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Cover design by Matt Seff Barnes

Edited by Kaitlynn Keller

Published by Roaring Tulips, LLC





KANDUM

The Land Bridge

HICARES

SERENCHEA

PESCEL

The Wastes

The Green Sea

PROLOGUE



Even in the heat, Clesta's swollen joints ached. She couldn't imagine how bad it would be if she lived anywhere else. The coastal Pescelean climate was much more agreeable than anywhere else on Tilverin. As things were, she woke up before dawn, unable to sleep through the various ailments that came with old age. She felt every single day of the thousand years she'd aged as a mortal. Once, she was a rebellious piece of existence in a dimension lacking any past or future. Now, she wandered the globe, living in this village or that as their healer.

She had a few rules to keep safe. One, she never went by her real name. Two, she never stayed for more than a decade. Three, she never let on to the true extent of her powers. They were all important. Most people had forgotten she was a goddess. The only god anyone worshipped now was her husband, Pecu. He was the one who placed her in this terrible position a millennium ago. Her anger with him cooled after a few centuries, but her loneliness never left. She missed him,

still loved him. She missed her sisters and nieces too. Sadly, solitude would be her lot for the next few thousand years until her magic ran out.

Clesta stuck to simple healer work, even though ordinary physicians looked down their noses at her. The more of her magic she used, the more her life force disappeared. Besides, there were still secret cults all over Tilverin. There were few mages and priests left in the world, and they only knew a fraction of what she and her siblings created for them. Who knew how many secret libraries there were on this planet? They needed a place for all their biased interpretations of the gods. She had no interest in becoming their teacher. She also didn't want to be a tool manipulated by the kings and queens of the world. She'd lived through enough wars to know how pointless it all was.

No, she would stick to curing commoners in obscure locations, except for today. Even exiled goddesses needed to eat, and this village was low on funds. She helped an aging fisherman with arthritis the previous day, and he repaid her with a helpful tip. His cousin at The Capitol would pay good money for the ointment she used to relieve pain.

She tied her baskets of clinking glass jars to her donkey's back and guided him on the long, slow journey North. It was too difficult to get on and off the beast. The poor creature was also getting on in years. She couldn't burden it any more than she already was. The sun rose and set on this trip before she finally made it to an inn. More than once, along the way, she remembered when she could travel anywhere on the astral plane. Pecu had taken that from her too.

Clesta put on a pathetic look for the innkeeper. Then, she traced a quick charm spell on the back of her hand. It was enough to get her a free night's stay and some kind words about how she reminded him of his grandmother. He even

gave her a small bowl of hot soup and soft, crustless bread. She was grateful for any food that required very little assistance from her few and ancient teeth. Sometimes, she loved people. She was so glad that she'd created them.

Clesta chose to eat at a small table in the corner for a little peace. Unfortunately, the place soon flooded with drunken soldiers and loud merchants. Words echoed in chaos around the tavern. The reek of body odor buried the pleasant smell of freshly polished wood. Clesta forgot all about her warm, fuzzy thoughts from moments before. She brought her empty bowl to the innkeeper, not wanting to leave a mess for the kind man on such a busy night. Stuffing the remaining bread in her pocket for later, she walked toward the room he indicated was hers.

"They call it the Statue of the Goddess Winds!" an excited merchant told his friends.

Clesta's heart leapt, and she stopped in her tracks to turn around. She wondered if her ears were wishful.

"They found it in a cave in Hicares, untouched for a thousand years," the merchant continued. "Their King plans on turning it into a tourist destination."

"Are you going?" his friend asked.

"Oh, yes," the merchant answered, "I could make a killing off bottles of dirt from the cave."

Clesta spat at the merchant and muttered a curse under her breath. The Statue of the Goddess Winds was not for the likes of some money-grubber.

"What was the meaning of that?" he cried out, insulted.

"I'm so sorry, young man," she responded, putting on her most innocent expression, "I don't know what came over me. It's my mind. I get confused, sometimes. I think I need to lay down."

She made a big show of how frail and feeble she was while

A.R.K. HORTON

she made the rest of the trip to her room. As soon as she was on the other side of the door, she let the joyful tears roll down her face. Good fortune found her at last.

CHAPTER ONE



”**D**on't tell Mom I'm here,” Eya whispered, holding a finger up to her lips.

Simrin rolled his eyes but motioned for her to join him. They stood at the railing, overlooking the preparations for Eya's coming out ball. She had turned seventeen recently but still acted like a little girl. It was difficult to imagine her meeting the young man she was marrying in a year this evening. Eya grabbed Simrin's hand to show her gratitude, but he yanked it back with a painful wince.

”Ouch!” Simrin cried, sucking on his fingers. ”How do you pick up so much static electricity all the time?”

”Sorry, Sim!” Eya apologized and shrugged her shoulders.

”I can't stay mad at you.” Simrin chuckled and ruffled her hair.

Eya didn't think she'd ever seen the castle looking so extravagant. She thought their mother must have put more time, effort, and money into this event than her own wedding to their father. For years, all Eya heard from her mother was how amazing this day would be. Now, she believed it. Servants

cleaned the green and gold banners with the Hicaron family crest. The goat embroidered on it even looked happy to be there. Shimmering gold cloth covered every table. Fresh green candles replaced the old melted white ones on every candelabra and chandelier. Green velvet reupholstered threadbare chairs. Gold plated flatware took the place of their regular silverware. Crystal chalices and decanters cast rainbows at every table. Eya finally understood why her mother insisted on extra lessons in dinner etiquette over the last few months.

Their older brothers Parvon and Novem approached. Eya groaned, knowing Parvon would likely tell on her to their mother. He was the oldest, the heir to their father's throne. She was confident he would crack under the pressure of his serious eyebrows one day. She was much closer to Simrin and Novem. Simrin had their mother's carrot hair and green eyes. He was the joker of the group and the one usually indulging Eya's adventurous nature. Novem had dark curly hair like Eya, but his eyes were greener than hers, which had a silvery cast. All the young women in their tiny country of Hicares swooned over him. They all admired him for his good looks and way with words.

Before Eya could even beg Parvon for his silence, Queen Iba herself came rushing down the hallway. Her mother's silk skirts floated around her in a blur of plum. A flush of irritation ruddied the woman's beautiful face. The Hicaron siblings gulped in unison.

"You all should be getting ready right now!" She called out to them, "Eya, you're coming with me!"

"But, Mom!" Eya cried.

Eya's brothers mocked her whine. Iba and Eya gave the princes the same stony glare, which only caused the young men to laugh in response. Eya's mother grabbed her by the

elbow and dragged her to where servants waited to prepare the princess.

"You're seventeen-years-old." Iba chided. "You're almost a woman. Act like one."

Eya wanted to say something about how much more mature she would be if she hadn't been so sheltered and controlled. Her entire life was a cycle of lessons on how to be a good little lady. Horse-riding around the castle grounds was the only thing that broke up the monotony. She'd never once even stepped foot outside the walls that protected their home from the rest of Hicares. Eya kept all these grumbings to herself. She knew better than to test her mother's reserves anymore that night.

All her disagreeable thoughts flew out of her head once she saw her gown. It had a low, sweeping neckline and sleeves embroidered with spiraling lines. Eya dressed in it at once. The fabric wrapped around her waist, fanning out with gauzy grace to her green velvet slippers. Eya realized her mother put a great deal of thought into what her daughter should wear.

The servants groomed Eya's black curls, picking out the usual leaf debris. They pinned her hair back from her face a little and inserted white blossoms to cover the pins. Then, Queen Iba revealed a jade necklace Eya knew very well. Over the years, Eya had gazed at the forbidden jewels from the other side of a glass case. She gasped in awe as her mother held it mere inches from her face.

"I-I get to wear it?" Eya asked, too scared to get her hopes up.

"It is your inheritance, and this is a special occasion," Iba answered, giving Eya a sweet peck on her forehead and clasping the necklace around her throat.

They shared a loving look in the mirror. The two were frequently at odds. Eya was the only daughter of King

Simnaud, destined to marry the second son of a Kandumes duke from infancy. They planned her life down to her dying breath and told her to be grateful. Eya rebelled, causing her mother endless grief. Tonight, the princess felt guilty for all her traitorous thoughts. She knew her parents only wanted the best for her. Why should she question that?

"Daijah Rodovan will live a happy life with you to gaze upon every day." Her mother said with tearful affection.

Eya sighed, remembering why they butted heads all the time. Queen Iba was raising the future wife of a noble. She treated her differently from her brothers. They prepared Parvon to be the future king. Novem and Simrin had all freedom in Tilverin to find themselves and pursue their own goals. They polished and contained Eya as if she were the jade necklace scattered across her décolletage. She was property, nothing more, and that's the way her mother liked it. Eya swallowed her bitterness and gave her mother a sweet smile.

"Thanks, Mom." She said. "Can I show Dad before the ball starts?"

"Not a chance," Iba answered. "You'll wind up running off and making a mess of everything we've done here. You'll see him soon enough."

Eya and her mother joined the princes on the balcony. The sun was setting on the distant horizon, where the ocean waves were just visible. Novem whistled with surprise when his sister came into view. Eya giggled and did a little twirl for her brothers.

"Eya!" Simrin exclaimed. "You look like a girl!"

Eya poked her tongue out at her brother.

"Act your age, Eya." Parvon reproached, giving her a disapproving scowl.

"You're not my father, Parvon!" Eya countered.

"Yes, that would be me." King Simnaud said from behind her shoulder.

Eya turned around to see her father standing in the light of the doorway. She had expected him to give her either a reproving look or an adoring one. This worried expression on his face confused her. It was unfamiliar on the man she knew had all the answers. She threw her arms around him, in her typically exuberant fashion. He responded by leaning into the embrace.

Queen Iba got everyone into formation to enter the ball. Eya walked between her parents, each locking one of her arms, as they came down the stairs.

"Presented at her first ball, Princess Eyanisade Simnaudona Hicaron!" the herald bellowed.

Eya had practiced this moment countless times. Still, the herald's booming voice and the resulting thunderous applause startled her. She hoped no one noticed that she didn't so much sit down as stumble backward into her chair.

With that, the ball finally commenced. The royal family of Hicares watched their Kandumes guests arrive. Then, Eya heard what she'd been waiting for all night.

"Duke Kojun of Rodovan and his son Daijah." The herald proclaimed from the entrance. What Eya could see was a man who appeared to be half bear. He was tall, dark, and brooding. She could only assume a smile had never trespassed his stony face. The Duke dressed adequately for the occasion. Yet, he looked as if he would be more comfortable dressed in heavy furs and carrying a whip. For all that, Eya had to admit that he must have been striking when young. With that thought, she immediately looked at his son with great expectations. She was a little disappointed. Here were the darkness and the brooding. He even had the promise of a towering figure, but he was gangly. Were those pimples all over his face?

The Duke and his son made their way through the crowd to sit next to the royal family. King Simnaud exchanged the necessary greetings, and the betrothed sat next to each other. Each was appropriately awkward near the other.

"It would be pleasant to see our young people dance together." Queen Iba encouraged. She realized that it would take prompting for the two to utter one word conversation.

"Would you care to dance?" Daijah asked after a cough, and with a noticeable degree of nervousness.

Eya nodded her head in response, and they made their way to the empty dance floor. Anxiety washed her in nausea, but she swallowed it down. They took memorized and cumbersome dance steps. Everyone in the room watched as the betrothed interacted for the first time. Nerves buzzed in Eya's fingertips.

"So, what are your interests, Princess Eyanisade?" Daijah asked.

Eya looked up into his black, glittering eyes, which were actually quite handsome. She had no idea how to reply to this question, except to say, "I enjoy horseback riding."

"I do as well," Daijah said with a smile, "at least when I'm not studying."

"What do you study?" Eya asked as he gave her a little twirl and pulled her back to him.

"Mostly medical sciences," he answered. "I want to heal people one day."

Eya thought that was an admirable pursuit, but couldn't help feeling a sting of jealousy all the same. Here was another man allowed to be whatever he wanted to be. Meanwhile, her parents pigeon-holed her into the role of his wife. Her shoulders fell.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"Do you want to get away from here?" She offered, tipping

her chin at the nobles, now beginning to fill the dance floor. "Let's go someplace we can really talk."

Daijah nodded his head, and she took him by the hand, leading him to her favorite secret spot. On the way, she grabbed some chocolate treats off a banquet table, handing a few to her future spouse. In the relative quiet of the dim hallway, they ate their treats in peace. Eya remembered a childhood filled with games of hide-and-seek here. Soon, she would be a woman, and those games would be over for good.

"A year," Eya whispered.

"Yes," Daijah responded.

"They want us to live in my Aunt Minza's estate."

"Will she mind?"

Eya chuckled a bit. Her face grew sad as she answered, "She died of the flu last winter."

"I'm sorry," was all Daijah could say.

Eya shrugged her shoulders, not wanting to let on how horrible it had been. It was the reason they had delayed her coming out ball by a year. Everyone in the family had gotten sick. Her elderly grandparents were the first to go. Simrin nearly hadn't survived. The most significant blow had been Minza's death. Her spinster aunt was her role model, much to Queen Iba's chagrin. The woman had her own home and no husband to walk on eggshells around. She tended to a small garden and a menagerie of pets, living a simple and happy life.

"It's not as large as the castle, but it will hold up to five servants, and we could have many children." Eya described, hoping to fill the awkward silence growing between them.

"Sounds like fun!" Daijah said and then blushed when he realized what his words implied, "I mean...I would like to have many children. I like children. They are fun. Not that getting the children here wouldn't be fun. I mean..."

To his surprise, Eya snorted with laughter. She was gasping

for breath and wheezing for a moment until the spell was over. His nervous expression shifted to a pleasant smile. After wiping away her joyful tears, she decided to ask Daijah an important question.

"Do you think you could like me?" She asked.

He opened his mouth to answer, but then they heard steps from around the corner. Eya hastily pulled him into a broom closet, where they waited in silence for the steps to pass by. Their bodies pressed together in the cramped space. She had never been this close to a man that wasn't her father or brothers. Their eyes locked in astonishment. Their noses were so close they nearly touched. Their short breaths could be felt in rising chests and quiet puffs against cheeks. Eya felt aroused and embarrassed about it.

"He's offering an obscene amount of gold." King Simnaud whispered from the other side of the door.

"You can't give it to him." Duke Kojun replied. "The Statue of the Goddess Winds might be the most powerful artifact in Tilverin. If you give it to Pescel, King Retam would see it as a declaration of war against Kandum."

"It's been a nuisance ever since that shepherd found it." Simnaud sighed, "The tourism money is helpful, but now I have to worry about screening visitors."

"Who would want to hurt Hicares?" Kojun chuckled, "You're the smallest, least threatening country in the world. Until now, the sole thing you were famous for was being the only way to travel by land from Pescel to Kandum."

"You're right," Simnaud replied. "I'll write back in the morning and turn him down."

The footsteps continued down the hallway, fading as their distance increased. Eya opened the closet door and stepped outside, motioning for Daijah to follow.

"What was that about?" Daijah asked.

"Oh, they discovered some relic recently." Eya explained, rolling her eyes, "The Regent of Pescel wants it. He thinks it's magical or something."

"You don't believe in magic?" Daijah inquired, and Eya laughed. "King Retam does."

"Have you ever seen any magic?" Eya asked.

Daijah shook his head, and Eya gave him a knowing look. Rumors circulated for centuries about secret magical cults. King Simnaud thought it was all a bunch of stories that weak-minded people told each other. Eya felt convinced her father was right about everything, including this.

"I do think we could be happy," Daijah said, giving her a crooked grin that was charming against his adolescent face.

"We should ride together." Eya said, "Maybe tomorrow?"

Daijah shook his head and gave her a sad smile, "I can't. My dad told me right before we got here that there's an emergency back home. We have to leave in the morning."

"Oh, I was looking forward to getting to know you," Eya said, her face falling when she realized she meant that.

They wandered out to the balcony. Eya gazed at how the moon reflected off the ocean waves and fantasized about taking a boat to some faraway country. She imagined fishing the plentiful waters of Pescel. Next, she was touring the impressive steam factories of Serenchea. Towards the end of her fantasies, she unearthed a treasure buried under the sands of The Wastes. She shook her head and looked at Daijah, lost in his own ruminations. She was a princess, not an adventurer. She was looking at the only future she would ever know.

The next morning, Eya said goodbye to her fiancé. Daijah made it clear he was reluctant to leave so soon, but his father had pressing matters in Kandum. They promised each other they would write as often as possible. Daijah looked forward to sharing his interests, if only through paper and pen. His father

thought of his pursuits as unmanly, given that they were from a country obsessed with war. Eya felt she would have little to tell him about her own life. Yet, she was also excited about the exchange. She hoped his letters would carry her far from her sheltered existence on the castle grounds.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Eya’s mother whispered into her ear as they watched the Kandumes ride away. “He may not be the best looking young man, but I think your father made you an excellent match.”

Eya couldn’t disagree. She knew there were far worse options. In Hicare, royalty often married commoners. Her own mother was the daughter of a wealthy wool merchant. It was rare for any Hicaron to marry a noble of such high stature, even if he wasn’t the heir to a dukedom. Yet, Eya didn’t feel lucky. She felt stuck. She wanted to be the perfect princess for her parents, and she wanted to share their desires. Deep down, though, she knew there was no contentment in store for her on this path. She didn’t have any idea what life she wanted, but she at least wanted a chance to find out.

“Chin up,” Simrin teased, “lover boy will be back in a year.”

“Shut up, Sim,” Eya growled, pushing past her brothers.

A rumble of thunder rolled above. Eya’s family looked up to see an unexpected gathering of dark clouds forming in the sky. Queen Iba looked down to see her daughter storming toward the castle. With a sigh, she instructed her sons to head inside. Summer storms were rare but suited Eya’s mood.



PESCELEANS WERE LAID BACK AND FRIENDLY PEOPLE. THEIR Regent was not at all like most of his countrymen, however. He was sly and cold underneath his attractive blue eyes and

long hair the color of moonlight. He only thought of what would bring him status and authority. He desired above anything else absolute control over the affluent Pescel.

Only somewhat less did he crave the affections of its queen, Esamne. The Arch Dukes planned to crown her as the active ruler once she reached the age of twenty-one. He was set on marrying her by then.

She was a vision of fire. Her copper hair hung slick straight down her back. Her amber eyes were usually calming but could ignite if prompted. Her strawberry lips were small and sweet. There was a glorious display of freckles scattered all over her skin. She was everything that her people were and wanted to be. Yet, she was a naïve young woman. She did not know nor care how the Regent ran her country. So, when Malphesent tried to buy the statue with government money, she was oblivious. That was also how Farek's experiments on the wandering tribes of Cuvanos went unnoticed.

"Sir Regent, a letter has arrived from Hicares," a page announced, as he knelt before Farek.

The Regent had been testing out what a magical ball of energy could do to the Cuvanos' body in front of him. He was delighting in the way the sizzling skin bubbled up into purple welts. He couldn't wait to see what other attacks his mages could teach him. Still, when he saw the page, he quit what he was doing and tore open the letter. After a cursory glance, he folded it closed and dismissed the page.

"He refuses once again," Farek said to his assistant Brence.

He motioned for an attendant to remove the body. The prisoner died long ago, and the room was too quiet. Farek had grown comfortable with the high-pitched screaming that echoed around the chamber.

"It brings great wealth to his people. You may have to offer him more," Brence remarked.

“No, it won’t matter.” Farek sighed. “I wish it could have been this easy, but I knew it wouldn’t be. It will have to be war.”

“What do you mean? War?” his assistant responded, wondering if Farek had received another vision from Pecu.

Brence couldn’t tell if the Regent had heard his question. Farek was motioning for a guard to bring in a new test subject. This part of his job always made him uncomfortable. He knew the Regent to be an intelligent and beautiful man, charismatic and pleasant at the best of times. Brence fell for him right away, dreamed of him every night. Yet, the man he longed for now seemed to actually enjoy torturing people.

Farek explained to him that the Cuvanos were criminals, thieves, and murderers, the lot of them. At least by practicing magical attacks on them, their executions were useful. Brence reminded himself of that daily, but it still felt wrong deep down in his gut. He was considering this when the guards brought in a Cuvanos woman. Farek played with her hair, tied up in intricate braids wrapped around her head like a crown. Brence could tell the Regent was considering what a magical attack could do to that hair.

“Unbraid her hair for me,” Farek said to one of the guards. “I need to handle some business in my office. I will return shortly. Brence, come with me.”

Brence hurried after the Regent. He was happy to be leaving the room full of misery, even if they would be returning soon. They were staying in the Summer Palace in the hills of Pescel. It had many large windows to view the blooming wildflowers. Right now, Brence was more distracted by the Cuvanos masses tied up in the plaza below.

“Tell me, where are you in your studies?” Farek questioned.

The Regent looked over his shoulder and ushered his assistant into his quarters.

“I cannot access the great library until I complete the cleansing,” Brence answered.

He was nervous about how Farek might respond. His opposing duties often conflicted. To the public, he was the Regent’s assistant. In private, he was a student at a particular Pecu cult that Farek was trying to infiltrate. He couldn’t find a way to excuse himself from his daily pressing matters. Yet, he had to if he was to hide away from everyone for the cleansing of worldly impurities.

“Then be cleansed!” Farek spat out in almost a hiss of a whisper. “If we do not claim that statue, we will meet our demise.”

“Our demise?”

Brence couldn’t imagine why a statue could be so dangerous to people thousands of miles away.

“It is the enemy or us,” Farek stated, and Brence understood at last.

“The Prophecies,” he whispered under his breath.

He remembered what little they had allowed him to learn before the cleansing. All he knew was that most cults of Pecu believed their real enemy would be a woman from a distant land. They would tell him no more until they deemed him worthy.

“I’m sorry, Sir Regent, but how can I explain a month-long absence to the other courtiers?”

He watched Farek study his staff. It was a work of art, with dark, polished wood, almost the color of night. Toward the top of the staff, was a beautiful, nude woman with long flowing hair and emeralds for eyes. A serpent locked her in a lover’s embrace. He often caught Farek gazing at it. Brence thought

he heard the Regent speaking to it once and had wondered if it was a simple staff or something much more.

“Are you truly my assistant, Brence? Do you long for the rule of Pecu?” Farek asked finally, right when Brence was debating if he should repeat his question.

“Yes, of course, with every beat of my own heart, Sir!” Brence exclaimed.

Without warning, Farek swung the bottom of his staff into Brence’s stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Brence doubled over and had no time to recover when the staff beat him over the head, sending him to the floor. He heard something crack when his head collided with the tile on the floor. Then, a hot and sticky liquid spread across the side of his face. Brence couldn’t move a finger now as he lay there with the world swimming around. Farek knelt over him and used Brence’s capelet to wipe his staff clean. Then, the Regent stood up and contorted his face into a convincing impression of despair.

“Guards!” Brence heard as he drifted away. “Guards! Someone assaulted my assistant!”