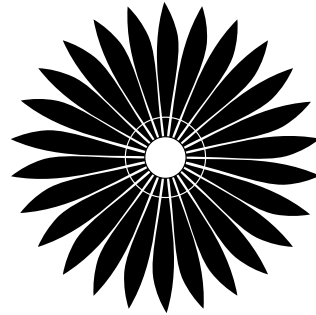


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about 7,000 words



## THE TALE OF DESMOND AND MELBA

by Joe Maginnis

It was one thousand years after Kaino crossed the Great Green Sea and now the city of Dume was at war with itself. The Drake family, who were loyal to the Empire of Duma, had ruled over the city for centuries – beginning with the Drake Invasion of 759 and continuing on through a long lineage of Drake sons and daughters thereafter. It is said that between these years, the Drake family was the most powerful in Duma. Even more powerful than the emperor himself. For Dume was among the largest cities in Duma and home of its greatest military stronghold. Deep in the mouth of a ravine at the base of Mount Zari, the black towers of Fort Dume were a sign of the empire's devastating strength.

But now rebellion loomed like a storm cloud on a summer day, threatening the dynasty the Drakes had built. Tension was rising between the dumai (sons and daughters of Duma) and the helishi tribespeople, who were native to this area and had been living in the eastern mountains for as long as anyone could remember. Displeased

with the empire's treatment toward the native people, some of the dumai came together in secret to form a militant faction that stood in opposition of the empire's regime. They were called the Fangs, and they were gaining support among the populous in Dume – especially in the poor outer boroughs that had been so neglected and exploited. Together, the Fangs and their helishi allies waged secret wars against the Drakes for years and years.

Nelson Drake was in power now, and he ruled with the same terrible cleverness and cruelty that all Drakes had before him – only he was said to be worst of them all. He grew up as a military man – serving in the emperor's army in the northern wars until his father died and he was called back to Dume. When he returned, the city was at the start of its political unrest, and he dealt with it ruthlessly. By now, he had already crushed three rebellions led by the Fangs and earned himself a reputation for depravity. Those who loved him would die for him, and those who opposed him would die to end his reign.

Desmond was the son of Nelson and the heir to the Drakes' claim to Dume. But Desmond was not like his father. Sure, he was just as large as any other Drake; just as smart and just as deadly with a longsword. But where his father was cruel, Desmond was kind. Where his father was merciless, Desmond was forgiving. Where his father was proud, Desmond was humble. And where his father was selfish, Desmond was compassionate. Still, Desmond loved his father and he was dedicated to his cause. He served as a young captain in the city guard under his father's command and he fought to subdue two of the three rebellions in years past. He was a Drake, and he was being groomed to be the next great ruler of Dume.

It was around this time that the Drake spies heard rumor that the Fangs were in possession of a *weapon* somewhere in the village of Rotan: an ancient helishi village at the top of Mount Zari. It was rumored to be a *weapon* of such great power that it would threaten the empire's control over Dume; however, no details about its mechanism were known. The news was unsettling to Nelson Drake, who was growing more and more cautious of the Fangs' power, so he recruited his son, Desmond, to go to Rotan to look for

the *weapon* and destroy it. Of course, Desmond willingly agreed. He knew better than to question his father's orders. He also secretly enjoyed this type of detective work and he had interest in this particular mystery.

He was quite clever about it too. He disguised himself as a northern tourist come south to see the Temple of Rotan, the oldest and most important of the helishi temples, and he began searching in secret for the *weapon* behind the backs of the devout helishi people who lived in the mountain town. He looked anywhere and everywhere that wouldn't make too much noise among the local folk. He looked over long stretches of barren mountainside, under huge sheets of stone, and inside small caves. He even looked inside the sacred temple. But after long weeks of searching the unforgiving mountain terrain, he had grown irritated and fatigued by the exercise, and he had found no trace of the *weapon* to show for it.

That's not to say his efforts were completely fruitless. His time in Rotan had introduced him to many agreeable helishi tribespeople, most important of whom was Melba – a young woman of twenty-seven who worked in the temple. Desmond became acquainted with her when he unwittingly interrupted her prayers by requesting a tour of the building on a day when few people were on its premises. Despite the abnormality of the request, Melba was gracious in agreeing.

She was a traditional helishi tribeswoman. She wore the conventional colors of dark blue and white, and her black hair was tied tightly into a long braid that fell to her waist. She had dark eyes and red lips, and she used both of them effectively every time she smiled. By all accounts she was a beautiful woman, and Desmond could not help but notice.

Keep in mind that Desmond was not looking for romance at this time. He was a handsome man, in the way a hammer is handsome – heavy, hard, and with great utility. He was as tall as Kaino, who crossed the Green Sea, and he had broad shoulders and strong arms. Curly dark hair covered his head and chest. Women were just as interested in his handsome body as they were in his kind heart. As heir to the city of Dume, he

would be encouraged to wed one of the daughters of a land-owning baron from one of the southern regions of Duma – at least, that’s what his father would want him to do. One such girl, Ariane Redlove, had even caught his attention as particularly charming, and he knew it was only a matter of time before tradition told him to marry her. But despite what his father and the rest of the nobility of Dume would think about it, Desmond found himself courting Melba.

He visited her every Wednesday morning during her shift at the temple, where he would ask her questions about the history of Helosh and the most ancient helishi tribes. Then, once she grew more comfortable with him, their conversations grew more personal in nature. On his sixth Wednesday in Rotan, much to his delight, Melba invited him to her home in Rotan for tea. Not long thereafter, he became, perhaps, the first Drake ever to enter into a romantic affair with a helishi tribeswoman.

Their romance had started slow, but it quickly caught a blaze like a spark on dry grass. Soon, Desmond was spending half his evenings with her in the village of Rotan. Even after his search for the *weapon* had seemingly come to a disappointing end, and he had no more reason to spend time in Rotan, he would still climb the mountain pass late at night to see her. Then, he would rise from sleep at an hour so early it was almost late to take the pass back to Fort Dume for his morning rituals with the city guard. This he did without a second’s hesitation. He would have climbed twice as far, and farther still, if it meant seeing her for even a moment.

“Did they love each other?” You may ask. Well, that may just be the whole point of this story. However, regardless of the answer, they did keep secrets from each other. Desmond had, by this time, revealed his true identity as the son of Nelson Drake, but he had not spoken of the rumored *weapon* or of his original purpose for coming to Rotan. Melba had secrets of her own to add too, and her secrets would have terrible consequences. She was an Okani – and a powerful one at that.

Desmond was not entirely familiar with Okan, or the Okani (practitioners of Okan). He had, of course, heard the tavern stories about how Idared, the greatest of all

Okani, defeated the Balmorians using *mind magic* long before the Empire of Duma was created, or how Kaino tricked the All-Seeing Mind into making a powerful relic that was infused with the powers of Okan. He had heard these and many more stories, but he hardly believed in people who could understand, let alone control the minds of others. And he had certainly not considered that his helishi lady love, Melba, might be one of those people. But it was true.

Its truth would not be known to him until weeks later when Desmond was walking about in the royal gardens outside of Fort Dume. That morning, by some matter of chance, when he was preparing to tell poor Ariane Redlove that he would no longer be able to marry her, he was approached by Elstar – a middle-aged dumai with messy silver hair on his head and face. Elstar had once been a high-ranking member of the Fangs and he knew many of their most well-kept secrets. However, during his service, he developed an affection for Melba which she did not return. When she denied his advancements, his love for her turned bitter and he became violent toward her. Then, she and the rest of the Fangs cast him out, and he became angry and sought revenge.

“I hear you are looking for a *weapon*,” he said. He had a sharp nose and piercing brown eyes and was wearing a grey cloak with red sleeves. “Though I know not where to find such a thing, I can guide you to something far more valuable. I can tell you where to find the person who will wield it.”

“I care little about some Fang soldier,” said Desmond in response. “My purpose is to find the *weapon* and destroy it.”

But Elstar would not be denied. “Could a spear kill a bull without a spearman to throw it? Would a sword be so deadly on the battlefield without a swordsman to hold it? No, young Drake. It’s the swordsman you ought to be looking for.”

“Anyone can swing a sword,” said Desmond. “Kill one swordsman, but leave the sword, and another will soon take his place. Better to find the *weapon* and destroy it so that none can take up arms.”

“Not this kind of sword,” said Elstar with a smile. “There are only a handful of people in Duma at best who know about it – let alone know how to wield it. And even among those who could wield it, none could do so with nearly as much effectiveness as this particular swordsman.”

Desmond took a moment to ponder this. “Tell me where to find him,” he said finally.

Then, Elstar let out a laugh that came from his whole belly. “That’s the best part,” he said, still laughing. “You sleep merely inches away from her.”

“How could this be?” Desmond thought to himself as he wandered the streets of Dume later that evening. He had just been preparing to abandon his family for this woman. But now, for the first time, he began to question that which they shared. For the first time, he saw their relationship through the eyes of another. She was a helishi tribeswoman, devout to ancient tradition and loosely tied to the Fangs. He was a dumai – son of one of the most powerful people in Duma and certainly the most hated in Rotan. He suddenly felt the risk of it – the recklessness of it. “How dangerous was she?” He thought. “What if this had all been a part of her plan? What if she had only been pretending to love me to use me for information? What if my foolishness would cost dumai lives?” These thoughts he carried with him all the way up the mountain pass to Rotan.

The night was dark and moonless, and Melba was comfortable in her small home in Rotan, illuminated by a fire that was burning off in the corner, when she heard a knock on the door. She still wore the same white dress and dark blue sweater that she wore in the temple, but now her braid was untied, and she let her curled black hair flow freely behind her. When she opened the door, she was surprised to find Desmond waiting under the stars.

He stood more than a foot taller than her, but she still managed to throw her arms over his shoulders in a warm embrace, pressing her head snugly against his chest. Her

hair smelled faintly of flowers. She pulled him by his hand out of the cold mountain air and into her home. There were no rooms in the dwelling. Rather, it was all one big room, making the space look far bigger than it actually was. The walls inside were the same off-white color as outside. The only structure to the room was a narrow staircase that was carved into the leftward wall leading up to a small platform with a bed barely big enough to fit two bodies.

Melba's dark eyes were shining with excitement. "I wasn't expecting you tonight," she said with a bright smile that came from her whole face. Desmond tried to return a smile, but it faded into a look of doubt. Melba noticed this and reached out to touch his cheek. "What troubles you, my love?" she asked in the tenderest voice.

Desmond didn't respond. He stood there, frozen, looking into her dark eyes. He could feel her looking at him; looking into him; invading his thoughts. He felt naked. "Do you keep secrets from me? Are you one of the Fangs? Do you really love me?" His mind asked silently. Melba was aware of his questions as if they were her own, and her expression gave her away. "So, it's true, then," Desmond said, finally. He spoke these words out loud. Melba dropped her hand to her side and turned away from him. "Well?" He asked expectantly. He was thinking of the last question that came to his mind. "Do you really love me?"

"Yes!" Melba cried out, still turning away from him. Her voice was shaky, and Desmond could see tears rolling down her cheeks.

The sight of the small helishi woman crying broke Desmond's heart. But despite the voice inside him that told him to forget all this madness, he pressed on. "I have to be sure," he said in a low voice. "You must understand that."

"How then?" She asked. "What would you have me do to prove my love?"

This was the question Desmond was waiting for. He had been thinking of such a thing on his long journey up the mountain pass. He was ready for it. "There is a weapon being hidden here in Rotan. It is said to be a weapon of tremendous power, and one that

only you are capable of controlling.” He took a hold of her hand and looked deeply into her eyes, which were still wet with tears. “If you loved me, you would lead me to it and together we could destroy it so that it can never be used against my people.”

Melba wiped the tears from her eyes. “I will not deny that I know of what you speak, but it’s not a *weapon*,” she said. “And you can’t destroy it. Even if it were possible, I wouldn’t let you. It’s one of the greatest gifts that’s ever been given to this world.”

“Very well,” said Desmond curtly. “A gift it is. But I still wish to see it, and you must swear to never use it against my family.”

In that moment, a thought came to Melba, and from it an idea was born. It was an idea that would shape the city of Dume and all of Duma for many years to come. “I will show it to you,” she said. “But it’s not fair that I should be the only one to go through trials to prove my love. If I am to do this, you too must prove your love for me by passing a test of my choosing.”

“Just minutes ago, you read my mind as if it were a children’s story,” said Desmond. “If my love were false, you would surely know by now.”

“No, no,” she shook her head. “The heart is completely separate from the mind. I have no power that will let me hear what your heart is saying, nor can I command your heart to do what I wish. Besides, how am I to know you’re not some masterful sorcerer who is misleading me with your own great power?” She said the last with a mischievous smile, which Desmond returned.

“Very well,” said Desmond. “I agree to your terms, but you must show me the *weapon* first.”

“Stop calling it that,” Melba said as she picked up a light pink blanket that was laying on the stone floor and wrapped herself tightly in it. “You might want to bring a blanket with you. It’s going to be windy tonight.” Then, she led him outside into the cool evening air, and they went on their way. They did not walk arm in arm as they always had when they were together. This time, Melba blazed the path forward, while Desmond



trailed by three paces – her black hair and his white coat were blowing about in the wind behind them.

They eventually came to a wide field on the top of Mount Zari. The grass of the field was short and well-kept, and there was a large rectangular building made of white stone at its far end. Desmond recognized the building as the Temple of Rotan, but he had never approached it from this side before. Melba pulled Desmond away from the field and into the thick mountain brush behind a tree. “Wait here,” she said. “I’ll call you when I’m ready.” He would have insisted on joining her, but before he could say a word of protest, she was off hurrying across the field toward the temple with the pink blanket still pulled tightly around her shoulders. Desmond watched her until she disappeared inside.

Many minutes had gone by without a sign of her, and now Desmond was beginning to feel restless. He feared for a moment that she had not brought him there with intent to show him the *weapon* he sought, but instead would turn him in to the helishi officials for asking too many questions about their great secrets. He knew the thought was folly, but the longer he waited for her, the more certain he was of its truth. Then, just as he thought about fleeing, all the world around him went dark and was left stumbling blind in the brush. He panicked, but it was not long before he heard Melba’s voice nearby – although he couldn’t tell from which direction it came. “Desmond?” It called. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” said Desmond, still in a panic. “But I have lost the use of my eyes!”

“This way,” he heard the voice say. It seemed to come from behind him this time. When he turned his head to inspect, he was surprised to see Melba standing there against a canvas of pitch black. He strained to catch a glimpse of their surroundings, but all was covered in darkness except for her. She looked very much the same way she had before – she still wore a white dress and a blue sweater, and her hair was still flowing in curls behind her – but now she wore a crown made of a dull black material. She watched Desmond’s eyes fall upon it.

“I bring you your *weapon*,” she said, gesturing to the black crown on her head. “This is the Jewel of Vindum – made by Gimse for Kaino after he crossed the Green Sea and swore to unite the four regions of Duma. He made the crown from his own flesh and so part of his power flows through it always. It is this power that allows me to speak with you as I do now, from where it rests underneath the temple.” Hearing these words from Melba, Desmond looked around again in wonder. He was still surrounded by the same pitch darkness. She had come to him in a vision.

“Many years after the fall of Kaino,” she continued, “the four regions were shattered by war, and the jewel came into the possession of Idared – the greatest of all Okani. He used it to defeat the Balmorians and bring peace to Helosh, and in that peace we have dwelt for hundreds of years.” Melba’s face went grim. “But that peace has been threatened by an empire that has risen from the ashes of war.” Suddenly, out of the pitch black around him, Desmond saw a vision of Mount Zari rise up into the sky, and beneath it rested all the city of Dume. The sharp black towers of Fort Dume dramatically sprung up inside the mountain, casting a long shadow on the city below it.

When the vision of the city subsided, the darkness melted away and it appeared as though they were back outside the Temple of Rotan where Desmond was hiding. “My duty as the guardian of this treasure is to protect it and to use it, if I must, to preserve peace in Helosh. It is for this reason that I cannot give it to you so that you might destroy it, if there were such a way. However, as evidence of my love for you, I have let you see it, and hear its story. And I offer you a promise that its power will never be used against your family. Do you accept this as evidence of my love?”

Desmond hesitated, still awestruck by the magic of what had just happened. “I trust you, my lady. But how can I be sure that another such as yourself, not knowing about the promise you just made, won’t take it up as arms against us?”

“There are no Okani in Helosh that you need fear except for me. I am one of only three who know where the jewel is hidden, and I am the only one who would be able to use it as a *weapon* of war, though I cringe at the thought of it.”

“Then I do take this as evidence of your love,” said Desmond. “I am relieved to know the truth about the rumored *weapon* of Rotan. I will report to my father at once and tell him the threat is nonsense and that he need not worry.”

Melba smiled brightly. “I rejoice to hear it,” she said. “But before we can celebrate our love together, I must offer you a challenge of my own.”

Desmond’s face grew a serious expression. “Name it and it will be done,” he said.

Melba walked to a nearby tree that looked to be half-decayed. But despite its rough appearance, there were pretty purple flowers that occasionally grew from its branches. She plucked one of these and handed it to Desmond. “The next time you come to me, you must give me this flower,” she said.

Desmond waited for Melba to continue, but when she did not, he showed a look of puzzlement. “And then what must I do?” He asked.

“That is all. If you bring this flower to me the next time you come up the mountain pass, I will have my proof that your love is real.”

Desmond looked surprised – almost offended. “I would climb every mountain in Duma for you. I would swim to the Cardol Islands and back. I would even cross the Great Green Sea if it meant winning betrothal to you. This simple challenge stands no match. I will strike down any who tries to take it from me. I will go willingly into a fire to save it from being burned. I will protect this flower with my life and return it to you safely.”

Melba was satisfied with his response, and she bid him farewell. But before he went, she kissed his lips. In that moment, all went dark again for Desmond. When the light finally returned to his eyes, he was standing alone in Rotan at the start of the mountain pass that would lead him down to Fort Dume. He was not sure of how he had gotten there. A purple flower was in his right hand and he looked at it strangely. He had never seen it before, but it reminded him of something. Perhaps it was something from his childhood – so far away that the actual memory of it was lost. But the emotion that the flower contained was so fresh to him. He stood there for a moment staring at it, but

its secrets were hidden from him, and in time he grew frustrated by it. Then, after enough time had passed, he made his slow way back down the mountain pass to his chambers in Fort Dume.

Farther up the mountain, Melba was pacing uncomfortably in her small home, thinking of something she told Desmond earlier that night. “The heart is completely separate from the mind.” It was something she learned from her Okani teachers many years before. She was counting on it to be true now. For she had just erased Desmond’s memory of her using the power within the Jewel of Vindum. This was her challenge. He would forget every evening he came to her and every morning he went, and then she would wait. And if when he forgot her his heart ached without reason; if he found himself restless in the night, dreaming of a ghost; if he found his way unknowing back to her, then it must be that he truly loves her. “The heart is separate from the mind, you see,” her teachers would say. “It’s only when the mind is removed that the heart shines through and reveals its truth.”

Melba did not sleep that night. She remained awake for many hours wondering if she had made a mistake. The following day, she spent most of her time staring out her window to where the mountain pass began – hoping to see Desmond’s white coat emerge from below.

But Desmond did not go back to Rotan the next day. Nor did he go back the day after. Days and weeks passed, and his life eventually went back, for the most part, to the way it was before he was sent to Rotan by his father. He trained with the city guard at Fort Dume, he frequented his favorite taverns with his favorite friends, and he even picked up a new romance with Ariane Redlove, who was still very fond of him. The only thing that had changed was the addition of a purple flower. He looked at it often – its emotion unchanged from the first time he laid his eyes on it. But now it was beginning to brown on its edges. Wanting to preserve it so that he might eventually uncover its truth, he shut it tightly between the pages of a large notebook with some blank pages in the back. Every now and again, he would open to the page where the dried remains of the

flower rested, and he would consider its secret with both wonder and frustration. But inside the book and out of his plain view, even the flower would eventually slip his mind and be forgotten.

It wouldn't be until many years later that Desmond would remember it again, and much had changed by that time. His father had tragically (or not so tragically, depending on your thoughts of Nelson Drake) died of illness, and Desmond now ruled as Duke of Dume with Ariane Redlove as his wife. Together, they had a nine-year-old son, who they named Desmond Jr., and they lived happily for many years.

Melba almost died of grief when she heard the news of the royal marriage. She still thought of him often, and she waited for a day that he might remember her again. She believed with her whole heart that he loved her, and she was right. Her evidence would come shortly after rumors of a *weapon* in Rotan slowly stirred among Desmond's inner circles again.

The mentioning of a *weapon* in Rotan was all it took to remind him of the flower he had tucked away in his notebook. Inspired again to understand what it was, where it came from, or why it made him feel such heartache, Desmond went back to his old bookshelf where he had left it so long ago. He picked up his old notebook and turned easily to one of the blank pages in the back, and there was the flower still preserved after all these long years. Its petals still maintained their beautiful pale purple color.

The sight of it struck him hard, and he felt intensely of love and longing and sadness all at the same time. Its emotion had become much stronger over the years, like an alcohol distilling in the depths of his heart. It scarred him, filling him with an intense depression that he couldn't shake for many months. He missed important meetings, attended very few meals, and began to neglect his dearest family. Those closest to him thought him sick and worried about his health. All except for Ariane, who knew that whatever afflicted him was a matter of his heart. She knew he had stopped loving her, and she wrongly blamed herself for it. "Do you love me?" She would ask her husband some nights when they were alone in their bedroom. Desmond seldom responded. She

would watch him as he sat and stared silently at nothing and then she would cry herself to sleep. In time, she too became afflicted with a deep depression.

All this time Desmond was thinking of the purple flower, but he still could not recall its origin. Eventually, the longing it filled him with was replaced by anger and frustration from its mystery. His temper grew shorter and his fury grew hotter. His kindness ran out and he became cruel. His humility festered into pride, and his compassion wore away until only selfishness remained. He became very much like his father was in his days as ruler of Dume. So, it was no surprise that Desmond reacted the way he did when knowledge of the *weapon's* whereabouts finally came to him.

“They keep it in the temple somewhere, though I don’t know its resting place,” one of his spies said nervously. “I’m afraid it’s hidden.”

“I’ve lost my patience for hidden things!” Desmond raged. He was thinking of the flower and the secrets it kept from him. “At any moment the Fangs could be at our gates. Their numbers grow; their violence escalates; and now I’m told they have a *weapon* that can bring half the city to its knees. No,” he said. “I will not waste precious time and risk dumai lives trying to find something that hides from me. We will go at once to the temple and burn it to the ground, and with it will burn whatever malicious artifacts are concealed there.” A chill fell upon the room at the mentioning of fire.

That evening, Desmond and his captains spent several hours planning their attack on the helishi temple. The room was filled with a disquiet, for all knew the implications of what they were intending to do. The temple had been standing for longer than anyone could remember. It was a sacred place, and they meant to destroy it. But none would dare to question Desmond now, so they went on planning.

The next morning, just before the sun began to rise over the peak of Mount Zari, Desmond marched up the mountain pass with two hundred city guard at his back. Most of them carried blades and several carried lit torches, but all carried with them an evil intention that could be felt in the surrounding air. The sight of the soldiers all dressed in

black plate armor created quite the fright for the few helishi who were up early enough to see. From them began a bustling, which grew into a commotion. Before Desmond and his men could summit the mountain pass, nearly the entire village of Rotan was in a panic. Even Melba was awoken from her sleep by it. She hurried to get dressed and joined the other helishi villagers on their way to see what was happening.

Far off from where she lived, Melba saw the swarm of soldiers marching toward the temple with torches raised in the air. Her stomach turned upside-down at the sight of it. Filled with fear and a duty to protect the sacred jewel, she found herself running after the militia – her mind racing as she went. Many of her neighbors rushed along with her, and soon the path to the temple became crowded with thousands of helishi villagers. Fortunately, she knew another passage to the temple that would take her around the heavy traffic. It brought her higher into the cliffs of Mount Zari, where she had a good vantage point of the chaos below. She watched the scene unfold as she made her hurried way toward the temple.

Desmond was one of the last of the dumai to make it to the top of the mountain pass, and by that time the villagers had arrived in great numbers – some of them armed with whatever tools they could find. But instead of turning north toward the temple like the other dumai had done, Desmond’s eyes went instinctually to the south toward the village; to the main cluster of white stone houses built into the cliffs; and to the one house that was slightly shorter and yellower than its neighbors. This was her home. The sight of it felt familiar to him. More than that, it filled him with an energy he hadn’t felt in years. Suddenly, he forgot why he’d come to Rotan in the first place. He was reminded of the purple flower and of the secret it held from him. Somehow, he knew this place was connected to it, and he thought, just maybe, the answers to his years-long questions would be found inside.

“I have something I need to look into southward, but you must not follow me,” he said to the nearest lieutenant. “Go on and light fire to the temple. If any of the villagers resist you, have them arrested. If any take up arms against you, kill them.” And at that,

he started off, alone, toward the small house in the distance. Had he been just ten minutes earlier, he would have found Melba sleeping peacefully in her bed, and who knows how this story might have been different then. Maybe he would have remembered her. Maybe he would have called off the attack and saved the temple from destruction. Maybe his wickedness would have faded away and he would have become kind again and lived happily for the rest of his days. But Melba was already high up on the cliffs of Mount Zari by that time – making her quick yet cautious way toward the temple.

Then, just as she was about to round a corner in the path, she caught a glimpse of Desmond's white coat out of the corner of her eye. For a moment she didn't believe the sight. But it was him, and he was moving south toward the village.

"Desmond!" she called from high up where she stood. But he must have been too far away to hear her. For he continued moving toward the building where she lived. "Desmond!" She cried again; this time louder than before. Her voice was shrill and panicked and it cut through the air, making the birds stir from where they rested. Desmond stopped walking and looked from side to side curiously, but he did not turn to look in her direction. She would have called him a third time, but just then she noticed that a great fire had begun to burn inside the temple, and a conflict broke out on the grass field in front of it. Horrified, she turned northward and made haste. When Desmond finally turned to look in her direction, she was already gone around the corner.

Heart pounding, Desmond approached the old wooden door to the stone building and slowly pushed it. He felt the rough wood underneath his hands and heard the slow croak it made as it opened. Inside the building, very little had changed since the last time Desmond was there over a decade before. Sunlight poured in through two long rectangular windows just above the doorway and reflected brightly off of the rear wall. There was a fireplace in the back-right corner and a kitchen furnished with some cabinets and a table in the back-left corner. A staircase was carved into the wall on his left – leading up to a small loft above the kitchen. It all felt so familiar to him.



As he slowly made his way around the interior of the building, taking in all the many details that stood out to him, he was reminded of the sensation within the purple flower. His senses and emotions felt tangled up like a spider's web – made up of individual strands, but all moving together with the slightest touch of a finger. He was reminded of the smell of hot tea and the feeling of laughter, of the colors of dark blue and white and black, and of the soft touch of lips. He had the unshakeable feeling that he had been there before, yet he was certain that he hadn't. His head was spinning, his hands were trembling, and his stomach was twisting. He wanted this feeling to go away and be gone forever, but the longer he waited in this mysterious place, the stronger it grew. Needing to escape it, he burst through the old wooden door and out into the morning air.

But the strange sensation didn't leave him. Its fire burned on now deeper in his chest until it touched his heart. Tears streamed down his face as he stumbled forward toward the mountain pass. Nearing its entrance with his head still spinning, he barely noticed the madness that was about him. Violence had escalated between the dumai soldiers and the mob of helishi villagers. Many from both sides laid scattered on the short grass. Off in the direction of the temple, a huge plume of smoke and fire was ascending into the sky. There was screaming of every kind – anger, pain, terror, mourning. But Desmond did not stop to acknowledge any of it. He simply continued down the mountain pass, crying and clutching at his chest.

He didn't stop until he reached his bedroom inside the gates of Fort Dume. He burst through the doors, limped to his bookshelf, found his old notebook, and brought it to his desk. Then, he fell into his desk chair, opened to the page where the old flower still remained, picked up his pen, and began to write. He wrote furiously for several minutes – like someone who had just seconds left to live, trying to squeeze out every corner of his heart. The occasional tear would drop from his face and smear the ink, but he didn't seem to notice. Then, when he was finished writing, he found himself some rope, tied it

around his neck, and hung himself from a wooden beam over his desk. His lifeless feet swayed slowly – just above the place where the letter and its contents rested.

Sadly, it was his mentally disturbed wife, Ariane, who was the first to find his corpse, and she did not respond well to the tragic scene. She had become increasingly troubled recently by her husband's apparent apathy toward her. It weighed heavily on her mind and made her melancholy. When she found the letter at his feet, she opened it and began to read. Its details confirmed what she feared and what part of her already knew. *"I do not love my wife, yet I have not the heart to tell her,"* he had written. Sick with depression and unable to bear the grief of the situation, Ariane took her own life too.

Up in the mountain, the violence continued on the grass where the Temple of Rotan once stood. By this time, the great building had been reduced mostly to ash, and Melba watched in horror from the brush behind it as the last of its structure crumbled away. A dull black crown was clutched tightly in her hands. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she trembled with rage and sorrow. She let out a horrible groaning sound, as if all the life she had was leaving through her mouth. Then, with eyes as black as coal and a face as grim as death, she placed the crown atop her head. Suddenly, all of their minds were before her, and they were hers to command. All went quiet. Even the raging of the fire seemed to subside.

And then began the reign of Malus...

THE END