

DESIGN

I

22 (B)efore the (C)oming of the (G)ods

In the seventeenth year of the reign of Whidbis IV over the city of Peshar, Indi Ransis, short, skinny, and green-eyed with an infectious grin, strolled through Tapestry Plaza idly looking at the tapestries displayed there. He was supposed to be hurrying to the far side of the Plaza where the best Houses displayed their work. He was to relieve his sister Atris, who was minding the three tapestries House Ransis was displaying. But somehow Indi's feet would not move faster than a stroll.

The plaza was alive with noise and color and aromas; but not the same as the market squares. Those were alive too, but they were filled with commerce. Tapestry Plaza was filled with— life? With Spirit? With. . . Indi could not say with what else, but he could feel the power and joy of it wash over him like the warm breeze that ruffled his hair as he walked. All of Peshar could feel it, for, at one time or another, all of Peshar passed through Tapestry Plaza.

"About time!" Atris snapped at her brother. "I'm starving!"

"I doubt that," Indi said, smiling at his younger sister.

"I am! And where have you been anyway?"

"Looking around the plaza. Taking the air," he answered, knowing it would annoy her.

"While I sat here in the hot sun, practically fainting from hunger!" she said, outrage in her voice.

"I am here now, Atris, so why waste time scolding me? You might drop dead from starvation."

"Why—" she sputtered. "I'll tell Papa! I'll tell him you left me sitting out here while you wandered around the plaza!"

Atris huffed and fumed and boiled for a few more moments, but Indi ignored her, and when she saw he was not listening, she flounced away and disappeared into the crowd.

Indi was sure she would tell Papa, and he was sure he would catch the sharp edge of the old man's tongue when he got home, but he didn't let it bother him much. He stretched his arms wide and yawned, then settled himself upon the short stool beside the tapestries. He did not glance at them. He already knew them well. One of them he knew far more intimately than he would have liked. He had strung most of the warp thread for it on the medium loom in the Ransis tapestry factory. It was a tedious, eye-straining, patience-trying job at the best of times, and much worse when the workman hated the work to begin with.

Young Ransis tried not to think about the factory. Thoughts of it made his stomach knot, as did thoughts of the dye works, the spinnery, or the sheep and goats on the farms that supplied House Ransis with wool. His stomach knotted with dread when he thought of the life which was planned out for him. He was the eldest son of House Ransis, and as such, was fated to take over as Patriarch when his father decided to retire and begin weaving his *Memoria*. That would not happen for many years, if the Gods were kind. The old man was strong and vigorous. But when the *Memoria* was woven Indi would be expected to bring it here to Tapestry Plaza to display it. That would be his first act as Patriarch of House Ransis.

"A life well planned," which could make Indi's mood bleak if he thought about it for more than a few moments.

He looked around the plaza. The day was beautiful. Blue sky with puffy white clouds slowly drifting by on a warm breeze. Bright golden sun which gave everything it touched a tasty aura of

brightness. Small groups of people moved slowly from display to cafe to teahouse, talking and nodding. Everything seemed right to Indi except for a group of people too large to be friends talking. Above the heads of this gathering a single head rose, facing the others.

Young Ransis glanced around, saw that no one was near the House Ransis display, and left his stool to find out what was going on. He pushed up to the outside of the crowd and turned an ear toward the man who was standing on something to raise him above the people so he could be heard.

"All things are in the hands of the Great Designer," the man said. He was youngish, but not a boy, for he had a considerable growth of beard. Much more than the scraggly fuzz Indi's chin could boast.

"The Designer is like a weaver of tapestries, like these here, only his weaving is the world and all that is in it. We are only threads within the Design, and can no more understand the fullness of it than can one thread in a House Ransis weaving perceive the greatness of the whole work.

"We poor children of this world go through our lives thinking we control what goes on around us. We think that with enough gold, or land, or herds we will have say over our lives, but it is not so. We prepare our lives and suddenly, without warning, the Great Designer speaks, and all we have, all we are, comes to nothing. Our fortunes are lost. Our lives are changed. Our very hearts are pulled out and put back different than ever before. And it happens in the blink of an eye. It happens between one breath and the next. The Designer and Maker of All crooks his finger, and a breath of wind comes to stir a puff of dust, which blows into a wagoner's eye and causes him to pull tight upon the reins, which causes his animals to rear up in their harness and, though they be the most gentle of beasts, they paw the air and strike the head of one passing, and he dies. Perhaps he is rich. Perhaps he is poor. But rich or poor, high born or low born, he is dead, and all his illusion of controlling his life is gone as fog before sunlight. Or perhaps a blind beggar sleeping in a ruin beside the refuse pit turns in his sleep rolling upon a lump of rock. The beggar pulls the stone from beneath him and casts it away with a curse, but a scavenger child, trying to stay alive upon the garbage of Peshar finds the stone and sees that it is a lump of stone with nodes of gold in it. He rejoices thinking that now he can control his life. He will no more have to dig in the refuse pit. But his control is illusion, also. In fact he has found this gold because the Great Designer wanted him to find it. The Great Designer has a purpose in the scavenger child's finding of the gold, just as there was purpose in the accidental death of the man beneath the hooves of the horses. Just as there was purpose in the curl of wind. All is in the hands of the Great Designer."

"But you can see tomorrow, I suppose," a voice sneered from the crowd. "And you will be more than happy to tell us what our tomorrows will be—for a zari or two."

Many of the crowd laughed and hooted.

The speaker grinned a twisted grin. It was not the shamefaced smile of one caught in a fortune telling scheme. "Even you, my friend, are moved by the Designer to his purpose."

"No doubt," answered the heckler.

"No doubt," said the speaker. "No, I am no teller of fortunes. I cannot see tomorrow any more than you can. I only know that I am in his hands, and he will deal with me in some way which will enhance the Design. My life will be a part of the Design, and I will be a willing thread."

"I do not understand, oh thread," another voice called. "What would you have us do?"

The speaker turned toward the questioner. "I would have you believe. I would have you leave off your belief in the old gods, and your dedication to their temples as did Macar Holis when the Great Designer spoke to him from the flame. I would have you know in the depths of your heart that

everything you do, everything you think, every breath you take, is at the behest of the Great Designer. Believe that you serve a purpose, and submit yourself to that purpose."

"And what will it cost us, oh thread?" the mocking voice asked.

"Nothing, and everything. When you acknowledge the Designer your life suddenly changes, for you no longer have the illusion of control. You find yourself completely at peace, knowing that you are truly a part of the Great Design. A willing thread, playing out your part with joy. Knowing that you have no control of life, but happy that you are controlled by the hand of the mighty Creator of All."

The crowd murmured and shifted, almost ready to turn away and go about their business.

"And suppose, oh thread," the mocking voice spoke, and the crowd calmed again, hoping for more amusement. "Suppose, oh thread, that your part of this great weaving is to stain it with your blood, when some servant of the true Gods separates your head from your neck? "

The crowd, half anxious for such an execution to add a little excitement to their dull lives, laughed and leaned forward to hear how the speaker would answer.

"I will not look forward to it," he said. "But, if that is in the Design, that is what will happen. It will serve some purpose though I will not live to see that purpose worked out."

The crowd broke up after a little more baiting by the heckler. The speaker refused to rise to grow angry or answer spitefully.

Indi noticed that several acolytes from the Temple of Pesh had been among those listening to the Servant of the Design. It did not surprise him. The Temple of Pesh had been assaulted by this cult of the Design before. They did not talk about it, but almost everyone knew that some time back the Macar Holis the preacher had mentioned, who had been a righteous believer in Pesh, had claimed to have received a vision from some other god, telling him that Pesh was not a god. These Designers returned now and then from wherever they hid to preach their god. It almost always ended badly for the preacher.

Young Ransis went back to his stool and parked himself upon it once more. This Designer sounds like Papa, Indi thought. He has all the future planned out and I have no say in it.

The thought left a bitter taste, but as Indi rolled it around in his mind, he saw that it was probably true. No one truly controlled his own life, even Pappa. He was only doing what his own father had set him up to do and would only do what he thought best.

"They are very beautiful," a voice said.

Indi looked up, then shaded his eyes from the glare of the sun to see who stood before the display racks. It was the Designer cultist.

"They are House Ransis works, are they not?"

"Yes," Indi answered.

"The workmanship is something to be proud of."

"House Ransis is very proud of its work. That is why we have them displayed here in the plaza."

"Yes, of course." He continued to stand before the tapestry for which Indi had strung the warp threads. "This one seems somehow different though," he said.

"Different?"

"Yes. More—pained than the others." He turned to face Indi who had risen and now stood close. "It is your work, is it not, Indi Ransis?"

"Not. . . ." Indi stopped short. "How do you know my name?"

The man smiled his twisted smile. Now that he was close enough, Indi saw that the twist was caused by a scar on the left side of the man's mouth. It was almost hidden by his beard, but not quite.

The man noticed the direction of Indi's eyes. "The Designer decreed that one who listened would be a strong believer in another god, and would demonstrate his belief with a large stone," he said with wry humor.

"How do you know my name?" Indi asked again.

"A dream. Your name and face came to me in a dream."

Indi snorted. "Those in the crowd who jibed were right. You're only a sooth-sayer and a dreamer of dreams. Go away. Leave me alone. I want nothing to do with your Designer."

"It does not matter. Your wants are of no consequence. The Designer has a special purpose for you, and it will be worked out as surely as the pattern of thread and color are worked into your tapestry."

The laugh rose bitter as bile from Indi's heart. "Much your Designer knows! I have a part in a Design right enough, and not one of my own making either. I was born eldest son of House Ransis, and nothing I can do, except perhaps die, can change my life from what is set out for me."

The other shrugged, unperturbed. "As you wish. Nevertheless, when the time comes, travel north to Keep Holis. It is not difficult to find. On foot the journey took me a little more than three months. You will know you are near when the mountains called the Three Needles are the last thing touched with the light of evening, and the first thing touched with the light of dawn. Ask for guidance then. You are expected."

Indi could think of no answer for the surety of the man. He could only stare open mouthed as the man turned and disappeared into the crowd.

* * * *

Design and Designers and what the Servant of the Design had said were never far from Indi's thoughts. He talked with no one about the visit to the display racks, or about anything else. He kept his own counsel and shrugged off the sharp words of his father who told Indi to pay attention to what he was doing, lest he knot the threads or string them backward.

Seven days after Indi had talked with the Servant of the Design he sat at a table outside a tea house in Tapestry Plaza, a cup of tea going cold in his hands, and watched ten men in the robes of the Temple of Pesh haul the Designer from the stool which lifted him above the crowd who listened to him. Indi joined the crowd which trailed the priests and their captive to the square at the foot of the broad steps leading up to the colonnade of the Temple of Pesh. A hooded priest dressed all in white came down the temple steps to join them. He carried a heavy bronze sword with haft long enough to be gripped with two hands.

"By order of Whidbis, Ruler of Peshar, Protector of the Ancient Faith, Chief Worshiper of Mighty Pesh, Father of Gods, you are accused of the crime of Blasphemy. Will you answer this charge?"

The Servant of the Design did not smile, but the smile was in his voice when he said, "How can one blaspheme something which does not exist?"

The crowd gasped. This was blasphemy thrown into the very face of Mighty Pesh and his servants.

Indi found a catch in his throat that made him want to cry out. NO! NO! NO! Do not say that! They will kill you! Do you not see the sword? But he said nothing, only watched like the rest of the silent crowd.

"By your own mouth you stand condemned," the priest said, cutting off any further words from the Servant of the Design. "Bind him," he commanded.

The priests began winding strips of cloth round the Servant of the Design. They bound him into a cocoon of cloth so that he could not move. The man did not resist or speak.

Indi watched, horrified. He had seen executions before, but not like this. He could not take his eyes away from the face of the Servant of the Design. It seemed that the other's eyes were locked onto Indi's.

At last the man was bound, leaving only his head and neck exposed. He stood still, held steady by three priests. These knelt in their positions, and the executioner stepped forward. He lifted the sword to the heavens and cried, "Behold, Mighty Pesh, we protect thy temple." He lowered the sword and let it rest broadside upon the left shoulder of the Servant of the Design who still stood upright.

The executioner drew the sword back, coiling himself to strike.

In the half heartbeat between the executioner's drawing back his sword and the cut, Indi saw the Servant of the Design draw a deep, calm breath, and he knew the man's last thought was, "All is in the Design."

The sword swung clean and flat, and the head of the blasphemer leapt to the right and rolled down the back of one of the priests who knelt holding the body. Blood pulsed in a fountain from the severed neck and washed down over all the kneeling priests.

The executioner stepped to the severed head and lifted it by the hair. "Thus ever Blasphemers," he shouted.

The following morning Indi Ransis told his father that he was going to Keep Holis to study the Design.

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All who studied the Design at Keep Holis changed their names. Indi chose to be called Javi, which meant seeker, and added Holis in honor of Macar Holis who had first heard the voice of the Designer.

Javi began his training as did all novices. He cleaned endlessly. Common rooms, yards, gardens, dwelling rooms of the Masters. He also helped in the kitchen and worked in the fields which fed those of the community of the Design. He slept and ate in the common rooms with other novices. He learned to look within himself for privacy, for there was no physical privacy in Keep Holis for novices. In the hours of the day not taken up with work he contemplated the drawings and writings of those who had lived and died in submission to the Design.

The Mandalai were Designs of incredible intricacy. They often took the form of wheels with the artist who had drawn them at the center. The artist's personal perceptions of the Design radiated out from this personal center. Other Mandalai had trees or the sun at their centers. All these were magnetic to Javi the tapestry maker. He could almost feel the stir such designs would make if they were displayed in Tapestry Plaza.

Some of the Mandalai he understood. They were celebrations of family, growing things, the changing of season, but others, called *dark*, he did not understand. He went to his masters to ask what they meant.

"We do not know," Master Aram told him. "That is why they are called the *Dark Mandalai*."

"But they have meaning, Master Aram," Javi said. "I can feel that."

"Yes. You are not the first to feel that they have meaning, but thus far no one has been given the understanding of them."

"But how did those who drew them know what to draw?" Javi asked.

"How does a mother bird know what she must do to hatch her eggs? How does the egg know that it must become a bird not a turtle?" Master Aram shrugged. "It simply knows. That is the way of the

Mandalai, and not just those called *Dark*. The Master of the Design whispered to the makers in their dreams or while they sat quietly listening for his words."

Javi sat a long time, and Master Aram did not disturb his thoughts.

Aram remembered the man who had first told him of the Design. That man had spoken of dreams and voices too, and student Aram had thought that man a fool at first. Now he sat, saying the same things to his student.

At last Javi came back from his contemplation and said, "Master, I think I have heard the voice of the Designer."

Master Aram blinked at this. He could hardly believe such effrontery. "Go on," he said.

"The words are not clear," Javi said. "I cannot see the full meaning of them, but I am sure the Designer has told me something of the power of the Dark Mandalai."

Master Aram did not quite succeed in keeping his doubts out of his voice.

"That is the way of the Designer," he said pulling his cloak tighter around him against the cold. "He knows our needs and our capacities, and gives us only that which he knows we are ready to know." He stretched out his hand and patted Javi on the shoulder. "Wait upon the Designer, Javi. He is preparing something for you. But do not be too quick to declare the whisperings of your own mind to be the voice of the Maker of All."

Javi bowed his head. "Yes, Master Aram. I will be careful."

The old man nodded. "Open your mind to the Designer," he said. "Allow yourself to be his instrument. Understanding will come to you, but do not be in too much of a hurry for it to come. Sometimes understanding brings more pain than satisfaction."

"Yes Master," he said, and went back to his duties.

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Winter's depths closed over the keep. The already restricted life became even narrower. No fire seemed able to shield against the knife-like cold which hemmed the Servants of the Design into Keep Holis.

It was during one such bout of cold that Javi, with a wry thought, took the Dark Mandala called The Fire, and began to study it. He carried the velum sheet with care to the hearthstone of the common room and sat down to study it. After many hours of contemplation of the Mandala he found himself nodding, heavy with sleep. The fire in the hearth had burned low, and the room was cold.

Javi stood, stretched, rubbed his eyes, and shivered. He thought of his cold pallet at the other side of the room and decided to make a cup of tea to fortify himself against the chill. He shivered yet more as he broke the thick skin of ice which had formed on the water jar near the door. Javi dipped water into the teakettle and hung it on the pot hook above the fire, then punched up the flames with a poker and added a few sticks. When the blaze merrily licked at the bottom of the teakettle he sat down on the hearth again. His mind wandered back to the Mandala he had been studying. The meaning of it seemed just on the edge of his comprehension, but he could not pull it into the full light of understanding. After a little he forcibly shoved the thoughts from his mind and leaned over to check the teakettle.

The fire's warming tongue licked up around the teakettle's bottom, and thin wisps of steam rose from the spout. The picture it formed stopped Javi as though he had been struck in the face. This was the meaning of the Mandala! It was the fire whereby the steam of the spirit could be released from the teakettle of the body. The meaning was so clear Javi was astonished and ashamed that he had not understood before.

With his heart pounding in excitement, the young Servant of the Design lay down upon the hearth and closed his eyes. The hiss of the steaming kettle made a soft background which blanked out the sounds of wind and the crackling of ice from outside.

Javi brought the Dark Mandala called The Fire before his mind's eye. It was fire licking up around him, as fire licked the bottom of the kettle. It heated that part of him which was the real Javi Holis. The essence of him.

After a time the Mandala began to have an effect. Javi felt his spirit warm and bubble like heated water, and steam began to rise; the conscious steam of his essence, his spirit.

There was a lightness to him. He felt himself drift up like steam from the kettle and he wondered if indeed he was rising like steam. He opened his eyes.

Below him, lying on the hearth was the body of a skinny young man with a ragged beard who was wrapped in a battered cloak. At first glance he looked dead, but a moments observation showed slow, shallow movement of breath.

Javi wondered who the young man was. He did not remember seeing him among the students. There was something familiar about him though. He looked like— he looked like Javi's father. But that couldn't be. Papa was old!

Realization came to him like a slap. The body on the hearth was his own body! The Mandala had done its work. He was separated spirit from body through concentration upon the Mandala.

Shock and surprise robbed Javi of control and his essence was drawn back into his body with a snap. In a moment he sat up and rubbed his eyes wondering if what had just happened was only a dream. He had often dreamed of flying like a bird when he was a child, but never so vividly that he could see his body below him.

Suddenly Javi was shaking, and not with cold. He was sure this had not been a dream. He had separated his essence from the vessel created to contain it and the very thought of it was overwhelming. Frightening!

Javi drew in a deep breath and tried to calm the shaking of his hands and the quivering of his stomach. He set about finishing the tea he had started to make, not because he really wanted it, but because his mind needed the refuge of common things in order to keep sanity.

Sunlight had barely touched the peaks of the Three Needles when Javi presented himself to Master Aram. He explained what had happened.

"Perhaps it was a dream, Javi," the master said doubtfully

"It was no dream, Master Aram," Javi answered positively.

"But have you tried this separation again to be sure?" the old man asked.

"No Master. I wanted you to help me in the test. And...I am afraid."

Master studied student for a moment, looking for the truth of what had happened. If the boy had been dreaming, then the dream might very well have come from the Maker of All. What else had Master been telling student? Now Master Aram was being put to the test. Did he truly believe what he had been telling young Javi?

"If this is a real power then there is reason to be cautious, Javi, just as there is cause for caution when using fire or knives or medicines. But all those things are gifts of the Designer, and when they are controlled, they are beneficial. I believe that this power, if it is real, is the same. Controlled, it may be of great benefit. Uncontrolled, it may be very dangerous."

"Then, shall I try to use it again, Master?"

The old man thought a moment. "Yes. I do not think the Master of Design would allow understanding if he did not wish the power used."

"I will go back to the hearth, and when the thing is done I will come to you in my essence."

Master Aram nodded, and wondered if he had done right as he watched his student go.

Javi returned to the hearth, placed the teakettle upon its pot hook, and punched up the fire. When steam was rising thick from the spout, he lay down and brought the Mandala of The Fire before his mind's eye. He was so nervous that he had trouble concentrating. Several times he opened his eyes and drew deep breaths, trying to calm himself. At first he feared to relax too much, lest sleep rather than the deep relaxation of meditation, overtake him.

After what seemed hours he was ready to give up the attempt. He rose from the hearth and went to Master Aram's chamber to confess his inability.

At the closed door of the master's chamber he stopped, and lifted his hand to knock. His hand disappeared through the door!

Javi snatched his hand back, and stared at the solid wood of the door. Then he slowly reached out. . . and put his hand through it.

It was an odd, watery feeling upon his wrist where it remained within the precinct of the door. He pulled his hand back.

After a moment Javi drew in a deep breath, then laughed at the incongruity of a man without a body drawing in breath and stepped through the door.

Master Aram sat at his desk studying another of the Dark Mandalai. He looked up toward the door a second after Javi entered as though the entrance of the students essence had disturbed him.

"Master Aram, I am here," Javi said.

The old man did not react to the voice, but his dark gray eyes seemed to deepen into their bony sockets, and his lined face took on a haunted expression, as though something frightening were just on the edge of his vision.

"Javi, I cannot see you, but I feel the truth of your presence. Can you make yourself known somehow?"

Javi hesitated a moment, then moved to the desk and put his hand into the hand of his master.

The old man snatched his hand away as if he had been burned, but after a moment he returned his hand to the position it had been in before and said, "Javi, if it was you who touched me, touch me again."

Javi did as he was told, and again Master Aram snatched his hand away. "Your touch is like ice, and your presence makes my stomach queasy. Please go before I am unable to control myself. Return to me when you are again joined to your body."

Javi found that he was glad to return to his body. He had begun to feel cold and watery all over, almost as the steam rising from the kettle must feel as it was longer and longer away from the source of heat. He hurried back to the hearth and felt the chilly liquidity growing. When he reached the hearth he had a moment of panic when he realized he did not know how to reunite with his body. He suppressed the fear and lay down on top of his waiting body, hoping this was the way to reunite body and spirit.

Minutes passed and the chill began to dissipate. Javi could feel the warmth of the fire, and knew he was no longer in two parts. With a corner of his mind he could see the Mandala of The Fire, and realized that during his separation he had focused on it from time to time. Now he consciously closed that compartment of his mind and opened his eyes to the physical world.

Javi squeezed his eyes shut once more and flexed all his muscles to assure himself that they still worked, then stood and went to Master Aram's quarters. He knocked and entered when the old man called to him.

"Is all well, Javi?" the master asked.

"Yes Master. I am fully restored."

"It was you who touched me," the old man said, no question in his voice.

"Yes. I spoke also, but you could not hear me."

"The instant you entered I felt your presence. There was a chill, but not from the winter's cold. Deeper, more bone freezing. And there was a sense of. . .like being at sea in a small boat. I felt sick."

"Yes, I understand."

The old man was in awe of his student. No one until now had understood any of the Dark Mandalai. Now this young man, hardly more than a boy, had been granted understanding by the Master of the Design. "What was it like, Javi? How did it feel?"

Javi tried to explain, but found it impossible. "There is no way to tell you, Master," he said at last. "And I do not know how I did it. I was unable to achieve the separation at first, but when I stopped trying, I suddenly found myself in two parts."

Master looked at student and found himself humbled. All the doubts he had harbored! All the silent laughter he had heaped upon what he thought was a pretentious child. All came back to haunt him now, and he was ashamed.

"Javi," Master Aram began, "The Maker of All truly has a special part of the Design for you to work out. I can only ask your forgiveness for my doubts. You must continue studying the Dark Mandalai. We have known for a long time that they were filled with great power, but we did not know, until now, what that power might be."

Javi, feeling suddenly alone and incompetent, swallowed hard. "Master Aram, I am only a student. I must have your guidance in this."

The old man was silent for a time, then said, "Perhaps I can help you in your studies, Master Javi."

Javi's eyes widened in surprise and he began to protest the title, but Master Aram waved him to silence. After a few moments Javi smiled shyly. "Then we shall be students together, Master Aram."

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