heads turn at once.

A small Saypuri official stands in the doorway, looking nervous and alarmed. Mulaghesh recognises him: Pitry something or other, from the embassy, one of Troonyi's lackeys.

Pitry swallows and totters down the aisle towards the bench.

'Yes?' says Mulaghesh. 'Is there a reason for this intrusion?'

Pitry does not answer. He extends a hand, holding a paper message. Mulaghesh takes it, unfolds it and reads:

The body of Efrem Pangyui has been discovered in his office at Bulikov University. Murder is suspected but unconfirmed..

Mulaghesh looks up, and realises everyone in the room is watching her.

This damned trial, she thinks, *is now even less important than it was before*.

She clears her throat. 'Mr Yaroslav . . . In light of recent events, I am forced to reconsider the priority of your case.'

Jindash and Troonyi both say, 'What?'

Yaroslav frowns. 'What?'

'Would you say, Mr Yaroslav, that you have learned your lesson?' asks Mulaghesh.

Two Continentals creep in through the courtroom doors. They find friends in the crowd, and whisper in their ears. Soon word is spreading throughout the courtroom audience. '*Murdered*?' someone says loudly.

'My . . . lesson?' says Yaroslav.

'To put it bluntly, Mr Yaroslav,' says Mulaghesh, 'will you be stupid enough in the future to publicly display what is obviously a Divinity's sigil in the hope of drumming up more business?'

'What are you *doing*?' says Jindash. Mulaghesh hands him the message; he scans it and goes white. 'Oh, no . . . oh, by the seas . . .'

'Beaten to death!' someone says out in the audience.

The whole of Bulikov must know by now, thinks Mulaghesh.

'I . . . No,' says Yaroslav. 'No, I would . . . I would not?'

Troonyi has now read the message. He gasps and stares at Dr Pangyui's empty chair as if expecting to find it occupied by his dead body.

'Good answer,' says Mulaghesh. She taps her gavel. 'Then, as the authority in this courtroom, I will set aside CD Troonyi's estimable opinions and dismiss your case. You are free to leave.'

'I am? Really?' says Yaroslav.

'Yes,' says Mulaghesh. 'And I would advise you exercise your freedom to leave with all due haste.'

The crowd has devolved into shouts and cries. A voice bellows, 'He's dead! He's really dead! Victory, oh, glorious victory!'

Jindash slumps in his chair as if his spine has been pulled out.

'What are we going to *do*?' says Troonyi.

Someone in the crowd is crying, 'No. No! *Now* who will they send?'

Someone shouts back, 'Who cares who they send?'

'Don't you see?' cries the voice in the crowd. 'They will reinvade us, reoccupy! Now they will send someone even *worse*!'

Mulaghesh sets her gavel aside and gratefully lights a cigarillo.

How do they do it, Pitry wonders? How can anyone in Bulikov sit next to the city walls or even live with them in sight, peeking through the blinds and drapes of high windows, and feel in any way normal? Pitry tries to look at anything else: his watch, which is five minutes slow, and getting slower; his fingernails, which are quite fine except for the little finger, which remains irritatingly rippled; he even looks across at the train station porter, who keeps glaring at him. Yet eventually Pitry cannot resist, and he sneaks a glance to his left, to the east, where the crushing white walls wait.

They are smooth and blank as milk. After thousands of years, not a single crack shows. He does not even try to see the tops: seven hundred feet up or so they disappear behind a veil of grey smog.

There is always grey smog at the edge of the walls of Bulikov. They seem to collect it, as if they are not city walls but the walls of a vast tunnel extending down from the sky, and no air escapes in or out.

It comforts Pitry not one jot that he is, more or less, partly right.

He looks back at his watch, and does some calculations. Is the train late? Are such unusual trains late? Perhaps they come on their own time. Perhaps its engineer, whoever it might be, was never told of the telegram stating, quite clearly, '15:00' and does not know that very important official people are taking this secret appointment quite seriously. Or perhaps no one cares that the person waiting for this train might be cold, hungry, unnerved by these white walls and practically death-threatened by the milky blue gaze of the train station porter.

He sighs. If Pitry were to die and see all of his life flash before his eyes in his penultimate moment, he is fairly sure it would be a boring show. For though he thought a position in the Saypuri embassies would be an interesting and exotic job, taking him to new and exotic lands (and exposing him to new and exotic women), so far it has mostly consisted of waiting. As an assistant to the Associate Ambassadorial Administrator, Pitry has

learned how to wait on new and unexciting things in new and unexciting ways: he is an intrepid explorer in the field of waiting, an expert at watching the second hand of a clock slowly crank out the hours. The purpose of an assistant, he has decided, is to have someone upon whom you can unload all the deadly little nothings that fill the bureaucratic day.

He checks his watch. Twenty minutes, maybe. His breath roils with steam. *By all the seas, what an awful job*.

Perhaps he can transfer out, he thinks. There are actually many opportunities for a Saypuri here: the Continent is divided into four regions, each of which has its own Regional Governor and accompanying staff office; in the next tier below, there are the Polis Governors, which regulate each major metropolitan area on the Continent; and in the next tier below that are the embassies, which regulate . . . well, culture. Which almost everyone has interpreted to mean nothing at all. Honestly, why establish an embassy in cities you effectively control?

The station porter strolls from his offices and stands at the edge of the platform. He glances back at Pitry, who nods and smiles. The porter looks at Pitry's headcloth and his short, dark beard, sniffs twice – *I smell a shally* – and then, with a lingering glare, turns and walks back to his office, as if saying, *I know you're there, so don't try and steal anything*. As if there is anything to steal in a deserted train station.

They hate us, thinks Pitry. But of course they do. It is something he has come to terms with during his short period at the embassy. *We tell them to forget, but can they? Can we? Can anyone?*

Yet Pitry underestimated the nature of their hatred. He had no understanding of it until he came here and saw the empty places on the walls and in the shop windows, the frames and facades shorn clean of any images or carvings; he saw how the people of Bulikov behaved at certain hours of the day, as if they knew this time was designated for some show of deference, yet they could not act, and instead simply milled about; and, in his walks throughout the city, he came upon the roundabouts and cul-de-sacs that had obviously once played host to something – some marvellous sculpture, or a shrine fogged with incense – but were now paved over, or held nothing more marvellous than a street lamp, or a bland municipal garden, or a lonely bench.

Saypur still celebrates the passage of the Worldly Regulations as if they were some martial victory, rather than a complicated piece of legislation. And in Saypur, the overwhelming feeling is that the Regulations have been a wild success, curbing and correcting the behaviour of the Continentals over the course of seventy-five years. But in his time in Bulikov, Pitry has begun to feel that, though the Regulations appear to have had some superficial success – for, true, no one in Bulikov praises, mentions or acknowledges any aspect of the Divine, at least not in public – in reality, the Regulations have failed.

The city knows. It remembers. Its past is written in its bones, though now the past speaks in silences.

Pitry shivers in the cold.

He is not sure if he would rather be at the office, so alight with concern and chaos in the wake of Dr Efrem Pangyui's murder. Telegraphs spitting out papers like drunks vomiting at closing time. The endless cranking of phones. Secretaries sprinting into offices, staking papers on to spikes with the viciousness of shrikes.

Yet then came the one telegram that silenced everyone:

C-AMB THIVANI TO BULIKOV MOROV STATION 15:00 <STOP> VTS512

And from the coding on the end it was clear this had not come from the Polis Governor's Office, but from the *Regional* Governor's Office, which is the only place on the Continent that has direct, immediate connection with Saypur . . . and so, the Comm Department secretary announced with terrible dread, the telegram might have been rerouted across the South Sea from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself.

There was a flurry of discussion as to who should meet this Thivani person, because he had doubtlessly been sent here in reaction to the professor's death, bringing swift and terrible retribution; for had not Dr Efrem Pangyui been one of Saypur's brightest and most favoured sons? Had his ambassadorial mission not been one of the greatest scholarly endeavours in history? Thus it was quickly decided that Pitry, being young, exuberant, cheerful – and not in the room at the time – would be the best man for the job.

But they did wonder at the coding, C-AMB, for 'Cultural Ambassador'. Why would they send one of *those*? Weren't CAs the lowest caste of the Ministry? Most of them were fresh-faced students, picked solely because they were bi- or tri- or quadrilingual, and often harboured a rather unhealthy interest in foreign cultures and histories, something metropolitan Saypuris found rather distasteful. Usually CAs served as ornamentation to frivolous receptions and galas, and little more. So why send a simple CA into the middle of one of the greatest diplomatic debacles of the past decade?

'Unless,' Pitry wondered aloud back at the embassy, 'it's not related at all. Maybe it's just coincidence.'

'Oh, it's related,' said Nidayin, who was Assistant Manager of the embassy Comm Department. 'The telegram came through just hours after we sent out the news. This is their reaction.'

'So why send a CA? They might as well have sent a plumber, or a harpist.'

'Unless,' said Nidayin, 'Mr Thivani is *not* a Cultural Ambassador. He might be something else entirely.'

'Are you saying,' Pitry asked, fingers reaching up into his headcloth to scratch his scalp, 'that the telegram lied?'

Nidayin simply shook his head. 'Oh, Pitry. How *did* you get yourself into the Ministry?'

Nidayin, thinks Pitry in the cold. *How I hate you. One day I will dance with your beautiful girlfriend, and she will fall helplessly in love with me, and you shall walk in upon us mussing your sheets and ice will pierce your muddy heart*.

But Pitry now sees he was a fool. Nidayin was suggesting this Thivani might be *travelling* as a CA, but he could in truth be some high-ranking secret operative, infiltrating enemy territories and toppling resistance to Saypur. Pitry imagines a burly, bearded man with bandoliers of explosives and a glimmering knife clutched in his teeth, a knife that's tasted blood in many shadows. The more he thinks on it, the more Pitry grows a little afraid of this Thivani person. *Perhaps he will emerge from the train car like a djinnifrit*, he thinks, *spouting flames from his eyes and black poison from his mouth*.

There is a rumbling in the east. Pitry looks to the city walls and the tiny

aperture in the bottom. From here it looks like a hole gnawed by vermin, but if he were closer it'd be nearly thirty feet tall.

The dark little hole fills with light. There is a flash, a screech and the train pounds through.

It is not really a train: just a beaten, stained engine and a single sad little passenger car. It looks like something from coal country, a car the workers would ride in while being carted from mine to mine. Certainly nothing for an Ambassador – even a Cultural Ambassador.

The train thuds up to the platform. Pitry scurries over and stands before the doors, hands clasped behind him and chest thrown gallantly forward. Are his buttons set? Is his headcloth straight? Did he shine his epaulets? He cannot remember. He frantically licks a thumb, and begins rubbing at one. Then the doors scream open, and there is . . .

Red. No, not red – burgundy. A lot of burgundy, as if a drape has been hung across the door. Yet then the drape shifts, and Pitry sees it is split in the middle by a stripe of white cloth with buttons down the middle.

It is not a drape. It is the chest of a man in a dark burgundy coat. The biggest man Pitry has ever seen – a giant.

The giant unfolds himself and steps out of the car. His feet fall on the boards like millstones. Pitry stumbles back to allow him room. The giant's long red coat kisses the tops of immense black books, his shirt is open-throated with no scarf, and he wears a wide-brimmed grey hat at a piratical angle. On his right hand is a soft grey glove; his left is bare. He is well over six and a half feet tall, incredibly broad in the shoulders and back, but there is not an ounce of fat on him: his face has a lean, starved look, and it is a face Pitry never expected to see on a Saypuri Ambassador. The man's skin is pale with many pink scars, his beard and hair are blond-white and his eyes – or rather *eye*, for one eye is but a dark, hooded cavity – is so blue it is almost a whitish-grey.

He is a Dreyling, a North-man. The Ambassador, however impossible it seems, is one of the mountain savages, a foreigner to both the Continent and Saypur.

If this is their response, thinks Pitry, *then what an awful and terrible response it is*.

The giant stares at Pitry with a flat, passive gaze, as if wondering if this runty little Saypuri is worth stomping on.

Pitry attempts a bow. 'Greetings, Ambassador Thivani, to the w-wondrous city of B-Bulikov. I am Pitry Suturashni. I hope your journey was good?'

Silence.

Pitry, still bowed, tilts his head up. The giant is staring down at him, though one eyebrow rises just slightly in what could be a look of contemptuous bemusement.

From somewhere behind the giant comes the sound of a throat being politely cleared. The giant, without a word of greeting or goodbye, turns and walks towards the station manager's desk.

Pitry scratches his head and watches him go. The little cough sounds again, and he realises there is someone else standing in the doorway.

It is a small Saypuri woman, dark-skinned and even smaller than Pitry. She is dressed rather plainly – a blue robe that is noticeable only in its Saypuri cut – and she watches him from behind enormously thick eyeglasses. She wears a light grey trench coat and a short-brimmed blue hat with a paper orchid in its band. Pitry finds there is something off about her eyes. The giant's gaze was incredibly, lifelessly still, but this woman's eyes are the precise opposite: huge and soft and dark, like deep wells with many fish swimming in them.

The woman smiles. The smile is neither pleasant nor unpleasant: it is a smile like fine silver plate, used for one occasion and polished and put away once finished. 'I thank you for coming to meet us at such a late hour,' she says.

Pitry looks at her, then back at the giant, who is cramming his way into the station porter's office, much to the porter's concern. 'Am . . . Ambassador Thivani?'

She nods, and steps off the train.

A woman? Thivani is a *woman*? Why didn't they . . . ?

Oh, damn the Comm Department! Damn their gossip and their lies!

'I trust that Chief Diplomat Troonyi,' she says, 'is busy with the consequences of the murder. Otherwise he would be here himself?'

'Uh . . .' Pitry does not wish to admit that he knows no more of

CD Troonyi's intentions than he does of the movements of the stars in the sky.

She blinks at him from behind her eyeglasses. Silence swells to engulf Pitry like the tide. He scrambles for something to say, anything. He lands on, 'It's very nice to have you here in Bulikov.' No, no, absolutely *wrong*. Yet he continues, 'I hope your journey was . . . pleasant.' Wrong! Worse!

She looks at him a moment longer. 'Pitry, you said your name was?'

'Y-Yes.'

There is a shout from behind them. Pitry looks, but Thivani does not – she keeps watching Pitry as one would an interesting bug. Pitry sees that the giant is forcibly taking something from the station porter – some kind of clipboard – which makes the porter none too pleased. The giant stoops, removes the grey glove from his right hand and opens his fingers to show . . . something. The porter, whose face previously had been the colour of old beets, goes quite white. The giant tears out a sheet of paper from the clipboard, gives the clipboard back to the porter, and exits.

'Who is . . . ?'

'That is my secretary,' says Thivani. 'Sigrud. He assists me in my duties.'

The giant takes out a match, lights it on a thumbnail, and sets fire to the piece of paper.

'S-secretary?' says Pitry.

Flames lick the giant's fingers. If this pains him, he does not show it. After he deems the paper has sufficiently burned, he blows on it – *puff* – and embers dance across the station platform. He tugs the grey glove back on and surveys the station coldly.

'Yes,' she says. 'Now, if it does not trouble you, I believe I would like to go straight to the embassy. Has the embassy informed any of the officials of Bulikov about my arrival?'

'Well. Uh . . .'

'I see. Do we have possession of the professor's body?'

Pitry's mind whirls. He wonders, perhaps for the first time, what happens to a body after it dies – this suddenly seems much more perplexing than the whereabouts of its spirit.

'I see,' she says. 'Do you have a car with you?'

Pitry nods.

'If you would, please lead me to it.'

He nods again, perplexed, and takes her across the shadow-laden station to the car in the alleyway. He cannot stop glancing over his shoulder at her.

This is who they send? This tiny, plain girl with the too-high voice? What could she possibly hope to accomplish in this endlessly hostile, endlessly suspicious place? Could she even last the night?

One of the most puzzling and fascinating obstacles in trying to understand the forces that governed so much of our past, and continue to affect our future, is that even today, after we have attempted so much research and recovered so many artefacts, we still have no visual concept of what they looked like. All the sculptures, paintings, murals, bas-reliefs and carvings render the figures either indistinct or incoherently. For in one depiction Kolkan appears as a smooth stone beneath a tree; and in another, a dark mountain against the bright sun; and in yet another, a man made of clay seated on a mountain. And these inconsistent portrayals are still a great improvement over others, which render their subjects as a vague pattern or colour hanging in the air, no more than the stroke of a brush: for example, if we are to take the Continent's ancient art at its word, the Divinity Jukov only ever appeared as a storm of starlings.

As in so many of these studies, it is difficult to conclude anything from such disparate scraps. One must wonder if the subjects of these works of art actually chose to present themselves in this way. Or, perhaps, the subjects were experienced in a manner that was impossible to translate into conventional art.

Perhaps no one on the Continent ever quite knew what they were seeing. And, now that the Divinities are gone, we might never know.

Time renders all people and all things silent. And gods, it seems, are no exception.

The Nature of Continental Art, *Dr Efrem Pangyui*