
Sultai: Betrayal

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Nishang's arm was less than a limb now. The wasting disease was making fine work of him. It had lost all function; its form, too, was nearing that end. Skin, once tan and hairless, riddled with the wounds of battle, was akin to the graying bark of a blighted tree. He kept it concealed in a loose sling to hide the rot, and he attempted to mask the terrible odor with flowering plants, but decay continued to seep from its cracks and drenched the fabric in a putrid soup. This did not escape the notice of everyone in the bar. Still, he kept on with a soldier's drunken rant to the barkeep.

"The *before times*, dragon-rule ... ah, they were great times! They were made for the strong and fearless ... for the conqueror! Me and Titsui, my second-in-command ... we would ... our army and us ... every fortnight or so ... every week maybe ... we would march into a new territory, a town or a village, and claim it as our own. To my disappointment, there was always little resistance. Cowards stopped wanting to put up a fight, you know." He took a swig from his cup. "Instead, they'd greet us with gifts of gold and precious treasures." He chuckled. "They'd *ungladly* lay down their lives to serve as our prisoners—*sibsig*—resurrected to serve Master Silumgar's aims."

"All right," said the barkeep, annoyed. "None of that ..."

"I was promised three *sibsig* of my very own," Nishang went on, "raised from the enemy dead, bequeathed unto me for my many years of loyal service!" He grumbled, growing more inebriated. "Given to me to polish my warrior's blade, to mend these damned rat-eaten robes ... to nurse my wounds." He coughed violently. Blood dripped from the corners of his mouth. "But this *new order* robbed me of my rightful spoils!"

"You're disturbing my patrons," the barkeep said sternly. "Quiet down or you're out."

"Oh, did I hit a nerve, barkeep?" Nishang grinned, taking another large swig from his cup. He leaned in. "They made being a *sib* an honor now and gave all our captives rest. No more work for them, no purpose. Pay a little money, get your resurrection, and a new life of leisure, while the rest of us, those who fought to preserve the true way—the Silumgar way—of life get this!" He showed off his decomposing face and neck.

At the sight of his crude affliction, two people stood from their table and exited, audibly disgusted.

"I should have died in battle," he continued, calling after them. "An honorable soldier's burial, like my kindred's, is what I deserved." He hoists his cup into the air. "To Titsui: the best soldier I ever knew!"

"Listen here," said the barkeep, "your war stories are one thing, and in my bar, blasphemy can slide for a few rounds. But you—that damned arm of yours 'specially—are just plain bad for business. Go home."

"I'm your best customer ..."

“Customers pay. You’re a waster I felt a little pity for.” The barkeep had stopped wiping the bartop. “Go spend your last days in peace. Gurmag Swamps, they’ll give you the soldier’s rest you want, or whatever.”

Nishang couldn’t help but frown as the barkeep went to grab his cup. Seemingly, as with a mind of its own, Nishang’s decaying arm jerked. His hand grasped the barkeep’s wrist and squeezed it tight.

With a hard yank, the barkeep pulled back, taking both the cup and Nishang’s arm with him. Loose from the sling, the limb was displayed in all its putrid glory, sending the rest of the patrons running out into the street. Flailing violently, the barkeep sent the arm flying to the opposite end of the bar, directly into the burning fireplace.

At once, Nishang leapt for it, reaching into the flames to retrieve the scorched appendage. He grabbed it and tried to beat the flames away.

“Get out,” screamed the barkeep, “and don’t you ever come back!”

Nishang stumbled out into the street. As the adrenaline from the altercation retreated, his drunkenness returned. He braced himself against a street lamp, and, for the first time, he took in the damage to his shoulder. There was no blood, only gnarled tendons clinging to diseased tissue. Though he had grown used to it, the stench nearly made him retch. Then he did, right there on the sidewalk.



Art by: Sergey Glushakov

In the foul liquid sat several teeth, a corner of tongue, perhaps, a piece of lung, and surely what was left of his dignity. Just beyond it stood a sibsig, face gaunt but eyes daggered; marked by his chartreuse robes with brass embellishments, his crown of flowering vines, and his pair of golden prosthetic legs.

“Don’t you look down on me, sib!” Nishang spat, stabbing his severed arm at him. “Your kind was lower than bugs under my boot!” He aimed his arm at the many passersby. “This is the new order of things, huh? The honor of death has been desecrated. And all of you are happy with it! You’re complicit with this, aren’t you?! You’re damned sheep!”

He continued his stumble down the street, heading toward home.

The walk was always a lonely one. He took to traipsing his usual path through the darkened alleyways. The authorities that policed the main roads forbade him to mingle with the general population on account of his many outbursts and his deplorable hygiene. Eventually, he arrived at a narrow canal where a ramshackle houseboat rested. He poured himself into it, collapsing with exhaustion. Then, after a few moments, with what little strength he had left, he crawled to the small steam engine at the back of the boat—an old system of pulleys, levers, and pistons from his warrior days. Lighting the coals that sat inside, the engine whirled to life. The boat pulled away from the canal’s edge and took him toward the swamplands.

Nishang’s public outburst did not land him in any trouble. In fact, he was mostly ignored, which was why, when he wasn’t drowning his woes in spirits, he spent his final days staring into the jungle swamps from his rickety houseboat. It was something the people of Kheru City understood—not only did the wasting disease affect the body, it affected the mind as well; eating away at the brain until a mindless husk was all that remained. Hallucinations were one of the first symptoms.

In the past few days, a carp, outlined in glowing purple light, had appeared to him, swimming silently at the bow of his boat. He had confused it with a bit of necromancer magic at first, but the spells of the naga or rakshasa had always shown themselves as snakes in the past. As he cruised forward, it appeared again.

“What are you, little fish?” Nishang asked, leaning over to it. “Why do you bother this old soldier ...?”

In that moment, his vision split in two, with the left half tilting, falling toward the water, then slamming to black. He clasped his hand over his eye, feeling only a hollow cavern in his skull. The disease had taken another casualty.

His loss of the organ and dropping it into the water seemed to excite the fish. It circled the bloodshot orb once as it sank, and, in the move, the fish began to glow brighter. That purple light extended to the boat, pulling it in close and binding it to the fish. Nishang felt the jolt of their sudden union but made no attempt to interrupt the magical happening, intrigued and curious about what may unfold in the time he had left. Then, like a train engine pulling its cargo, the fish led the boat into deeper waters. Surrendering, he let it take him. What else could he do?

Nishang’s remaining eye took in this change in environment—an eerie, ghostly forest wrenching out of a murky, black sea. The boat eased through the water, sheltered from the crooked tree roots and mud mounds by the magic emanating from the carp’s fin. The air was muggy, sticky—each breath into his withering lungs felt like he could take it with a spoon. He hacked up more blood as he neared a massive tree at the center of the swamp.



Art by: Alexander Ostrowski

There, the small bit of iridescent moonlight began to dim, waning to something akin to a deep indigo. He felt as if he were not alone. The jungle trees trembled in the wind and twinkled in their hollow spaces, as if they were full of eyes—an audience of shadow creatures eager to watch him perish.

“Hello?” Nishang croaked to the trees. “Hello? Is anyone out there?” The trees remained silent. “I was ... I was told I would find a soldier’s rest here. I was one, when I was ... well ... I was a soldier, loyal to the one true ruler of this plane—the great Silumga—”

Before he could finish the name, his jawbone fell from his face. It shattered into several pieces upon the floor of the wooden boat. He didn’t bother to pick it up. Armless, eyeless, and now jawless, this final indignity was indeed the end for him. He felt his lungs seize, his heart palpitate wildly, just as a sudden stirring in the branches above and a distant rumbling in the ground played prelude to his demise. Something very large was heading in his direction—a massive figure traipsing through the swamp.

He leaned forward, craning his neck to get a better look, when there came a loud *crack* at the top of his spine. He felt his head fall forward, the skin tear, the tendons *snap* ... then darkness.

Nishang blinked several times as his eye focused ... wait ... his eyes focused. Strange. He was laying on his back, face up in a shallow pool of water. Swirls of ethereal smoke danced above him, slithering through the ivory branches that dangled with purple wreaths and around the leaves of the trees, which seemed to hum with their own inner light.

Is this the afterlife? Am I dead?

“Not anymore,” came a low, discordant voice, a voice Nishang recognized. “You are *un* dead, kindred.”

Nishang quickly sat up. Standing above him, just a few feet away, was a large, purple vulture, complete with wings, beak, and talons, dressed in the green garb of an ancient warrior. The seal of Silumgar was on his chest.

“Titsui?” Nishang asked out of pure disbelief. He studied his friend’s face and form. He saw no gauntness or golden prosthetics. “How are you *alive* ? In our last battle ... I saw ... he killed you.”

“Nearly lost a wing,” Titsui replied.

“Your head, too!”

Titsui straightened. “Yes, that, too.” He smiled. “From the time since I saw you last, this has been my home. I was wounded, mortally, but I was saved by the only one who may have loved our master more than us: Sidisi.”

“Silumgar’s vizier.” Nishang rose to his knees. A shadow in the distance slithered through the undulating fog.

“Yes. And she has saved you, too; given you life anew.”

“I’m ... I’m a sibsig?” Nishang spoke. “Wait ... I can speak?”

He rushed to a still puddle of water and peered down into it. In the reflection, he saw his jaw—new, chiseled and solid; his eyes—both right and left, the latter replaced with golden orb, sparkling in the lavender light; and his neck repaired with a skintight collar. There came a harmonic ringing when he touched the collar—the chime of metal against metal, which brought his attention to the fingers of his new hand; attention to his entirely new arm, in fact. Nishang held it out, examining his gold-plated forearm etched with intricate designs.

“We are the last of a great age, kindred,” Titsui began. “But there is still hope ... in you.”

As if responding to the call, Nishang’s arm began to glow with purple light.

“In a day’s time Dauna, chief necromancer of the Sultai, will hold a ceremony for the newly undead, welcoming them into this honored clan. Together, they will be anointed in the sacred waters of the ancient tree that grows within Qarsi Palace. Hundreds of them. You will stand among them in their celebration as a proud sibsig.”

“But I am not proud!” Nishang fired back. “There’s no honor in this!”

“Of course not,” Titsui smiled. “But you, friend, will feign happiness and gratitude, all the while carrying our vengeance in your new limb ...” He gestured to the glowing arm. “*Poisons* gathered by Sidisi during her tenure of service to our master—to *kill* these undead abominations; to *kill* the tree, to *kill* the traitorous necromancers that desecrate our Silumgar’s legacy.” Titsui moved slowly toward him. “And once you have done your duty, Silumgar’s rightful heir will take her place ...”

At that moment, the creature, ophidian and terrible, emerged through the veil of swirling fog—her armored scales wet and glimmering, her eyes ragefully aglow, and her staff alight with purple necromantic magic—lording over her two faithful subjects.

“And your name will be revered throughout the annals of history—Nishang, destroyer of the Sultai usurpers,” she said.

Nishang immediately shifted to kneeling on one knee, his head bowed before the great Sidisi. Filled with a warrior’s pride and rage, he replied, “I will be honored to deliver your vengeance.”

“Good,” Titsui smiled. He looked up to Sidisi. Her eyes gave a flash and narrowed, prompting Titsui to speak further. “And to seal the pact, one more thing is required ...”

“Anything,” Nishang exclaimed. “I will offer it gladly.”

“A small piece of your soul, given willfully to our new lord.”

Nishang stood, loyal and unwavering.

“Take what you need from me,” he said. “I will give anything and everything to bring back all that we’ve lost. I swear to serve.”

“And serve you shall.”

Nishang made his way through the streets of Kheru City, a beautiful and lively place, shaped by large stone buildings, bustling markets, and gleaming waterways.

The pain and degeneration he bore in his old life had made hunching and shuffling routine, so it took him a bit to find comfort in a sibsig’s comportment. *Shoulders back, posture straight, heel to toe.* This new rhythm did not go unnoticed. Pedestrians smiled in his direction, bowed graciously as he passed, even took his hands in theirs and kissed them. *Strange.* As a soldier, he had always been received with terror and hatred. But now ... *respect? Deference?*

“Excuse me, sir?” a lighthearted voice called to him. “Wait a moment.”

He paused his march and turned to see a beautiful woman with long, flowing black hair running toward him from a shop. In her hands she carried a garland of wildflowers laced with golden ribbons. Nishang felt his heart skip a beat. *Strange.* She stopped just ahead of him. The smell of her perfume wafted over him; more potent and intoxicating than any drink he’d ever had.

“Has no one crowned you yet?” she asked with a tender sigh. No one had ever looked at him in such a way, let alone a woman.

Nishang stared back at her, confused. *And now adoration?*

“Today, you, sweet sibsig, are to be celebrated,” she beamed, placing the garland over his head, “as the life that was and the life that is to come.”

She gave him a soft kiss on each cheek, allowing the second to linger. Nishang stiffened, unprepared and wide-eyed, unable to speak.

“Have you never been kissed before, handsome?” she asked bashfully.

Nishang shook his head. In his life, all he had known was war. Softness was something seen as weak and undesirable. A firm fist always outweighed a gentle caress.

“Well ...” Not a moment later did she bring her lips to his. Soft and tender. One leg kicked back, as she rose to standing on her toes. Nishang’s shock faded at once, and he felt himself sinking; sinking into the affections of another for the very first time.

After a moment, she pulled back slightly, her eyes still locked in his. “Perhaps,” she spoke softly, “when the ceremony is over, you and I ...”

There suddenly came the sharp sound of something searing, along with the smell of burned flesh. The woman retreated with a yelp, clutching the back of her arm, where Nishang’s metallic fingers had brushed her, *burned* her.

There was the look he remembered—horror and betrayal—that frightful regard every man, woman, and child had given him as a soldier whenever he marched into town.

“Oh, I’m ... sorry ...” Nishang muttered fearfully. The words struck him. He had never uttered them before. *I’m sorry.*

The woman shook her head violently, then hurried back to the safety of her shop.

Nishang stared down at his hand—a searing-hot coal encased in brilliant, inviting gold. When dragons ruled, all this would have amused him. He would have made a mockery of the woman for his fellow soldiers and for all the people in the square to see. He thought it should have been laughter that spilled out from behind his flashing teeth ... surely it should have come. Not an apology; not the tightening in his chest or the nauseating turn of his stomach.

His gaze turned next to the flowers laid around his neck. It was clear they had been picked fresh, cleaned of debris and withered petals, woven beautifully together with purposeful hands ... for him. *When was a sibsig, under his supervision, ever given him something beautiful? Sibsigs were lower than rodents, weren’t they?* They were dispassionate and heartless creatures, only meant to do the bidding of their masters. But now he was one, wasn’t he? He felt just the same as he always had.

“You’re going to be late, kindred,” came Titsui’s voice from behind. It felt close, like dragonfire burning at his ear.

Nishang spun around. No one was standing near him, but on the sidewalks, several people who had heard the woman’s yelp were staring at him, utterly bemused by their interaction. Titsui’s breath still hovered about his ear and directed his eyes to the shadows of a narrow alleyway. There, he saw Titsui’s slender beak slowly retreat into darkness. He went to him.

Entering the alley, Nishang thought the two of them would be covered in a cloak of darkness, however, the walls of the neighboring building and the ground beneath him hummed with flickering purple light. It was as if a fire were smoldering beneath Titsui’s talons, which cast the wiry stork in a devilish purple glow.

“Sampling the spoils before the harvest, are we?” Titsui muttered. “You were always such a ladies’ man.”

The accusation didn’t feel right, causing Nishang to squirm at the sound of it. *Spoils.*

“Was I, Titsui?” Nishang asked, eyeing him suspiciously. “A ladies’ man?”

“Were you not?”

“I don’t ... I’m not sure.” Nishang replied, staring back at him.

Titsui let out a hearty laugh. “Of course you were, kindred. You were never shy about sharing your unsavory exploits with your fellows. You were the most ruthless of us all on the battlefield and the most lascivious about town. One of Silumgar’s finest.”

“The way you flatter is new to me. It feels ... different ... I ...”

Titsui took a step forward. “The memory of a sibsig can be a bit shifty, they say. You won’t have long to worry about that, as long as the mission remains clear. Who knows, perhaps, you’ll get three sibsigs of your very own, bequeathed to you for your ...”

“Many years of loyal service.” Nishang said nervously, finishing Titsui’s statement. He took a hard look at Titsui. “Friend, in our last battle together, how did you *nearly* lose your head?”

Titsui paused for a moment and stared back at him. His eyes seemed to be slowly catching fire.

“An axe ...” he replied simply, without emotion, “thrown by a filthy Jeskai soldier.”

Nishang’s breath stopped in his throat. He took a step back, shaking his head. “Who are you?”

Titsui straightened.

“Your kindred, your friend ...”

“You were murdered by a *Sultai* priest. The traitor cut your throat. Cut so deep he severed your head. You are not Titsui.”

At once, Titsui’s entire form became engulfed in purple flames. His robes, feathers, and flesh burned away like cannon fodder, revealing the monstrous form of a rakshasa beneath. Blue-skinned, tusked, and demon-horned, the immense and muscular creature rose to a great height. His wings tremored, shaking the feathers away to reveal four muscular arms that stretched wide. The alleyway could barely contain him. Skulls, both human and animal, decorated his armor along with the shining trinkets that hung from his shoulders, wrists, and waist. He grinned wide, teeth dripping with black, devilish delight.



Art by: Chris Rahn

“You are such a talker when you drink,” the rakshasa chortled. “I guess, in all your incessant rambling, I missed that little detail, how your friend died.”

Nishang fell back with both fear and surprise. “You ... you tricked me.”

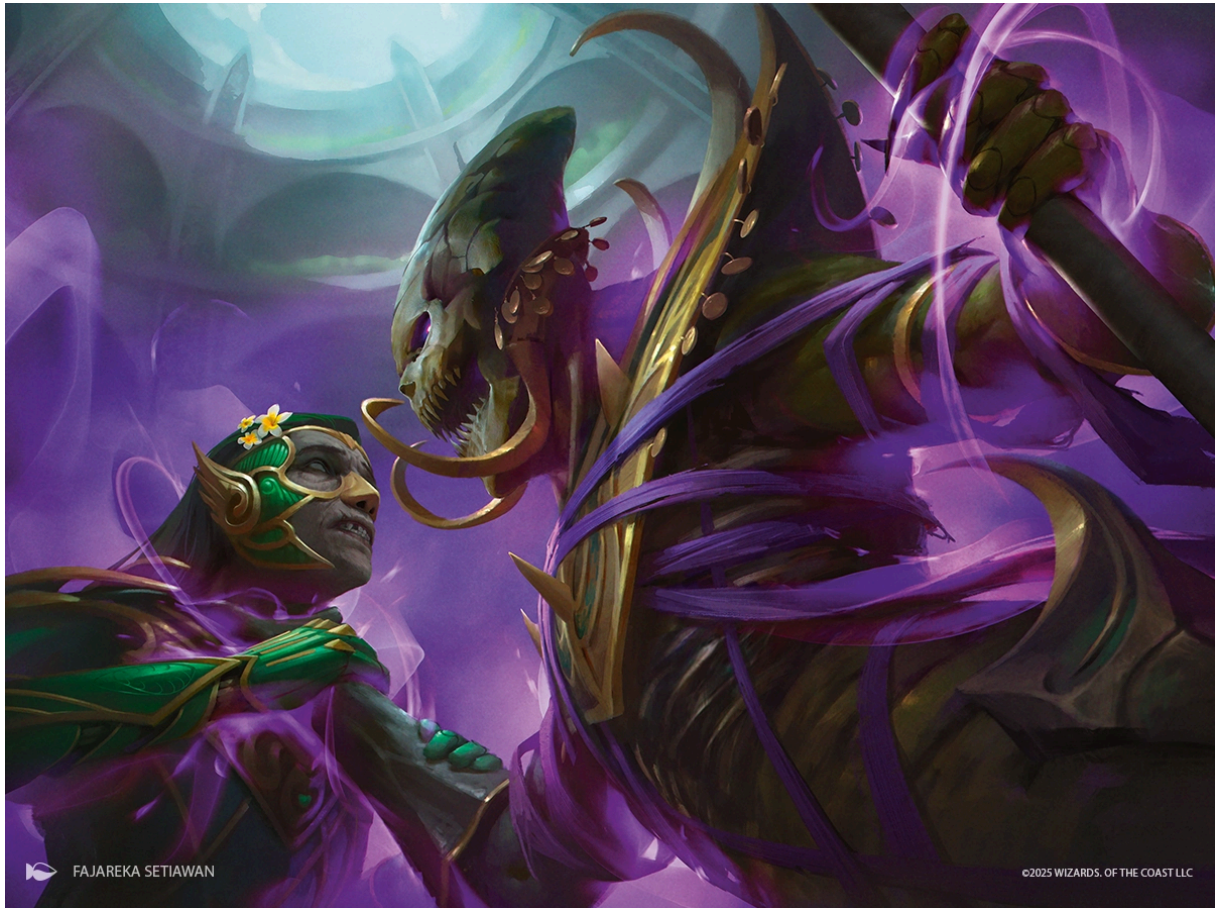
“It was a necessary deception,” the rakshasa replied, his form shifts once again to Sidisi, the undead naga, in all her powerful glory. “For Sidisi to rise, the new order must fall, and we must be doubly

sure those we recruit for the cause are steadfast and true. Sadly, I fear your loyalties have changed, Nishang.”

“How ... how do you know that?”

“An *apology* ?” the rakshasa said, shaking his head with disgust. “To that Sultai worm? You have *compassion* for these roaches.”

“No,” said Nishang, shaking his head. “No. I hate these traitors. But I *hate* being lied to as well.”



Art by: Fajareka Setiawan

The rakshasa, like a spider cradling its prey, ensnared him in his web, taking Nishang by the shoulders and spinning him around so he was looking out into the street. There, he saw the march of many other sibsigs, all adorned with floral wreaths, waving to the crowd of adoring patrons.

“Just look at them,” the rakshasa snarled. Nishang heard shifting skin, splitting bone, behind him; again, the rakshasa was changing appearance, though he dared not turn around to discover into *what*. “They didn’t earn their immortality. Unworthy vermin. They never wielded a sword, never conquered a city, never bled for a greater cause. Not like you have.”

The rakshasa released him with a push that set his feet moving toward the street. *That’s right*. Each step seemed to strengthen his commitment, and soon he was marching proudly toward his destiny. However, once he crossed the threshold—moving from the dark of the alley back into the light of the street—a young boy bounced off him and fell to the ground with a thud.

Nishang regarded the frail creature. Somehow, the urge to reach out came over him; dregs of that filthy compassion the rakshasa had accused him of nurturing. He held out his golden hand, unthinking.

“Yes, kindred.” The rakshasa chortled with devilish delight. “Help him. In the only way you know how.”

The boy looked up at Nishang and smiled, reaching for the offered hand. In that moment, Nishang remembered what happened to the woman when he touched her. *Compassion*. This was a feeling the Silumgar sought to stamp out from the very beginning, at the sunrise of his own adolescence. *He had been a boy just like this one once, hadn't he?* Before his training. Before he had marched to war, and never really come home.

I never thought ... Nishang said to himself. *I never knew sibsigs could feel anything. No pain, no sadness, no ... love. But they do.*

Nishang switched hands, helping the boy to his feet with the other. The boy smiled. He smiled back. Then, they parted.

“They’re just like us,” whispered Nishang. “Undead, but no different. Not really.”

“*Their only purpose is to serve!*” the rakshasa shouted, returning to his monstrous form, the purple fires burning around him like an inferno. “The same as yours.”

Nishang suddenly felt himself fall to one knee by no will of his own. His head bowed without his command, and his right arm with fist clenched slammed into his chest in salute. The rakshasa was controlling him, totally and completely. Nishang would complete his mission whether he liked it or not.

“Fortunately, we made sure victory would be guaranteed.”

My soul. Nishang shuddered. *He has my soul and, with it, my body.*

“Hurry now. You don’t want to be late.”

At the command, Nishang stood to his feet again. Try as he might, he could not open his mouth to resist; though he tried to plant them firmly on the ground, his feet turned him round and marched him back into the street. There, he joined the march of other sibsigs heading toward the castle. He looked to those around him—the cheering citizens along the street, the Sultai warrior escorts, and the sibsigs themselves—for help, but the rakshasa forced a rictus grin onto his face. He looked positively delighted to be there, he realized miserably.



Art by: Ioannis Fiore

Guided by proud necromancers who cast intricate, snake-like spells in the air through song, dance, and mystic instruments to welcome them, the sibsig were led into Kheru Temple. Sunlight, once golden and warm, faded behind the arched doorway of twisting branches as they entered, and it was replaced by a sublime and resplendent white glow that emanated from the roots of a vast, ancient tree. Submerged beneath the sparkling surface of a large crystal-blue pool, its roots drank in the water's aspect, bringing starlight to the branches, the hanging floral vines, and the emerald leaves. It was a wonder to behold.

Along the sylvan-etched walls stood intricately designed pyres with flues stretching high into the tree's branches, reaching toward a boundless ceiling above. In their mouths smoldered tender orbs of dragonfire. Nishang remembered a time when the acid-scorched corpses of men hung in those teeth; how Silumgar would use these furnaces to make a spectacle of his enemies.

The sibsig came to stand about the great lake, all of them filled with tangible pride, assured of their purpose and promise to the Sultai. Nishang smiled like them, stood proudly like them, though every fiber in him wanted to scream, wanted to rage, wanted to run. *This must be how sibsig felt, in the time of Silumgar.* They were prisoners in their own bodies, beholden to the will of monsters beyond the bars. *Monsters, like me!*

A doorway in the heart of the roots alighted with purple light, and, at the same time, the branches overhead began to tremble. Blinding emerald light, piercing the veil of floral wreaths above, harkened the entrance of Teval, the spirit dragon, and judge of the Sultai, who peered down at the crowd of sibsig with loving, flame-filled eyes. Her scales, intricately patterned, tipped in shining gold, refracted the light from the tree, filling the room with divine brilliance.

“There’s the vile serpent,” Nishang mouthed, the rakshasa’s desires flowing through him.

Teval’s luminescence flowed down into the rooted doorway, intensifying the light within it. This harkened the grand entrance of her chief necromancer. Dauna. Dauna was an exquisitely alluring woman, tall with olive skin, raven hair, drawn into a bun, topped with a golden crown. Her green, gold-trimmed armor flashed in the white light, and a red and gold sash danced like water in the air.

“And her pretty little worm,” Nishang remarked again. He felt tears welling in his eyes at the thought of what would transpire here. His body was still not his own.

Dauna stood before the crowd of sibsig and raised her arms.

“Welcome, honored sibsig, tenders of the abiding harvest!” She spoke proudly, firmly. “Among you today are the most cherished of our clan. Some of you may have known one another in your first life, others are simply friends you haven’t met yet. All of you are here at this time because you are the future hope of the Sultai: invaluable diplomats who have negotiated treaties, brokered alliances, and affirmed our noble status within the clans of Tarkir; healers and spiritual leaders, our bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds, providing our fair citizens with care that edifies their bodies and souls and safeguarding our traditions; masters-at-arms who, in their second life, continue to provide protection, discipline, and stratagems for our armed forces; and elders, our devoted council members, whose wisdom, guidance, and judgment bring clarity and a clear-eyed perspective of what is to come.”

Nishang listened intently to each word of the necromancer. As a sibsig, he felt more than he ever did as a living man or as a disciple of the old faith—felt all the more keenly the terror at what he knew he would shortly unleash.

“And, now,” Dauna called, “join me as we anoint you into this glorious future!”

With audible cheers, the sibsig entered the lake, immersing themselves up to their chests in the renewing waters, delving into what would soon be their mass grave.

“Wait,” Nishang said to himself, the rakshasa speaking through him. “Wait until they’ve all gone in.”

Dauna gestured to him. She gave a smile and beckoned him forward.

Desperately, Nishang clawed at the walls of his mind, but his limbs would not obey. Step by dreaded step, he marched forward, a helpless bystander and witness to an unspeakable crime. He entered the water, sinking lower and lower until the surface was no more than an inch below his fingers.

“Be blessed,” Dauna smiled heartily.

And with her blessing, Nishang descended and disappeared beneath the surface.

There was silence for a long moment as water flooded his ears and muffled the gentle slosh of wading limbs. Though he tried to close them, to slam them shut, his eyes remained wide open; the wicked puppeteer wanted him to see it all. Before him, like a rising mist, the poison expanded, turning what was once tender blue a violent orchid.

The first to be claimed by it was a male sibsig with two golden, prosthetic legs; in fact, this was the same man he had encountered outside of the tavern a day ago. Like the deadly breath of Silumgar, the poison tore through his implants like acid dissolving raw flesh. This was a wasting disease of another sort—one unforgiving and ignorant of time. The man kicked and wailed violently to escape its grasp, but, in mere moments, all left of him were only a few strands of his robes.

Suddenly, Nishang felt an incredible pain shoot through his chest and out of his back. Not the pain of remorse but a blade that had been shot through him and was now lodged in place. In the next

instance, a tremendous force pulled him from the water. He remained suspended in midair, hanging from a branch by the blade and the glowing chain attached at its hilt. Securing it was Dauna, whose eyes burned with terror and betrayal.

Nishang felt a bit of control release from his neck, which allowed his head to fall back over his shoulder. His horror-stricken eyes fell to the pool below, where the hundreds of sibsig, each melting, tore at their flesh for relief. It was to no avail, however—they disappeared in the purple mist as the rakshasa's evil cackle rippled through Nishang's mind.

"What have you done?" Dauna shouted. "What have you done?"

"Wait," said Nishang desperately as she dug the blade in deeper. He felt blood pouring over his beautiful golden jaw. "I'm different! I've changed!"

And maybe that was true. But part of his soul would always be in the grip of Silumgar.