

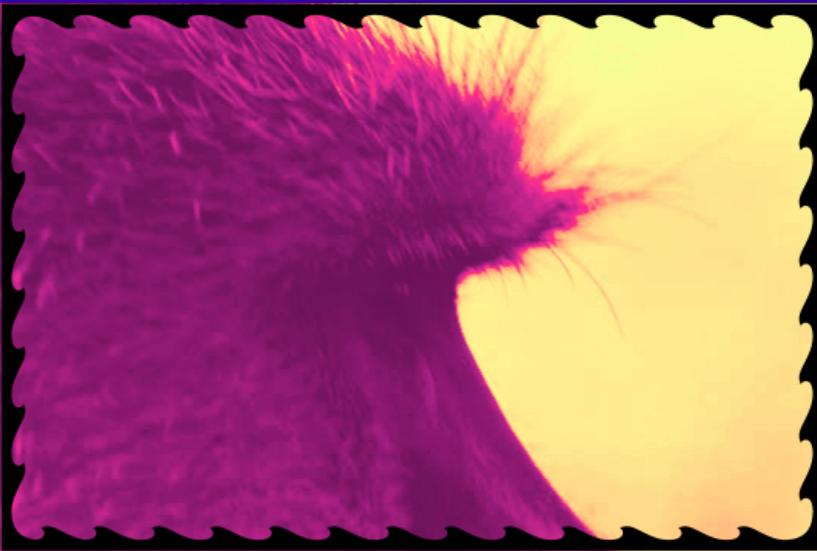
SIDEWINDERS

THE FIRE SACRAMENTS, BOOK II
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Chapter 8: A Child of Her Radiance

The injured man woke to discover a white baboon crouched upon his thighs. He was rather sure he was in hell.

The creature was unbandaging him, peeling encrusted dressings one by one



from a wound on his chest, and eating them. It grunted softly, absorbed in its work.

Darkness, heat. Smoky lamplight splashed on a wall. The bed so high it might have been an altar on which

he'd been placed, face up, readied for the knife.

A scream, he thought. That's what the moment calls for. But he knew that the baboon would, at the very least, respond in kind, and the thought of hearing its voice was somehow even more terrible than what it was doing to him. The man's legs ached; the baboon was large and potbellied and its nails were sharp.

Was this his private
damnation, his fate? To
watch this monster open
him layer by layer to the end
of time?

The creature stank of
sweat and dander and
spoiled food. But behind the



reek he detected a finer smell: the brisk, clean odor of creosote. He sniffed. No,
not quite creosote: that was creosote *bush*. In flower. A harbinger of spring.

This was not Hell then but merely Gathen, where the bush grew thick upon
the plain. The scent cleared his thoughts a little. Enough to note the weakness of
his body, the many stitches in his chest. Enough to recall a carriage ride, three
days and nights it must have been, and each rut and stone in the highway jolting
him from him his drug-induced sleep. Enough to recall, much earlier, the
fascinating sight of a dagger sliding between his ribs.

*I have been in a coma. I lay in the dirt and my blood pooled around me. Someone
was kneeling in it, shouting. How curious that I survived.*

Names returned next. First his own, Garatajik, Secondborn son of Her
Radiance the Prophet. Then the names of the brothers who had danced and
gibbered in his dreams. Kandri Hinjuman. Mektu Hinjuman. His chosen



couriers, his heroes. No sooner named than knifing him.

Gods of Death, they were just peasants. Village boys given machetes and marched to the front. You utter fool. What possessed you to place the world in their hands?

The lamp was somewhere behind his head. The baboon's lips moved, as though it were not just picking at his bandages but reading them.

Fool or not, he was more lucid with each breath. He recalled that he must pretend to hate those brothers, to speak of them as accursed, the Twin Abominations, the blight foretold by prophecy. He must say that he had not asked anything of them, not conversed on any subject, only tried to enforce his mother's justice. That he had no idea where they had gone.

He recalled other names as well.

“Sleepyhead.”

The baboon fixed its round, babyish eyes on him.

“Get your fat foul body off my legs, if you please. I want to use them.”

The baboon placed a paw on his cheek. The touch was inquisitive. They had known each other for twenty-five years.

“What sadist left me alone with you?”

The baboon leaped straight up, screaming, that scream Garatajik hated above all sounds in the world. Time slowed. He had leisure to marvel at his failure to recognize that the beast had been sent there to kill him. He saw its claws spreading, its lips curling back from those obscene fangs, the zenith of its ascent.

The way its mouth yearned for him even as it started to fall.

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