

Part I: Mouse

Chapter 1: Nania

14th of Pentember, 957E

City of Zuhuz

"You have to believe me, little one, it is for your own good." Ochaboo Dokehda knelt with her leathery brown palm laid flat against the sun baked clay tiles of the kaht-Ahrood kitchen. Her black braid, just starting to show streaks of grey, fell over her shoulder and brushed the ground. Her neck complained slightly as she pressed her face against the floor to stare into the dark crack beneath the stove. She winced, "It certainly isn't for mine."

Two little black eyes stared back at her, whiskers catching bits of light as they twitched.

"If Lady kaht-Ahrood or any of her kitchen staff catch you in here, it will be the butcher's knife waiting for you. And we don't want that, now do we. Come on, I've got you."

There was a moment's hesitation before the little brown mouse scurried forward from the darkness and right onto Ochaboo's open hand.

"Ah, ah, ah!" Ochaboo raised her other hand, halting the snake draped around her shoulders before its coiled neck could strike. "You hunt on your own time. I've promised our little friend here he won't be anyone's lunch." She got carefully to her feet and picked up a mango from a bowl on the counter. "Here, you like these better anyways."

Junai gave a reproachful flick of her tongue before digging her fangs into the fresh fruit. She launched herself off Ochaboo's shoulder, gracefully unfurling her feathered wings mid-air from against her golden body and carrying her prize to the counter to be devoured. Ochaboo walked to the open kitchen window. She placed the mouse on the sill, where it sat up on its hind legs and gazed at her.

Ochaboo smiled fondly. "Well don't just sit there, run along. The market's on today, I'm sure the pickings there will be better than this pristine place."

The little creature took off with a bound and was lost almost immediately among the flowering vines that covered the wall. Behind her, Ochaboo heard pattering footsteps on the stairs, and a young maid with her hair tied back in a scarf came skittering into the kitchen, panting.

"It's time!" She turned on her heels and ran out of the room, calling "It's time! It's time!"

Ochaboo turned to the counter where Junai stretched her long golden body in the sun next to the shriveled mango husk, her eyes trained on Ochaboo.

"Go, my friend. Find the cubs." The snake's amethyst wings became a blur as she lifted herself up into the air. A grin of anticipation spread across Ochaboo's face. "It's time." She watched Junia zip out the kitchen window. With a jolt, she ran to the kitchen door, flung it wide, and called after the already shrinking creature, "And don't even think about looking for that mouse!"

Kalim leaned over his desk and stared seriously down at the blueprints spread before him. The room was silent as the dozen men standing, leaning, and perching around the place exchanged nervous looks. Finally, Kalim brought his fist down on the table. Everyone jumped.

“Excellent.” There was a collective sigh as the men allowed themselves to smile. “I’m sure the priests and priestesses of Selene will be very happy with these renovations, and your designs will make a proud Dokehda addition to the Temple District skyline. You’ve done the firm proud.” They clapped one another on the shoulders, relieved and excited — all but one, who leaned against the back wall, arms crossed, smiling as he watched Kalim’s face grow serious again.

“Now need I remind you gentlemen that we are significantly behind on our two largest projects.” No one groaned, but he could feel the collapse in the room. Kalim sighed inwardly. “I appreciate that you came in on your Ohnan. Take tomorrow off. I’ll see you on the 16th. Now, go home. You’ve earned a rest.”

As the men filed out, looking a little brighter with the prospect of a day off ahead, Kalim stood by the door and shook each of their hands. When the last man reached him, Kalim stopped him and handed him the drawings. “Please take out the marble parakeets someone added to the spires. And there are some doorways they’ve stretched to 8 feet that need be no more than 5. And —

“And I’ll make sure we get the pearl hued sandstone, not the off-pink stuff they have indicated on the order slip.” The man clapped Kalim on the shoulder. “Don’t worry nephew. I’ll take care of it.”

Kalim smiled tiredly. “Thank you, Coraan. I know I can count on you.”

Coraan smiled and shook his head. “You remind me so much of your father when he was your age.”

Kalim frowned. “I can’t say I appreciate the comparison.”

“Faults aside, your Joskous took his work very seriously. I’m glad he had a son like you to take over when he passed.” His hands full, he nodded his farewell and left Kalim alone in his office.

Kalim went to his desk and collapsed his large frame into the leather chair, staring down at the parchment calendar on his desk. He had just given the firm the first day of the long week off to make up for working on the Ohnan, the rest between the short and long weeks. He crossed out Pentember 15th. That left 3 work days before the Dihnan -- he crossed out the 19th and 20th as well. Then they’d have the short week before his audience with Calipha Quabilah on the 24th. He rubbed his temples.

“Who summons a man on his Ohnan?” he grumbled. Ever since Grand Caliph Khalil had inherited the throne from his father, his wife had been contracting the Dokehda Architectural firm to design addition after addition for the royal palace. An honour, really, but Calipha Qubilah wasn’t a particularly patient woman, nor was she particularly pleasant. She was really just particular — about every angle, arch, and accent they used in her designs.

He absent-mindedly opened a drawer and took out the pear and strips of dried meat that his wife, Prihma, had sent with him, “in case he stayed through dinner.” He gave a rare chuckle, and turned to the portrait of his namesake and grandfather on the back wall.

“How many family dinners did you actually attend in your time here?” He chewed thoughtfully. “I bet you kept count. Have to ask when I get home.” He turned back to his desk, reaching for his pear, only to find it’s empty skin sitting next to a two-foot long snake, who stared at him with shrewd black eyes, her purple wings folded against her golden scales.

He rested his head in his hands. “Junai, you remind me on a regular basis why we use the expression “as slippery as a snake.” He stared at her a moment, then started to his feet. “Junai!” He was already making for the door. “Get the others, I’ll head there straight away.” Before the door could slam shut behind him, Junai was out the open window, back out into the guilds district.

Makiram carefully folded the delicate white silk and pinned it into place on young bride to be’s shoulder as her finely dressed mother looked on, gossiping with Makiram’s friend and neighbour Helam.

“You know her?” Lady Sharohna il-Jacahn was aghast.

“Oh yes Lady.” Helam smiled sadly. “She still works at The High Grass Tea House in market district, just down the hill. Every time there’s even a whisper that he might have resurfaced somewhere in Mudore, the poor things shakes like a leaf for days. Can’t pour a cup of tea without spilling. They usually just send her home.”

“Even after five years?”

“Come, Lady Sharohna,” Makiram chided kindly, carefully stitching a fold into place, “think about what that girl survived. I imagine it would take a lifetime to recover from.”

“I can’t say I can even imagine it.” The noblewoman shivered. “Such an unpleasant subject, really.” She clapped her hands. “Thank you again so much for doing this, Sah Dalhass. Especially in your condition. If I had known...”

Makiram put a hand on the small bump of her belly and smiled. “Please, “Sah” is for my mother-in-law. Makiram is fine. And it’s a pleasure to be able to help you and your lovely daughter.” Auhna il-Jacahn blushed at Makiram’s words. “I’m only sorry you had bring the silks all the way down.”

“Oh no, it was well worth it, given that you came so highly recommended. Aliya kaht-Ahrood said you had a real knack with silk, and I just wasn’t happy with the work they did at my usual shop in the Upper District.”

Helam looked proudly at her friend working deftly away on the noble girl’s gown. “Sometimes you’ve got to come down the hill to get something done right.”

“Whatever it takes. For my Auhna’s wedding dress, we couldn’t have any less than the best. She’s marrying an il-Pon you know. Book of Gold.”

Makiram smiled at the young bride. “You must be very excited.” She opened her mouth to respond.

“Just thrilled!” Her mother enthused. “Lady Aliya is always so well dressed, and now I know why! Very gracious of her to share her secret.”

Makiram laughed. “My sister is nothing if not gracious.”

The noblewoman’s eyebrows shot up. “She’s your sister? I’m sorry, I didn’t — But she came from House Dokehda, no? Book of Bronze? And the name Dalhass isn’t—”

“I married young, Lady. Even before Aliya. House Dokehda had not yet been raised to the lower nobility.”

“Ah, just missed it then.” crooned Sharohna. “Poor dear.”

Helam was glaring daggers at the noble woman, but Makiram smiled pleasantly as she knelt to fix Aunha’s hem. “I am as proud to bear the name Dalhass as I would the name of any noble house in Mudore. And now to be continuing that name.” She placed a hand tenderly on her stomach. “I married a man I love. An honourable, hard working man, and here in the market district that may as well put him in the Book of Gold.”

The lady was saved having to respond as a johkobo slammed to a halt outside the open kitchen door, it’s talons screeching against the paving stones. A very tall young man with the crest of the Glass maker’s guild on his tunic jumped down from the bird’s back, and wrapped it’s reins around the hitching post. He gave it’s long feathered neck a pat before ducking through the doorway.

“Crowded kitchen you’ve got here, Sah Dalhass.”

“Makiram Dalhass’s kitchen is always full, young man.” grinned Helam.

“What can I do for you, Syt?” Makiram asked warmly, snipping the last thread from Auhna’s hem.

The young man smiled. “Syt Dalhass seems to have forgotten his lunch, and insists that if they’re keeping him late with a meeting, the only thing that’ll fill him till he gets home is your lamb stew.

Makiram giggled girlishly. “Rajesh can be terribly stubborn when he wants to be.”

“I think he’d got the right idea.” Helam sighed, “There’s just no match for that stew.”

Makiram hopped up on a short wooden stool to fetch down two little clay pots from one of the shelves, and then ladled up two large serving of stew from the large black pot that still hung in her kitchen hearth. She handed them to the rider.

“One for Rajesh, and one for you. And don’t let him convince you to give him both. He doesn’t need it.”

The rider smiled. “Yes, Sah. Thank you.” He smiled at Aunah, “And may I say, Lady, you are a vision.”

Auhna’s face blossomed into a smile. “Thank you, Syt.”

He gave a small bow to the room, and returned to his waiting bird.

“Well I’d say it’s a success.” Lady Sharohna circled her daughter, running fingers along the gentle folds of the silk and adjusting already perfect draping.

“I’m glad you’re happy with it.” Makiram took Auhna’s hand and gave it a little squeeze.

“I love it, Sah Dalhass.”

“Good. You can use the next room to change, if you like.”

"I'll come help love. Don't want the gown getting creased." Lady Sharohna bustled off after her daughter into the next room, and once they were gone, Helam rolled her eyes. "She reminds me why I almost never cross Mid Street."

Makiram giggled. "Oh she's not so bad. If you'd been raised the way she has, you'd probably be just as insufferable."

Through the open door sped a winged snake, making a beeline for the generous fruit bowl that always graced Makiram's table, and immediately sinking her teeth right through the shell of a coconut.

"Junai! That's it! I have to go!" In moments she was out her kitchen door, much faster than it seemed her short legs should carry her.

"Makiram!" Helam jumped to her feet just as Makiram appeared back in her doorway.

"Right. Um, Helam, would you..." She was clearly about to burst from her skin.

Helam sighed. "You owe me for leaving me with her."

"You'll eat lamb stew for a month!" Makiram called out as she bounced at a sprint up towards Mid Street.

'On the seventh day descending, the potency of the Imperial Dweomer increased by a stunning 20.3%, high enough to slow down our movement nearly 300 times. And yet, we were still miles from the Underdark.'

Farida turned the page of her book, making no effort to be covert about her reading. Tavarán, or rather, Professor Ilbaereth, knew she wasn't listening. He also knew that she had learned whatever it was he was writing on the board, because she had already memorized his textbook on the use of advanced divination magic in the anthropological study of the Empire, and submitted him a copy with her suggested revisions. They had come to an understanding: so long as she didn't disturb his classes by challenging the inaccuracies that came from dumbing the material down to a second year university level, she could research in his classes in peace.

'A series of connecting Imperial ruins forms the underground tunnels of the reclusive Desert Elves, that is to say, Alabashee. As expected, their numbers had increased with the eclipsing of Air into Earth.'

Naturally, she thought. But what caused the increase in elemental power? Where was that coming from? Was the answer hidden somewhere in an Empiric Ruin?

'Our expedition was well armed and did not need to hire any of their guides, so we left them alone. The dwarven kingdom of Afdol is wholly slanted, presumably from whatever great impact formed the Suddensea. That was not the magic we were after.'

Blah, blah, blah. Enough with the suspense, get to the facts. Who'd written this again? She turned the book over. 'Ruins of Afdol' by Jamie Wanderwell. She snorted. An Alman. It figured. Mudore's northern neighbours had always struck Farida as a bit obtuse.

'On the 12th day we came to the sunken elemental shrine, encircled with white-gold statues, presumably of all the elven races although half of them were worn beyond shape. Our diviner, Yulakh il-Nadir, determined a few races by what he called 'Sculpture Essence,' which is

to say that the elves must have ensorcelled the statues with elemental magic, for they each held specific elemental traces. The barely recognizable Alabashee statue, to no one's surprise, emitted the elements of Earth and Fire."

Something about this paragraph bothered her. She read it again.

'*White-gold statues, presumably of all the elven races*'. The phrase twiggled something in her memory. There had been mention of something similar in a chapter of the book she'd finished earlier in "Advanced thermal dynamics of Elemental Evocation". She leaned down to search through her book bag, brushing aside the winged snake who fluttered next to her.

Yes, there it was, buried in what was basically a propaganda puff piece on the glories of Mathgamana, Alma's magical university, in a chapter titled "Surrounding ruins of Falcon Reach Canyons". A dilapidated shrine of the Empire, so far considered unimportant according to the book's author, that featured 12 worn statues, at least some of them still identifiable as Elves.

She laid the open books side by side and stared at them, her fingers steepled against her lips. There was more than one such shrine, which increased the likelihood that Jamie Wanderwell and his crew of merry adventurers might have actually stumbled upon something important in the ruins beneath the Aldol desert.

There was a persistent hissing near her left ear. She covered it with one hand.

An Elvan organization of some kind? Could they even be the ones who controlled the shift of elemental power? Could they or their descendants or some vestige of their magical powers be affecting the shifts in the landscape of elemental magic she had been observing for months? Tavaren might know something, being three quarters *tarquendi* Elf, himself.

Junai landed on her desk, obscuring the pages.

"Do you mind?" Farida swept the snake aside, forcing her to catch herself as she fell towards the classroom floor. The snake began to frantically whizz around Farida's head, its tail whipping at her hair. Farida raised her arms to ward her off.

"Would — you — just—" The snake finally managed to wrap itself around Farida's head, completely obscuring her vision. Farida got clumsily to her feet.

"Ahrg! Junai, can't you see I'm busy!" She pushed the snake up onto her forehead and suddenly became aware that her classmates were staring at her, wide-eyed, exchanging looks of utter shock and confusion. Great, they thought she was being weird again.

"Farida?"

She turned on Professor Ilbaereth, exasperated. "What!?" He stood at the front of the class, an unfinished incantation on the board. His hands were clasped behind his back, and there was a look of mild amusement on his face.

"Pardon my intrusion, but do you think perhaps your serpentine friend is trying to tell you something?"

There was a pause. Then she sighed.

"Tak."

She was on her feet and down the hall in an instant, Junai, following closely on her heels. She reached the nearest opening to one of the inner columns of the tower and whistled. A carpet whizzed down from an upper level and stopped at her feet. She stepped onto it and huffed, "Ground Floor, and be quick about it." The carpet plummeted downwards, Junai

corkscrewing down after it. Before the carpet had fully landed on the ground floor, Farida jumped off and was charging through the crowded entrance hall of South Tower. She stormed through the grand double doors and down the stairs, off along the path that led back to Crown Street, cursing under her breath as she strode through the fresh Pentember air. Junai kept pace, wings beating so quickly that Farida couldn't help admire the physics of it.

"I'm going, I'm going! Go, get Esahfa!"

But the snake stayed by her side, hissing as they went.

"What? What do you want? Do you want an apology?" Farida cried. "I'm sorry alright? I'm sorry I swatted at you and pushed you off the desk, that it took Tavarán of all people to remind me I need to be somewhere." She felt her cheeks flush red as she recalled his amusement. "Okay? I'm sorry."

People passing her stared.

"And now I'm talking to a snake."

Junai continued to circle Farida's body, bumping into her book bag and nudging it with her head. Farida dug around in the bag and pulled out a slightly squished plum. She held it up before her. "This? Is this what you're after?"

Junai darted in at the plum.

"Would you— I— Ugh!" Farida tossed the plum into the air. Junai snagged it, and took off down the hill towards the upper district.

"Animals." Farida grumbled to herself as she reached Crown Street and headed toward Palace Way, the fastest route down to House kaht Ahrood. "I honestly just can't be bothered."

"Easy friend." Esahfa kept a grip on the squirming kitten while trying to hold a bucket steady under the faucet.

"Hallo? Ochaboo?" Wehna's voice rang out as the bell on the shop door tinkled.

Esahfa looked down at the filthy, feral little thing in his hands. "Sounds like we have a visitor." He turned off the water and placed the tiny creature back in one of the wooden crates that lined the walls of the workroom, latching the grated door shut. The kitten mewed pathetically and licked itself. "Yeah, don't think you're home free. You're still getting a bath. Those flees won't take care of themselves." He went back to the sink and rinsed his hands, calling, "In the back!"

Wehna kaht Fosaad appeared at the open half-door of the workroom, smiling her pretty smile. "Esahfa! You're here!"

He flashed her a grin. "Aren't I always?"

"I don't know. I just assumed I kept getting lucky." She winked.

"Doesn't seem all that lucky to have a dog who keeps throwing herself in front of carts."

Her face lit up. "How is Jasmine? Can I see her?"

Esahfa laughed. "And here I thought you came to visit me. She's through here. Come on in." He pulled up the bolt and opened the rest of the door.

"I brought my cousin with me, is that okay?"

"Of course. Just make sure she knows to keep calm around the animals."

"She does." Wehna turned back to the store front, "Ensi, come on!"

A vaguely familiar girl a few years younger than Esahfa and Wenha turned from the shelves where she'd been browsing and came around the counter to follow her cousin into the back.

"You'll love this." gushed Wehna. "They take care of all kinds of animals here. Last Dihnan I came by, and they had Lady Fatisah's marmoset. Sooo cute! Is he still here?"

"No, we sent him back fit as a fiddle."

"Esahfa's mother, Ochaboo, yeah, as in *the* Ochaboo, my Fa says she's the best animal healer in Zuhuz, and that she was even before she became a — what's she called again?"

"A druid."

"Right. And Esahfa's not bad at it either." She poked him in the ribs.

He laughed as he led them through another door into a long narrow stable where straw littered the floor. "Wehna, you make more noise than that marmoset."

"And you have it's manners."

"You're lucky you're cute." Esahfa brought them over to the right, where the muzzle of a sleek grey hound was just visible over the stall door, whining at the sound of Wehna's voice. "Down you go." Esahfa reached in and gave the dog a gentle shove before opening the stable door. The dog rushed out into Wehna's arms.

"Hallo sweet heart!"

"She's pretty well set to go home. I wouldn't let her race for a few days, the stitches still aren't out but I'll come by in a day or two for that."

"Thanks. You can send the bill— Esahfa watch out!" she shrieked as a gold snake whizzed in through the open side door and flitted around Esahfa's head. Wehna clutched Jasmine to her chest.

Esahfa raised a hand, and Junai settled herself around his wrist. "Hey there beautiful." He murmured. "Guess it's time to go?"

"Esahfa!" Wehna cried, "Kill it! Do something! It might bite you!"

"Not unless he's a mango." Ensi was smiling as she watched her cousin cower. "Look at her wings. She might snack on the occasional rodent, I'm guessing she'd much prefer something like this." She pulled a tiny orange from a pocket somewhere in the layers of her skirt, and held it out. Esahfa watched, impressed, as Junai took off from his arm to snatch the orange from Ensi's palm. The girl didn't so much as flinch, and her bright eyes never left the snakes impossibly quick wings. "Her venom works best for dissolving fruit fibre so she can drink it from the skin. It's the ones with red feather's you need to steer clear of, and even then, they hardly ever attack humans without provocation. Though I didn't know any of them could be tamed as pets."

Esahfa stared at her, fixated. "She's not a pet. She's a friend of my mothers."

Wehna got to her feet, blushing deeply. "Well I don't know how anyone is supposed to *know* any of that. And I've never seen it here before, Esahfa."

He didn't look at her as he answered, "Yeah, yeah, she doesn't come round the shop often, she's not crazy about cats." He took a step towards Ensi, reaching out an arm for the

hovering Junai, who let the intact orange peel drop to the floor as she landed on his forearm and slithered up to drape over his shoulders. "You know a thing or two about animals, Lady."

She returned his gaze, steadily and shrugged. "They interest me."

"That's why I brought her, of course." Wehna took a long leather tie from her pocket and attached it to Jasmines collar, who was letting out a low rumbling growl as she stared up at the snake. "But I think we'd better go."

"You should come back again soon." suggested Esahfa.

"Sure, maybe." Wehna was tugging Jasmine away towards the side door. "Come on girl. You don't want to burst your stitches."

Ensi's eyes hadn't left his. "Yeah, maybe." She smiled. "Thanks for the tour, I guess."

"Yeah, my pleasure."

"Well, see you around." She turned, and followed Wehna out into the lane.

Esahfa watched her go, until he noticed Junai was staring at him from his shoulder.

"Yeah. Thanks for that." He took out a couple of grapes from his pocket and fed them to her as he locked up the shop, and made his way through the streets up to the Noble Estates.

Ochaboo sat on a long bench in a wide upstairs hallway of house kaht-Ahrood, eyes fixed on the great wooden doors in the wall opposite, waiting. The house had always been a well kept place, albeit a little gawdy, but since Ochaboo's eldest daughter Aliya had arrived after marrying the oldest kaht-Ahrood boy, the floors glowed with fresh wax and the hangings blowing in the breeze from an open window sent wafts of sweet spices through the air. Ochaboo inhaled deeply. It shouldn't be long now.

On the bench next to her, Farida, her youngest daughter, shifted anxiously, glancing up from her book to look out the window at the noonday sun. Kalim, her eldest child, paced restlessly at the far end of the corridor. Esahfa, the youngest of the cubs, leaned casually against a wall, smiling as he picked dirt from beneath his nails and listened to his 24 year-old sister, Makiram, chatter away, her plump frame bouncing with nerves. Ochaboo smiled and felt blessed that Fate allowed her such simple moments in life. She tired to rise to her feet, but Junai, who had been resting in her lap, would not budge.

"Get up you lazy thing." she huffed. Junai lethargically fluttered to the windowsill to bask in the sunlight, and the Dokehda children fell still and silent, looking to their mother who rarely moved without purpose.

"*Someone's* been over feeding that snake."

For a moment, her grown children became guilty six year old cubs again as they chorused, "Sorry Mama", then shared a grin.

Ochaboo smiled. "I should have known." As she looked at them, she felt a lump in her throat. "It's nice, don't you think? The cubs all-together in one place. Doesn't happen so often these days." She walked over to the window and gazed out over the sprawling city of Zuhuz. From the rise on which the noble estates stood, one could see right over the glistening rooftops

of the cities' many districts, right down to the sea ports, beyond which stretched the gleaming waters of Suq Bay. "I suspect this will be one of our last gatherings together for a while."

"When do you leave for Hayil, Mama?" asked Makiram.

"I am to leave in the next three days, all things allowing."

"And you still think it wise?" Kalim walked to his mother and laid his hands on her shoulders. "I worry for you."

"When have we ever needed to worry about our mother, Kalim" Esahfa snorted.

Kalim glared. "Hayil is a very different city from Zuhuz. It isn't the same political dance as here, it's all back rooms and side streets. Nothing's in the open."

"Which is exactly why Sultana Alurah needs me." Ochaboo took her son's hand. "She is very young to be taking over such a labyrinth."

"But why you Mama? Hayil isn't your mess to manage."

"And under the old laws it shouldn't be Alurah's either. You know that if a precedent hadn't been set all those years ago when I won my trail, today Alurah would be some man's powerless prized possession and Hayil would be *his* headache."

"But that was her father's decision."

"One he couldn't have made if I hadn't fought for myself and my equal rights. I will not let that poor girl pay the cost for my freedom and leave her to rule such a rats nest on her own, at only 25, as the first Sultana in Mudoran History to boot."

"Fine, Mama, I understand. You feel responsible, you want to help. But honestly, it doesn't make sense. You are a wise womam—"

"—and a wonderful mother." gushed Makiram.

"—and she has done wonders for our family's station." Esahfa grinned.

Kalim was flustered. "Well yes, of course, but really—"

"You don't know the first thing about ruling a city." Farida turned her page matter-of-factly.

"Yes Farida." Kalim rolled his eyes at his sister. "Thank you as always for your tact."

Ochaboo shook her head. "Fate has a funny sense of humour sometimes. I have told Alurah the same thing, that I have no experience with ruling. Of course she points out that I raised the five of you, and apparently her father always said dealing with the people of Hayil is like wrangling a bunch of naughty children." She tweaked Kalim's nose.

At this, Esahfa laughed. "Then you're the woman for the job, Mama! Kalim, if you'd ever seen her handle a herd of johkobos you wouldn't be worried."

"I consider criminals and johkobos to be in fairly different leagues, brother." Kalim glared. "I do wish you would take this more seriously. Both of you."

Esahfa shrugged. "Alurah sees Mama as the reason she gets to be Sultana in the first place. Nothing wrong with wanting to share the fun."

"Esahfa is right. It might not make sense to us Kalim, but who am I to argue with the will of a Sultana? If Alurah is certain she wants an animal healing woman turned Druid to serve as her Vizier, and she is adamant that she does, then it is the least I can do to accept the post."

"That city is an absolute madhouse. I just don't know how she expects the two of you to manage on your own."

"We won't be on our own Kalim. That's what the high council is for."

"Maybe so, but I've heard whispers that finding people to serve on Alurah's high council might not be so easy. There are many who want nothing to do with a woman in power."

"Well, I can be very persuasive, and a little new blood never hurt, either. For every one pompous airbag who refuses, I'm sure we'll find someone with fresh perspective who'll jump at the chance." Ochaboo looked up into Kalim's face, too lined for his 27 years. "Stop worrying, love. We're two clever chickens. Between the two of us, and her many hangers-on, I'm sure we can manage the City of Intrigue just fine." She winked at him. "Besides, it's time Esahfa takes over my practice for himself, and without occupation I do get so terribly bored."

"I'll take good care of it, Mama." Esahfa grinned from his post against the wall.

"Oh yes, he'll croon over every fussy noble's johkobo and hunting dogs" grumbled Farida, "And he'll take care of every godforsaken ally cat that wanders in until the streets are flooded with felines."

"Oh don't start Farida," chuckled Ochaboo. "You can stay locked up in your university tower and never have to worry about any overpopulation your bother's care might cause." Farida glowered and looked back at her book while the other three did their best to stifle laughs.

Suddenly the great oak doors burst open and Hahtim kaht-Ahrood stood beaming in the doorway. "It's a girl!" He gasped. He turned and practically ran through the antechamber, back into the bedroom where his wife Aliya lay, red faced and sweat soaked, with a triumphant smile plastered across her lovely face. Ochaboo and her children rushed in after him, serving girls and midwives standing back as the family crowded round the bed to welcome the tiny bundle in Aliya's arms.

"Blessing on you, Aliya!" Makiram was glowing with pride for her sister.

"Thank you Makiram. It's been a long day. Would you fetch Isaph for me? He should be down the hall in his room."

"Of course." Makiram bounced out.

"So," Kalim put a proud hand on his sisters shoulder, "what will you call her?" Aliya ran a finger over the tiny nose, and looked down into great, sea green eyes.

"Nania."

"A beautiful name for a beautiful little girl." Ochaboo smiled wryly. "With those eyes she may one day draw as many looks as her own mother."

Haltim gazed adoringly down at his wife, "As any daughter of Aliya Dokehda should."

Makiram came bustling back into the room, pushing five year old Isaph before her. "Go on boy, your sister has arrived." Isaph went to stand by his father, peering at the swaths of cotton. "Is she in there?" Everyone laughed, but Isaph frowned and looked puzzled. "What? I thought she would be bigger. That's barely the size of a loaf of bread."

"Yes, Isaph, she is small." His mother held the bundle towards him so he could see his sister's face. "And that's all the more reason for you to love her. You're her older brother. You'll help to look out for her." Isaph stared at the baby for a long moment. "She's boring. I liked Sofya better." He turned and ran out of the room.

"Isaph!" Hahtim almost went after his son, but Aliya stopped him with a hand on his arm. Her eyes were watery, but she smiled softly.

“Let him go. It’s a lot of change for a young boy. He’ll come around.” Aliya let out a heavy sigh.

“You must be exhausted, cub.” said Ochaboo. “We should leave you to your rest.”

“Yes, I suppose that would be for the best. But perhaps I’ll be able to join you downstairs for dinner?”

“That should be fine,” the midwife chimed in, “so long as you get some good sleep and Nania is feeding properly.”

“We’ll see you soon, sister.” Farida gave one of her rare, warm smiles. “Rest well.”

As Ochaboo and her four children filed out of the room, she looked back over her shoulder to see Hahtim pulling a chair right up to the edge of the bed, grinning like a fool and whispering to his wife and baby girl. It was always a joy to see quiet, measured Hahtim come to life with his children. It seemed the only thing he was more devoted to than his studies and the Caliph was his family. As it should be.

The kaht-Ahrood kitchen was filled with pungent smells and bubbling pots as the cook barked orders to the kitchen maids and as Lady Karima kaht-Ahrood, Hahtim’s mother and lady of the house, fussed over the details of tonight’s celebratory dinner.

She paused as she passed Ochaboo, who was pouring tea for herself and her daughters, and eyed Junai who was settled on her shoulders. “Forgive me Lady Ochaboo, but I don’t usually allow reptiles in my kitchen. But the terrance is a lovely place for tea.”

“Of course Lady Karima. Thank you.” As she turned to go, she chuckled to her daughters. “Lady Ochaboo. Seven years in the Book of Bronze, and I still can’t get used to that.”

The three of them, Ochaboo, Makiram and Farida, took their tea through the formal dining room, pushing open the paned glass doors, and stepped out onto the stone terrace. Flowering vines and potted plants grew here in abundance, and rich cushions and blankets littered the sandstone tiles, ideal for enjoying the view of Zuhuz and the bright, Pentember sun. The three women settled themselves with their tea while Junai flitted off to explore the foliage. They passed a moment in silence, all three wrapped in the splendour of their city. Stretched out before them, the view was a patchwork of glittering glass and metal, domed roofs and polished stone, littered with the bright bursts of greenery and colour that were the many public gardens thriving in the rich soil of the inlet bank.

“You can see the old Dokehda House from here!” Makiram exclaimed, pointing towards the bottom of the Guilds District.

“And there’s the new one, just below High Street.” Ochaboo pointed just down the hill. “See the curved roof? That’s your grandfather’s favourite design. He used to put that in every one of his plans, but Kalim has now convinced him to reserve it for his pet projects.”

“You don’t get this kind of view from the merchant district.” Farida continued to gaze out at the sea. “If I cared for a life of splendour I might almost be jealous of Aliya, living in a place like this.”

“And before long Hahtim will be moving them up to the palace, now that Caliph Khalil has appointed him as his Vizier,” added Makiram.

“Yes, our Aliya has done well for herself.” Ochaboo shook her head. “If you’d told me as girl that my eldest daughter would marry into the Book of Silver, I would have told you to get checked for heat stroke. As any clay merchant’s daughter would, knowing her station.”

“But not her fate.” grinned Makiram. “You were not destined to be any clay merchants daughter, Mama.”

“No, apparently not.” Ochaboo sipped her tea. “And now I am off to be the Vizier to the *Sultana* of Hyial.”

The three women shared a look. Makiram stifled a giggle. Ochaboo grinned.

Farida just shook her head. “Now we have two Vizier’s in the family.” Barely a moment passed before they were all on their backs laughing, barely remembering their hot tea in time to keep it from spilling. When their laughter subsided and Ochaboo caught her breath, she looked at her two daughters.

“I’m glad we will all be together tonight. With such busy, important children, I wasn’t sure I’d see you all together before I left.”

“We are all happy to make time for you, Mama.” said Makiram, patting her mother’s arm. “The boys will be back tonight for supper, and we’ll all be together, all six of us, to celebrate little Nania.”

At this, Farida frowned. “I didn’t want to say anything upstairs, not in front of Aliya and Hahtim. But the baby is extremely small. Almost as small as —“

“Farida, must we —“

“No, Makiram, Farida has a point.” Ochaboo looked down into her tea. “Nania is very small. Almost as small as Sofya was when she was born. It is worth acknowledging.”

“But not so small.” Makiram’s voice was almost pleading. “And when Hahtim came down to get tea he said she was already nursing well.”

Ochaboo nodded. “It is a good sign. Sofya was tetchy from the day she was born. We can only hope that with nourishment, Nania will grow strong. To a healthy two year old a fever like the one that took Sofya would be nothing.”

“So strange” mused Makiram, “that after such a strong, healthy boy like Isaph, Aliya’s next two would be such...”

“Runts.”

“Farida!” Makiram smacked her.

“What? Technically that’s what they are! I may not be crazy about animals like most of you but I spent enough time around them in our household to know the small ones in a litter are the runts!”

“Yes, but you don’t call your nieces runts!” Makiram chided, a hand defensively to her stomach. “You are exasperating, you and your university technicalities. Besides, technically, you were a runt, and you turned out just fine.”

“Yes, Mama got one out of two. Let’s just hope Aliya has the same luck as Mama, and at that rate Nania will be fine!”

“Mama, she’s being awful!”

“Enough. Both of you.” Ochaboo sighed a long sigh. “Children die. It happens. It is a part of nature. When your twin brother died, only days after the two of you were born, I was devastated. But you were my greatest comfort, Farida. I was just so grateful to have you. It has been a hard 6 months for Aliya. I think Nania will be exactly what this family needs.”

“Isaph isn’t exactly happy about it.” said Farida.

“He is a young boy. It’s a lot for him to understand. I’m sure he will be just as good with Nania as he was with Sofya.”

“Whoops!”

A small wooden arrow flew through the open doorway and landed squarely in Makirams tea. Isaph entered at a run, bow in hand, and halted abruptly when he saw the mark that had been hit. He looked cautiously at the three women.

“Who’s tea was that?”

“It was mine Isaph.”

He sighed with relief. “Oh good. I thought maybe it was Auntie Farida’s. And then I would have had to run.”

“Not true!” cried Farida, taking the boys arm and pulling him into her lap. “I am only very grumpy with adults when they are silly. You are too cute to be silly, so I can’t be grumpy with you.” Isaph giggled, and then turned to Ochaboo.

“Grandma Jaguar, look what I can do!” he put his hand out palm up and shut his eyes, his face squishing up with concentration. A dessert swallow flew over the tall roof of the kaht-Ahrood house, circled once, and landed in his palm. His eyes flew open, and he beamed with delight. “You see? I am going to be just like you!” Ochaboo offered her hand to the little bird, and it jumped into her palm. “And uncle Esahfa. He says he’s going to teach me to ride johkobos. And I’m going to be a johkobo warrior.”

“I’m sure you will be a great warrior, Isaph.” said Ochaboo “But unless you want Grandma Ahrood chasing you instead of Farida, I wouldn’t practice shooting in the house.”

“Papa says that when we move up the palace I can go out to the training yards and shoot my bow there as much as I like.”

“The castle will be a very exciting place for a boy like you. I’m sure there will be lots and lots to do”

“Well this looks like a fun party.” Rajesh Dalhass stood in the doorway, his lined face and greying hair illuminated by the evening sunlight that streamed across the city.

“Raj!” Makiram jumped up and bounded to her husbands side.

“You know, you don’t move like a pregnant lady.” He leaned down and scooped his young wife up in his arms.

She giggled. “I thought the guild meeting would keep you later!”

“I excused myself.” he grinned, placing her gently back on her feet. “You know how I feel about missing parties.”

“Especially when there’s food involved.” Farida whispered to Isaph, making the boy laugh.

“Mother Jaguar,” Rajesh bowed with mock formality, “congratulations on the latest addition to your brood.”

Ochaboo pulled herself to her feet. "Am I a cat or chicken Rajesh? I can't be both."

Good natured Rajesh just laughed. "I should know better than to mix animal metaphors with a druid. Esahfa and Kalim are also back, and from the looks of it supper is almost under way." He took his wife's hand. "Shall we go in?"

He and Makiram turned and headed into the dining room where servants were loading serving trays onto the long wooden table. Isaph leapt up after them. The smell of rich sauce and spices wafted through the air. A baby's laughter echoed down from an upstairs window.

"Well that's quick." Farida raised her eyebrows at her mother and said, "You know, I don't think I ever heard Sofya laugh," before turning to follow her sister into the house.

Cheers and applause filled the air as moments later Aliya emerged from the hallway into the dining room, Nania in her arms. She made her way through the crowded room, greeting Dokehda relative's and in-laws alike, who had all come to welcome the new addition to the family. People milled about, gushing about the babies bright eyes, or the few soft brown ringlets already crowning her head, and extending their thanks and compliments to Karima kaht-Ahrood and her husband for their generous hospitality and the amazing feast spread on the table before them.

In the midst of all this, Aliya finally made her way to the terrace where her mother stood, gazing out over Zuhuz. She passed Ochaboo her newest granddaughter and leaned her willowy frame against the doorway.

"She's very small, Mama." Aliya's fingers twisted in her skirt. "The midwife says she's not particularly strong either." Ochaboo bounced Nania in her arms, sharing a smile with the infant.

"But Aliya, she is full of life. I can feel it. Just look at her! Look at her eyes. They are full of light. Full of...something." Ochaboo stared into those huge limpid green pools. "They are quite the eyes, Aliya."

"So everyone keeps telling me. But I haven't a clue where they came from. Hahtim says they're not from his side, so they must be from ours. But I didn't remember anyone in the Dokehda line or even from your line having green eyes."

"They don't." Ochaboo chuckled, gazing out over the city. "But then, before me, no one in either line had much magic in their blood either. And now I have a daughter who's a Sorcerer at the university of Zuhuz, a son with wild healing magic, and a grandson who is calling birds to him at age five. If magic can materialize in a bloodline, so can green eyes."

Aliya smiled. "I suppose you're right." There was a comfortable silence for a moment, with the chatter of the dining hall drifting out to them on the breeze. "Will you miss Zuhuz, Mama?"

"I don't know Aliya. I do know I will miss my cubs, very very much."

"I am glad you are here to meet Nania before you go."

"So am I." Ochaboo looked down into those big green eyes. "Do you know all this fuss is about you little one?" Nania burbled as if to reply to her grandmother, making both Ochaboo and Aliya laugh. "Yes, I'm sure you know. And I'm sure it won't be the last."

Chapter 2: Runt

21st of Hexember, 965E

Palace of Zuhuz

Early evening sunlight streamed in through the tall glass windows, illuminating the high vaulted ceilings of the wide sitting room. The Vizier's apartments in the Palace of Zuhuz were generous, and their location on the first floor of the southeast side meant that just outside and one step down sprawled the Royal Gardens. The great glass doors out onto the lawn now stood open, framed by white sheer curtains that billowed in the warm summer air. In the midst of this tranquility, dwarfed by the great hearth and grand carved furniture, eight-year-old Nania kaht-Ahrood reclined in a large arm chair, her embroidery fallen idle in her lap, feet swinging lazily high off the floor. She gazed out a window, captivated by the light that glittered off the tall towers of the university visible beyond the tree line.

"Nania kaht-Ahrood, I leave you for a few hours and I return to find a spider monkey where I left my daughter. That is no way for a young lady to sit."

"Yes Mama." Nania straightened herself as her mother Aliya picked up her own embroidery and settled gracefully into the seat across from her daughter.

"Mama, do you think Auntie Farida can see us from up in her tower?" Her mother looked out the window.

"You know, I don't know. It's rather far away. And come to think of it, I'm not sure which of the towers your Auntie Farida even studies in."

"I bet she sits up there in one of those towers with a spy glass, and watches us, and all of Zuhuz! And that's how she knows so much." Her mother smiled.

"We should wave to her then!"

Nania stood up in her chair and waved both arms towards the great towers.

"Hallo Auntie Farida!" she called, her voice floating out over the lawn. "Come and have tea with us!"

"Nania, ladies don't stand on furniture. Now back to practicing those loop-stiches, please."

"Yes Mama." She hopped back into her seat and picked up the handkerchief she was working on. "But I won't do even one more loop-stitch. They are dull. I'm working on a present for Isaph instead." Aliya raised her brows.

"Really now? And what's that?"

"I'm doing sand swallows." Her mother rose and swept around to peer over Nania's shoulder at her work.

"My goodness! Nania that's lovely! Where did you learn that design?"

"I'm not stupid Mama. I know what sand swallows look like. So I just stitched them."

"That is very impressive Nania. I didn't start my own designs till I was much older. You are a natural." She kissed the top of her daughters head. "You keep at it. I'll see about tea." She looked around. "Have you seen Noorine this afternoon?"

"Last I saw her she was off to the laundry in a fuss about mud on the carpet again."

"Oh Isaph. Well, never mind, I'll put the water on myself." She grinned, "Just don't tell Lady Fatihsah or you know what we'll hear for the next tenday." She put a hand to her forehead and struck a dramatic pose. "A Lady fussing about with pots!"

Nanai joined her, heads thrown back as they wailed, "The notion. The notion!"

Their laughter bounced off the arches making it sound like a chorus of sand spirits laughed along with them.

Aliya sighed as she glided over to light the fireplace. "Nobles."

"But we are nobles, Mama."

"Yes, but we weren't always Nania. Your mother was born a long ways down the hill and you'd do well to remember. We nobles living up on our great heights are just lucky people who fate has smiled upon. That does not mean we are above making our own tea."

There was quiet as Aliya stoked the fire and Nania sat pensively staring out the window.

"Mama, how will you know how much tea to make?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well, how will we know if Auntie Farida has accepted our invitation?"

Her mother smiled. "Well decorum says that when a lady receives an invitation, she should send a prompt reply, accept or no."

No sooner had she finished her sentence than the sound of boots echoed out in the antechamber. Nania's eyes lit up as she gasped. "Like magic!" She flung herself towards the doorway and nearly collided with her father.

"Steady on!" He caught her in his arms and hoisted her up onto his hip. "What's the excitement, Nahni?"

"I thought you were a messenger from Auntie Farida. We invited her to tea, and it's only good manners to send a reply. But it's just you."

"You sound disappointed."

"No. I should have known. Auntie Makiram always says Auntie Farida has no manners to speak of." Her father chuckled.

"Down you go, Nahni." He kissed Aliya and looked about. "Hallo, love. Where's our boy? Khalil has invited us to go shoot against him and Prince Ostah. I bet him 5 gold that'd we'd burry them."

"He's outside somewhere." Aliya waved towards the forested gardens. "Gods know where."

Hahtim strode over to the open door and put his fingers to his lips, blowing three short blasts. A moment passed before one short blast came echoing back, and not far off a flock of birds came bursting up from the treetops, soaring towards them over the Pavilion of Light that sat nestled at the edge of the gardens, and up over the palace. "Well, he's on his way back now."

"I could go with you, Fa."

"Would you like to Nania? We're just going down to the practice yards to shoot. I'm afraid you might not find it very interesting."

Nania made a face. "That's not true. I like bows. I always watch Isaph practice with his."

“Whisper and the wind will carry, here he comes!”

Isaph had burst through the trees at a sprint, his long legs carrying him across the short stretch of lawn towards the palace. He bound up the step, and stood panting in the doorway.

“Three blasts. Must be something good, Fa.”

“Their royal highnesses have challenged us to shoot. Three arrows each. Five gold to the winner.”

Isaph grinned a wolf’s grin. “I’ll grab my bow.”

“Wait, Isaph, your feet are covered in dirt. Noorine will have a nervous fit if you track it in twice in one day.”

“Sorry Ma.” He sat on the step just outside, trying to rub his feet clean.

“You know if you stuck to the paths they wouldn’t be half so filthy.”

“And it wouldn’t be half so fun.” He lifted a foot up to show her. “Is that clean enough?”

“Yes, but please do something about your hands before you go see the Caliph.”

“Here Isaph!” Nania ran to her chair and grabbed the handkerchief, biting off the extra thread before handing it to her brother. He took it hastily without a word and scrubbed at the dirt on his palms.

“Did you see, Isaph? She did sand swallows especially for you.”

“Did she really?” Hahtim walked over and took a corner of the cloth in his hands, examining it more closely as Isaph continued to wipe his fingers. “They’re very detailed. Look at the feathers! How very thoughtful, Nania.”

Nania looked up at her brother with wide eyes. “Do you like it, Isaph?”

“Uh, sure. It’s neat.” He ruffled her hair. “Thanks Mouse.” His hands clean, he dropped the handkerchief on a table and moved towards the hall.

“Grab your old bow, too.” Isaph halted and turned to his father, eyes suspicious.

“Why?”

“Nahni is going to come down with us. A family effort.”

Isaph’s shoulders slumped. “You’ve got to be kidding me!” He stared his father, his eye pleading. “Fa, it’s the Caliph and his Crown Prince. It’s pretty important we win this one, isn’t it?”

“And we will, but that only takes one arrow, and there’s no reason Nahni can’t have a shot.”

“But she’s never held a bow in her life! Look at her, I bet she can’t even pull back the string!”

“Isaph.” There was warning in his mother voice. Nania’s lip was already quivering.

“What? It’s true! She’ll just make a mess of it, and Ostah will laugh about it for a month!”

“Be reasonable Isaph, it’s just a friendly challenge.”

“I’m not going if you’re going to let the runt shoot. It will just be embarrassing.” Isaph stormed off down the hall to his room. Tears trickled down Nania’s cheeks as she silently picked up the handkerchief off the table.

“Would you like me to take that down to the laundry for you, Nania? I’m sure Noorine has a trick that’ll have it clean in no time.”

“No. It’s okay Mama. I’ll take it down.”

“You’re not going to come be my second, Nahni?”

“No Fa, take Isaph. I won’t be much help.” She turned to go. “Can I take the servant stair Ma? It’s faster, and I won’t get in anyone’s way.”

“Of course, Nahni. I’ll have tea ready when you come back.” Her mother’s voice was soft, but her eyes were stony as she stared off after her son. Nania went into the hall, and the sound of the servants’ door creaked shut behind her. Aliya whirled on her husband, fire blazing in her dark eyes.

“He shouldn’t even be allowed to go, talking about his sister that way. That is the third time in a tenday he’s reduced the poor thing to tears. He needs to learn that just because she is small she is not to be trod upon.”

“Yes, he is insensitive.” Hahtim shook his head. “When did our boy get such a temper?”

Aliya sighed, “He’s at a volatile age, I suppose. Lots of things change. Everything becomes a matter of grave importance. But it’s never too early for him to learn some control.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’ll go talk to him. And I’ll see if Esahfa is still about in the stables to be my second.”

Aliya bit her lip. “He is a terrible shot.”

Her husband sighed. “I know. But he is family. And that was the deal.” He kissed his wife on the cheek. “The things we do to teach our children.” He strode out, grumbling. “That boy just cost me the easiest five gold I’d have made in a tenday.”

When Nania returned to their apartments through the servant’s passage, she found her mother on the far side of the great room at their favourite round table with a pot of tea, and a plate of rosemary cakes.

“I sent to the kitchen for something to go with our tea. We got lucky, they just made our favourites fresh.” Enticed by the sweet steam still rising off the plate of treats, Nania slid meekly into a seat, placing the clean, folded handkerchief on the table before her. Aliya put two cakes on Nania’s plate, and poured her a cup of tea.

“Thank you Mama, but I don’t really feel like tea.”

“No? You were looking forward to it earlier.”

“Yes, I know. But I’m just not very thirsty anymore.” Aliya reached out and rubbed her daughters hand.

“Your father had a chat with Isaph. He says he is sorry he called you a runt.”

“Do I have to believe him?”

Her mother smiled sadly. “No, you do not.”

“Good. Because I don’t.”

“If it makes you feel any better, your father didn’t let him go to the training yards.”

Nania looked confused. “Then who did he go with?”

“Uncle Esahfa.” They both grimaced.

“Oh dear. Isaph can’t be happy.”

“No, but he needs to learn that just because he is older and bigger than you does not give him the right to treat you badly. He is going to be a strong man one day, and he needs to

learn that strength does not give him the right to—“ she stopped abruptly, taking a deep breath. “Boys at any age can be mean, Nania, and I’m sorry your bother was hurtful, even if he is not.”

“It’s not fair, Mama. If I were strong, I wouldn’t treat people like he does.”

“And that’s one of your gifts, Nahni. You see things your brother can’t, you see people in a way he doesn’t. In fact, you can do all kinds of things your brother can’t do.” She touched the folded handkerchief on the table. “Your brother could never make something beautiful like this.”

“It’s not the same! I don’t want to be nice and sweet and sew forever. That isn’t strength. I want to fight, Mama. I want to call birds to my hand and have magic! I want to be like Isaph.” She clenched her fists on the table. “But I can’t. Because I’m a stupid little girl, and he is a boy. We can never be strong like them.” Aliya regarded her daughter for a long moment.

“Nania, let me ask you something. Grandma Jaguar is a woman. Do you think she is strong?”

Nania made a face. “That’s different, Grandma Jaguar is a druid.”

“Your grandma was the Jaguar long before she became a druid. She was just a woman once, very much like you and I.”

“What do you mean, Mama?” There was a pause, while Aliya stared into her tea. “Mama? Why is she the Jaguar?”

“Do you know what happened to Grandfather Joskous, Nania?”

“Yes. He died a long time ago.”

“Yes, Nania. And do you know how?”

Nania shook her head.

“Your Grandfather was a very strong man. While he was alive, he managed every construction project the Dokehda firm designed and built. But he had many faults. And one of them was his temper. Sometimes he...” Her eyes took on a far off look, “Well, he wasn’t always very nice. Not to Mama, and not to us. One night, when I was around your brother’s age, your Grandfather came into our room, and he was very, very angry. And when some men get angry, Nania, they get very dangerous.” She paused, and Nania’s impatience got the better of her.

“What happened Mama? Did he hurt you?”

“No. He would have. But your grandma put a knife in his belly.”

Nania’s eyes went wide. “She killed her own husband?”

“Yes. She killed her own husband to protect her cubs. And she did that without training, without magic, without anything but her own strength. And then, when the law tried to take her from us and throw her in jail, she fought them too. And she won. And *that* is why they started calling her the Jaguar.”

“But how?” Nanai whispered in wonderment. “How did she do it?”

Aliya smiled. “If there is one thing I have learned in my life Nania, it’s that you can not underestimate the strength that comes from being a mother. Take me, for example.” She spread her slender arms. “I am not strong, I can’t fight with a scimitar or fire a bow. But I have given birth to three children. You ask your father, who has been through his fair share of fights, if he would trade places with me one of those days.” She grinned. “I bet you anything he would say no. Nahni, I grew out of your grandmother’s body, and I was born out of her strength. So you

were born from me. Every family is a testament to the strength of a long line of women, and yours is no exception. You are no exception, Nania.”

Nania stared at her mother, awe in her eyes. “Do you think I will be a mother some day?”

“I certainly hope you are.”

“Then when I am, I will be strong for my cubs just like you and grandma.”

“Of course you will. You are already strong Nahni. You just have to see how.”

Nania bit into her cake, relishing the savoury-sweet richness. Mouth still full she mumbled, “I’d like to see Isaph try and grow something inside him. I bet he’d get even fatter than Auntie Makiram when she had her triplets.”

Aliya pressed a delicate finger to her lips, suppressing the urge to laugh. “Nania, that is not a very nice thing to say, especially with your mouth full. It is not ladylike.”

Nania swallowed. “Yes Mama.” She grinned, and slurped her tea.

The next day, Isaph rose with the Greater Sun. He enjoyed having time for his own morning ritual during his free summer months, without tutors or trainers to dictate his schedule. He dawned a loose-sleeved shirt and light breeches. Gingerly, he took his bow down off its hook, rubbing his hands over the polished wood, breathing in the smell of the beeswax as he inspected it for thin spots. Finding the bow in good condition, he strung it and slung it over his shoulder with his quiver. His leather gloves and arm guard tucked safely in his back pocket, he padded out into the sitting room to escape to the practice yard.

He found Nania sitting in her armchair, waiting for him.

“Good morning, Isaph” she smiled cautiously.

“What do you want, Mouse?”

“I was wondering if I could come with you this morning to watch you shoot.” For a moment she thought he would refuse her, but then he sighed.

“Fine, Mouse. You can come watch. Just try not to squeak too much.”

“I don’t squeak. Mama says I’m actually quite...quite... articulate! For my age. Because I read. Auntie Farida says—“

“There. See? Squeaking. I need to focus before I get to the range.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.”

The Lesser Sun was already up, turning the sky a deep periwinkle blue. As an almost full Bara Druu was just visible over the forest, cloud formations swirling over it’s milky blue surface. As it was about to set, the Greater Sun was just cresting the horizon, casting a soft orange glow on the palace lawn and making flecks in the sandstone of the Pavilion glimmer in the light. The two walked in silence along the stone path that circled the palace, heading south around the edge of the building, until the path split in two. Garden Path curved off to the right, marking the edge of the royal gardens as it looped all the way around the back of the Palace grounds. Straight ahead along Palace Path were the outdoor training grounds, a maze of many fenced dirt courts, used for sparring and weapons practice. Isaph led Nania along until they reached the archery ranges on the far side of the yards.

At this early hour only a few servants milled about, extinguishing the torches that stood outside the stables where the Palace guard and nobles housed their johkobo. The only other figure in the yard stood stretching, waking up his body for some early morning archery. Despite being almost two years Isaph's senior, 15 year old Prince Ostah did not have Isaph's height or broad shoulders, but his boyish frame carried all the easy confidence one would expect in a crown prince. He grinned as they approached.

"Morning Isaph. Wasn't sure you'd make it after you missed last night. Word is you got grounded for bad behaviour."

"Well yes, Smarmy-pants, but I'm here now aren't I." The boys clapped each other on the shoulder in greeting. Ostah nodded towards Nania.

"This your penance?"

Isaph shrugged. "She wanted to come watch. I don't see the harm. Unless you're scared to lose in front of a girl."

"Whatever you say. Get warm. I'm still fresh after whooping your father and uncle last night." Ostah picked up his own bow and arrows and took his place in one of the shooting lanes on the far side of the range. In this court, the targets were set at 50 feet.

"You can sit back there behind the fence." Isaph gestured to a line of tall stools that sat under a sunshade, set up like a viewing gallery against the wall of the Palace. "That's where the girls always sit when they watch us. Keeps you from walking in front of an arrow." As Isaph began his stretches, Nania walked over to the stools, which were nearly taller than she was. She grabbed one by both legs and began dragging it with great effort over the dirt towards her brother.

"What are you doing, Mouse? You look ridiculous, leave it there."

"But I want to be closer." As she struggled with the overlarge seat, Isaph sighed.

"Here, Mouse." He dragged it over to the fence with ease. "Better?" Nania used a low rung of the fence as a step to hoist herself up onto the stool. She now sat just feet behind her brother's shooting position.

"Yes. Better. Thank you Isaph."

"Uhuh."

"Mama hates it when we say 'uhuh'. It's supposed to be, 'you're welcome.'"

Isaph turned slowly, staring at her. Then he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and managed through gritted teeth, "Whatever you say, Mouse."

Nania watched Isaph take a few practice shots, glancing over at Ostah's target now and then to see how he fared. In a lowered voice, she said, "Ostah is good, Isaph."

Isaph notched another arrow and took aim. "Yes, thanks Mouse, I know that."

"But you're better. Your body stays still when you release, and he keeps letting his arm jump left."

Her brother's bow dropped to his side, as he turned to stare at Nania in consternation. "What?"

Nania shrugged. "Watch him shoot. Look at his arrows. It's pretty obvious."

Her brother turned to watch the prince. As he raised the bow to take aim, his form was perfect, but on the release there was the smallest twitch in his left shoulder, and his arrow flew to join the cluster just left of target center.

"Well look at that. You're right mouse." Then he glared, remembering he was supposed to be upset with her. "Now enough squeaking. I only have a few more practice shots."

A few moments later, Ostah called over, "You ready, kaht-Ahrood?"

Isaph gave a great mock bow. "Whenever you are, your Highness." They both went to collect their arrows and met in the centre of the lanes, taking their shooting stances next to each other.

"Three arrows, no re-shoots. Closest to the bullseye wins."

"Agreed."

Together they drew, and together they fired, their arrows whizzing down the lanes to thud heavily into their respective targets. Isaph's arrow hit two rings above the bullseye. Ostah's was two rings to the left. Without words, they drew their next arrows from their quivers and took their shots. This time, Isaph's arrow quivered just inches to the right of the bullseye, while Ostah's thudded near his first. By now there were more people wandering through the yards. The stables were almost bustling, and a few men of the palace guard had stopped by the fence to watch the final shot.

"You sure you are not tired after all that shooting last night?" Isaph taunted as they set their third arrow. "That bow arm of yours looks a little tired."

"Nonsense, there's wind."

"Funny, doesn't seem to be catching my arrows." The palace guards hid smiles, and Nania giggled.

"Very funny Isaph. Let's get this over with so I can win."

They each drew their bows, taking careful aim. This time, Ostah's arrow arrived barely left of the bullseye. But Isaph's arrow found true home.

"Hurray Isaph!" Nanai cheered. The men laughed and gave a small applause for the victor before going on their way. Ostah slung his bow over his shoulder.

"Well, lucky shooting kaht-Ahrood." He offered his hand. "I'll get you next time."

"Sounds good, your Highness. And just as a sign of good faith, I'll let you hold on to my five silver for me until then."

"Hey! Ostah! Isaph!" Doshass il-Tahrit and Mukah kaht Ahseed came trotting towards them from the stables, each leading a johkobo. Doshass was a short, slightly chubby young man, while Mukah was a lanky thing with a mouth that never stopped moving.

"Morning Mukah. Doshass" Ostah greeted each of them with a warm smile and a nod. "You are out early."

"We wanted to get in a few laps on the boys before the paths got busy." Mukah patted the neck of his johkobo. "Care to join us?" Ostah turned to Isaph.

"What do you say, kaht-Ahrood? Want to let me take my money back."

Isaph grinned.

"You can try."

Nania followed the four boys as they made their way to the edge of the training yards, where the stonework of Garden Path stretched out in either direction before them.

"You first, lads." Ostah and Isaph held the reins as Doshass and Mukah pulled themselves onto their mounts.

"Ready?" The johkobos scratched at the ground with their talons, their beady eyes glinting as their riders crouched low over their necks.

"Set."

Nania watched, captivated, as the muscles in the birds' powerful haunches tensed.

"Go!"

"Yah!"

The birds took off, careening down the path. They were visible for a few moments, hurtling along neck and neck, before they disappeared around a curve and were gone. After the explosive start, things suddenly seemed very quiet.

"Now what?" Nania asked, looking up at her brother.

"Just wait."

The three of them settled themselves on the grassy side of the path. Nania lay on her back, closed her eyes and listened for the sound of returning riders while the Prince and her brother chatted idly. It couldn't have been more than two minutes or so before she heard galloping footfalls, and Mukah's johkobo came racing round the bend, Doshass close on his heels. Mukah let out a victorious whoop as he reached the finish point and reined his great bird to a halt. Just behind him, Doshass's johkobo ground to a stop, and the boy rolled off sideways onto the grass.

"So close!" he moaned, then sat up. "I know Mukah, a win is a win." He reached into his pocket and handed over a piece of silver.

"Your turn." Mukah tossed his coin and tucked it in his pocket. "Ready to clean him out Ostah?"

"You know it. Especially since big bones over here sits in the saddle like a sack of bricks." He elbowed Isaph playfully, but Isaph looked unimpressed. The two boys mounted up, and Nania couldn't help agree that compared to slender Ostah, Isaph sat much heavier on his johkobo's back.

Mukah put a hand in the air. "Ready? Set. Go!" The two birds were off like a shot. As they approached the bend in the road, a woman yelped and dove into view, having narrowly missed being run over by Isaph's beast. It let out a loud cry itself, breaking stride for a moment before it disappeared around the corner. The woman picked herself up off the ground, muttering as she glared after the racing johkobos. Doshass and Mukah sniggered she passed them on the path. Then Mukah groaned.

"We need to get permission to take a few birds out of the city for an afternoon. I'm so sick of getting up this early just to have a crack at this piddly little loop."

"Yeah, good luck with that. Esahfa might let us, but there's no way grumpy old Commander il-Dresh would let us take palace mounts off palace grounds."

"Then I'll have to convince my Fa to buy me my own johkobo. I'm nearly 14, he had one when we was my age."

"Yeah, well, knowing how stingy your Fa is I wouldn't hold your breath."

"You watch you mouth, Doshass il-Tahrit. Or one of these days I'll jump on a johkobo and chase you right out of the city out into the sand dunes. See how much ground these things can really cover."

"I didn't realize they were so fast." The two boys turned and looked at Nania, clearly having forgotten she was even there. She sat curled up in the grass, her arms wrapped around her knees, staring anxiously at the spot where the path curved back around the trees. "It takes my Ma and I a good 15 minutes to walk the outside of the gardens."

"Uh, yeah." Doshass said, glancing sideways at his companion. "I guess they do move pretty quick."

"Kweh!" The cry of a johkobo echoed off the palace as Prince Ostah barreled into view. Mukah grinned. "Especially with the right rider."

Ostah reached the finish place just as Isaph's johkobo rounded the corner. He jumped off the bird's back and lay down in the grass, arms behind his head, lounging like he'd been there for hours.

"Why Isaph, whatever took you so long?" He grinned innocently as Isaph pulled up his mount and jumped off, his eyes stormy.

"I want a rematch." Isaph fumed, pulling off his riding gloves. "He never got his stride back after we nearly hit that woman."

"Excuses, excuses, Isaph. I won fair and square. We're even."

"Yes, fine. We're even." Isaph grumbled. Then he noticed Nania had made her way over to Ostah's johkobo and was staring up into its dark beady eyes. It had its long neck bent down to the tiny girl, head cocked, as if he in turn were fascinated by her great green eyes.

"I've never seen one this close before."

"Well get away, Mouse, before you upset it."

"He doesn't look upset, Isaph. I think he looks like he's in love." Doshass and Mukah laughed along with their Prince as the johkobo huffed through its beak, sending Nania's dark curls flying back off her face.

She giggled. "You think he likes me?"

"I'll say. You want to see what it's like sitting up in the saddle?"

"Ostah, her feet won't even reach the stirrups." Isaph snorted.

"So? I think she'll look cute as a button up there." Ostah crossed his ankles and leaned back on his arms, the very picture of a Prince having his way. "Help her up, Isaph."

Isaph forced a grin, and bowed low, trying to play along.

"Very well, your highness."

Nania could barely contain her excitement as Isaph picked her up by the waist and set her in the saddle. He was right, her feet dangled half a foot above the stirrups. Gingerly, she took the leather reins in one hand, and ran the other over the creature's feathered neck.

"He's so beautiful." She breathed.

"You know how to ride, Nania?" asked the prince.

"No," Isaph grinned wickedly at his friends, "but she knows how to hold on." He smacked the johkobo with a glove and with a loud wark it leapt forward, nearly unseating Nania with its

first few steps. She threw her arms around its neck and held on for dear life, her knees squeezing the saddle with all her might, her eyes tight shut in terror. After a few heart-stopping moments, the sounds of the boys howling laughter faded away behind her, and all she could hear was the steady beat of talons striking the stones. She felt the rhythm of the bird's thick muscles as they rocketed along. The rushing wind whipped her hair back, but it also carried the smell of forest blossoms to her nose. The world beyond her eyelids seemed almost...peaceful. She took a deep breath, and opened her eyes.

The world sped by at a break-neck pace. On her right stretched the rich greens of sycamores and vines, the bright pinks of lotus blooms: the lush growth of the Royal Gardens. On the left, just below her down a short steep slope, wound Crown Street, which divided the castle grounds from the bustling University of Zuhuz. She gazed down at the streaming students, priests, and professors, before the path began to turn, looping back towards the palace.

Nania's fear had evaporated, replaced by exhilaration. "Faster!" She cried as she clung to the saddle. "Please! Let's go faster!" The johkobo let out a cry and stretched its neck forward, its legs pumping as fast as it could as the path curved back along the palace towards the training yards. She zipped past the door to her families apartments, past the Pavilion of Light, and moments later as she rounded the corner, she saw the boys on the grass, staring in shock as she rode up along side them.

"Well... that was fast." Prince Ostah regarded Nania, respect in his eyes.

"How did she... How did you?" Muhak could barely get the words out, while Doshass's mouth simply hung open, staring up at the eight year old still astride the johkobo. She beamed at them all.

"That. Was the most fun. Ever." She panted.

"She outrode us all. Her first time, and she out-rode us all." Mukah threw his hands in the air. "I'll never ride again!"

"She cheated." Isaph's face was twisted in shock and rage. "You must have. You took one of the paths through the north end, didn't you? You cut across."

"Isaph..." Nania faltered, uncertain. "I didn't. I promise. I didn't cheat."

He turned to his friends, practically spitting. "You can't honestly believe she managed the loop that fast, do you? Look at her!"

"Exactly. Look at her." The prince watched Nania as she slid down off the johkobo's back. "She probably weighs less than most city guard's saddle bags. She barely weighed it down."

"It's like they flew!" Doshass finally managed.

"Don't be dumb." Isaph snapped. "Of course she didn't fly. She cheated! She had to have cheated."

Ostah shook his head. "All I know is, I want to race Nania next. But I wouldn't put money on it. By the gods, I wouldn't."

"Isaph! Isaph slow down!"

Isaph dragged Nania by the arm, her shoulder wrenching as she practically ran to keep up.

"Isaph, you're hurting me." He slowed his pace, but did not loosen his grip as he turned off the path to cut towards their quarters. "Isaph, why did we have to go? You lied. Mama didn't want us home now, everyone will be at breakfast."

"I wasn't having fun anymore." He growled as he pulled her up the step and into the deserted sitting room.

"Well I wanted to race." Nania pouted. "You could have gone home by yourself. I don't see why I couldn't stay."

Isaph threw his bow and quiver down in a chair and rounded on her. "Because. They are my friends, and you are just my runt sister. You may have fooled them into thinking you're something special, but you haven't fooled me."

"You're just mad because I rode faster than you. You're mad because you lost. Oh, poor bird boy, so big and strong, but couldn't make his johkobo go any faster."

"Shut up!" He roared. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!" His grip tightened even harder on Nania's wrist.

"Ow! Isaph, let go!" She pulled against him.

"You, runt, are nothing." His eyes gleamed with fury. "You are not some lady warrior who goes riding about on johkobos. You are a weak, helpless little spit. See?" He spun her and turned her wrist up behind her back." She yelped and he laughed. "Oh come on. I'm barely touching you! You're so sad!" He pushed her hand up, "Come on, march runt!" She bit her lip to keep herself from making any more sound as he paraded her around the sitting room and down the hall. "You see, runt? You are weak, and I am strong. And that's what matters." They turned into his bedroom. "Now, I am tired of listening to you squeak."

He threw open the door to his closet and shoved Nania in against the shelves. He slammed the closet shut, and Nania's hands scrambled blindly behind her to find the door handle. She heard a chair scrape across the floor and felt it jam against the wood at her back. "Go ahead, runt. Get yourself out of this one." She heard his footsteps retreating, and the door to his bedroom shut.

"Isaph?" He did not reply. "Isaph!" He was gone.

Nania stared forward into the tight, cramped darkness at what she assumed must be a pile of clothes. The only light was that which trickled in through the tiny crack beneath the door, barely illuminating her feet. Having found the door handle behind her she tried to jiggle it. No use. The door would not budge. Nania took a few breaths to steady herself. She could not panic. Breakfast would be over soon, and Mama and Father and Noorine would all come back to the apartment. She would wait, and listen for their return.

She stood, pressed between the door and the shelves for what felt like an hour, but she did not hear anyone return. Perhaps she had missed it?

"Hallo? Noorine? Mama?"

Silence.

Why was this taking so long? They should have been back by now. She shifted her weight back and forth between her legs. They were starting to tire after standing so still. If only there were room to sit down. She felt around on the shelves in front of her, and noticed that the bottom shelf was set a full two feet from the floor. She slid her foot around to see what was in the space below, but found it empty. Slowly, awkwardly, she bent her knees and twisted herself until she could fold her legs under the bottom shelf and slide down the door onto her bum. She stretched out her legs as best she should could. She focused on her own breath, being as quiet as she could and listening intently for any sounds outside.

Hours passed.

"Is anyone out there?" Someone had to come back eventually. But what if they couldn't hear her? How long would she have to be here? What if...what if no one ever found her.

She shook her head. That was silly. Sooner or later someone would let her out.

"I hope sooner." She whispered to herself. Her voice caught in her throat, and she felt her lip begin to quiver. She heard Isaph's voice in her head. *You're just a helpless little spit. Just so sad.* She banged a fist against the door.

"Somebody?"

You are weak.

"Please, someone. Mama! Noorine! Fa!" She heard Isaph's laughter echo through her head. "Let me out!" She cried, frantic. "Somebody! Let me out!" Tears streamed down her face. The darkness around her felt thicker. Had the closet always been this narrow? Or were the walls creeping towards her? Nania felt panic rising in her chest, her breath coming in short, dry heaves. Was it possible to suffocate in a closet? What if no one ever found her, and she died right here in her brother's room? Her thoughts were whirling, her fingers scrabbled on the wood behind her, searching for a weakness, for any way out, through, away from this tiny, shrinking place. She dug at the crack between the door and the stone floor until her fingers ached, gasping for air. She threw her self back against the wood, over and over again.

"I need to get out! I need to get out!" It was no use. She would die here. And no one would remember the runt was even gone.

Exhausted, feeling hopeless, she collapsed heaving to the floor, and wept.

Isaph strode toward the great dining hall for supper, hands in his pockets so his mother wouldn't see the dirt under his nails. His stomach grumbled angrily at him for having missed both breakfast and lunch. Apparently the mulberries he'd snacked on in the garden hadn't been quite enough, and the smell of roasted lamb already emanating down the corridor made his mouth water.

He entered the hall and made his way through the maze of round tables and chairs, darting around serving staff with large plates of food, until he reached his family table at the front of the room. His parents sat, sipping their wine, chatting with a couple of visiting dignitaries from Hayil. His mother looked up and smiled at her son. "There you are Isaph." She peered around him. "Where's your sister?"

“What?” Isaph’s stomach dropped.

“You mother and I haven’t seen her since we got back from the courts this afternoon. She left with you this morning, we assumed you’d taken her with you for the day.” Isaph felt the blood drain out of his face, and he put a hand on a chair to steady himself.

“Isaph, what is it?” His mother rose and went to him. Isaph looked up at her, mouth hanging open, searching for words.

“Is it Nania? Did something happen to Nania? Do you know where she is?”

“She...I think she’s in my closet.”

“What?” Hahtim rose too. “What do you mean, Isaph?”

“I...I shut her in my closet. This morning. I thought someone would come home and let her out. But, you...” he trailed off, and then in almost a whisper, he said. “I was mad. I thought it would be funny, later.” His parents stared at him, shocked. Then Aliya turned and ran out of the dining hall.

“Gods.” Hahtim turned to their guests, “Please, excuse us.” He grabbed Isaph’s shoulder and made with all haste towards their apartments.

“Nahni!”

Her mother’s voice called Nania to consciousness. She blinked heavily. “What is it Mama? What’s going on?” Her head was pounding, and she couldn’t remember why her back ached so badly.

“Hahtim, look at her fingers, they’re bleeding!”

“I’ll send for a healer.”

Aliya took her daughter in her arms. “It’s okay Nania. I’ve got you.” As she carried her out of the room, Nania gazed blearily over her mother’s shoulder at the closet, then at Isaph. He stood by his bed, eyes frozen wide with horror, unable to tear his gaze from the bloody scratch marks on his closet floor.

They reached the sitting room, Nania trying to clear her aching head. “Why was I in Isaph’s room...” and then darkness and panic came flooding back into her mind. She gasped, and tears were streaming down her face. Her mother sat down with her on the divan by the hearth.

Nania could barely breathe, choking on sobs that shook her body and sent shooting pain through her back. Her mother rocked her in her lap. “Shhhh-sh-sh-sh, calm down, Nahni. You’re safe now.”

Hahtim came striding in from the antechamber, a palace priestess on his heels, followed closely behind by Aliya’s handmaid, Noorine, still in all the trappings of a trip down to the markets.

“Over here!”

The priestess rushed over to the gasping girl. She lay a gentle hand on her forehead and spoke a few hushed words. Immediately Nania’s shaking subsided and her breathing steadied.

"There now, child. Deep breathes. We don't want you passing out now do we?" Nania shook her head. "No. Now, let's have a look at these fingers."

As the healing women examined Nania's hands, Hahtim brought water to Noorine, who had become light-headed at the sight of blood.

"Oh Hahtim! It's just so awful. How long was she in there?"

"Best we can figure, since about seven or eight this morning."

"But I had only just left for the market then..."

"And Aliya and I had only just left for the courts."

"You always get home from the courts by the afternoon. Didn't you hear her cries?"

Hahtim shook his head. "When we found her she was asleep. Or unconscious. We're not sure which. Poor thing must have worn herself out trying to escape."

"So then, you were here, in the apartment, for hours, while she was just—"

"So it would seem." Hahtim wore a weary look on his face as he watched the priestess tend to his daughter. "It is a fact I do not like to consider."

"No, of course." Noorine sniffed. "I should put some water on for tea. Let me just put these things away." She gathered herself and bustled off to her little chamber down the hall.

The priestess came to speak with Hahtim, her work done. He walked with her through the antechamber to the main door of the apartments.

"I patched up her fingers. They should be fine. And I took care of the nasty bruising on her back." She paused. "I didn't mention this to Lady Aliya, she already seemed so distraught, but three of Nania's ribs were broken, as well. I've healed those too, but I wouldn't let your daughter run about for a couple days while they set."

"Thank you." Hahtim pressed a silver into her palm.

"Oh, no Sir, my services are paid by the palace."

"For your discretion."

"Oh, of course Sir. You have my word." She bobbed a curtsy and slipped out into the corridor. Hahtim returned to the sitting room where Noorine was handing steaming cups of tea to his wife and daughter. He went to sit next to Nania and put an arm around her.

"I am so glad you are okay."

She managed a weak smile. "I'm fine, Fa. I feel much, much better now."

"Drink your tea." Her mother fussed. "It will help calm your nerves too." She took a deep sip. "I know it is helping mine."

"Nahni?" Isaph stood in the sitting room doorway, looking much smaller than usual. "Are you okay?"

"Yes she is okay. No thanks to you." Aliya snapped.

"Aliya, please."

"Mama, I'm so, so sorry, really I am, I—"

"It is not me to whom you owe an apology, young man."

Isaph seemed to shrink before their eyes. "Nahni, I am so sorry. I thought someone would come let you out. I never meant for you to be trapped in there all day, I promise. I never meant for you to get hurt. I was just angry." There were tears welling in his eyes. "I am so sorry Mouse."

Nania stared at him, her eyes turned to jade. "Mama, do I have to believe him?"

"No. You most certainly do not."

"Good. Because I don't." She looked her brother square in the face. "You are a monster."

Isaph was crying now, looking much more like a 13-year-old boy than usual. "I just...I was so mad. I lost my temper. I didn't know you'd get hurt."

"No? Not when you were twisting my arm behind my back?"

Her mother gasped. Isaph opened his mouth to reply, but couldn't find anything to say. Aliya rose, and with a shaking hand she placed her tea down on the table next to her.

"Noorine, would you kindly get Isaph's bow from his room?"

"Yes, Lady."

"Why, Mama?" Fear crept into Isaph's eyes. "What are you going to do?"

"You don't get to ask questions right now."

Hahtim raised a hand. "Aliya, I would also like to know why you want Isaph's bow."

Noorine scurried past Isaph, bow in hand, and gave it to Aliya. She, in turn, strode over to the hearth and held the bow towards the fire.

"Mama, please! Don't."

"You need to learn." hissed his mother, eyes fiery though they brimmed with tears. "You need to learn that losing your temper is never an excuse to hurt others. That your strength and size do not make you invincible. That hurting people has a cost."

"But Mama—"

"No!" She yelled. "I will not have a violent bully for a son!"

"Aliya, please." Hahtim's voice was calm, though as he looked at Isaph his face twisted in a mix of pain and disgust. "Isaph made a mistake. A very bad mistake. But let us not be rash. Isn't that the lesson we are wanting to teach? Restraint? Self control? Do not make yourself a hypocrite, my love. Put down the bow."

Aliya's chest heaved as she looked from her husband to her son, and back again. Then her eyes fell on Nania. "But he *needs* to learn." Her voice quivered.

"I am sure there is another less destructive way to teach this lesson, and I promise we will find it. But I very much believe this is not a decision to make when tempers are still high." For a moment he thought she would not listen, but Hahtim added, "He is not your father, Aliya. He is just a boy."

She dropped her arm, defeated, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"You are right, Hahtim. Of course, you're right." Her face fell into her hands, the bow clattering to the floor.

"Noorine, please give Isaph back his bow." Hahtim turned to his son, his face better composed. "Isaph, I think it's best you go to room for the night. I will be in to speak with you shortly, and then your mother and I will figure out the appropriate consequence for your actions tomorrow."

Tears still rolled down Isaph's cheeks as he took back his bow. He looked at his sister, searching for anything he could say. She looked back, stone faced.

"Isaph, go."

He turned, and ran from the room.

The kaht-Ahrood sitting room was a very quiet place that evening. The three ladies sat clustered together by the hearth with their embroidery, the cool dessert night air blowing in through the open doors. On the step outside, Hahtim sat smoking a long pipe and gazing up at the stars.

Aliya set down her needlework and rubbed her still swollen eyes. "I think I must retire for the evening." She tucked her things back into her sewing basket and rose with a sigh. "I am sorry, everyone. I embarrassed myself this afternoon."

"Not at all, Lady Aliya. If my little brother had done such a thing, my mother would have laid that boy over her knee and smacked him silly." Noorine shook her head. "To do such a horrid thing to our Nania. It's enough to drive anyone out of their wits."

"Noorine's right, Mama. You were only trying to protect me."

"Yes Nahni, I was. But that doesn't make it okay for me to yell."

"I guess not. But I didn't mind."

Her mother smiled. "Well thank you Nahni. Thank you both for being so understanding."

She was about to go when Nania spoke again. "You don't have to worry though Mama." Aliya looked back at her daughter. She was staring fixedly at the fire, its light glinting in her bright eyes. "I'm going to find a way to take care of myself. I am never going to grow big, but I will find a way to stop feeling so small. And then you won't have to protect me. I promise."

Aliya stood there, unsure of how to respond to this strange little declaration. Noorine, too, seemed slightly unnerved by the young girl's intensity.

"I'd better come with you, Lady. Help you with your things." She shivered. "Perhaps put on a fire in your chamber."

"You know that's not necessarily, Noorine. I can do it."

"I know you like to take care of yourself, Lady Aliya, but it's been a long day. You must be tired. I certainly am." She stretched. "I'll come with you, and then I'll turn in myself."

"As you wish." Aliya regarded her daughter who had returned to her careful stitching. "Bed soon for you too, Nahni? You must be exhausted."

"Soon Mama. I'm working on a new design. I want to get this part just right."

"Hahtim? You'll put out the fire in here before you come to bed?"

"Yes love."

"And make sure my Nania gets tucked in?" Aliya ran a hand over her daughter's dark curls.

"Of course, my love."

"Very well. Good night you two."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight Mama."

Noorine and Aliya left the sitting room together, glancing back at Nania as they went.

"I do hope she's alright." Aliya's slender brows knit together. "It's been a rather traumatic day."

"I think she's fine. Probably just drained, poor thing, and doesn't realize yet."

But back in the sitting room, Nania was anything but drained. As she stitched, her mind still seethed with rage. She would never forgive her brother for what he had done. And maybe one day she would find a way to give him a taste of his own medicine— to curb that strength he was so proud of, and make him feel as helpless and weak as he had made her feel. Maybe take away all of his clothes so he woke up in the morning with nothing to wear. Lock him up in the kennels with the hunting dogs, and let him beg for his supper. Tie him up with yards of rope and see how strong he felt then. In her minds eye she saw herself rope in hand, tying a great tight knot around Isaph's ankles as he slept, just like the ones she used at the ends of her embroidery. She could picture every loop and tie she'd make as she wrapped his whole body up in rope, tight enough that he couldn't move a muscle. And then, just for good measure, she'd tie one final loop over his big, fat mouth.

"Try and get out of that, Isaph."

"Nahni?" She jumped as he father laid a hand on her shoulder. "Did you hear what I said?"

"No, sorry Fa. I was distracted." She looked down at her sewing and realized she'd completely ruined her design. Her blue thread had become tangled and bunched in places, weaving in wild loops and turns all over the tan cotton clothe. Frustrated, she popped it on top of the sewing basket next to her.

"I was just saying that I'm turning in, so the fire in here has to go out. You about ready for bed?"

"Yes. I was going to finish my design but then I started day dreaming and made a mess of it."

Her father bent over to peer at the cloth. "I think that's actually rather pretty Nahni. Kind of wild. It reminds of the mirages you see out in the dunes sometimes."

Nania cocked

her head and squinted at it. "Really?" She looked up at her father, incredulous. "What did you put in that pipe tonight, Fa?"

He laughed. "You are a cheeky little thing sometimes, Nania kaht Ahrood. Now let's go, off to bed with you. You've had quite the day."

Chapter 3:

22nd-28th of Hexember, 965E

Palace of Zuhuz

The next morning, a scream pierced the air. Nania sat bolt upright in bed. There were sounds of running footsteps in the hallway outside her room, doors slamming open, and muffled frantic voices. Her heart pounding, Nania slid out of bed and went to press an ear to her door. More muffled voices, and the sound of sobbing just outside. She pushed open the door and found Noorine, sitting against the wall, knees hugged to her chest, blubbering.

“Noorine, what’s going on?”

“Oh, Isaph! Oh the poor boy!”

Fear began to rise in Nania’s chest. “What’s wrong? Noorine! What happened?”

Suddenly there was a bang and the sound of heavy boots. Two palace guards burst into the hallway from the antechamber, their weapons drawn. Hahtim came running out of Isaph’s room.

“Our apologies, Lord Hahtim, but we heard a scream.”

“There is something gravely wrong with my son. Please send someone for High Priest Ardeshir kaht Zahad from the infirmary.” Then as an afterthought, he added, “And send someone for hostler Esahfa Dokehda in the stables, please.”

“Yes, my lord.” The guards bowed and rushed out. Hahtim turned and went back into the bed room.

“It was just a couple of guards. I’ve sent them to bring Ardeshir.”

“You hear that Isaph?” Nania could he hear mother crooning. “Lord Ardeshir is the best healer in Zuhuz. Help is on the way.”

“Hallo?” Esahfa strode down the hallway with more gravity than Nania was accustomed to seeing in her ever laid-back uncle.

Hahtim called back, “In here!”

“I was on my way, came to see if Isaph wants to go for a ride this morning. What’s going on?”

Nania slipped into the room in her uncle’s wake.

Aliya rose from the bed and ran to throw her arms around Esahfa’s neck.

Nania gasped. Isaph lay on the bed, the covers pulled down over his torso to reveal his arms stuck rigid against his sides and his back straight as board. His head and neck still appeared to be mobile, though the muscles in his jaw tensed and flexed as if working to pry it open. His eyes were wide with terror.

“No, no, no!” Nania ran to the bed, throwing herself upon her brother. “Isaph! Isaph, I’m sorry!”

“Nania, no!” She was pried away from him by strong arms.

“It’s my fault! It’s all my fault!”

Her father carried her into the hallway. “Nania, you shouldn’t get too close. Not until we know what’s wrong. If it’s some kind of virus, it could be contagious.”

Noorine's head popped up out of her hands. "You think it's a virus? But I was close to him, I touched him when I woke him up. "

Hahtim shook his head. "I wouldn't worry Noorine. Whatever it is, it is unlikely it would spread to you with so little contact, we just can't be too careful."

"I didn't mean to do it, Fa. I didn't mean for it to really come true!"

"What are you talking about Nahni?"

"Isaph! I did it! Last night I wished that all his strength would be taken away, but I didn't think... I didn't know..."

"Shhhh, Nahni, don't be silly. Your wishes didn't do this to Isaph."

"How but can you be sure, Fa?" Nania sobbed. "I wished that he wouldn't be able to move a muscle, and now—"

"Enough Nania. You're being hysterical. I know it's very upsetting to see your brother this way, but you have nothing to do with it.

"I don't believe you! I won't leave him!" She tried to run back towards the room but her father grabbed her by both her arms and held her fast.

"I don't care if you believe me, young lady, but you will listen to me. Isaph has caught something, a virus, gotten an infection perhaps. There are plenty of venoms that cause lockjaw, even muscle paralysis. With all the time your brother spends outside, it could be any number of things. But until we know, you will not get too close. Do you understand?"

Nania nodded.

"Good. If you like you may go sit at the end of the bed, but if I see you get closer than that I will send you out to the sitting room." He stood. "Noorine, would you take a message to House Dokehda? Kalim should know what's going on. If he's not there, try the firm down in the Guilds District. You know where it is?"

"Of course. I'll go at once." She clambered to her feet, grateful for something to do.

There was an insistent knock at the front door and Hahtim rushed to answer it. Nania heard the deep voice of Ardeshir kaht Zahad echoing from the antechamber.

"Where is the boy?"

"The last door on the left." Lord Ardeshir swept around the corner and down the hallway, his long blue robes brushing Nania's feet as she watched him pass and disappear into Isaph's room. Her father followed Ardeshir and Nania squeezed in behind him, slipping between her mother and Esahfa to perch atop the bench at the end of the bed. Isaph stared up at the great man who stood next to him, his nostrils flaring as he dragged air into his heaving lungs.

"Easy boy. Stop fighting to move or you'll exhaust yourself." Ardeshir took out one of the vials that hung at his waste and bent to hold it beneath Isaph's nose. "Take a deep breath for me, Isaph."

The boy's eyes darted to his parents' faces.

"Listen to him, Isaph." Hahtim's voice remained calm and steady. "Lord Ardeshir is here to help. He'll figure out what's going on."

Isaph's eyes fixed on the vial, but he could not settle his rapid, shallow breathing.

Ardeshir straightened. "It is often harder to relax in a room crowded with bodies."

“Aliya,” Esahfa took his sister’s arm. “Why don’t we go into the sitting room. I’m sure that Hahtim will come tell us as soon there is anything to know.”

Aliya looked at her son, eyes red and swollen, “But... but I don’t want to leave him like this.” She let out a sob, and Isaph’s eyes began to fill with tears as well.

“Aliya,” Esahfa whispered to her, “you have never been good at hiding your feelings, and right now Isaph needs to feel that things will be okay. I know you love him, but you are not helping.”

“You’re right. Isaph, I’ll be just outside in the sitting room. Lord Ardeshir will take good care of you.” Esahfa threw his nephew a warm smile and lead Aliya out of the room. Ardeshir eyed Nania where she crouched on the bench, her gaze never leaving her brother.

“I will need quiet while I work.”

“Believe me, my daughter knows how to be quiet when she chooses. Don’t you Nahni?” She nodded.

“Very well. Let’s try this again. I need you to breath deeply, Isaph.”

Isaph’s eyes fell on Nania. They were still wide with panic. She had agreed to be silent, but her guilt forced her tongue.

“Isaph, I know how you feel. I know it’s scary to be trapped. But you’ve got us here, and we won’t leave until we’ve got you out.”

Slowly, Isaph nodded his head on his pillow. His shallow breaths became long, ragged inhales, until finally he could breath with more ease. Ardeshir looked wordlessly at Nania. He nodded almost imperceptibly, then held the vial back under Isaph’s nose. With a deep sigh, Isaph’s eye lids began to droop, and the muscles in his face relaxed.

Ardeshir replaced the vial at his side and closed his eyes, gripping the pendant that hung from his neck. For many moments he stood whispering to himself before eventually laying his hands on Isaph’s chest. He paused, waiting for results, but Isaph’s arms remained pinned by his sides. Ardeshir’s second incantation was much longer and involved a complex pattern of hand movements that Nania couldn’t follow without getting dizzy. This too left Isaph as still as before. Ardeshir attempted a string of other spells, waving and chanting over Isaph’s body for the better part of an hour. When these spells, too, failed to produce results, he stood still and silent staring at Isaph for a long while. Hahtim had begun to worry that there was something wrong with the priest himself when Ardeshir turned to him, his face unreadable.

“Hahtim, a word?” Hahtim looked uncertainly at his son. “Don’t worry,” Ardeshir’s voice was hushed. “He’s sedated, you won’t be missed. And we must talk.”

Indeed, Isaph looked peaceful lying still against his pillow. Without another word, Hahtim followed Ardeshir out into the hall.

“It is not poison. Nor is it a disease. In fact, it like no physical ailment I have seen in all my years. I am therefore left to believe we are dealing with magic.”

Hahtim rubbed his forehead, the concern and confusion mounting on his face. “Is there anything you can do?”

“I have tried to dispel it, but I’m afraid I was not successful. I have exhausted my store of spells, and I know little more than when I started.”

“Can you tell us anything? Anything as to the nature of the enchantment?”

Ardeshir grimaced. "To tell you the truth, I can't even tell what school of magic this comes from. It's been a long time since I encountered something I couldn't identify. It could be a curse for all I know. You need a sorcerer. Preferably one with an excellent grip on spell craft."

"Farida."

Ardeshir raised his eyebrows. "Of course. Farida Dokehda is your sister-in-law. Very fortunate for your son. She is a great mind. And as family, you are probably one of the only people who could get her to leave her tower."

"I'll send a messenger at once." Hahtim paused. "You don't happen to know where in that labyrinth I can find her, do you?"

Ardeshir smiled tiredly. "I believe she's in the East Tower. And given that no one likes to say no to Lady Farida Dokehda, she's probably somewhere near the top."

"It's not a disease?" Aliya sat on the divan next to Esahfa, staring worriedly at her husband. Kalim had arrived during Ardeshir's visit and stood, arms crossed, before the hearth.

"Then it is an attack." At Kalim's words, Aliya looked alarmed.

"What?"

"Kalim, we don't know what it is. Ardeshir says we need a sorcerer's expertise, so I've sent a messenger to the University for Farida but I don't know how long it will take. She may be able to identify what this is, or at the very least dispel it. Ardeshir says what he's given Isaph should keep him sedated for another hour or so. The best thing we can do is wait, and keep our wits about us."

"Why Isaph?" Aliya sniffed. "Why our son? Who would do such a thing?"

"You want the full list?" Kalim rubbed his forehead. "With things heating up in the North again there are many people who would love to distract the Grand Vizier from his duty to the Caliph. And if the Rouge Prince has anything to do with it, Isaph has the added appeal of being Ochaboo Dokehda's eldest grandson."

"It could be simpler." Esahfa mused. "Someone from Hayil trying to draw Mama back here, away from Sultana Allurah. I'm sure there are some circles who would prefer to deal with the young sultana without The Jaguar to advise her."

"It is impossible to know." Hahtim sighed. "House kaht-Ahrood has its enemies, too. Though it's hard to imagine who would resort to targeting a child."

"And yet our son lies in his bed, paralyzed by unknown magic from an unknown force." Aliya's voice was hard and her eyes filled once more with tears. "It makes me sick— a boy, suffering for the sake of someone's politics."

"Whatever threat we face, we will face it better if we remain calm."

Kalim's slammed his fists down on the mantle. "He is my nephew! He is Dokehda blood! And I can do nothing but wait? How in the name of the Eight Enlightened do you expect me to remain calm?"

"No one expects *you* to stay calm, Kalim. Which is why I am here." Farida's voice rang out from the far end of the room, and Kalim almost jumped. He turned to see her standing

before Aliya's writing desk, her robes settling around her as if they'd been blown by a slight breeze.

"Gods be blessed!" Aliya cried.

"You made good time." Kalim's expression was twisted between irritation and relief.

"Yes, brother. It's this funny thing I do sometimes called magic." Farida swept past him to kiss Aliya's tear-stained cheek. "Now let's go see about your son."

Hahtim led Farida down the hallway.

"You say Ardeshir tried to dispel it?"

"He did."

"Fascinating." She reached Isaph's room and pushed the door open. Nania still sat curled up on the bench at the end of the bed, watching her brother doze. She looked up at her aunt.

Farida eyes warmed as she smiled down at her niece. "Keeping your brother company, I see?"

"I told him I wouldn't leave him till he was fixed."

"I'm sure he appreciates that."

"I don't think he even knows I'm here." Nania's face was filled with concern as she looked at her brother's half closed eyes.

"Well we'll have to make sure he knows when he gets up." She gave Nania a wink, and moved up to Isaph's side. "What has got a hold of you, Nephew?" She murmured to herself, her eyes running over Isaph's stiff form, then gazing around the room. She closed her eyes and with cupped palms she drew the air before her towards her face and up over her head. She then pressed a thumb and forefinger gently to her eyelids, hissed something under her breath, and blinked before gazing about her once more.

"Peculiar." Farida circled the bed and peered under it. Humming quietly to herself, she went to the closet, opened it, and shut it again, unsatisfied. She turned back to Isaph and stared with narrowed eyes, her long fingers steepled against her lips.

"Farida?" Hahtim's patience was fraying.

"The boy is being held by strong magic, there is no doubt about that. But I don't see magic on his body, only in the air tight around him, so it isn't a curse. It's some kind of evocation spell, though all I see is the shadow of the magic— it's effects but not the fabric of the enchantment itself." Again she scanned the room. "I only know of a few very rare and very specific types of magic that could work this way. If I'm right, the spell itself is likely nearby, knit to a material component."

"But can you dispel it Farida?"

She looked at him, alarmed. "Yes of course I can. But Isaph is not in danger or distress, and I am loathe to dispel a work of magic I do not understand." Hahtim was about to argue, but Farida raised a hand. "I know it seems cruel. But consider, Hahtim: would you execute a spy before you knew from whom he was sent? If I can examine the spell, I will know more about its origins." She lowered her voice. "Hahtim, this kind of magic requires proximity. Wouldn't you like to know who could have been close enough to your home to be-spell your son?"

Hahtim's face paled. "Of course, Farida."

“Then I need to keep looking.”

Hahtim followed her down the hall to the sitting room. Everyone fell silent as they entered.

“What—“

Hahtim raised a finger to his lips to silence his wife. Once more, Farida wafted the air before her towards her face, over her head, pressed her eyelids with a whisper and blinked. She stared into the left corner of the room, eyes raking over the ornamented sideboard and the great wooden table and chairs. When her gaze reached the sitting area before the hearth, her eyes snapped to the wicker embroidery basket sitting on an end table. She strode forward and picked up the mess of cotton cloth and blue thread that sat on top of the pile. A string of archaic syllables issued from her lips as she waved a hand back and forth through the air above the embroidery. Moments later she fell still, then turned to her sister.

“Whose work is this?”

Before Aliya could reply there was a small cry and the sound of running footsteps. Nania burst through the doorway eyes bright. “Mama! Fa! Come quick! Isaph—” Her eyes fell on the embroidery in Farida’s hands and the smile was gone from her face.

“Nania?” Her father’s face was slack with shock. “It can’t be, she...”

“What’s going on?” Aliya looked from her husband to her sister, confused. “What did you do Farida?”

“I dispelled the magic woven into this embroidery. It contained the spell that held Isaph.”

Aliya rose. “So he is freed?”

“See for yourself.”

Aliya hurried from the room, followed closely by Esahfa and Kalim.

Nania continued to stare at her embroidery, her face grave. “I was right, wasn’t I? It was me, wasn’t it Auntie Farida?” Tears filled her eyes. “I told you, Fa. I told you it was my fault.”

He sat heavily in a chair. “It’s not possible.”

Farida went to her niece and knelt before her. “Nania, did you know you had cast a spell?”

Nania shook her head. “I was angry. I started daydreaming about getting back at Isaph for shutting me in the closet. I imagined that I’d tied him up so he would feel weak, too. But I didn’t mean for it to come true.”

“While you were day dreaming, you were working on this?”

“Yes, only I was trying to do flowering design, but I wasn’t focused so I messed it up.”

“I think you were far more focused than you know, Nahni.” Farida turned to Hahtim. “It seems our Nania is a stitch witch.”

Hahtim looked bewildered. “A what?”

“A stitch witch. It’s a misnomer really. The Daughters of Fate are more like priestesses, but come up with a name that rhymes and people never let it go.”

Nania looked confused. “I didn’t pray to anybody! I wouldn’t ask anyone to hurt Isaph, honest Fa!” She ran to her father, who scooped her up into his lap.

“I know Nahni. Of course you didn’t.” Her father stroked her hair.

"Of course not." Farida raised her brows. "Nobody asks anything from Mother Fate unless they are in dire, dire straights. Even her daughters."

"Then how do they work, these priestesses?"

"I'm... not sure."

"What do you mean you're not sure?" Hahtim cool temper flared. "You're supposed to be one of the best respected spellcraft experts at the university."

Farida put her hands on her hips, indignant. "And do you know what I do at that university, Hahtim? I research. Because there is a lot about magic we don't know, and somebody has to figure it out." She sunk into the chair across from him.

Hahtim persisted. "How can Fate have priestess when people debate whether she is a god or great force of the universe? She has no worshipers, no temples, then how can she have priestesses?"

"They're more like her chosen."

"Chosen?" Hahtim looked hopefully down at his daughter. "Nania?"

"Don't get excited. It doesn't mean her path is any better than it would have been otherwise, just that she is tied to Fate and her workings." Farida rubbed her eyes tiredly. "As I understand it, Mother Fate grants her chosen few, mostly women, a degree of magic which allows them to manipulate the weave of the world around us. With a great deal of focus, they are able to link their thoughts into the fabric of things and shift it. It's vaguely akin to some priests' thought magic, or the way some sorcerers shape magical energy with evocation, but since there aren't many established spells each stitch witch tends to develop her own ways doing things." She sighed. "I admit, my grasp on the subject is weak at best." Her eyes fell on Nania, who remained huddled in her fathers arms. "I'm sorry, I know it's a lot to take in, but honestly Nania these abilities are nothing to be scared of. Most people are excited when they find out they have a propensity for magic."

"But I *don't* have one! I ended up hurting Isaph. I don't want this!" Nania buried her face in her father chest.

"Nania, love," he made her look at him, "it was an accident. Nobody blames you."

"But I'm just like Isaph. I lost control."

Hahtim frowned. "It's different Nahni. Isaph knows his own strength. You have just discovered yours."

"It is common for young magic users to have accidents when they're just starting out." Farida smiled at her niece. "Perhaps not quite such dramatic ones, but you're half Dokehda, and we've never been good at doing things quietly."

Hahtim wiped Nania's teary cheeks. "You've always said you wanted magic like your brother. You should feel proud of yourself."

"I just feel like a monster." Nania whimpered.

"You're not a monster, Nania." Farida's voice was kind. "You have been fated with a great gift. You just have to learn how to use it."

Hahtim scratched his head. "Though it sounds to me like this isn't something many people can teach."

“No. There aren’t books of theory to study or common spell structures to impart. The only person I’d trust to teach this magic would be another stitch witch.

“Do you have one of these... ‘stitch witches’, at the university?”

“Not for years. There is only a handful on record in Mudore.” Farida grinned, “But with a bit of Dokehda luck, I think I know where we can find one.”

Rakani Nambout stood patiently in the sitting room doorway, a long, immaculate travelling cloak hanging off broad shoulders, her riding gloves folded in her hands as she listened to Aliya read Ochaboo’s letter to Nania.

“So, my Nania. I cannot say I was surprised when Farida’s message reached me. You have always been so very bright-- it makes perfect sense that lurking inside that head of yours was a gift waiting to surface. I am sorry I am not in Zuhuz to watch you and your magic flourish, as I have no doubt both will, but I am very glad that in this instance I am at least able to send help. Rakani has been serving on Allurah’s council for three years, ever since I met her on a tour of the desert tribes north of Hayil. I trust her immensely, and have no doubt that under her mentorship you will thrive. All my love, Grandma.”

“Well this is fortunate indeed, isn’t it Nania? You are most welcome to Zuhuz, Sah Nambout.”

“It is my deepest pleasure, Lady kaht-Ahrood. There are not many of us, and it is a nearly impossible magic to master on one’s own.” She smiled, her teeth flashing brilliant white against her dark skin. “Gods know I made a mess of it until I was found by another daughter. I am just glad I can spare another young woman that experience.”

“Well, it’s very generous. I’m sure Nania appreciates your coming, don’t you Nahni?”

Nania looked up at the tall newcomer. She looked to be in her early thirties, with smiling brown eyes and thick lips. She wore her long black hair in tiny braids, held in a thick bunch by an band of tan cloth embroidered with vines. Under her spotless traveling cloak she wore the loose wrap-style tunic favoured by Mudore’s desert tribes, it’s deep green fabric also accented here and there with intricate stitching. Her riding gloves too, appeared to have embellishments on the cuffs.

Nania stared at them in Rakani’s hands. “Did you ride all the way here?”

Rakani smiled down at her, “I did indeed.”

“On a johkobo?”

“Mhm.”

“Is it your johkobo?”

“He is.”

“What’s his name?”

“Klowah.”

“How long did it take to get here?”

Her mother answered her. "It takes at least two days if you ride hard along the Coastal Road from Hayil. After which, I am sure Sah Nambout is extremely tired. Perhaps you can ask her your questions after she's at least been settled in her rooms."

"Oh. Right. Sorry Sah Nambout."

Rakani smiled. "There is no need to apologize for curiosity. It is the best path to learning. Your questions will always be welcome with me, Nania."

Aliya laughed. "Careful. You underestimate how many questions a precocious eight year old can ask."

"If there is one thing embroidery teaches, Lady kaht-Ahrood, it is patience."

"Sounds like you two will be well matched then."

"I certainly hope so. I've never had a student before, so we'll be figuring it out together. If it suits you, Nania, I'd like to start first thing tomorrow." She grinned. "After I see to Klowah, of course. He gets very fussy in new stables. Perhaps..." her eyes glittered. "No, that probably wouldn't interest you."

"No, no! What?"

"Perhaps you'd like to come help me before we start our lessons. I'm sure Klowah would like to meet you."

"Yes, please, Sah Nambout!"

"How about you just call me Rakani. May as well do away with the formalities since you're stuck with me." She winked, making Nania giggle.

"Alright, Rakani."

"Then it's settled." Rakani rubbed her brow. "Lady kaht-Ahrood, I believe you mentioned rooms. Would these rooms happen to have a bed?"

"They do indeed. They are up on the third floor. Allow me to show you." Aliya called down the hallway, "Noorine?"

"Yes Lady?"

"Will you come help with Sah Nambout's— I mean, with Rakani's bags?"

"Coming!"

"So we'll meet tomorrow morning in the stables, Nania?"

"We can go down together after breakfast! You can sit at our table, right Mama?"

"Seems only appropriate." Aliya smiled warmly at Rakani.

Noorine trotted in from the hallway, and gave a little bow. "A pleasure to meet you Sah Nambout." She began gathering the bags at Rakani's side. "I saw the rooms this morning. I think you'll be very comfortable. And I've made sure my friend Dahsta is assigned to you. Can't be too careful in the guest quarters, some of the girls in Petal Fall Tower haven't a clue how to steep a proper pot of tea." She bustled out into the antechamber.

Rakani raised her eyebrows in mock affront. "And Gods forbid I should make my own tea!" She turned and followed Noorine out.

Aliya smiled, watching Rakani go. "Oh, I like her."

"So do I." Nania beamed.

"And that's what's most important." Aliya kissed the top of her daughters head, and went to save Rakani from Noorine's excited babble.

"Is that the lady Grandma Jaguar has sent to teach you your thread stuff?" Nania whipped around to see Isaph standing in the doorway out to the garden, his hands in his pockets. After what their family was calling "the incident", Isaph had remained in bed until the next morning. Their parents had sat them down for explanations and apologies, but besides passing each other in hallways and 'please pass the syrup' at breakfast, Isaph and Nania had not spoken since.

"I like the look of her."

Nania wasn't sure how to proceed. "Yes, she seems very kind and clever. She's going to introduce me to her johkobo tomorrow."

"Neat." They stood in silence for a long moment. Isaph shifted uncomfortably. "I was going to go out to the practice yard and shoot. You want to come along?"

"Are you sure? I don't want to—"

"No, really, you should come. Let me grab my bow and we'll go."

"Okay."

Isaph returned with his things and led the way outside onto Palace Path. They had almost reached the archery range when Isaph said in a low voice. "Auntie Farida says you stayed with me while I was...out."

"...yes."

"But... why? I saw you when Mama pulled you out of that closet... I wouldn't have wanted to stay with me in your shoes."

Nania shrugged. "But you're my brother. And it didn't matter that Fa said you were sick, I still felt guilty like it was my fault. I couldn't stay mad at you while you were... like that."

"I guess so." They walked in silence for another minute until they reached the empty range. Isaph put down his quiver and bow. "You want a stool?" He carried one over and brought it around to the inside of the fence, then retrieved his bow from the ground, brushing it off carefully.

Nania just stared at the stool. "So, you're really not mad at me for...magic-ing you?"

Isaph snorted. "As far as I'm concerned I had it coming."

"Isaph, don't be silly."

"Nahni, I locked you in a closet for hours."

"I tied you up in magic rope!"

"But you didn't mean to!"

"No, but I wanted to!"

"Did not. No way." he shook his head. "I don't believe for a second that you actually wanted that to happen. You don't have it in you, Mouse."

Nania felt fresh rage welling inside her. "You're wrong Isaph. It turns out I have a lot in me, and Farida says I'm going to be powerful someday. I'm no weakling!"

"That's not what I mean." He sighed. "I'm not saying you're too weak to fight back, Nania. I'm saying you're too... good. You just know better."

She blinked at him. "Oh."

"So don't act like what we did is the same. I knew what I was doing, you didn't. Besides, I'm your older brother. I'm supposed to be the one who takes care of you, not the other way

around. At the very least I'm not supposed to be the one doing the damage." No one spoke for a long moment. Isaph stared down at the bow in his hands. "Mama should have burned this. It's what I deserve."

"Isaph, no! You love that bow."

"I know." He looked at her. "Then again, maybe it's for the best. If she'd burned it, I couldn't have given it to you."

"What?"

"I'm giving it to you." She stood gaping at him. "Come on, Mouse. Take it." He held it out before him.

She stared at him. "Isaph, I can't."

"Sure you can. I want you to have it."

"But... but it was your first real bow."

"Exactly. About time I get a new one, don't you think?" He grinned. "Besides, Fa says I'm starting a growth spurt. This'll probably be too small for me pretty soon, anyways. But you mouse, I don't think you'll have that problem."

Tentatively, Nania took the bow from her brothers hands. She ran her fingers over the polished wood. "I don't even know how to hold it."

"Well, it's probably about time you learned. Here, come stand here." Step by step, Isaph showed Nania the proper stance. He adjusted her feet and made her step in and out of position until it was familiar. "There, you've got it. Now, hold the bow in your left hand, just on the grip there, and hold it up in front of you. Keep that arm straight. That's right." Isaph stood back. "Yes, you look like you know what you're doing already."

"Really?" Nania beamed.

"Sure you do, Mouse. You want an arrow?"

"Um, okay."

Isaph took an arrow from the quiver. "See this groove at the end with the feathers? That's where the string goes, to help hold in place while you aim. And the other end rests on that ledge just there. Now, with these two fingers you pull back the string. Wait, one goes above the arrow, one goes below. Better. Now, pull those two fingers back to the corner of your mouth."

Nania pulled, but she couldn't quite get the string back to her mouth. "It won't go Isaph. I can't get it back far enough." She let her bow arm drop, discouraged.

"Come on, Nahni, cheer up. I couldn't pull it back when I first started."

Nania glared. "You were five, Isaph."

He grinned his wolfish grin. "But I was about the same size. And Fa helped me till I got the hang of it. Here, maybe I can help you, too." He got a pouting Nania to raise her bow again, and stood bent behind her, his fingers on top of hers. With his help, she pulled the string back to her mouth. "Alright, hold tight, Mouse, I'm going to let go."

"No, don't."

"Don't worry, keeping the string there is way easier than getting it there in the first place. You ready?"

"Okay."

He took his fingers away. Nania's right arm shook, but she held the string in place.

"There you go! Now, close your left eye, and try and line your arrow up with the target. And when you like how it looks, you let go."

"I can't get it to steady."

"Just do your best."

"But I want to get it right."

"Nahni, you've just got to release it. It'll go where it goes. You can do it."

For a moment Nania saw the arrow line up with the target centre. She released. Her arrow sailed up through the air and arched down to land in the dirt about 10 feet short of the target. Isaph and Nania both stood blinking at it for a moment, then burst out in howls of laughter.

Nania held her sides as her stomach ached. "Well, I guess it's a start."

"You'll get there. We'll just have to make sure you get lots of practice."

"I'll never shoot like you, though."

Isaph grinned. "Yeah well, I'll never make napkins that can freeze people. Different strengths."

She grinned back. "I guess so."

The door of the stables opened as a hostler left for the night, and the wark of a johkobo came drifting out into the evening air.

"Hey Nahni, what's say we do more shooting another day when we both have bows. How about we see if we can find a couple johkobos to take around the gardens."

Nania's eyes lit up. "Can we make it a race?"

"Hah! Not a chance, Mouse. I'm not ready to lose to you yet."

Part II: Stitch Witch

970 E

Chapter 4: Kadra

Quadrember - October

The Greater Sun beat down on Nania's neck as she squinted at the tiny pattern of knots she was trying to tie in her thread. Her fingers were getting sweaty with heat and frustration, and she dropped her work into her lap, trying to suppress a groan.

"I'm never going to get this right. These knots are tiny, even for my fingers."

"You just need more practice Nania. It's possible, but you know you need to focus. Keep trying. And remember to watch your spacing, too. If you don't keep your pattern, then the ward won't work and magic will slip right through, no matter how well you've tied each knot."

"But—"

"Focus."

"But how?" Nania exclaimed. "How can I focus on these tiny knots when summer is finally here and there's so much else to watch!" She leaned back on her hands, taking in all of Palace Square from their spot on the wide lip of the fountain at its centre. Before them stretched an expanse of intricately paved sandstone, where Palace Way stretched up from the bottom of the city to intersect Crown Street as it wrapped around the castle grounds. The Palace itself stood grand before them, the wide staircase that led up to its arching stained-glass doors bustling with an array of characters coming and going about their business. Nania slipped off her sandals and turned herself around, dipping her feet in the fountain's water and staring down busy Palace Way, right down to Garden Arc where she could see people milling about like ants. "The tapestry of Zuhuz is so much more interesting than this little thing."

As she said it, she watched the sea of ant-like figures part as a rider on a johkobo came racing into Garden Plaza and turned to gallop up Palace Way.

"Rakani, look!"

The rider was speeding up the hill, the afternoon sun glinting off a polished helm and oiled leather breast plate.

"Who rides about in armour on a day like this?" Rakani mused. They watched as the rider neared them, and when he finally reached the top of the rise he turned down Crown Street towards the palace stables. As he passed, Nania saw the diamond shaped emblem with crossed scimitar and spear emblazoned on his saddle bags.

"Of course." Rakani snorted. "A Kadran would."

"Very official looking. And in quite the rush. Wonder what that's about."

"Who knows. Could be bad news from the North. Could be anything really."

Nania threw her arms in the air. "You see? Who can focus with such excitement about?"

"That's why I bring you out here, Nania. It's one thing to focus in your sitting room, but life won't always provide such a conveniently quiet setting for casting. You won't be much good as a stitch witch if you can't tune out your surroundings and focus on your spell!"

"But Rakani, I am focusing, I just keep getting lost. I lose track of what's next and then I get distracted."

"That's because you're losing sight of the greater shape of spell."

"Greater shape." Nania snorted. "Today it just feels a bunch of random string."

"And there's your problem." Rakani held out her own work for Nania to see. Spread out, Rakani's neat web of threads looked like a waving circle surrounding three great complex knots.

"You make it look so easy! That would take me forever!"

"It takes me about two minutes. And if you practice, it'll come that fast to you, too. You just need to step back and see the whole pattern instead of just each individual step." She put down her work. "Remember Nania, we're playing with the tapestry of Fate. If a person looks too closely at the knots and threads of their life, they can get lost in the seeming randomness of things. But at the end of a life, when we can stand back and admire it as a whole, we see the picture each stitch helped create. Our spells work the same way. Focus on the individual parts, and you'll get lost. But see it, feel it -- the whole of it -- and it becomes real."

Nania stared down at the mangled threads in her hands. "I guess that makes sense." She sighed. "Does that mean I have to start again?"

"That depends. How specific was your image of what the spell would do?"

Nania sighed again. "Not very."

"And did you decide how your pattern would reflect that image *before* you started?"

"It was taking forever to plan!"

"Patience, Nania, patience. Remember that once you've designed a certain kind of spell enough times you find a pattern that works for you, and then you can do it in a snap. Untie what you've got now, and then this evening we'll try this ward spell again."

"Can't I do it after supper? I work faster on a full stomach."

Rakani looked stern. "Come on Nania, do it now. It's only 3 o'clock, there's lots of time yet."

"But if I go now I can probably still catch the boys at the range. I promise I'll focus extra hard tonight."

"Nania kaht-Ahrood, if you focused half as hard on your thread work as you do on your archery you'd already be a better stitch witch than I am. This will take you 20 minutes now and then you can go to the range."

Nania flopped back on the sandstone. "But why now?"

"Because I said so."

"But why do you say so?"

"Gods Nania, not one of these moods. For a girl about to turn thirteen you're behaving awfully like an eight year old."

Nania put on a mock pout. "You know, when I *was* eight, one of the first things you told me is that my questions would always be welcome."

"Oh!" Rakani dipped her hand in the fountain and flicked it at Nania. "Sometimes you are just impossible!"

"Hey now!" Nania filled her palm with water and scooped it at Rakani.

“Ah!” The woman sprung to her feet laughing and heaved water at Nania with both hands. Nania pulled up her skirts and waded right into the fountain, kicking water at her teacher and they screeched and giggled.

“Who’s not acting her age now, Rakani?”

“You are an imp, Nania kaht-Ahrood!”

“Am I? I thought I was a stitch witch!”

A shadow fell over the two women. “You’re soaked is what you are.” Nania looked up at the tall, well-muscled man before her. At 18, Isaph had easily outgrown his own father, and years of training with blade and bow were evident even beneath his loose sweat-stained summer tunic. Nania smiled cheekily at her brother.

“Rakani started it.”

“Guilty as charged.” Rakani shook her head, sending water droplets flying from her braids. “But sometimes your sister deserves a good splashing.”

“Don’t I know it.” Isaph gave Nania’s soggy curls a ruffle.

Rakani tried to wring out her tunic, her loose linen pants plastered against her skin. “Uck, I hate wet. You win Nania, we’re done for this afternoon. I’m going find some dry clothes before dinner.”

Nania watched Rakani weave through the crowd towards the front staircase.

“You going too, Nahni?”

“No.” She sat back on the fountain lip, spreading her skirts about her. “I’m going to let the sun dry me off.” She shaded her eyes to look up at Isaph. “I thought you’d still be in the yards.”

Isaph settled next to her, leaning back to drink in the sunlight. “Ostah got tired of being out-shot, so he felt the need to whoop me with steel. I gave him a good run though.” He smiled smugly. “Took him 15 minutes to force a submission. After that we both needed a break.”

“Well, tak. I was hoping I’d join you for at least an hour or two before dinner.”

Isaph shoved her playfully. “You watch your mouth, Mouse. If Mama hears to swearing like that she’ll think me and the boys are having a bad influence on her little lady. Besides, you can join us tomorrow afternoon. For that matter, we’ll be out there every afternoon till we go.” He cracked his knuckles. “Gotta be ready to show those Kadran recruits we’re not just capitil-born cowards.”

Nania scuffed her bare feet on the ground, her eyes tracing the lines between the many sandstone blocks. When she spoke, her voice was quiet. “I wish you weren’t leaving.”

“I know, Mouse.” He put a big arm around her shoulders. “But Ostah’s put off going as long as he can, and even grumpy old il-Dresh admits he doesn’t have much left to teach me. I’ve got to go to Kadra and earn entrance to the Bahadur. It’s time.”

“You don’t *have* to go.”

“Yes, I do. Those of us without magic have to find other means of making our way through the world.”

Nania rolled her eyes. “You do have magic Isaph.”

He sighed dramatically. “I suppose. But the masters say I’m rubbish with it. I’m not good with spells or prayers or any of that. I don’t have your brain, Nahni.” If his voice contained a

tinge of real wistfulness it was instantly covered by his usual grin. "Besides, il-Dresh says that with my strength and my shot, it'd be a waste if I didn't serve Mudore as a Bahadur."

"Fine. Just don't go off and get killed before I can see you again."

"Don't worry Nahni, it'll be a year before they send us up North, and until then we won't see any real combat. Besides maybe fending off a Corsican raid or two along the coast," his eyes glittered, "but from what I hear that's mostly just good fun."

"It won't be the same here without you."

"Well, I'll be back at some point." He grimaced. "Fa will want me to settle down and get married, heir to house kaht-Ahrood and all, so wherever I start I'll get reassigned to the Zuhuz Division eventually."

"That wouldn't be so bad. You like girls."

He grinned. "Yes. I do like girls. That's why I don't really want to get married."

It was Nania's turn to shove him, for all the effect it had. "You are awful! Ostah too. A couple of hopeless flirts, the both of you."

"You're just jealous that he doesn't flirt with you."

"I am not!" She blushed and shoved him again.

"Whatever you say Mouse." He looked up and grinned. "Speaking of flirts, look who's here."

Mukah's fourteen-year-old brother, Nasih, and his year-mate Guran il-Parang were strolling across the square. Isaph waved at them, and they waved back, changing course towards the fountain.

"Well, this should be fun, eh Nahni?"

"Brother, I'm going to skin you." As the boys approached, Nania's back straightened, her knees pulled together, and her hands folded primly in her lap as she groaned inwardly. This was going to be painful.

"Hey Isaph. Afternoon, Nania." Nasih exchanged easy nods with Isaph, and gave Nania a little bow.

"Lady Nania," Guran's bow was much deeper than Nasih's, "Are you enjoying the summer heat this afternoon?"

Nania smiled sweetly. "Why yes, Lord Guran, I am. Thank you for asking."

"Too hot at midday for me, but it's rather nice by mid-afternoon."

"Indeed, Lord Guran."

"And, uh, if I may say," he swallowed. "You look very lovely in this sunshine."

Nania looked down at her sopping wet dress. "Thank you, Lord Guran. You are too kind."

Guran wiped his sweating palms on his loose cotton breeches. Nasih and Isaph were both trying to hide smirks.

Nasih tugged Guran's elbow. "Well, I think we'd best be on our way. Let's go, Guran."

Guran's excessive bow nearly cost him his balance. "A—a pleasure to see you, Lady Nania."

She inclined her head. "And you, Lord Guran."

"Come on. That's it." Nasih guided the sweating boy away, looking back over his shoulder with an apologetic grimace.

Nania threw herself back on the stone and groaned, “Ugghh. He is so irritating. ‘Nice weather, eh Nania? You look so pretty.’ Could he be any more inane?”

Isaph snickered as he watched them go. “You’re funny, Mouse.”

Nania glared at him. “Am I?”

“The way you become ‘Lady kaht-Ahrood’ all of a sudden.”

“They’re called manners, Isaph.”

He shrugged. “I call it not being yourself.”

“I can be proper and still be me, Isaph. I am a Lady after all, just as much as I am the girl who out-rides you on a johkobo. I get to be both. So there.” She stuck her tongue out.

“Now there’s my little sister.”

Nania rolled her eyes. “Well there’s no point being reserved around you.”

“What’s the point of being reserved around anyone?”

She scowled. “I don’t know. It’s safer.”

“Safer? For who?”

“Everyone!”

Now Isaph rolled his eyes. “How does that work?”

“So long as I don’t let my feelings get the better of me, they can’t hurt other people, and they can’t make me look a fool.”

Isaph thought about this and shrugged. “Well it doesn’t make you much of a flirt.”

She glared at him. “Well maybe I didn’t feel like flirting.”

“It wouldn’t kill. I mean Guran’s a bit of a joke, but who knows,” he poked her ribs, “he could be your future husband.”

“I’ll talk more when he comes up with something of greater interest than the weather. As it stands I have nothing to say to Guran il-Parang and I’m certainly not going to marry him.”

“Who says you’ll get to choose.” He grimaced. “Continuing the family name and all. We’re kaht-Ahrood’s, they’ll marry us both off eventually.”

He had a point. Nania pictured Guran’s clammy hands clasping hers, smiling dopily as a priest asked for her vows. She shuddered.

Isaph stretched his arms over his head. “At least hiding out in Kadra and up north for a few years will be a nice way of procrastinating.”

“Yes, you go off and have your adventures.” Nania pouted, “And by the time you get back I’ll be somebody’s wife and getting fat.”

He laughed. “I’m sure well see each other well before *that*.”

“No we won’t. It’s going to be forever!” She threw herself across his lap. “And you’re going to go have adventures and forget all about your mousey little sister long before I see you again.”

He poked her nose. “Don’t be silly Nahni. I promise I’ll write lots. Besides, who knows what the future holds. We could be together again sooner than you think.” He was looking up at the sky, but Nania thought she saw a twinkle in his eye as he spoke.

She sat up. “Isaph—”

He got to his feet. “Oh, I forgot to mention— the reason I came out to find you. There’s an official messenger come from Kadra.”

"Yes, I saw." She frowned. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh, it's better than okay." He grinned. "Esahfa seems to have figured out a cure for that fainting sickness that was tearing through the Kadran herd."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope. Has them all on the mend. But it gets better. The Caliph was out to watch our fight. When he heard the news, he told the messenger then and there to rest up and ride back to Kadra with word that he's awarding Esahfa the position of head hostler of the johkobo Army."

"That's incredible! I bet Uncle Esahfa will be over the moon! Although, knowing him he's probably just excited he's cured the birds, and won't be bothered about the title."

"He'd better get excited about it, or the whole tournament the Caliph is holding to honour his service will be a bit of a waste."

"A tournament?" Nania's eyes went wide. "Does that mean—"

"Yup." Isaph grinned. "We're *all* going to Kadra."

On the last day of the journey across Mudore, three generations of Dokehda women, and one lazy golden snake, trotted together at the front of the train of caravans.

"Don't get too far ahead, you three!" Hahtim called from behind where he rode along with several other council member from Zuhuz, though he alone bore the badge that marked him as the Caliph's representative.

Ochaboo waved at him over her shoulder, careful not to disturb the sun soaked Junai who lounged across her lap. "What's he fussing about?"

Aliya gave a strained smile. "Oh, he's just being cautious, that's all."

"Cautious of what? We hardly have to worry about Corsicans this close to Kadra."

"I..." Aliya eyed Nania, who attempted a disinterested gaze at the horizon, hiding her irritation. It was insulting that her mother tried to keep her in the dark, as if being the daughter of the Grand Vizier she could possibly be unaware of the political goings on. As if she still needed protecting. By now she had learned that the less she seemed to care, the more she overheard.

Aliya seemed satisfied by her act. "I don't think it's Corsicans he's worried about."

"The raiders stick to the deserts and the greater threats yet further to the North."

"But with the way things are shifting, there's just no way to—"

"Aliya! A word?" Hahtim was waving her to join him.

Aliya shot a glance at Nania and said low to her mother, "Probably for the best." She turned and rode back to her husband, leaving grandmother and granddaughter together again.

Ochaboo, who would be acting as Sultana Allurah's representative at the tournament, had joined their party along with a group of Hayil's nobility after they'd stopped for a night in the City of Intrigue. Since then, she and Nania had ridden side by side, catching up on life since their last visit and mulling over the difficulties of mastering ones magic.

These long, fascinating conversations had done much to raise Nania's spirits, which had grown lackluster in the absence of her brother and his friends. Despite days full of thread lessons, riding and archery, and her blossoming friendship with her female cousins, Nania found

herself missing Ostah's wry jokes, Mukah's persistent blabbing, and Doshass's booming laughter. Most of all, she missed Isaph's constant presence— their duet of private looks and jokes that underscored every public conversation, his perfect balance of goading and encouragement in the yards, and their late night rides around the garden, hooting and whooping at the stars as they pushed each other to ride harder and harder.

Fall couldn't pass fast enough. The tournament had been set for the end of the season in the last tenday of October, so it was nearly five months after Isaph's departure that the rest of the kaht Ahroods and many other noble families packed themselves into caravans for the 15 day journey to the city of Kadra. Since it was Nania's first time travelling anywhere further than the foot hills surrounding Zuhuz, she'd been exhilarated by the prospect of riding on the open road. Her excitement was somewhat dashed when she discovered how slowly a party of caravans traveled, and she was further frustrated when her mother insisted that if Nania wanted to ride on bird-back instead of in the caravans, then she had to ride side-saddle. Nania protested, but Aliya pointed out that travelling or not, breeches were unacceptable attire for a lady at court, and it was even less appropriate to ride with one's skirts hiked up around one's thighs— an argument which Nania begrudgingly accepted.

Even with her grandmother's company, the ride had felt painfully long, and Nania was aching to reach their destination. Just that morning the train had left the Coastal road as it curved south around the Suq Inlet, instead continuing straight along what Ochaboo called the Kadran Passage. Nania knew it couldn't be much father, and it was all she could do not to kick her bird into a gallop and leave the train to catch up. But now, after a few hours riding through nothing but sandy desert hills, Nania could finally see the great walls of the City of Power come swimming into view.

Built like a true fortress city to defend against Corsican raiders, the walls stretched far higher than those of Hayil or Zuhuz, and the exterior had been sanded smooth to dissuade even the most proficient climber. There were no clusters of buildings or tent cities spilling out around the gates; all remained within the protection of the walls. Just past the city, Nania could see something glittering through the haze. She squinted to try and make it out.

"Grandma, what's that just past the city?"

"That, Nahni, is the Walking Sea."

As they drew closer, she could see the vast expanse of deep blue water, stretching out to the horizon. The sandy dunes on either side of the road turned to dry plains, and as they approached the city Nania could make out a cluster of men riding in the fields outside the largest gate. As she watched, one of them seemed to spot the party of caravans. He pointed and the other riders wheeled their mounts to look. The largest of the four figures stood in his stirrups, waving his bow high above his head.

"That's them! That's Isaph!" Nania's johkobo pranced, sensing its riders excitement.

"Well, what are you waiting for girl? Your mother's not here to stop you."

Nania laughed and threw her leg over her johkobo. Planted squarely in her saddle, she took off at a gallop, barreling along the road.

Ochaboo watched her go, tiny frame bent low over her johkobo, her long dark curls flying out behind her.

Aliya rode up beside her mother, frowning. "Hahtim's just had word. Viper division rode in a two tenday early, they weren't supposed to be down until next month."

Ochaboo did not seem to hear.

"Some 9,800 deployed, 560 dead or injured, but only 8500 returning. That man is gaining momentum up there, Ma, and it seems the more troops we send, the more we end up fortifying his numbers. Decimated five years ago, and now? I never thought I'd see the day when 500 Bahadur would throw away their oath to join with a bunch of rebel swine. So much for Mudoran Honour." Aliya stared at Ochaboo, waiting for her response. Ochaboo let out a little sigh of contentment.

"Did you even hear me, mother?"

"Of course I heard you, girl. Which is exactly why I am taking this moment to appreciate something beautiful before we reach Kadra and I retreat once more into an endless line of council meetings and debriefings." Ochaboo's eyes remained fixed on her granddaughter. "Such grace at a gallop. Even on the back of a johkobo she looks like a lady. You've done well with her, Aliya."

Aliya sighed and rubbed her forehead. "She's certainly growing up."

"Then perhaps you should start treating her that way."

"I know, Mama. But sometimes I am overwhelmed with what I know about the world, and I don't want her to be before her time."

"Well, she'll learn sooner or later. Fate will see to that. Besides, she's a mature little thing. I think she can handle more than you know." Ochaboo looked sidelong at her daughter. "She reminds me of you at that age."

"Hah! I find that hard to believe."

Ochaboo chuckled. "And why is that?"

Aliya smiled ruefully. "I know very well I was a handful. Nania doesn't exactly have my temper. She takes after her father. You know, all thoughtfulness and reason."

"But underneath it lives her mother's fire. Look at her." As Nania approached the men, Isaph jumped off his johkobo to greet her. She practically vaulted off her mount's back and he caught her in his arms, spinning her around and giving her a great bear hug.

"She's quite something to watch."

"She's determined to be the best rider in the Palace. Rides every morning and night."

"See? That's your passion."

"It could be your stubbornness."

Ochaboo winked. "Our stubbornness, dear."

"Well, her brains are decidedly yours."

"But she got your charm."

"Your wit."

"Your breasts."

"What?" Aliya swivelled in her saddle to stare at her mother. A smile played at the corners of Ochaboo's lips as she stroked Juani's feathered wings.

"She's an early bloomer, just like you."

Aliya tried not to smile. "Mama!"

“Of course, you had a good six inches on her at this age. Bean pole that you were. But our Nahni,” Ochaboo turned to watch her granddaughter, “she has already grown into her beauty. And that, she got entirely from you.”

That afternoon, Isaph collected Nania from the Palace at the centre of the city. Together they walked through the streets to the tournament grounds, Nania leading Rakani's johkobo Klowah by the reins. The grounds had been set up in one of Kadra's four great military blocks, around which each of the city's quarters were built. Next to the stables, great stands, hung with banners and garlands, had been erected before a expansive dirt court which would be set up in turn for wresting, scimitars, and the tournament centerpiece, the archery championship. Past this yard stretched the race track, a permanent fixture of each military block, around which the tournament grounds had been designed.

Isaph and Nania stopped by the stables, surveying the scene before them. From here, the nobles would be able to take in each event without leaving their seats.

“Pretty neat, huh Mouse?”

“And Kadra has four of those?” She pointed towards the race track.

“Yup. Sure beats dodging people on Garden Path, I can tell you that much.”

Ostah, Mukah, and Doshass emerged from the stables, each mounted up, Ostah leading a fourth johkobo for Isaph.

“About time you two got here.” Ostah tossed Isaph his reins. “What do you think, Nania? Little different from the yards at home, huh?”

“I'll say. I think the all the yards in Zuhuz could fit inside the track alone.”

“Ready to give it a try?” asked Mukah.

“I want to give Klowah a good rinse first. He's still all sandy from the road.”

Ostah frowned. “Didn't they do that at the palace stables?”

Nania grinned. “They tried.”

Her brother laughed and ruffled Klowah's feather. “Fussy thing. Well, we'll head over to the track and get in a practice lap or two before you come trounce us all.”

“Hah. Sounds good to me.”

As the men rode away, Isaph drawled over his shoulder, “It's a good thing you're here Nahni. Ostah's forgotten how to lose, and his head was getting too heavy for his poor johkobo.” Doshass guffawed, and Ostah tried to steer his johkobo into Isaphs. Isaph laughed wickedly and kicked his bird into a gallop, taking off towards the track. Nania giggled to herself as she tied Klowah to a post by the water spigot. It was good to back with the pack.

She had just finished rubbing Klowah down and was about to begin saddling him again when three young women came tumbling into view around the stables, holding their skirts up as they ran and twittering frantically.

“Where?”

“Over there, by the track!”

“I can barely see!”

“Up here!” They took absolutely no notice of Nania, but flitted past her to the stands and up a flight of wooden stairs to cluster at the railing and stare out across the yard.

“There!” The middle one pointed towards the men who were trick riding at one end of the track. “I told you he’d be here.” The three girls fell silent, watching. “Now that’s what I call a man.”

The shortest of the three sighed. “That jaw.”

“You don’t think his nose is too—”

“No.” The middle girl cut her plump companion off. “It’s perfect. Strong defined features are more masculine.”

“Well I think the Prince is more handsome.”

“Well you would. You always go for the “pretty” ones. And the fact he’s a prince doesn’t hurt either. Isaph is far more the man.”

“Mmm, even from here you can see his shoulders.”

“I do love a man with broad shoulders.”

“I love the way he wears his hair long.”

“And how he tosses it sometimes, like a lion.”

“He *is* like a lion.”

“I’d let him pounce on me.”

The other two girls giggled. “Rosahl!”

“Well I would. And I bet you money he’d do it.”

“Do you think?”

“Oh yes. He saw me here just the other day, and you should have seen the way he bowed in his saddle.” She bit her lip. “You two look all you like, but mark my words, that man is mine.” Nania found herself caught between laughing and cringing, to hear her brother talked about so. Women could be very ridiculous.

“Oh my.” Rosahl’s friend giggled. “I’m not sure anymore who’s who, predator or prey.”

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Lady Rosahl. And may I say, looking particularly lovely today.” Nania looked up from Klowah’s saddle to see who this new voice belonged to. A well built man in light leather armour, emblazoned with the Kadran sigil, came sauntering across the yard towards the stands. “What brings you ladies out here this afternoon? The tournament isn’t until tomorrow.”

“Why we’re here is none of your business, Nadeer.” That stopped him in his tracks.

“So cold, my lady?”

One of her friends giggled. “You’ve been gone too long, Bah Nadeer. Rosahl’s got her eye on one of the new recruits. She—”

“Hehfa!” With a flick of her fingers, Rosahl sent a spark flying into her plump friend’s rump.

“Ow!”

“She does, does she?” Nadeer climbed the stairs to look out at the track. “Him?” There was an arrogance in the young man’s voice that made Nania grit her teeth. “He’s still a trainee, Rosahl, nothing to fuss about. Just another pretty boy from Zuhuz.”

Rosahl raised an eyebrow as she watched Isaph ride. "He looks worth the fuss to us, doesn't he ladies?" They nodded obediently, and chorused their agreement.

"He doesn't even have his title Rosahl."

"I know lots of Bahadur who aren't half the man he is."

Nadeer scoffed, "You won't be so breathless when you watch me destroy him in the tournament tomorrow."

"I wouldn't be so sure." Four pairs of eyes turned to stare down at Nania. She continued doing up the straps of Klowah's saddle.

"What was that?" Nadeer looked at her, his smile incredulous.

"I said, I wouldn't be so sure. That man is Isaph kaht-Ahrood. He was the best shot in the palace of Zuhuz."

Nadeer looked Nania up and down, his eyes taking in the curves beneath her tunic and the fullness of her lips. "I appreciate your kind concern, little lady, but this isn't the palace of Zuhuz."

Nania shrugged as she worked. "I just thought I'd give you fair warning. I'd hate to see you get your hopes up only to see him shoot them down tomorrow."

"How can you be so sure he'll succeed? You don't even know who I am."

Nania turned and curtsied gracefully, "Begging your pardon, my lord, but I don't particularly care."

Nadeer's smile tightened. "Who are you then? Another of his fan girls?"

"No." Nania pulled herself onto Klowah's back. "I'm his sister." She kicked the chococbo into a trot towards the track.

Once Nania was out of earshot, Hehfa gushed, "Did you see her eyes? I could scream with jealousy!"

Rosahl's face was sour. "She certainly thinks she's someone special, doesn't she?"

Her other friend sighed, "Well shouldn't she? She's just as pretty as her brother!"

"Yes." Nadeer slid his hands into his pockets, watching Nania ride away. "Yes she is."

Chapter 5: Wager

October 26th

Kadra

“A silver says she touches his arm again in the next 30 seconds.”

“Done.”

Nania and Doshass stood leaning against a fence at the edge of the yard while Ostah and Mukah snuck in early morning archery practice before the tournament grounds began to fill for the day. Already there were more people milling about than usual for this hour, and out beyond the race track vendors were setting up stalls and carts to cater to the common folk who would line the streets to watch the day's proceedings.

Isaph was supposed to be shooting along side them, but before he could make it much past the stables he'd been intercepted by Lady Rosahl, dressed in her finest for the tournament. The two had spent the last 15 minutes in conversation, while Nania and the others watched with wry smiles from the range.

“How does he do it?” Doshass stared openly. “They just throw themselves at him.” Rosahl playfully smacked Isaph's arm, giggling coyly. “Look at her!”

“That was less than 30. Pay up.”

Doshass handed Nania a silver, shaking his head. “As if they're not even in public.”

Nania turned her attention from her brother's conquest to keep an eye on smarmy Nadeer who was lounging in the stands with a couple other young men, glaring towards Isaph and Rosahl. “You should have heard her yesterday. She's determined she'll have him. Silly chit.”

Mukah loosed a shot. “Well, she's pretty enough.”

Ostah snorted. “When has that ever been enough to keep Isaph interested?”

“Well, he can afford to be picky with all the attention he gets.”

“Jealous, Dosh?”

“Shut it, Mook.”

Rosahl's shrill laugh rang through the yard, and all four of them turned to watch as she curtsied deeply and presented Isaph with a delicate silk handkerchief. He took it and bowed in return until she rose and sauntered away, hips swaying as she glanced back over her shoulder.

Ostah chuckled. “Oh, she's shameless, that one.”

Isaph strolled towards them, hands and handkerchief shoved in his pockets. “Well I think she's enough to make even Old Kor stick pins in his eyes.”

“Nice hanky.” Mukah grinned.

Isaph smirked and as he took his bow off his shoulder. “Yeah, yeah, are we shooting or what?”

“Whatever you say, lover boy.”

“Get fucked, Mukah.”

“Pft. Just cause you have girls all over you doesn't mean you don't have to wait till you get married like the rest of us, Isaph.”

At this, Ostah groaned. “Must we be reminded?”

He, Mukah, and Isaph took their positions in their shooting lanes, while Doshass drew his scimitar and moved off to drill a pattern dance. The men began firing off rounds of arrows—the first quiver slow and precise to drill technique, the next one for speed. They had collected their arrows again and were about begin their third round when a shot whizzed over Isaph’s shoulder and thudded near the bullseye of his target.

“What the...”

They all turned to see the shooter. Nadeer leaned over railing of the stands, bow in hand. He and his friends had their heads together, snickering, and kept darting glances at Isaph and company.

“*Who* is *that*?” Isaph growled.

“Dunno.” said Mukah. “I don’t recognize him from the local divisions.”

“He’s got some kind of badge with a snake on it.” The men turned back to Nania.

Ostah nodded, thinking. “Viper Division got in just before last Dihnan. Sent down to recoup their losses and get some rest now that Bobcat’s gone North again. He probably just got here.”

“Well what’s got into his breeches then?” Isaph grumbled.

Nania smiled smugly. “I think his issue is what *hasn’t*. I overheard him talking with Lady Rosahl yesterday. Nadeer, I think. He seemed none too pleased to find her mooning over you, Isaph.”

“Aw, Tak.” Isaph frowned. “Now I’ll have gone and offended his honour by making eyes at his woman.”

“Oh, no - try as he might, she wasn’t having any of it.”

Ostah cocked his head, staring at her. “Then what’s your measure of him, Nahni?”

Her lips tightened. “Just seems like an arrogant pig to me.”

“Well then,” Isaph grinned, “let’s see if we can’t take him down a peg or two.” He nocked an arrow and turned to take brief aim before letting it fly. Nadeer, who hadn’t been paying attention, yelped as the arrow thudded into the railing, pinning his loose sleeve to the wood. He and his friends sat frozen for a moment, all eyes on the arrow. Then, slowly and calmly, Nadeer yanked the arrow from his sleeve, and leapt down over the railing. His friends jumped after him, landing in crouches, causing little dust clouds to puff up with their impact.

Isaph lowered his bow and said matter-of-factly. “Well, that’s done it.”

“Here comes trouble.” Muhak sang under his breath.

Ostah murmured, “Weapons away boys. Keep it easy.” As they slung their bows over their shoulders, Doshass sheathed his scimitar and pulled out his belt knife, using it to casually pick his nails as he leaned against the fence.

Nadeer strode towards them from the stands, followed closely by his four companions. Nadeer’s lips curled in a tight smile as he reached Isaph and held out the arrow.

“I believe this is yours.”

Isaph took the arrow and returned his saccharine expression. “Why thank you, Lord...” He cocked his head. “Dear me, I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure of being introduced.” Giving a shallow bow, he began in formal tones, “My name is—”

"I know who you are, Isaph kaht-Ahrood." Nadeer did not return his courtesy. "I've heard plenty more about you than I've wished to since my return home. Word is you're something of a famed shot back in your glittering city."

Ostah stepped forward to Isaph's side with authority. "And your name, good lord?"

Nadeer stiffened at his tone. "Bah Nadeer il-Ranad, Second Sword to Company 2-8, Viper Division." He looked Ostah up and down, his voice scathing. "And you are, trainee?"

Mukah piped up from behind, "Allow me to present his Royal Highness, Crown Prince Ostah il-Assad il-Zahir."

"You'd do well to show some respect before royalty." Doshass remarked, his attention still seemingly transfixed on his blade beneath his nails.

Nadeer raised his brows and swept his arms back in a low, affected bow. "Oh, of course! A pleasure to meet you, your highness." His bared his teeth as he straightened. "And you, kaht-Ahrood— it'll be a pleasure to take you down tomorrow."

Isaph, unperturbed, chuckled as he scratched at his scruff. "You can try if you like. I always welcome a challenge."

Nadeer's eyes flashed. "If you're so confident, fancy a wager?"

Isaph shrugged, "Why not? We love a good wager, don't we boys? Shall we say, 5 gold?"

"Hah!" Nadeer sneered, "Only boys bet for coin. How about something a little more interesting?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"The Lady Rosahl."

Mukah, Doshass and Ostah all chuckled, sharing a look.

"I'd rather take your gold, Bah Nadeer. Lady Rosahl may be easy on the eyes but..." Isaph wrinkled his nose, "she's not for me."

Nadeer's nostrils flared and his fists clenched. "She's not for you? Lady Rosahl is one of the finest women Mudore has to offer, and if don't see that, you are either blind or dumber than you look." Derision dripped from his words. "Or perhaps just mind-numbingly arrogant like most Capitil-born morons."

Isaph stiffened. "Perhaps capitol life has just led me to expect more substance from my woman. But if you fancy her, well, then by all means pursue her."

Nadeer snapped. "Don't play coy Kaht-Ahrood. I saw you accept her token."

"This?" Isaph pulled the handkerchief from his pocket. "A handkerchief? I'll give you this outright Bah Nadeer. But Lady Rosahl isn't mine to give."

"Fine." Nadeer snapped. "Then we'll wager on something that is. If I win, I want her." He pointed at Nania.

"You —"

"She's your little sister, isn't she? So you can give her to a husband. If I win, I'll wed her, bed her, and send her back to Zuhuz a used woman. Are those stakes high enough for you?"

Isaph ground his teeth. "You're mad if you think—"

"What does he get if he wins?" Nania stood by the fence, her face serene, her unnervingly cool eyes fixed on Nadeer.

Inside she was fuming - at this Kadran prick, for his arrogance and barefaced depravity, and now at herself, for letting it get to her. Recklessness and rage were just what Nadeer wanted, she chided herself. Were it not for her well-practiced glassy exterior, she would have rewarded him.

Isaph was giving her a warning look. "Nania—"

She flicked her eyes at her brother. She had almost lost hold of herself, but now she could not lose face. She was no weakling.

He sighed and turned back to Nadeer. "If I win?

"100 Gold."

"Try again, il-Ranad. There are few things in this world I prize more than my sister. I will not take kindly to another such insulting offer."

Nadeer considered him a moment, then grinned and spread his arms wide. "My position then."

His companions shifted uneasily. "Nadeer—"

He held up his hand to silence them. "If you beat me, I'll see to it that when you pass your test and become a Bahadur, you take my place as a Second Sword."

Ostah raised his brows. "Fresh Bahadur first serve as Third Swords. Everyone knows to be promoted you have to prove yourself."

"You may not respect me, Highness, but there are those who do. If kaht-Ahrood beats me tomorrow, he'll have proved himself well enough."

Isaph crossed his arms. "I grant, a tempting offer, Bah Nadeer. But what becomes of you when I take your station?"

"Oh," Nadeer rolled his eyes, "let's say I cross that bridge *if* we come to it, shall we? Now, do we have a deal?" He held out his hand.

Isaph glanced back at Nania and raised his eyebrows. She him gave a tiny nod.

There was no backing down now.

He turned back to Nadeer. "Very well." He took his hand. "You have yourself a deal."

In the space of a breath, five arrows whizzed through the air crossing 75 yards to thud into their targets, and the packed crowds surrounding the fenced yard erupted in cheers. Two arrows had hit the bullseye, which meant three archers eliminated, and two finalists to proceed to the final round. Nania sat fanning herself in the front row of the stands, fighting mild nausea from the pungent combination of human sweat hanging thickly beneath floral perfumes that swelled all around her. It made a convenient explanation for the nervous churning of her stomach. She watched Ostah clap Isaph on the shoulder and wish him luck before heading off the range to join the other unsuccessful competitors.

The herald blew his horn to announce the final round. "I present, your finalists in the event of archery, Trainee Isaph kaht-Ahrood, and Second Sword of Company 2-8, Viper Division, Bah Nadeer il-Ranad!"

Nadeer and Isaph both bowed deeply towards the dais at the centre of the stands, where the Sultan of Kadra, Aarzam il-Hifash, sat comfortably along with his wife. Also among those on the dais sat Hahtim and Ochaboo, as representatives of their respective leaders, and the guest of honour for the tournament, Esahfa Dokehda, with Ensi by his side and their six year old, Randesh, in his lap, all curls and smiles. Esahfa grinned and waved at his nephew, laughing as his son copied him.

The people clapped and cheered for the finalists. The two men waved to the crowds from their shooting positions as they waited for the targets to be moved back to their final distance of 100 yards. Isaph winked at Nania before turning back to the targets. She returned his wink, her face composed, her hands fold gracefully in her shirts. It would be silly to worry – her bother was a champion through and through, of that there was no doubt. It was the oppressive heat of the day that made her skin prickle.

Nania glanced over at Nadeer and saw him draw from his sleeve Lady Rosahl's silk handkerchief. He raised it to his lips and kissed it, staring into the stands. Nania craned her neck to peer down the row and saw Lady Rosahl sitting with her two silly friends. She returned Nadeer's gesture with a cold smile and a little nod.

Doshass, sitting to Nania's right, rubbed his sweating palms on his breeches. He had an unusual look of concern on his face. "You nervous Nania?"

"Have you seen the way Isaph's been shooting today? There's nothing to be nervous about."

Doshass smiled ruefully. "I suppose you're right. Oh, here we go." The targets were set at the very far edge of the yard and the herald had risen again to his feet. The crowd fell silent.

"The final round. Three arrows at 100 yards, the closest to the bullseye wins the tournament."

"Gods," Doshass whispered, "I couldn't even hit the target at that distance."

Nania smiled, "That's why they give you scimitars."

"Archers Ready!"

Nadeer and Isaph drew arrows from their quivers and nocked them.

"Draw! Aim!" They stood, strings drawn, ready to shoot. Nania furrowed her brow, trying to focus her sight. Were Isaph's hands shaking?

"Fire!" The arrows flew across the yard into their targets. Nadeer's arrow landed only two rings out from the bull's-eye. Isaph's arrow bit into the outer edge of the target, far to the right. A murmur rose in the crowd. Isaph face looked drawn as he lowered his bow. There was sweat on his brow.

"...what? I mean, how did..." Doshass's mouth worked to find words. He swallowed. "Must just be nerves. Eh, Nania?"

Nania was frowning, staring out at the two competitors. "When has Isaph ever gotten nerves over anything?"

"Second shots! Archers ready!" Nania watched Nadeer's lips spread into a smug smile as he watched Isaph struggle to nock his arrow, his hands shaking so badly that it took him three attempts to get it on the string. Isaph's eyes were wide with apparent terror as he raised his bow. He barely looked like himself.

“Something’s not right.” Nania murmured.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know exactly. But look at him, Dosh. Have you ever seen him like that?”

“Draw! Aim! Fire!” Nadeer’s arrow hit close to his first. Isaph’s sped right past the target to thud into the straw backdrops. An audible gasp rose from the crowd.

“No!” Nania breathed. Isaph dropped his bow and fell into a crouch, his head in his hands.

Her heart was pounding in her throat. “There’s got to be—” She caught Nadeer’s elated eyes dart towards the stands as he pulled his third arrow from his quiver. Nania followed his gaze and saw Lady Rosahl, her hands dancing in her lap and her lips in constant motion as she stared with malice at Isaph’s hunched form. Nania felt heat rise in her face as rage swelled within her, burning away her fear, consuming it. “That sisat!”

“Nania? What is it?” Doshass tried to follow her gaze “What’s going on?”

“Magic. Nadeer’s got her using magic. A fear spell, something.”

“Who?”

“Lady Rosahl. We have to tell someone.”

“Nania, I don’t think there’s time.”

“Archers ready!” Isaph rose slowly to his feet, his whole body trembling. He picked up his bow and tried again to place an arrow on the strings.

“What’s the matter kaht-Ahrood? Suddenly realize you’re not in Zuhuz anymore?”

Nania’s fists clenched. “How dare he! He can’t...I won’t...” She needed more time to think. She noticed a loose thread on the sleeve of Doshass’ tunic. Deftly, she grabbed it and pulled it loose.

“Nania, what—”

“Sh!” She held either end of the thread and pulled it tight, then fixed her eyes on Nadeer’s bow string.

“Aim!”

As he raised his bow, she imagined running her hands over that string, imagined the way the stretched sinew felt against her skin. The image strong in her mind, she closed her eyes, and the sounds around her dulled in her ears until all that existed was that single bow string. “Pray gods this works.”

“Fire!” As the call rang out, Nania gave the thread a sharp tug and it broke. A loud twang rang out, followed by a half startled, half pained cry.

“Hold!”

Nania’s eyes flew open to see Nadeer on the ground clutching his face, his mangled bow lying next to him on the ground. Its limbs were shattered and the string snapped at one end. Isaph stood, bow still drawn, frozen as he stared down at his competitor, trying to grasp the situation. Members of the crowd were on their feet, peering to see what had happened as others rushed out to Nadeer’s side. She allowed herself a moment’s relief before cold calculation kicked into gear.

Doshass turned to Nania, eyes wide. “Did you...?”

"I had to stall." She peered down the row at Rosahl who continued her quiet casting like nothing had happened.

Doshass followed her gaze, and shook his head. "Cold."

"She has to be stopped."

"I'll find an official." Doshass went to stand.

"No!" Nania pulled him back down. "Dosh, there isn't time. And if we stand up and make a big stink, she'll end the spell, and won't have any proof she was casting it. It'll look like we just raised a fuss because Isaph's losing."

"Then what? Your stall won't last forever." He gestured to the archers. Nadeer was on his feet, a healer rubbing ointment on a long red welt across his cheekbone where the string had whipped his skin.

Nania took a deep breath. "I need more thread."

"Here." Doshass continued to pull the broken thread from his sleeve, unraveling a little section of the fabric as he went. "Sorry ma." He handed the pile of string over to Nania. She stared at it for a long moment. "Nania? You okay?"

"Yeah, of course, I—" She tried to swallow down her nerves, her hands beginning to fumble with the thread in her hands. She was making a mess of it.

"Nania." Doshass put a hand on her shoulder.

Her lip began to quiver. "I—I've never actually got this one right." She looked up at Isaph, who stood dumbly watching with wide eyes and ashen face as Nadeer tested the bows his companions offered him. Her voice cracked as she whispered, "I don't know if..."

"There's always a first time for everything." Doshass' voice was low and warm. "Look at it this way Nahni. You can't be any scared-er than he is."

Nania looked up into Doshass big, kind face, and felt a sudden flood of gratitude for her stocky friend.

She smiled weakly. "Right." Closing her eyes, she tried to drown out the sounds of the crowd. She kept catching snatches of conversation that pulled at the edges of her brain, but she clung to her mental image of her brother, his shaking hands, his haunted expression, and as she began knotting the string into an intricate little ball, she felt her love for Isaph, her fury at this injustice, and her fear for her own fate if she failed surge from her fingers into her work. She began the circular pattern of twists and crosses that would make up her ward, surprised by how her well of emotion streamed forth to guide and entwine itself into the threads of the spell. She pictured the web of magic weaving through the air around Isaph, and in her mind's eye saw the air glowing gold around him as the invisible sparks of Rosahl's spell bounced futilely off of Nania's magic. Her hands were filled with warmth as she tied the final knot that would close her protective circle and whispered with weary, ragged breath the spell words, "and so to Fate" before opening her eyes.

Isaph stood just where he'd been when she closed her eyes, but the tension in his muscles seemed diminished, and Nania watched as the look of terror slid from his face to be replaced with puzzlement.

Doshass watched her anxiously. "Did it work?"

"We'll have to see." Nania bit her lip as Isaph shook his head a little and looked around him as if to orient himself. Nadeer had finally selected a replacement bow and the two of them were once again alone in their respective lanes. "Come on, brother," she whispered under her breath, "you can do this." His eyes instantly found hers in the stands, as though he had heard her voice over the din. She nodded to him, and he nodded back, his hands steady as he reached over his shoulder to pull an arrow from his quiver.

He set it deftly to the string and raised his bow before him. "Waiting on you, il-Ranad."

Nadeer just sneered as he raised his bow to match.

The herald blew his horn to silence the crowd, and as they settled again he cried, "Archers ready?" Both men nodded. "Draw!"

Now himself, Isaph was the picture of form and fluidity: his stance and draw, textbook, while his body remained relaxed and ready. Nania's insides swelled with pride; without a shot fired, it was plain who was the better archer.

"Aim! Fire!" Both men released their arrows and the crowd held its breath. Isaph's arrow flew straight and true through the air, till it was buried squarely in the bull's-eye of the target.

So did Nadeer's.

Nania gasped. The crowd remained hushed as several nobles who'd been officiating throughout the tournament jogged down the range to examine the targets. They returned shaking their heads, a couple of yard hands carrying the targets back with them.

The Master of Arms spoke. "Your Majesty, as you and all before us can bear witness, we have two true bulls-eyes here."

"So it would seem." The Sultan rose to his feet. "Well, what is the precedent in such cases? Where is our Master of Ceremonies to guide us in such an event?"

Nania heard someone behind her offer in a stage whisper, "Sloshed!" which caused a ripple of laughter around them.

A rather portly man, who was indeed quite red-faced, rose unsteadily from his seat just before the dais, endeavouring very hard to look serious.

"Precedent? What precedent? There is no precedent! Such a thing is unheard of! In the final shot of the final round, a tie? The chances! The likelihood! Why it's... it's practically... unprecedented!"

"Yes, so I gathered, Lord Tastash." The Sultan tried to hide his amusement as Lord Tastah withered where he stood. A woman next to him, presumably his wife, reached up and gently pulled him back into his seat.

Esahfa rose to his feet, clapping his hands together. "Your majesty, I propose that as our magnanimous host, you should make the final decision as to our tournament champion."

"Do you, Lord Esahfa?" The Sultan looked at him appraisingly. "Well perhaps as the Guest of Honour at our tournament you'd be so kind as to weigh in with your opinion."

This caught Esahfa quite off guard. "I, my lord?" He laughed, uneasy, "I'm hardly one to judge such matters! Ask any of my family and they'll tell you, I have little to no skill at archery."

"Oh come now, you saw the same shots as I. Tell me, who do you think has showed himself the better marksman today?" Esahfa's face fell as he turned to look between Nadeer

and Isaph. Isaph stood, hands clasped tight before him, knowing what his uncle was bound by honour to say.

"I think, your Majesty, that while both men showed incredible skill here today— truly, both worthy marksmen— but... it is hard to deny that Bah Nadeer faired better in this final round."

The Sultan regarded him with pleasure and smiled. "Excellent judgment, Lord Dokehda. I think so too." He turned and spread his arms.

"Nadeer il-Ranad, for your excellent skill and tenacity demonstrated here today, I hereby name you as our Tournament Champion!"

A roar went through the crowd as Nania's heart sunk. Nadeer whooped and punched the air, his friends jumping down from the stands to lift him on their shoulders. He waved to the crowd and bowed deeply to the Sultan from atop his perch.

"Don't worry Nania." Doshass said, getting to his feet. "Isaph will never let this stand."

Isaph, jaw tight, gave a low bow before turning and making a b-line for the stables.

Nania grimaced at the familiar expression. "Oh, I know it."

"This is going to be messy." Doshass began to make his way along their row towards the stairs, Nania slipping behind him.

"Well at least he's got the good sense to wait till he's out of sight."

From their seats with the disqualified archers, Ostah and Mukah had managed to slip ahead of the spectator crowd and beat Nania and Doshass handily to the stables, so that as they approached the doors, Nania heard Ostah's voice over the coos of the johkobos.

"What happened, man?"

"I don't know. Gods!" Nania came through the doors, the smell of dry straw and bird scat a welcome relief to her nostrils, arriving just in time to see Isaph slam his fist into a wooden beam. "I couldn't keep my damn hands from shaking. I couldn't think straight let alone see straight!"

Doshass strode towards them. "He cheated, Isaph. Nania caught him at it, didn't you Nahni?"

"He what?" Isaph's face went white with rage.

Nania nodded. "It's true Isaph. He had Lady Rosahl use her magic." There was silence while the room processed this news.

Mukah stammered, "But he... in front of... and with the wager!"

"I. Am going. To kill him!" Isaph bellowed and slammed his fist again into a post.

Doshass grabbed his arms. "Steady, big guy. You're scaring the birds."

Ostah's face was calculating as he turned to Nania. "Can we prove it?"

"I don't think so. I— I don't know how."

The stable doors were pushed wide open and Nadeer strolled in with his friends, looking sickly smug with a garland draped over his shoulders.

"Well, kaht-Ahrood, a wager is a wager, and I'm here to claim my prize."

It clearly took all of Isaph's restraint not to throw himself at Nadeer as he spat, "I would never give my sister to a swine like you."

“Careful now, kaht-Ahrood. I’d hate to think you’d go back on your word. I might begin to worry you were a man without honour. And a man without honour will never be made a Bahadur.”

Ostah stepped foreword, his voice cold. “You are the one without honour, il-Ranad. You are a cheat.”

Nadeer looked taken aback for a moment, then he grinned. “And where’s your proof?” No one spoke. “It looks like it’s your word against mine. And you may be the crown prince, but I’m afraid you still sound like a sore loser.” Ostah ground his teeth but said nothing. “That’s what I thought. So, I will take her.” He made to move towards Nania, but Mukah stepped in his path. “Oh don’t worry. You’ll get her back. Perhaps a little looser than before, and maybe not quite so pretty when I’m finished...”

“You —” Ostah lunged, swinging for Nadeer’s face, but Mukah moved fast enough to hold his shoulders.

“Ostah! Easy!”

“Oh, I see. She’s your whore, then, your highness? Your little whore and you don’t feel like sharing?”

Mukah struggled to keep Ostah back. “Come on, Ostah, let it go! Dosh, a little help here?”

Nadeer grinned and took a few steps back towards his friends. “In fact, I bet you’ve all had your turn rutting the little bitch.”

Mukah froze for a moment, then cried, “Oh that is IT!” before he too threw himself at Nadeer. A few of his men started forward in his defense, but Doshass caught both of Ostah and Mukah by the arms and pulled them back.

“You!” Isaph roared, fists balled at his sides. “You dishonour my sister, and you dishonour my friends. And I will not stand for it!”

“Oh no?” Nadeer crowed, “Then fight me, man to man, if you care so much for ‘honour’. Or are you too great a coward?”

Isaph bared his teeth and snarled. “I am no coward.” In a flash both men had belt knives in hand, knees bent, ready to rush at each other.

“Enough.” Nania’s even, icy voice cut a swath of silence through the air, halting all in their tracks as they turned to gaze on her. Her skirts concealed her hands as finger nails bit into palm. She would not risk her brother dying on this scorpion’s blade because she hadn’t held her tongue. Nadeer had bested her once, and the wager had been struck. She kept her breathing slow and even, her face an impassive mask. He would not best her again.

“The only coward here, Nadeer, is you — to win a woman in a wager because you can not woo one for yourself. It’s laughable.”

Nadeer’s face contorted with rage and he brandished his knife at her. “How dare you speak to me like that, you little bitch? You’ll learn to show your husband some respect!”

Nania took no notice of his blade but stood rooted in place, hands folded serenely before her, her stony eyes boring into his face. “I could never respect a coward and a cheat.”

“You have no proof!” Spit flew from Nadeer’s mouth, his eyes bulging from his reddened face.

"I don't need proof! I don't care who you think you are, I will tell everyone the truth about their great Tournament Champion, and enough people are bound to believe it that prize or no prize your honour will forever be in question. And somehow I don't think that's something you want to risk, is it Bah Nadeer?" This time it was his turn to be silent. "I didn't think so. So I have a proposition."

"Big words for a such a little bitch." One of Nadeer's friends barked. Nadeer put up a hand to silence him.

"What might that be, Lady?" He spat the word like a curse.

"A race."

Isaph shot her a questioning look. "Nania, what—"

"To decide the true winner of the wager."

"A race?" Nadeer almost laughed. "Against that great—"

"No. Against me."

"...against you?" Nadeer looked uncertain.

Nania spread her arms. "Win me from myself, Nadeer, and no one will question your claim. Five laps of the track, fastest rider wins."

Nadeer looked suspicious. "You want to race me yourself?"

She smiled graciously. "And if you win I'll give myself most willingly."

His narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

Nania felt her stomach tighten. "I—well—"

"No. Absolutely not!" Isaph stepped forward.

Nania looked at him in disbelief. "Isaph—"

"Nania, as your brother, I forbid you to do something so stupid, so irresponsible—"

"Isaph, shut up!" Nania stared at him with wide eyes. Why was he being so thick?

Nadeer looked delighted as he watched their exchange. "It doesn't seem your sister wants your help, kaht-Ahrood. Better step down or she might challenge you, too." The mock fear in his voice earned him chuckles from a few of friends, while some catcalled their agreement.

Isaph ignored them and dropped to his knees in the dirt before his sister. "Nahni, I beg you. Don't do this. Listen to me, I'm your brother, I know what's best." Nania could have slapped him, but before she could move he gave her a little wink. "Trust me."

At once, Nania understood. She raised her chin, the picture of a proud noblewoman.

"You can't tell me what to do, Brother. Win or lose, I will defend my own honour!"

"You have to listen to reason! Ostah, Mukah, help me! Dosh!" They looked at him blankly. "Think! If he gets her on the track, there's only one possible outcome!"

Comprehension dawned in Ostah's eyes, and he took a knee. "Nania, he's right, it's madness!"

"Be serious Nahni!" Doshass took the cue and kelt too, "It's not worth it! Let one of us ride for you."

Muhkah threw himself to the ground before her. "Nania, please, for the love of the gods, don't do it!" Ostah and Dosh's mouth's twitched and Isaph eyes rolled in exasperation. Nadeer looked pensive as he eyed the backs of their heads and for a moment Nania was afraid they'd gone to far.

She took a deep steadying breath and added, "A coward buys his beast, Bah Nadeer. A true man tames it. What do you say? Will you race?"

"Very well, Lady." His lips curled into a smug smile. "I will indulge this whim. But I wouldn't get used to it if I were you."

Nania gave him a deep curtsy, "Oh, I won't, my Lord. You have my word. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go saddle my bird." As she turned, she gave her hair a toss and sighed over her shoulder, "Don't try and stop me gentlemen. My mind's made up." Then glided off to saddle Klowah, a quiet smile playing on her lips.

As she retreated, Nadeer smirked down at the men on their knees. "Too bad boys. She's mine now." He turned to his companions and clapped his hands. "Let's go! That little bitch needs a lesson." His friends laughed and followed him to over to his johkobo.

Isaph rose and watched him go, then turned back to Ostah, Mukah and Doshass, who stood wiping the dust from their knees with wide smiles plastered across their faces.

"Well lads, I'd say he's in for a nasty surprise."

The tournament yards, largely deserted after the days of festivities, glowed orange in the evening light. Nania felt Klowah shifting nervously next to her as she stood, reins in hands, at the starting line of the track. She reached up to stroke his neck and whispered, "Steady boy." Next to her, Nadeer was already pulling himself into the saddle as his friends took up their posts leaning against the outer fence to watch. From his mount, he gave Nania a final derisive once over.

"You're sure you want to suffer this indignity, lady? You could just give yourself over and save yourself the pounding." He smirked. "For now, anyways." Beneath the laughter of Nadeer's companions, Nania could hear the low growl in Isaph's throat. He stood with the pack on the inside of the track, arms crossed, Ostah's hand on his shoulder.

Nania gave Nadeer a genteel smile. "It is my privilege to ride for myself." She placed a foot in her stirrup, and with little effort launched herself up into the saddle, swinging her leg, skirts and all, over Klowah's back to land lightly in her seat. Her hands never left the reins. The laughter in the air died abruptly, and Nadeer's own smile wavered. Nania batted her eyelashes at him, privately bursting with pride. "And so ride I shall."

He snorted contemptuously, but Nania watched the trepidation creeping into his eyes. "Let's get on with this." He nodded to the tallest of his friends. "Jofihr."

Jofihr stood up on the wrung of the fence and raised a hand in the air. "Alright. Five laps, first one across the line wins. Riders ready?" Nania and Nadeer both nodded. "On your mark. Get set." Nania felt Klowah's muscle's tense beneath her as she bent low over his neck. Jofihr dropped his arm. "Go!"

Nania squeezed her knees and whispered, "Let's go, boy!" Klowah sprung forward.

Nadeer kicked his bird with a loud "Hiyah!" and took off beside her. They hurtled along neck and neck for about half a lap, the wind buffeting Nania's skirts about her legs. She felt a flood of panic as she realized she'd never raced in skirts before. What if the drag slowed her

down? But the concern was momentary; she glimpsed Nadeer's bird huffing to keep pace. She watched it in the corner of her eye as, despite its best efforts, she and Klowah began to pull ahead until bird and rider were no longer visible in her periphery. She gave a whoop and bent lower, laughing as adrenaline coursed through her veins.

She approached the starting mark and saw the men on both sides of the track cheering and hollering for their riders. Mukah was jumping up and down, fists pumping in the air, while the others whooped and clapped as she thundered by. As their cheers faded behind her, she tried to listen for the sound of Nadeer's bird, but she couldn't make it out over the sound of the wind in her ears. As she rounded the far end of the track she glanced over her shoulder and saw Nadeer nearly a third of a lap behind her, just passing the starting line. Giddy, she pressed forward.

By the time she approached the starting line for a second time she could see Nadeer across the track, now nearly half a lap behind. Isaph, Ostah, Mukah and Doshass roared her name, and Nadeer's friends hissed and shouted profanities at her as she rode by.

"It's a good thing your mothers can't hear you." Nania grimaced to herself as she galloped on. "The only thing worse than a man without honour is a man who only has it when he's watched."

And suddenly, there he was. She could see Nadeer ahead of her now, less than a third of a lap away — and the gap was shrinking. By the time he'd passed the finish line she was only 200 yards behind. "Let's get him, Klowah." She whispered into the rushing air. "Let's teach him a lesson." The watching men had all fallen silent, as the thirteen year old girl rode down the Kadran solider. Nadeer's friends looked ashen faced and slack jawed, while Nania's brother and companions looked overcome with glee and anticipation.

Nania came barreling down on Nadeer, close enough now to hear his heavy breathing. He was darting glances at her over his shoulder as she approached and murmuring under his breath. She pulled up alongside him, feeling triumphant, but her stomach dropped when she saw his bared teeth and crazed eyes. When his eyes fell on her, his voice rose until it was a manic scream.

"Little Bitch! You sisat! She-devil!" In a blur of movement his hand was on the knife at his belt and he launched himself sideways towards her, blade drawn. Nania cried out and tried to steer Klowah to the left, but he was already upon her, dragging her down out of her saddle, striking out with his blade as they tumbled together. Nania felt the hot sting of metal bite deep into her flesh before she hit the ground hard. She laid there, winded and gasping, hands pressed to her wounded side as fear rose in her throat. She could hear yelling and running footsteps, but they were too far off. He would kill her, here, in the Kadran dirt, before anyone could reach her. She braced herself and waited for his blade to strike.

But it never came. Instead, blood-curdling shrieks ripped through the air, and the furious wark of a johkobo. She opened her eyes to see Klowah, wings spread, hissing and pecking at Nadeer who scrambled to right himself and keep his face covered from the bird's mercilessly sharp beak. He was already bleeding from two long gashes in his forehead, while a third vicious looking wound cut deep into his upper lip. Finally on his feet, Nadeer stumbled away from the advancing bird, grabbing the reins of his own anxious mount and struggling into his saddle.

Klowah's beak closed around his ankle as he kicked his bird. Nadeer screamed as his mount took off, tearing his ankle from Klowah's grip, and leaving behind bloodied shreds of fabric.

Nania watched him ride out of the festival grounds, and down an empty street before he turned a corner and was out of sight. As she watched him go, she became aware of a soft cooing in her ear as Klowah ran his beak through her dusty hair.

"I'm alright, boy," she murmured, feeling her hands grow wet and sticky, her body trembling with adrenaline. "I'm alright." She hoped.

"Nahni!" Isaph's voice shook as he reached her and crouched at her side. His eyes fixed on the blood seeping between her fingertips. "Ostah, she's cut." Ostah's face drained and he turned to Nadeer's friend Jofihir who was slowly backing away, exchanging nervous looks with his companions.

"You. Go and find a priest and—"

"Me? Why—why me? Why not him?" Jofihir pointed at Mukah.

Ostah's face darkened. "Because you Jofihir, are of house il-Kamil," he pointed at symbol hanging at the man's neck, "Book of Bronze. An honourable family who have lived in Kadra for generations. Which means you, unlike him, know this city like the back of your hand. Now, let me try this again. You will go, now, and find a priest. Send them here, immediately. Then, and only then, you find me the nearest squad of the Kadran civil division, and return with them, here. Do you understand?" It was spoken like a Caliph. Jofihir nodded, and took off at a run. "Mook?"

"On it." Mukah took off after him.

Nania tried to sit up, the pain in her side making her gasp.

"Woah, easy Nahni." Isaph laid a hand on her shoulder. "Trust me, that's only going to feel worse the more you move."

She grimaced as she laid herself back down. "Fine, fine." She looked up into her brother's worried face and tried to smile through the throbbing in her side. "It's not that bad."

"Of course not. Just, better safe than sorry."

Nania heard one of Nadeer's friends whisper, "She's white as a sheet." Isaph shot daggers at him, but it was Ostah who spoke, addressing the five remaining Kadrans.

"You. All of you. What you have just witnessed was no less than attempted murder. Try and say otherwise, and you will suffer the consequences of your friend's actions along with him. And believe me, there will be consequences. I will hunt that dishonourable dog down if I have to dredge this cities sewers to do it." He stared them down. "If you're smart, you'll help." They nodded their heads eagerly with a chorus of "yes" and "of course."

Doshass crossed his arms. "You're speaking to your prince."

Hastily they bowed low. "Yes, your highness!"

"Good. I'm glad we understand one another." He turned, smiling at Dosh who remained watching the nervous men as Ostah joined Isaph at Nania's side.

"Hanging in there, Nahni?" His face swam a little in her vision. She felt her gorge rise, and she tried desperately to swallow it down.

"I'm fine. Honest."

He gave her a warm smile. "Liar. But don't worry, you will be."

Perhaps he was right. Her pack was with her. Perhaps she'd come out of this just fine.

Isaph's brow was lined with concern. Nania reach up a hand to smooth it as tears ran down her cheeks of their own accord.

"Isaph, don't ruin this by getting all fussy."

He frowned deeper. "Ruin what?"

"My big victory!" She said it weakly, but Isaph's face broke into a rueful smile.

"Of course Mouse. I wouldn't want to ruin that." It was so rare to see Nania cry these days – suddenly she was his seven-year-old sister again, scared for her life in a closet, and Isaph felt his throat tighten as he fought back tears of his own. "I promise, we'll get you patched up and make a real night of it."

Ostah grinned. "I wonder where we could *possibly* celebrate something tonight?"

Nania giggled and winced as her head spun. "We'll figure something out." She looked at Isaph, who was staring off across the track. "Right, Isaph?"

He smiled, strained. "Of course Mouse. I promise." Two men in long blue robes had emerged at a run from a nearby street. "Now, let's see about these priests."

"You should have seen the look on his face." Mukah shook his head, "When Nania lapped him, I thought he'd fall off his mount."

"Pity he didn't." Said Doshass grimly. There was murmured agreement from their fellow trainees seated up and down the long benches at their table. The mood among them was tense and somber - their hushed conversations a stark contrast to the general din of music and happy chatter that filled the garden. Since the great hall of the Palace of Kadra could not accommodate all those who'd participated in the tournament, as well as the local and visiting nobility, the ample back lawn had been filled with long wooden tables and hung with rich fabric and lanterns for the tournament's closing feast. Stars twinkled dimly in the deep dusky light of the lesser sun, hanging low on the horizon. Beneath the fragrant roasting meat and spiced wine, the early autumn scents of dying blossoms and over-ripe fruit leached through the air – they at least suited Isaph's mood.

He glowered. "This is all wrong. How can they still hold a Victors feast for a Victor who can't attend, because somehow between the competition and dinner he became a disgraced criminal?"

Ostah sighed. "They couldn't very well have canceled it, it's been planned for months."

"Yes, they absolutely could. I'm sure given the circumstances, people would understand."

Ostah rubbed his forehead. "Well, the circumstances aren't exactly common knowledge yet."

"And why *is* that?" Isaph voice was thick with contempt, his fists clenched on the table. "Why isn't it being made public that their beloved champion stuck a knife in my little sister."

More grumbles of assent came from the men within earshot.

Ostah smiled bitterly. "They probably want to find him first."

At this, Imahl, the trainee on Isaph's left spoke up, his wide forehead creased with concern. "Still no news on his whereabouts, then?"

Isaph shook his head. "Not a word."

Next to Mukah, trainee Lohjak played with his fork, thinking. "They got guards on the gates pretty quick. You think he made it out of the city?"

Isaph shrugged. "Hard to say. My mum's keeping Nania close. She's paranoid he'll try and come back to finish the job, but I don't think he's that stupid."

"He was on a bird-back when he fled." Ostah pointed out. "He could be hundreds of miles up the coast by now."

Imahl smiled as he looked towards the dais where the Sultan and his most honoured guests were seated. "Your sister doesn't look too concerned."

Heads turned to glance at Nania where she was tucked between her father and grandmother, gleefully watching Junai drain a pineapple dry. Seeing her chatter away animatedly to Ochaboo, and with her dress concealing her wound, Isaph could almost forget how pale she had looked lying in the dirt of the racetrack, or how quickly the cotton pads had turned crimson as the healers pressed them to her wound.

Isaph sighed. "They say she'll make a full recovery in a matter of hours, thanks to the palace priest's magic."

Ostah nudged Isaph with his elbow. "Incoming, 10 o'clock."

From a table near the dais, a man and woman in elaborate dress had risen and were making their way through the maze of tables towards them.

Isaph recognized the man's strong jawline and the woman's arched brow.

Ostah put a hand on Isaph's arm. "Steady boys."

"Who is it?" asked Mukah, not wanting to turn around and look.

Imahl, a Kadran native, peered around Doshass' head. His eyebrows rose. "That's—"

"Lord and Lady il-Ranad." Isaph pushed himself to his feet as they drew up to the table. As he did so, Sultan Aarzam il-Hifash also rose to his feet, and the sounds of merriment dwindled into silence. As the Sultans eyes were fixed on the Lord and Lady standing before Isaph's table, so too was every set of eyes in attendance.

"Your Grace." The man offered a deep bow to Ostah, which his wife elegantly mirrored. Ostah nodded his head, his face betraying nothing but polite interest. Lord il-Ranad straightened, and his eyes fell on Isaph. When he spoke, it was in a deep, clear voice that rung out across the still garden. "Master kaht-Ahrood. My wife and I have come to make restitution for the act of violence committed against your sister by our son, Nadeer il-Ranad, and for his dishonourable behaviour against you in today's competition. He has brought great shame upon his family, and his actions cannot be forgiven. We offer you this gift of 10,000 gold, and declare here, before the Kadran court, before his highness," he bowed towards the dais, "before the representatives of the Mudoran Sultans and of the Grand Caliph himself, that henceforth we denounce him, and strip him of his blood ties to house il-Ranad."

A ripple went through the crowd as people whispered among themselves, trying to find someone who knew what had happened. Lady il-Ranad raised her chin and spoke over the

crowd, "He is no son of ours." Her voice was cold and steady, but Isaph could see from her swollen eyes what this declaration cost her. He bowed graciously.

"On behalf of my family, I thank you for your apology, and forgive your house for your son's crimes against me in today's tournament. I can not, however, forgive his violence."

At this the crowd again erupted into a flurry of whispers. There was a sharp glint in Lord il-Ranad's eye as he said carefully, "What more can I do, Lord Kaht-Ahrood, before you will grant us pardon?"

"It isn't mine to give." Isaph's gaze flicked past him to the dais, where his eyes met Nania's with a thin smile. "You must beg it of my sister, Lady Nania kaht-Ahrood."

Lord il-Ranad went stiff. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but his wife gripped his arm and he snapped it shut again. His eyes flickered up over the sea of nobles staring at him. A muscle in his jaw twitched. He looked back at Isaph, his eyes icy, and with a curt bow, said "Of course." Slowly he turned towards the dais and met the impassive green eyes of the slight girl sitting straight backed and proud at the high table.

"Lady Nania, on behalf of my house, I offer my deepest apologies for my son's actions towards you, and ask that you grant our house your pardon."

Nania rose to her feet, and bowed to Lord il-Ranad. "I accept your gracious apology, and thank you for the restitution you have made me. I gladly grant you and your honourable house pardon."

Lord il-Ranad visibly bristled. He stood, staring at her, until his wife broke the icy silence.

"Thank you, Lady Nania." She curtsied deeply, and wordlessly her husband followed suit. Nania returned the gesture, and settled back into her seat. Isaph sat as well. He couldn't help admiring how his sister's face showed no sign of pain, nor did her movement betray the heavy bandaging around her waist. He glanced at his mother and father, whose faces remained composed and they watched the il-Ranad's offer deep bows and murmured thanks to Sultan Aarzam. But Ochaboo's glittering eyes were fixed on Isaph. As he met her gaze, he saw her give the tiniest smile, and an almost imperceptible nod.

Sultan Aarzam waited as the il-Ranads made their way back to their table, then looked out at the crowd of grave and confused faces.

"For those of you not yet aware, a great injustice was done today. Tournament Champion is a title of great honour. It is not only meant as a mark of martial skill, but of a warrior's discipline and integrity. Today it has been misplaced - Lord Nadeer did not win his title fairly, but through the use of magic, the source of which remains a subject of inquiry. Furthermore, he has been charged with the violent attack —"

"Attempted murder" Isaph growled under breath.

"—of an innocent young girl. I hereby ratify his expulsion from House il-Ranad, and strip him of all titles, honour, and position. Furthermore, I banish him from the city of Kadra. Should he be found within these walls, he will face justice at the hands of the courts. We can not suffer traitors within these walls when every day our forces fight against the traitors in the North."

Many in the crowd shifted uneasily, and Aarzam saw fear in the eyes of his people. He smiled sadly. "These are dark pronouncements, I know. But let us not forget that among us there are still men of skill and bravery, who bring nothing but honour to their family, and to our

country. And that, good people, is reason enough to celebrate here tonight. I ask you to join me in honouring our new and rightful tournament champion, Trainee Isaph kaht-Ahrood.”

Isaph’s table erupted into cheers and applause, followed by the other trainees and soldiers, and finally by the relieved nobles and guests.

Isaph stared at the sultan, frozen in surprise.

Ostah leaned in and said in his ear “Stand up, moron, they’re clapping for you.”

But before Isaph could obey, Aarzam raised his hand for silence and addressed him. “Kaht-Ahrood?”

Isaph got dazedly to his feet. “Uh, yes, your majesty?”

“I understand there was also a certain wager made between you and Siyt Nadeer.”

‘Siyt’, the title of a male Mudoran commoner, was all Nadeer now received, and hearing it spoken aloud was a chilling as it was gratifying.

He collected himself. “Yes, your majesty. He promised me his post as Second Sword upon completion of my training, and assured me his superiors would ratify the agreement should it come to that.”

The Sultan raised his eyebrows. “Do you have anyone who can witness the terms of this wager?”

Before Isaph could speak, Ostah was on his feet. “I can, your highness.”

“And I.”

“And I.” Mukah and Doshass rose and bowed.

“And I.” At a table across the garden, Jofhir il-Kamil rose to his feet and bowed before the Sultan. Isaph saw looks pass between a few other men at the table, and it was moments before the rest of Nadeer’s gang had risen and bowed as well.

Aarzam looked pleased. “Very well then. It is my pleasure to confer upon you, Isaph kaht-Ahrood, the title of Second Sword to Company 2-8, Viper Division, conditional on your completion of your training at years end.” He allowed himself a grin. “But I’m sure after today, there is little doubt in anyone’s mind that you’ll do just fine.”

There was laughter throughout the crowd, and Isaph grinned back. “Thank you, your Grace.”

Aarzam raised his glass. “To you, Isaph. May the gods smile upon you in your trials to come. And tonight, may your honour and accomplishments be celebrated with good wine, good food, and better comrades!”

Raucous cheers and the clinking of glasses filled the night air. The musicians took this as their cue to pick up their instruments, and soon a lively tune swelled beneath the delighted tumult once more.

Having slipped away from the dais, Nania weaved her way towards the men’s table as speedily as her cup of warm cider and tender side would allow. As she approached, it was Ostah who noticed her first. “Here she is! Today’s real victor!” The trainees laughed and cheered as Nania gave a rare blush.

When she reached her bothers side, he reached up and ruffled her hair. “Mom released you, I see.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Yes, grudgingly. Scooch over.” Ostah and Isaph made room for her on the bench.

“How’s the side?” Isaph asked her quietly.

“Fine.” She grimaced. “I’m not allowed to ride for a couple days to make sure the healing takes. They’ll probably make me go back in the caravans.”

Lohjak offered Nania a tiny glass filled with dark brown liquid across the table. “Care for a drink, Lady Nania?”

Nania frowned, “That doesn’t look like wine.”

Isaph frowned, too. “She’s 13, Lohjak. I don’t think she’s ready to handle smoke.”

“Says you. From what I’ve heard today about magic tricks and johkobo racing, the little lady seems to handle herself just fine.”

Nania grinned. “Yes, thank you, I can. But I think I’ll still pass on whatever that is.” She sniffed, “It smells like our hearth.”

“Suit yourself! Bottoms up boys!” Lohjak raised the glass of smoke, and all around him trainees lifted their glasses and drained them to the dregs.

From down the table a fair-skinned fellow called out, “Lady kaht-Ahrood, shall we expect to see you in trainee uniform any time soon?”

Isaph put an arm gingerly around his sister shoulders. “Not a chance, Dyson. Not if I have anything to say about it!”

“Which you don’t!” Nania chided, merrily. She crossed her arms. “There are Askars and Askaras! Why not Bahadur and Bahadura!” Men around the table chuckled and oohed.

Dyson grinned. “She’s got you there, Isaph! I’m sure the johkobo army would be lucky to have a rider such as yourself, Lady.”

“And I’m sure Dyson wouldn’t mind having you around to look at, eh Dyson?” Piped up a fellow trainee.

Dyson blushed a deep crimson. “Well I mean, that wasn’t my first thought— not that I don’t— I mean...”

“Drink up, Dyson!” called another. “It’s your only way out!”

As the men laughed and Dyson buried his face in his tankard, Isaph turned to Nania and asked softly, “You don’t actually want to enlist, do you Nahni?”

“What? No, of course not.” She smiled. “I’ve got far too much magic to figure out to come mess about with you lot.”

“Good.” He looked relieved, and tweaked her nose. “Someone’s gotta hold down the fort in old Zuhuz.”

Ostah, a little drunk, slung an arm around her shoulder. “You did us all proud today, Nahni— a lot of force to be reckoned with for such a tiny package. In fact—” he got to his feet. “A toast!” He lifted his tankard, and each man followed suit.

“To Nania!”

“To Nania!”

Up on the dais, Aliya poured her mother another glass of wine as they looked across at the table where the boys were celebrating. Dwarfed between Isaph and Ostah, Nania sat contentedly sipping her mug of cider.

Aliya sighed. "She's going to pout the whole way back to Zuhuz."

"Does she miss him so much?"

Aliya nodded sadly. "They're very close."

"What about his friends? Is she 'close' with any of them?"

"Nania is too young to be getting your kind of 'close', Mama."

Ochaboo raised her brows. "She's 13 now Aliya. Noble families marry their daughters young."

Aliya was suddenly cross. "Oh, I know, believe me! But it can't be just anyone, especially with Nania." She scowled. "Hahtim's mother and that Lady Fatihsah il-Parang are incorrigible, dropping names ever since her birthday, like she's some mare for breeding. But I won't be rushed!"

"Oh I'm not worried, Aliya. You'll find someone right for our Nahni." As if she'd heard her name, Nania's great green eyes turned to meet her grandmother's, and they exchanged their quiet smile. "I mean really, who wouldn't want their son to marry a stitch witch?"

Chapter 6: Enlightening

December 31st
The Black Day - 970/971
Zuhuz

The torch-lit great room of the kaht-Ahrood quarters was crowded with bodies as preparations were made for the afternoon's annual Black Day celebrations in the Pavilion of Light. Even with most of the adults already out in the Pavilion, Nania and her Zuhuz cousins made up quite the brood.

"Joshi—" Makiram's admonishing cry came a moment too late, as her three year old son came careening around an armchair in middle the sitting area. He collided with the back of Rakani's legs as she stood, examining Nania's sleeve. Nania shrieked in surprise as Rakani's full cup of spiced wine splashed crimson across the front of her cream coloured gown.

Saphria, Makiram's eldest daughter, turned from fixing Yasma's hair and gasped.

"What?" Yasma, twisted in her chair and peered around her cousin, her furrowed brow increasing her already striking resemblance to her father, Kalim. "Oh no, Nahni..."

Yasma's younger sister, Askana, had her hands over her mouth, in shock or to hide her amusement, who could say. Noorine froze, eyes wide, the pin in her hand halted halfway to Askana's head. Kalim's youngest, Loki, stood up on the divan to see, and even Makiram's triplets, who had been lounging in the sitting area, bored out of their wits by the chatter and preparation, sat up in their seats to get a better look at the silken carnage.

Makiram scooped her youngest son up in her arms. "Josheet Dalhass, I swear to the Gods I am going to send you off to join your uncle's herd of johkobos. Now, what do you say to Rakani?"

He pouted his lips and batted his lashes in his sweetest look of contrition. "Sorry Rakani."

"And to Cousin Nania?"

"Sorry Nahni."

Nania smiled into his pudgy face, sticky with mushed date. "That's okay Joshi. No harm done."

Makiram thrust her youngest boy into the lap of the nearest triplet. "Lahleh, please take him down the hall. He's getting underfoot and we're late getting out to the Pavilion as it is."

Lahleh stood with him, her eyes beseeching. "Why doesn't Rajan have to babysit?"

"Rajan, help your sister."

"Me? But what about Ahmit?"

"Ahmit, help you brother."

"But Ma, why doesn't Saphria have to do it? She's the oldest."

“Saphria is busy helping Yasma fix her hair for this afternoon’s festivities. Are any of you good with hair?” There was silence. “That’s what I thought. Now take your brother to Isaph’s old room and keep him busy.”

Rajan groaned as he got to his feet. “Does it really take all three of us? He’s just a little kid.”

Makiram turned on him, hands on her hips. “If he’s such a sweet desert breeze, would you like to go on your own?”

Rajan looked at Joshi as he yanked Lahleh’s hair in an effort to climb over her shoulder, and sighed. “Let’s go guys.” The triplets trailed out into the hall with their little brother, and Makiram turned to survey the room with a sigh.

“There. That’s better.” The room felt much less crowded. Saphria and Yasma were at the makeshift vanity set up on the dining table. Askana sat in a chair on the other side of the room, proud and prim as a princess, with Noorine dutifully hovering over her long dark tresses. Loki, the youngest cousin left in the room, had clambered down off the divan before the hearth and was once more seated patiently in his festival best, feet swinging off the floor. Makiram came over to where Nania and Rakani stood before the sitting area, looking forlorn.

“I really am so sorry about your gown, Nania. I know you took great pains making it.”

“It really is no harm done, Auntie Makiram. See?” She gently shook the front of her dress. The wine was already running off the fabric in little rivulets and pooling on the floor at her feet. Makiram’s eyes went wide, but Rakani smiled.

“Very nice, Nania. Looks like you’ve finally mastered that one.

“That’s incredible!” Makiram reached out to touch the dress. “It’s completely dry! Not a spot! How does it just slide off like that?”

Nania held up the loose sleeve she’d been showing Rakani, revealing a pattern of golden threaded embroidery that began as a circle of flowering vines at the cuff, and wound in tendrils up to her elbows.

“I’ve hidden a little something in the pattern.” She smiled. “It was my latest project with Rakani. I was hoping I wouldn’t get the chance to test it today, since it hasn’t been consistent, but I suppose better here than once we’re out in the pavilion.” It taken Nania painstaking months to get the magic to work, ruining no small amount of cloth in the process. Rakani, patient had always, had sat with her as she raged over the precise stitches, trying to hold the pattern in her mind, apart from her roiling feelings. Adding it to the embroidery on her dress had been a last minute venture, and she was very grateful to see her weave had worked.

Yasma was watching the last of the wine disappear with admiration. “That’s amazing, Nahni! Could you do that to mine?” She fidgeted in her pale green gown, her long limbs ill suited for sitting still. “I always spill and mama will be furious if I stain another gown.”

Saphria pushed a pin into Yasma’s elaborate hairstyle. “If you don’t sit still I’m going to stick you with one of these and then your gown will get stained a very different shade of red.”

“Ugh, sorry.” Yasma turned back to the large mirror propped up on the table. “Nahni? Please?”

“Of course, Yas.” Nania stepped gingerly out of the puddle at her feet. “Just let me—”

“I’ll get it, Lady!” Noorine came rushing to her aid, pulling a cloth from her waistband.

“Noorine!” Eleven-year-old Askana crossed her arms imperiously. “Come back and finish my hair first!”

Noorine flushed with embarrassment, “Sorry, Lady, I just —“

Makiram put a hand on Noorine’s shoulder and looked sternly at Askana. “You watch your tone young lady! Noorine knows what needs to take priority, and I’m sure your Aunt Aliya won’t take kindly to a stain on her floor because you demanded your hair take precedent.”

Askana pouted and grumbled, “You’re the one who said we were running late.”

Makiram raised her eyebrows. “Are you taking a tone with me, young lady?”

Askana blushed, “Of course not, Auntie Makiram.”

“Well good. Noorine, you get that puddle. Askana, I’ll come take a look at your hair.”

“What about me?” Seven-year-old Loki piped up from the divan. “Why do all you girls get pretty things? I want fancy hair too!”

The tension in the room melted as everyone shared a chuckle.

Rakani came over and knelt before him, smiling her wide warm smile. “Perhaps I can try my hand at something, young man. You don’t mind braids, you do?”

Nania pulled out the little pouch with needle and thread that she kept tucked into even her most formal outfits, and brought it over to sit with Yasma and Saphria. While Nania was older by a slight margin, all three girls were in their thirteenth year, and in the absence of Isaph and the pack they had become Nania’s closest companions.

Yasma still had half an eye on her younger sister, her look disapproving. She kept her voice low. “Askana sounds just like Grandma il-Parang sometimes. It’s disgusting. She’d never do it when Ma or Fa are around, but she speaks so rudely to anyone who isn’t noble.”

Saphria tucked another of Yasma’s curls into place and said bitterly, “It’s people like your Grandma who keep me from going to the Festival today.”

Nania shook her head as she got to work adding a golden embroidered flower to the sleeve of Yasma’s emerald gown. “It’s so ridiculous. You’re family. You should be there with us for the lighting ceremony.”

“Right?” Saphria furrowed her smooth brow and pouted her full lower lip. Even making a face, Saphria was painfully pretty. “Why couldn’t my Ma have fallen in love with an il-Pon? Or even a kaht-Mosahl? But no, she had to fall in love with my big dumb Fa.”

“What about your big dumb Fa?” Makiram had made short work of Askana’s hair and come over to check on their progress. She was grinning.

Saphria flashed her back a smile. “Oh nothing Ma. I was just wondering out loud why you couldn’t have had *worse* taste in men so I could have gone to the party today.”

Makiram poked her daughter’s nose. “Cheeky monkey.”

“Do you get an invitation, Auntie Makiram?” asked Yasma.

“Yes. Being born a Dokehda gets me that much at least.”

Saphria cocked her head, confused. “So why aren’t you going, Ma?”

“And leave you and your poor father to wrangle the little ones on the darkest day of the year?” Makiram scoffed. “You’d almost certainly lose one!”

Yasma scowled. “So why not insist they come with you? They’re your children!”

“Because Saphria’s right. As lovely as my children are, they aren’t from a noble house.”

Nania seethed quietly as she deftly pulled her needle through the silk, trying to keep her anger from flooding into the spell she was trying to weave. The muscles of her jaw tense, she managed coolly. “But *you* are. And your children as much *from* you as they are from Uncle Raj.”

Makiram chuckled. “It’s an excellent point Nanhi. You’d think it would work that way.” She smiled a little sadly, “We don’t seem to have come quite that far.”

“There!” Rakani rose to her feet. She had braided two strands of Loki’s shoulder length black hair and pinned them up so they circled his head like a crown.

He bounced exuberantly where he sat, “How do I look?”

Askana giggled from an armchair, “Very pretty, Loki.”

Rakani looked around the room. “Well, are we almost ready to go?”

“Just about.” Nania finished tying off the thread on Yasma’s sleeve. “Just me left.”

Makiram clapped her hands. “Excellent. Stay right where you are and just turn your chair around.”

Nania did as she was told, and Makiram and Saphria set about piling her hair on top of her head with pins. Loki raced excitedly around the room searching for different substances to test on Yasma’s newly mess-repellant gown, while Rakani knelt and began adding a similar thread charm to the beaming Askana’s clothing.

Facing the doors of the living room, Nania stared out through their great glass panes. Torchlight spilling from the apartment lit the closest few feet of grass, but the world beyond was consumed by a deep darkness. The Greater Sun spent every December eclipsed by the massive planet of Bara Druu, whose blackness now filled a third of the sky. This year, the Lesser Sun rose in the evenings, which meant a month of starlit days and dusky blue nights. While the skies varied through the seven-year celestial cycle, December 31st was always the darkest day of them all — the day between years, when the lesser sun, too, disappeared completely from the skies, leaving the world to stumble onwards by flickering starlight.

And it was this day each year that the Mudorans celebrated their Festival of Light. Here and there, torches bobbed across the dark lawn as people made their way out to the Pavilion of Light where it sat nestled against the Royal Gardens. Dark and empty on every other day of the year, its tall arched windows were now dimly illuminated, giving it an almost haunted look as the shadows of people within danced across the openings. In a few hours the great stone building would be filled with the light of dozens of magnificent lanterns. Nania shivered, remembering the beauty of last year celebration. This was by far her favourite holiday — a testament that in the deepest darkness light shone with its truest beauty.

Saphria stepped in front of Nania’s view, interrupting her reverie as she fiddled with the curls that hung down around her face.

“There!” She stepped back, satisfied. “You’re finished.”

Makiram came around to join her daughter and sighed happily, “Absolutely breathtaking, Nania!”

“Let’s see, let’s see!” Askana demanded. Nania turned to her. She squealed, “You look like a princess!” Makiram and Saphria had teased and tucked Nania’s gentle waves so that they cascaded from a loose arrangement at her crown, brushing the tops of her shoulders, with a few carefully selected tendrils falling delicately around her face.

Rakani beamed at her. "It's beautiful, Nahni."

Nania wrinkled her nose. "Oh come on, it's just hair."

"I've got the cloaks!" Noorine came rushing back into the room, her arms piled full. When she saw Nania she gasped. "Oh! Let me look at you!" She threw the cloaks down on an armchair and rushed over, holding out her hands, which Nania took.

"Radiant! Just radiant! That cream colour against your skin! And the way it makes your lovely eyes stand out so! Oh, you look so lovely I could cry." Her eyes welled with tears. "Little Nahni looking so grown up. If that kaht-Zahad boy wasn't grateful to be matched with you before, he surely will be now."

Nania felt her body go stiff. What was that Noorine had just said? She caught Rakani's exasperated glance at the ceiling. No, surely not.

Askana gasped, "Nahni's getting married?!"

Saphria and Yasma exchanged confused glances, and looked questioningly at Nania, who shook her head ever so slightly, to indicate she had no more idea what was going on than they did. Though that had damn well better change soon.

"You know Noorine," Makiram said hurriedly, "the little ones have been awfully quiet down the hall. Would you be a dear and make sure Joshi hasn't got them all...oh I don't know..."

"Locked in the closet?" Nania offered, fixing her Aunt with a cool stare.

Noorine gasped, "You don't think?"

Makiram laughed uncomfortably. "She's joking Noorine, of course. But would you go see that they're alright?"

Noorine wiped her nose. "Of course, Lady!" She dashed out of the room. Rakani went and closed the door behind her.

Nania folded her hands in her lap. "Alright. What's going on?" She kept her voice steady, though a twinge of panic flared in her gut.

Makiram and Rakani looked to one another, clearly lost for words.

Finally Rakani spoke. "I think— I know your mother planned on telling you herself. Once things had been... settled."

Makiram nodded and bounced on her toes. "Yes, that was the plan. I'm sure she would have said something already if they hadn't run into certain... complications." She gave a rueful little laugh. "But it would seem the cat's out of the bag now. Lord Ardeshir approached your parents last tenday about a match between you and their oldest son. Lohkiim, I think his name is. You probably know him, Nahni.

"Sort of." Her mind raced. She knew of him. He was a couple years older than her, so they rarely had lessons together. However there weren't that many noble families who had permanent residence in the Palace. He was a familiar face in the hallways, though he'd never really hung around in the practice yards. And she'd certainly never thought about marrying him.

Askana bounced over and danced around the dining table. "The Book of Gold, Nahni! You'll be in the Book of Gold!"

Makiram grinned, "It is an excellent match. I think that's the only reason your mother would agree to anything so early. But I'm sure she'll want to talk to you about it herself." She grimaced a little, "She won't exactly be thrilled that you've found out like this."

"In that case, let's not tell her." Nania got to her feet, putting on her brightest smile. "Not today, at least. I'm sure it'll come up sooner or later." She went to find her cloak in the pile. "And today we have a festival to celebrate."

Makiram looked exceptionally relieved. As she and Saphria helped everyone else sort out their cloaks for the cool walk across the lawn, Nania waited by the doors, trying to collect herself. Her throat was tight, and her hands shook as fumbled with her clasp. She was aware that since her 13th birthday last Pentember her parents had been receiving offers for her hand, but they'd never bothered to mention any to her, so she hadn't given it much thought. She's always known her choice in the matter would be limited; the pressures of her kaht-Ahrood grandparents and The Book of Silver guaranteed that. All the same, it was a strange and somewhat terrifying realization that the choice had actually been made - that this unknown entity would be her husband, and the father of her children.

He could be anyone -- a spoiled palace pig of the upper nobility who still saw women solely as political trading pieces, a disinterested flirt with no interest in a wife or family. Nania took a deep breath to stop her thoughts running away from her. Her mother wouldn't allow the match if he wasn't a good man, no matter how good a family he came from. And if there was one thing to be learned from Grandma Ochaboo, it was that it didn't take a good husband to be a good mother. Wistfully she thought of her father once wiping a finger through a mound of mashed yams Isaph had landed squarely on her mothers face and insisting it tasted sweeter than off the plate, instantly reducing a full-on blow out to a family wide laughing fit. Nania sighed. A good husband would certainly help.

Saphria came over to adjust the cloak over her shoulders and said quietly, "You doing okay?"

Nania nodded mutely.

"That good, huh?"

It made Nania smile. She sighed. "He'll be there, won't he." It wasn't really a question. "Do you think he knows?"

Saphria shrugged. "He might. But you don't have to go over and bring it up."

Nania shuddered. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Makiram was done fussing with Loki. "Alright, all of you out the door!"

"I'm sorry I can't be there today." Saphria took Nania's face in her hands. "You look forward to this all year. Don't let a silly boy get in the way. It'll be great. And you'll keep her distracted, won't you Yas?"

Yasma had come up beside them, fixing her own clasp. "Absolutely." She smiled cheerfully and took Nania's hand as Rakani pushed open the glass doors, holding the torch out before her. "We'll light some lanterns, fill our bellies, and you can forget all about it."

“Yes, Lady Fatihsah, it is very exciting. Now if you’ll excuse me, I really must find the rest of my family.” Backing away, Nania gave a small curtsy before turning and disappearing into the dark sea of bodies, cursing under her breath.

She heard Yasma’s voice behind her. “Uh, yes, we should go. I’m sure we’ll see you later, Grandmother. Come on, Askana. Loki, let’s go.”

Nania didn’t wait for them to catch up. She wove her way through the shadowy assembly, fuming. That insufferable old woman. Of course she already knew about the engagement. And if she knew, then everyone else did too. Lady Fatihsah would have seen to that.

She scanned the faces around her – most were indiscernible, the only light in the otherwise pitch-black pavilion shining from the lanterns scattered throughout the crowd. It was so dark in the pre-ceremony pavilion that Nania could make out the great multi-storied windows by the great swaths of stars glittering in at them. Pushing through a few tight-knit groups, she absently admired the elaborate embroidery of everyone’s festival best as it brushed against her skin. The air here was warm and held the heavy, pleasant sent of packed bodies, burning braziers, and mulled wine, and Nania breathed it in deeply. Normally this would have lulled her out of any mood, but Lady Fatihsah’s squawking laughter rose above the hum of chatter. Nania ground her teeth. Of all nights, tonight.

At last she spotted her parents, their faces lit from below by the lantern her father held – the lantern of House kaht Ahrood. Even in a foul mood, Nania couldn’t help but appreciate the soft golden glow through the yellowed paper. Hatim’s brow unfurrowed when he saw her approach. “There you are, Nahni. We were worried you’d be late coming over – the ceremony is about to start.”

At that moment, Yasma pushed through the crowd, followed by Askana who was practically dragging Loki behind her. Yasma caught Nania’s hand and gave it a brief squeeze, whispering “See you soon” before she hustled on to find house Dokehda. Nania could only just make out Yasma’s grimace as she looked back over her shoulder to mouth “Sorry!” Poor Yas. Nania was the one who should feel sorry for her, with that woman as a grandmother. She shuddered. Auntie Prihma was alright – practical and pretty, Nania could see why uncle Kalim had pursued her as a bride – but how he could stand having Lady Fatihsah as a mother in law was beyond comprehension.

“Sorry Fa. We ran into Lady Fatisah al Parang on the way over.”

Aliya pulled a face. “Then I’d say you made excellent time to have made it here before next year’s black day.” Nania forced a smile for her mothers quip, her resentment a hard ball in the pit of her stomach. “What was she on about?”

“The affairs of others. What else?” She managed to keep her tone breezy, but she was not practiced at lying to her mother and it did not come as easily as her usual concealments. Why should it, when she and her mother shared all with one another? She felt a tremble in the tight line of her lips and bore down on the guilt quivering in the pit of her stomach. She was not the one who had set this new precedent.

“Look, it’s about to start!” came an excited whispered nearby, as shushing swept through the crowd, a few people elbowing their more oblivious companions or pointing to the balcony

where a lantern bearing figure had come forward to stand before the railing. The Caliph's face flickered, but his voice was as warm and steady as the beaming sun as he began the ceremonial welcome.

"From the dark of the ice age, to a nation of burning sands, we rise and shine as one people, one nation, united. As we are thrust into this day into darkness, may we be reminded that, coming together, we can burn away the blackness and cross over into new light."

The soft thumps of hundreds of leather-clad feet reverberated through the great circular pavilion as the collected audience stomped their united approval on the sandstone floor. The Caliph looked down and inclined his head, and at this signal a figure stationed against the wall directly below him moved forward. As was tradition, the crowd had gathered in a semi-circle, leaving space before the balcony so all could watch as the herald crossed to stand before the round stone platform in the centre of the room. Only a shadow, he turned and made a deep bow to the Caliph high above him. As one, the nobles of Zuhuz followed suit.

The Caliph raised his arms. "I call to you in darkness."

As one, the pavilion chorused, "We bring forth our light." The ceremony had begun.

The herald reached for the round shape hanging at his side, and Nania felt her mother's arm go around her shoulders as she whispered, "Here we go!"

A rich, deep clang sounded out through the room, and over its fading echo a tenor voice cried "House Dokehda! Book of Bronze!"

Though it had been twenty years since their elevation to the Book of Bronze, House Dokehda was still the newest nobility. Nania's heart swelled with pride as she watched the dark shapes of her family separate from the crowd and make their way towards the centre of the room. Barely visible were the black armbands each person wore – a tribute to the recently passed Dokehda Patriarch, her Great Grandfather, Kalim Dokehda. With Grandfather Joskus dead thirty-five years, Uncle Kalim now took up his namesake's place leading the family up the step to the circle platform. Beside his broad form came the graceful silhouette of his wife, Prihma. In the dim light Nania could make out the shapes of Yasma's long limbs, Askana tiny waste, and Loki short, curly head close behind. There was Great Uncle Coraan, long a widower, with his three sons and their families – his daughter would cross later with her husband. And there, bringing up the rear was Farida's tall proud figure.

As she watched, Kalim crossed the centre of the platform, and in that instant released the lantern of House Dokehda. It floated up in the silent room, above the procession, a glowing ball of light in the darkness. Nania felt her breath catch in her chest – year after year, this moment never ceased to make her feel ablaze with wonder.

As she watched the round paper light rise, she felt a sudden pang as she thought of Isaph, across the country, crossing alone the platform alone, the only member of house kaht Ahrood present. This was her first Festival of Light without him beside her – poking fun of her awestruck face even as he beamed in exaltation at the brilliant ascent. She realized that of course this meant he carry and release a lantern all his own for House Kaht-Ahrood. It was an odd thought – Isaph as the head of a household, even just as a stand-in. She supposed some far off day he would be the one to carry their lantern here in Zuhuz, a Bahadur Captain no

doubt, with his own family walking with him. Her lips quirked at the thought of Isaph, older and mature. That day would surely come, but it was long off yet.

For now, he was young and probably raring for a wild night of celebration – for not only the Festival of Light, but his admittance into the Bahadur. Word had reached Zuhuz a tenday past that he, Ostah, Dosh and Mukah had passed their assessment and would be deployed with Viper Division in the new year. No one was surprised that they'd passed after on their first attempt. Some nobles spent up to four years studying advanced tactics and leadership before they gained entry, but the Pack had been training under Commander Il-Dresh since they were boys, even getting their feet wet out on patrols, and they had been more than ready even before they left Zuhuz.

Nania had begged her parents to join Isaph in Kadra for the Festival, to be there to celebrate his achievement. She argued that on bird-back she could make the trip in a tenday and a half easily. The response had been a firm no – as good a rider as she was, her parents said thirteen was too young to ride across the country alone, and that as the Vizier, her father's place was in Zuhuz for the Festival. Fair, she supposed, and her mother had had that look in her eye that warned she was done with a discussion, so Nania hadn't pushed it, but really, couldn't someone else have been her escort? Surely she would have been safe with Ranakni. With a start she wondered if the engagement would have something to do it. Internally she groaned. Well, whether because of her age or her bride-to-be status, she was here in the gossipy court of Zuhuz, and Isaph was far, far away and fancy free. At least Isaph wouldn't be entirely without family -- Uncle Esapha, Auntie Ensi and cousin Randesh were also celebrating their first Dark Day in Kadra and celebrate him properly. Would Isaph think of her as that first lantern glided through the night air?

At last the glowing globe bobbed gently against the gilded ceiling, its solitary brilliance bouncing off the lustrous surface of the golden dome, the radiance ever so slightly softening the darkness in the great pavilion below. Such a subtle change, but to Nania it was a magic far greater than any she could weave or knot, as though the pavilion had been transported beyond the palace grounds and into the realm of the divine.

She had not paid attention to the herald's cry, but another family was already climbing the step to the platform. She looked for the Dokehds and thought she could make them out across the circle. She had not paid attention to the herald's cry, but another family was already climbing the step to the platform. She looked for the Dokehds and thought she could make them out, settling into place across the circle. Now their part was done, and name after name, the herald would call the Noble families of Zuhuz to bring forth their light.

The glimmering dome of the pavilion slowly filled with lanterns, jostling one another gently and their numbers grew, until there was enough light for Nania to distinguish the smiling faces throughout the room. Light reflected on upturned faces, dancing in eyes crinkled with joy. Little gasps and sighs could be heard all around the chamber, as air currents caught a bobbing lanterns here and there, dancing and twirling it on its way up to the golden firmament.

The herald called the first name in the Book of Silver. Nania watched as Mukah's family, House Kaht Ahseed, crossed the platform. Dim things may be, Nania caught the obvious wink Mukah's little brother Nasih shot at the lovely Jinnatah il-Nefesh, almost five years his senior,

whose cheeks seemed to colour even in this low light. A saunter in his step, Nasih had all of Mukah's missing luck with ladies, and he knew it. Nania rolled her eyes, and caught Yas's eye, who shook her head and concealed a giggle with her free hand. There came Doshass's family, House il-Tahrit, one of the largest groups in attendance – his father was the youngest of seven brothers, most of whom had grown children of their own who were starting families. At least six children under the age of four toddled across the platform, holding adults hands, some staring out at the mass of people with as much rapture as those who watched their family lantern's ascent.

Finally the herald called House Il-Dresh, the last house before Nania's family would cross. She bounced on the soles of her feet as she watched Commander Gasnati il-Dresh lead his family across the platform. Once a famed Commander in the North, there was no trace left of the crippling injury that had brought him back to Zuhuz nearly ten years ago. His hair was now decidedly gray, his face lined, but the man was solid muscle, back straight and step sure -- even in his festival best, the now Commander of the Zuhuz Civil Division looked every inch the solider. Though stern and demanding in the practice yard, even had the trace of a smile on his lips as he released his lantern into the air.

"House kaht Ahrood! Book of Silver! Bring forth your Light!"

Her father stepped forward Aliya on one side and his widowed mother on the other. Nania fell in step behind them. Her father stepped forward Aliya on one side and his widowed mother on the other. Nania fell in step behind them. Behind her came her great uncle and his wife, with their two sons and their families. The kaht Ahroods were a small clan here in Zuhuz – her uncle Mahlek had moved to Wasat a few years ago to be near his wife's family for a time, and her aunt Amisa had married an il-Friahl, and had yet be called forth to cross. Her kaht Ahrood relatives always seem nice enough, but they were not close. Nania knew politics played a part – her Fa had made an unpopular decision when he married a woman so newly raised to the Book of Bronze the ink was barely dry. But she couldn't say she minded – Grandmother Karima moved in circles with the likes of Lady il-Parang, while Grandma Jaguar was, well, Grandma Jaguar. She smiled to herself as she mounted the platform behind her parents, wiggling her fingers at Loki who waved enthusiastically from Farida's arms. Yas was giving her a wide grin and an awkward "come here" head jerk that Nania was sure was intended to be subtle. Askana had her arms primly crossed and was giving her older sister a withering look. Nania's smile split into a silent laugh. She was proud to be a kaht Ahrood, but she was just as proud to be a Dokehda.

Her father mounted the platform and released their lantern into the air – it sailed above her head as she crossed, up and up to join its fellows in the now bright cloud of lanterns.

And that was it. Nania grinned as she followed her parents down off the platform, almost giggling at her own euphoria over such a brief moment. Her family flowed back into the crowd and took their place in the semicircle to watch the next House cross.

Nania nudged her mother's arm and whispered. "Ma, can I go watch with Yas?"

"Well, yes, of course Nani." Aliya offered a smile, but Nania still felt a slight pang of guilt at the poorly disguised disappointment on her mother's face. "Have fun."

Nania returned the smile – her fake was much better than her mothers – and slipped into the crowd.

“There you are!” Yas whispered as Nania emerged beside her. “They’re almost through the Book of Silver.”

Askana eyes danced. “You know what that means Nahni.”

“Askana...” Yas’ warned.

“What?” Nania looked between the two of them.

“Nothing Nahni! Just that we’ll have mulled wine in our hands in no time.”

Askana scoffed. “What are you jealous, Yasma? You should be excited for her!” She turned to Nania. “The kaht Zahads will be crossing any minute!”

“Oh.” Nania tried to keep her voice even. “Yes, I suppose they will.”

Askana looked at her confused. “So... so you’ll get to see Lokim! At his very best, too, so if he’s not much to look at now, well, you’d best just be thankful he’s in the *gods blessed book of gold!*” She squealed these last words, and Yas shushed her softly. Graceful fingers settled on Askana’s shoulder, and she looked up into her mother Prihma’s reproving face. Askana at once looked contrite, and allowed herself to be led to stand between her parents.

“Well...” Yasma hemmed, rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet.

“Well indeed.” Nania smiled tightly. They stood in silence as House il-Pon crossed the platform. Most of the lanterns were airborne now, reflecting brightly off the guilt dome and washing the room in their golden light. They blotted out the stars from view, but at least she could properly admire the vast splendor of the pavilion, open to visitors this one night a year. Two massive crescent staircases curved down from either side of the high balcony, following the inside of the pavilion wall. Every year she wondered how it would feel to slide down one of those wide sandstone railings. It would not be proper. Against the smooth sandstone wall of the balcony draped an iridescent waterfall of sheer fabric, shifting and shimmering in the night air, pooling on the floor below.

Would he be called next? There were only ten houses in Zuhuz who were Book of Gold. Nania realised she was holding her breath, and let it go at once. This was silliness. She’d have to see him sooner or later; he lived in the same bloody palace as she did.

“House kaht Loffahm! Book of Gold! Bring forth your light!”

No. Why hadn’t she paid better attention to the order of the Book of Gold before? She stifled her anxious shifting, drawing on her deepest reserves of stoicism, but Yas took her hand anyway. Nania looked at her cousin, who gave her a rueful smile.

“At least we have a good excuse to stare.”

Nania nodded. Perhaps that was something.

“House kaht Zahad! Book of Gold! Bring forth your light!”

From the mass of people stepped Omaran kaht Zahad, wizened patriarch of his house, clad in the deep scarlet and gold robes of the Chancellor of the University of Zuhuz. Behind him towered his son, High Preist Ardeshir kaht Zahad, Head of the Palace infirmary and chief healer to the Grand Caliph, who to be fair towered over everybody.

“You can’t say he doesn’t come from good stock.” Yas muttered out of the corner of her mouth.

With the tall and taller figures came Ardeshir's wife, Rishandi, in the opalescent purple of the Priestesses of Zann, and behind her—

"There!" Yas whispered, clearly excited despite herself. "That's him, isn't it?"

—walking between his bother and sister, Lokim kaht Zahad strode up across the platform, gazing up at the gently whirling lantern of his family. Its light reflected in dark brown eyes framed with long lashes. His delicate nose crinkled as he laughed at something his sister murmured in his ear, his full lips spread into a beaming smile. His black, tightly curling hair had been martialed back into a stub of a horsetail at the nape of his neck, and his beard — he had a beard -- was neatly trimmed. Dressed simply in a wide sleeved, deep blue shirt, black pants and soft brown leather boots, he put an arm around his sister's shoulder as they stepped down off the platform and into the crowd.

They stood in silence for a moment.

"He's not very tall." Nania observed.

Yasma smacked her shoulder. "Unbelievable."

"Well he isn't."

"Well, neither are you." Yasma said in her matter-of-fact way.

Nania grimaced. "Fine, point taken."

Yas sighed. "So he's not a giant like Isaph or Mukah, or even Dosh. But he looked, I don't know, well proportioned." Nania gave her an incredulous look. "Oh I don't know! I don't know how to talk about men's looks. You need Saphria here for this." She rubbed a hand over her face. "He's looked well enough to me, but I'm not the one who has to marry him."

Nania's tightened her lips.

"Sorry," Yas said, chagrinned.

"It's fine, Yas. I just, I mean —" Nania took a breath to collect herself, biting down on her frustration. "It's hard to care how he looks when I don't know anything about him."

"You know some things about him." Yas offered helpfully. "You know he grew up in the palace, he's a couple years younger than Isaph and I *think* he studies at the university?"

Nania nodded. "I don't see him in the practice yards, he must spend his time somewhere."

"He's the oldest of three? Doesn't look like a half bad brother."

"True." Nania chewed her lip thoughtfully. "That or he cares as much about appearances as half the other nobles in the Book of Gold."

Yas put a long arm around her shoulders, and whispered cheerfully. "See? A veritable wealth of knowledge."

Nania couldn't help but smile as she wrapped her arm around Yas' shoulder in turn. "You're right, Yas. A veritable wealth."

Askana appeared at her sister's side, apparently freed from her mother's clutches.

"Nice shoulders! I think he's got very clever eyes", she whispered. Then, wrinkling her nose, "He's not very tall."

Nania suppressed a grin and looked pointedly at Yas, who could only roll her eyes.

"House il-Assad il-Zahir! Book of Gold! Bring forth your light!"

"Bring us into the light!" Came the chorused response from all around the great pavilion.

In the following silence, the Caliph again raised his arms, “I hope you will forgive me this moment of personal celebration. Since my son could walk it had been his duty to carry our family lantern down these stairs, bringing our ceremony to a close. This year, he carries our lantern in Kadra, where he celebrated his acceptance as a Bahadur!”

Cheers and applause erupted around the pavilion, and somewhere on the far side of the room someone began a chant of “Ostah! Ostah! Ostah!” The Caliph wore a gratified smile as he raised a hand for silence.

“Thank you, thank you. Now, I have been firmly reminded that the Princess Cala has *already had* a turn carrying our lantern, before Ostah was old enough to do so.” He looked meaningfully at his daughter who sat behind him on the dais. She gave a rueful smile and lifted her hands in mock resignation, to many soft chuckles from below. “This year, it is with great pride that I present to you Layan il-Assad il-Zahir, my brilliant daughter and your radiant princess.” He turned, and all eyes turned with him, to the top of the grand staircase to his right. Standing there, lantern held before her, the Princess Layan wore an exhalant if somewhat mischievous smile. She made her way down the expansive steps, chin held high and formal scarlet university robes billowing out behind her.

Yas leaned over and whispered, “I bet her mother loved that wardrobe choice.” Sure enough, Queen Qubilah’s smile was exceptionally tight as she watched her daughter’s descent.

Nania rolled her eyes. “You’d think she’d be proud.” It was not uncommon for women to study at the university, but few princesses had ever enrolled. Nania new from Ostah that Layan had been set on attending since she was a child, and now battled constantly to convince her mother that twenty-two was not too old to be unmarried, and that marriage didn’t have to mean giving up her studies.

“What is it with mothers and marriage?” Nania grumbled under her breath.

Layan reached the bottom of the stairs and glided across the room, mounting the pavilion steps and stopped in the center of the room. Slowly she turned, surveying the room with a coy, playful grin. Excited laughter bubbled through the waiting crowd, breath bated and eyes transfixed on the lantern in her hands. Her father cleared his throat, his face amused. Layan held the lantern aloft, raised an eyebrow at the musicians who sat poised to play, and launched the final lantern into the night sky.

The room erupted in a massive cheer. The musicians instantly struck up a rich, lively tune to serenade the lantern as it rose. Yas lifted Nania in a tight hug, spinning her around. She caught sight of her mother caught up in her father embrace, lips entwined like newly weds. Loki jumped from Frida’s arms and ran to his father, who whisked him off his feet and threw him in the air. All around, the noble men, women, and children of Zuhuz celebrated the dawning of a new year.

Above the joyful cacophony, the Caliph shouted, “Darkness may surround us, but we revel in the light!”

“We revel in the light!” echoed from all around, the final line of the ceremony. The age-old cry of Mudore.

Nania and Yasma collapsed panting onto one of the many plush divans now arrayed in clusters around the outside of the pavilion. Nania fanned herself with a hand. Away from the dancing, laughing throng, she savored the cold night air drifting in through the open windows at least three stories tall.

"I'm starving." Yas pushed herself up on her elbows, looking around for one of the many tray-bearing servants who circulated the room's perimeter, offering delicacies to the many nobles seated in conversation. "Here we go." She plucked two miniature pies of a passing tray, and waved to another fellow who brought over an array of crackers covered in goat cheese, chopped nuts and honey. Nania helped herself to one of these, biting into the thick, warm dairy, savoring the salty sweet delicacy.

"Gods these are good." Yas said through a mouthful, brushing a bit of buttery pastry off her lips. A thick dribble of dark brown sauce fell from the pie in her hand, and she reached out reflexively to stop it. It landed squarely on her sleeve. "Oh Tak." She groaned.

"With any luck, better your dress than the divan." Nania carefully took Yas's arm and pulled a handkerchief from the hidden pocket in her skirts. In a single stroke the mess was gone. She sighed with relief.

Yas bounced in delight. "Like water off a birds back! Oh that is a brilliant trick, Nahni! It's like wearing full body napkin!"

"I'm just glad it worked. I'm still getting the knack of it."

"Well if you're not careful my Ma will give you lots of practice spelling my entire wardrobe." She took another generous bite and chewed thoughtfully, peering at the steam rising from the half eaten pie. "Do you ever wonder how they keep the food warm all the way from the palace?"

Nania almost choked her own bite of cracker, giggling. "They don't bring it all the way from the palace kitchens!" She pointed to the fabric-draped wall. "See those two doors? One by each staircase?"

Yas frowned. "Yah, where they take all our cloaks for the night."

Nania shook her head conspiratorially. "They're not just cloak rooms. There's a whole kitchen under the balcony. All kinds of storage rooms and passages."

"You're teasing!"

"Am not! Look at it! They can fit three floors under there."

"How do you know?" Yas asked suspiciously.

"Isaph and I snuck in three summers ago to have a look around. See that huge column up there? She pointed to the mammoth column at the back of the balcony. It was intricately carved and inlaid with gold to create a backdrop for the dais built against it, on which sat the five thrones of the present royal family. "There's a room in there."

Yas eyes were wide. "Oohh, what kind of room?"

Nania shrugged. "It was hard to tell since there were sheets over everything, but there's a set of stairs that must lead down to the kitchen. I figure it must be a staging area for the servants who wait on the nobles up there. Something like that. Anyway, that's where we got caught."

“By gaurds?” Yas furrowed her brow. “Now that I think of it, I’ve never seen this place patrolled during the year, for all that it’s off limits.”

Nania shook her head. “We tripped some kind of ward. It froze us right at the top of the stairs. We knew we were in trouble when Khalil came himself.”

“The Caliph?” Yas covered her mouth with a hand. “Oh, Nahni.”

“Yup,” Nania took another bite of her cracker. “It was a bad day. A very long lecture about sacred ground, no johkobos for a month—“

“Uhoh.”

“Yeah, really. Isaph threw one of his fits and—“

“No, incoming.”

Nania craned her neck to see through the crowd. “Is it Guran? His palms are so sweaty. But if he asks very nicely I’m about ready for another dance.” Then she spotted them – Grandmother Karima weaving through the room, Lady Fatisah il-Parang and her walking stick at one elbow and, of all people, Calipha Qubilah il-Assad il-Zahir at the other.

“Oh Tak.” Nania felt her spine stiffen, shoulders fall back, hands go primly to her lap.

“Nania, my dove, there you are.” Her grandmother glided over, hand outstretched for Nania to kiss. “And looking so very elegant.”

Lady Fatisah shot a bitter look at the back of Lady Karima’s head. “Yasma.” She offered her own granddaughter a curt smile and a nod. The two older women waited for Qubilah to seat herself in the finely worked chair across from the girls before coming to roost on the divan adjacent, Lady Karima looking somewhat ruffled as she shuffled to accommodate Lady Fatisah’s impressive girth.

Nania rose to her feet and offered a fluid curtsy to the Calipha. “This is a beautiful evening your Grace. You have surely outdone yourself.”

Yas curtsied beside Nania with her own lanky grace. “We are honoured by your generosity, your Grace.”

It was common knowledge, if not openly discussed, that Qubilah didn’t concern herself with the actual practicalities of the festival – those were left to her Chief Steward and the Master of Ceremonies – only the touches of pomp and grandeur. Nevertheless, it was tradition to credit the Calipha with the success of events such as these, and Qubilah smiled graciously.

“Thank you, girls. I do think it’s been a rather beautiful evening, if not without its... hiccups.” She shared a pointed look with the other two noble women.

Nania settled herself back on the divan. “I certainly haven’t noticed any, your Grace, but I’m sure my eye is not as keen as yours. We are, of course, our own worst critics.” She inclined her head, the picture of deference and modesty.

The Calipha’s mouth curled in what might be amusement. “So it wasn’t a grandmother’s pride, Lady Karima. A very well spoken young lady, indeed.”

“My Grandmother is too kind. As is your Grace.” Nania met Qubilahs approving gaze.

The Calipha was undoubtedly beautiful. She wore an immaculate gown of pleated purple and pearls, it’s high collar setting of her swanlike neck. Thick black hair was pulled sleekly back from her face in a perfect plait braided with pearls, revealing high sharp cheekbones. She had

the Ostah's mouth. Or rather, he had hers-- the same bow shapes lips she had passed down to all three of her children.

It was the eyes that ruined it. For all her benevolent smiles, the expression never seemed to reach those dark cheerless pools. Nania suppressed a shiver.

"We were just telling her Majesty about your up upcoming engagement." Grandmother Karima beamed with pride.

"Yes." Calipha Qubilah tapped a slender finger to her lips. "How exciting. Are you excited, Nania?"

"Oh yes your Grace. To think, next year I may walk the pavilion at my husbands side." It hadn't occurred to her till she'd said it, but it was true. This may have been her last festival as a kaht-Ahrood. The thought made her stomach turn, but she kept her face smooth. Eyes wide, she drew on her best impression of Asakana tone, without the giddiness, "And in the book of gold, no less. It is truly a great honour."

Yas threw her a sidelong look, plainly puzzled. Flaming sands, if she gave Nania away...

Qubilah raised an arched eyebrow. "A great honour it is. You do well to recognize it as such. Not so many years ago, I think, your mother married into the Book of Silver, and now here you are courting the Book of Gold." That was hardly fair. From what Makrim had told her, Nania was fairly sure the offer had come to her, not the other way around. Her toes curled in her satin slippers.

Lady Fatisah nodded sagely. "Your mother is wise not to be wasting any time finding a good match."

"Certainly." Karima pressed a hand to her heart. "I must say I'm relieved. I thought our gentle prodding had had fallen on deaf ears."

"Thankfully Aliya has shown good sense." This was punctuated by a thump of Lady Fatisah's walking stick on the floor. "You'll do your family proud, girl, to be married and bearing children at your age."

"Not like most girls these days." Karima sniffed. "I don't understand it. Such wasted time. I was married to Livahn by fifteen and was pregnant within the year."

Lady Fatisah drew herself up proudly. "Doram was born was I was fourteen."

"Exactly. Aliya?" Karima waved a dismissive hand, "Didn't have Isaph till she was twenty!"

"Yasma here wasn't born until Primah was twenty-one!" Lady Fahtisah sighed. "But that seems to be the way of it these days. So unfortunate, don't you think your highness?"

"Such a shame, the poor women." The Calipha's voice was grave, but Nania noticed her earlobes redden as she picked something invisible from her skirts. Nania did some quick figuring. Yes, that was right, Princess Cala was only twenty-three. Unless Qubilah was much younger than she looked-- unlikely given the life of leisure she was reputed to lead-- she had to have been in her twenties when she had her first child. The nasty hypocrite. She resisted the urge to glare at Qubilah's resigned smile. "What can one do in times like these but set good examples where one can."

"Speaking of which," Lady Fatiah's adopted a singsong tone. "I hear a certain Princess is expecting again."

Karima clapped her hands together, "Oh, I thought Cala looked particularly radiant this evening!"

Qubilah beamed affectionately, the smile actually creasing the corners of her eyes. "It is early yet, but the priests say the child is healthy and strong."

"Four beautiful grandchildren." Lady Fahitsah cooed. "You must be very proud."

"And for Layan," Lady Karima's expression turned dark and commiserative, "well, we can only pray she comes to see reason."

Qubilah pressed her lips together in a tight line. "We shall see. The girl insists she won't marry until she's fallen in love. Next thing I know she might be asking our blessing to wed some common university boy. Gods prohibit it."

Lady Fahitah sighed despairingly. "Oh, I had such a time with Prihma when she fell in love with that Dokehda boy. It mucked up the whole process. And there she is, married into the book of Bronze!" She puffed herself up. "This nonsense about a woman getting to choose her husband--"

"That it is her *right* to have a say!" Lady Karima almost snorted.

"The notion. The notion!" Lady Fahtisah fanned herself with a hand as if truly overwhelmed by the thought, shaking her head tragically.

Qubilah nodded coolly. "Quite right. Any woman silly enough to get that idea lodged in her head is lucky if she finds a husband at all."

"Really." Karima clucked. "No regard for tradition, for the lineage that needs to be upheld."

"Old blood, House kaht-Ardeshir." Lady Fahtisah looked at Nania appraisingly. "You're a pretty girl, Nania. I'm sure there won't be any time wasted carrying on the line."

"But what if Nania doesn't want to have children yet?" Yasma's face was incredulous. Nania cringed inside as Yas went on. "Being a new wife is one thing, but she's supposed to become a new mother right away, too? I don't understand what all the rush is about."

Fatisah's eyes were narrow slits as she rounded on her granddaughter. "I beg your pardon? What can you pretend to know about marriage and children? A year of your mother's best efforts and I don't see you engaged any time soon."

"How dare you question your grandmother so." Lady Karima spat.

Lady Fatisah went on in a froth. "It is not about what she wants, it is about what is best for her. Those are rarely the same thing, even less so when you are too young to know better. That is precisely what parents are for, to figure these things out for you."

"Until a woman gets a husband, and then it becomes his business." Lady Karima fluttered her hand as if to say, 'and good riddance'.

Face twisted, Lady Fatisah turned away from Yasma as though unable to look at her any longer. "You Majesty, I apologise for my Granddaughter's ill-mannered ignorance. Yasma, you will apologise at once for embarrassing me, and for the mortifying position you have put these ladies in having to listen to it."

Yas tall torso curved in on itself, face downcast in an effort to hide her trembling chin. "Sorry Grandmother. Lady Karima. Your Highness." Nania looked up into the satisfied faces of the women seated around her. Her skin prickled. Poor sweet Yas. Heart on her sleeve, she was

the last person who deserved such abuse. She really didn't understand the need to keep her mouth shut around these horrible old birds.

When Nania spoke, her tone was carefully controlled. "Begging your pardon, your ladyship, but I think what Yasma means is that I have much room for improvement before I become a mother. She's heard me say time and time again how much motherhood means to me, and I'm sure she just wants me to be as ready for it as I can." Nania took Yas' hand from the divan between them and squeezed it in hers, seeking her cousin's soft brown eyes. Yas looked up and Nania felt a genuine smile on her lips. "Yasma is one of the most caring people I know, your ladyship. I think she will be an excellent mother herself one day."

"That is very generous of you." Lady Fatisah said grimly. "You have a good friend in Nania, Yasma. You should be grateful. And take the opportunity to learn from her."

Yes, please, let Yasma learn. Let her learn how to keep herself safe from these vultures.

Yasma's face looked pained, but she managed a smile at Nania. "Thank you Nania." She squeezed her hand once more before folding hers contritely in her lap.

"You are a genteel young woman, Nania." The Calipha was staring at her.

Nania met her gaze with civil impassivity. "Thank you, your Grace. If I am, I am sure it is all to my parent's credit." She managed to keep her bite of sarcasm from her voice.

If Lady Karima's head had been held any higher, it would have popped off her neck. "No doubt she and Lohkiim will do very well together."

"Perhaps." Qubilah eyed Nania intently. "But then, I've known Lokim kaht Ardeshir since he was a babe. He is a handsome young man from an exceptional family, for all he's also a scholar. I have always found him a refined and well-mannered. Such a pedigree is certainly much sought after and not to be handed off lightly."

Internally, Nania snorted. If Qubilah was willing to vouch for him, she wasn't sure she wanted anything to do with the fellow. This backward jackal could take her opinions and wander off a sand dune. Her teeth ached as they ground together.

Outwardly, she did her best to look contemplative. "Well, if I am lucky enough to marry him, I suppose I shall do my best to deserve and serve him for the rest of my days."

"Yes." Qubilah regarded her thoughtfully. "I think you will." She laid her hands together in her lap. "I am satisfied. When your parents bring the match forward, I'll see to it they have our blessing."

Lady Karima nearly trembled with excitement. "Oh, that is just wonderful! Thank you your Grace."

The proud, self-satisfied – how could this woman be Ostah's mother? How did the Caliph stand her? Nania tried to take a deep breath to steady herself.

Calipha Qubilah leaned forward towards Nania, smiling magnanimously. "Forgive my scrutiny, child. Young as you are, you do have reputation, and a decent one at that, but the granddaughter of Ochaboo Dokehda, well," she sat back in her chair, "one just couldn't be too sure."

Nania gasped as though she had been doused in solemn spring water, her hands white in a vice-like grip on the edge of the divan.

Yas had a hand on her back at once. "Nania? Are you alright?"

Nania stood unsteadily. "If you'll excuse me. I am not well." Her legs shook so hard she could barely curtsy before she stumbled away, making for the drink table on the opposite side of the room.

"Nania!"

"Yasma Dokehda, you will *sit down*."

That was enough. Enough! The vile, contemptible woman. How dare she speak about Grandma Ochaboo that way – a woman who had done more for Mudore than that stuffed bodice ever would! She pushed blindly through the crowded dance floor. A decent reputation! She'd like to slap the wretch and tell her what kind of reputation *she* had. And Grandma Karima – to sit there and listen to that kind of talk about her own in-laws. About women! The dishonour was astonishing. Literally, breathe taking. Her chest heaved as she pushed through the crowded dance floor. Grandma was a woman! Gods, all three of them were women! How could they wish themselves and their fellows to be so... so powerless?! Her head pounded. How dare they. How dare they!

"Nania?" Someone put a hand on her shoulder, and Nania looked up to see Guran il-Parang, brow furrowed as his eyes searched her face. "Are you okay?"

She took a deep shuddering breath. "I'm fine Guran I—" she choked on the words and her throat tightened, as she looked around at all the dancing, laughing people. She suddenly saw herself as Guran saw her, and her eyes went wide. "No." Her arms began to tremble, her hands going numb. Her mind screamed at her to hold on, pull it together.

But from the look at Guran's face, it was already too late. "You don't look fine. Here," he put a hand on her elbow, guiding her towards the refreshments table against the wall. "Let's get you some water."

"I'm fine!" She pulled away from him, looking around wildly. "Look, Guran, I can't do this right now, I—"

The stairs. She bolted, racing for the foot of the staircase. When took the first few at a run, before she looked up and saw a couple stopped mid-conversation to watch her. She slowed her pace as she passed them.

"Good evening." Her voice was shaky, but she managed a weak smile, and the couple smiled back before returning to their conversation. She looked over her shoulder towards the crowded hall. Everyone could watch her. She forced herself to take slow, even steps, one at a time, up towards the balcony. She passed more groups of chattering nobles, but kept her eyes straight ahead. She just needed a moment of peace, a moment alone to martial herself and get things back under control. A few minutes without anything to—

She reached the top of the stairs she saw, among the few figures her up here, her Mother standing thirty feet away by the balcony railing. Her gut turned to stone and she felt something rising up from within her, stuck for a moment in her parched throat. Before it could escape, she hurled herself towards the back of the balcony, towards the colossal column, and through the narrow curtained doorway almost hidden between the curve of the column and the wall.

The circular room was completely, mercifully empty. Nania paced its length, pressing clammy hands to her flaming cheeks, trying to get her breathing under control. She assessed

the damage. She would need to apologise to Guran, of course, but he would accept it without question, gracious and cloying as always. The three old bags could go rot—she grimaced. No, that wouldn't do. She would have to commit to the lie – feign ill for a day or two, blame it on a bad meat pie – not that could be taken as a slight. Dehydration. That would work. From too much dancing and sweating and merrymaking. She ran through her behaviour. Yes, she had managed well enough until the end to sell it. And if she was lucky, no one else had noticed.

She leaned against the wall and slid to the floor, feeling taught as a quivering bowstring. She had to leave. Her grip on herself was tremulous at best, and she couldn't risk another run in with anyone. But how would she get past all those people. Both curtained doorways – the one she'd through which she'd entered and the one opposite – lead out onto the balcony. Grandma Karima would doubtless be looking for her throughout the pavilion. But the kitchens... She eyed the stone door opposite her, sunken into the floor down a small flight of steps, clearly descending under the dais. Perhaps during the festival it would not be spelled...

She whacked her fist against the floor. She couldn't risk it. The last thing she wanted was the Caliph storming in here wondering who'd set off his ward. What else. She scanned the room, her eyes alighting on a rack of hanging clothing. Wearily she pushed herself to her feet and went to rifle through the rack. It contained only sumptuous cloaks and a couple extravagant gowns -- clearly contingency garments brought here for the royals in case of a spilled cup or a cold breeze. Useless. They would all draw attention. She went through again, hoping against hope she'd missed something. Something inconspicuous, a servants uniform, to make the nobles eyes just...slide past her.

She froze, plush velvet fabric still in her hand, as the bud of an idea unfurled in her mind. She turned it about in her head, examining its shape, it's angles. Dazedly she reached into her pocket and stared down at the pouch of needle and thread in her hand. If it worked, it would be a miracle. But the chances—

No sense second-guessing it. She hunkered back down against the wall and took the hem of her dress in her hands. With needle threaded, she began embellishing the detailed embroidery work with the familiar spell-pattern. In her mind she conjured the weave, the fabric of energy that made up the seen and unseen world around her. She carefully picked out threads of abjuration, stitching them along with the knots and loops to create her pattern, while holding in her mind the over-all image – of the embroidery, yes, but also of the visual, visceral experience of the final intended effect. See it, feel it, and it would become real. She felt it work for her as it had before, the weave fitting to the well-worn shape of her will.

Now came the tricky bit. Improvising, Nania saw herself stretching the pattern, doing her best to coax it into a slightly different shape as had seen Noorine do with a wet blouse from the wash.

The pattern would not budge. Nania felt her stilled mind begin to race again. It had to. This had to work. Heat began to rise in her cheeks. She felt damp sweat beading on her brow as her fingers worked, hot tears well in her eyes. She tightened her mental grip on her heart, pushing the panic and frustration away from the weave in her mind. It could not overwhelm her or she would never make this work. She pressed the pattern harder with her will, dragging at its

edges, kneading and shoving the relentless form of the energy she wove to make it manifest her image. To no avail.

To her horror she heard footsteps approaching and a voice say, "Right away, your grace." Nania felt her strength give way and her desperate rage and frustration flooded her mind, rushing through the knots and loops of the thread, twining itself around the obstinate, unbending pattern. As she tied the final knot, she managed a despairing half sobb-half whisper, "And so to fate," Before breaking off the thread. As she spoke, she felt her flooding emotions fill the final corners of the pattern she wove, their energy bursting outwards, and she felt the weave shift with them, as easy as an inhale, around the shape of her intention. Then her connection was severed with the thread.

The sudden ease of it made her gasp, and she clapped a hand over her mouth as the opposite curtain was drawn back. A serving girl hurried in with a pitcher. Nania shut her eyes and held her breath, trying to make herself as small as she possibly could, awaiting the admonishment, the sudden shriek and crash of the pitcher.

Nothing. She heard the lid of a crate being shifted and the clinking of glass bottles. Carefully she opened her eyes. The girl was crouched not five feet away, rummaging around in a crate of wine, the golden carafe next to her. Using the wall for support, Nania slowly got to her feet. The serving girl did not look up. Tentatively, she took a step towards the middle of the room, wiping her damp cheeks. The serving girl straightened and sighed. Rubbing her back, she replaced the lid and turned, walking right towards Nania. The girl looked right at her, but her gaze didn't seem to focus. Instead, she continued past heading for another crate, her eyes sliding off Nania like—

"Water off a birds back." Nania said in soft wonderment.

The girl whirled around. It took her a moment, but she seemed to be able to see Nania standing there. "Oh! Lady. I didn't hear you come in. Can I help you with something?"

"No, no that's quite alright. I just..." Nania watched the girl squint, a pained expression on her face.

She put a hand to her forehead. "You're not really supposed to be back here." Her face contorted further as she heard herself, and added, "begging your pardon, Lady. I've suddenly got a splitting heading. You can of course stay if you wish, but truly, this room is just meant for staging."

"Of course." Nania looked towards the curtained doorway. "I... I suppose I'll be leaving now."

"As it pleases your Ladyship." The serving girl bobbed a curtsy, still rubbing her head, and turned back to the crate.

Nania licked dry lips, took a few steps towards the hanging curtain. Tentatively, she reached up and pulled back the fabric. No one in sight, she edged around the curve of the column until she could see more of the balcony. A large group stood talking at the top of the steps, but there was more than enough room for her to sneak past.

She tiptoed like a cat for the stairs. Not a soul turned to watch her approach. Of course they didn't. She straightened. What was she sneaking around for? She was supposed to be

invisible, wasn't she? A giggle bubbled up inside her and she stifled it in both hands. This was working. She took a deep breath and strode forward. A few more steps and –

Two women bolted straight up the stairs towards her – laughing and hooting as they raced each other to the top. Nania was about to throw herself sideways when someone in the gathered group called greeting, and the two women shrieked and nearly tripped as they halted. One woman leaned back against the stair railing, fanning her face and laughing at their exuberance. Her companion swayed on the step below Nania, so close she could smell the spiced wine on her breath. They both were completely drunk.

A grin twitched at the corners of Nania's mouth. She extended a hand before the woman's face, waving it back and forth. The women's brow furrowed as she tittered on about a dare, and her eyes became slightly unfocused, but that was it. She practically spoke into Nania's open palm.

Nania threw her head back, bouncing from foot to foot. This was brilliant! And Yas had thought the stain-proof trick was neat. She'd lose it over this! And Rakani! She couldn't wait to tell Rakani!

She stuck her tongue right in the women's face. That was for getting in her way. Never mind, there was yet another staircase. Rolling her shoulders back, she marched off across the balcony. As she approached the dais she recognised her father at his ceremonial post by the throne, deep in conversation with Commander il-Dresh and Caliph Khalil. It looked like something her mother would call "serious adult business", and Nania felt giddy, her march becoming a scamper.

"...sure they'll be invaluable resources, all four of them."

She run right up the dais steps to their little circle and stood solemnly between her father and the commander, hands behind her back they way her Fa stood.

"Isaph especially. Begging your pardon, your Highness." Il-Dresh added. "Ostah is an excellent warrior, and no doubt will rise through the ranks. But I give it a year before Commander kaht-Rambi gives Isaph a contingent. With things heating up he'll need the best First Swords he can get. Isaph may be green, but if I were still commanding Viper, I'd want that man by my side."

Hahtim rubbed a hand over his face. "Even with the new additions, Viper's in no shape to head north again. And with all the rebel raids down here these last few months..."

Il-Dresh snorted. "If I have to listen to one more disgruntled Caravan Merchant complain about how much he's spending on mercenaries just to feel safe on the roads."

The Caliph sighed. "It's bad. Even the southern tribes have been asking for increased protection. Normally they act like they're doing the Desert Divisions a favour by letting them patrol at all. That man hasn't sat on his hands since the Alman's thrashed him. He's preparing for something. He's trying to break us down, weaken our supply chains and the people's moral. We need to be ready. Chief Commander il-Baliik is bringing two thirds of the johkobo army down from the north to bolster southern defences. We need to find out where their forces are camped and drive them back." He ran a hand through his oiled curls. "And there's allot of desert to cover."

Il-Dresh frowned. "And we're sure there won't be any trouble from Vascone?"

Nania recognised that name from her lessons. Vascone was some old ruin in the far north of the Afdol desert. The Almans had wandered down through the Al Rashid pass and built a “missionary chapel” there two hundred years ago, which had grown into a fully occupied fort. Every few decades it seemed, whichever King had the throne decided it was time to prove his might and wreak havoc on the northern tribes of Mudore.

“We are at peace, Commander.” Khalil said, wearily.

Il-Dresh went on. “Begging your pardon, your Grace, but I served as Second Sword in the Sixth Crusade until your father brokered peace with the Almans. And my son almost served when they broke it. What’s to say they won’t break yours, too?”

Hatim answered him. “Kind Baric understands we want no further bloodshed. One must hope even an Alman has *some* understanding of honour.”

“Hahtim, you were telling me this morning that Iftah expects a significant grain surplus? Perhaps we can arrange for someone to detour east and collect it – Kit Fox Division would be the closest? We’ll need it if we’re going to have extra 60,000 men in the south by spring.”

“Yes, your Grace. And the watching cities report that their orange yield was especially high, perhaps—”

“Excuse me, your Grace.” Il-Dresh bowed. “I had best leave the logistics to your, more suited minds.”

Nania was with him. The interesting bit was over. She backed out of their circle, hopping down the steps. She meandered over to the balcony railing, lost in her thoughts. Raiders and looters on the southern roads? That was nearly unheard of. Nania paused mid-step. Perhaps that was why her mother didn’t want her riding to Kadra. If caravans with armed guards were being robbed... She trailed her hand along the smooth sandstone balustrade, watching her feet tightrope along the pattern in the stone floor. Mudore had its rebels and troublemakers, sure — those who disagreed with the way the throne ruled — but historically they lived in bands in the north where the Caliph’s power was diluted. In the last decade or so, however, the disparate rebel groups had been consolidated—by “that man” the caliph had been so reticent to name. Kamwar, formerly of House il-Assad il-Zahir. Ostah’s uncle and the King’s disowned brother. Otherwise known as the Rogue Prince.

Isaph had told her all the stories of the seventh crusade, four years past — how when the Almans broke the peace and rode out from Vascone, they crashed headlong into the camped rebel army. Kamwar led his forces against the Almans, driving them back, until the tides had turned when Kamwar was wounded in single combat by some Alman crusader. Their leader out of the action, the rebel forces were decimated, and it had been a few years since they’d been seen in any number.

Until this last year. And now they were coming south.

“What kind of a mother would I be if I didn’t at least consider it?” Nania’s head shot up at the sound of Aliya’s voice. Farida’s straight back was two feet in front of her, her mothers flushed face visible over her shoulder. “Farida, she’s too young for such things. Marriage and children? No one was asking me to handle those kinds of life altering decisions until I was nineteen!”

“To be fair, you weren’t a noble until you were eighteen. Commoners get to do things differently.”

“I don’t care how nobles do things! Thirteen is no age to choose a husband!”

“To be fair, they don’t expect her to choose a husband, they want you to do it.”

“Enough “to be fair”! How any of it fair? Why am I expected to know what will make my *child* happy for the rest of her life? How does his name in a book make this Lohkiim the best match for Nania?” Nania stood frozen, watching tears well in her mother’s eyes.

Ma.

Farida put an arm around Aliya’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Sister. I am not being very helpful.”

“You’re brilliant, Farida. Would you agree to the marriage? Or tell all the old birds and their ideals to go stuff themselves? Please sister,” her voice cracked piteously, “what should I do?”

Farida turned her sister to face her. “You should talk to Nania.”

Aliya began to sob, her shoulders shaking. “I know, Farida. I know you’re right.” Nania felt her lip begin to tremble. “I just want her to be happy, Farida. I don’t want her to have to deal with any of this. / don’t want to deal with it and I’m a grown woman, by the gods! Who she marries should be her business! When she’s old enough to want to make it her business! It’s just not fair!”

Nania felt tears trickling down her cheeks, her breath growing ragged. It wasn’t fair! Of course it wasn’t. Not to her or her mother. Or any woman put in this position. She wanted to run to her mother, to throw her arms around her and tell her it was alright. That that’d figure out what to do together. But instead she wrapped her arms around her stomach, sinking to a crouch on the floor. She had been so busy blaming her mother for keeping things from her she had never stopped to consider the position her mother was in. Stupid, selfish child. Footsteps approached from the staircase, and Nania looked up to see Karima kaht-Ahrood striding up behind Aliya, waving her wine glass imperiously.

“Aliya, have you seen Nania? She—my goodness dear, what’s wrong? We’re at festival, do pull yourself together.”

Nania felt her stomach unknot into a dense, growing heat. How dare that woman speak to her mother that way.

“It’s nothing, Karima. I’m fine.” Aliya wiped her ruddy cheeks. “What were you saying about Nania?”

“Well, I had arranged for Calipha Qubilah to come and have a talk with our Nania, so she could make a good impression. But Nania dashed off so abruptly, barely excusing herself. It was unbelievably ill mannered, and just when the Calipha had given Nania her blessing on the engagement.”

“What?” Aliya’s voice had turned to ice.

“Yes, we’ll be lucky we can get a blessing on any engagement for her now.”

“You told Nania about the engagement?”

Karima looked confused at Aliya’s words. “No dear. Lady Fahtisah said she knew when she arrived tonight. And now she’s simply nowhere to be found!”

Aliya looked at Farida, stricken. “How could she know? Who told her?” Her face was white as a sheet. “Gods, she’ll never forgive me.” She turned and ran for the stairs, crying, “Nania?”

She was right here! She stood and ran after her mother, reaching out for her, but she was half way down the crowded stair, people milling in her wake and there was no way Nania could weave after her without being seen. She wanted to cry. To scream. Instead, she rounded on Lady Karima, now standing by the balcony railing by Farida.

“Well, that’s embarrassing.” Karima took a sip of her wine.

That old cow. Nania stalked towards her, blood pounding in her ears.

The serving girl approached with her golden carafe. “More wine, Lady?”

Karima wordlessly held out her glass to be filled. With the force of her suppressed roar, Nania ran forward and slapped the glass in her grandmother’s hand. Both women screamed as glass shattered. The serving girl fumbled the pitcher in her haste to cover her face, and the carafe fell to the floor with a deafening clatter. Wine spilling in a wide puddle, and as it spread, it reached the edge of the balcony and began streaming down the iridescent fabric in dark, crimson rivers.

“Look what you’ve done!” Karima raised her hand to the serving girl, but long fingers wrapped firmly around her wrist.

The serving girl fled, crying, “I’ll fetch a cloth!”

Karima wheeled, fuming. “How dare you!”

Cool as spring water, Farida loosed her grip and pulled forth a napkin to wipe her wine sticky fingers. “It looked to me like you were the one who dropped her glass. I couldn’t have you striking that girl for your own clumsiness.”

“I did nothing of the sort.” Karima said aghast.

“Well, we’ll have to ask them what they saw.” Farida gestured over the balcony, and Karima and Nania both turned to see all eyes in the pavillion upturned and watching with wrapt attention.

Karima’s face was stricken, eyes wide. She swallowed several times, a momentary smile twitching crazily at the corners of her mouth before sputtering out like a flame. Lips tight, she dipped her chin, turned away from the crowd and dashed toward the back of the balcony calling, “Where is that cloth?”

Music began to play again, and the scene below thawed as dancers returned to their lively steps and conversation picked up with cheerful vigour.

Nania wanted to howl in triumph. Most satisfactory. Let’s see how Lady Karima kaht-Ahrood spun her way out of this incident. She scanned the pavilion floor, her heart swelling. She had to find her mother. Farida moved off towards the stairs – perfect, Nania could slip down through the crowd in her wake and no one would be the wiser.

She paused as they rounded the wide flat top of the banister, admiring its smooth gleaming finish. Her heart beat like a racing pack of johkobos. Perhaps she didn’t need to sneak down after Farida after all. She hoisted herself up onto the broad sandstone surface and swung her legs around in front of her. Sitting there in her skirts, she was suddenly very aware of the three-story drop on her left. Now that it came to it, she quite wasn’t sure how to do this. Should

she sit astride it like a horse? She grimaced. Or slide down on her front, facing up the banister so she could hand on? Her front wouldn't be very dignified.

She suddenly laughed out loud. Who cared! Dignity was for other people, and right now she may as well be the only one in the pavilion. She turned herself around and straddled the wide railing, leaning forward with arms stretched out to wrap around the wide edges. As if she were climbing out of a tree in the Palace Forest, she shimmied backwards down the slope until she felt gravity pulling at her, and then loosened her grip. Her silk dress flowed like water against the polished stone, and she picked up speed as she slid. Head turned, she watched the dancing mass below hurtle towards her. What a way to celebrate a victory! She wanted to whoop, but while her laughter had been lost in the hubbub, a shout like the one inside her would draw attention.

Instead, she smiled so hard her cheeks hurt. Rushing air shifted her curls. It might even be better than riding a johkabo.

No, that was ridiculous. But it was exhilarating.

As she neared the bottom of the stairs, her gaze fell on the opposite staircase.

The bottom dropped out of her stomach. There, standing at the railing, was Lohkiim kaht-Zahad. And he was watching her.

It wasn't possible. She thumped down on the flat end of bannister and nearly lost her balance as she half fell, half slithered backwards to her feet. Has she imagined it. She looked back and there he was, eyes twinkling right at her. Her mind raced. Maybe he was—

She spun to look behind her. A group of noblemen stood there picking fruit skewers off a tray. She turned back around to see his lips quirked.

No. No, no, no! Nania scurried behind a group of passing nobles and ducked down. Walking in a crouch, she began to weave her way around the outside of the room. She needed to find Rakani.

She found her mentor sitting in one of the great low windowsills – Nania had to crawl behind a divan or two to reach her. Rakani watched the busy room. Lazily she popped a grape into her mouth. One grey trousered leg bent before her, the other swinging lazily over the side as she leaned back against the stone. Her long dress coat hung open over her grey wrapped tunic, and though it looked plain, Nania could make out the heavy black embroidery against the black fabric. The only ornament Rakani wore were the golden threads with clusters of shining beads woven through her many tiny braids.

Nania finally stood up before the sill, her back to the room. “Not much of a dancer?”

“Nania?” Rakani blinked, still looking out into the room.

“I’m here, Rakani.” She kept her voice low, so as not to be overheard by anyone seated nearby.

Rakani turned to her and almost at once brought a hand up to shield her eyes. “So you are.” She unwound the black string wrapped between her fingers and strung it between her two hands, pulling it into a pattern and looking Nania up and down through a squint. “That’s not something I ever taught you.”

“Yes it is. Sort of. It’s the fabric guard we’ve been working on,” Nania crossed her arms proudly, “only, I improvised a little.”

Rakani's mouth fell open. "So you did." She averted her eyes back to the dancers, speaking out to the open air. "That's quite the alteration, Nania. No wonder your poor mother has gone back to the palace to look for you."

Nania made a face, "Yes, well, that was an unfortunate side effect. I'm going to straighten that out as soon as I can."

"And what, pray tell, was the intended effect?" Rakani raised an eyebrow.

Nania rubbed a hand over her face, "Rakani, it's a long story. Can explain later?"

"Only if you also explain how to do it." Rakani smiled wryly. "I can think of a few people who would find this trick of yours very useful."

Nania's arms fell to her sides. "You mean there isn't a proper way to do this?"

"Not that I've ever encountered." Rakani laughed, leaning her head back in her hands. "Gods. I've got to write Himaru. She's not going to believe this."

"Yeah, well, don't get too excited yet. It isn't perfect." Nania shot a glance at the stairs. Lohkiim still stood there, eyes fixed on her. He absolutely caught her looking. Tak.

"Oh?"

Nania turned her back on him to stare out the window. "Up on the stairs. A certain young gentleman won't take his eyes *off* me."

"Huh. It seems you're right."

"You know who he is, don't you?" Nania huffed.

"Oh, I may have heard a whisper or two about a *thrilling* new engagement at court." Rakani's drawl oozed with delighted sarcasm.

Nania made a face. "Hilarious. You shouldn't look so pleased, you're the one sitting in a corner talking to herself."

Rakani cocked her head. "He's got nice eyes."

"So he's still looking?"

"Yee-ah." Beside her, Nania saw Rakani twiddle her fingers in a wave.

"Rakaniiii!" Nania gave a stifled cry of exasperation.

"What, I'm just being friendly." Rakani's grin was wicked.

"Gods! Why is this happening? Why him of all people in the world?"

"Well, Nania my love," Rakani's voice was kind, but laughing, "the trouble with having your spells depend on the fabric of Fate, is that sometimes she gets in your way."

Nania felt her arms go cold, and it wasn't from the open window. "Fate?"

"Fate." Rakani raised her hands, grinning helplessly.

Nania stared at her, swore, and strode off across the room.

She found herself out on the terrace that wrapped around the pavilion. Away from the people and burning braziers, frigid winter air pulled hungrily at the heat of her body. Goose flesh rose on her bare shoulders, but against her burning cheeks it felt blessedly cool. The crisp air cleared her clamouring mind and she was suddenly overcome with weariness. She leaned her elbows on the balustrade, hands clasped before her as she stared out over the dark lawn. Somewhere beyond her vision stretched the Royal Gardens. And above that...

Nania let her head fall back, staring up the blanket of stars, shining brilliant in the moonless, sunless, planet-less night. She sighed heavily, and watched her breath ghost through the air before her, the invisible made visible.

How much had he seen? Anything was too much. She rubbed her face. It was all too much. Here she was, fighting tooth and nail to deny the plans being built around her, only to find that the weave itself had a vote to cast in the lot of it. A loud, humiliating vote.

A long shadow fell on the balustrade beside her. Looking over her shoulder, she saw a young man silhouetted in the open arched doorway of the pavilion, his wide sleeves blown in the breeze.

"May I join you?" It was a soft, mellifluous voice, the words still clear and crisp through the sounds of the party inside.

Nania felt her insides shrivel. But she would not flee a third time this evening. She gave the barest nod and turned back to stare at the sky.

She listened to the soft padding of leather as Lohkiim came up beside her. He too leaned his arms on the stone, and looked up at the heavens.

"I've missed them." He wrinkled his nose. "The Suns Cycle is an astronomer's nightmare. At least the Stone Cycle this year will provide a few hours of total darkness every night."

Nania looked at him sidelong. He stood a hand's-breadth taller than she did, lean and slender. Up-close she could smell citrus and cloves. Isaph would have called his features "pretty" in a snide tone, but Nania decided they suited Lokhiim's face. She admitted grudgingly to herself that he was, by all accounts, quite handsome. She especially liked the way the corners of his mouth turned up in that quite smile and the deep creases that formed at the corners of his eyes.

She realized he was returning her stare, rueful amusement fluttering across his face in the shadowy light. "So, you are to be my forever, huh?"

Abruptly Nania straightened and he followed suit, brow creasing as he searched her face.

"I'm sorry, Lady kaht-Ahrood. I'm sure you came out here for some peace and here I am intruding on your evening." His ran a hand over his dark curls. "I've unsettled you. I only thought-" he gave a short sigh. "Well, I've been given a lot to process the last few days, and I thought perhaps you were the person who'd best understand." He shook his head. "My apologies. I will leave you." With a polite bow, he turned back towards the pavilion.

"Nania." Her face remained impassive beneath his uncertain gaze. "Just Nania."

He slowly returned to his place at the balustrade. "Alright. Nania, then." Together they rested their arms back on the stone, Lohkiim copying her as he continued to watch her, as though waiting for her to say something. Nania found she could not make her mouth move properly. She looked stiffly out into the darkness.

Lokhiim rubbed the back of his neck. "Look," he hesitated, but when he spoke his words were slow and deliberate, "you don't know me. But I do. I am a good man. I am honest, I devote myself to my passions." He spread his hands before him. "I don't *know* you." He rubbed his beard, "Oh, I am assured you are a remarkable young woman. From the little I've seen tonight, I

don't think my parents know the half of it." He raised both eyebrows and Nania laughed in spite of herself, burying her face in her hand.

Lokhiim laughed with her, but in the following silence, his face fell once more. "You seemed a little upset up on the balcony. I'd like to think that had nothing to do with me, but... somehow I doubt it." Nania bit the inside of her lip and said nothing. Lokhiim's hands curled into balls and he stared at them, his expression dark. "My sister is divorced, Nania. Did you know that?"

She had not, and she looked at him with genuine surprise.

"I didn't think so. It's not something to advertise, exactly, and your family doesn't strike me as the type to go in for gossip. Nysha was married to a nobleman in Iftah, of excellent repute. They met just twice before their wedding—twice—and from the stories I've heard he never gave her the time of day except— well, except when it suited him. She's free of him now," he stretched his fingers and placed flat hands on the stone, "but she never should have wed him in the first place." He turned to look at her, his serious eyes intent on hers. "My father wants me engaged this year, and to you, if he can make it so. But I will not marry a woman who doesn't want to have me, Nania. If your fight with your grandmother was any indication—"

Nania cut him off, "It wasn't a fight exactly."

Lokhiim raised an eyebrow. "It certainly looked that way."

"You weren't supposed to see it in the first place."

"Oh?" He chuckled.

"No one was."

He crossed his arms, waiting for an explanation.

She supposed she owed him one. "I... have a gift. It's—when I use thread, for sewing or embroidery or, well, just about anything."

Lokhiim nodded. "Right. A stitch witch, they call you."

"Right. Well, I'm fated with this gift where I can reach out and—" she absently grasped at the air in front of her, searching for words, "contact the weave of things. Of the world around me. And if I focus and get all the moving parts right, I can make changes in the pattern."

"And tonight?" he prompted.

"Tonight I lost my temper and decided it would be best to leave the Pavillion without drawing attention. I sort of jerry-rigged a spell to make myself invisible. Or at least, to keep people from being able to see me." Lokhiim's eyebrows almost reached his hairline. "So, when I—when I came downstairs..." Nania felt her face flush with embarrassment.

Lokhiim laughed and she glared at him. "I'm sorry. I did wonder why I was the only audience for such an excellent stunt." His grin turned to puzzlement. "But why me? How was I the only one left out of your little trick."

Nania groaned. "I really have no idea." This was embarrassing enough, and she wasn't about to try and explain that her sort-of-a-goddess, who was maybe just the personified weave of the universe, had been interfering in her magic on account of her love life. Put that way, it sounded just too ridiculous.

"Oh well." Lokhiim shrugged. "Guess it remains a mystery for now."

Nania stared at the serene curiosity on his face. "Oh well? That doesn't bother you?"

Lokim shrugged. "If I let every little thing I don't understand bother me, I'd have run screaming from the university ages ago." He smiled up at the sky. "You see that void in the stars?" She followed the line of his outstretch arm and noticed for the first time a solid black patch in the sky about the size of a gold piece. "We have no idea what that is. It isn't Athos or Jakarti or any of the other known planets in our star system. But we have records going back almost a thousand years telling us that every black day, even if nothing explainable should be eclipsing the lesser sun, whatever that shape is... just does."

"That's just astronomy. We accept we don't know what's going on and try to figure it out. Unless you're Alman." He grimaced. "The Almans just wave their hands and say every planetary orbit and total eclipse is all the gods doing."

Nania laughed, incredulous. "What?"

Lokhiim rolled his eyes. "Oh. you wouldn't *believe* what they believe. They name each of the seven sky cycles after one of their seven gods."

Nania's mouth fell open, "They only have seven gods?"

Lokhiim paused, "Well, more or less. I could get into that later. Anyway, each cycle is named for a god, and for that whole year, every action the heaven's take is their doing. For example, take this last year. They call the Suns Cycle 'Carsathix Fire' after their trickster god. According to the Almans, he's the reason the lesser sun shines throughout the night one year every seven – it's his attempt to prank the world and turn it on it's head."

"Really?" Nania grinned.

Lokhiim nodded, and went on with eyes gleaming. "And they call the Ice Cycle 'Alywends Fire', because for that year their goddess of life, Alywend, is locked in a struggle with her dark counterpart, the god of death. Apparently that's why we have both suns shine during the day, but both eclipsed behind Baradru for all of December."

Nania remembered December of the Ice Cycle five years back. It had been frigidly cold – essentially a month long Black Day where the stars offered the only light.

"Why do they call them 'Fires'?" she asked.

Lokhiim tried to keep a straight face. "Because, Nanai. The lesser sun is actually a giant torch being passed back and forth by the gods to signify who controls each year. So of course, whoever's year it is..."

"It's their fire." They said it together, Nania mouth agape at the stupid simplicity.

Lokkim nodded. "You've got it."

Nania continued to giggle uncontrollably. "Auntie Farida is always complaining about the idiocy of Alman scholars, but I had no idea. It's just childish!"

Lokkim shook his head. "Such a lost people, to believe the gods are the ones weaving the tapestry of the universe, instead of seeing them as great powerful beings with their own faults and fallibility. They want to have someone to blame and beg in turn for everything that happens in their world. But it's not all as simple as that." He looked wistfully towards the sky. "There's so much we don't know."

"Sounds to me you know a good deal more than I do." Nania said wryly.

Lokhiim gestured to himself. "Oh you think I'm bad? You should hear my grandfather. Get that man started on a topic and he will go on and on."

Nania held up a hand of protestation. "I'm not complaining. Listening is an excellent way to learn."

He looked at her side long, "You like to learn, Nania kaht-Ahrood?"

"I do." She said, suspiciously.

There was that quite smile that played at the corners of his lips. "There are fair few people who claim to know we'll get along. The least we can do is find out if they're right." A loose curl fell into his face as he lowered his gaze, rubbing his thumb into the palm of his hand. "I think I'd like to learn about you."

Nania swallowed, feeling heat caress her wrists. "I'm not sure I'm much of a teacher."

"Nonsense. The best teachers just share what they love with others. I love the skies." He smiled at her from beneath those long lashes. "What do you love?"

"I love to ride." The smile flowered on her lips as she said it.

Lohkiim gave a stout nod. "Think you can learn about skies on the back of a Johkabo?"

Nania flashed him a wicked smile. "I can do anything on the back of a Johkabo."

He grinned back at her, light from the pavilion glittering like stars in his dark eyes. "Well then, we will ride."

Part III: Woman

971E – 972E

Chapter 7: Surprises

Pentember 971E

Zuhuz

“Again!”

Doshass glistened with sweat as he spun, throwing the full force of body behind the kick aimed straight at Nania’s side. He grunted as he made contact with the transparent dome a foot and a half before her. Even after a dozen such strikes, Nania flinched behind her shield.

“It’s not coming down Rakani.” Muhak grinned widely from his shady spot atop the hitching post outside the stable doors. “If Dosh’s roundhouse won’t shake it, I reckon you’d need a stone giant with a maul to have a decent shot.”

Doshass did not stop, the muscles of his bare chest and shoulders rippling as blow after blow bounced off the invisible barrier.

“I know that, Mukah.” Rakani pushed herself off from the fence where she’d been leaning and made her way across the dirt-packed training yard. “You’ve got pudding for brains if you think I’d have asked him to try otherwise. Doshass, that’s enough, thank you.”

Doshass bent down to pick up a cloth at his feet, his breathing steady as he wiped his dripping face. “Thank *you* ladies. I haven’t had such a good spar since training with Isaph back in Kadra.” He knocked the top of her dome, grinning at Nania inside as if she were a monkey in a menagerie. “You’re pretty sturdy in there, aren’t you Nahni?”

Nania giggled. “And a good thing, or I’d have flown into the stable wall a time to two.”

“Or nine.” Mukah chuckled.

“Now, the real question – can you take it down and leave the framework in place?”

Rakani twisted black twine idly through her fingers. She watched as Nania held up the square of linen clutched in her fist and flattened it against her palm, looking for the right loop that held the shield in place.

Twine held in its pattern, Rakani could at once see Nania’s shield as a wall of golden sparks in her vision, and the square of linen glowed with gold lines of energy that clung to each stitch and knot in the pattern. With the right snip, Nania could dematerialize her ward and whisk it out of existence.

Rakani held her breath, as Nania’s eyes combed over her work. There. She’d found it. Nania pulled her leather pouch from her pocket, took out her tiny silver sewing scissors, and neatly slipped the blade beneath the thread. One clip of the scissors and the golden lines and sparks of the shield spell disappeared. Rakani sighed and pulled the black twine from her hands, wrapping it casually back in place at the base of her pinky and fourth finger.

“Well? Is that it?” Mukah squinted at Nania. “Is it gone?”

Rakani shrugged, “Only one way to find out. Doshass?”

Doshass looked momentarily confused, then at a wink from Rakani, somberly took his stance to launch another of his powerful kicks. Nania shrieked and ran to hide behind Mukah and the hitching post. “Very funny Rakani!”

“Oh don’t come hiding over here, Nahni,” Mukah put his hands high in the air, “I made my permanent surrender to Doshass long ago.” He grinned, “Unless I get a bow and a decent head start.”

Doshass guffawed and began a pattern dance of stretches.

“You’ve done excellent work today, Nania.” Rakani took the square of cloth, examining it. “You’re really getting a handle on that pattern. And now that you know how to dispel it properly, you can use this embroidery to cast it again in a few minutes instead of an hour.” She pulled the cut thread from the fabric – a circle disappearing from the pattern as it came free. She handed it back to Nania. “Give it a try. Re-activate the spell.”

Nania carried the spell work over to the bench against the side of the stables, settling her work in her lap as she pulled needle and thread from her pouch. Rakani sat next to her and leaned back against the wall, legs stretched out before her. She let her eyes fall shut. Even here in the shade the summer air enveloped her in a sleepy warmth. The stable door was rolled wide open, letting the sweet smell of hay and johkobo droppings drift towards them, along with the varied warks and chirps of the creatures housed within. Rakani smiled blissfully to herself, feeling the subtle shifts in the weave as Nania stitched next to her.

The shifting stopped when there came the scratching of claws through the dirt, two men talking animatedly as they emerged from the stables and led their johkobos past.

“Focus Nahni.” Rakani cracked an eye to see Nania looking at her open mouthed.

Then she grinned sheepishly. “Yes, Rakani.”

Nania went studiously back to her work and Rakani felt a self-satisfied tug at the corner of her lips. The girl was surely bird-brained.

She heard the soft thump of Mukah’s boots as he hopped down off the hitching post, his voice drawing closer. “I was thinking how useful a shield like that would be in combat. But it’s not exactly quick work, eh Nahni?”

Rakani sighed to herself and opened her eyes see Nania frowning down at her work.

Mukah leaned against the wall next to them and crossed his long arms, head tilted thoughtfully. “I mean, I guess if you knew you’d be needing it you could get in place ahead of time.”

“There are faster ways of working this spell. Different techniques. But they are advanced, and require an intimate understanding of how the spell is constructed in full.” Rakani ruffled Nania’s hair. “Give her a couple years and she’ll be ready for some real battle magic.”

Nania looked up at Rakani, her brown furrowed. “But what if I need to defend myself now?”

“Don’t worry Nahni, that’s what you keep us around for.” Doshass stretched an arm across his barrel chest.

“Exactly.” Muhak nodded. “Us and the other 40,000 men we’ve now got stationed near Zuhuz.”

“And you’ve always got your bow, Nania.” Rakani added.

“True!” Mukah rubbed his hands together. “Good luck to the poor unwelcome sisat who tries to get within 50 feet of you.”

Nania’s face softened and she smiled. “I suppose you’re right.”

Across the training yard, a plump young woman in summery blue skirts meandered along Palace Path. She flipped her mass of curling hair over her shoulder, and Rakani recognized her as Jinnatah il-Nafesh.

“Dosh.” Mukah inclined his head in her direction, and Doshass looked over his shoulder.

“Well, that’s my cue.” He hurried over and swiped his shirt off the fence post where it hung. He picked up his water skin and took a long drink before dumping the rest over his head.

“See you tomorrow night?” Nania asked.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world Nania.” Dosh ran fingers through his wet hair, pushing it back out of his face. “See you there, Rakani.” He turned and sauntered off across the training yard.

Muhak cupped his hands and called, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

“Later, Muk,” was Dosh’s droll reply.

Rakani watched him go, sunlight shining off tanned shoulder. He reached Jinnata, bowing low over her offered hand before pulling his shirt over his head. It clung to the moisture on his skin, and Rakani could see the gleam in Jinnatah’s eyes from across the training yard. She had to agree – it was very pleasant having so many Bahadur visiting the city.

“Dosh and Jinnatah, huh?” Nania was watching as well, amused.

Muhak laughed. “They’ve been on each other like winged snakes on plums since we arrived. I expect we’ll be hearing wedding bells, if they keep us stationed here long enough. Speaking of which—” Rakani made her eyes wide as possible, looking at him over the top of Nania’s head and giving hers a tiny shake. “—uhhh, any word from Isaph? I hear Viper Division has been having a hell of a time in the desert, fending off raid after raid along the roads into Halwa.”

Nania went back to her stitching. “Not since his letter that came with Hawk Division.”

Muhak made a face and mouthed ‘thank you’.

“Rakani,” Nania had stopped her work and was playing with her needle, pressing her finger gently against its sharp point. “What if I did have to defend myself? If I didn’t have my bow, or someone got too close for me to use it?” Rakani could see a hardness in her young face. “Surely with all this power there must be something I can do.”

Rakani rubbed the back of her neck. “Well, yes Nania. There are ways we can use this gift that are offensive. Your first encounter with your gift, for example. There are ways to bind people and hobble them. Although...”

“What?”

“Well, when cast with embroidery and stitching, they take time the same way your shield does. They’re more useful in the heat of things when you learn more advanced casting techniques.”

“Like when you make string patterns with your fingers.”

“Exactly. But the trade off is that they’re not as lasting, and they require your concentration to maintain. It’s just the nature of the method – quicker but impermanent.”

“So, in a fight,” Nania tried tentatively, “if you’re facing multiple enemies, it isn’t always very effective.”

“Correct.” Rakani was already weighing in her mind wither to go on when Nania spoke.

“So if the spells themselves are less permanent, they need to have affects on the physical world that are lasting. You’d have to wound your opponent.” Nania spoke in her level, measured way. “And there’s a way we can do that, isn’t there Rakani.”

It wasn’t a real question. Nania looked at her with determination in her level green eyes. Rakani considered her pupil – here she was, the day before her fourteenth birthday, grappling with concepts of magic Rakani hadn’t tackled until much older. But times were different than when Rakani was a girl, and if an attack from the rebels came...

Rakani nodded her head. “Yes, Nania, we can wound with our magic. We can not cut like a sword or pierce like an arrow but,” Rakani felt her stomach tighten, “we have other ways. They take a deal of study.” She cocked her head. “How much have you learned about the human body?”

Nania looked out at the yards. “Well, I know we’re made up of bones, and our muscles make our bones move. And blood brings oxygen to our muscles through little tubes called veins and arteries, but I can never remember which ones take blood away from the heart and which ones take it back.”

“Arteries take oxygen away, veins bring it back” Muhak broke in. “It took me forever to remember which was which.”

“Oh, thanks Mukah.” Nania opened her mouth to continue, but Mukah went on.

“And then there’s our nervous system, and our digestive system. And our lymphatic system – like how when we get sick those spots in our neck and armpits get all swollen.

Rakani cleared her throat. “I’m glad to see you remember your anatomy classes, Bah Mukah. But I was in fact asking Nania.”

Mukah shoved a fist in his mouth and managed a muffled. “Sorry Rakani.”

Rakani reached down and pick up Nania’s wrist and turned it over to run a finger along the arteries and veins beneath her skin. “Many parts of our body are string-like. These, for example – they’re like long hollow chords that our blood runs through. Other parts of our bodies are built from long stringy fibers – like the tissue that connects our bones together, called our ligaments, or the tendons that connect our muscles to our bones so they can move.” She pressed on the tendon protruding in Nania’s wrist.

Nania gasped as her finger curled involuntarily. “We’re strung together like puppets!”

Rakani smiled. “A little like puppets, yes. And a lot more complicated. Even our muscles are made of a kind of tiny threads.”

“Really?” Nania looked down at her wrist.

“Think about it.” Rakani raised an eyebrow. “What do we call it when you’ve been working so hard that your muscles tighten up in one spot and don’t want to let go?”

A look of delighted realization spread across Nania’s face. “A knot!”

“Exactly! Our magic works best on the parts of the body that share a shape with our thread—the closer the parallel, the easier it is to affect them with our patterns.

“Oh!” Mukah grinned. “The same way Nania can use a thread in her hands to snap Nadeer’s bow string!”

“Exactly like that, Mukah.” Rakani said, gravely.

“Egh.” Mukah made a face as the image sank in.

“Will you teach me, Rakani?” Nania’s mouth was set in a grim line.

“Yes, but not today.” Rakani sighed wearily. “And it will be slow going, Nahni, even for you. Working magic on the human body is extremely dangerous. Even with something as simple as temporary as a knotted muscle, you really need to know what you’re doing in theory before you try it in practice. Every part of our body is interconnected. Accidently snapping a tendon or constricting an artery can do very serious damage.”

“So can a sword.” Nania pointed out.

“That’s true, Nania. But the learning process is very different. Mukah, how many hours would you say you practiced with wooden swords before you were allowed to spar with real ones?”

Mukah blew air through his lips. “Gods, I couldn’t even tell you. Years?”

“Right.” She put a hand on Nania’s shoulder. “We don’t have the option of using wooden swords Nania. We either do a thing, or we do not.”

Nania nodded slowly. “I understand Rakani.”

“Good.” Rakani put an arm around her shoulder and gave her a squeeze. “We’ll start with theory, and when we’re ready, I’ll talk to the kitchen about getting us some practice material for the more serious stuff.”

“Come ask at the camp mess outside the city.” Mukah picked at his teeth. “The meats plenty stringy out there.” Rakani barked a laugh and Nania rolled her eyes.

The Greater Sun was sinking to the west beyond the stables, shafts of evening light glinting off petal fall tower through the hazy summer air.

“Speaking of kitchens,” Nania began to pack her needle and thread away in their pouch. “I am starving.”

Rakani put a hand on her arm. “Before we head inside Nahni, I wanted to give you your birthday present.”

Nania looked at her quizzically. “Wait, you’re coming to my party tomorrow, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am! But surely you don’t want all your presents at once. I thought you’d want to spread out the celebration. Of course, if you’d rather wait till tomorrow...” Rakani shrugged and made to rise from the bench.

“No, no!” Nania bounced. “I’d love a present now!”

“Alright then.” Rakani settled back in her seat. “Muhak, would you fetch it for me? I’ve stashed it in the stable. Thirteenth stall on left.”

Muhak smiled broadly and saluted. “It would be my pleasure, Sah Namboot.” He turned and loped off around the corner.

“Sneaky!” Nania giggled.

“I have to be, to get things over your head.” Rakani poked her nose.

Nania made a face and tired to swat her hand away. “Rakani!”

"I know, I know, you're not a child anymore." She tucked a tendril of Nania's long black hair behind her ear, gazing down at the face with all its mischief and play, and yet so different from the little girl she had hoisted onto Klowah's back all those years ago. "But I intend to poke your nose until you're old and grey."

Nania leaned her head against Rakani's shoulder. "If you say so, Rakani."

Rakani heard footsteps inside the stable and felt tingles in her calves. "Happy Birthday, my Nania."

Muhak came around the corner, a grin plastered on his face. In his hands he held a leather lead. Rakani felt Nania's lungs fill with air, hands coming to her mouth as a johkobo strutted around the corner behind him, the diffuse sunlight creating amber flecks across its soft sandy feathers. Rakani stood and took the lead from Mukah, reaching up to stroke the feathered neck.

"Pretty good, huh, Nahni?" asked Muhak.

Nania stared at the bird transfixed, eyes wide as saucers.

Rakani held out the reins for Nania to take. "It's about time you had a mount of your own."

"Oh Rakani," Nania's voice was soft with wonderment. "She's beautiful." She dazedly looked down at the lead and shook her head. "But I can't—I couldn't possibly—really, it's too much. A creature like this..."

"She's one of Klowah's. He sired three for the palace herd last year, so one was due to me. The hostler who's been rearing her says she rides like anything." Rakani gently took Nania's hand and closed her fingers around the lead. "Her name is Airit."

"Airit." Nania murmured, slowly outstretching a hand. The great bird bent its head to examine the proffered fist, her dark eyes flicking brightly to Nania's face before she stretched her neck high into the air and ruffled her plumage with a proud *wark*. "You are beautiful." Nania cooed, getting to her feet to stroke Airit's neck. "My own johkobo. My *own* johkobo!" Tears welled in her eyes, and she threw herself at Rakani's wrapping her arms tight around her middle. "Oh Rakani, thank you! Thank you!"

Rakani stroked her head. "You are so welcome Nania. I hope she serves you as well as Klowah has served me."

"Oh I know she will!" Nania pulled away, hastily wiping wet cheeks. "If she's half the bird Klowah is, she's more than I deserve!"

Rakani cupped Nania's chin. "Enough of such nonsense. You're worrying her." Sure enough, shuffled her taloned feet, fluttering her wings and producing a soft coo as she watched the women intently.

Nania laughed and went to stroke her chest. "There now, you silly bird, I'm fine! Just — just so happy! Now, do you have a proper riding saddle?"

Rakani smiled. "She does but..."

Mukah tapped Nania's shoulder. "I'm supposed to give you this." He handed her a worn envelope. Nania took one look at the script on the front and tore it open, eyes ravishing the pages as her face lit with elation. "It's from Isaph, Rakani! He's sending her a full riding kit made

especially in Kadra!" She narrowed her eyes at her teacher. "But then I suppose you already knew that, unless Isaph has suddenly taken up divination."

Rakani shrugged innocently, "It could have been a lucky guess."

"Ohhh!" Nania smacked her playfully with her papers.

"Don't you want to go check them out, Nania?" Muhak gestured toward the front of the stables.

"They're here?!" Nania gasped.

"Dosh picked the crate up from the docks himself." He took a few backward steps, "And I gave them a good oiling this morning. They're waiting in her stall."

Nania pulled gently on the lead as she stumbled into a run, Airt taking up an easy trot behind her. "Come on, girl, let's go see what Isaph sent you!"

Rakani took a few steps after them. "Dinner, Nania?"

"Tell Ma and Fa I'll be along soon!" Nania called over her shoulder before disappearing around the corner.

"Alright!" Rakani chuckled to herself. She would say no such thing. Grown as she may be, Nania would doubtless forget to eat at all tonight. Rakani bent and plucked a sandy feather from the dirt, listening to the exhalant cries coming muffled through the stable walls. Spinning the feather between her fingers, she strode back off towards the palace.

Nania flew down the corridor. As she approached the doorway that lead into a commonly occupied reading room she slowed to a sedate walk, her divided skirts settling primly around her legs as she glided past occupied tall backed chairs and servants carrying empty breakfast trays. Once she was through the doorway she took a sharp left and slipped into a servants passage. She dashed down two flights of steps, past stock rooms and the raucous laundry room and up a narrow flight of stone stairs, at the top of which stood the servants door to the main floor of Petalfall tower, the most [DIRECTION] wing of the palace. She tucked an errant curl back into place before cracking the door to peer out.

She spied a figure in the curved corridor and was about the ease the door shut when she heard a brisk voice say, "It's only me, Lady Nania. Coast is clear."

Nania sighed with relief. "Thanks Dahsta." She pulled the door wide and held it open as Dahsta bustled past, a basket of washing in her arms.

"Best be careful this week, Lady Nania. We've an Alman maiden visiting, and I'm quite sure she'd be scandalized to find our nobility creeping about in the servants passages."

Nania bowed her head sheepishly. "Noted. Thanks Dahsta."

"And tell Noorine she'd best not forget our trip to Market tomorrow!" Dahsta called as she bobbed down the stairs.

"I'll remind her!" Nania made to close the door behind her.

"Oh, and Lady Nania?" Dahsta paused at the foot of the stairs, basket poised on her hip.

"Yes, Dahsta?" Nania held her breath.

“Happy Birthday.”

Nania let out a sigh of relief and grinned. “Thanks.” And she was off, speed walking with as much elegance as she could muster towards the back entrance that would let her out near the stables. She passed a few others in the hall, some long term guests of the tower who nodded in a familiar way, others complete strangers. Most of the guests on the first floor were messenger types, but you never knew who you’d run into coming and going from Petalfall.

The thick wooden door stood open, letting fresh summer air drift into the hallway. Two plainly dressed folk passed by along palace path, about their morning business. Nania stepped out into the morning sunlight.

“Morning Lady Nania.” Faril stood at his regular post by the door, dressed in the tan Askar uniform, his badge marking him as a member of the Zuhuz Civil Division.

“A beautiful day, Faril!” Nania pulled a folded napkin from her skirts and handed it to him. “They’re pineapple this morning – to die for. But I’m afraid I have to be off!” She was across palace path and heading towards the stables.

“None for you this morning, Lady Nania?” He called after her.

She walked backwards to reply, “I’m in a rush today, Faril! But next Onan, I promise!”

He grinned and gave her a salute. He was good conversation, Faril. He had an excellent memory and an observant eye, which meant he always had interesting news about the business in Petalfall tower and the stable yards. It had become their custom over the last six months to share a pastry each ohnan on Nania’s way to meet Lokhim in the stables. But today, Airit was waiting.

Nania hurried in through a wide stable door and down the long rows of stalls. There she was, stabled across from Klowah, preening her tawny wing feathers.

“Good morning, my darling!” Nania cooed as she pulled open the stall door. Airit turned bright black eyes on her, watching her gather tack from hooks on the wall. “Let’s get out there and see what you can do.”

She chatted softly to Airit as she saddled her for riding, and led her out of the stables. They strolled around the long building to the designated meeting place, Nania bubbling with excitement. “It’s only once a week. I think it could be more someday, when things aren’t so up in the air, but for now I’ll take you out to the sands every Ohnan. If you’re as fast as Rakani thinks you are, poor Ficka is going to have quite the time keeping up.” She lowered her voice confidentially, “Lohkim is an excellent rider and handles her well enough, but we’ll still have to take it easy on them.”

Airit turned sharp black eyes down at her.

“Well not that he’d be a poor sport about it. No, certainly not. He’s not the type.” Nania stroked Airit’s neck, grinning with anticipation. “Come on, you’ll see.” They trotted around the corner and Nania’s stomach dropped as she saw the gaurd of soldiers already mounted up and waiting.

Lokhim looked up from inspecting his mount’s tack, creases forming at the corners of his almond eyes as he saw her, then took in her Jokahbo by her side. “Who’s this beauty? Rakani off with Klowah this morning?”

“This is Airit.”

- some sentence about Nania liking him, feeling warm or something
- retinue arrives, nania disappointed cause she was excited to introduce her to Lohkiim
- lohkiim arrived, who's this // my new jokabo // wow nania amazing! // she's weird and subdued about it //
- heading out to the street, down through the temple district,
- Lokhiim talking about his mom, something to do with religion and the temple
- Nania had been learning a great deal the last six months
- out through the gate, where she was the expert
- they ride together.
- she gets carried away, almost rides off over a dune
- guards call her back. Admonish her gently, she's not supposed to go off where they can't see her.
- (it wouldn't be a problem if they could keep up)
- polite/contrite apologies.
- ride back to the stables, Nania is quiet on the ride back
- reach the stables (time jump)
- nania trying to decide if she'll invite lokim to birthday party.
- he's like "so see you tonight?"
- she's take aback, "who invited you?" realizes that's rude, tried to cover it up/back pedal.
- he's like "uh, sorry, I think your mom mentioned it to my parents."
- "right, well, great, see you there."
- heads off in a huff

- opening gifts, something from someone
- lohkiim's gift

