

magician of great skill, it was said that he could summon spirits to his aid and read portents of the future in the actions of animals and the patterns of storms. That this Nyfashi could have worked such havoc against him indicated an enemy of vast power.

"When did this happen?" Odoohan asked.

"This morning, before dawn. But we do not wish word of this to spread to the people, or even the imperial soldiers, for Ji-Ling's life also hangs by a slender thread."

Ji-Ling was Sokuno's daughter, a beautiful young woman considered by many to be the flower of the court, and especially doted upon by the childless emperor himself.

"What do you mean, advisor?" asked Odoohan, tension mounting in his voice though he was trying to remain calm. "What has become of the master's daughter?"

Chiang-Thoe showed us a note that named a location where emissaries from the emperor should go if his magnificence should wish to send Nyfashi a message—to *plead for forbearance or to beg for Ji-Ling's life*, as the insolent wording put it. This location was a derelict inn that stood within a section of the city that was commonly known as the "Place of Tatters", for over the centuries this small district had become a collection of slums sheltering the impoverished and houses of vile reputation. Ji-ling would no doubt be there as well.

Two warriors from an ancient order . . .

The son of Ketjubi Atalkai, I—Zshweng-Lah—was initiated into learning the ancient arts of combat when I came of age at three years old, for my family line, the House of Liuyari, was one of the Yunei—the warrior nobility of Mangjen. As a Yunei warrior I was taught the centuries-old arts of fighting, especially mastering the combination of sword-and-shortstaff, which was the Yunei's own unique style. With this instruction went a strict code of ethics and honor, the rules of which governed my life and conduct.

Discipline of mind and body were perhaps the two most fundamental aspects of a Yunei's training, without which the