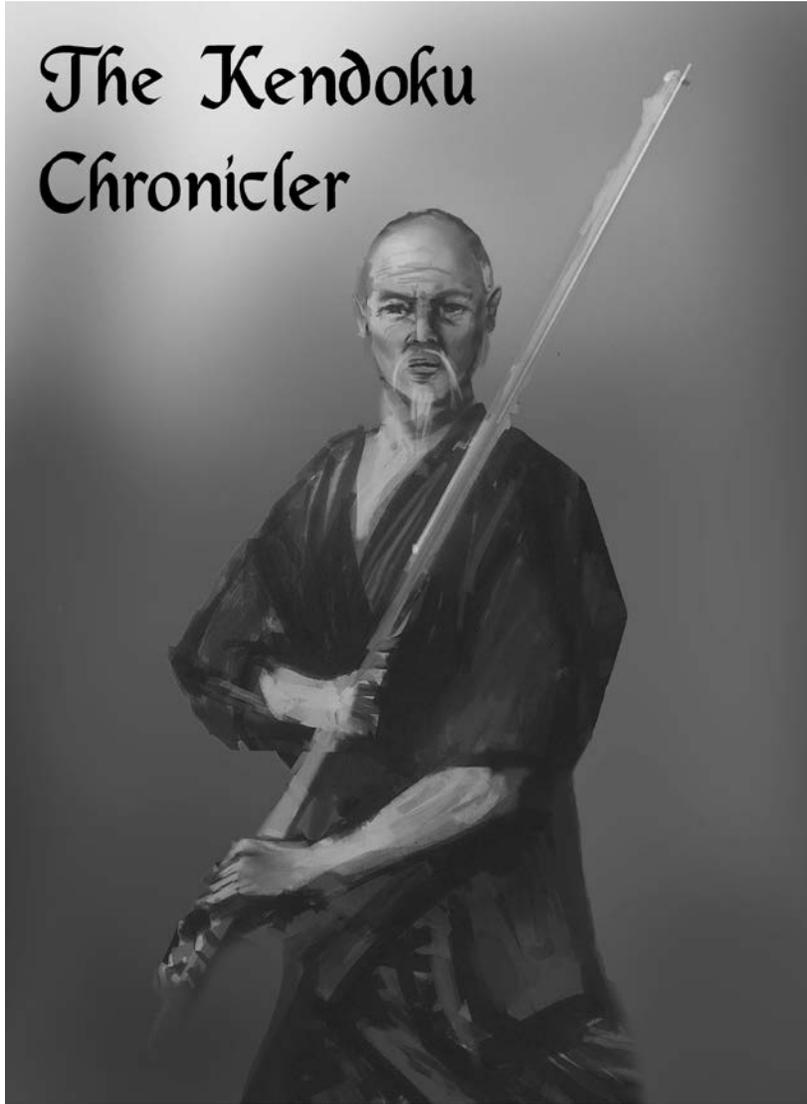


The Kendoku Chronicler



Saga of 5 Ages
The 12 Rings of the Emperor
Tales 5 & 6

A foretelling of
A Fantasy Novel by James Shade

The Priestess

Year 763

Lightning flashed in multiple strikes as the booming thunder rolled for leagues on end.

The final phase of the Cleansing had begun.

Rain began to fall in heavy sheets as the wind whipped it across the faces of Priestess Itania and her retinue. She loved how it stung her face and drenched her hair; it was the vigorous caress of the storm goddess Be'Lath. Itania reveled in the darkened skies and the roiling clouds, the smell of fresh rain washing away the stench of decay and putrescence that had lain in the corrupted fields of Diathilos for nearly a century. Now, the mission of Marinthea, the Holy Land, was almost complete. Two months, maybe three, and the D'losian highway (or Holy Highway, as some called it) would be finished. Started over two decades before Itania's birth, it would provide safe passage from Urok and the southern nations into Gylanth and Kalistad. Whereas travelers in days past would have to manage a time-consuming sea voyage around the entire continent or risk a dangerous trek across the anarchy of Diathilos, they would now be able to travel freely and directly through sanctified territories, over purified lands and along well-guarded roads without fear of monstrous ambush or wild magics.

Priestess Itania had fought viciously to be awarded the honor of leading the final party into the wastelands and bringing the blessing of the gods and goddesses to a terrified people and a befouled empire. Once this quest was complete, she was almost assured ascension to the position of High Priestess of the Church of Be'lath. The thought excited her and a sort of euphoria began to overtake her as she whipped the storm into a frenzy.

"Be'lath, Goddess of Storms, hear me! Send me the wind that is your voice! Send me the thunder that is the pounding of your heart! Send me the rain that is your rushing blood! And send me the lightning that is the power of your will!"

The priestess outstretched her arms so that she could more fully receive the full force of the storm that her goddess was bestowing upon her and the surrounding lands. "I call upon you to cleanse this area of evil and corruption! Wash away the filth of decades past and allow an era of blessed purity to unfold upon all who will travel these roads! I am Itania, your priestess and servant, and I consecrate this ground in your name, Be'lath, Goddess of Storms!"

As if on cue, the winds rose to an eerie howling pitch and the lightning fell like rain in a hundred flashes that blinded the eye of all who saw. Floods descended the nearby cliffs and washed over the ragged hills. Fields were flattened and rivers and streams became indistinguishable. The few trees that had remained were felled and swept away by the awesome force of wind and current. Carcasses of the dead floated by, seemingly grateful that they were finally on their way to the

underworld. Long abandoned settlements had their buildings and structures demolished by the otherworldly force, making way for the new ones to come. Plant and animal life, no longer healthy or natural, was eradicated so that nature could resume its normal course.

Looking down from the highest peak, Priestess Itania exulted as the tempest purified an expansive swath of northern Diathilos. She fell to her knees in reverence and cried out graciously for Be'lath's blessing as her fellow Marintheans took shelter from the storm. Deep within her soul, Itania knew that she would not be harmed, but there was no denying the awesome power of the goddess.

The storm would last for hours, perhaps until daybreak, but Itania was already exhausted. It was all she could do to remain semi-conscious in a giddy sort of daze. Time became meaningless to her, as thoughts of her future promotion circled back around to memories of her childhood. She was first generation Marinthean, as many of the current clergy were. Her parents had been refugees from the fallen empire, given shelter by those who had first formed and sanctified the Holy Land. Upon her birth, she was educated and cared for equally by all nine churches. Temperament and aptitude led her most strongly into the following of Be'Lath. Many feared the church and followers of the Storm Goddess, saying that they were too chaotic and unpredictable. But most farmers - and many sailors - dared not invoke Her wrath by *not* paying homage.

It was a proud day when Itania became an official acolyte of the church. Prouder still was the moment she achieved the rank of cleric. Unfortunately, her parents did not live to see the day that she ascended to full fledged priestess. But they died, full of pride, and secure in the knowledge that their daughter had been chosen by the goddess to be Her blessed servant. Itania performed the funeral ritual herself, calling down lightning from the skies to obliterate the bodies of her mother and father, then raising the winds to scatter their ashes. Ever since, she felt the loving touch of her parents in every gust and breeze that caressed her face. Itania knew that they would be with her when she became High Priestess, and then...Arch-Priestess?

Slowly, Itania became dimly aware that she was no longer within the embrace of the storm. She could make out the vague forms of her companions and a hazy flickering fire they had built within the shelter of a nearby cave.

She was warmer and drier, but she was not happy.

"Why do you remove me from the touch of the goddess?" she asked sternly, if a bit slurred.

"You had collapsed," answered Heisren, a battlepriest of Dregan. "We feared you may drown or be washed over the cliff."

"She will never let me drown," informed Itania.

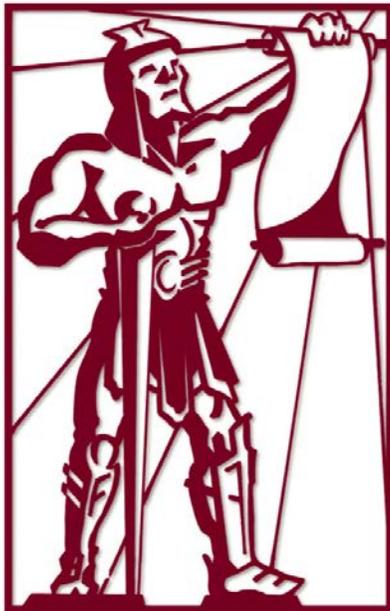
"As you say, priestess. But you need to rest as comfortably as possible. For tomorrow, when the storm abates, I shall begin reforming the land. I will need you to be vigilant while I am in the throes of my own ritual."

Itania had nearly nodded off by the time Heisren had finished speaking.
“Very well, battlepriest.”

At that, Itania fell into a deep slumber, with dreams of gliding through a sky filled with dark clouds as her reward.

“The Saga Unfolds...”

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