

Destiny, Make Haste!

By

Anne Luyten

The night the star fell was one that could not be rivalled in ferocity of wind or violence of weather. No one heard the crash or witnessed the figure that dragged themselves, bruised and bloodied, out from within the fiery wreckage. Rain fell; heavy and sweet smelling and, after pulling themselves from the twisted, mangled metal, Ekam struggled with the long raincoat they had salvaged from inside, pulling it on with shaking hands.

It wasn't long before they were completely soaked through, shivering and mind reeling from the shock of the crash. Something had hit the wing and the ship had spiralled out of orbit, tearing through the atmosphere. They had been mapping landmasses and bodies of water and knew next to nothing about the planet at all, only that The Syndicate had been surveying it, setting up satellites, studying and coding the languages, always hidden in the shadows of space.

As with every planet that blipped onto The Syndicate's radar, it was important to determine its amiability in terms of outside forces before any kind of physical contact could be made. Essentially, they needed to know if the presence of extraterrestrial life forms would cause mass panic, large scale wars, or planet wide psychosis.

Ekam found it hilarious that they, a human being, could be seen as some terrible, incomprehensible monster. Now though, staring up at the burning remains of their ship, bleeding in the

dirt with their breath coming in short, sharp bursts, they certainly saw how it could be a cause for concern.

Lightning flashed across the sky, deep red against black clouds. The wind was beginning to snap and bite and the smell of the rain was becoming suffocating. They couldn't stay out in the storm. They would have to find shelter and with the ship still burning behind them, they felt lost.

A flicker of light caught their eye, then; a tall, heavy fortress atop a hill not so far away. Looking at it, Ekam blinked, wondering at how it curled and billowed, moving with the raging wind. Around them, the storm was growing. They pushed themselves up, wheezing slightly with the movement, and started towards it, limping through the dark.

Within the fortress; within the sturdy masonry which rolled and swelled with the storm, a great hall echoed in a celebration that even the howling wind could not cast a gloom over. A court was gathered; knights, courtiers, lords, and ladies sitting gaily, a hearth at their back, all settled at a table and made merry by the warmth of their drinks.

Like every night during the Season of Layn, it was one spent indoors, fortified against the endless dark and suffocating perfume of the rain. Confined as they were and with not much else to do, it wasn't unusual to find a court mid feast, celebrating nothing much in particular.

That night however, a star had fallen.

Its light had torn through the clouds, streaking across the sky, illuminating the hall with a dazzling light. Those assembled had watched in awe and with hearts fluttering at the

scene before it disappeared back into the night. It was enough to enthuse the company though, and a chain of speculations, superstitions, and retellings of strange old myths began in earnest.

In such situations, stories of gods, adventure, and great destinies have been known to spur the already longing soul. Here, it proved to be the court's own master, a young lordling by the name of Parys, whose imagination was captured by those chivalric heroes and tragic monsters. It listened to the tales, enraptured, and thoroughly charmed by the romance of it all.

KNOCK KNOCK

All merriment ceased. Laughter stuttered into silence, storytellers and listeners alike jumping at the sudden, booming sound. Parys turned to stare at the doors as lightning crashed outside. The knocking came again, pounding against the doors, fervent and continuous.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

Parys was frozen, the knocking now thundering in its ears. Hesitantly it raised a hand, long ornamented claws glittering in the firelight. It motioned to the doors.

A pair of guards unbarred them, shuttered as they had been against the weather, and Ekam was able to slip inside, now completely overcome by the fragrance of the rains. Every set of eyes in the hall gazed at them as they entered, twinkling with curiosity, minds still wistful with thoughts of old legends and fallen stars.

In their eyes, Ekam was a stranger appearing unexpectedly from the storm, their face hidden in shadows beneath a hood and

disguised in what they saw to be an odd cloak. They were unprecedented, mysterious, and alluring.

After a moment had passed and Ekam's breathing had become easier, they looked up. All at once, they were lost in the swirling, bulging architecture of the hall. Its soaring ceilings were a contradiction, arching high and straight one moment but bowing and bending the next, to the point where Ekam thought they might cave in. The aesthetic was ostentatious to say the least. Their first thought would have been rococo, if not for how it strained their eyes the longer they stared at those climbing columns that dripped with light and the statues that seemed unsure about which of their many faces they should be displaying.

That was to say nothing of the occupants.

Slowly, Ekam lifted their hand to their temple, tapping their cognitive translator to life before speaking in a voice that croaked, garbling the words as they twisted up through their vocal cords.

"I apologize for intruding;" they began carefully, "the night has not been kind to me. Who is the master of this house?"

"I am."

Parys stood eagerly, bumping the table as it did so, knocking over its drink. It turned a glare on its companions whose laughter was not well enough hidden. The firelight caught on its skin, crystalline scales that formed and reformed across its body, shifting and settling like the statues, different faces curling against one another. It made the space behind Ekam's eyes ache.

In total, they counted six hands, each finger curling into extravagantly enameled claws and each hand attached to its body with what Ekam could only describe as strings of fine pearls. Its head swept back into two long horns that twisted intricately and, falling in gentle, shifting waves between them was a long mane of pitch black hair.

This world seemed to boast its splendor in every aspect, from its perfumed rain down to its finely crafted inhabitants. If humans were the ones to crawl out of a primordial soup, these things must have come from champagne.

"I am called Parys. Would you speak to me, stranger?"

Ekam blinked, snapping out of their reverie.

"I fear I would ask to intrude upon your hospitality," they called, "It has turned into a foul night indeed."

For a moment the hall was quiet - and then, to their surprise, the gathered company burst into laughter. It echoed off the walls, drowning out the storm even as thunder shook the sky.

"A foul night to be sure," Parys called over the din, grinning through golden tusks, "A foul season, I believe you mean. You are most welcome, stranger. Come, settle yourself by the fire. Food and drink shall be brought to you directly."

Parys was eager to see them up close; there was something strange about the way they stood and how they held themselves which roused an enthusiastic interest.

Ekam however, did not care to be the center of attention in an alien court. They were hidden beneath their long coat for the moment but they couldn't risk being questioned or seen.

"I'm sure I would be poor company," they said instead, "I've traveled far and would hope that it is not presumptuous to ask simply for a bed, at least for the night."

Parys' smile fell just slightly and it hesitated in replying, its disappointment and curiosity struggling against its ingrained amiability and good breeding. It wanted to speak to them, to see the face they hid beneath their hood and to know why, during the season of storms, they had been traveling. It wanted to know what had brought them, on a night illuminated by such an omen as a falling star.

It would be lying if it said it wasn't feeling the slightest bit like it was caught up in the embrace of kismet.

However, courtesy won out and Parys nodded, bending into a slight bow.

"Of course, a room shall be prepared for you immediately."

An attendant hastily ushered Ekam out of the hall and once they were gone, the gathered company fell into a veritable assemblage of gossip, fantastical speculation, and eager eyes which gazed in the direction that they had departed to.

Parys' eyes were as transfixed as anyone's, only half hearing the extravagant conclusions its companions made about the stranger. It felt an abrupt need to speak with them, to see them up close, to know if they felt the same pull of fate. With a heart far and away too earnest and romantic, Parys did not even try to quell the excitement that caught it but instead excused itself, withdrawing from the hall.

The room which Ekam had been brought to was magnificent, certainly better than the bunk they'd had on the ship. The bed was long and wide and for a moment, they mistook it for a slab of stone. It glistened like polished obsidian with edges that could slice through a phone book. Reaching out to touch it though, they found their hand sinking into the plush fabric of a bedspread.

"Oh no," they grinned, "I might just stick around."

They stripped off their raincoat and clothes, all of which were soaked completely though. The attendant had drawn a bath for them, pouring heated water into a small pool at the edge of the room behind a thick curtain. Ekam knelt down next to it and nearly melted. The water was not heavily perfumed but more subtle, gentle and slightly floral. They wasted no time in climbing in, sighing deeply, sinking beneath the water.

A knock at the door brought their attention back and, so lost in the warmth and bliss of the bath, they found themselves calling out.

"Come in."

"I've brought you food and drink and kindling for the fire."

The voice that spoke was decidedly not that of the attendant, as they had thought. They moved quickly, peeking around the curtain to see Parys standing, a tray held in its hands. Ekam ducked back, their eyes wide.

"Hello?" Parys called again, "Stranger?"

"Yes!" they shouted. Their mind was a wave of panicked thoughts, "Yes, I...hello! Thank you, place it where you like, I'll set it burning once I'm finished."

"Nonsense," was the pleasant reply, "You said you had travelled far and must be tired. Allow me to light it."

"You are very kind," Ekam said through gritted teeth, craning their neck to observe its silhouette through the curtain.

Parys smiled gently and a light blush dusted the space between its billowing scales as it knelt down to set the kindling.

"May I be so bold as to ask for your name?"

"Ekam," they answered, washing the grime from their skin before beginning to search for something to cover themselves with.

"Ekam," it handled the name with delicacy and its blush deepened.

"I will admit to my surprise," it continued, "upon your sudden appearance in my hall; my *pleasant* surprise, of course. Very few have ever travelled through the storms; it is considered quite the feat."

Ekam resented having to pull themselves from the warmth of the bath. Their eyes flitted towards the curtain and they could see Parys beginning to stand from its place at the hearth, its form obscured by the thick fabric.

"If that is the case, then I am lucky indeed."

Looking around them, they cursed silently. There was no towel, nor anything they could hide themselves behind.

"Perhaps," Parys spoke with a skepticism which made Ekam pause, watching with suspicion as its silhouette moved, "but I cannot help but wonder, could *luck* truly have brought you here; something so frivolous?"

"What do you mean?"

Parys began to approach and their heart jolted in their chest.

"A star fell tonight, did you see?" it stood on the other side now and though the heavy curtain hid its face somewhat, Ekam could see its claws drifting over fabric, "Just before you arrived. You must have seen it; it bathed the sky with a light even the sun could not contest."

"A star?" Ekam cringed; a star, *their* star, *their ship*, "You think its appearance has bearing upon my own?"

"It can be no coincidence," Parys persisted, beginning to round the curtain, but Ekam was a step ahead, circling to the other side before it could see them, the two now orbiting the sheet, "Tell me, what brought you out into the storms?"

"I was traveling, the storm struck and I saw the lights from your hall."

Ekam backed away and water dripped from their skin to the floor, leaving puddles as they went.

"This storm has been raging without interruption since the season began. You would not have survived had you been traveling through it!"

"Oh, indeed?" the laugh that escaped them bordered on hysterical, "And you would know this? Perhaps I am hardier than I seem!"

"Or perhaps it was intended. Perhaps it was fortune that guided you to me, our meeting foretold."

Ekam could see Parys' silhouette rounding the other side of the curtain. Their eyes widened, realizing that if they didn't find something to hide themselves with, they would be seen.

"I can assure you, fate is no more responsible for my being here than your star. I am only a traveller."

"Do you not find it strange though, that you have endured the storms unscathed? That your arrival was heralded by such an omen? Do you not see the providence in it?"

Just as Parys' hands came into view from the side of the drape, with its bizarre pearl string arms, a half formed idea sent Ekam's hand shooting out. They grabbed hold of the curtain and pulled, tearing it from its place in the ceiling, sending it tumbling down. They heard Parys' shout of surprise and confusion but didn't waste a moment, wrapping the fabric around themselves, holding it across their body with one hand and bringing the other side up to hide their face.

"Stars fall," they challenged, but their voice wavered and their arms shook, "It is an often enough occurrence. There is nothing of *providence* about it!"

Parys only stared, patches of its scales billowing, reforming, and then settling back. It blinked and took a hesitant step forward, one hand reaching out while the others moved restlessly around it.

"You—" it paused, "You are...hiding yourself from me."

"You caught me unawares!" Ekam snapped, "In the bath! Am I to be harassed for my modesty?"

"But you are hiding your *face*."

Ekam took a step back.

"Why?" its voice was soft and confused, but it loomed over them and the question echoed in their ears.

"Don't ask me that. There is no answer that I can give."

Sharp claws reached out, brushing over the fabric. They drifted gently over their face and Ekam felt their breath catch as it passed over their eyes.

"Would you allow me to *find* the answer then?"

A hand curled around their own, the one that held the fabric over their face, gentle and unmoving, allowing them to pull away if they chose. They didn't, but looked away, breath quickening as a blush rose to their cheeks. Slowly, Parys drew its hand back, bringing with it not only Ekam's own, but the drape as well. They held tightly to the other corner, keeping the rest of the fabric held just below their collar bone.

There was a sharp intake of breath, a gasp. They didn't look over.

"What manner of creature are you?"

Its hands moved all at once, claws ghosting over their hair, their face, not quite touching but dizzying. They moved nervously, flitting restlessly in and out of their vision.

"I'm not some fantastic monster," they looked over, brows furrowed.

"No," Parys' voice trembled, "No, you are certainly not that."

"But I've frightened you."

"Yes." it breathed, "I was not expecting--"

It stopped, struggling to find its words.

"May I--" it stopped again, huffing slightly as its face shifted and roiled like the sea, "That is, would it be presumptuous--? Would you allow--? I am *afraid*...to touch you."

Ekam let out a breath which curled into a laugh. They reached out and settled the palm of their hand against its own.

"You may find," they said with a voice now blithe and brisk, "that there is no reason to be."

Hands found their face immediately, passing gently over their lips, their nose, and over their eyes, pausing for a moment to brush against their lashes. Ekam couldn't help the laugh that bubbled up past their lips as hands weaved into their hair.

"You think me a fool." Parys said, not a question but a soft accusation.

"No," Ekam answered, though their smile was charmingly insincere, "Not at all."

It huffed, hands drifting over their collar bone and their throat. It drew them in, enfolding them into an embrace and pressing its face into their shoulder. Tusks brushed against their jaw and they felt its faces shift against their skin. They reached out, letting their own hand pass over its cheek, feeling it's strange, undulating scales beneath their fingers.

"I would be so," it said, claws gliding over their back, "eagerly. A fool in love with a god."

Ekam shuddered and pulled back. Parys followed, hands brushing over their hair before it stopped, seeing the look on their face.

"I am not a god."

"Alas," Parys' hands pulled away, coming to rest against its hips, another pair smoothing back its hair, "I seem to know no other words that could describe you. In the wake of a great portent, you have come to me. Allowing me to look upon you, to gaze upon your splendor; is this not your great blessing? Is this not fate?"

"No."

Ekam watched Parys' face fall, its smile curling into something distressed and eyes flickering, searching for a tell, a sign that they were lying.

"I'm sorry. Truly, I am, but I will not be worshipped by a fool in love with a god that does not exist. Our meeting was not foretold and my arrival was not fate, it was happenstance. I am not your destiny."

Parys took a step back and for a moment, the room was quiet. The storm filled the silence well with its roaring thunder and resounding rain and Ekam found their eyes drifting away, tense and unsure. Then it spoke - its voice heavy and marked with only the barest disappointment.

"You are a traveler," it nodded, "While I do not understand, I know I have...distressed you. I have been discourteous and allowed my own longing to cloud my vision of you. You are my guest and I have been impertinent."

Parys did not reach out to touch them again, but bowed low.

"I apologize and..though you are a *traveler*, I hope that you might stay. For the season, I mean. The storms are strong and dangerous, and I confess I would be saddened if you were to leave so readily and on my account."

Ekam hands came up, rubbing at their arms. A small smile settled on their lips when they saw Parys staring at them, eyes still wide and curious.

"I will stay as a grateful guest. Perhaps I may even find more to you than a capricious character and dreams of a great destiny."

"Others have tried and alas I am always found wanting," a grin curled behind its tusks and it lowered its head again in a bow, "I shall take my leave of you then. Good night, Ekam."

"Good night, Parys."

The door clicked shut behind it and Ekam let out a heavy breath, running a hand through their hair. They padded over to one of the large windows that overlooked the land outside the fortress. They looked for smoke from the crash but saw none, no doubt put out by the rains and wind.

Ekam wondered about the nature of fate and destiny as they crossed back over to the bed. Their bruises still ached but, settling on the plush sheets, they sighed and slowly let their eyes drift shut.

"I guess I could stick around," they said to nobody in particular, "just for the season."