

Iron Dragon, Black Swan

By Abby Sandman

I. *Vanashai*

Twenty Years and Three Moons Before the Ascendancy

I.I

The first eight years of Dai's life smelled like stone. Like the smoky musk of sunbaked battlements and the salty nip of sea-soaked tunnels. And they smelled like *gonalei*, the roots of the bone white *gona* flower that grew in abundance at the base of Mount Sarai. It was a root burned as incense during prayer and brewed into tea to stave off illness.

But *gonalei* was not brewed in the halls of the Monastery where Dai grew up, nor was it burned. In the Monastery, that pleasant herb and floral scent with the faint sting was the smell of *ikana*, the magic practiced by the shai'kah of the White Court, the religious order of the Empire. It was the magic of life and death. Magic that could heal. Magic that could kill.

And this magic—any magic—left its mark.

Swathed in the busy streets of the capital city, Khava, Dai glanced up at her mentor where the midmorning light caught on the white scars of *ikana* curling around his eyes and along his jaw. They disappeared beneath the neck of his white robes, which swished against Dai's blue-gray ones, the color of a novice. Dai only had one such scar on the back of her shoulder, but novices were forbidden from using *ikana* until their masters deemed them ready. She could only imagine the day when the scars would twine all across her body, another added every time she used her magic.

And today was the first step.

One of only three novices born directly into the White Court, Dai had spent her early life restricted to the volcanic rock and marble walls of the Monastery. Isolated on that rocky island in the center of the bay, Dai had watched Khava longingly from a distance—and, in the past year, spent many hours grilling a new novice from the city named Koa for details on his home city.

But *finally*, her mentor Vana Ruu had deemed her ready, not just to see the city for herself, but to witness the tithe on which the Vei'jah Empire thrived. She'd had to practice her

breathing the whole way across the long White Bridge from the Monastery, fearful that Vana Ruu might change his mind.

He didn't, and Dai thought she just might burst from excitement. For the first time, the monotonous tune of waves against rocks was drowned out by cartwheels grinding over cobblestones and the chatter of Khavans. She had never heard so many people speaking before—except perhaps when she snuck up to the Monastery battlements, but she hadn't known at the time that *voices* were the source of the dull roar coming from the city.

"It's magnificent," she breathed, glancing furtively up at her mentor to check that she had used the word correctly. She'd only heard him use it to describe Mount Sarai, the volcano that stood watch over the bay, but she thought Khava deserved it.

He smiled wryly down at her, which she took to mean he approved, and she beamed back. She was nearly drunk on happiness and the intoxicating smell of the city. To a girl who had scarcely scented more than stone and *gonalei*, the smell of stagnant canals and human sweat and mud mixed with the smoke from cookfires was exhilarating, if not altogether pleasant.

Silk scarves stood out to her from the necks of many who passed—a *'shaik*, she knew they were called, the color symbolizing the years tithed to the White Court.

"They show how devout a citizen is, right?" she asked Vana Ruu. "That they would gift their years to the servants of the gods?" Too caught up in the city, Dai didn't notice that she'd given her mentor no context for her question.

Vana Ruu followed the direction of her eyes and nodded. "It is a godly practice," he agreed, "but it's much more than that."

The rhythmic shift to his tone tipped Dai off that she should school herself and pay attention.

"This country survives on tithes," he went on, tucking her close to him to avoid an oncoming merchant cart. "Some of those years will go to the sick or dying. Some will go to *firre* generals on the seas and the mainland whose time is not up. Occasionally, the years go to Empresses and Emperors who are not done serving. And many will go to our masters, so that they might gain the wisdom of another generation and pass it on. But the tithe is also essential for the people." He looked down to meet her eyes. "The more years they've tithed, the better they live."

Dai nodded, her body easing with the melody of her mentor's voice and her eyes slipping back over the scarves. As they did, something utterly unexpected caught her attention. Something she didn't remember Koa mentioning, though perhaps the novice had and she had just failed to grasp what he meant.

The people of Khava...they looked *different*.

It was the hair she noticed first, the eyes second. All of the Khavan people had dark hair and dark eyes. No sea greens or sky blues. No sunset oranges or dusky violets. The colored scarves were a stark contrast to their colorless hair.

"What's wrong with them?" she asked.

Vana Ruu stroked a hand down her head. "They are normal, At'ka Dai Feiren. And we are not."

She looked up at him, taking comfort in the deep green of his hair and forest shade of his eyes. "Why aren't we normal?"

He smiled, those eyes crinkling—the only lines to be found on an otherwise smooth face. "Because we are chosen, *abki*. Because we are more."

Dai smiled back, twisting a lock of her iron gray hair between her fingers and thinking of her blood red eyes as they captured the reverent gazes of the Khavans, who parted for them like the sea around the Monastery. She said, "I like being more."

She could have kept walking forever, never mind that the heels of her feet were beginning to hurt. But, she reminded herself, they did not enter the city just to wander.

A white temple loomed before her, one of many scattered across the city and one that she thought looked like a rather underwhelming version of the Monastery. Still, her pulse skittered as they crossed the square before it, their progress tracked by the Khavans waiting on the wide pavilion at the temple's entrance.

Most bowed their heads and performed the traditional gesture of veneration. Others were rooted to the spot, as though they'd forgotten to breathe. Vana Ruu nodded to them as he and Dai crossed through the doors, and Dai mirrored him, hoping her wide eyes didn't betray her nerves.

She loosed a breath as they stepped into the cool embrace of the temple and the familiar smell of *gonalei* washed through her. But she couldn't stop her heart from galloping in her chest. Dai hadn't witnessed *ikana* since that day when she was four and performed it for the first time utterly by accident. And she most certainly hadn't seen the tithe.

She hugged Vana Ruu's robes as he greeted the acolytes who helped run the temple, but her eyes strayed to the only other shai'kah present, her waist-length sky blue hair braided over one shoulder. She was clad in white like Dai's mentor, the color of the *vana* sect of shai'kah responsible for daily tithes, and her ember eyes glimmered kindly as she caught Dai's gaze.

Vana Ruu placed a hand on Dai's shoulder, and she turned from the woman to see an acolyte separating himself from the group before them. Dai's mentor guided her onto the low platform that separated the shai'kah from the temple-goers during services and prayers, but Dai watched the acolyte over her shoulder. His plain black hair glinted in the candlelight as he moved towards the series of doors open on the pavilion, motioning for two figures to enter: a young child around Dai's age, with a gray pallor and glazed eyes, and an older woman with a yellow *a'shaik* tied around her throat.

The old woman eyed those three shallow steps dividing the atrium as the pair followed the acolyte towards Dai and Vana Ruu. Vana Ruu only smiled, stepping forward to offer her an arm. Gently, he guided her and the sickly child up onto the platform and down onto the carpeted stone. The old woman's hand trembled as he let her go, kneeling down before her. Dai did the same, her eyes stuck on those wavering, wrinkled fingers. Even her mentor, at two centuries old, didn't have wrinkles like those. She hadn't seen age like this on a person.

"What can I do for you, *ama*?" Vana Ruu asked in that quiet voice that always soothed the worst of Dai's nerves. His soft green gaze coaxed the old woman's up from the child, who was leaning heavily against her side.

Dai marveled at the ferocity in those black eyes folded amidst her creased skin, and the woman's throaty voice thrummed in Dai's ears as she said, "Save my grandson."

Vana Ruu nodded. An acolyte who had been lingering nearby came forward holding a wide smooth stone set with two bowls and a blade. One bowl was black as the boy's inky hair, which was plastered to his clammy forehead. The other was white as Vana Ruu's robes.

Dai winced as Vana Ruu slid the silver blade across the woman's palm, her blood dripping into the black bowl of Noi, the high god of death and nothingness. When he held a hand out to the child, she almost shut her eyes. The boy moaned as his blood was spilt, this time into the white stone bowl of Vanashai, the high god of life.

Vana Ruu placed the blade back on the stone. Then, he crossed his hands, dipping two fingers of each into the small puddles of blood. He uncrossed his wrists and wrapped those

scarlet fingers around each subject's wrist, the boy's blood now staining the woman's skin just as hers stained his.

Dai held her breath, praying that Vana Ruu couldn't hear the way her heart stuttered—though she knew that a powerful shai'kah like him could.

After a few moments, color spread through the boy's cheeks and his spine began to straighten. His illness was fading. He was coming back to life! Barely able to contain her excitement, Dai looked to the woman—

And her high spirits plummeted. The skin on her face had shriveled, clinging to her bones, and her breath now rattled in her lungs, ricocheting in Dai's ears.

Vana Ruu released them.

"Praise Vanashai," the woman gasped, tracing the sign of prayer through the tears of relief shining in her eyes. Her free hand clasped her grandson's, who looked dazedly around the temple, utterly oblivious to the old woman's hunch and the acolyte now supporting her.

Dai watched, stunned into a stupor as Vana Ruu untied the woman's yellow *a'shaik*, replacing it with a blue one. She barely noticed the second acolyte that joined them, her eyes glued to the silk secured at the woman's papery throat as she was helped to her feet and led to the door.

When they were gone, Vana Ruu turned to Dai, his face drawn.

"Do you understand?" he asked.

Dai's eyes did not move from the pavilion where the woman and her grandson had disappeared. "She's going to die," she said in a small voice.

"Soon, yes."

"But the boy, he'll live. Without her."

"Yes."

Dai burst into tears. She cried for the woman, who had given up some of her last years to save her grandson. She cried for the boy, who would live most of his life without her. And she cried for the power in her blood, the power to alter the course of life and death and for the knowledge that she would forever be responsible for such a power.

Vana Ruu sat with her until her tears dried, waving away the acolytes who came to aid her. In his silence, she knew she had disappointed him, and she cried harder.

“You cry in the face of your gift,” Vana Ruu said quietly when her sobs had dissolved into sniffles.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped as the weight of her failure settled on her. Another sob threatened her small frame. A true shai’kah would not have wavered in the face of *ikana*. And if she was not shai’kah, the White Court had no place for her. She just hoped that she would be allowed to remain at the Monastery, that she could serve as an acolyte or even perform the duties of a novice for all her life.

Vana Ruu continued as though he hadn’t heard her. “It is the rare novice who sees past the awe of the power in their blood. It is the rare novice who does not inflate with the knowledge of their power. But only once before have I seen a novice with such clarity of mind that they could recognize the toll *ikana* takes on both subjects and on the world—and weep for it.”

Dai’s foggy mind struggled to process his words.

Vana Ruu’s finger grazed her chin, and she brought her bloodshot eyes up to his.

“It is important for you to recognize that,” he said quietly. “It is essential. And it will make you a far better master than your peers, a far better servant to Vei’jah and the gods. But your power is not something to weep for. The subject who approaches the *vana* for help does so willingly. The years they give are theirs to sacrifice. You are merely the conduit; you possess the power to make their sacrifice possible. You possess the power to give the years they relinquish to those who need them more. Yours *is* a gift, At’ka Dai Feiren. *That* you must not forget.”

Dai could only nod, taking comfort in the warmth of her mentor’s hand on her shoulder as she braced herself against the emotions that had tumbled through her since she left the Monastery that morning.

In the moons that followed, she would come to see that Vana Ruu was right. Dai would spend many hours at the temples. She would watch dozens of desperate people walk through the pavilion doors. Desperate mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, friends. All desperate for one thing: to save someone they loved. And the years they gave made that possible. Vana Ruu made that possible. One day, Dai could too.

But even when tears of gratitude spilled over her cheeks, even when her heart sang with the promise of the power in her blood, there was one thing her mind would never let her forget.

The way the woman’s blood had glistened against the ebony bowl, each drop clinging to the next. As though even her spilt blood knew that death was gaining on her.

I.II

Fen hated waiting. Especially here, tucked in an alcove in the Merchant Quarter, where the streets thronged with aggressive sellers and skeptical buyers, and scuffles over fair price were as common as pickpockets. The slippers Troien gave her were too thin, and the soles of her feet ached from standing on uneven cobblestones. It didn't help that she hadn't eaten since breakfast—a meager helping of rice and mackerel—and that her stomach roared angrily every time she caught a whiff of cinnamon duck roasting on a spit.

Her nerves didn't help either, crawling over skin already slick with sweat from the midday walk.

She tugged at the yellow scarf tied around her neck. It was the most common *a'shaik* by far, and since Fen didn't have one of her own, Troien had insisted that she wear his. “The shai'kah notice the undevout,” he'd said. But since he tied it at the base of her throat, her breathing had been shallow, the thin silk sitting like lead on her shoulders.

Traitor, it whispered to her.

Fen had promised herself long ago that the White Court would never touch her years. A promise that, for someone of her low status, had required her to go to great, unpleasant lengths to keep. But even knowing that the shai'kah had never laid a hand on her, the thought of being lumped with all the others who'd tithed to the White Court...it made her ill.

We're just waiting now, her father's voice whispered in her head, the image of blue veins peeking through her mother's pastry-thin skin blocking out the busy street.

Fen shook her head, forcing her hand away from the scarf.

This was not the time for her memories.

The sun had already started to set, the smoky air shimmering pale gold and dipping into shadows. Some of the merchants had begun packing up their wares for the day, but she knew others would stay just long enough after dark to catch the stragglers on their way home.

“She'll come by way of the canals, and she'll disappear that way too,” Troien had reminded her for the fifth time before she left. “Once she returns to the swan, you won't find her again.” It was only unease and the flutter of nerves that curbed the impulse to hit him. She had

already failed twice. And though she knew Troien was fond of her, she wasn't sure how many passes she really had. She didn't get the impression that the Black Keep was fond of second chances.

Unfortunately, swans—the slender, long necked boats that shuttled between the streets of Khava—were as common as bones in seared fish, and they never lingered. And Fen had only ever seen the Vana ascendant from afar, one of three distant figures on a dais before the White Bridge. Even if Fen pretended she was capable enough to actually track the shai'kah down, she had a sneaking suspicion the Vana ascendant would incapacitate her well before she had a chance to win her over.

Fen scanned the window of canal visible between the buildings. Swans had been passing by all day, but with the flow of people moving between Fen and the canal, it would be easy for someone to slip off unnoticed.

Anxiously, she considered moving. There were still enough buyers that she could blend with the crowd. Maybe she could pretend to be interested in the sprouts at the stall across the way and keep one eye on the canal. She could easily get away with five minutes pouring over them—sprouts were unreliable here, the delicate fronds often suffering during transport from the mainland.

Casting an eye once more at the canals, she steeled herself and slipped from her nook—
And made it all of three steps before the sharp whistle of steam and a crack had her head whipping up the street.

The crowd was pushing and shoving, more than one stall teetering on its foundations as the buyers clamored to reach the walls. A sharp shove in the back had Fen wheeling forwards, barely catching herself before she tumbled into a pile of sprouts. She recaptured her footing long enough to glimpse the black metal beast careening over the cobblestones, and then she too was fighting to get out of the way, unceremoniously driving her elbow into more than one of her street-fellows.

The machine stopped, but the crowd didn't. It was only when Fen's back was safely tucked against the wooden base of a stall that her eyes settled on the dark paper windows and four wheels...and she registered what she was looking at.

Her stomach dropped.

Drakes, they were called, after the fire lizard of Vei'jah legends, named because the steam they emitted resembled the creature's smoky breath. They were rare in the city, a new invention, and only two powers possessed them. The Empress and the White Court. Fen would have preferred the Empress, but she doubted the ruler was day-tripping to the Merchant Quarter.

A hush smothered the crowd as the glistening black door clanged open. The first thing Fen saw was hair the orange of flickering embers. The second was the black robes.

Not just shai'kah. The drake was carrying one of the *noi'ya*. Night stalkers. The shai'kah masters responsible for tracking down Khava's criminals and doling out punishment to the guilty.

The crowd recoiled, and that collective dread pooled in Fen's stomach as the man with the pin straight ember hair stepped down from the drake. He paused, his golden eyes surveying the crowd down a narrow nose. Fen's breath shuddered as the fading light caught one of the pale marks along his cheek. She was too far away to see them clearly, but it was not first time she'd glimpsed the white scars that marred shai'kah's skin. The more scars they had, the more years they'd taken. That was what she had always been taught. Most often, shai'kah wore long flowing robes to hide their scars. The White Court and their acolytes taught that it was modesty—they did not wish to flaunt the power gifted them by the gods. Fen was not of the same opinion.

The *noi'ya* smiled, a kind, curling smile that didn't reach his eyes, and his hand lazily traced out a *savana*, the most common sign of prayer. "No need for panic," he said softly, his voice carrying in the quiet. "We come only for one."

Those inhuman eyes scanned the street, and many in the crowd touched their scarves, an instinctive response. Suddenly, Fen remembered the one around her own neck and tried not to shrink. It was illegal to wear another's *a'shaik*.

A cry sounded to her left and dozens of heads whipped to the side, necks craning to get a better view.

The *noi'ya*'s smile deepened.

"Ah," he said in that same quiet tone. "How wonderful, Meiva."

This time, Fen *did* shrink, her own hand now clutching her *a'shaik* as a black cloak snaked through the crowd only a pace or so away. A second *noi'ya*, one Fen had never seen leave the drake. This one had rippling hair dark as grape wine and skin the same deeper shade as Fen's. But it was the name that struck a chord of fear in her.

Meiva.

That distant dais flashed once again in her mind, the memory just slightly out of reach. She remembered three figures, one in white, one in red, one in black. The one who'd worn white was Fen's target. But she could have sworn Meiva had been one of the other two.

The second *noi'ya* pulled a figure from the crowd. A man, not tall but broad, with his arm pinned behind his back. The sprout seller.

"I haven't done anything," he snarled.

"Excellent," the ember-haired one said. "Then this should be quick. Meiva, if you will."

To Fen's eye, Meiva did nothing. But the man stilled, gritting his teeth.

"Is your name Mian Po Han?"

"Yes," the man grunted.

"And you sell greens, correct? Sprouts, fennel, cabbage?"

He grunted again.

"Well, then it's all sorted," the *noi'ya* said kindly. "You *are* who we're looking for. Cabbage is decreed by law as an essential product and receives a *riga* deduction under a *'shaik* law. But sprouts..." He clucked his tongue. "...do not. It is my understanding that you have been observing a *'shaik* law on sprouts instead of cabbage. Might I inquire as to why?"

The man broke Meiva's grip, swinging a wild fist at the ember-haired *noi'ya*. He ducked smoothly.

The man made to run...and then he froze and dropped to the ground, clutching his throat.

Fen's chest tightened as she looked back to the two *noi'ya*. Meiva's eyes were on the sprout seller, her lips parted like she was sucking in. The man rolled on the street, clawing at his throat, white panic in his eyes.

Fen looked away.

After a few moments, the ember-haired *noi'ya* spoke again. "Thank you, Meiva."

When Fen looked up, two young men in gray robes were hauling the unconscious seller into the back of the Drake. White Court novices.

Meiva watched them, her amethyst eyes glittering from an artfully carved face. The kind of perfection sculptors in the Artist's Quarter dream of capturing in stone. Perfectly emotionless.

"I needed some air," she replied to her fellow *noi'ya*. Then she turned, her black cloak whirling behind her and climbed into the drake.

The ember-haired *noi'ya* cast one more long look at the crowd and bowed his head. “May the gods grace your exchanges,” he said, and then he climbed in after her.

The instant the drake had rumbled out of sight, the crowd surged as one. Some returned to shop. Others raced to get home. More than a few scooped up the sprouts now left unattended.

Fen remained still. Her heart thundered in her ears, and she felt as though her thin slippers had melded to the street. *You're alright*, she reminded herself. *They weren't looking for you*. And they never could have suspected that she, of all those in the street, was wearing a false *a'shaik*. But if they'd known who she worked for, who she was hunting...

Fen caught a flash of iron hair in the crowd.

Her mission. The swans.

But the crowd was too thick, too mobile. By the time she fought through to where she'd seen that gray-haired, hooded figure, they were already gone. And four swans were gliding past the alley entrance.

Another failure.