

THE LONG FIRE

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First Chapter Sample

CHAPTER ONE

The Anuk Anwar, favored Son of the Sun, the Imperial Glory, Emperor of mighty Noorhitam, heir of conquerors, blessed by Hulan's grace, woke with a start and stared up at the intricately painted tiles on his ceiling.

Then he swore: "Anwar's elbow!"

His voice emerged in little more than a whisper, for his heart raced too hard and his breath came in too short of gasps to allow for speech. So he stared at the painted tiles depicting at intervals Anwar and Hulan's various faces and the faces of their children: Maly, the star for which the city of Lunthea Maly took its name; the twin lights of Zampei and Zampey; Chendu, the star of wisdom; and, of course, Chiev, the North Star. He stared at them, but it was not their painted faces and forms, worked into elaborate medallions, that he saw before his eye.

He saw instead his dream.

With a sudden surge he sat upright, roaring as he did so, "Bintun! *Bintun!*"

The door to the small adjoining apartment opened, and the emperor's favorite long-suffering personal slave and bodyguard stuck his face into the room, his eyes bleary with want of sleep. "Yes, Imperial Glory, Son of Anwar?" he asked, in the same tone with which a mother might speak to a child screaming in the night.

The Imperial Glory of Noorhitam snatched up one of the many pillows tossed about his enormous boat of a bed and threw it with all the force he could muster at Bintun's head. "Bring me the Besur!" he cried. "Bring me the Besur and any priests you can find!"

"Hulan is at the full tonight, Imperial Glory," Bintun reminded his emperor, his voice a smooth cadence of tolerant calm. "The Besur and his priests will all be at prayer, performing the rites of—"

"I don't care!" said the emperor. His eyes were wide and full of fury, and his hand grappled for another pillow to throw. He selected one and hurled it across the room, where it struck the wall by Bintun's face without provoking his servant to so much as blink, which infuriated the Imperial Glory all the more. "I don't care if you fetch them naked from the ceremonial baths! Bring them to me! *Now!*"

It was an hour later before the Besur could make his entrance. Although the Crown of the Moon stood adjacent to the emperor's palace, temple and palace were both so enormous that it took several couriers running at full tilt a good ten minutes to travel from one to the other. Then, when the Besur—who had been interrupted in the middle of a loud and involved prayer to Hulan, which was difficult enough to remember without slaves plucking at his sleeves—had received the message, rolled his eyes heavenward, and cursed, "Anwar's elbow!" in unconscious echo of his emperor, he was obliged himself to run in order to change into the required robes a high priest always wore when entering the presence of Anwar's favored son. Since the Besur spent most of his time in prayer—and ate and drank a great many ceremonial cakes and sacred brews—any amount of physical exertion left him sweating and puffing.

Therefore, shrugged into robes of gold and a headdress mimicking that which artists and poets said adorned the head of Chendu, the star of wisdom, he was obliged to stand some moments outside his emperor's private chambers, gasping to regain his breath while slaves wiped sweat from his brow. Ten other priests of various orders clustered behind him, none of them eager for another audience with the Anuk of Noorhitam.

They knew exactly what this midnight meeting was about.

At length, his dignity somewhat recovered, the Besur motioned to Bintun, who slid back the door and announced the Besur in a voice much too loud for the time of night.

The emperor, still in his bed and clothed in his nightgown (which, the Besur noted with some envy, was of finer work and intricacy than his own ceremonial garment), looked smaller than usual without his crown. He was not a big man to begin with; indeed, he was rather scrawny of limb and proportion, scarcely taller than a woman. But the old crown of his forefathers, fashioned in glorious imitation of Anwar's own, always lent him a magnificence that would bring the princes of other nations to their knees before him. Without it, he looked like an overgrown child. But he was still the emperor.

"What in Hulan's name took you so long?" the Anuk demanded before the Besur had even finished reciting the required greeting.

"I came as soon as I could," the Besur growled, then added "Imperial Glory" and bowed, just to be safe.

"Don't try to placate me!" yelled the emperor and, since he boasted a wealth of pillows, took up his third one of the night and threw it, with remarkable aim, at the Besur's headdress. It knocked the headdress askew, and the Besur dared not adjust it, because that would be an overt mark of disrespect to his emperor. So he left it be and wondered how long until it fell off altogether and landed with a ringing thud on the floor.

"How may I serve you, Imperial Glory?" the Besur said, even though he already knew, or at least strongly suspected, the answer. This was not the first time he had been summoned to the emperor's chambers in the middle of the night. Indeed, it was the fifth time in the last two weeks.

The emperor sank back upon his pillows, and his face was very pale against the rich red silks. "I saw it again," he said.

"The dream, favored Son of Anwar?"

"Yes. I need you to find out what it means. And this time I need you to *succeed*. I can't bear it any longer."

The Besur bowed again to give himself time to think, and felt his headdress teeter dangerously. "Will the Imperial Glory kindly describe what you saw in your sleeping mind?"

"Why? I've told you already. Four times."

"Perhaps in a fifth telling you will be able to communicate something more, something to enable me to shed the light you so desire," said the Besur. He didn't believe it himself, and he

could feel the unease in the ten priests gathered and bowing behind him. But he simply did not know what else to do.

The Anuk of Noorhitam sucked in his lips, chewing on them and causing his face to look rather frog-like. Then he closed his eyes as though better to see the images which had crossed his unconscious mind.

“I saw the Lady Moon,” he said. “She screamed. And she bled from a thousand wounds. Her blood stained the whole of the sky. And I saw men with their arms full of fire, and they hurled that fire at the walls of Manusbau. My loyal servants, defending the walls, crumbled to dust in their flames.”

He opened his eyes, and though his face was that of a middle-aged man, his eyes were very young. Perhaps it was the fear that made them young. The Besur shuddered under his gaze.

“Tell me what it means, priest,” said the emperor. “Tell me why my rest is again disturbed by this vision.”

The Besur tried to swallow, but his mouth and throat were too dry. He said, “I do not know the meaning, Imperial Glory.”

This time the hurled pillow knocked his headdress clean off his head, and it rolled with great clattering across the floor. “Dream-walk, then!” roared the emperor. “Do what you are supposed to do and enter the Dream! Find out what it means or so help me . . .”

The subsequent threats were empty, the Besur knew. If the emperor dared do any of the horrible things he shouted with curses at his high priest, his warlords would rise up in protest. Not even the favored son of Anwar had absolute power. But while the threats were harmless, the rage was real, and the high priest dared not ignore the rage of the Anuk.

He bowed. His head felt cold without its headdress. “I will try,” he said.

At the emperor’s command, slaves scurried from the room and returned momentarily with braziers and harimau spice. The bare-headed Besur and his ten companions ordered how the braziers should be arranged, then lit the coals and sprinkled liberal handfuls of harimau. Soon the room was filled with its odor, which tingled on the senses. The emperor sneezed. Three slaves fell over themselves to give him handkerchiefs.

The Besur stood in the center of the circle of braziers, and the ten priests took their places around him. They stretched out their hands to each other, their fingertips just touching. And they began the chant.

It was an old chant, designed to bring the mind into clear, concentrated focus. To step from one world into another was a feat an ordinary man could never accomplish and even an extraordinary man could not succeed on his own. Indeed, as the Besur closed his eyes and composed his mind into a deep, meditative state, he felt the strength of his brothers around him and knew he could never do what he attempted now without their support.

He breathed deep of the harimau. In actual fact, any spice would do, so long as it was strong enough to absorb the senses, blocking out other smells and fixing the mind upon a single path. But harimau was the strongest spice, too hot even to be used for culinary purposes. Those who ground it from harimau peppers wore stout leather gloves to keep from burning their skin. When tossed over coals, it stung in the nostrils and made the eyes water.

It cleared out everything save the chant.

Wise men speculated that the gateway into the Dream was different for each man. The Besur did not know if this were true or not. But for him, it looked like the door to his mother's summer home, which he had visited each year as a boy. A red door painted with peonies. Every spring, slaves were obliged to repaint the door, for the winter weather wore away the color and brilliance. The boy who was once the Besur's true self had always loved those frilly peonies on their crimson setting, and associated them with all the joys of summer and freedom.

He saw those peonies in his mind now, appearing in the darkling haze of the priest's chants and the spice. The door seemed as his boyhood eyes had seen it, much larger than it probably was in reality. He approached without fear, slid it open, and stepped through into the Dream.

All around him was mist. All around him was blindness. He breathed harimau, leaned into the support of the chant, and moved forward. But still, only mist. Only blindness.

He must try to find the emperor's dream. Theoretically it was possible. The scrolls of bygone Dream Walkers indicated that many of them had succeeded in discovering dreams and interpretations while moving through the Realm of Dreams. But the Besur had never managed anything like it, not in all his years of loyal service within the Crown of the Moon.

He moved through the mist, searching. Sometimes he thought he glimpsed solid ground beneath his feet, but even that vision did not last long. He hadn't the strength of the great Dream Walkers.

He hadn't the strength of Lady Hariawan.

The chanting of his brethren supported him, lending strength to his spirit as he moved in this strange plain of existence. He knew the chant as well as he knew all the prayers of the temple, could recite it to himself backwards in his sleep.

*“From this world to the other, let me walk
From the Near, from the Far, into the Between
From tedium to elucidation, let me walk
From mortal bounds into Eternity.”*

He knew the chant and all its hundred variations. So when a new line of sound—deeper, darker, and far, far stronger—touched upon his soul, he turned to it with great surprise.

He had never heard anything like it before in the Dream. It sounded as though it sprang from the voices of men. But this was no chant he knew, and it was not spoken in a language he understood. It could not be voiced by any priest of his order.

The Besur’s heart began to race. He felt it, back in his physical body. He breathed deep, trying to draw in more harimau, trying to block out the fear which he knew would, any moment, hurl him back to his own world. His mind sought for the support of his brothers’ chant, but it was becoming more and more lost in this new sound, this new darkness.

The mist parted. He saw a great gate supported by two posts, one carved in the likeness of a dragon, the other uncut and ugly. He uttered a shout of fear.



“Besur? Besur?”

Anxious hands slapped his cheeks, chafed his wrists. The Besur groaned as consciousness stole back into his mind, bringing with it a headache to rival the worst headaches he’d ever had after a night of drinking sacred brews.

“Is he awake? Is he alive?” the voice of the emperor demanded with more curiosity than concern.

The Besur opened first one eye then the other. He found that he lay on the floor in the emperor's chamber, surrounded by braziers and priests. The emperor had crawled to the foot of his bed and looked down over the edge.

“Ah! So you're not dead.”

“No, Imperial Glory,” said the Besur, carefully, for his own voice rang too loud in his skull. “I am happy to report that I yet live.”

“Did you see my dream? Did you find it?”

Groaning again, the Besur allowed several slaves to assist him first to sit up and then to stand. He leaned heavily on one of them, whose knees buckled beneath the high priest's bulk. The Besur addressed himself to the emperor and spoke with great dignity.

“Imperial Glory of Noorhitam,” he said, “I was unable to find the dream by which you suffer. Nor could I discover an interpretation.”

“Anwar blight it,” snarled the emperor and flopped back across his bed in an attitude of great despondence. “I shall die for want of sleep! I shall! And then you'll all be sorry,” he said, casting an arm across his face.

Bintun exchanged glances with a fellow slave then, with a sigh, moved to his emperor's side and gently stroked his forehead. “There, there,” he said, without much conviction. But it seemed to soothe the Imperial Glory.

The emperor sat up, clutching his blanket with sudden vehemence, and fixed an angry eye upon his high priest. “Perhaps,” he said, “you simply lack the proper motivation.”

“If you please, favored Son—”

“I'll tell you what,” the emperor said, not interrupting because emperors never interrupt. When they speak, all others are silent. “I'll tell you what, I'll give you incentive. If you, or any man in this kingdom, can find and interpret my dream, I will . . .” He paused, considering. Then his eyes lit up with inspiration. “I will make that man my chief vizier, and the entire province of Ipoa will be his and belong to his children and his children's children hereafter. And,” he added with enthusiasm, “I will give him the hand of a princess in marriage!”

The priests looked at one another, their eyes round. None of them, officially, should be tempted by such an offer. They had all made vows to forgo such earthly treasures in favor of Anwar and Hulan's service. But every one of them saw the light of his own greed reflected in his brothers' eyes.

“This is my offer,” said the emperor. “Let it be written in stone.”



“Lady Hariawan could do it.”

The Besur, seated in his private chambers, rubbing his throbbing head with one hand while his other gripped a cup of strong, hot tea, growled in response to Brother Yaru’s statement. Brother Yaru, unperturbed, continued his thought processes, which tended more toward rambling as his age advanced. These days he was almost impossible to listen to. But he was the Besur’s oldest friend, and so he was permitted into the high priest’s chambers when all others were ordered out.

“Of course,” said Brother Yaru in his most musing tone, “she would not be able to marry a princess. Our Imperial Glory has failed to consider this.”

“Our Imperial Glory does not know that any woman can dream-walk,” said the Besur through his teeth. Then he added, “You Sun-blighted fool.”

“Perhaps a prince, then?” Brother Yaru continued just as though he had not heard (which he probably hadn’t). “There must be a good dozen or more princes by this time, and some of them are of an age to marry. And Lady Hariawan is, after all, remarkably pleasing to look upon, so I can’t imagine any prince would object—”

The Besur snarled suddenly and sat upright, the knuckles of his hands turning white as he clenched the arm of his chair and the bowl of his teacup. “Lady Hariawan is gone. Gone, don’t you remember? Missing, vanished, beyond our reach!”

“Oh. Is she?”

“Yes, you idiot! We received the message only just this morning from Daramuti. You were there. You heard as well as I. She disappeared, it must be three months ago now, and no one knows what has become of her.” He added in an undertone, “I’d like to strangle that Masayi girl. With my own two hands!”

“Perhaps she is on her way home?” said Brother Yaru, his toothless mouth working with the effort of thought. “Perhaps she is even now approaching Lunthea Maly? That sweet young woman will protect her.”

“That sweet young woman probably slit her throat and left her in a ditch somewhere,” said the Besur.

“Oh no, I don’t think so,” said Brother Yaru. “She had such a charming smile.”

The Besur, recalling Sairu’s smile, shuddered and buried his head in his hand once more.

“What of the other message from Daramuti?” Brother Yaru said. He approached a small table upon which a porcelain tea set was arranged and poured himself a cup of tea. He swirled it in the cup, watching the tiny whirlpool created. “What of the slave boy Brother Tenuk sent you for sentencing? They’re still holding him in the granary, I believe.”

The Besur shrugged dismissively. “Tenuk is a fool not to have hanged the boy himself. Why should he bother me with such nonsense? String him up, for all I care.”

Brother Yaru sipped his tea, found it too hot, and licked his burned lip. “Well,” he said in his slow, dreamy way, “it does seem unfair to hang him without at least looking over the case.”

“I can’t be bothered,” the Besur growled.

“It won’t hurt a thing to put him in the dungeon until you have a spare moment to address the matter,” Brother Yaru continued. “Besides, he would be good company for Lord Kasemsan. The poor lord is in such a bad state these days, my heart quite bleeds for him! A little company would cheer him.”

The Besur snorted. “Nothing is going to cheer him. That blighted Golden Mother has been at him too long.”

“Yes,” Brother Yaru agreed, “she’s certainly not contributed to his well-being, poor man. I doubt he’ll live another week at this rate. But perhaps a friend at the end of his life would be a kindness. Hulan does bless those who show an extra kindness.”

Once more the Besur shrugged. “I don’t care,” he said. “Send the boy to the dungeons. Hang him. Set him weeding the onion bed. Do what you like, but don’t bother me with him again, do you hear?”

“I hear,” said Brother Yaru. He remained where he stood, sipping at his tea and saying nothing until his cup was empty. Then, with a bow and murmured, “Good night,” he slipped from the Besur’s chambers.

End of Sample

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