

THE PHOENIX AND THE NIGHTINGALE

BROKEN PHOENIX

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1

‘Confess.’

The tone was soft but determined. Resonating in the velvet darkness, the disembodied voice was as seductive as a caress. Zakq lay on a threadbare blanket, his face bathed in soft light. Above his newly broken nose, his tightly closed eyes bore testament to his resistance.

‘Confession will be such a sweet relief,’ the unseen speaker persisted quietly. ‘You know the penalty for defiance. Confess now and the pain will end.’

Zakq remained motionless. Without opening his eyes he traced the face of his torturer in his mind. The serious expression was keen and intelligent with grey eyes that held untold secrets while seeking to extract more. Despite his pain, Zakq felt the urge to laugh at the ludicrous promise, but Security Chief Jai’k was not a man to be mocked. Fighting the impulse, Zakq preserved his bitter silence.

‘So you’re determined to persist in this foolish opposition,’ Jai’k resumed with a verbal shrug. ‘I’m disappointed, Zakq. I gave you greater credit. I’d marked you as one of the more intelligent of your race, but it seems I was mistaken. You’ve reverted to kind in spectacular fashion. And now, all I see before me is a ridiculous, broken Kqeg, too dim-witted even to provide a credible account. Do you think me as ignorant as you? Do you imagine I won’t check your story against the facts? What do you hope to gain by this stupid obstinacy? I already have all I need to condemn you. ‘Will you say nothing to help yourself?’

After another protracted silence, the security chief gave up. ‘So be it.’ He sighed in weary resignation. ‘The choice was yours and now the course is set.’ Rising from his chair, Jai’k scraped the legs across the stone floor.

The sharp grinding set Zakq’s teeth on edge, but hearing the security chief depart, he savoured his solitude with inexpressible relief. Alone at last, he sought escape from the stresses of the interrogation and his bitter regret at the course of events that had brought him here. Slipping out of his suffering, he drifted into a comfortable lethargy.

Suddenly, the darkness was displaced by an unbearable brightness; coolness was replaced by searing heat. Tied to a roughly hewn stake in the merciless midday sun, Zakq knew it was the end. Strangely dispassionate, he viewed his demise as participant and spectator, victim and witness.

Overhead, the sky was harsh and white, the distant mountains, a rosy mauve. With an eerie detachment Zakq studied the mountaintops, watching them heave to and fro, on the turbulent waves of the heat haze. Once, on assignment, he had seen the ocean, a baffling expanse of endless water, far from this arid landscape and quite unimaginable in this scorching heat. For a split second he felt a fierce gladness, but then pain distorted his thoughts, just as the ferocious heat distorted the landscape. The memory of the sea evaporated with the serum in his cracking blisters. Stripped naked,

Zakq's pale skin peeled away to expose raw flesh. At first, his red-gold hair gave his scalp some protection, but the excruciating heat swelled until he felt that his skull must burst under the pressure.

The agony grew unbearable. Like scalding scarlet lava pulsing in the depths of the bubbling core, it surged, incandescent and inexorable.

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Somewhere cooler and darker, the executioner glanced at Jai'k's expressionless face as he recounted the death with a relish for detail. In the shuttered office, the security chief's face seemed to shimmer in the lamplight. Disconcerted by the unfathomable grey gaze, the executioner stumbled over his words.

'Then the body you know, com... er...' He struggled to find the right word. 'Er... combusted... all at once... I mean, it was...'

'Spontaneous combustion,' Jai'k completed with frigid restraint.

'Yes, sir. I've never seen anything like it. I mean, I've read about it, but... Well, I was reading an interesting article the other day. All about Kqeg biochemistry. New research, you know, about their intolerance to sunlight.'

Jai'k made a mental note that the young executioner became talkative when nervous.

'It said they can't create an essential enzyme or something, so they can't regulate their body temperature properly,' the executioner continued, his enthusiasm waning. 'and that's why they overheat like that. I like to keep up to date, sir,' he concluded lamely.

'Thank you. That will be all,' Jai'k said in dismissal.

Jai'k stared at the empty space where the man had stood. Rubbing his throbbing temples, he filled a glass with water and took a sip. He took no delight in the execution. He had ordered it because it was necessary for the sake of public order. Nearly ten years had passed since the last death sentence and Jai'k recalled the last Open Security Council meeting and the claims of the idealistic guest speaker, who had presented this fact as evidence that Kqeg resistance was now effectively quelled. This annual affair was said to "encourage community interface, giving interested civilians the chance to make constructive comment and hold the council members to account". So ran the official line and Jai'k appeared acquiescent with this worthy purpose insofar as he gave no indication to the contrary. In fact, with an outward persona that was coldly professional to the point of intimidation, there was no chance that he would ever be called to account. Nevertheless, he nurtured a private contempt for the process and considered "open security" an exercise in futility.

As Head of the Jeni'th Intelligence and Security Service Jai'k was entrusted with matters affecting security, public order and the Kqeg Community. The three areas of responsibility were invariably interrelated. A race apart, the Kqeg were viewed by the Jeni'th authorities as a constant threat. Jai'k was an acknowledged expert on all aspects of their culture. An incisive mind, uncompromising perseverance and twenty-five years' dedicated service had resulted in his unrivalled position. Security Chief and sometime member of the judiciary, Jai'k was one of the few Jeni'th trusted to transact individually and collectively with the Kqeg.

It was in his role as judge that he turned to his next task. He was often called upon for a legal opinion when there was a Kqeg element in the case and, in this instance, he was required to consider an appeal. Jai'k opened the case file. Scanning the pages, he found that he was unable to summon the concentration that was usually second nature to him. He paused to take another sip of water before returning to the task.

At the base of an oval cave a skylight filtered the sun's rays through a mosaic of emerald, amber and crimson glass. The uneven panes diffused the desert sunlight to the darkness below. The softened light was helped down by three double-sided mirrors, cleverly angled to bounce the rays from one to another. Hung between the mirrors were wooden chimes and cascades of polished crystal while, closer to the ground, candles stood in wall crevices and rested on hanging candelabra. Down here, the air was deliciously fragrant as the heady scent of pressed cactus blooms mingled with the warm woodiness of drying herbs.

Standing on a colourful rug, a young woman stood at a table, distilling precious oils from the flowers, and singing as she worked. The amber blush of the stained glass highlighted her honey-blonde hair while the trembling wind chimes accompanied her song. Kqym always enjoyed teasing the luxurious perfume from the cactus flowers, delighting in the cool touch of the satin petals, their rich colours and translucent sheen. This was a labour of love that she saved for times of pain or times, like this morning, when she needed to soothe her jangling nerves.

She had spent a sleepless night and an anxious morning waiting for her brothers' return. As the sun neared its midday zenith they were still missing and, while she feared the worst, she dared not face her secret dread. Instead, she sang in a clear, passionate voice, waiting for the perfume to lull her troubled mind. After a while, she began to relax and her thoughts travelled at random, alighting on pleasant memories.

*Her brothers were with her. They had arrived as promised to hang the mirrors from her ceiling. She and Ikqe pored over Zakq's complicated diagram. He had calculated the angles of suspension needed to direct the sunlight into the corners of the room, but, typically, Ikqe was quibbling as he doodled his own version in the margin. Kqym didn't understand the meaningless symbols, but they confirmed her opinion that her brothers were quite brilliant. Moving away from the table, she watched the twins as they bent over the absorbing problem.*

*No one else would have anything to do with Kqym's madcap scheme of introducing sunrays – however carefully diluted – into a living space. But then no one else, she realised with a surge of pride, would have been able to put it into practice anyway. When Kqym first proposed her idea of light and colour to Zakq, he had listened patiently, questioning her with quiet intentness, before investigating how it could be carried out – just as she knew he would.*

*As the argument became more animated her brothers slipped into the flat vowels, glottal stops and lilted sentence completion that formed the distinctive cadence of the Kqeg accent. Ikqe, knowing he was destined to lose, deflected the attention to his sister.*

*'I can't understand what Kqym wants with more bits of junk hanging from her ceiling anyway!'*

*Accepting the chance to be reunited with his twin, Zakq laughed and grabbed Kqym's hand. Reaching for a candle he studied her sparkling nails. Specks of copper glittered within the malachite green varnish she had created for herself. Smiling, she awaited the inevitable.*

*'What kind of advert is that for a healer?' Ikqe said.*

*'Ah, there's no help for it,' Zakq said, shaking his head regretfully. 'It'll have to come off.'*

*They had been teasing her for as long as she could remember and she couldn't imagine a time when she wouldn't be the preferred butt of their jokes. It didn't matter. She forgave them with the boundless absolution of unconditional love.*

*'The whole hand?' Ikqe suggested mischievously.*

*'Oh, no! Both hands. Just to make sure!'*

*'Yeah, then we'll hang them from the ceiling to deflect the sunlight. It'll be a whole lot easier than fixing these mirrors!'*

Still smiling, Kqym put another handful of flowers into her bowl. As she turned she caught sight of herself in one of the mirrors and paused to contemplate her reflection. The Kqeg were generally tall and well built, but she was an exception. Kqym, in contrast to her brothers, was unusually small, the crown of her head falling well short of their broad shoulders. Looking at the face in the mirror, Kqym was studying the faint freckles that dusted her nose when a movement from the bed interrupted her self-criticism.

The old woman eased herself into a sitting position. Smiling warmly, Kqym walked across to rearrange the pillows.

'How are you feeling today, Kqatlin?' she asked tenderly.

Murmuring inconsequential remarks, she began to prepare a meal.

Kqatlin was ancient. Lately, she spent most of her time asleep and refused to spend any of her waking moments separated from Kqym, whom she loved as a daughter. Kqym alone never lost patience with the old woman, even when she was at her most tryingly eccentric.

'I'm not hungry, dear,' Kqatlin said querulously. 'I'll just have a drink of water.'

'How about a glass of cordial? It's already made and it's so much nicer than plain water.'

It was something of a ritual between the two women. As usual, Kqatlin happily gave in to Kqym's coaxing and accepted the tonic. The old Kqeg sipped the drink slowly, taking care not to spill it.

'What's wrong, dear?' she asked, perfectly lucid as she probed the young woman's burnished green eyes.

Kqym hesitated for a moment. 'My brothers,' she said at last.

'Sit down and tell me about it,' Kqatlin instructed, patting the bed.

Kqym's scream pierced the air, making the old woman wince. Sinking to the floor, her arms flailed and her face contorted as she was consumed by the engulfing agony. Fighting to control the rising pain, she felt herself being sucked towards a swell of heaving, red quicksand. For a while, the sticky liquid pulsed with a nauseous rhythm, glowing dangerously beneath a radiant heat haze, and then it began to flow towards her. Pleading and weeping, Kqym held out her hands to fend off the unspeakable horror. But desperation gave no resistance and, finding no escape, she surrendered to the inevitable destruction. An eternity passed in a second and, as Kqym waited to be submerged beneath the implacable tide, her terror knew no bounds.

### 3

Two glowing shades lit the sombre office. It was late evening and Jai'k was no longer working alone. His daughter, Ali'sha, had arrived within the last hour, keen to continue the research for her degree dissertation.

She knew it was her father's habit to work late. Indeed, for the whole twenty-two years of her life, he had spent virtually every waking moment engaged in official business of one sort or another; and Ali'sha had become the most promising history

student at Ci'tadel University by sharing her father's workaholic tendencies. She had come to appreciate the advantages of meeting her father on a Friday evening. For one thing, it gave her access to the Security Service Library, which held an exciting range of restricted information on the Kqeg.

She was making notes when her father looked up.

It was Jai'k's habit to comb his fingers through his dark hair and this absent-minded gesture accompanied his glance. 'How are you getting on with your dissertation?'

Ali'sha's stomach clenched. 'Fine,' she replied shortly.

'What exactly are you covering?'

'It's entitled "The History of the Military Order of Joakqim and its Importance to the Imperial Strategy of Jeni'thagh",' she replied keeping her voice steady.

These were the narrow terms in which she was wise enough to couch her dissertation title, but even so, her tutor had been vociferous in his condemnation of her subject matter. Ali'sha had been unshakeable. Ever since childhood she had avidly read every book she could find on the Kqeg and, rather than satisfy her curiosity, they had piqued it all the more. It was her special secret, one that by its very nature had to be pursued in secret. Some people delve into necromancy and experiment with the occult. Ali'sha's need to seek out the forbidden was satisfied by her solitary investigations into the Kqeg. And now, having found an excuse for her studies, she was determined to make the most of her opportunity. She felt a tremor of apprehension as she wondered if her father had uncovered her secret.

'And what do you have so far?'

'Mainly introductory material,' Ali'sha replied obliquely. 'I'm going to add some notes on pronunciation, for instance the silent q in the kq consonant that's incorporated into all Kqeg names. Do you know how the convention came about?'

'No.'

'Do you think it's a Jeni'th imposition?'

Jai'k frowned. 'Well, the Kqeg don't write,' he replied, picking up a library book from the pile. 'You're reading about the Annual Testing.'

'Yes,' Ali'sha agreed, faced with no other choice.

'What have you found out about the Joakqim?'

Ali'sha was disconcerted by her father's unusual interest and persistence. To further her broader interest in the Kqeg she had recently pleaded for the chance to interview one of the members of the Order of Joakqim. In reality Ali'sha had no need to tease the details of the Joakqim rank system out of any interviewee. She already possessed a staggering knowledge of the Order's divisions and the relevant qualifying powers. She realised that she needed to tread carefully now, for divulging too much would risk the interview. On the other hand, too simple an exposition would seem suspicious after so much research.

'Well,' she began carefully, 'all of the Kqeg have a heightened sense of empathy, or perhaps 'intuition' is a better word, but only those who demonstrate greater potential are admitted into the Order of Joakqim - those who can influence the ideas or actions of others. The lowest rank is novice. Initiates are tested annually and Joakqim novices qualify as secondmasters if and when they have learned to refine their skill. Expertise is acquired through disciplined training.

'Secondmasters are able to implant suggestions that will affect the behaviour of a host, that is, the person they are trying to influence. They can also probe the conscious mind with subtlety and hide their own thoughts from the mind-scan of all

but firstmasters. I imagine that kind of privacy is especially valuable in a psychic society,' Ali'sha suggested.

'I imagine so,' Jai'k agreed unemotionally. 'And the rank of firstmaster?'

'Less than a tenth of the Joaqim achieve the status, and three of the most talented are elected as grandmasters. The grandmasters are the guides and guardians of the Community and are headed by a chosen leader known as the Eminent Grandmaster.'

As to their powers, Ali'sha's painstaking research had revealed that firstmasters could access a person's dreams. Even more dangerous and intriguing, their psychic ability was honed to include telekinesis. However, the most perilous power was so devastating that it was forbidden by the code of the Order. As far as she could understand, it entailed some sort of mind shattering that led to a dreadful, untimely death. The Kqeg called the prohibited assault a "kqashakq" and even to use the word was a profanity. Ali'sha chose not to reveal any of this to her father.

'Like the rest of their race, they can't read or write. I'm a little unclear on the way they transmit knowledge. Obviously they must practise the oral tradition – passing stories from one generation to the next – and I imagine that they must be able to tap into some kind of collective consciousness.'

Ali'sha had also come across a suggestion that some of the Joaqim were able to communicate through the medium of music, but try as she might, she could not work out how music could translate into a coherent language. Feeling her father's gaze, she took the opportunity to ask the question that occupied her thoughts.

'The Kqeg that was executed today was a Joaqim firstmaster, wasn't he?'

'Surely, you didn't go and watch the execution, Ali'sha!'

'No, of course not, but I couldn't help hearing about it. It's all anyone's talking about. Was he a firstmaster?'

'Mmm.'

Ali'sha knew better than to procrastinate. 'What did he do to deserve the death sentence?'

'He was found in the grounds of the university after curfew.'

Jai'k gave a direct answer to draw Ali'sha's attention to the political sensitivity of the case. He hoped that, understanding the new position, she would volunteer to release him from his promise. But he hoped in vain. Ali'sha fully appreciated the political sensitivity of her interest. Through her father's indulgence, she had gained access to a wealth of new material in the Security Service Library and with the promised interview she was on the brink of accessing something far more exciting. Her research was a labour of love and nothing was going to stop her now.

Much to Jai'k's frustration, she resumed her questioning. 'What was he doing there?'

'Breaking the law,' came the terse reply.

'But it's a strange place to find a Kqeg –'

'Within the walls of Ci'tadel is a strange place to find a Kqeg after curfew.'

Thus far, her father had only stated the obvious, since it was a capital offence for a Kqeg to enter the city between the hours of dusk and dawn without special dispensation. Ali'sha risked probing a little deeper.

'Yes, I know,' she said, 'but I thought it might be useful to know if the university was his actual destination. Maybe he was on his way somewhere else.'

Secretly, Jai'k admired his daughter's perseverance. He was also pleased to note the focus of her investigation. It was the question that he, too, wanted answered.

‘I’ve little interest in that,’ he said, closing the file on his desk. ‘And now, I have to speak to Night Security. I won’t be gone long. Stay here.’

Ali’sha watched her father leave and mused on the hard-earned information. The Kqeg victim had indeed been a firstmaster and he had been arrested at the university.

After a while, she noticed the folder on her father’s desk. One thing in particular grabbed her attention: the label categorised the contents as ‘Kqeg Healing’. The remaining details told her it was a legal case waiting for an appeal decision. Ali’sha hesitated. She had never before transgressed by reading her father’s files and she knew the consequences of being caught, but the temptation was unbearable. Here, within arm’s reach, was another area that fascinated her. Elusive and unfathomable, Kqeg healing had never been adequately explained in anything she had read. And probably would not be here, she told herself. A quick look would be enough to prove its worthlessness as a source of new information.

Rising quietly, she walked to her father’s desk, glancing at the closed door and listening for footsteps in the corridor. Easing the folder open, she scanned the opening pages.

The facts of the case were simple enough. A Jeni’t’h mother, Jai’na, had taken her child to a Kqeg healer. The ten-year old boy, Emi’l, had suffered from a muscle wasting disease that had gradually immobilised his limbs. When Jeni’t’h medicine provided no answer, the mother’s desperation knew no bounds. Sacrificing both pride and reputation, she sought Kqeg therapy in the hope of curing her son and, after four sessions with the Kqeg healer, Emi’l had improved to the point of walking with the aid of crutches. At this point, against the healer’s advice, Jai’na chose not to return for further treatment. Her plan backfired, for Emi’l’s condition had deteriorated rapidly and he had been admitted to the local hospital. In a conversation with the doctor, the boy naïvely volunteered the details of the Kqeg involvement. Outraged, the doctor had refused further treatment and Emi’l had died two weeks later.

In the initial court case Jai’na had sued the hospital for failing in its duty of care. Seeking compensation for the loss of her son, she had argued that Emi’l’s death was directly attributable to the doctor’s refusal to treat him. The trial judge found in her favour, awarding substantial damages to the grieving mother, but the hospital had appealed and it was now Jai’k’s task to endorse or overturn the original decision, but the legal niceties held little interest for Ali’sha. Turning to the transcript from the original case she read the exchange between Jai’na and the defence counsel.

Def Counsel: You said just now that you cared deeply for your son – that you were prepared to try anything to see him well again, isn’t that so?

Plaintiff: Yes, of course. I was his mother.

Def Counsel: And yet, rather than trust in verified medical science, you saw fit to surrender your son, whom you loved so deeply, to the charlatan practices of a Kqeg healer. Please, would you be so kind as to enlighten the court and tell us: what exactly did this so-called healer prescribe?

Plaintiff: Conventional medicine couldn’t cure Emi’l. The doctors couldn’t prescribe anything to make him better. They told me –

Judge: Please limit your response to answering the question. What did the Kqeg healer prescribe for your son?

Plaintiff: I don’t know. I didn’t understand. Something that helped the natural healing process. There was massage therapy and herbal medicine. It was a completely different approach.

Def Counsel: Healing hands and weed tea? What about incantations and spell weaving? No? Then, how about smoking incense and licentious music? Any hallucinogenic out-of-body experiences? I understand the Kqeg have a quite a reputation for drug abuse.

Plaintiff: No! The Kqeg believe that good health relies on the free flow of kqash through the body.

Def Counsel: Free flowing kqash? I'm sure we'd all like more of that!

Judge: What exactly is the nature and purpose of this "kqash"?

Ali'sha felt a surge of excitement. This was a question she also wanted answered for she felt sure that it must be related to the kqashakq. But before she could read Jai'na's response she heard a door open in the corridor.

Jai'k found his daughter deeply engrossed in her book. Returning to his desk, he opened the appeal case and turned to the final pages.

Plaintiff: It wasn't like that! You don't understand!

Def Counsel: You're quite right I don't understand. I don't understand how an intelligent Jeni'th woman could demonstrate such a shocking lack of judgment as to approach a Kqeg for a medical opinion. I don't understand how a caring mother could subject her ailing son to the superstitious mumbo jumbo of an illiterate tribal hoaxer.

Plaintiff: No, no! Listen and try to understand! My son wasn't going to recover. That's what the doctors told me. There was nothing they could do, nothing they would even try. But I couldn't leave it like that. I couldn't sit by while my son suffered the living death sentence the doctors gave him. They wouldn't try anything new, but I was prepared to try anything – anything, absolutely anything – even Kqeg healing! Can't you understand? Emi'l meant the world to me. You're trying to say that I didn't care enough, but you're wrong. I risked everything in the hope of helping him.

Jai'k knew that Jai'na was not exaggerating. In seeking the help of a Kqeg healer she had not transgressed the racial laws, but she had violated a social taboo. Indeed it was unbelievable that she should dare bring a legal suit after such a blatant flouting of Jeni'th morality. Jai'k suspected that the court's award would be small consolation for the ostracism she would face. He returned to the desperate mother's impassioned argument and, to his discomfort, he found that her words made a disconcerting appeal to him.

Plaintiff: I don't understand what you're trying to say! What caring parent would do less? Wouldn't you do the same if there was even the slightest hope your child would recover? Wouldn't you try everything, however unlikely, however extreme, in the hope of finding a cure? Wouldn't you?

Jai'k was able to empathise with Jai'na and, for a few moments, he mused on whether her risky venture held any chance of success. The security chief knew something of Kqeg healing. Many of the Joakqim were accomplished in various therapies, which had been tentatively outlined by Jai'na and sneered at by the Jeni'th lawyers and medics. Jai'k was less dismissive of the medical efficacy of the Kqeg approach, because he had witnessed some remarkable results. So he was prepared to entertain the possibility that continued treatment might have cured Emi'l. Following this train of thought he recalled that Zakq's sister, Kqym, was an especially gifted healer and that she had chosen to dedicate herself to the physical and spiritual health of the Kqeg Community.

Jai'k stroked his beard. With sudden decisiveness he pressed a button on his desk console.

'Coroner's Office,' came the prompt reply.

'I want the autopsy report for the Jai'na case. Deceased child by the name of Emi'l,' he said, providing curt details. 'Courier service – addressed for my personal attention.'

Without waiting for a reply, Jai'k returned to the case file to consider the appellant's argument.

It is an accepted fact that the Kqeg are incapable of rational thought or action. Unable to organise their own affairs, unable to ensure their own survival, the Kqeg require the imposition of external government and the intervention and charity of the Empire. Who does not know this? It is a fact taught in every school across the land. How then can the seeking of Kqeg help at a time of medical crisis be the action of a rational and reasonable citizen? Even accepting the argument that a desperate mother will grasp every last chance, however hopeless, it is the appellant's contention that resorting to the primitive witch doctoring of a Kqeg healer represents parental neglect of the worst kind. Let it not be forgotten that the law also imposes a duty of care upon the parent.

Jai'k stretched his legs and yawned. His brow furrowed as he thought of Jai'na, and he pondered whether he or his wife would make the same sacrifice. After a moment's reflection he was forced to admit that the dilemma would not even exist for Li'sl. She would never entertain the thought of trying anything that was not proven, recommended, top of the range and prohibitively expensive. This conclusion heralded a moment of rare indulgence for Jai'k, who rarely yielded to feelings of bitterness about his spouse. Indeed, he rarely indulged in feelings at all. Such spurious emotion interfered with his work, a conclusion that was amply proven by this inconvenient preoccupation with his daughter. Yet, despite observations to the contrary, Jai'k was not made of stone.

Suddenly he spoke again. 'Of course you understand, Ali'sha, that today's execution changes everything.'

Ali'sha looked up with a frown. 'What do you mean?'

'The interview we discussed... quite clearly it can't go ahead now. It's unfortunate and I know you're disappointed, but it can't be helped.'

'But –'

'No, Ali'sha,' Jai'k said firmly. 'The political climate is too volatile now. And, after all, the interview isn't really necessary,' he pointed out by way of consolation.

'It's necessary as a primary source for my dissertation!'

'You can find all you need about the Order's rank system from verbatim accounts in the library.'

'I haven't found any reliable verbatim accounts so far,' Ali'sha objected. 'Everything I've read is too heavily editorialised to have any value as a primary source.'

'What more do you need to know? Maybe I can help. Surely an interview with the incumbent security chief would be considered a valuable primary source?'

Ali'sha's sigh of frustration was drowned by the ringing phone. The sound was loud, strident and intrusive and, when Ali'sha answered it, the voice at the other end fitted the same description. Having identified her daughter, Li'sl demanded to

know when she and Jai'k were coming home, then demanded the chance to extract the information, firsthand, from her husband.

'What was the name of the executed firstmaster?' she asked as Jai'k replaced the receiver.

Caught off guard, he was outmanoeuvred into a direct reply. 'Ikqe,' he said before realising his error. Frowning in annoyance, he added sternly, 'I think we've exhausted this particular topic, Ali'sha. Come now, the matter is closed and your mother's waiting. Let's hear no more of your lurid fascination with this Kqeg execution.'

'But there's no denying the relevance of my dissertation now. It's more topical than ever.'

'Ali'sha, we've already been through this!' Jai'k said in exasperation as his daughter reached the door. He raised his voice to add weight to his authority. 'Give up any hopes you have about interviewing the Kqeg!' Already in the corridor, Ali'sha pretended not to hear.