

EXILES OF KHO

A Tale of Lost Khokarsa

by Christopher Paul Carey

Prologue

10,812 B.C. (788 A.T.)

And if thee fail, death! Horrible death! The end of Time Itself!

The ghost voice—thundering, terrible, ancient—reverberated at the core of Lupoeth's being as she made her way up the craggy slope. Fumes drifting out of a nearby crack in the volcano's side stung her eyes, the thermals rising from the hellish hole drying the warm tears as they streamed down her high cheeks. The whole world smelled of ash.

She stumbled and slid several feet back down the gravelly incline before coming to a stop. Groaning softly, she felt her throbbing knee. Blood came away on her hand, but she quickly pushed herself to her feet and resumed the precipitous climb.

Though she tried, she could not silence the memory of the eerie, disembodied voice she had heard three nights prior during the sacred orgiastic rites on the Isle of Abhobeth. The voice had come only moments before she had received the news from the capital of Queen Nadythkha's unexpected death.

"When the great star falls to the huntsman's terrible cry! On the shores of the southern sea! There, and there alone, shall thee build Mine fane."

Lupoeth shivered despite the heat. Whom could the voice have belonged to but Kho, the Great Goddess Herself?

High on the mountainside above, Lupoeth saw the oracle standing before the dark yawning mouth of her cave, her white robe reflecting the rich reddish-orange hue of the sungod's twilight gaze. The wizened old woman's arm was outstretched, as if imploring her supplicant to climb faster.

At last, her knees, shins, and palms bloodied and hurting from the difficult climb up the steep and uneven gradient of volcanic rock, Lupoeth crawled onto the ledge before the cave. A faint yellowish flickering came from inside the opening, and the oracle silently pointed a crooked arm that bade her guest to enter. Lupoeth made the sign of Kho and preceded the old crone into the side of the mountain.

She walked until she came to the back of the cave. Here a low corridor of rough lava walls jogged off to the left. The oracle motioned her guest onward. Lupoeth passed down the short passageway and found herself in a small, roughly rectangular room with a low three-legged stool in the center. Out of respect to the oracle, she removed the belt of water buffalo hide that held her scabbarded sword and set it around the corner of the entryway. Then she stepped back into the room and knelt on the cold hard stone floor, her head bowed, as the crone crawled onto the stool.

"Raise your eyes, O Daughter of Kho." The oracle's voice quavered with great age, and, looking up, Lupoeth saw the woman's many-veined eyes glinting redly the light of the guttered torches. "We are alone, child, and if you have obeyed my instructions, no one knows you are here."

"I have obeyed, O Oracle." Lupoeth fought back a tremor of fear. The oracle's secret summons had been unprecedented, even for a guest as important as the chief acolyte of the Wootla, the Voices of the Moon. So was the opportunity to speak to the oracle directly, without the oracle's head attendant serving as liaison and interpreter. Lupoeth felt overawed.

"I am not here to prophesy, child," the old woman croaked. "The Goddess has already done that for you."

“But I’ve told no one of my—” Then Lupoeth bit back her words, mortified at her unseemly outburst.

The oracle merely smiled back at her with blackened teeth.

“I am the Voice of the Voice of Kho. Do not you think I hear when the Great Goddess speaks to one of her children?”

Lupoeth shuddered. She had been initiated into a great many secrets as a member of the Wootla, to a degree that the mundane explanations for many so-called wonders sometimes caused her to question her faith, but the oracle’s powers were otherworldly and she could not doubt them.

“I also know what lies heavy in your heart, O Daughter.” The oracle laughed harshly, then quickly sobered as if she sensed the welling fear in her supplicant might cause her to flee. “I know you are afraid, my child, and well you should be. Queen Nadythkha—your mentor and protector—is dead. By her own hand, they say, after hearing of King Semsateth’s assassination in Mukha. You wonder to yourself, and only yourself, for you can trust no one: ‘What has truly happened to my queen? And what of her broadly known plans for succession? Should not I be on the throne instead of Dephekla?’”

Now Lupoeth indeed felt like fleeing, but not merely because of the oracle’s uncanny insight into her private thoughts. Lupoeth’s life would be forfeit, no matter her high standing among the Wootla, were anyone to hear her question Dephekla’s right to ascend the throne.

Still, fury burned deep within her. Queen Nadythkha had made it no secret she was grooming Lupoeth to one day take the throne. The sudden and unexpected crowning of Lupoeth’s cousin Dephekla stank of corruption at high levels in the priestesshood. To voice such suspicions, however, would threaten to sunder the foundations of empire itself. If the public got wind that the College of Priestesses could not be trusted, the priests of Resu would immediately seize upon the perceived weakness to their own benefit. Ultimately, it could mean the beginning of Kho’s decline and the unthinkable rise of Resu.

“But deeper still digs Dephekla’s blade.”

Lupoeth could not help the little cry that escaped her. It represented deep emotional pain as much as shock at the oracle’s all-knowingness. Kho Herself must have informed the old crone about Qansweth’s betrayal, for had Lupoeth not just fled from him in tears before ascending the volcano? No one else could have conveyed to the oracle the news of his tragic decision, which he had not yet an hour ago made on the spot before a stunned and devastated Lupoeth.

The oracle smiled crookedly, as if she enjoyed Lupoeth’s misfortune, then motioned to the entryway.

“Show me your lover’s parting gift.”

Lupoeth rose and returned with the sword, holding forth the unusual blade to the oracle.

“Ah, yes,” the old woman said approvingly. “I have never seen another of its like. A pointed blade, and of such bright iron! Qansweth would not have parted with it had he not felt deeply for you. But of course, the desire to be king runs deeper in some. In any case, you will need a good sword where you are going.”



Illustration by Mike Hoffman

Lupoeth wanted to blurt out that it was Qansweth's misguided desire to please the priests who had taken him in and raised him from a young age rather than any play for power that had determined his decision. But she held her tongue; one did not argue with the oracle. Nor did she feel much like defending Qansweth at the moment.

"Let us not speak of Qansweth." The woman motioned dismissively. "That your lover has abandoned you for Dephekla's bed is of little concern to the deities. A priestess of the Goddess must be strong and know her vow to Kho precedes all."

The words stung at Lupoeth, even though she knew the truth they carried.

"Forgive me, O Oracle," she said, lowering the blade, "but even the deities fall before fair Adeneth's sword."

The oracle shook her head in affirmation and grinned knowingly.

"So it shall always be. But you, O Lupoeth, are not destined to be cut down by the goddess of passion and madness. Kho, the Mother of All, has other plans for you."

From beneath her robe the oracle withdrew a small bundle of black cloth, tied at one end by a leather cord. The oracle's eyes glimmered fiercely as she thrust forward her prize.

"This, O Lupoeth, is the most sacred of Kho's holy secrets! Take it!"

Lupoeth did as she was bid. The cloth bundle gave beneath her clutching fingers as if it were filled with sand.

"Reveal this gift or lose it, and Kho will strike you down!" Menace and authority filled oracle's voice. "It must be protected and nurtured as if it were the holiest of Kho's children. For that the *nethkarna* is—a pure seedling from the Tree of Kho itself! At the heart of every oracular temple it grows"—the oracle stabbed a wrinkled finger at the cracks in the floor beneath her stool from which thin tendrils of grayish vapor rose—"and from its burning roots comes the holy smoke of prophecy!"

Wide-eyed and gaping, Lupoeth looked down at the little bundle in her shaking hands. The Tree of Kho from which all life sprang!

"Go now!" The oracle waved a pockmarked claw. "Go where Kho has charged you and do not return until you have planted the seedling beneath Her holy fane!"

As the oracle spoke, Lupoeth's ears began to thrum and the room itself seemed to sway. At first she thought she reeled under the effects of the oracular vapor. Then she realized the cave indeed shook. Khowot was rousing from sleep and rattling the whole mountain.

She did not wait for a further sign from the oracle. Clutching the bundle that held the *nethkarna*, Lupoeth bolted down the lava corridor and out of the cave mouth into the hot night breeze. There she stood, on the brink in more ways than one, looking down the mountainside at the granite spires and domes and walls of the capital of Khokarsa glowing softly in the moonlight.

Now the shaking ceased. Had she not seen a cloud of ash sweeping down the cone of the volcano far to her right, she might have believed the tremor to have been merely a figment caused by the fumes she had inhaled in the cave.

As she stood there above the city, wondering at the oracle's words, a queer feeling that she was being watched suddenly seized her. She squinted into the night.

Then, in the distance, she saw it. Or him. A black-haired stranger bounding like a god in the moonlight down the side of forbidding Khowot with an ease no mortal could conceivably employ. She closed her eyes to clear them of the stinging fumes that hung in the air. When she looked again down the slope, the godlike stranger was gone.

She shook her head in disbelief. Had it been a spy of the new queen? Or could it have been...?

No, she could not allow herself to blossom such a ludicrous thought in her mind.

She sighed. Even had it truly been a god in the flesh, what of it? She was on her own now, with only the memory of Kho's terrible voice to keep her company. No one, especially not the god whom the stranger resembled, could help her through the trials that would soon face her.

With a prayer to the Goddess for strength, Lupoeth clutched the oracle's extraordinary gift to her chest and began the long climb downward.