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S.A. Rule

Shaihen Heritage Book 2

STAFF OF POWER

by

S.A. Rule

Foreword – the Shaihen Heritage

In Shehaios, you do not believe in the Spirit.

It is.

For a Shaihen to say, “I do not believe in the Spirit” is for a man to stand in front of a tree and say, “I do not believe in this tree”. It will make little difference when it falls on his head.

The Spirit of Shehaios dwells in the soil of the land. It breathes the soft moist breath of the creatures who live there. It flies on the wings of the birds and insects who breed and feed there. It flourishes in the flowers of the Shaihen flora. It lives, sometimes, in the hearts of the men and women who call themselves Shaihen and writes its name on the works of the best of them.

Chapter 1: An End

Ravir had tried to warn the boy, but boys do not listen.

“You are not dealing with a man, Orlii. The Enchanter of Shehaios is the father of lies. Do not trust him.”

But Orlii just smiled at him, and said, “The Magician of Shehaios is the master of freedom, Brother. He is my master. I am his heir.”

The answer set the underlying heartbeat of anger which informed the life of an *as-caii* priest throbbing a little louder through Ravir’s veins. The priest saw the arrogance of an unbeliever in the boy’s smile. Orlii bore the mark of the *as-caii* people on his breast, but he had lived seven years in the grip of Shehaios, and Shaihen magic, learning to believe that he was the master of his own destiny. Ravir feared his soul was irredeemably lost.

“You speak blasphemy, child!” Ravir warned him, “God is your master!”

Orlii did not listen.

Boys do not listen.

Ravir stood on the high mountain path near the Shaihen border as helpless as the rest of his people to reach the boy now. They had left the camp of their Shaihen enemies in high triumph, carrying with them the bodies of the Shaihen King, his heir, and his Lord High Magician. It was Orlii's triumph, Orlii who had led them into the camp and delivered these potent trophies into their hands.

But Orlii, like Ravir, could only watch in horror as the dead figure of the Enchanter surged up from the dust. Ravir saw terror drain the colour from Orlii’s face as his eyes locked, mesmerised, on the small Shaihen man. It seemed as if the young, strong *as-caii* warrior with the cloak of the Enchanter on his shoulders and the staff of Shaihen power in his hand shrank as the black-haired Shaihen magician grew.

Ravir felt the Enchanter’s scream rend through his body, through the earth beneath his feet. He felt it bind him into immobility, as if he had been turned to stone.

He saw a figure leap at Orlii; he couldn’t have said if it was the figure of a man or a beast, but it dragged the young *as-caii* from his Shaihen horse and left him facing the figure of a man, outlined in a lurid light that burned from somewhere inside him. A dead man, come for revenge.

He saw the Enchanter reach out both hands, and cover Orlii’s face. He saw Orlii’s body twist in torment. He smelled the heat, the reek of burning flesh, but he couldn’t see any fire or any visible injury, only the writhing torso and the flailing limbs of the boy’s silent hell.

He saw Orlii drop lifeless, the Enchanter’s hands falling away from his face. The Enchanter snatched the cloak from Orlii’s back and Ravir felt his courage fail him as the embodiment of Shaihen magic turned the ferocity of his gaze on Orlii’s people. The figure pulsed with energy, its size and its solidity constantly shifting in front of him.

It shrank as Ravir watched. He felt the paralysis leave him, and saw some of the *as-caii* warriors around him move in towards their enemy. Brave men.

Ravir moved cautiously towards Orlii’s body.

Fire burst out from the bodies of the Shaihen King and his son, lying on the ground where the Enchanter had arisen. Horses started and whinnied fearfully at the sudden flames. The *as-caii* warriors surged forwards to surround the small man at the centre of the Enchanter’s power, as he snatched the cloak of magic from the smouldering corpse of the boy who had once been his servant, and flung it around his shoulders.

Ravir looked down at the staff lying where it had fallen from Orlii's grasp. It was an uncannily beautiful, intricate object, made of many different woods carved and interwoven with each other. It was difficult to tell where one ended and another began, and impossible to guess how it had been made. Ravir had trained for his priesthood in a provincial city, he recognised artefacts from distant reaches of the Empire. He could see that the staff had been made not only from trees familiar to the Magician's own people, the North Caiivorians who called themselves people of "she-haios", the Fair Land, but also from trees that would not last a season in the cool dampness of the north Caiivorian climate.

The Enchanter had promised Orlii that his people, the as-caii, would inherit the power of the Fair Land. Ravir did not trust the promises of the Shaihen Enchanter, but the staff was almost at his feet. He reached cautiously towards it. He had it in his hand. He lifted it.

Fear rose in his throat as he became aware of wings thrashing above him. He spun round, raising the staff defensively, expecting a fierce power to rip it from his grasp.

The shape of a huge bird soared over his head. The Enchanter had gone.

Orlii's body lay on the ground with curls of smoke drifting up from it in thickening clouds. Ravir saw the young warrior's clothes beginning to dry and blacken with burning, and the flesh beneath rise in blisters.

The staff of power was in his hands, and death was the Enchanter's heir.