

*Magic has abandoned the world, leaving it a shell of its former glory, with humanity reduced to fighting over scraps of the past. Amongst the scattered survivors are three women from very different backgrounds, with very different goals, who may hold the key to humanity's salvation or its destruction.*

## **TRINITY'S CONVERGENCE**

by John Beachem

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A TRINITY OF FLAMES: BOOK ONE

# Trinity's Convergence



John Beachem

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## CHAPTER ONE - THE CARAVAN

Red silk as dark and deep as fine wine melted beneath the woman's fingertips as she examined the shawl. It rippled like water, caressing her sun-darkened skin and eliciting a murmur of appreciation from the woman's thin, cracked lips. Muddy, unremarkable eyes lit with that combination of desire and guilt that Miryam recognized so very well. It was the ultimate weakness in a customer — the sign that with only a gentle nudge or two they would be yours.

"No one is able to make it any longer," Miryam explained. She traced the index finger of her right hand along the flawless hem of the shawl. Her young, fair skin contrasted beautifully with the fabric -- far better than the slightly mottled, older flesh of the other woman, but that was one of the prices of commerce: the well-suited customer was not always the one interested in the trade.

"It's a remnant," she continued. Her gaze wandered out of focus, giving her that misty-eyed look that so often enraptured customers. "A holdover from the days before the Flame." The woman responded to this statement with a slight intake of breath. "Oh yes," Miryam pressed. "No one knows how it was made. We stumbled upon it in a forgotten part of Northern Kareeshia, in a ruined tower on the edge of the Expanse."

That was not *entirely* true, but it was close enough. After all, they had traded for it in Kareeshia, and telling anyone that something came from somewhere as distant and mysterious as the far north always sweetened the scent of the find. "The people of the north are master craftsmen, as I'm sure you know, but even they were quite mystified as to its origins. Magic," she finished in a hushed tone. She looked into the woman's small but wide and fascinated eyes and obtained her undivided attention. She allowed her own dark blue eyes to hold her, transfixed, for a long moment before she spoke again.

"Magic that survived, in its way." Was that true? Possibly. Who knew anymore? Adding a little legend made a trade feel special and unique. Her father preached honesty and integrity as a tradesman, but even he admitted spicing the deal with a little exaggeration was not unwelcome to most customers. Many of them knew they were not being told the whole truth, and participated willingly in the harmless little lie.

“Is it... is it safe?” the woman asked. There was a slight quiver to her voice, and Miryam gave a whisper of a smile in response.

“Of course,” she assured her. That was not a lie in any way. It was a silk shawl for fortune’s sake. How dangerous could it possibly be? She gently pulled the shawl from the woman’s trembling fingers, the material slipping smoothly from her grasp. The whisper of a smile found a complementary wink on Miryam’s face, and a shade of pink bled into the customer’s plain, wide features.

Nothing more would be needed. No further building of the legend or explanation of the shawl’s origins would help seal the deal. The wink hinted at answers that contradicted her assurances of the shawl’s safety. It promised a secret shared only between them. It gave this poor woman a touch of danger and mystery in a life most likely dedicated to functioning as a dutiful mate to one of the local hunters or farmers or working the fields under a scorching sun. How did these people handle the constant heat?

The customer was fairly well-dressed. Her shirt and trousers had clearly been stitched by someone who at least knew what they were doing, which was a difficult find. The sack in which she carried her bartering materials might have been crude, but it also looked heavy with possessions. She was no mere servant or farmhand begging for meals or, worse, scraps. Miryam allowed her gaze to drift quickly over that sack, mentally weighing its contents, before looking the woman in the eye again. She was once again gazing, transfixed, at the shawl draped across Miryam’s arms.

“What do you want for it?” the woman asked. One of her slightly pudgy hands went to the drawstrings of the bag at her feet, the other extended slightly, as though reaching for her prize. Her fingernails were cracked and worn, the skin plump but the muscles beneath were strong. She was also no stranger to hard physical labor. So few were.

The shawl’s value was entirely dependent on the region. In the north she would gain very little for it, but in the warmer climate of western Ikthul, where they had set up their market, a bit more might be obtained. Normally she would have looked for dry goods or meats in an area like Robesbiel — one where agriculture had spread and the people were not starving and hunting through ruins for scraps — but they would be moving north before the next moon cycle, and many people here had something

that would be far more valuable to the people of the cold, harsh northlands. Miryam's father, Nestor, had traded very little for the shawl in a small town in what was once called Kabula. Miryam meant to more than double their profit.

"Seven ildines," Miryam said. The woman's eyes widened slightly. It was a hefty price, but five for the shawl and two for the thrill she had contributed to this bored woman's life seemed a reasonable exchange.

The hesitation lasted for only a few short moments, and she then opened her sack and began counting out the small, thin, brittle bits. Ildines could be found in the Wastes throughout Ikthul, and they had a wonderful property that made them invaluable in colder climates — snapping one in half caused the two pieces to glow with bright, radiating warmth that lasted for hours and could ignite flammable objects in an instant. The transaction ended with Miryam complimenting the woman on how beautiful she looked in her new shawl, and an unuttered hope that the woman's mate or mates would not react violently to the frankly frivolous trade. She then placed a rough, linen blanket over her remaining wares on the table, nodded to Tomas -- one of the guards -- to keep an eye on it while she was gone, and made her way toward her wagon.

She ducked and weaved her way through the crowd of locals and her fellow travelers. Biton, the butcher, carved an animal carcass with sharp strokes, the dark metal of the blade moving with practiced efficiency. Past him, a collection of large animal rugs was being sold by Cascadia, one of Biton's mates. The strong odor of the gray-haired tanner and her wares both drew and repelled the crowd. Miryam passed a rack covered in farming tools, a cart filled with melons, a brown rug on which sat a small collection of leather-bound volumes, and a mass of women bidding on a device said to bring moon blood to the infertile. People jostled and grunted against one another, looking for deals and steals. Armed guards patrolled, keeping a close eye on anyone who looked questionable or dangerous. A few children ran screaming between people's legs. The scents of spices and roasting meat hung heavy in the air, mixed with the foul smells of unwashed bodies and refuse.

Occasionally she heard a whispered *Kareeshian* from someone in the crowd as they spied her. Her blonde hair might be hidden, but there was no mistaking the blue eyes, so she had given up attempting to mask her ethnicity long ago. If they greeted her with disdain, she replied with a

smile. If they turned their back, she thanked them for their interest. *Fight them with kindness and friendship*, her mother, Esme, had once said. Sometimes the weapons changed someone's mind. Oft times they did not. Old hatreds ran deep.

Nestor Galik, the man sitting on the fold-out steps to Miryam's wagon, managed and operated the entire venture. Nestor employed dozens of merchants and guards, kept them fed and clothed, and made enough extra food and goods besides to keep his children in what passed for luxury in a time when having enough food to keep from starving was something of a rarity. Miryam strolled up as Nestor scribbled a series of notes on his ledger in bright red ink. A set of iron scales sat on the step to his right. The pen with which he wrote was one of his prized possessions, and it never left his person. Quill pens and bottles of ink were uncommon, but ink-makers had become slightly more prevalent in the past decade, so they were not unheard of. Nestor had even tried to convince an Arthenian ink-maker to join the caravan this past winter, but had been unsuccessful. Fountain pens, though, with their own self-contained ink supply, like the one Nestor owned, were exceedingly rare.

It was said that in the old world pens did not require ink. Magic flowed from their tips, emblazing parchment with strokes of lightning that never faded or ran. If that was true, such instruments had long since vanished from the world. Nestor put the finishing touches on his documentation and closed the ledger. He stuck the pen in a breast pocket on his plain, ecru shirt, and looked up at his daughter. One of the buttons on the shirt had fallen free. She would need to talk to Iline about replacing it.

Miryam's father had pleasant, good-natured features. He was a little on the thin side, and gray tinged his blond hair if one looked at it closely enough. His eyes, so like Miryam's, were a deep, attractive blue, and he had a ready smile for anyone and everyone. He never dressed in an ostentatious manner, preferring a light button-up shirt, black trousers and heavy boots. He was loving, understanding, and the shrewdest businessman in the world as far as Miryam was concerned. Warmth filled her heart each time she saw him.

"Seven ildines for that red shawl you picked up three moons ago," Miryam said. She tossed the small, brown pouch containing the profits to her father, who deftly snatched it out of the air. He also arched an eyebrow and made a "tsking" noise at his daughter.

“Seven?” he asked. “Who have you been fleecing, my dear? That shawl was worth five at the most.”

Miryam smiled and moved to sit beside her father, who lifted the set of scales and placed them between his feet to give her room. She sat and he put his arm around her, hugging her close. She placed her arm around his midsection and squeezed as well. A slight frown pulled at her lips at the feeling of his ribs through the thin material of the shirt, but she said nothing. This conversation had already taken place, and would no doubt rear its head again, but she did not want to spoil his good mood.

“Some poor, neglected woman,” Miryam said with a heavy, dramatic sigh. “Someone who needed a little color in her life... a little danger... so I gave it to her. After all, we don’t *know* that shawl was made by some simple seamstress, do we? We don’t *know* that it wasn’t actually made, say, a century ago? Just before the Flame, perhaps? A relic, if you will, of an age when magic ruled the world, before we were reduced to this.” She waved a hand before her, taking in the throng of customers and merchants plying their trade. She looked up at the man and gave him an impish grin.

Nestor’s eyebrows rose once more. “You’re not selling anything to me, my dear, least of all that story.”

“Perhaps not, but *she* bought it, and she was a willing purchaser. Now, how are the receipts looking so far?”

Nestor smiled fondly. “Down to business, eh? We’re doing well. I knew any cloth outside of basic linen clothes would be a smashing success, and behold the results.” A twinkle in his eye, he shook the bag of ildines Miryam had tossed him a moment ago. “Still, I don’t mean to stay long.”

Now it was Miryam’s turn to raise her eyebrows in an exact mirror image of her father. “Oh?”

Nestor gave a bit of a shrug and scratched the back of his neck. He glanced around at the crowd for a few, silent moments. No, Miryam realized as she studied him, not at the crowd, at the rolling hills beyond the crowd. He was worried about the residents of those hills -- both human and inhuman -- and she knew she should not doubt him for being concerned. They had set up camp on the outskirts of the town of Robesbiel, which lay nestled in a valley of hard, rocky hills. Robesbiel was not much to look at anymore. It had once been comprised of tall, thin towers that stretched so high that were one to lie on ones back, they



could not see the uppermost spires, which would be lost far above the most distant clouds.

They knew those towers had existed, for the remnants now lay scattered about the area, blasted to pieces by winds, wars, and age. The town now consisted of what hovels people had managed to build in the ruins of those once-great buildings. Otherwise all that remained was a massive, stone block set into one of the cliffs to the east, which had once been the Grand Library of Ikthul. Apparently a small clan had taken up residence there and dedicated itself to cataloging and translating the library's contents. For each their own pursuits, she supposed. Like all the other buildings, the library was primarily a mass of irreparable ruins. Five hundred passings of the seasons hence they would still not be able to return the town to its former glory. There were some things magic could create and sustain that simply could not be replicated without its use.

Miryam had, of course, never seen magic used by a human. No living person had witnessed the feats that had created the ruins that now covered the world -- the same feats that had made the world burn for what must have seemed an endless changing of the seasons. They had stories passed down by grandparents and great-grandparents, but nothing more. Most of those who survived the time of the Flame died shortly thereafter of what many said was grief for their lost abilities. It was hard to imagine living a life where you could do anything you wanted whenever you wanted, and then suddenly you could do nothing. Nestor once said his grandmother had described it as waking up one morning deaf and dumb, and she had been only a small child when it happened.

Despite the terrible losses suffered by humanity, Miryam personally felt some good had come of the whole mess. If nothing else, it had made humanity self-reliant. The people who picked up what was left and struggled on were survivors as were their descendants. The generations that could snap their fingers or wave their hands or whatever it was they did to create anything and everything they could want were not really living. They had no craft or skills, they lived simply to live.

Of course, a lot of negative things had come with the few positives, Miryam thought as she gazed out on the hills to the north. Her father would pull the wagons into a defensive position that evening, rounding them up and placing the guards on patrol, but it was still dangerous to be stationary in such an uncivilized area with a horde of valuable materials.

“Any specific clan that has you worried?” Miryam asked.

Nestor continued looking over the hills as he got slowly to his feet, letting out a little grunt of effort as he did so. Five winters ago he would not have made that grunt. Five winters ago he had been at least twenty pounds heavier, too. “Clan Parradah is in this area,” he finally said. The name meant nothing to Miryam, but she had little interest in the clans or their activities. Nestor glanced up at the sky and scratched at the back of his neck once again. “Find Markus when you have a moment. Tell him I want to start taking things down within the hour... plenty of time to pack up before nightfall. We’ll spend tomorrow here, I think, but nothing more. I want to be on the move by the following day.”

He nodded once, as though finishing some internal debate, then turned to face Miryam. He smiled and offered his hand, which she took. Nestor pulled her to her feet and guided her down the few steps of the wagon. A quick embrace, and then he moved out into the crowd. Miryam packed up the discarded ledger, scales, and pouches, and locked them in the wagon.

Finding Markus would not take long. All she needed to do was feign some form of distress and the great ox would be at her side in moments -- ever the gallant hero. Markus was strong, brave, reasonably handsome, and dumber than a dung beetle. She smiled. That was a bit unfair. She knew he was not really that stupid, but he sure acted the part quite well most of the time. They had been in a relationship for a short while, and she had ended it when he attempted to explain to her why she was not suited to carry on her father’s business. They had then resumed it when she realized he was really the only decent, eligible man in the caravan. It had started and stopped several times since then. At the moment, they were between relationships... if she remembered correctly.

A loud, clanging noise interrupted her reverie, and she glanced up to see her father clattering the bell that hung from the lead wagon. It was to let the merchants know to move toward packing up the camp for the evening. A few confused murmurs rose from the crowd, no doubt because night was still a ways off. Some would say the old man was being overly cautious, but Miryam never doubted her father’s instincts or actions. He had the best interests of the caravan at heart.

Dusting off her bright, red skirt, Miryam moved toward the edge of the market and her covered wares. She had little desire to pack up for the

night, but helping Markus prepare for the evening was always time consuming, and there was no point in putting it off. A few glances around the crowd indicated some of the customers were trying to get their trades completed as quickly as possible. Always a good time to make a deal. Maybe she would put things off a little longer after all.

At the edge of the crowd stood a young man, hovering nervously and looking over the shoulders of the other patrons. Miryam frowned and moved slowly toward him. Usually that level of nervousness indicated someone was up to something, but the man did not have the look of a thief. He was fairly short -- not much taller than her, in fact -- and dressed in a shabby brown robe with frayed edges. It would not have been worth a bowl of stew in trade. Bad stew... with week-old chunks of horsemeat. His hair was a mass of brown curls plastered to his pale skin by a layer of sweat. His eyes were small and close-set, and his face had a doughy, weak look to it. He more closely resembled a pitiful beggar than anything else, but there was one very unusual thing about him that contradicted the rest of the image.

Clutched to the young man's chest was a mass of papers and books. Scrolls and parchments jutted out at odd angles, like some bizarre potted plant. As Miryam watched, one of them dropped from the pile and the man tried vainly to shift his cargo to a position where he could retrieve the lost treasure. Quickening her pace, Miryam reached the man's side and scooped up the rolled parchment. Gently, she placed it on top of the pile and tried vainly to straighten them to the point where he would be unlikely to drop anything more. While it was doubtful the pitiful-looking man had anything of interest written on his collection, blank parchment and six or seven books could be extremely valuable to the right people in the right regions where such things were still uncommon.

The man looked up, the sunlight behind Miryam catching him full in the eyes. He squinted at her through small, watery eyes and then gave a weak smile. "Th-thank you," he mumbled in a far deeper voice than she would have expected from his appearance.

"My pleasure," Miryam said. She flashed him her most winning smile and took him gently by the elbow, careful not to jostle his cargo. With the softest touch, she guided him toward her site. A look of confusion passed over the man's face, but he allowed himself to be led away from the rest

of the throng. “Why don’t you set everything down for a moment,” Miryam suggested. “You look tired. Some wine, perhaps?”

“Th-thank y-y-you,” the man said again. “I-I...” he trailed off pitifully and simply resumed walking.

“Are you looking for something in particular?” Miryam asked as they reached the set of woven rugs on which she had positioned her wares. She considered removing the covering, but decided against it. He did not have the look of a man who was browsing, and more than that, he did not look like a man who could afford much of anything. The way he clutched the books to his protruding belly indicated they were precious to him, and given his lack of other visible possessions they were likely all he had in the world.

“I-“ he managed once again. Miryam bent and picked up a wooden mug and a decanter of low-quality but perfectly drinkable wine, which she drank slowly throughout the course of the day. She nodded encouragingly as the violet liquid rushed into the mug. The man had to have more of a vocabulary than he had displayed thus far. She gestured toward a large, empty portion of the table and he nodded shakily.

Carefully, he set his books and parchments in an unstable pile, then split it into a trio of smaller stacks. He let out a long, equally shaky breath as he stood and accepted the mug from Miryam’s outstretched right hand. She gently cupped his hand in both of hers as he took the drink, and gave another encouraging smile. *Like dealing with a beaten dog. But who beat you?*

“How about your name?” Miryam asked after the man took a few long gulps, his pale neck bobbing and jiggling with each drink. “I’m Miryam.”

“Ber-Ber-Bertram,” he said. “I’m s-sorry. I’m n-n-not... this is...” he gave another of his weak smiles and shook his head sadly.

“It’s okay,” Miryam assured him. She was simply pleased to have made some headway. “Now, can I help you with something? You’re looking for...” she glanced meaningfully at the pile of books. “Either another book to balance on that pile of yours, or you’re looking for a cart to lug them around in. Am I right?”

Bertram grinned and shrugged half-heartedly. “I’m l-looking f-f-for-err-some... some... th-thing.”

“Glad we narrowed it down,” Miryam said. “If I get it in five guesses will you tell me if I’m right?”

Bertram's grin widened just a bit. His posture had shifted ever so slightly. He looked a bit more relaxed, but only a bit. Odd, really, that he would be so nervous. Customers were sometimes wary about sleazy merchants taking advantage of them, or were apprehensive around items that might be dangerous, such as leftovers from the old world or half-assed new inventions, but to be so nervous simply having a conversation was unique. Those looking to steal something often displayed nervous tics and shifting eyes, but he did not have the look or demeanor of a thief.

She looked him over a bit more carefully, trying to get a better feel for the man. His shoes were certainly unusual. They were flat sandals, in good condition but poorly suited to travel of any sort. They might have been worth a few decent meals as his feet looked to be of average size. The brown robe was thin and poorly stitched -- inadequate protection on a cold night and worth nothing. His ragged belt held no pouches of any kind. If he had anything to trade beyond his pile of books he kept it well-hidden. Yet, who walked around with a pile of books and papers but no food or drink? True, he might have simply strolled in from town, but why carry his writings with him? Unless he meant to trade them. Or...

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" she asked.

His previously slightly-relaxed posture shifted immediately. He tensed, and his neck jerked as though he intended to look behind him, but his gaze remained locked on her eyes. They were sharp, quick eyes. Not foolish or suspicious like Markus's, and not shrewd like her father's, but intelligent and keen. Yet, the way he carried himself indicated a lack of confidence and a great deal of uncertainty. He was out of his element.

Bertram had not answered her question, and was looking rather like an animal that had heard a loud noise. "Where are you from?" she tried.

"Why?" he asked. His tone was half suspicious, half fearful. *What in the world is wrong with this fellow?*

She was about to respond when a voice came from behind her. "Are you two all right?" Markus, of course. That was all she needed. She glanced back over her shoulder to see the guard walking toward them, his stride indicating he was ready for a fight, as always. He carried a hefty baton, about two feet long, in his right hand, and tapped the end of it against the palm of his left.

Like all the guards employed by Nestor, Markus wore a brown uniform of sorts, consisting of a heavy vest, long trousers, and sturdy boots. Both

cobblers and tailors traveled with the caravan, and traded the guards' clothing for Nestor's protection. Markus had wavy brown hair that flowed to the base of his neck and a muscular build. His eyes were large, dark, and guileless. His presence made Miryam more than a little nervous, as Bertram did not seem inclined to answer questions, and Markus generally beat anything to a bloody pulp if it refused to answer questions and he thought it might be a threat to a member of the Galik family.

"We're fine, Markus," she assured him, though she knew already that such a statement would not suffice. Sure enough, he did not break stride. He came to a halt beside Miryam and pointed the end of his club at Bertram. Bertram immediately went cross-eyed as he stared at the wavering, threatening, thumping end of the wooden shaft.

Bertram took a step back, but his eyes flicked to the pile of books to Markus's right. Markus caught the look and glanced down. Eyes returning to Bertram, he picked up the top book from one of the piles. He looked it over quizzically, as one might a glowing object that had fallen from the sky at one's feet, and frowned. "What's this?"

"It's called a book, Markus," Miryam snapped. She yanked the volume from his grasp and placed it back atop the pile.

"I know what it is," Markus said, his frown deepening. "I mean why is it here? You don't sell books. This guy latching? You know your father doesn't want lachers here. Come on, you. Get your stuff and get out—"

"He's not a lacher," Miryam assured him. Lachers were those who used the draw of the caravan to conduct their own trades with customers. They were generally sneaky and sly to avoid detection, not bumbling stutterers. Still... she furrowed her brow and glanced at Bertram once again. "Are you?"

Bertram shook his head, quickly. "N-no, no," he said. "I'm fr-fr-fr—" He pointed frantically toward the town rather than finish his sentence, which might have taken him the rest of the evening to complete. Markus and Miryam both turned to look in the direction of the town, though the end of Markus's baton continued to waver, threateningly, in poor Bertram's face.

"The library?" Miryam asked as she turned back to him. She could not see the great block of stone from such a distance, but it made sense. Who else in this tiny corner of the world would know how to read? Bertram

commenced nodding rapidly, as though the more vigorously he agreed, the more quickly Markus's weapon would be retracted.

While Miryam knew little about the order that resided within the library, she did know that they rarely, if ever, ventured out of doors. One of the farmers from the area had described the order to her father when they arrived, stating that they maintained a small vegetable plot behind the building, raised their own animals, had their own well, and generally avoided contact with outsiders.

Slowly, reluctantly, Markus lowered his weapon and replaced its ominous presence with an equally ominous frown directed at the young scholar. "Well what are you doing here?" the guard asked.

"I think we've established he's neither a latcher nor a thief," Miryam interjected before Bertram could try vainly to muster an answer. "Let me handle things from here, will you please?"

Markus's ominous frown gave way to a dejected one, and he turned to leave, but stopped himself. His gaze had locked on the distant community of Robesbiel, and his eyes narrowed as he tried to see something. Miryam followed his gaze, spying a cloud of dust rising from the fields of dirt and dead grass that surrounded the buildings. It looked like someone rapidly approached, kicking up a storm of dirt in the process.

As the figures drew nearer she could make out a few details. There were two of them, riding steeds she did not recognize. Not horses, to be sure, but something vaguely similar. They appeared to be clothed entirely in black, including black masks covering their scalps and eyes. Miryam's gut constricted into an increasingly tight knot as the seconds passed, and she glanced at Bertram. He stared at the two with his mouth hanging open in... disbelief? Confusion? No... fear.

"Markus, go get my father," Miryam said.

"I should not leave you with—"

"Now," she hissed.

She mouthed a silent thank you when Markus offered no further protests before running off to find Nestor. Miryam glanced quickly about to take stock of their situation. Most of the caravan had closed down. Her most immediate neighbors had packed their wares, and the only still-active traders were at least twenty yards away, as were any other customers. She and Bertram were essentially alone, and she did not know why that scared her, but it did.

“Who are they?” she asked.

Bertram’s head moved from side to side, very slowly. “I...” was all he managed to say.

The riders reached them a moment later. The larger of the two pulled his mount to a halt only a few feet from Miryam, the creature’s clawed feet kicking up a cloud of dirt that surrounded her merchandise table. He was a sturdy-looking fellow, clothed entirely in loose-fitting, high-quality black clothes. His tunic bore a bright red emblem near his right collarbone -- three vertical lines with a fourth line cutting diagonally through them. She did not recognize it. The mask he wore covered his scalp and came down to the bridge of his nose. The deeply-tanned flesh of his cheeks and chin remained uncovered. Across his back he wore a long, curved knife of some sort inside a plain, black sheath. A knife that long would be good for very little, and the very little that sprang to mind did not fill Miryam with feelings of safety. Attached to his belt against his left hip was a curved, blunt weapon of some sort that looked to be made of metal. Something very old and very, very valuable, if she had to guess. All told he looked like a man of means, and a dangerous one at that. Even without the long knife or the weapon on his belt to give this away, the quality of the saddle on his beast was remarkable. She would have needed to trade a team of horses for such a thing.

The steed was rather similar to a horse in its build, but shorter, thin, and lean. It had a longer snout than a horse’s, and two long, white tusks jutted straight out about half a foot from around the sides of its snout. Its eyes were bright, shining red, and it had long, tapered ears. It snorted angrily as its rider pulled on the reins, keeping it from getting too close to either Miryam or Bertram.

“Ho there,” the man said. His voice was light and friendly, with a trace of an accent Miryam did not immediately recognize.

She stuck her most winning smile firmly in place. “Good evening to you,” she said. “How might we be of service?”

The man smiled, displaying perfect, white teeth. He did not, however, make any move to dismount. The snout of the animal moved toward Miryam again, putting its clicking, probing, deadly-looking tusks in close proximity to her chest. The rider jerked the reins once again, and the animal moved its head back. “It would appear you’ve already helped, dear lady,” the man said. Left hand still clutching the reins, he pointed at



Bertram with his right. "You've captured our quarry for us. My thanks to you."

Miryam kept her winning smile in place, though it took a bit of effort. His voice and posture exuded arrogance and smugness rather than the friendly demeanor he was trying to present. "Well, I'm always glad to be of assistance, but if you're referring to my friend here, we may have a problem." She had no idea why she said it, and judging from the sharp intake of breath from Bertram, he had no idea, either.

The rider's smile faltered for a moment, but he collected himself. "My dear lady, this 'friend' of yours is a wanted thief and murderer."

"Oh?"

"Indeed." The smile widened. "Allow me to introduce myself. Rheyger Calhoun of the Ikthulian Security Force. My companion and I," he gestured toward the other rider, who remained several paces behind, "have been sent to collect this man and return him to the local magistrate for trial. Neither he nor we will trouble you any longer if you'll simply relinquish him into our custody."

*A named man with a pretty little speech?* Miryam felt a near overwhelming urge to applaud as Rheyger concluded his sales pitch with a flourish. It was also one of the most asinine things she'd ever heard and so ridiculously rehearsed he must have been waiting all day to use it. There was no Ikthulian security force. There was no Ikthulian anything, as there was no Ikthul. The kingdom was dust, of course, but the average nitwit would likely be ignorant enough to buy into the contrived tale. That he had provided a Magi name would normally have been interesting, but he had likely made that up as well.

Yet, while the story may have been a load of horse dung, there were possibly elements of truth to it. Miryam risked a glance at the still-gawking Bertram. A thief and a murderer? She somehow doubted the latter at least, but his cargo might very well have been stolen. She coughed, using the movement to glance at the table beside Bertam where he had placed his piles of books. There was nothing there. The rug had been pulled up to cover everything. She glanced at Bertram again as she moved to make eye contact with Rheyger. Apparently the gawking, foolish scholar was not nearly so gawking nor so foolish as he made out.

"I see," Miryam said. She tried to use her most thoughtful tone of voice, and attempted a look of feigned surprise and alarm as she looked at Bertram. "That is concerning." *Come on, Markus. Where are you?*

"Fortunately he'll not harm you or any of your people now," Rheyger continued. *My, you do play your part with gusto, don't you, you pretentious prick?*

"Take him, Rheyger, and be done with it," said his companion. Miryam now looked at the woman with the heated voice. She was only a little shorter in her saddle than Rheyger, though clearly not as physically imposing. The skin around her mouth and nose was paler than Rheyger's, and the hair that spilled down from the back of her mask was as black as the rest of her outfit. She wore a pair of long knives in bright, red sheaths, one hanging from each side of her belt. She and her mount appeared restless, too. They moved back and forth behind Rheyger, the beast's clicking claws stirring up more dust as they did so.

Rheyger's smile stayed in place, but his eyes flicked from Bertram to Miryam and back again. He gave an almost apologetic shrug. "I do have to apologize for all of this, dear lady. It has been a long search for this man, and we are eager to bring the hunt to an end. Will you please stand aside and..." his smile vanished to be replaced by a frown. "Where are the books, Bertram?" His tone had shifted as well. It was no longer light and friendly, but deeply troubled.

Bertram shuffled back a step, and Miryam found herself drifting over to stand in front of him. "He had no books when he arrived here," she said, allowing her bright smile to dwindle to a rather sad look of resignation. "And we have a problem. You see, this man is a customer of mine, and I don't turn my customers over to just anyone."

"You're joking."

"I fear not, my *dear man*."

The sound of running footsteps came from behind her, and everyone looked over Miryam's shoulder to see Nestor, Markus, and two more men armed with long staves. Nestor reached them first, red-faced and a little out of breath, and strode past Miryam to stand before Rheyger.

"Nestor Galik," he said as means of greeting. Miryam almost smiled. Normally he would have opened with a sales pitch or at least a friendly welcome, but he obviously knew this warranted something quite different. Her father had always been able to size up a situation in seconds.

"Rheyger Calhoun," Rheyger said, suddenly looking a little less confident than he had only moments ago. "Of the Ikthulian Security Force."

Miryam could not see her father's face, but she imagined he had at least grinned coldly at the ridiculous claim. Apparently Rheyger intended to stick to his story no matter what.

"Tell me another one," Nestor replied.

Rheyger scowled. "Listen old man," he said, all civility dropping like overripe fruit, "I want that man, and I want him now. If you don't give him to me, I *will* take him." He pointed at Bertram as he spoke, and Nestor turned his head just enough to take in the young man behind him. Markus and one of the other guards had moved to either side of Bertram in a move somewhere between protection and wariness. "He is a thief and a murderer, and he will answer for what he has done."

Nestor scratched at the back of his neck and turned to take in the young man. As he did, Markus stepped between Rheyger and his employer, baton held ready. Miryam's father looked Bertram up and down, his shrewd eyes taking in every detail about the man. Miryam had seen it a hundred times. Her father could figure someone out in moments. He had taught her most of the tricks, but it really came down to experience, and Nestor had that in excess.

"What's your name, Son?"

Bertram blinked rapidly at the caravan owner. Anticipating a string of barely-audible vowel sounds, Miryam braced herself and prepared to leap to the man's defense. "Bertram," the scholar said, quite clearly.

"And is it true? Did you steal something?"

Bertram's gaze shifted to the still-mounted Rheyger, who towered above the entire gathering. "I stole nothing from th-them," he said.

"That doesn't answer my question," Nestor said, a touch of impatience in his voice. "Did you steal something? Are you a thief?"

Bertram looked Nestor square in the eye. "I've s-stolen, yes."

Miryam waited for him to say more, expecting him to expound -- to offer an explanation for why he had done such a thing. *Why are you defending him? You don't know the first thing about this man.* It was true, too. Yet while she knew absolutely nothing about him, there was something about his pathetic, beaten demeanor that appealed to her. *You always did have a soft spot for life's losers, didn't you?*

“And did you murder someone?” Nestor asked it calmly, and he showed no signs of hostility or threat. Miryam had little doubt, though, that a lot hung on the answer to his question.

Bertram looked Nestor in the eye. “No.”

“Liar!” the woman behind Rheyger screamed the single word and spurred her mount forward, elbowing past her companion.

“Leeset!” Rheyger shouted, but to no avail.

Markus leaped in front of Bertram and held his weapon in both hands, preparing to swing it if necessary. The woman leaped clear of her mount at the last moment, drawing both her long knives as she did so. She was quick, lithe, and while Miryam knew little of combat, the woman certainly appeared more than capable. The weapons flashed dazzlingly as she moved, the quality of the tools unlike anything Miryam had ever seen -- bright and shining rather than the dull black of the knives Biton used when cutting meat. *I could trade those for anything we ever needed*, she thought, momentarily forgetting what those blades might mean to her and her family.

“Leeset, enough!” Rheyger roared. The woman had nearly reached Markus, the longer blade held high, the other low, and ready to slice him into fine pieces.

A loud *crack* echoed through the air, and the woman skidded to a halt. Both she and Markus turned to look at Nestor, who held his long, baton-like weapon in his right hand, aimed at the woman’s chest.

“Your friend is right,” Nestor said, calmly. “That is enough. That man before you is my employee, and Bertram is my customer. If you try to harm either one of them I will use all necessary means to stop you. I advise you not to take those words lightly.”

“You threaten me?” the woman, Leeset, hissed. “Do you know who I am?”

“I don’t care if you’re the High Magus come back from the *fucking* dead,” Nestor said. He took a step forward, his weapon still aimed straight at the woman’s chest. “I want you back on your mount this instant. You and your friend will leave my people and my customers in peace.”

Silence. Everyone, from Bertram to Rheyger to all the guards, to Leeset above all else, stared at the tip of Nestor’s weapon. Miryam had never, in all her life, seen him draw it, much less use it, in public. Slowly, unwillingly, Leeset lowered her weapons, and then returned them to their

sheaths. Her gaze never shifted as she backed up and leaped onto her saddle once more, her movements fluid and powerful.

"All you needed to do was give me my prisoner. Instead you have made a very serious mistake," Rheyger said.

"It wouldn't be the first and it probably won't be the last," Nestor replied.

"It may very well be just that," Rheyger snapped. He gave a shout and jerked the reins, and in seconds nothing remained of the pair save a cloud of dust, leading back toward Robesbiel.

Nestor gave a long, weary sigh, and returned his baton to the long sheath on his belt. He looked to Miryam and gave a short nod. "Let's finish packing up. Markus, I want double the patrol around the perimeter tonight. No one ventures out alone. Hear me?"

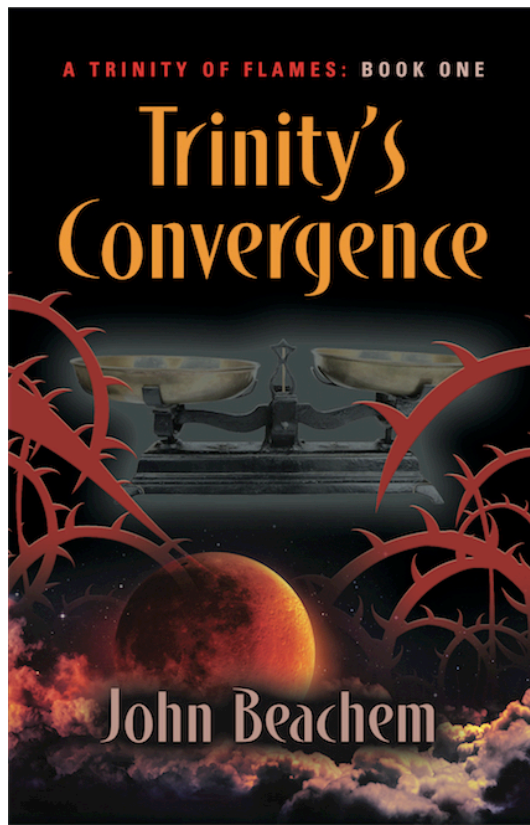
Markus nodded and gestured to the other two guards to get back to the wagons.

"M-my th-th-thanks," Bertram whispered.

Nestor gave him a long, hard stare, and finally a short nod. "You'll sleep in the supply wagon," he stated, simply. "I'll keep a guard posted there. We leave in the morning. It would appear we've worn out our welcome here."

With a last look at Miryam, he started back toward the wagons. He looked old and tired... more tired than Miryam could ever remember. She sighed and glanced at Bertram. "Get your things and help me take this back to the wagons, will you?"

Bertram turned his gaze on her, his skin pale, his small eyes wide. He managed a slight nod and stooped to collect Miryam's wares, and the two began the long process of putting them back in her cart. The sun was nearly fully set as they finished, and Miryam wanted nothing more than to fall onto her cot and get a full night's sleep. Yet, somehow she knew, sleep would not be coming any time soon.



*Magic has abandoned the world, leaving it a shell of its former glory, with humanity reduced to fighting over scraps of the past. Amongst the scattered survivors are three women from very different backgrounds, with very different goals, who may hold the key to humanity's salvation or its destruction.*

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