

TARA, QUEEN OF THE TOUARGANG

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CHAPTER ONE

The tiny Shaman sat on the crest of the hill with his legs crossed and his fierce, oval eyes closed. His body hovered above the ground as he meditated. Secretly, the Touargang¹ villagers called him 'Priest' or 'Wizard,' but his name was Om. Om's shaved head glistened in the morning sun. His thin moustache grew far below his chin, and the ends had been neatly braided. He wore a scarlet cape and baggy silk pants. An emerald pendent hung from a woven strand of leather around his neck.

Om felt a cool breeze caress his face. With the breeze came the unexpected scent of ginger, and he was shaken from his meditation. His eyes snapped open; he stared skyward. A chill ran along his spine, as in awe as anyone who had lived as many centuries as he had could be.

Neither the blue falcon nor his transparent mate had ventured from their heavenly aerie for 196 years, and not for six centuries before that. No man, sage, or sorcerer had caught sight of the legendary falcon's metallic reflection in nearly two centuries, and there were both mystics and magicians who spent the better part of their lives looking.

For most, the falcon and his mate had grown into vague legend now little more than the occasional fireside story. Hardly a soul in the Great Expanse these days remembered the Fire Wars that nearly brought an end to every living thing on the planet, at least every living thing walking on two legs. At it was a safe bet that not even the most ardent Storiers² knew the details of the rock storm that, eight hundred years past, changed the courses of rivers, turned grasslands into deserts, and choked the breathing holes of the abyss dwellers.

Nearly two hundred years, and yet here they were, like apparitions weaving among the clouds. If the sight troubled Om, his somber expression didn't change.

He knew as well as any living thing in the Expanse that the falcon's appearance signaled more than change. It signaled the coming of suffering, pain, and destruction. It signaled a test of survival and a struggle of wills that would mark every man, woman, and child. It signaled a shift in the invisible forces that only the very learned and the most tortured could tap. Legend described the blue falcon as an emissary of the goddess, Kuan Yin. And if the stories were to be believed, she and the other gods were soon to exert their will.

How often, the Shaman wondered, did a day dawn, seemingly like every other, and evolve into something filled with watershed moments that wizards would dissect for years and Storiers would try, without success, to exaggerate. It was a day when change would be felt like the grip of a wild animal. It was a day

¹ Translated in the common language to mean: Dwellers of Time and Honor

² Tellers of Ancient and Not-so Ancient Tales; Historians.

when death would be as palpable as life was festive. One thing was certain, life on the rugged, beautiful plains of the Expanse would never be the same.

To read more of Tara, Queen of the Touargang, please call or e-mail. I look forward to hearing from you.