

One.

White and gold, his attire glowed warm in the light of the torches in the night, at the temple. He knelt in supplication, ready to give his life, atop the truncated pyramid.

The Deliverer stood before him, alone on the open platform. People of high rank stood around the periphery, waiting for the appointed time.

"To our god, we give our best." The mass of people were below the temple, silent. "The evening star will catch the Rabbit King. Hainyat will carry the message."

Three days before. The child king picked up the obsidian knife, out of idle exploration, as a toddler would. His grandfather was pleased at this. "He knows something of the world."

Two.

The Timekeeper rushed into the King's chamber.

"There is an omen!" A hush fell.

"Surely, it can be appeased." the King was confident. "We know we have fourteen days until the meeting in the sky. The clouds will stay away."

"If the mountain brings us rain, it is only what we asked for" said the Deliverer. "Perhaps the evening star will not catch the crescent moon. Can we afford the sacrifice?"

"If Hainyat can remain true." the king said. "Then his offer may reach the sky."

"Yet, the omen!" the Timekeeper said. "A black butterfly alighted upon the temple of May."

"A trifle, is it not, Deliverer?" said the king.

"The Oracle promised a significant change. It was seen that the presentations we make cannot alter the metamorphosis. The black butterfly made us sure of it." said the deliverer.

"The pure child is not ready, yet." said the King. "If Hainyat fails to convey our message to the evening star, we will need the princess, as well." He lamented: "My family is lost."

Three.

Hainyat knelt before the large bowl of water. Leaning forward, he splashed his face. The boy handed the cloth.

"I will thank you when you join me in the sky!"

The boy laughed mechanically. Hainyat howled with delight. "You will join me there!"

Sandu spoke: "Do you not fear the omen?"

"I trust my heart."

" but can we change?" she said.

"I can appease the crow, we will go to the sky. I will show you."

" Remember the words you must speak to the evening star. Your plea must be correct. Sincere." pause. "She will measure you."

" I know. I know."

Four.

A dead crow was found upon the temple of May.

" We must make the offering at that moment, there on the platform, on the stone" said the Oracle.

" But the running star is leading us away, " said the boy.

" The crow is more important," said Hainyat.

" Can your son return yet a hundred times?" Som asked.

" He will be ready, in his turn. Now, it is my calling to carry our message, to offer my heart."

" But, what about the omen?" said plaintively.

" Dead crow brought his message," Hainyat said. "The end of the age will not be easy. We have done everything we can according with the Oracle and the Timekeeper. My offer can carry us over. I will tell them. They must believe, or we will lament. I will give the twelve incantations by the morning. The Timekeeper has prepared me. I will be still for a day."

" Can you?"

" Yes. Crow shows me how."

" Will we live four hundred years.? "

"Yes. My son and a thousand years! "

Five.

Breathing slows, deep in meditation, of a single mind. Concentrate. Focus. Become vigilant, until the sound in the darkness holds nothing. Become still.

Tomorrow, I will leave them, when the evening star catches the crescent moon. Today, the sun shone strongly. I imagine the black butterfly with me here tonight. She is silent, flexing her wing, softly, a leaf in a gentle breeze, to and fro.

I sleep.

I dream of a fiery orb descending to the temple of the serpent. The lines were shown by the setting sun. I feel warm, like in a hot spring, in the darkness, I see a cat. I do not fear it.

Yesterday, the moon was in a void. Tomorrow, it will return anew. The evening star is waiting. If we remain correct, we will prevail. The rituals are decided. The Deliverer is ready. The King is wise, his counsel true. The Timekeeper knows the calendar. Now is the time. The sky is clear. Change will come.

Six.

The Deliverer spoke to Elonda.

"I can't do that now." There was silence for a few minutes, deeply contemplative, as the Deliverer stood.

"What have we done? Have our rituals become so brittle and empty? We have so much fear. We want a change, but... the running star moves so contrary. What can I do if the black butterfly chose this? We must follow!"

Elonda gazed upward from kneeling; while he wrung his hands, he began pacing in fits and starts within the room of their own. He paused, still for a few moments. Her gaze turned away, to the floor, her hands in her lap.

"Can you answer me?" he asked.

"No."

"Is formality all we have? Must we behave so? With so much blood?" He was anguished. She couldn't help and turned her face away again.

"the ritual..." she began.

"Father!" the boy ran into the room. "Mog said the world will end! He's wrong!"

"Son," the Deliverer spoke more softly. "I can promise nothing."

"Why?"

"When the caterpillar becomes hard like the branch, it can rest. Then, in springtime, it will be born again as a butterfly, and it will fly away."

"The black butterfly can come back?" said the boy.

"Yes. And then it will land on another stone."

"How does it know?"

"It will make a choice." the Deliverer paused. "We will obey."

Seven.

Hainyat was still kneeling. It was the appointed time. The gathering of the night was full. The air lit by torches was still, and chill. The sun had set. The crescent moon hung low in the clear, darkening sky. The evening star held a few degrees away.

Hainyat must remain silent and pure of heart. The Deliverer held the obsidian knife. One other was dressed as a crow, dancing, then stood silent with a somnolent posture.

"Evening star" said the Deliverer, "Now we come."

Hainyat heard a still small voice... .

"No." Hainyat raised his head to look in the eye of the deliverer. "I say 'NO!'"

A single scream from a woman among those at the edge of the platform, then a gasp of fear swept through... .

A terrific crime had occurred. No one had ever said "no."

Eight.

Slave Jim was talking to the captain's wench.

"Samuel, Mog and the doge all said this would happen. Everyone is praying, but the omens..."

"The calendar was wrong! We know that..."

"Only a fool could say that! Hainyat may yet be pure, but the incantation must be precise" said Jim.

"It doesn't matter. He will not fail. A buffoon could make the claims," she said.

"But the omen..."

"If you would pay me, I could tell you what you want."

"If the captain knew..."

"The captain already pays me."

"I know thirty men who..."

"You know? You are a scofflaw. No one can hear you."

"I know the calendar, and there is still measure in its' worth," said slave Jim.

"So you say, but everyone knows a change will come, if the star does not catch the Rabbit Moon," she paused. "When the moment arrives, there will be only one outcome. Everyone knows."

"Lies!" said Jim. "We will move forward. It doesn't matter what what those people think or say. The Timekeeper said..."

"The timekeeper said... ."

Nine

Hainyat said "No."

He didn't know why. It was not planned. A small voice compelled him. It was the boy, present and interested from a distant place and time. The boy told him "no." And society, in that moment collapsed.

A single violence, and then another, how do we amend the crime? Who can say "no"? More will die.

For three days, the city burned. The population, in ruin, only remnants fled. Out of a culture of ritual and superstition, when mere form supplants reason; when the way of a society becomes drawn from the whim of the vizier, and the arbitrary becomes the governor, and authority is lost.

One word was spoken: "No!" Is that enough?

The end.