

Three - Chapter One

The Arrival

Matching the horizon-filling, desert dunes upon which she stood, the powerful *nishikori*, boldly tattooed on Costa's back was a resolute, red chimeric dragon.¹ Embracing the warmth of the brash, Zungian spice wind on her cheek as it seductively brushed her silken hair across her heart-shaped face and flapped her dragon-covering, purple cloak in its breeze, unseen, Costa watched him rise up from the crimson soil, dust himself off, and, true to his prior profession, adroitly check himself for any injury. No blood. No cuts. No bruises. Still hidden from his sight, she shared his sense of relief and then instantly felt his mounting frustration as this handsomely tall, athletically-built, foreign man scanned the peculiar location he found himself in and battled to gain his bearings.

Don't have a clue, do you, Chosen-boy?

Behave.

He's scared.

You'd be scared.

I would no-

Be gone, I have work to do.

You're no fun.

I do believe the pot is calling the kettle black.

Perplexed by the logic of her logic, Cascadia ebbed into her rostral folds to contemplate the conundrum posed by the pot and the kettle.

¹ *Ohayo gozaimasu, tomadachi. Genki desu ka? Nishikori is the Zeppen word for brocaded carp. The fish is a dog, rushes up waterfalls until it transforms into a dragon. To the Zeppen this is a symbol of courage. Oh, who are the Zeppen? They're a sophisticated, island-living nation in the Lands of the Silkway. Mata ne.*

But Cascadia was right, he was clearly afraid. Costa watched his *locus coeruleus* - the 'blue spot' of the brain² - go to work, preparing his muscles to react to whatever danger may suddenly erupt at him from the dunes. She sympathized with his struggle to come to terms with wherever this 'strange place' was, recalling the fear that had overwhelmed her the first time the Council of the Lairds had dispatched her to this mirage-inducing, harrowingly silent, scarlet wilderness.³

Searching for water, smart.

They don't pick them stupid. Is it the pot or the kettle?

Haven't decided, yet.

Keeping her distance, the polyhistor stealthily tracked him as the Chosen-elect - for that is what he was about to become - headed for the northern horizon of the crimson mesa, where grew groves of mushroom-shaped shrubs - with their red, urn-shaped flowers - intermingled with sky-reaching Saguaro cacti.

Wrong way.

Give him a chance.

Any second now.

"This is codswallop!" he screamed at the scarlet dunes.

What the-? Land of the Bells? Are they off their rockers?

They always have their reasons.

Did they forget?

Don't be stupid.

Me? No, no, no, Lady Dodo, there's only one stupid in this relationship.

² Found in the pons, in your brain stem, the 'blue spot' is your panic button.

³ We're on the stunning, vast Plain of Zunge, in the northern realm of Skaoi. It's where the Senate of the Sages have all the Chosens-elect deposited.

There's no way they forgot. Though Costa did have to agree with her self, the Senate's choice of a Land of the Bells Chosen-elect was potentially problem-fraught; the last one had been a total disaster.

Observing this Chosen-elect, Costa knowingly made note of the agitated tapping of his manicured fingers as he popped the beads of emerging sweat in his palm.

Here it comes.

You be kind.

Abruptly stopping himself in his tracks, he screamed aloud, "How the wankin' Hell do I not know who the fuck I am?!"

Because, Chosen-boy, your wankin' hippocampus has been wiped clean. Cascadia couldn't help herself; it was too delicious.⁴

I am not having this with you today. Swiftly bringing palm to palm, Costa rubbed them together.

Agh! Alright! Stop! I'll behave.

Costa stopped rubbing. *One more and your gone.*

One more and your gone, Cascadia mockingly aped.

Do not! Push. It.

Muttering derogatory expletives under her breath, Cascadia begrudgingly retreated into her folds.⁵

Returning to her charge, Costa knew precisely where he'd look next. It was where they all, instinctively, looked next. East, to the blinding disc of light, hovering beyond the distant range of chalk-white hills - streaked with black and yellow, and ugly patches of dirt brown - now causing him to raise his hand and shield himself from its retina-burning irradiation.

⁴ *You have two hippocampi, one on each side of your medial temporal, and you use them to store your personal memories. Wipe them clean and - like this poor dweeb - your emotional memories are mush. ;Hasta.*

⁵ *God damn it, she's a pain in my ass.*

Costa too stared into the disc, the mystical lamella of light that marked the limits of her ken, and the boundary of his and her parallel universes. Having never been through the disk, she often wondered what the pre-world of the Chosens was like. Where did they come from? She deeply regretted that - with their hippocampus wiped - the Candidates, the other word for them, could not tell her. Perhaps one day, she-

Never going to happen in a million years.

Despite your incessant insistence, you don't know everything, you know.

You know what? I know you're never going to know what's on the other side of that light. And, yes, I do.

Alright, omniscient one, what is on the other side of that light?

Cascadia fell silent.

*QED. You go think about that, smarty pants.*⁶

Refocused, Costa watched the Chosen-elect turn back to the sea of red soil and - as the dancing spots in his pupils cleared - now facing west, take in the V-shaped ridge of the ten domed hillocks in the distance, each with its own pond.

There's your water.

She clandestinely followed him as he determinedly started for the ponds. She watched him admire the elegant line of thin-trunked, ashen trees, their vertical branches swaying, leading him to the parallel ridges, akin to the terraces of a tea plantation, sloping off into the darkness beyond. Her nostrils widened with his as they became engulfed in her favourite aroma, the spice-filled fragrance of the Zungian breeze.

*Do not interrupt me during this, Costa commanded as she quickly stretched her gait.*⁷

⁶ *She's insufferable when she's right. The other side of that light is known as the Via Lactea, and I don't have a friggin' clue what's out there. Mind if I hang with you guys for a spot?*

⁷ *All yours. I'm chillin' with my newfound hombres.*

"Fuck off!"

"Sorry, I can't do that," she answered - with a smile that would have disarmed the pounding fists of a charging gorilla - as she stepped into his path.

"No, I'm trying to remember my- Who the bollocks are you?"

"Costa."

"Costa who?"

"Costa of Spindle."

"That a place or a profession?"

Witty, yummy, yummy.

"A place."

"Do I know you, Costa of Spindle?"

"You do not."

"Good to know. Do you know me?"

"I do." Elegantly, she bowed to him. "Welcome, Chosen-elect. I expect you have many questions."

"You don't say?"

"I will answer all that I may." She noted her reflection in his disbelieving eyes. She concurred. How often do you come across a statuesque, purple-cloaked, Lands of the Silkway-featured woman wandering through a desert of red? "I'm not a mirage."

"Good to know."

She noted the saccadic movements of his pupils as his frontal eye field put together a three-dimensional image of her face.⁸

⁸ *Yep, she's that smart. [BA8] - your FEF, in your middle frontal gyrus, builds a visual perception of what you're seeing. Try this. Look straight ahead. Focus on an object on either side of your head. There you go. Your FEF did that. Cool, huh.*

The bleedin' nerve. He's trying to calculate our age.

He likes me.

No, no, no, no, no, no, over my dead body.

I possess the body.

Semantic hogwash.

What is your problem?

We're an inshango. We do not like when they like us. It's not in our DNA.

It's in mine.

You do not have separate DNA. We-

His outburst of laughter snapped them back to one.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"You are."

"How so?"

"I don't know... yet."

Cascadia erupted. 'Yet'?! There's no friggin' way. Tell me we didn't hear 'yet.'

Yet we did.

Yet we must not, yet. There's no way they didn't. Find out.

"How can I help you elucidate that?" she asked.

He smiled. It was beguiling.

And why do they always have to be so friggin' charming?

This was a constant bone of contention with Cascadia. For the life of her, Costa couldn't understand why. Therapy would have brought this issue to the fore, but, naturally, Cascadia refused to go. Comes with the territory.

That's all you got?

I would have a full explanation if you would-

Not happening.

Costa returned the smile.

"You have a nice smile," he told her.

"Thank you. You too."

Oh my God, get a room. No, don't.⁹ Find out if his hippocampus is wiped.

"Alrighty, in for a penny. Let's start with, 'Who are you?'"

"Your guide," she answered, ignoring the grammatical quirk that was now causing Cascadia to twitch like a trapped nerve.

"My guide? To where?"

"The Pathfinder."

"Why would I want to meet the Pathfinder?"

"It is ordained."

"I'm a god?"

"Ha!"

"Sorry?"

"I'm so sorry." Costa cupped her palms together and squeezed them tightly. "No, you're not a god. But, if you're elected, you will be a Chosen."

"You alright?"

"I'm fine." Costa unclasped her hands.

⁹ *Can you friggin' believe these two? As the great Bard of Brythonia opines, "If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction." Love that man.*

"A chosen what?"

"Simply a Chosen."

"Who's electing me?"

"The Council of the Lairds."

"There are Lairds, how posh. And who might be these Lairds be when they're at home?"

With a gracefully disarming smile, Costa turned and walked away. "Come and see," she invited him. Being a polyhistor, she was aptly cognizant of the misnomer that adrenaline causes 'flight or fight.' Adrenaline causes 'flight or freeze.'

Proving this point, the Chosen-elect planted his handsome feet defiantly in the crimson soil. "You're bonkers if you think I'm going to follow you willy nilly."

"As you wish," she replied, unperturbed. This was not Costa's first Chosen. Phen had tried the same ploy. Chosen Zebina had been remarkably trusting, but then that was Chosen Zebina.

"This is wank."

This is wank.

Ignoring the equally irksome inner and outer voice, Costa continued on her path.

"I'm just supposed to follow you into the heart of darkness?"

Still walking, the polyhistor turned and, curling her elegantly long index finger, gave him the seductive 'come hither' gesture. "Alstublieft," she added.

"Whatever that means."

"It has no translation." Continuing on, she counted, "One, two, thr--"

"Then how am I supposed to make sense of it?"

He did it again. I'm telling you, they forgot.

Costa stopped walking. Cascadia was right, this was not part of the plan. She turned to face the plan. "That's fair."

"Glad you agree," he retorted.

Way too cocky, this one.

Cascadia had a point. The polyhistor needed to take a closer look at this clearly unorthodox choice for Chosen-elect. She scanned his face. It was rounder than expected, yet in line with his charming sensuality. The eyebrows? She predicted they would be straight to reflect his pre-disk profession; they were. She preferred low over high. They were low, denoting a fast mind, a 'get it done' disposition, and a habit of interrupting; he was all of these. The eyes? Sapphire blue - no surprise there - but also clairvoyant and sharp with intelligence, powerful assets for a Chosen. The nose? Straight. With? Yep, a tell-tale tip-down; brooding and moody. Athletic, charming, brooding, clairvoyant and handsome, with a razor-sharp intellect. This might be the strongest, and scariest, Candidate she'd ever encountered.

What about his personality?

Costa looked to his lips. The Cupid's bow was distinct, denoting creativity and abundant energy. She particularly liked the squareness of his mouth, it meant he was honest. There was no doubt in her mind, Cascadia's objections aside, that - like Chosen Phen - this one would be extremely popular. She noted another, unexpected, quality about his lips, they were full.

He's got secrets.

Lots.

Do not engage with him.

That was going to be hard. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but this Chosen-elect possessed a quality she'd never sensed in any of the others. This one could chill and thrill in the same second. It was all very exciting.

I'm telling you, something's akimbo.

Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.

You think you're so funny.

"The meaning of 'alstublieft' is akin to, 'if you would be so kind.'" Again, turning with her smile, she continued on.

"In that case, how can I not?" And, as a Chosen-elect ought, he followed her.

Striding across the flat-top, scarlet mesa, feeling the familiar shifting waves of kinetic motion ripple beneath the soles of her feet, she looked back for his reaction.

As expected, he was caught off-guard by the subterrestrial undulations. "Where in the Hell are we? That's exactly where we are, isn't it? Do I believe in God?"

"How would I know that?"

"You seem to know all."

Bam! Nailed ya.

"God is a personal choice."

"Not if you don't know who you are."

He did-

I got it, already.

"You will," she assured him.

"Know who I am, or believe in God?"

"Yes, and only you may know that."

"When?"

"When Chosen Zebina reveals to you who you are. As for God, I cannot speak to when you might believe in a deity."

"Who, in the bleedin' name of Beelzebub, is Chosen Zebina?"

"This will be revealed."

"There's a lot of 'revealing' going on."

She laughed. "There is."

They continued across the undulating dunes, the Chosen-elect a respectful three steps behind.

"Love the tattoo. *Nishikori, right?*"

He speaks Zeppen?!

Costa turned to him. "You speak Zeppen?"

"If you mean Japanese, I do."

"How?"

"Fuck it. I don't know. Why don't I know?"

Okay. Gonna share?

Too soon.

"There are many things for you to learn, Chosen-elect." Smiling, she turned and continued on.

After a hesitant pause, he followed. "Something tells me you've played this game before."

"Something would be right."

"What's my name?"

"You don't have one."

"How can I not have a name?"

"Because Chosen Zebina has not yet given you one." Before his lips could form the words, "Not even close to my pay grade."

He laughed. "Shite, this is frustrating."

There was no need for comment. As a polyhistor, Costa was fully cognizant that Chosens deplore any inability to solve a challenge. It was what they all had in common, and the primary reason they had been chosen as Chosens. From previous experience, she knew she would now become his challenge.

Looking north, to the red, urn-shaped flowers on the mushroom-shaped shrubs, he asked, "Are you permitted to tell me about the bushes?"

"I am. They are the buds of Corium."

"Good to know." He gestured to the spice-filled air. "And this place?"

"The Plain of Zunge."

"Alrighty, we're making progress."

Are you going to fix that?

"How about, 'Where are we going?'" he asked.

"The Isthmus of Drozza."

"What might that be?"

"The Isthmus of Drozza."

"Exact. I like that. What will we find at the isthmus?"

"A lake."

"A lake?"

Come on!

"No more questions."

"I have a right to know, you know."

"You know that?"

"You bet your sweet Fanny Adams."

Veiling her smile, she ignored the comment.

"We're going to play coy? Then, 'Lay on Macduff.'"

"And damn'd be he that first cries, 'Hold enough!'"

"You have got to be kidding, you know Shakespeare?"

"The great Bard of Brythonia is my favourite poet."

"Brythonia? I thought he was from Avon."

"Where's Avon?" she asked, turning to him.

He struggled to find the answer, but she could see - from the mandibular firing of the trigeminal causing his jaw to clench¹⁰ - that a personal memory, he knew he once knew, was gone.

You go, Sherlock. Yep, confirmed, it's wiped.

I feel bad for him.

He'll get over it. Now, if he had remembered-

Don't even go there.

"Chaos shall come to calm," Costa assured him. She pointed to the black void beyond the tea terraces. "The answers you seek await in the darkness." She smiled warmly, hoping it would bring him comfort. It didn't. Falling silent, they continued on. Instinctively, she knew he was mulling over why he was being led across a crimson landscape - befitting an extra-terrestrial planet - by a koi-inked, cloak-clad woman, who quotes the Bard of Brythonia, knows who he is, and - worst of all - knows why he doesn't know who he is. It's tough being a Chosen-elect.

"Shit! Bollocks! Fart and fuck! But I will."

"Will what?" she asked, laughing.

"None of your beeswax," came his petulant reply.

"As you wish." Walking directly ahead, she led him into a shallow valley at the bottom of which a narrow path split into a 'V'. Continuing straight ahead, her footprints created a new trail through the virgin, undulating, crimson soil.

¹⁰ *She's a walking Gray's Anatomy, knows every page of the damn tome. The Trigeminal is the 5th of the 12 cranial nerves emanating from your noggin. It's called 'tri' because, yes, it has three branches: the ophthalmic going to the eyes, the maxillary to the face, and the mandibular to the jaw. We'll make physicians of you yet.*

No question? I'm telling you, there's something wrong.

He's fine. Though, Costa had to admit, even the ever-trusting Chosen Zebina had questioned why they had not taken one of the paths. Chosen Phen had been unfazed by her choice but had wanted to know where the paths lead. She looked back. He was still there, with a shit-eating grin on his face.

Why I oughta- I do not like him.

That's going to be an issue, he's my favourite one yet.

Don't let Phen hear you say that.

If Phen hears me, this one won't be with us, will he?

Ooh, touché, Polyhistor. Come up with that all on your ownsome?

Go fold yourself. Done with Cascadia, Costa drifted her focus to her parietal. What are the odds Phen is still alive?¹¹

Pointless conjecture, Polyhistor. Observation over supposition.

Naturally, Cascadia was right. The wellbeing of Chosen Phen would be visually affirmed should Chosen Zebina and Ferryman Cricophangus appear over the horizon on Lake Hyoid. She looked to the distance, where the very lake awaited them. She looked back to the Candidate. He does have a nice smile.

What is wrong with you?

Look at it.

It has a certain charm. He might be, you know.

Who's supposing now?

Yeh, yeh.

But, you're right, he might.

¹¹ Ten different parts of your brain are involved in the act of adding and subtracting. But, it's in the posterior parietal - her hiding place from me - where you make sense of all those calculations. She, being an inshango, is brilliant at it.