

Hoid's Stories

The Origins of the God Kings (*Warbreaker* Chapter 32)

We begin in a distant haze. The first God King of Hallandren is ancient. Ancient, yes. Older than kingdoms and cities, older than monarchs and religions. Not older than the mountains, for *they* were already here. Like the knuckles of the sleeping giants below, they formed this valley, where panthers and flowers both make their home.

We speak of just 'the valley' then, a place before it had a name. The people of Chedesh still dominated the world. They sailed the Inner Sea, coming from the east, and it was they who first discovered this strange land. Their writings are sparse, their empire has long since been taken by the dust, but memory remains. Perhaps you can imagine their surprise upon arriving here? A place with beaches of fine, soft sand, with fruits aplenty, and with strange, alien forests?

Paradise, they called it.

A paradise hidden between the mountains, a land with pleasant rains that never grew cold, a land where succulent food grew spontaneously.

A land of color.

Because of the Tears of Edgli, the striking flowers of such brilliance that could yield dyes that would hold fast in any cloth.

The First Returned was born during this time. Aboard a ship that was sailing the coast. Returned can now be found in all parts of the world, but the first one—the man whom you call Vo, but we name only by his title—was born here, in the waters of this very bay. He declared the Five Visions. He died a week later.

The men of his ship founded a kingdom upon these beaches, then called Hanald. Before their arrival, all that had existed in these jungles was the people of Pahn Kahl, more a mere collection of fishing villages than a true kingdom.

Now, you may wonder why I must travel back so far. Should I not speak of the Manywar, of the shattering of kingdoms, of the Five Scholars, of Kalad the Usurper and his phantom army, which some say still hides in these jungles, waiting?

Those are the events we focus upon, the ones men know the best. To speak only of them, however, is to ignore the history of three hundred years that led up to them. Would there have been a Manywar without knowledge of the Returned? It was a Returned, after all, who predicted the war and prompted Strifelover to attack the kingdoms across the mountains.

Strifelover? Oh, you'll know him better as Kalad the Usurper. A Returned, and so was Peacemaker, the man who overthrew him and founded Hallandren. However, we haven't arrived to *that* part yet. We are still back in Hanald, the outpost-become-kingdom founded by the men of the First Returned's crew. They were the ones who chose the First Returned's wife as their queen, then used the Tears of Edgli to create fantastic dyes which sold for untold riches across the world. This soon became a bustling center of trade.

The Tears of Edgli. The source of Hallandren wealth. Such small things, so easy to grow here. And yet, this is the only soil where they will live. In other parts of the world, dyes are very difficult to produce. Expensive. Some scholars say that the Manywar was fought over these flower petals, that the kingdoms of Kuth and Huth were destroyed by little drips of color.

The others... the other scholars claim it was Breath. Most agree that the Manywar was not only about petals squeezed dry, but a much greater prize. *People* squeezed dry.

You know, perhaps, that the royal family was growing increasingly interested in the process by which Breath could be used to bring objects to life. Awakening, it was then first being called. It was a fresh and poorly understood art, then. It still is, in many ways. The workings of the souls of men - their power to animate ordinary objects and the dead to life - is something discovered barely four centuries ago. A short time, by the accounting of gods.

Breath. The years leading up to the Manywar, those were the days of the Five Scholars and the discovery of new Commands. To some, this was a time of great

enlightenment and learning. Others call them the darkest days of men, for it was then we learned to best exploit one another.

One of the Five Scholars made a discovery. Commands. Methods. The means by which a Lifeless could be created from a single Breath.

This, perhaps, seems a small thing to you. But you must look at the past of this kingdom and its founding. Hallandren began with the servants of a Returned and was developed by an expansive mercantile effort. It controlled a uniquely lucrative region which, through the discovery and maintenance of the northern passes—combined with increasingly skillful navigation—was becoming a jewel coveted by the rest of the world.

And so the war came. The Five Scholars split, joining different sides. Some kingdoms gained the use of Lifeless while others did not. Some kingdoms had weapons others could only envy.

My story claims one other reason for the Manywar: the ability to create Lifeless so cheaply. Before the discovery of the single-Breath Command, Lifeless took fifty Breaths to make. Extra soldiers—even a Lifeless one—are of limited use if you can gain only one for every fifty men you already have. However, being able to create a Lifeless with a single Breath . . . one for one . . . that will double your troops. And half of them won't need to eat.

Lifeless are no stronger than living men. They are the same. They are not more skilled than living men. They are the same. However, not having to eat like regular men? That advantage was enormous. Mix that with their ability to ignore pain and never feel fear . . . and suddenly you had an army that others could not stand against. It was taken even further by Kalad, who was said to have created a new and more powerful type of Lifeless, gaining an advantage even more frightening.

Nobody remembers what these new Lifeless are. The records of that time have been lost. Some say they were burned intentionally. Whatever the true nature of Kalad's Phantoms, they were frightening and terrible—so much so that even though the details have been lost in time, the phantoms themselves live on in our lore. And our curses.

None of the stories agree on why the royal family broke away. Some people speak of religious indignation and of treachery by Kalad the Usurper. The Pahn Kahl people tell of the royal family working hard to gain powerful Lifeless and Awakeners,

then being surprised when their tools turned against them. In Hallandren, they tell of the royal family aligning themselves with Kalad, making him their general and ignoring the will of the people by seeking war with bloodlust.

But time burns away behind us, leaving only ash and memory. That memory passes from mind to mind, then finally to my lips. When all is truth, and all are lies, does it matter if some say the royal family sought to create Lifeless? Your belief is your own. Either way, the Returned took control of Hallandren.

They gave it a new name, a variation on the old one. And yet, some still speak regretfully of the royals who left, bearing the blood of the First Returned to their highlands. Yes, it was the First Returned's wife, pregnant with his child, who became the first queen of this land. Those royals are his descendants.

So the royals abandoned Hallandren, and the God Kings carried on without the blood of the First Returned.

6 God Kings there have been these 300 years, starting with the Peacegiver, and Concluding with His Immortal Majesty, Lord Susebron.

The dynasty of Hallandren was founded at the conclusion of the Manywar, the first one gaining his Breath and life from Peacegiver himself, who was revered for dispelling Kalad's Phantoms and bringing a peaceful end to the Manywar. Since that day, each God King has fathered a stillborn son who then Returned and took his place.

How did Peacegiver create a new God King? The story is lost in time. How indeed? Breath can be passed from one man to another, but Breath—no matter how much—does not make one a god. Legends say that Peacegiver died by granting his Breath to his successor. After all, can a god not give his life away to bless another?

I speak of foundations. Peacegiver was no ordinary Returned, for he managed to stop the Lifeless from rampaging. Indeed, he sent away Kalad's Phantoms, which formed the main bulk of the Hallandren army. By doing so, he left his own people powerless. He did so in an effort to bring peace. By then, of course, it was too late for Kuth and Huth. However, the other kingdoms—Pahn Kahl, Tedradel, Gys, and Hallandren itself—were brought out of the conflict.

Can we not assume more from this god of gods who was able to accomplish so much? Perhaps he did do something unique, as the priests claim. Leave some seed

within the God Kings of Hallandren, allowing them to pass their power and divinity from father to son?

The God Kings are immortal, are they not? With the Fifth Heightening, they have reached Agelessness. And yet, why do they pass on? Why do any Returned pass on?

Because they tire. Gods are not like ordinary men. They come back for us, not for themselves, and when they can no longer endure life, they pass on. God Kings live only as long as it takes them to produce an heir.

It is a common fact. At least, to storytellers and scholars. Each God King has passed from this world shortly after his son and heir was born. It is natural. Once the heir has arrived, the God King grows restless. Each one has sought out an opportunity to use up his Breath to benefit the realm. And then...

And then they pass on. Leaving their people blessed and their heir to rule.

Wandersail (*Way of Kings* Chapter 57)

This story is about Derethil, and the *Wandersail*.

Derethil is well known in some lands, though I have heard him spoken of less here in the East. He was a king during the shadowdays, the time before memory. A powerful man. Commander of thousands, leader of tens of thousands. Tall, regal, blessed with fair skin and fairer eyes. He was a man to envy. Derethil fought the Voidbringers during the days of the Heralds and Radiants.

When there was finally peace, he found he was not content. His eyes always turned westward, toward the great open sea. He commissioned the finest ship men had ever known, a majestic vessel intended to do what none had dared before: sail the seas during a highstorm.

Derethil's goal was to seek the origin of the Voidbringers, the place where they had been spawned. Many called him a fool, yet he could not hold himself back. He named the vessel the *Wandersail* and gathered a crew of the bravest of sailors. Then, on a day when a highstorm brewed, this ship cast off. Riding out into the ocean, the sail hung wide, like arms open to the stormwinds.

The *Wandersail* ran aground and was nearly destroyed, but Derethil and most of his sailors survived. They found themselves on a ring of small islands surrounding an enormous whirlpool, where, it is said, the ocean drains. Derethil and his men were greeted by a strange people with long, limber bodies who wore robes of single color and shells in their hair unlike any that grow back on Roshar. These people took the survivors in, fed them, and nursed them back to health.

During his weeks of recovery, Derethil studied the strange people, who called themselves the Uvara, the People of the Great Abyss. They lived curious lives. Unlike the people in Roshar—who constantly argue—the Uvara always seemed to agree. From childhood, there were no questions. Each and every person went about his duty.

One day, while Derethil and his men were sparring to regain strength, a young serving girl brought them refreshment. She tripped on an uneven stone, dropping the goblets to the floor and shattering them. In a flash, the other Uvara descended on the hapless child and slaughtered her in a brutal way. Derethil and his men were so stunned

that by the time they regained their wits, the child was dead. Angry, Derethil demanded to know the cause of the unjustified murder. One of the other natives explained. 'Our emperor will not suffer failure.'

As Derethil began to pay more attention, he saw other murders. These Uvara, these People of the Great Abyss, were prone to astonishing cruelty. If one of their members did something wrong—something the slightest bit untoward or unfavorable—the others would slaughter him or her. Each time he asked, Derethil's caretaker gave him the same answer. 'Our emperor will not suffer failure.'

The emperor, Derethil discovered, resided in the tower on the eastern coast of the largest island among the Uvara. Derethil determined that he needed to confront this cruel emperor. What kind of monster would demand that such an obviously peaceful people kill so often and so terribly? Derethil gathered his sailors, a heroic group, and they armed themselves. The Uvara did not try to stop them, though they watched with fright as the strangers stormed the emperor's tower.

Derethil and his men came out of the tower a short time later, carrying a desiccated corpse in fine robes and jewelry. 'This is your emperor?' Derethil demanded. 'We found him in the top room, alone.' It appeared that the man had been dead for years, but nobody had dared enter his tower. They were too frightened of him.

When he showed the Uvara the dead body, they began to wail and weep. The entire island was cast into chaos, as the Uvara began to burn homes, riot, or fall to their knees in torment. Amazed and confused, Derethil and his men stormed the Uvara shipyards, where the *Wandersail* was being repaired. Their guide and caretaker joined them, and she begged to accompany them in their escape. So it was that Nafti joined the crew.

Derethil and his men set sail, and though the winds were still, they rode the *Wandersail* around the whirlpool, using the momentum to spin them out and away from the islands. Long after they left, they could see the smoke rising from the ostensibly peaceful lands. They gathered on the deck, watching, and Derethil asked Nafti the reason for the terrible riots.

Holding a blanket around herself, staring with haunted eyes at her lands, she replied, 'Do you not see, Traveling One? If the emperor is dead, and has been all these years, then the murders we committed are not his responsibility. They are our own.'

Fleet (*Words of Radiance* Chapter 59)

Close your eyes. What do you see?

In the driest part of the Brightest Day, the man set off from the eastern sea. And where he went or why he ran the answer comes for you from me. He ran from the storm.

The Man was Fleet whose name you know, he's spoken of in song and lore. The fastest man 'ere known to live, the surest feet 'ere known to run.

In time long past in times I've known. He raced the Herald Chanarach. He won that race as he did each one. But now the time for defeat had come.

For Fleet so sure, and Fleet so quick to all who heard, he yelled his goal, to beat the wind and race a storm!

A claim so brash a claim too bold, to race the wind? It can't be done!

Undaunted, Fleet was set to run!

So to the East there went our Fleet, upon the shore his mark was set. The storm grew strong, the storm grew wild!

Who was this man so set to dash? No man should tempt the God of Storms, no fool has ever been so rash.

With a clap of Thunder, the race begins.

O're rock and grass, our Fleet did run. He leaped the stones and dodged the trees, his feet a blur, his Soul a Sun. The storm, so grand, it raged and spun but away from it, our Fleet did run. The lead was his, the wind behind. Did man now prove that storms could lose?

Through land he ran, so quick and sure, and Alethkar he left behind! But now the test he saw ahead. For mountains he would have to climb. The Storm surged on, released a howl! It saw its chance might now approach. To the highest mounts and the coldest peaks, our hero Fleet did make his way. The slopes were steep, and paths unsure, would he maintain his mighty lead?

No! The storm grew close till it chewed his heels. Upon his neck, Fleet felt its chill. Its breadth of ice was all around, a mouth of night and wings of frost, its voice was of the breaking rocks, its song was of the crashing rain.

Then the tip he reached, the point he found! Fleet climbed no more, he crossed the peak, and down the side, his speed returned! Outside the storm, Fleet found the Sun. Azir's planes were now his path. He sprinted West, more broad his stride!

Yet soon the race, its tool did claim, his feet like bricks, his legs like cloth. In gasps our runner drew his breath, the end approached, the storm outdone, but slowly did our hero run.

A final challenge did raise its head. A final shadow to his dread. The land did rise up once again! The mystic mountains guarding Shin! To leave the storming winds behind, our Fleet again began to climb! The storms again came to his back, the winds again did spin around! Time was short, the ending near, as through the mountains our Fleet did dash. It was right upon him, even going down the other side of the mountains he was unable to stay very far ahead. He crossed the peaks, but lost his lead!

The last paths lay before his feet, but strength he'd spent and might he'd lost. Each step was toil, each breath a pain. A sunken land, crossed with grief. The grass so dead it did not move. But here the storm, it too did wilt. With thunder lost and lightning spent, the drops slipped down, now weak as wet. For Shin is not a place for them. Ahead, the sea. The race's end! Fleet stayed ahead, his muscles raw. Eyes barely saw, legs barely walked. But on he went, to destiny.

The end you know, the end will live. A shock for men, to me you'll give.

He died? Well, I can work with that.

Upon that land of dirt and soil, our hero fell and did not stir! His body spent, his strength undone, Fleet the hero was no more! The storm approached and found him there, it's still and stopped upon its course. The rains, they fell. The winds, they blew. But forward, they could not progress. For Glory lit and light alive, for goals unreached and aims to strive. All men must try, the winds did see. It is the test, it is the dream.

So in that land of dirt and soil, our hero stopped the storm itself. And while the rain came down, like tears, our Fleet refused to end this race.

His body dead, but not his will; within those winds, his soul did rise. It flew upon the day's last song, to win the race and claim the dawn. Past the sea and past the waves, our Fleet no longer lost his breath. Forever strong, forever fast, forever free to race the wind.

The Girl Who Looked Up (*Oathbringer* Chapters 25 and 82)

There was a girl. This was before the storms, before memories, and before legends - but there was still a girl. She wore a long scarf to blow in the wind.

The girl in the scarf played and danced, as girls do today. In fact, most things were the same then as they are today. Except for two big differences. The wall, and the lack of light.

You see, in those days, a wall kept out the storms. It had existed for so long, nobody knew how it had been built. That did not bother them. Why wonder when the mountains began or why the sky was high? Like these things were, so the wall was.

Of course, even without light, people still had to live, didn't they? That's what people do. I hasten to guess that's the *first* thing they learn how to do. So they lived in darkness, farmed in darkness, ate in darkness.

The girl was curious. So, she asked. "Why is there a wall?" She asked the man selling fruit.

"To keep the bad things out," he replied.

"What bad things?"

"Very bad things. There is a wall. Do not go beyond it, or you shall die."

The fruit seller picked up his cart and moved away. And still, the girl looked up at the wall.

"Why is there a wall?" She asked the woman suckling her child.

"To protect us," the woman said.

"To protect us from what?"

"Very bad things. There is a wall. Do not go beyond it, or you shall die." The woman took her child and left. The girl climbed a tree, peeking out the top, her scarf streaming behind her.

"Why is there a wall?" She asked the boy sleeping lazily in the nook of a branch.

"What wall?" The boy asked.

The girl thrust her finger pointedly towards the wall, shrouded in darkness.

"That's not a wall, that's just the way the sky is over there."

“It’s a *wall*,” the girl replied. “A giant wall.”

“It must be there on purpose,” the boy said. “Yes, it is a wall. Don’t go beyond it, you’ll probably die.”

Well, these answers didn’t satisfy the girl who looked up. She reasoned to herself, if the wall kept evil things out, then the space on this side of it should be safe. So, one night while the others of the village slept, she sneaked from her home with a bundle of supplies. She walked towards the wall, and indeed the land *was* safe. But it was still so dark. Always in the shadow of the wall. No sunlight, ever, directly reached the people.

The girl traveled far. No predators hunted her, and no storms assaulted her. The only wind was the pleasant one that played with her scarf, and the only creatures she saw were the cremlings that clicked at her as she walked.

At long last, the girl in the scarves stood before the wall. It was truly expansive, running as far as she could see in either direction. And its height! It reached almost to the Tranquiline Halls!

And so, she decided that the only way that she’d find answers would be to climb the wall herself.

Was she stupid or bold?

I believe she was both. If nobody asks questions, then we never learn. However, what of the wisdom of her elders? They offered no explanation, no rationalization of the wall. There might just be a difference between listening to your elders, and being just as frightened as everyone else.

She didn’t turn back. She *climbed*. There were outcroppings on the wall, things like these spikes or hunched, ugly statues. She had climbed the highest trees all through her youth. She could do this.

The climb took days. At night, the girl who looked up would tie herself a hammock out of her scarf and sleep there. She picked out her village at one point, remarking on how small it seemed, now that she was high.

As she neared the top, she finally began to fear what she would find on the other side. Unfortunately, this fear did not stop her. She was young, and questions bothered

her more than fear. So it was that she finally struggled to the very top and stood to see the other side. The hidden side...

...and on that side of the wall, the girl saw steps.

The girl stared at those steps, and suddenly the gruesome statues on her side of the wall made sense. The spears. The way everything was cast into shadow. The wall did indeed hide something evil, something frightening. It was the people, like the girl and her village.

Beyond the wall... beyond the wall was God's Light.

The girl who looked up climbed down the steps. She hid among the creatures who lived on this side. She sneaked to the Light and she brought it back with her. To the other side. To the land of shadows.

An incredible escape. A frantic climb up the steps, and a crazed descent down the wall.

And then...

Light. For the first time in the village, there was light. Followed then by the coming of the storms, boiling of the wall.

The people suffered, but each storm brought light renewed, for it could never be put back now that it had been taken. And people, for all their hardship, would never choose to go back. Now that they could see.

Mishim and Queen Tsa (*Oathbringer* Chapter 67)

There are still stories to tell! Everyone knows that Mishim is the cleverest of the three moons. Though her sister and brother are content to reign in the sky - gracing the lands below with their light - Mishim is always looking for a chance to escape her duty.

This story takes place during the days of Tsa. The grandest queen of Natanatan, before that kingdom's fall. Blessed with grand poise and beauty, the Natan people were famous across all of Roshar. Why, if you'd lived back then, you'd have viewed the east as a place of great culture, not an empty wasteland!

Queen Tsa, as you've doubtless heard, was an architect. She designed high towers for her city, built to reach ever upward, grasping toward the sky. One night, Tsa rested in her greatest tower, enjoying the view. So it was that Mishim, that clever moon, happened to pass in the sky close by. (It was a night when the moons were large, and these—everyone knows—are nights when the moons pay special attention to the actions of mortals.)

"Great Queen!" Mishim called. "You build such fine towers in your grand city. I enjoy viewing them each night as I pass."

Now, Queen Tsa was hardly ignorant of Mishim's crafty ways. The Natans were never fond of Mishim, but rather revered the great Nomon.

Still, one does not ignore a moon. "Thank you, Great Celestial One," Tsa called. "Our engineers labor ceaselessly to erect the most splendid of mortal accomplishments."

"Almost they reach to my domain," Mishim called. "One wonders if you are trying to obtain it."

"Never, Great Celestial One. My domain is this land, and the sky is yours."

As always, Mishim was hatching a scheme. She loathed being hung in the sky each night, far from the delights of the world below, and the pleasures that only mortals know.

The next night, Mishim again passed Queen Tsa in her tower. "It is a pity," Mishim said, "that you cannot see the constellations from up close. For they are truly beautiful gemstones, shaped by the finest of gem cutters."

"It is a pity," Tsa said. "But all know that the eyes of a mortal would burn to see such a lofty sight."

On the next night, Mishim tried again. "It is a pity," she said, "that you cannot converse with the starspren, as they tell delightsome stories."

"It is a pity," Tsa agreed. "But everyone knows that the language of the heavens would drive a mortal mad."

The next night, Mishim tried a third time. "It is a pity that you cannot see the beauty of your kingdom from above. For the pillars and domes of your city are radiant."

"It is a pity," Tsa agreed. "But those sights are meant for the great ones of heaven, and to behold them myself would be blasphemous."

Mishim was not finished. The queen was pious, but the moon was crafty. I will leave it to you to decide which is the more powerful.

The fourth night, as Mishim passed the queen, she tried a different ploy.

"Yes," Mishim said, "your city is grand, as only a god can see from above. That is why it is so, so sad that one of the towers has a flawed roof."

"What?" Tsa said. "A flawed tower? Which one?"

"It is but a minor blemish," Mishim said. "Do not let it worry you. I appreciate the effort your craftsmen, however incompetent, put into their work." She continued on her way, but knew that she had trapped the queen.

Indeed, on the next night, the beautiful queen stood waiting on her balcony. "Great One of the Heavens!" Tsa called. "We have inspected the roofs, and cannot find the imperfection! Please, please tell me which tower it is, so I can break it down."

"I cannot say," Mishim said. "To be mortal is to be flawed; it is not right to expect perfection of you."

This only made the queen more worried.

On the next night, she asked, 'Great One of the Sky, is there a way that I could visit the heavens? I will close my ears to the stories of the starspren and turn my eyes away from the constellations. I would look only upon the flawed works of my people, not the sights meant for you, so that I may see with my own eyes what must be fixed.'

“It is a forbidden thing that you ask,” Mishim said, “for we would have to trade places, and hope that Nomon does not notice.” She said it with much glee, though hidden, for this request was the very thing she desired.

“I will feign that I am you,” Tsa promised. “And I will do all that you do. We will switch back once I am done, and Nomon will never know.”

And so, the moon and the woman traded places.

Mishim came down among the mortals, and Tsa climbed the heavens to sit in the place of the moon!

Mishim spent the remaining hours of the night drinking, and courting, and dancing, and singing, and doing all the things she had watched from afar. She lived frantically during her few hours of freedom.

In fact, she was so captivated that she forgot to return, and was shocked by the dawning of sunlight! She hurriedly climbed to the queen’s high tower, but Tsa had already set, and the night had passed.

Mishim now knew not only the delights of mortality, but the anxiety as well. She passed the day in great disquiet, knowing that Tsa would be trapped with her wise sister and solemn brother, spending the day in the place where moons rest. When night again came, Mishim hid inside the tower, expecting that Salas would call out and chide her for her appetites. Yet Salas passed without comment.

Surely, when Nomon rose, he would lash out against her foolishness. Yet Nomon passed without comment. Finally, Tsa rose in the sky, and Mishim called to her. “Queen Tsa, mortal, what has happened? My siblings did not call to me. Did you somehow go undiscovered?”

“No,” Tsa replied. “Your siblings knew me as an impostor immediately.”

“Then let us trade places quickly!” Mishim said. “So that I may tell them lies and placate them.”

“They are placated already,” Tsa said. “They think I am delightful. We spent the daylight hours feasting.”

“Feasting?” Her siblings had never feasted with her before. “We sang sweet songs together.”

“Songs?” Her siblings had never sung with her before.

“It is truly wonderful up here,” Tsa said. “The starspren tell amazing tales, as you promised, and the gemstone constellations are grand from up close.”

“Yes. I love those stories, and those sights.”

“I think,” Tsa said, “that I might stay.”

Mishim now knew another mortal emotion. Loss.

The moon began to panic! She thought of her grand view from up so high, where she could see all lands and enjoy - if from afar - their art, buildings, and songs! She remembered the kindness of Nomon and the thoughtfulness of Salas!

“Wait!” Mishim said. “Wait, Tsa! Your word is broken! You spoke to the starspren and gazed upon the constellations!”

“Nomon said that I could,” Tsa explained. “And I was not harmed.”

“You broke your word nonetheless!” Mishim cried. “You must come back to earth, mortal, for our bargain is at an end!”

To Mishim’s eternal relief, Tsa relented. The queen climbed back down into her tower, and Mishim scrambled up into the heavens. With great pleasure, she sank toward the horizon.

Though just before she set, Mishim heard a song. It was a song of laughter, of beauty. A song Mishim had never heard! It took her long to understand that song, until months later, she passed in the sky at night and saw the queen in the tower again. Holding a child with skin that was faintly blue.

They did not speak, but Mishim knew. The queen had tricked her. Tsa had wanted to spend one day in the heavens, to know Nomon for a night.

She had given birth to a son with pale blue skin, the color of Nomon himself. A son born of the gods, who would lead her people to glory. A son who bore the mantle of the heavens. And that is why to this day, the people of Natanatan have skin of a faintly blue shade. And it is why Mishim, though still crafty, has never again left her place.

Most importantly, it is the story of how the moon came to know the one thing that before, only mortals had known. Loss.

The Dragon and the Dog (*Rhythm of War* Chapter 80)

There is an inn, that you cannot find on your own. You must stumble across it on a misty street, late at night, lost and uncertain in a strange city.

The door has a wheel on it, but the sign bears no name. If you find the place and wander inside, you'll meet a young man behind the bar. He has no name. He cannot tell it to you, should he want to—it's been taken from him. But he'll know you, as he knows everyone who enters the inn. He'll listen to everything you want to tell him—and you will want to talk to him. And if you ask him for a story, he'll share one. Like he shared with me. I will now share it with you.

This story is a meaningless one. You must not search for a moral. It isn't that kind of story, you see. It's the other kind of story.

This story is called 'The Dog and the Dragon.'

The Dragon was a brilliant pearlescent color, with silver running along the contours of its body. One day, the dog saw this dragon flying overhead. The dog marveled, as one might expect. He had never seen anything so majestic or grand. The dragon soared in the sky, shimmering with iridescent colors in the sunlight. When it curved around and passed above the dog, it called out a mighty challenge, demanding in the human tongue that all acknowledge its beauty.

The dog watched this from atop a hill. Now, he wasn't particularly large, even for a dog. He was white, with brown spots and floppy ears. Not of any specific breed or lineage, and small enough that the other dogs often mocked him. He was a common variety of a common species of a common animal that most people would rightfully ignore. But when this dog stared at the dragon and heard the mighty boast, he came to a realization. Today, he had encountered something he'd always wished for but never known. Today he'd seen perfection, and had been presented with a goal. From today, nothing else mattered. He was going to become a dragon.

The dog sat upon that hilltop through an entire night and day, staring. Thinking. Dreaming. Finally, he returned to the farm where he lived among others of his kind. These farm dogs all had jobs, chasing livestock or guarding the perimeter, but he—as

the smallest—was seldom given any duty. Perhaps to another, this would be liberating. To him, it had always been humiliating.

As any problem to overcome is merely a set of smaller problems to overcome in a sequence, he divided his goal of becoming a dragon into three steps. First, he would find a way to have colorful scales like the dragon. Second, he would learn to speak the language of men like the dragon. Third, he would learn to fly like the dragon.

The dog chose the scales first, as it seemed the easiest, and he wanted to begin his transformation with an early victory. He knew the farmer owned many seeds in a variety of colors, and they were the shape of little scales. Because he was not a thief, the dog did not take these—but he asked the other animals where the farmer obtained new ones.

It turns out, the farmer could make seeds by putting them in the ground, waiting for plants to grow, then taking more seeds from the stalks. Knowing this, the dog borrowed some seeds and did the same, accompanying the farmer's eldest son on his daily work. As the youth worked, the dog moved alongside him, digging holes for seeds with his paws and planting them carefully with his mouth. It was an amusing scene, watching the dog work.

The farmer's eldest son found the dog's actions quite amusing—then incredible as the dog went out each day, gripping a watering can in his teeth. The little dog watered each seed, just as the farmer did. He learned to weed and fertilize. And eventually, the dog was rewarded with his own small crop of colorful seeds.

After replacing what he'd borrowed from the farmer, the dog got himself wet and rolled in his seeds, sticking them all over his body. He then presented himself to the other dogs. 'Do you admire my wonderful new scales?' he asked his fellow animals. 'Do I not look like a dragon?' They, in turn, laughed at him. 'Those are not scales!' they said. 'You look stupid and silly. Go back to being a dog.'

The dog slunk away, feeling foolish and hurt. He had failed at his first task, to have scales like a dragon. The dog, however, was not daunted. Surely if he could speak with the grand voice of a dragon, they would all see. And so, the dog spent his free time watching the children of the farmer. There were three. The eldest son, who helped in the fields. The middle daughter, who helped with the animals, and the toddler—who was too

young to help, but was learning to speak. They were all working in the yard—the farmer’s wife, who was taller than the farmer. A youth, lanky and assiduous. A daughter who would someday share her mother’s height. A baby who toddled around the yard, tended by them all as they did their chores.

Anyway, the dog figured that the best way to learn the language of men was to study their youngest child. So the dog played with the baby, stayed with him, and listened as he began to form words. The dog played with the daughter too, and helped her with yard work. He soon found he could understand her, if he tried hard. But he couldn’t form words. He tried so hard to speak as they did, but his mouth could not make that kind of speech. His tongue did not work like a human tongue. Eventually, while watching the tall and serious daughter, he noticed she could make the words of humans on paper. The dog was overjoyed by this. It was a way to speak without having a human tongue! The dog joined her at the table where she studied, inspecting the letters as she made them. He failed many times, but eventually learned to scratch the letters in the dirt himself.

The farmer and his family thought this an amazing trick. The dog was sure he had found a way to prove he was becoming a dragon. He returned to the other dogs in the field and showed them his writing ability by writing their names in the dirt. They, however, could not read the words. When the dog explained what writing was, they laughed. ‘This is not the loud and majestic voice of a dragon!’ the dogs said. ‘This is speaking so quietly, nobody can hear it! You look silly and stupid. Go back to being a dog.’ They left the dog to stare at his writing as rain began to fall, washing the words away. He realized they were correct. He had failed to speak with the proud and powerful voice of the dragon.

But there was still hope, if the dog could just fly. If he could achieve this feat, the dogs would have to acknowledge his transformation. This task seemed even harder than the previous two. However, the dog had seen a curious device in the barn. The farmer would tie bales of hay with a rope, then raise or lower them using a pulley in the rafters. This was essentially flying, was it not? The bales of hay soared in the air. And so, the dog practiced pulling on the rope himself, and learned the mechanics of the

device. He found that the pulley could be balanced with a weight on the other side, which made the bales of hay lower slowly and safely.

The dog took his leash and tied it around him to make a harness, like the ones that wrapped up the hay. Then he tied a sack slightly lighter than he was to the rope, creating a weight to balance him. After using his mouth to tie the rope to his harness, he climbed to the top of the barn's loft, and called for the other dogs to come in. When they arrived, he leaped gracefully off the loft. It worked! The dog lowered down slowly, striking a magnificent pose in the air. He was flying! He soared like the dragon had! He felt the air around him, and knew the sensation of being up high, with everything below him. When he landed, he felt so proud and so free.

Then the other dogs laughed the loudest they had ever laughed. 'That is not flying like a dragon!' they said. 'You fell slowly. You looked so stupid and silly. Go back to being a dog.'

This, at long last, crushed the dog's hopes. He realized the truth. A dog like him simply could not become a dragon. He was too small, too quiet, too silly.

What was that?

The dog looked up, confused. He heard noises. Sudden shouting? Yells of panic?

The dog raced out of the barn to find the farmer and his family huddled around the small farmyard well, which was barely wide enough for the bucket. The dog put his paws up on the edge of the well and looked down. Far below, in the deep darkness of the hole, he heard crying and splashing. A pitiful, gurgling cry was barely audible over the splashing. The littlest child of the farmer and his wife had fallen into the well, and was drowning. The family screamed and wept. There was nothing to be done. Or ... was there?

In a flash, the dog knew what to do. He bit the bucket off the well's rope, then had the eldest son tie the rope to his harness. He wrote 'lower me' in the dirt, then hopped up onto the rim of the well. Finally, he threw himself into the well as the farmer grabbed the crank.

Lowered down on this rope, the dog 'flew' into the darkness. He found the baby all the way underwater, but shoved his snout in and took hold of the baby's clothing with

his teeth. A short time later, when the family pulled him back up, the dog appeared holding the littlest child: wet, crying, but very much alive.

That night, it rained on the other dogs, who slept outside in the cold barn, which leaked. But the little dog snuggled into a warm bed beside the fire, hugged by the farmer's children, his belly full. And as he did, the dog sadly thought to himself, 'I could not become a dragon. I am an utter and complete failure.'

The end.

Real ending:

That night, the little dog snuggled into a warm bed beside the fire, hugged by the farmer's children, his belly full. And as he did, the dog thought to himself, 'I doubt any dragon ever had it so good anyway.'