

# THE ARCHER'S HEART

BOOK THREE OF THREE



ASTRID AMARA

THE  
ARCHER'S HEART





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BY  
ASTRID AMARA



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This book is dedicated to Angus.

# MARHAVAD



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## CHAPTER 36

JANDU LOUNGED ON THE PILLOWS OF HIS ROOM, DRAWING A picture of Keshan.

Ennui pulled at him like barbs, but this act of patiently recreating his lover gave him a pleasurable contentment that soothed his boredom. Soft afternoon light filtered in from the windows above. He used a flat wooden board to protect the carpet from his ink. Every angle of Keshan's face, every curl of his hair, could be conjured from memory, and Jandu lulled himself into pleasant memories as he drew.

Someone knocked on his door.

"Who is it?" Jandu called out. He sat up.

When Yudar entered, Jandu smiled. He hadn't seen much of his brother in the past few weeks. Jandu rose and hugged his brother. Tonight Yudar looked terrible, his skin white as clay and beaded with sweat.

"Oh God, Jandu," Yudar whispered. He shut the door gently, his hand trembling.

"What's wrong?" Jandu asked.

Yudar swallowed. Tears welled in his eyes.

Jandu frowned at his brother. "What's happened?"

Then Jandu heard the sound of men laughing in the corridor outside his door. He didn't understand why there were men in the women's quarters.

"I've done something very wrong," Yudar choked.

"What?" Jandu's heart beat faster. He had only ever seen Yudar this upset one time before. The thought of that night made him sick and nervous.

“I...” There was another knock on the door, and the voices outside rose. Yudar looked at his brother once more, tears now pouring down his face. “I’m so sorry.”

Yudar fled the room, leaving the door ajar.

Jandu started after him, but was stopped at the door when three men entered the room. One of them he had never met before. But he immediately recognized Firdaus Trinat, and his brother Hanu. The other man locked the door behind him.

Jandu brushed his braid over his shoulder. “How dare you enter my room without permission!”

“I heard of your beauty from my brother Hanu,” Firdaus said, leering lewdly. “Now that I see you, I think he did you no justice. You’re the sweetest thing this side of the Patari.”

Jandu glared. Firdaus looked older and fatter than when Jandu had last seen him at the dice game, but his sinister smile looked just as foul as it had then.

“What are you doing here?” Jandu demanded, crossing his arms over his chest protectively.

“Your brother gave us to you for the night.”

Jandu felt as if he had been punched. “No. He wouldn’t.”

Hanu smiled thinly. “He lost you in a friendly dice game. He’s not very good at gambling, you know. I have no idea how he convinced Indarel to be his teacher.”

Jandu’s ears rang, and he felt in his gut the raw agony of the truth. Yudar had staked him, just as he had before. Only now he wasn’t a prince, he was just a small, unarmed servant girl.

“I have a say in the matter,” Jandu said sharply, backing away. “I do not comply with my brother’s wishes.”

“You must pay your brother’s debt,” Hanu said smoothly.

“Where’s your Triya honor?” Jandu yelled. “Do you think I’m—”

Firdaus slapped Jandu across the face so hard that Jandu crumpled to the floor. He was shocked by his own weakness. He had been hit by maces harder than that and remained standing.

"I owe no honor to a Suya like you, girl," Firdaus growled.

Jandu fingered the spot where Firdaus hit him. He stood up, glaring.

"You bastard," he hissed, hating the way his voice shook, his soft feminine tone. "You'll die for that."

Hanu laughed and lunged towards him.

Jandu turned to run away, but was caught by Firdaus' friend, who held him as Firdaus and Hanu approached.

Jandu kicked at the men. Firdaus grabbed his legs and held him. Jandu was humiliated by his lack of strength. Muscles that had long been allies failed him. The men dragged him over to the bed and forced him down.

Firdaus quickly climbed on top of him.

"You want her first, Hanu?" Firdaus asked calmly.

Hanu yanked Jandu's arm down onto the bed, pulling hard. "No, you go first, brother."

"What are you doing!" Jandu gasped.

Firdaus ripped open his zahari blouse.

Jandu only then really understood what was about to happen. It had seemed so inconceivable, unthinkable. But the second Firdaus' large hands painfully groped at his breasts, and the look of lust in his eyes became apparent, Jandu realized that the impossible was about to happen. He struggled harder against the hands holding him down.

"How could you?" he whispered, thinking of Yudar. It would have been kinder for his brother to kill him.

There was no forgiveness for this. Ever.

The other two men grabbed his legs and held him open as Firdaus squirmed and licked Jandu's skin. He took his time untying the knot in Jandu's skirt until Jandu lay naked before him.

Hanu took off his harafa scarf and brutally stuffed the cloth in Jandu's mouth. It tasted like sweat. Jandu gagged for air as his body was crushed by Firdaus' weight. Jandu told himself that this was not his body. This was just a disguise that he wore. He had to stay focused and look for his chance to escape.

“Lovely,” Firdaus whispered, grinning.

Firdaus untied his dejaru while the other men watched lasciviously. Jandu could see their erections growing in their trousers.

Jandu managed to break one leg free and kicked as hard as he could, sending Firdaus off of him. Hanu brought his fist down hard on Jandu’s nose, breaking it instantly. The pain was staggering. Blood exploded across Jandu’s face and the bed. Jandu’s vision blurred. He couldn’t breathe. The cloth in his throat and the blood in his nose choked him, and he thrashed like a wild animal, desperate for air. He breathed fast and shallow, sucking through the thin cotton of the harafa in his mouth.

Firdaus climbed back on top of Jandu, his hands digging into Jandu’s flesh to restrain him. Jandu twisted to throw him off, but Firdaus put his hands around Jandu’s throat and choked him, painfully grinding his body against Jandu.

The other men held his legs open, wrenched his arms above his head. Jandu jerked violently, his eyes white and rolling, panic flushing through his system as he tried to find a way out of this assault.

Jandu tried to think of anything other than what was happening to his body. What was Yudar doing right now? When this was over, Jandu would kill him. He would relish killing him.

It was the only vindication he could look forward to, killing his brother for allowing Firdaus to fuck him.

## CHAPTER 37

A JOURNEY THAT WOULD HAVE TAKEN KESHAN TWO WEEKS passed by in one day. The Yashva kingdom blurred past Keshan as he ran. Each step allowed him to traverse entire towns, fields, and mountains, warping in his consciousness as he strove towards Afadi.

His fury burned away his exhaustion. He plunged through the Yashva world recklessly, ignoring the startled faces of other Yashva. He didn't care if Firdaus' cousins saw him now. All that mattered was reaching Jandu in time.

At the palace, Keshan slowed his pace, focusing on the hazy outlines of the human world. He passed the cherry tree he saw in the vision, and looked to the building that was guarded. The women's quarters. Jandu was in there.

Keshan broke into a sprint, bursting through the barrier between Yashva and human worlds. The smells and sounds of humanity engulfed him in abrasive noise and humidity. Keshan listened for some sound to direct him to Jandu's room.

He heard the low laughter of a man's voice.

Keshan charged the door. He brought his palms together and closed his eyes, summoning a sharta. The wooden door shattered inwards. Keshan unsheathed his sword. He stared at the scene before him, and realized he was almost too late.

Firdaus lay between Jandu's legs, groping him obscenely. Firdaus' brother Hanu and another man crouched on either side, holding Jandu's legs open.

Hanu turned as Keshan appeared in the room. Hanu's face was red with anger. His trousers were around his knees, a vulgar display of the crime he was about to commit.

“He is mine,” Keshan hissed, his voice dark and terrible.

“He?” Hanu asked. He didn’t get a chance to say anything further. Keshan slashed his sword across Hanu’s throat. Hanu collapsed, a bubbly croak seeping from his mouth as he died.

Keshan wasted no time. He slammed a knife into the other man’s chest and twisted, spitting a Yashva curse as he did so. The man’s body flew backward and hit the far wall with a sickly spatter. A strange pressure convulsed the air and almost at the same moment he heard the words of another sharta being spoken. Firdaus glared at him, his dejaru pooled on the floor, lips moving to form a curse. Keshan started the counter-curse, but he was too late.

Firdaus’ words sank into Keshan’s skin like icy syrup soaking through to his bones. The Yashva world grew distant, as if the door between them was closing, and then Keshan felt it, a solid thump, and then his entire awareness of the Yashva disappeared. Firdaus had bound him to the human world in preparation to unleash a curse upon him. Keshan lunged forward, swinging his sword.

“Wait, Adaru!” Firdaus gasped. He held one hand up in the sign of peace while the other gathered up his dejaru. “Peace! I didn’t know she belonged to you.” Firdaus gestured to Jandu, who scrambled backward, trying to cover himself. Firdaus continued his plea. “If you kill me, who will revoke the curse? The Yashva won’t forgive you for killing me over a human!”

Keshan plunged his sword deep into Firdaus’ guts. He pulled the blade upwards, cutting a wide slit in Firdaus’ belly. Blood sprayed out and intestines tumbled out around Keshan’s hands.

“I curse you!” Firdaus was so close Keshan could smell his breath.

“I don’t care.” Keshan shoved Firdaus away from him. Firdaus flopped backwards, dead.

Keshan wiped a spray of blood from his face, and then rushed to Jandu’s side.

“Are you all right?” Keshan knelt beside Jandu, who crouched in the corner, coving his body with ripped zahari fabric. “I saw the dice game in a vision and I came.”

Jandu didn't speak. His entire body shuddered as Keshan covered him with his own harafa. Jandu looked overwhelmed, his nose bleeding, his eyes wide as saucers.

Keshan reached for Jandu. Jandu recoiled from Keshan's hands and turned his head away, a look of absolute fear on his face.

Keshan sat beside Jandu, afraid to touch him. When Jandu tentatively reached a hand out, Keshan took it gently.

Jandu's hand trembled violently. Keshan tried to wipe the blood off of Jandu's face with his zahari, but Jandu pulled away, it obviously hurt his nose too much.

“I have to get you a doctor,” Keshan said.

“No!” Jandu said hoarsely. “Just get me some water to clean up.”

A woman gasped as she came upon the shattered door. Then she screamed. Instantly other women rushed from their chambers and crowded into the hallway. As the spectators took in the blood on the walls, the corpses, Keshan stood and blocked Jandu from view.

“Someone needs to bring the lord's physician,” he said, his voice breaking with unspent anger.

None of the women moved. They stared in shocked silence.

“Now!”

A young girl curtsied and rushed away.

At that moment, Suraya pushed her way into the room. She looked different in servant's garb and with her long hair tightly tucked into a bun, but no other woman had eyes as large and expressive as hers.

“My God! My God!” Suraya screamed as she saw Jandu's bloody face, and the wreckage in the room.

Guards carrying heavy lances appeared and pushed their way through the women.

Keshan caught Suraya's arm. "Stay with him," he whispered in her ear. "Don't let anyone touch him."

"Keshan!" Suraya shook her head, uncomprehending. "What has happened?" She asked, her expression bewildered.

Keshan didn't have time to tell her anything more. The guards were almost upon him.

"These men attempted to defile my wife," Keshan said, half to Suraya and half to the guards. "Take me to Lord Indarel. I demand to be compensated."

The guards looked momentarily bewildered, as if having come to arrest the Triya, then being ordered to do exactly as they had planned, was too much to comprehend.

"Take me to Lord Indarel now!" Keshan bellowed. The guards backed away. One even bowed.

"This way, my lord," he said.

Keshan stepped over Firdaus' corpse, but stopped when he spotted something that had fallen from Firdaus' pocket. Keshan reached down and picked up a pair of dice. They glowed blue for a moment, and then faded. Keshan clenched them in his hand, his lip curling in anger.

"Enchanted." Firdaus cheated at this dice game, and no doubt at the one all those years ago in Prasta.

Keshan pocketed the evidence, and then left with the guards.



## CHAPTER 38

BY NIGHTFALL, RUMORS OF KESHAN'S RAMPAGE HAD ALREADY left the boundaries of Afadi, on their way eastward. The entire city reverberated with the shock of it. The fact that Indarel's dice teacher and friend Esalas had gambled his sister away for sexual favors was big news. But even more dramatic was Janali's rescue. No one even knew that Keshan Adaru had left Tiwari. And yet he had appeared in Afadi out of nowhere, kicking through a door to save a servant. It was all too mysterious, too exciting not to be discussed at every table. There was nothing Keshan could do to stop it.

Indarel welcomed Keshan to his reception hall, grim-faced and sober with the fact that the lord of a neighboring state had been murdered in his house.

"We will have to reinforce our border," Indarel said. He eyed Keshan darkly. "We have been on the cusp of war for years, Adaru. This will no doubt bring a retaliation from Chandamar."

Keshan's eyes smoldered. Inwardly, he dared Indarel to challenge him, to blame him. He wanted to destroy Chandamar. And Afadi while he was at it. He had never felt such an all-encompassing desire to condemn an entire people to death before. It was not like him, and he had to breathe deeply to cool the flush of fury that burned his heart and made his fingers itch to unleash ungodly weapons of mass destruction.

"You have my support," Keshan stated.

"I expect it," Indarel said.

Keshan bowed his head.

“I also expect an explanation,” Indarel said coldly. “While we have always been allies with Tiwari, you have endangered our entire state with your actions. If the rumors are true, if Esalas truly staked his sister legitimately in this dice game, then it is not our place to challenge it, as foul as Esalas’ act might have been.”

“I do have a claim to challenge it,” Keshan said. “Janali is my wife.”

Indarel stared at Keshan in stunned silence. Keshan schooled his expression into one of calm fortitude. The secret to a good lie was all in the face.

“Janali and I were married in Prasta,” Keshan continued. “Her older brother Esalas took her away against my wishes. As her husband, it is my duty to protect her and to seek vengeance against her assailants. Esalas had no right to stake her, as she is mine.”

Indarel was stunned. “You... you married a lower-caste servant?” he finally managed to say.

Keshan bristled. “Who I chose to marry isn’t your concern. What is your concern is the impending retaliation from Chandamar. Once I am assured that my wife is safe, I will do everything within my power to guarantee Afadi’s safety.”

Indarel nodded stiffly. “Good. We do not have a quarrel with you, Adaru.”

“Nor do I have any quarrel with Afadi. What will you do with Esalas?” Keshan asked. He hoped Indarel would execute him.

“I will confront Esalas later,” Indarel said sadly. “I do not have time to deal with such matters now.”

Keshan nodded. “And Janali?”

“My son Abiyar is escorting her to my wife’s summer manor. She will be in good hands. I will write you a letter to grant you permission to stay with her.”

“Thank you.”

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Indarel gave Keshan a weak smile. "Please rest tonight, and we will discuss our actions in the morning."

Keshan bowed respectfully, and then left to find Jandu.



The summer manor was built along the river, surrounded by bucolic pastures and an old cemetery, about five miles from the city gates. The large, airy house surrounded a central garden and was protected by high stone walls. Along with numerous staff, several of Lady Shali's friends resided there during the hottest months of the year, as well as Lord Indarel's own mother. The only man Keshan saw was an elderly guard who treated Keshan warily. He read Indarel's letter over twice, and escorted Keshan the entire way through the manor.

Keshan saw a handful of other women relaxing in the garden or sheltering from the heat indoors in a large marbled sitting room. The guard kicked at the roaming peacocks as he directed Keshan to Jandu's room.

Keshan knocked at the door. A moment later, Suraya appeared.

She looked tired. "Hello, Keshan." She nodded to the guard. "It's all right. He can come in."

Keshan thanked the guard and then followed Suraya inside. Jandu's room was large and airy, with white cotton curtains billowing in the sweet smelling afternoon breeze. The teak floor was covered in richly embroidered rugs. A set of teak wooden doors led out to a private rose garden.

Jandu slept fitfully, curled in a clenched ball under the muted red cotton sheets of his bed.

"How is he?" Keshan whispered.

Suraya stood beside Keshan, frowning at Jandu. "The physicians sedated him with herbs to help him sleep." She swallowed and looked up at Keshan. "Is it true? Did Yudar really stake him to Firdaus?"

"Yes."

Suraya closed her eyes. Tears appeared but she wiped them away hastily. "I don't know how Yudar will live with himself after this."

"I don't care how he lives," Keshan hissed. "I only care about how Jandu will live with this."

"You saved him, though. You got to him before..." Suraya closed her eyes again, then seemed to recover. She smiled and laid a hand on Keshan's arm. "Go to him now. I'll leave you two alone. Just let him know... let him know how much we love him."

Keshan stared at her. She smiled shyly.

"I've told the guards to let you in and out. Feel free to sleep here as long as you are in Afadi. Lady Shali gave me a room down the hall so you two can have your privacy."

Keshan's eyes widened. She knew.

"Suraya, I hope you don't think..."

Suraya rose up on her toes and kissed Keshan's cheek. "Please take care of him for me."

As soon as she left, Keshan sat down on a wooden chair in the corner, watching his friend's fitful sleep.

Just the act of sitting flooded Keshan with exhaustion. He hadn't rested since his frantic run from Tiwari, and now his body ached with weariness.

Keshan worked the leather straps of his armor quietly, moving slowly as he untied his breastplate and arm bands. Free of the heavy armor, he stretched back against the uncomfortable wooden chair and closed his eyes.

But as the reality of what he had done sunk in, sleep became impossible. Bone-weary as he was, he couldn't escape the realization that he had just forfeited his own life as a Triya warrior.

As soon as it was discovered that the Parans had spent their third year of hiding in Afadi, it would be revealed that Janali was Jandu. And that Keshan had saved Jandu, breaking Keshan's vow to not help the Parans during their exile. Keshan would

be stripped of his caste, no longer allowed in the palaces of the country, unable to make decisions for his family. He would not be able to fight in any war, or claim Triya justice. He had forfeited his identity and his entire social standing.

Iyestar was going to be furious at him.

The thought of his brother made Keshan momentarily smile, but the smile faded as soon as he realized how sad Iyestar would be. Keshan breaking a vow was not only Keshan's dishonor. His action would dishonor the entire Tiwari tribe. Keshan had sacrificed everything.

He tried to comfort himself, knowing that, if given the choice, he would do it again. Jandu had become more important to him than honor, than caste, even more important than his own family. It seemed fitting that the sacrifice Keshan had to pay to save Jandu from a violation so great would be heavy indeed.

But this was cold comfort. Keshan had been able to at least stop the worst of Jandu's violation. But it wasn't enough. He hadn't done enough. Since the beginning of Jandu's exile, Keshan had always provided just enough help to ease his conscience, but not enough to actually do Jandu any good. He brought money to keep Jandu from dying, but it wasn't enough to stop his hunger. He had killed Jandu's attackers, but only after they had beaten him. And despite the fact that Keshan was never one to harbor useless, accusatory thoughts, he couldn't shake the feeling that this was somehow his fault, that if he had just been a little faster, a little more attentive to his visions, he could have changed all this.

Keshan had often questioned his powers in the past, but had never felt so angry about them as he did now. They were there when he needed them, but they weren't powerful enough to truly save those close to him from harm. If he had done a better job of understanding his own capabilities, he might have been able to preempt Jandu's assault.

Keshan breathed deeply, and closed his eyes. Unbidden, the vision he had seen since a little boy came back to him, broken

but unchanged. He sat with a warrior, firing his weapon in a great war, and changing the fate of Marhavad. But how could that vision be true now, after everything he had done?

Jandu suddenly started and sat up. He blinked, and when he saw Keshan sitting in the chair, he immediately tensed and leapt into a defensive crouch.

“It’s okay, Jandu,” Keshan said softly. “It’s only me.”

Keshan got up and sat on the edge of the bed. There was such suffering in Jandu’s eyes. Keshan never imagined someone as proud, as fierce and as beautiful as Jandu could be reduced to such grief.

Jandu said nothing.

Keshan studied the changes in Jandu’s body. Jandu as a woman was a lovely sight, only now he was marred with a broken nose and bruised face. He looked so dramatically different—small and petite, with curvy hips and breasts, his fingers long and thin, his face so tiny and pale. But there was still no question that it was Jandu. His eyes were so distinctive, as was the way he held himself, and even though his body had completely metamorphosed, Jandu’s soul was plain to see. Keshan looked down at his hands, usually so still and assured. They trembled slightly now, with exhaustion and anger.

“Is there anything I can get you?” Keshan asked. “I’ve told Indarel that I married you back in Prasta, so now I can come and go as I please. Would you like me to bring you something? Tea?”

Jandu shook his head, looking away. “I can’t bear you looking at me.” His voice sounded strained.

“Jandu.” Keshan reached out hesitantly to touch Jandu’s hand. He paused when he saw the dark ring of bruises around Jandu’s wrist.

“I look revolting,” Jandu said.

“No, you don’t,” Keshan said. “Come here.” He patted the bed and Jandu sat beside him, propped against the headboard. Jandu leaned into Keshan, his body so much smaller than it was before, his head barely reaching Keshan’s shoulder.

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“You are going to be all right,” Keshan told him.

Jandu’s lip trembled. “This is not a sword or an arrow wound. There is nothing honorable in these bruises.” Jandu dragged his hand across his face, wiping his eyes in the most unladylike fashion Keshan had ever seen.

“What I don’t understand,” Jandu whispered, “is how he could have done that to me.”

“Firdaus was vermin,” Keshan said.

“Not Firdaus. Yudar.” Jandu’s shoulders began to shake with silent sobs.

Keshan let Jandu cry. He sat on the bed and let Jandu tire himself out. And finally, exhausted, Jandu slumped down into an uneasy slumber.

Keshan curled himself around Jandu’s small body. As he drifted off to sleep, he realized he could kill Firdaus over and over, but it would never make a difference. It had been Yudar who hurt Jandu the most, and there was nothing Keshan could do to avenge the damage. Jandu had been betrayed by someone he loved, and even murdering Yudar would bring Jandu little peace. The damage was already done.

## CHAPTER 39

THE DARKNESS OF THE NIGHT MINGLED WITH THE WINE IN Tarek's cup. He considered saying his evening prayers and then going to sleep. But the monsoon was back, hot and heavy outside, and even in his cool rooms in the palace, sleep in such heat would be difficult.

It felt wrong to pray and then sin, and so Tarek delayed his evening ablutions, simply washing his face in the basin before making his way through Prasta's palace to the soldier's quarters.

Tarek knocked on Anant's door. When he entered, he dismissed the servant and shut the door. He slowly approached Anant's bed. Anant sleepily stood to bow.

"Sit down, Anant, for God's sake," Tarek said. Anant sat down.

Anant's face had almost completely healed. The skin around his left eye was still discolored. But his sight was fine.

The physician had told Tarek that there were likely bone fractures behind Anant's eyes, causing his face to look slightly irregular. However the swelling in his cheek and jaw was gone and Tarek still found him handsome.

Tarek crouched beside the bed, leaning on the balls of his feet so that he was eye-level with Anant.

"How are you feeling?" Tarek asked.

Anant nodded. "Fine. Thank you, my lord."

Tarek studied the man in front of him in silence.

"My lord?" Anant asked quietly.

Tarek frowned. "You saved me."

Anant looked confused for a moment. "Of course I did."



“Why?” Tarek reached out and touched the tender, fresh scar across Anant’s jaw.

Anant swallowed. “You are my lord.”

“That’s not good enough,” Tarek said.

“I have other reasons,” Anant said, his voice lowering.

Tarek stared at him so intently, Anant looked away.

“No, look at me,” Tarek ordered.

Anant looked back at him and stuck his chin out defiantly. His eyes searched Tarek’s face for understanding.

“What do you want from me?” Tarek asked softly. “Love? Sex? Power? I don’t know what I can offer you, Anant. I don’t know if I have any of those things in me.”

Anant’s eyes softened. “I don’t want anything from you. I enjoy being with you. That’s all.”

“That’s all,” Tarek repeated. Anant nodded.

Tarek rubbed a hand over his face, suddenly tired. He stood, his knees cracking. He gave Anant a long look, and then held out his hand to him. “Then come to bed with me.”

Tarek led him back to his own room.



Tarek’s slumber was disturbed by the dramatic sound of someone banging on his door.

Tarek blinked at the early morning darkness and cursed himself for being so careless. Anant lay sprawled naked beside him, sleeping soundly despite the noise outside. There was something endearing about Anant’s ability to doze through anything. His dark body lay above the sheets, unashamed, his legs spread wide, one arm thrown over his eyes, the other on his chest, his hand gently rising and dropping with his breathing. Tarek wanted to lean down and smell his body, run his hands over Anant’s dark flesh, touch his cock where it lay slumbering on a thick bed of pubic hair. Instead, Tarek gently shook Anant’s shoulder.

Anant awoke sleepily, blinking as he got his bearings. He looked over at Tarek and smiled shyly.

“Good morning, my lord.”

“You have to go back to your rooms through the window,” Tarek whispered. He got out of bed and started dressing. “Someone is at the door.”

Anant quickly pulled himself together. He hastily dressed, throwing his clothes on with a soldier’s efficiency. Tarek caught his arm before he slipped out of the window.

“Wait,” Tarek said softly.

Anant looked at him, expectant, hopeful, his eyes wide with anticipation.

“Come to me tonight,” Tarek said. “Wait for me in my room. After the servants have gone to sleep.”

A slow, dazzling grin spread across Anant’s face. He bowed again. “Yes, my lord.” He checked the courtyard for witnesses, and then dashed into the darkness.

Tarek watched him flee, and then shut his window to finish his own dressing. The room smelled of semen and sweat. It stank of Anant. It was both pleasing and terribly incriminating. He lit a stick of incense.

The person at his door grew impatient and knocked harder.

“Tarek!”

It was Darvad. Tarek quickly pulled on his vest.

“Hold on.” He brushed his hair back from his face, and then opened the door.

Darvad looked pissed.

“I was asleep,” Tarek started to explain, but Darvad scowled and waved the remark aside.

“Of course you were. It’s two in the morning.”

“What has happened?”

Darvad sat down on the bed without asking permission. Tarek felt his cheeks grow hot. It wasn’t the first time that Darvad had been in his private rooms—they often spent many hours alone together in their own chambers, gambling and talking and drinking. But Darvad was sitting on stained

sheets. Tarek felt exposed. He turned to his wash basin and grabbed his razor.

"Firdaus has been murdered."

Tarek froze, razor suspended in the air. "What!"

"Keshan Adaru killed him."

Tarek frowned. "But why? Why now, after all these years?"

"I received a request from Ishad Trinat, Firdaus' son. He has asked that I send you down to Afadi to investigate the circumstances. As Royal Judge, I need you to determine who is at fault and bring justice."

"And if it is Keshan?" Tarek asked.

Darvad sighed. "It is a tricky situation. You have to find out what happened. Firdaus' son claims it was an unprovoked attack, but I have heard rumors that Keshan defended a servant girl who was being gang-raped by Firdaus and his friends."

"What was Keshan doing in Afadi?" Tarek asked.

Darvad shrugged. "Another mystery. I've sent a message to Iyestar, and he will hopefully clarify issues for us. But you need to leave for Afadi."

"Right now?" Tarek looked at the darkness outside.

"Tomorrow at the latest." Darvad stood. He hesitated for a moment, and then touched Tarek's shoulder. "Other than you and Iyestar, all of my closest allies are dead."

"And Iyestar will not be pleased with either of us if we punish his brother," Tarek said. He had no desire to harm Keshan.

"If he has broken a law, then it is your duty to do just that," Darvad said sternly.

And as suddenly as he appeared, Darvad got up to leave. "Keep me informed. Bring messenger pigeons. Let me know what really happened to Firdaus." Darvad hugged Tarek quickly, and left.

Tarek looked out the window. It was too late in the morning to go back to bed. He spent the day preparing for the four day journey to Afadi, on the coast of Marhavad. He called for

wine early in the morning, and drank steadily throughout the day, overseeing the selection of Dragewan soldiers to join him and retrieving his favorite bow from where it was being tuned. His charioteer had to be called back from Dragewan. Despite Darvad's urgency, Tarek refused to leave without the young charioteer, feeling a strong kinship with the man who had driven him into battle at Jezza.

Frustration coiled around him. Once again, he was off, leaving Darvad behind for God knew how long.

That evening Tarek blew into his bedroom like a storm. He threw his sandals off and poured himself another cup of wine. Then he turned and saw Anant standing in the corner.

*Shit.* He'd forgotten he'd invited him earlier.

"I'm in a terrible mood, Anant. I'm sorry. You should go." He swilled the wine.

Anant moved closer. In the darkness, his face looked almost perfect again.

"I can make you feel better," Anant said quietly.

Tarek snorted cruelly. "Doubt it." He poured himself another glass of wine and drank it down.

Anant stood a few inches away. Tarek could smell anise on Anant's breath. He frowned. "What?"

Anant's hands shook. But that didn't stop him from reaching uninvited to Tarek's waist sash and untying the knot. He pulled down Tarek's *dejaru*.

Tarek's breath left him, heavy.

"Anant..." He didn't know what he wanted to stay. He wanted to stop him. But he didn't. He let Anant nervously kneel, put his hands upon him, guide Tarek into his mouth. Tarek leaned his head back and moaned.

Anant felt so good. His mouth was so hot, so persistent, it swirled around him and pulled him deep into his throat. Tarek had to remember to breathe. He reached down and put his hands on Anant's hair, guiding him into a rhythm, pulling him closer, until the shadows in the room divided and

brightness shone through Tarek's body. Pleasure shot from him in gasping arcs.

Anant didn't rise. He knelt, breathless, staring up at Tarek with love and admiration shining from his eyes.

"Anant," Tarek said again, sadly. He placed a hand back on Anant's head. "I am heartless."

Anant's gaze didn't waver. "I'll love you anyway."

"I know," Tarek said. He let go of Anant and pulled up his dejaru. "That's the problem."

Anant continued to kneel. His glance flickered to Tarek's packed trunk. "You're leaving?"

"I must go to Afadi. The lord of Chandamar has been murdered."

Anant swallowed. "Am I staying behind?"

Tarek was about to say 'yes.' But the look in Anant's eyes softened Tarek's mood. His anger, his frustration with everything, it ebbed slightly in Anant's presence. He wasn't Darvad, and this wasn't love. Tarek would not lie to himself. But it was comforting nevertheless.

"Come with me," Tarek said before he could change his mind.

Anant stood. He bowed low before Tarek. When he looked up, he appeared more confident and handsomer than Tarek remembered. Anant's mouth curved into a small smile.

"It will be my honor, my lord."

## CHAPTER 40

JANDU COULD LIVE WITH THE CONSTANT THROB IN HIS NOSE, the bruises on his body, the ache of movement.

He even thought he could learn to live with the revulsion of his attack, the humiliation. Images of the attackers' faces remained branded in his mind, their sick grins leering down at him every time he closed his eyes. But Jandu could bear this. Eventually, he would learn to live with the repulsive memory of Firdaus' body grinding against his flesh.

But the way Yudar had betrayed him—this pain was unbearable. Hanu and Firdaus—their crime, while foul, was understandable. They were greedy and violent. But Yudar's treachery wounded Jandu deeper than any blade could penetrate. Jandu would have died a thousand deaths defending any one of his family members against such a crime. So how could his brother, the staunch supporter of truth and religious righteousness, not only allow such a thing to happen, but facilitate it? He led the men to Jandu's door. The guards of the women's quarters would never have permitted three strange men to enter Jandu's building if Yudar hadn't convinced them to do so.

Every time Jandu thought about it, he shook with fury. His brother had sold him as a whore. For the first time in his life, Jandu honestly and truly wanted to kill Yudar.

That was his mantra during his week of healing. He stared at the rose garden outside his new room and watched the bruises on his body turn from purple to yellow, and he fantasized about murdering his brother, and then ending his own life. He would slit his own throat. It was the honorable way out of this torment.

Keshan tended Jandu as if he were a sick child. Jandu's

self-loathing made Keshan's presence insufferable. He couldn't stand the fact that Keshan had seen him so vulnerable and weak. It was terrible to go through this with the one person whose opinion Jandu cared about most of all.

Yet Keshan didn't seem to mind. He prattled on about trivial things, and kept Jandu posted on Afadi's preparations for war. Ishad, Firdaus' son and the new lord of Chandamar, had asked the King to send the Royal Judge as mediator. Now Indarel pulled all of his Afadi soldiers into the capital city, in advance of the arrival of the Chandamar negotiating party. The threat of war shuttered houses up and sold out bakeries, as the city prepared for a siege.

Secluded in his room, miles away from the chaos, Jandu saw little of the panic his attack had instigated. He heard activity in the courtyard as more Triya noble women moved into the retreat to escape the stressed city. But other than Suraya and Keshan, Jandu saw no one. After a week of such isolation, Lady Shali herself paid Jandu a visit, begging his forgiveness for suffering such injustice under her roof.

"Because of me, there will be trouble here," Jandu said, trying to appear the gracious, proper Suya girl.

"If we can't protect one woman alone in our own household, we deserve the trouble." Shali's voice shook with anger. "You are very special to Abiyar. I wish you a speedy recovery."

"Thank you, my lady." Jandu worked at politeness. But he was grateful when she finally left him alone.

Keshan was absent for most of the day, helping Indarel prepare for the arrival of Tarek Amia, the Royal Judge. Jandu took the opportunity to sit in his private rose garden. It was his first time outside since the assault, and the fresh air felt like a cool balm, soothing his weary spirit.

When Keshan returned, he whistled so as not to surprise Jandu. Jandu turned around and watched Keshan walk through the wooden doors into the rose garden. Keshan's movements were tense, angry.

“Keshan,” he said. He smiled.

“Hi.” Keshan pulled up an extra chair beside Jandu. They sat contentedly together as a strong breeze blew the fragrant red roses in a twisted circle.

“This garden is beautiful,” Jandu said. Jandu caught himself absent-mindedly rubbing the bruises on his throat. He dropped his hands into his lap.

Keshan nodded. “It reminds me of my mother’s garden when I was young. She used to hide sugared candies from me by hanging them above one of her rose bushes so I would be stuck with thorns if I tried to get to them.”

“Did it work?” Jandu asked.

Keshan smiled. “No. I would get stuck full of thorns and eat the candies anyway. Then she’d punish me twice—once for stealing the sweets, and once again for having to clean up all my scrapes.”

“I wish I knew you then,” Jandu said softly.

“You’d make an excellent Tiwari maiden.”

“You like the way I look right now?” Jandu asked.

Keshan nodded. “I wish I could touch you.”

“I hate it,” Jandu said. “I can’t wait for this year to be over. I hate the weakness in my flesh. I just can’t believe...” he frowned, absentmindedly covering the bruises on his face. He closed his eyes. “I can’t bear the fact that you’ve seen me like this.” Jandu turned his head.

“Don’t look away,” Keshan said sharply. “Don’t you dare be ashamed.”

Jandu was silent for a long moment. Then he forced himself to stare at Keshan. “I don’t know what else to be.”

“Be Jandu,” Keshan said. “Be yourself.”

Jandu shook his head angrily. “You have always said you have known our fates. Did you know this would happen? Was this part of some great plan?” He took a deep breath to steady his voice. “Why did this have to happen to me now?”

Keshan’s eyes became soft and liquid, and Jandu momentarily



feared that Keshan would cry. But Keshan just reached up and gingerly held Jandu's hand.

"I don't know why this happened. I wish I did. I've been trying to understand what this all means. But I don't have the answers. I only know what is shown to me." Keshan sighed.

Jandu swallowed. "I just—I just never expected this. Especially after meeting you. You've filled my head with such a sense of purpose. You've made me believe I could have a great destiny." Jandu stared at Keshan. "But now this—this changes everything. How can I be the greatest archer of Marhavad, how can I help make this world any better, when I can't even protect myself? When I am so *pitiful*?"

"Look at me." Keshan spoke in a low voice. He cradled Jandu's bruised face. "Nothing is changed about your future."

"I am useless," Jandu said.

"No you aren't." Keshan leaned close. "How do you think I recognized you? You look completely different, but you are still Jandu under it all. Through the years in the forest, through the servitude, through even this, you remain Jandu Paran, the same, fierce, proud, beautiful warrior I fell in love with all those years ago. He is safe inside of you, you just have to find him again."

Jandu swallowed. "I feel like Jandu Paran is dead."

"No!" Keshan gritted his teeth. "You've been through hell, but that's it! It's just been a shitty couple of years! And you are going to get through this, because I love you and I need you!"

The corner of Jandu's mouth twitched slightly. He pushed a stray lock of Keshan's hair out of his face. "You are always so fucking melodramatic, Keshan."

Keshan laughed and leaned forward to kiss Jandu's forehead. "Well, you bring it out of me. I wouldn't have to be so histrionic if you stopped getting into such precarious situations."

Jandu smiled and Keshan's face washed with relief, his body seeming to thaw suddenly, growing loose and relaxed like it used to be. He sat down in the chair again. "Are you feeling better?"

Jandu sighed. "Yes. I suppose I'll have to face the rest of the world again. Though God knows what I will do when I see Baram."

Keshan hesitated. "And Yudar?"

Jandu looked out over the roses. "I have nothing to say to him right now. If I see him, I'm going to kill him."

Keshan leaned over his chair, and hugged Jandu to him. A week ago, Jandu wouldn't have been able to stand it. But now, in the sweet river breezes of the summer house, safe and alone with Keshan, he allowed Keshan's embrace.

"I would kill them a thousand times for you, if I could," Keshan whispered.

Keshan tentatively pulled Jandu into his lap. Jandu wrapped his arms around Keshan, momentarily grateful that he was smaller than Keshan now, able to curl into Keshan's strong, protective body. Jandu sank into the heat of Keshan's chest, letting his warmth heal the bruised and broken spots Jandu couldn't wait to be rid of.

They were finally disturbed by a knock at the door. Jandu's throat went dry.

Keshan untangled himself from Jandu's arms and stood. "I'll get it."

"Give me one of your knives," Jandu said.

Keshan's expression darkened, but he diligently pulled one of his throwing knives from his belt and handed it to Jandu.

"Wait here," Keshan said. He went to the door. Jandu waited with Keshan's knife clutched tightly in his hand. He knew it was irrational to be afraid of every knock on the door, but he couldn't help himself.

Keshan returned to the courtyard and leaned against the door, a bemused expression on his face.

"There is a young man to see you," Keshan said.

Jandu narrowed his eyes. "Who?"

"Indarel's son, Abiyar. He begged an opportunity to talk to you."

Jandu sighed. Although it had been Abiyar who personally drove the chariot to the summer retreat a week ago, Jandu hadn't exchanged any words with him since that ill-fated kiss in the music room. Jandu was in no mood to deal with a teenage boy's crush. But he realized he couldn't hide in his room forever. Eventually he was going to have to see people other than Keshan and Suraya. And Abiyar was as good of a person to start with as any.

"I'll see him," Jandu said. He followed Keshan back into his rooms, tucking Keshan's knife under the blankets of his bed. He knew Keshan watched him, but he didn't say anything.

"He's got flowers," Keshan whispered. Jandu thought he detected a flicker of amusement on Keshan's face.

Abiyar stood in the doorway, his face already pink with embarrassment, his oversized armor hampering his movements as he held out a bouquet of flowers.

"I picked these myself," Abiyar stuttered. He eyed Keshan nervously.

Jandu accepted the flowers. "Thank you, Abi. They're beautiful." Jandu decided not to comment on the dirty fuzz above Abiyar's lip, the mustache an obvious attempt to appear more manly.

Abiyar nervously made eye contact. "Janali, I... I just wanted to say I'm sorry. You should have been safe in the palace. This crime is a stain on all good people of Afadi. I should have been there to defend you."

Jandu smiled. "You and your family have always treated me well. I am grateful for everything."

Jandu could feel Keshan's presence looming behind him, and he turned to see Keshan observing the young boy, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Abiyar, I want you to meet Lord Keshan Adaru of Tiwari." Jandu nodded to Keshan. "He is the Triya I told you about who is a master of the flute."

“Is he your husband?” Abiyar asked nervously.

“Yes, I am.” Keshan answered, and Abiyar seemed to shrink.

Jandu smiled. “Keshan, you should hear Abiyar play. He’s much better than I am. He has real musical talent. I’m sure you’d be impressed.”

Keshan frowned at Abiyar and raised an eyebrow.

Abiyar looked like he wanted to curl up and die. “Well... if you need anything, let me know. I’m staying here to defend you and the other women here if there is any trouble.”

The idea of little Abiyar defending the three dozen women in the retreat amused Jandu.

“Thank you, Abi. I have faith in you.” He glanced down at the bouquet and added, “Thanks again for the flowers.” But by then Abiyar had fled down the hallway.

Jandu shut the door and turned to Keshan. “That wasn’t very nice of you.”

“He’s in love with you.” Keshan said. “Can’t I be a little jealous?”

“Last time I saw him, he kissed me,” Jandu said.

Keshan raised an eyebrow. “Did you like it?”

“No. He’s not my type.” Jandu set the flowers aside. “And I don’t think I’m his type either.”

“He’s in for a surprise,” Keshan said.

Jandu nodded. And then they both started laughing.

“Poor, deluded kid,” Keshan said.

“Everyone here thinks he’s gay.”

“Maybe he is.” Keshan kissed the side of Jandu’s face that was uninjured. “Maybe he can tell you’re a man underneath this woman’s body. I can.” Keshan hugged Jandu.

Jandu shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

They held each other for a moment longer, but Jandu could feel Keshan tensing again.

“I have to go, Jandu. I need to be with Indarel when Tarek arrives.”

Jandu let go of him. He had wanted Keshan to be as far away from him as possible all week. But now that Keshan was leaving, a dank, oily fear filled Jandu's stomach. "You have to promise to come back to me."

Keshan looked surprised. He kissed the top of Jandu's head. "I will. I'll see you soon, I promise."

Keshan stood stiffly in the doorway. Jandu could see the pain in his eyes, and suddenly realized what it must have cost Keshan to spend this week with him. It was probably as unbearable as it was for Jandu himself. He went to Keshan and hugged him once again, the two of them gripping each other fiercely, as if they would never see each other again.

"I love you," Keshan whispered. He kissed Jandu's forehead. And then he left Jandu alone.



That night, Jandu could feel it.

There was a lengthening in his bones. His muscles shook as they transformed, pulling upon tendons as they grew.

He couldn't sleep through the pain, but he welcomed it regardless. He was changing back into a man. His final year of exile was over.

In the morning, Jandu felt a thrill of excitement and relief as he saw the changes that had already occurred. In one night, he had grown. Power surged through his arms and legs again.

This transformation was faster than it had been when he had turned into a woman. Jandu was grateful, but it was excruciating as well. By evening, he took to his bed once more, moaning as his bones shifted and his skin stretched, agonizing pulses radiating from his groin, every part of him sore and pounding. If he concentrated, he could actually see his toes lengthen.

What made it worse was the knowledge that his transformation had come a week too late. If he had even this much muscle a week ago, he might have been able to fight off the men who attacked him.

Jandu focused on the pain, and on the changes, and decided he could no longer think about his assault. He had to look forward. Their three years of hiding were up and he would be a prince again, and once he was, he would take his retribution.

## CHAPTER 41

TWO DAYS AFTER KESHAN'S DEPARTURE, JANDU AWOKE IN THE morning to the sound of the alarm ringing through the summer manor.

Jandu rose to find out what the turmoil was, but the second he moved in his bed, he was distracted by his own torments. Bolts of pain shot through his groin. Parts were sealing, parts were protruding—it was an excruciating mess of nerves.

Suraya came to him moments later, as she had done every morning. They had used the excuse of his assault to justify his seclusion, and Suraya had brought him his meals and fresh linen. By now, his dramatic changes would cause a stir.

“Jandu!” Suraya walked in quickly and locked the door behind her.

Jandu moved slowly to meet her. Each step he took was sheer agony. Hot flashes of pain shot up his legs.

“Tell me what has happened,” Jandu demanded, his voice breaking as it dropped nearly an octave. It was puberty all over again.

“A messenger reported that a battalion of Chandamar cavalrymen are on the other side of the river. It looks like they're on their way here.” Suraya handed him a cup of tea.

Jandu stared at Suraya in shock. “What?”

Suraya shook her head. “Indarel stationed all of Afadi's army at the city gates. And now only the oldest men and youngest boys are left to defend us.”

“Fool!” Jandu said, wincing. Even his mouth was changing, and his teeth felt strange and loose in his mouth. “How many soldiers are protecting this house?”

A flicker of fear crossed Suraya's eyes. "Ten guards. And Abiyar."

Jandu dropped his tea. "That's it? We're virtually undefended?"

Suraya shook her head. "I'm sure that Lady Shali's messengers will get to Indarel in time. He will send reinforcements."

"This place will be overrun by then." Jandu sat down on his bed. He shuddered. "We can't let them in here." He watched, almost distantly, as his hands began to shake. It was still too soon after his own attack to contemplate a horde of soldiers falling upon the defenseless women in the summer house. "We have to stop them."

"Abiyar volunteered to fight them alone," Suraya said. "His mother is in hysterics, but I thought you would be proud of him."

Jandu stood. He tried putting on his sandals but his feet had grown too large. He would have to go barefoot. He grabbed a loose cotton shawl to pull over his face to hide his mannish features.

Suraya watched his burst of movement warily. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to help him." Jandu pocketed Keshan's knife. "I'll be his charioteer," Jandu said. "Or he can be mine."

Suraya's eyes grew wide. "Are you serious?"

"Of course." Jandu quickly tied his hair back with a leather strap.

"But Jandu..." Suraya lowered her voice.

"What other choice to we have? Let a sixteen-year-old boy face an army by himself?"

"You could get killed!" Suraya cried.

Jandu put his hands on Suraya's shoulders. "Fighting a battle does not frighten me, Suraya. But sitting here, helpless?" Jandu swallowed his revulsion. "No. I'd rather die fighting."

Suraya pursed her lips, making Jandu smile. She only did that when she was about to give in to something she disagreed with.

Jandu's large hands fumbled for the pouch in which he kept Zandi. He stroked his flute appreciatively, and then whispered the words Keshan had taught him.



The flute vibrated in his hands. The metal melted and dribbled from his hands, pooling on the floor. Suraya watched, awestruck, as Zandi reformed herself into his bow, the metal swirling, shimmering impossibly bright.

Jandu tried stringing her, but his arms shook and he could not bend Zandi enough to complete the task. Suraya shot him a look of concern, but Jandu ignored it. He carried Zandi in his hand. He'd try again later, or have Abiyar help him. Between the two of them it would be easy.

Servants rushed from room to room closing shutters and barricading the outside doors. Jandu covered his face with a harafa as he walked beside Suraya towards the gates.

"Talk to Lady Shali," Jandu whispered to Suraya. His voice grumbled low and deep in his throat. "Tell her to arm the servant girls with helmets and swords, whatever they can find. Have them stand along the wall."

"Why?"

"From a distance, they'll look like soldiers," Jandu said. "Maybe we can fool the raiders."

Suraya nodded, and then squeezed Jandu's arm. "Good luck."

Jandu leaned down and kissed the top of her forehead. They both smiled at each other as they realized it was the first time Jandu could do such a thing in a year.

As soon as Suraya left for Shali's suites, Jandu pulled his head scarf tighter and walked to the summer house guard.

He was an old man, half-blind and overweight. He looked agitated.

"I need to leave the grounds," Jandu told him, using his best falsetto voice. It sounded fake, and he winced at his own ruse.

But the guard seemed too distressed by the imminent attack to wonder at the size and sound of the woman who stood before him. "It's not safe. There is an invasion force on its way—"

"—I know. I will be back directly."

“Hurry.” The man groaned as he opened the large wooden gate, and Jandu dashed outside.

Even though his bones ached, Jandu forced himself into a run. He darted across the eerily empty street. The two times that Jandu had been on the main thoroughfare to Afadi, it had teemed with people and noise and smells. Now it was deserted. Other than the lowing of cattle, the pastures surrounding the city walls were silent. No one traveled along the dusty road up to the river or towards Chandamar.

Jandu’s body straightened and his muscles stopped shaking by the time he reached the cemetery across from the summer house. Jandu swore under his breath as he climbed the tree. The corpse that had been hung near their weapons was now a pile of bones on the ground, the noose dangling emptily from a branch studded with summer flowers. Jandu dropped the bag of weapons, and then scurried down the tree to check the contents for damage.

Baram’s breastplate had taken the brunt of the impact, and was slightly dented, but everything else looked as beautiful and sharp as when they had hidden their weapons over a year ago. Jandu’s eyes feasted upon his inexhaustible quiver, his own symbol clearly visible below the fletching of the enchanted arrows. He quickly retied the bag and, testing his strength, lifted it up onto his shoulders.

Every step he took, he felt stronger, and the bag felt a little lighter. Jandu pushed his body and himself. He walked faster, and then he ran, feeling the last of his pain fade to a dull ache, and then disappear. Exhilarating strength rolled through him. As Jandu approached the guard of the summer house, he realized he had grown almost an inch since he left less than an hour before. He passed the old guard at a sprint. He was out of sight before the old man hauled the gate closed.

Jandu raced to the stable. He arrived just as Abiyar took his seat in a small war chariot. He looked tiny in his armor and his

expression was far away. Abiyar urged his two chestnut stallions forward without seeming to notice Jandu.

"Shit." Jandu jogged alongside the chariot. He threw the weapons inside and then jumped in, clutching the central pole for balance as the horses moved from a trot to a canter and out through the gate.

"What the...!" Abiyar glared around at Jandu. "What are you doing?" The horses cantered along the deserted street. Abiyar pulled the horses to a halt. He stood and glared at Jandu. "What do you think you're doing!"

"I'm coming with you," Jandu said, no longer hiding his masculine voice. Jandu untied the deerskin bag and quickly put on his armor. He tied on his breastplate, leather on one side and beautiful embossed silver on the other, in the shape of two elephants. Jandu unwrapped his head scarf and reached down for his helmet.

"Who are you?"

"Janali, you fool," Jandu said. "Who else would come out here to fight with you?"

"*Janali?*" Abiyar's shock was apparent. He stared openly at Jandu, his eyes widening. He looked over Jandu's body, taking in the differences. He grimaced. "What the hell has happened to you?"

Jandu opened the deerskin wider and stepped back, admiring the gleam of their weapons. Jandu strapped on his sword.

"Just get us across the river," Jandu ordered. "I'll take care of the rest."

Faces appeared over the summer house wall, as the women inside watched for invaders. Abiyar took no notice. His eyes were locked on Zandi, in Jandu's hand.

"Whose weapons are these?" Abiyar asked again, his voice barely above a whisper.

Jandu pointed to the large sword. "That belongs to Yudar Paran. The mace and sword there are Baram Paran's."

Jandu held out Zandi. "And this bow is mine."

Abiyar stared at him, slack-jawed.

“But...”

“I’m Jandu Paran,” Jandu said.

“What?” Abiyar stammered.

“Hadn’t you heard the story? We had to live in hiding.”

“I heard you all died of privation!”

Jandu pulled on his helmet and tied the deerskin closed.

“Well, you heard wrong. We were living with you. Yudar is Esalas, the dice teacher. And Baram is Bodan, the cook.”

“Azari must be Suraya,” Abiyar said to himself.

Jandu nodded to the reins. “If you want my advice, young lord, I suggest we hurry. We should meet the invaders as far from the summer house as possible, where we can see them clearly.”

Abiyar stared at him. A slow, furious blush covered his face. “But you... you have *breasts*.”

Jandu stopped smiling. “It’s my disguise. Come on, Abi, focus on driving the horses.”

With bold new confidence, Abiyar grabbed the reins and whipped the horses into motion across the river. Jandu took off his bangles and pulled on his leather archer’s gloves. He flexed his hands in the leather, refreshing his body to the feel of them.

They reached the river. The monsoons were late this year, and the soil was parched for moisture. The horses’ hooves brought up clouds of dust, and soon Abiyar and Jandu were coated in dirt.

As the chariot raced across the stone bridge, Jandu knelt and prayed. “Please, God, give me back the strength I need.”

Abiyar stopped the chariot. Jandu stood and watched a distant cloud of dust emerging from the main road to Chandamar. In the dead stillness of the morning air, he could even hear the sound of hooves upon the earth. Abiyar adjusted his own helmet nervously.

“I’m scared.” Abiyar gripped the reins, his fingers bone white.

“It’s all right to be frightened,” Jandu said calmly. “But to run when faced with danger is the definition of cowardice. You are many things, Abiyar, and coward is not one of them.”

The cavalymen suddenly appeared around the bend of the hill. They charged forward at a full-on gallop. The sun glinted off their swords. There was a distant roar, a battle cry, as they kicked their horses faster towards the summer manor. They raced towards Jandu and Abiyar, the column stretching back as far as Jandu could see. There were at least fifty of them.

“God.” Abiyar’s face was a deathly green. “God!”

“Focus on controlling the chariot,” Jandu said. “I’ll take care of the men.” Jandu now could see the riders clearly. The earth seemed to shake from their furious gallop. Jandu reached down to string Zandi, praying that he now had the strength he needed to do so. It took more effort than it used to, but Jandu was able to string her. He smiled, and twanged the string, sending out its unique ring across the battlefield. In response, he saw the men straighten.

“This is going to cure all my ills,” he told himself. He took aim.

Unshaven and poorly dressed, the cavalry looked like Chaya caste thieves. But the way they tightened into even rows of horses, five abreast, ten rows deep, was decidedly military. The men were armed with lances, maces, and swords. And although this gave Jandu a slight advantage, as none of the men had bows, it was still alarming.

These were clearly Triya soldiers in disguise. They galloped in formation, yelling as they charged towards Jandu and Abiyar’s lone chariot.

“Abi, listen to me,” Jandu said. “I’m going to use a sharta. Don’t be alarmed. Don’t move forward until I tell you, understood?”

“Yes.” Abiyar’s teeth chattered.

“I’m going to kill as many of them as I can before we have to move from the river. ”

“All right.”

“Be ready.” Jandu knelt in the chariot and closed his eyes. He brought his hands together in supplication and prayed, summoning the Manarisharta, one of the all-powerful, devastating weapons he had learned from Mazar. As he spoke the words under his breath, vomit rose in his throat. He could taste blood. His whole body began to tremble. A light emanated from his pores, but he clenched his eyes shut and finished the terrible curse.

All the hair on his body stood on end. There was a deep, all-encompassing silence, like a gap between waves.

Then the air crackled, on fire.

Electricity burst from Jandu’s chariot and shot out towards the first line of riders. The arc of lightning shot forth and caught the riders ablaze, wind whistling and crackling around them, the stench of burning flesh washing over them.

The cavalry who’d been behind the blast scattered, veering away from the initial bolt, but reformed quickly, clearly trained to deal with shartic weapons.

Jandu leaned over the chariot and threw up a stream of blood. Jandu wiped his face with the back of his hand. His shook in aftershocks from the sharta.

The cavalry broke into three columns, two groups making their way around the left and right flanks of the dead bodies, another charging straight through the debris.

Jandu nocked an arrow and whispered the Rajiwasharta. He could already feel the drain of the first sharta through his body. He aimed the arrow at the right flank of men. As he spat the last words of the curse, blood trickled from between his lips. He loosed his string. The arrow hit the ground in front of the lead riders and split the earth. The soil collapsed, plunging horses and riders into the sinkhole. Jandu heard screams and breaking bones as the right flank was swallowed by the earth.

The other soldiers were now upon them. “Left!” Jandu shouted at Abiyar. “Swerve past the left flank!” Abiyar’s frantic whipping got the horses off to a furious gallop. Their chariot wheels thundered along the ground. As they came within

striking distance of the cavalry, Jandu closed his eyes and whispered another sharta, shooting the arrow deep into the ground and causing an explosion of dust to blind the soldiers and block the chariot from view.

Too exhausted to conjure any more shartas, Jandu took a deep breath and began to shoot arrow after arrow. His muscle memory returned, and he worked relentlessly, releasing a cloud of shafts into the dusty confusion. He heard screams and knew he had pierced the men even in the darkened chaos of the dust cloud.

The remaining cavalry circled to follow the chariot. Jandu turned to shoot behind him, aiming at the eyes of horses and the throats of men.

An explosion of pain blossomed in Jandu's groin. He clenched his teeth to stop from crying out, and looked down, expecting an arrow wound. Instead, he saw that he was uninjured. He kept shooting, pain shivering through his body in agonizing waves, and he watched as his arms enlarged before his very eyes, his height changed.

Nausea washed through Jandu as the world shrank around him. "Straight ahead!" he yelled to Abiyar.

Every time Jandu fired his bow, his arms grew stronger. Zandi lightened in his hands. The armor slid loosely on his chest as his breasts receded. He realized that, by the end of this battle, if he survived, he would be a man again. He fired faster, exuberant in the battle.

By now the remaining men galloped alongside the rushing chariot. A lance sliced Abiyar across the hands. Abiyar cried out, but he retained the reins, jerking the horses to the right to find a gap amongst the cavalrymen.

One of the men punctured their chestnut stallion in the shoulder. The horse screamed in protest but continued to run, fuelled by fear, tied to his companion.

Abiyar brought the chariot back around, and as he did, they were assailed from all sides by the last half a dozen men

left alive, who beat at Abiyar's horses with maces and struck towards them with lances. One of the horses stumbled but they continued forward. The smell of blood filled the air.

A stabbing pain spasmed in Jandu's shoulder, and he looked to see he had been cut. Jandu roared, and then spit out a curse word that he didn't even remember he knew. Men all around him burst into ash. Only two cavalymen remained.

Suddenly the rider to Jandu's left leapt from his mount into Jandu's chariot. Jandu was so surprised he let down his guard long enough for the man to push Jandu against the chariot's central pole, his sword ready to plunge.

Abiyar swerved, and the two men tumbled to the floor of the chariot. The man fell on top of Jandu, his hot body lying heavy upon Jandu's own, and Jandu reacted with total, absolute panic. He reached up and twisted the attacker's head with all his strength, breaking his neck. Jandu scrambled from under the dead body, loathing crawling like bugs on his flesh.

"Are you okay? Janali!" Abiyar was screaming.

Jandu focused on the last rider, who was almost out of range and galloping towards the hills. Jandu's rage would not let the man live. Pulling together the last of his strength, he clutched an arrow to his chest as he whispered a long string of Yashva words. Nausea swirled through his mind as he spoke them. His hand hurt as the shaft expanded within his grasp, and he watched, amazed, as the tip of the shaft changed to a crescent moon, glittering with a liquid metal similar to that of Zandi.

Jandu shot his arrow at the fleeing rider. The arrow emitted a high-pitched shriek as it flew from the bowstring, and sighed as it hit its target. The crescent tip severed the man's head.

"Stop the horses!" Jandu bellowed. It took almost a minute to get the frightened team to halt. Jandu was sick again, throwing up blood over the edge of the chariot, his stomach churning from so many magical weapons. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.



Abiyar looked back at Jandu, his face a mask of dirt, gray and frozen in fear. "Janal—I mean, Prince Jandu?"

Jandu looked at the back of his hands. They were man's hands. His body was that of a man. He ran his fingers over his face, feeling the familiar contours of his high cheekbones, his chin, his wide lips. He turned from Abiyar and touched the front of his zahari. He felt his penis there, and testicles, and he almost wept with relief.

He turned back and smiled at Abiyar. "Are you hurt?"

Abiyar swallowed. His voice was scratchy and hoarse. "I couldn't see when you took up your arrows, when you fixed them on the bow string, and when you let them off. I couldn't see you move. You were so fast." He brought his hands together in the sign of peace.

"You saved Afadi." Abiyar started crying.

"And you were the finest charioteer I have ever seen," Jandu said. He felt choked with emotion. His body shook with the leftovers of adrenalin and the intense usage of new muscles. But he didn't have a chance to relax. The Royal Judge would be in the city now, negotiating a peace. They needed to know that Chandamar had broken their treaty and invaded. He had to inform Lord Indarel of Chandamar's treachery.

"Abi, we need fresh horses. I have to tell your father Chandamar has attacked."

Abiyar turned the horses back towards the retreat. The stallions breathed heavily, their coats white with frothy sweat.

"Let me come with you," Abiyar shouted above the noise of the chariot. They rode back over the scorched ground, the wheels creating parallel lines of blood and gore across the parched soil.

"It will be dangerous," Jandu said. He leaned against the chariot's central pole, his body shaking with exhaustion. "We could step into a war."

Abiyar turned to face Jandu, his eyes misted over. "What do I have to fear with you beside me?" He turned to whip the

horses. Jandu stared down at Abiyar, his heart flooded with affection. It made him sad to realize that their time together would be over soon. But Abiyar was better trained than when Jandu first met him. Jandu took great pride in Abiyar's achievements. He reached down and touched Abiyar's shoulder.

"All right." Jandu smiled. "But stop calling me lord."

Abiyar turned and beamed Jandu a smile.

As soon as they were close enough to see the gates of the summer house, Jandu heard the cheers from the women inside. They had watched the battle from the walls. Abiyar slowed the chariot at the gates. He turned nervously to Jandu, speaking in a low whisper. "Lord Jandu?"

"Jandu's just fine," Jandu told him.

"You aren't... you aren't going to tell anyone that I kissed you, are you?"

"No. Of course not."

"Because I really thought you were a girl," Abiyar said quickly. "I am not a faggot or anything."

The insult shot an icy tremor up Jandu's spine, but he covered up quickly with a weak smile. "I *was* a girl when it happened. But no, I won't tell anyone."

Abiyar looked relieved. He turned back to urge the horses through the summer house gate.

Inside, women assailed them from all sides, throwing flowers and offering water. Lady Shali rushed towards them and fiercely pulled her son into her arms. Suraya embraced Jandu, looking him over proudly.

"Look at you! You are back to your old self!" She walked with him back to his room. "I'll see if I can borrow a set of men's clothing from Lord Indarel's wardrobe, while you wash off that blood and dirt."

"We won't be staying," Jandu said. "Abi and I will ride for the capital as soon as we change horses."

"I'll just get the clothes then," Suraya said, nodding.

Jandu caught her arm. "Fetch one more thing," he said.

## THE ARCHER'S HEART

Suraya raised an eyebrow. “What?”  
Jandu held out his pony tail. “A pair of scissors.”

## CHAPTER 42

THE LATE MONSOON RAINS LEFT THE CITY OF AFADI SHROUDED beneath a mushroom of dust. Tarek had never been to the city before, but he saw glimpses of white washed walls and realized that, normally, the city was beautiful and bright.

But today, as Tarek made his way past thousands of garrisoned soldiers, both the buildings and the atmosphere of Afadi were tense and ugly. In the palace itself, more soldiers stood in formation, eyeing Tarek's banner and his contingent of soldiers warily.

Lord Indarel Lokesh greeted Tarek at the gate and ushered him into the reception hall personally.

"We are honored to have you with us, Royal Judge. This whole business has been very sad indeed, and we look forward to a rapid resolution of this crisis."

Within the marble reception hall, Tarek saw Afadi soldiers lined along one wall. On the other side of the room, the black crane banner of Chandamar and dark red uniforms of the Chandamar soldiers stood guard around their new young lord, Ishad Trinat, son of Firdaus.

Ishad looked like a healthier, more vibrant version of his father. He had Firdaus' piercing black eyes and broad shoulders, but his black hair was kept slick and short, and his body was fit and trim. Ishad stepped forward to greet Tarek, and Tarek offered Ishad the sign of peace.

"Blessings upon you, Lord of Chandamar," Tarek said.

"And upon you, Royal Judge," Ishad said.

"My condolences for your loss," Tarek said. "I knew your father well."

Ishad bowed. "Thank you."

Indarel ushered Tarek to a seat at the front of the room, in a semicircle with Ishad and Indarel. Courtiers, servants, and Indarel's son Ramad stood around them at a polite distance. Only when seated did Tarek notice someone was missing.

"Where is Keshan Adaru?" Tarek asked, searching the faces in the room.

"I am here, Royal Judge."

Keshan stepped out of the shadows, smiling at Tarek. Keshan bowed before Tarek. Tarek smiled at his friend and hugged him in return.

"How was your journey?" Keshan asked politely.

"Long and dusty." Tarek smiled at Keshan. "How is your health?"

"Good, thank you."

Ishad glared at both of them angrily. Tarek motioned to a servant. "Bring another chair for Lord Adaru. I believe he had an important part to play in what happened."

Keshan raised his eyebrow at Tarek, but other than that small gesture, Tarek could read nothing of Keshan's complicity on his face. Keshan looked tired, Tarek realized, his eyelids drooping, but otherwise, he appeared as nonchalant as always.

Ishad glared with open hostility as Keshan took his seat.

"Now," Tarek began, looking at the men around him. "What happened?"

"Keshan Adaru murdered my father and uncle whilst they stayed in Afadi under Lord Indarel's protection!" Ishad exclaimed.

Tarek held out his hand to silence the boy. He turned to Indarel. "Is this true?"

Indarel looked nervously to Ishad. "It is true that Keshan killed Firdaus and Hanu Trinat, as well as another companion." Indarel's expression darkened. "But it was his right to do so, Judge. He was defending a woman, one of my servants, who was

being dishonored by these men! To assault her within my own house is a grievous insult against me and the State of Afadi!”

Tarek turned to Keshan. “Is that what happened?”

Keshan’s finger beat out a nervous staccato rhythm against his thigh with his fingertips, but otherwise, he looked composed. “They beat her. She was screaming for help. It was the right thing to do.”

Tarek felt sick even discussing it. He knew Firdaus, knew he was guilty. It sounded like something he would do. And it was too unlike Keshan to simply murder another lord, even a lifelong enemy, on a whim.

“Your father committed a crime,” Tarek told Ishad.

Ishad stood angrily. “No! It was my father’s right to claim her! He won the servant in a dice match!”

Tarek frowned. “How do you know this?”

“Indarel’s dice teacher admitted it!” Ishad pointed to a thin, frail looking man in the corner.

“Come forward,” Tarek demanded.

The man who stepped forward was nicely attired in clean cotton, with a yellow turban on his head. His beard was trim and tinged with gray. But he had a nasty-looking black eye and a split lip, and his expression was filled with remorse.

“Greetings, Royal Judge,” the man said.

Tarek froze. He knew this voice. He looked into Esalas’ eyes. How could no one else see who this was?

At that moment, Tarek understood why Keshan Adaru was here. He had just found Yudar Paran. Darvad would be thrilled. Regardless of what happened between Afadi and Chandamar, Tarek would triumph.

But then Tarek looked to the giant man beside Esalas, saw it was none other than Baram, and realized it had to have been Suraya who Firdaus had tried to rape.

“None of this has anything to do with Afadi,” Indarel stated. “This is a matter between Keshan and Firdaus. We had no part in this, and we beg the judge to see Afadi is blameless.”

Indarel pleaded with Tarek. "Keshan defended his wife! It is his own private affair, not ours!"

Tarek narrowed his eyes at Keshan. That, at the very least, was a lie. "*Your wife?*"

Keshan stared back at Tarek unflinchingly. "Yes. Esalas had no right to claim her."

"Why did you not make a formal protest? Inform Lord Firdaus that he was molesting your property?"

"I had no time. And I think we both know how unlikely it is that Firdaus would have stopped just for me."

"Lord Adaru is right, I had no claim to Janali," Yudar said, falling to his knees. He held out his hands in supplication. "Please, Judge, spare Lord Adaru. If anyone is to blame for what happened, it is me. Blame me. I am the one who endangered her."

Keshan stared down at Yudar with a look of pure loathing.

This was getting complicated. Tarek rubbed his hand over his face. "What is the date?"

No one said anything and the silence hung over the large hall. Tarek looked to Yudar. "What is the date?" he asked again, but in his mind, he already calculated the months.

Yudar frowned. "I'm not sure, Judge. It is close to the monsoon season."

"The monsoon season has already begun," Tarek said. "Your three years are over."

The silence stretched.

Yudar stood.

"I don't know what you mean—"

"Prince Yudar," Tarek said tersely, "perhaps you would like to explain truthfully what happened so I can make a fair judgment."

Yudar pulled off his turban. Men in the room gasped loudly. Indarel looked about to faint.

"Esalas... Esalas is Yudar Paran?"

Baram moved to stand beside his brother.

“Why don’t you tell me who Janali is,” Tarek said, already knowing the answer.

“Janali is my youngest brother, Jandu,” Yudar said.

The room exploded with noise as men spoke simultaneously. Tarek’s mind reeled. This was not what he expected.

Keshan remained sitting quietly, staring at Tarek expectantly.

“The Parans!” Ishad pointed at Indarel. “You have harbored the Parans under your care, against King Darvad’s wishes!”

“I did not know!” Indarel stood as well. “I did not know they were the Parans! They were in hiding! And how was I to know that Jandu was a woman?”

“Lord Indarel has broken no oath,” Yudar said. With each word, his voice gained confidence. “We fulfilled our exile in all accordance with the rules of the dice game. Indarel thought he hired servants, nothing more.”

“Jandu is a woman?” Indarel’s eldest son, Ramad, who stood beside his father, shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“Jandu used a Yashva curse to transform himself for one year,” Baram said. His voice boomed through the audience.

Ishad turned to Keshan. “You claimed that Janali was your wife.”

Keshan’s calm expression did not change. “Yes.”

“But that is a lie.”

“I could not tell the truth, or else I would have endangered Indarel’s oath not to protect the Parans.”

“But *you* knowingly helped them,” Indarel stated carefully. Keshan said nothing.

“Then Keshan has broken the King’s oath!” Ishad crossed his arms.

“No!” Baram bellowed. “It was your father who acted dishonorably toward my brother!”

“Regardless, Keshan Adaru broke his oath and should be branded an outcaste and disgraced,” Ishad shouted. “If King Darvad expects Chandamar’s continued support, he must stand by his own laws!”



Tarek's throat felt tight. He looked to Keshan, who seemed less assured than he was a few moments ago.

Was Tarek really going to brand Iyestar's brother an untouchable? Cast him from the noble Triya heritage that Tarek had only just gained himself? Tarek knew first hand what humiliation and poverty faced Keshan. And being an untouchable was ten times worse than being Suya. Keshan would no longer be able to suggest laws, make changes, even enter any Triya household. Tarek would be destroying one of his closest allies, one of the few men he respected and admired.

Tarek believed in Keshan's vision of a new world. How could he, in good conscience, destroy it all because the man had defended his lover?

Tarek looked behind him, to the tight unit of Dragewan soldiers that stood along the wall. Anant was there, staring blankly forward, but he made eye contact and Anant's mouth curved up in a slight smile.

What if someone had raped Anant? Wouldn't Tarek forego all oaths to protect the man? What if it was Darvad, instead of Anant? Without a second's thought, Tarek would have broken all the laws of the world to save him, and pay any consequences later.

Keshan loved Jandu, and now he was going to pay for it. Sickness welled inside of Tarek. He didn't want to do this.

"It sounds as though the course is clear," Indarel said softly. He would not look at Keshan. "I hope that if the Judge takes action against Keshan, then Afadi will remain blameless in the eyes of both Chandamar and Prasta."

"You want me to do this?" Tarek asked him.

Indarel looked embarrassed. "If it will save Afadi from war."

"Will this please Chandamar, and will they cease all threats against Afadi's boundaries if this happens?" Tarek asked.

Ishad sat back down. "We will consider it just retribution for what happened. And we will continue to stand by our King proudly."

Tarek looked to Yudar. The man seemed on the verge of tears.

“Do you have anything to say, Prince Yudar?”

“It is not Keshan’s fault. It is mine,” Yudar said quietly. “Punish me, Tarek.”

But, as much as it would have pleased Tarek to do so, he had no legal grounds. “You fulfilled the terms of the exile,” Tarek said. “Keshan did not.” Tarek turned to the man in question. “Keshan?”

Keshan was now quite pale, but he smiled. “Yes, Judge?”

“Do you understand what this means?”

Keshan nodded.

“And do you acknowledge your guilt?”

Keshan’s stare pierced through Tarek. “I would do it again if I had to.”

“Look what you have done now!” Baram growled at Yudar. “You have ruined two lives!” Yudar flinched.

Tarek stood, his knees cracking with fatigue. “We will reconvene in the courtyard in one hour.” He hesitated, but then turned to Indarel. “Bring a branding iron.”

“Yes, Royal Judge,” Indarel bowed low.

Tarek took three steps towards the exit, then turned back and signaled to Anant. “Come with me, commander.”

Anant inclined his head. “Yes, sir.”

The two of them made their way through the reception hall and out into the palace’s courtyard. Afadi servants had set up a room for him in the guest quarters of the palace. Tarek immediately excused them, and then shut the door so that he was alone with Anant.

Anant relaxed, his broad shoulders loosening as soon as they were alone. He put his helmet down on a desk. “My lord?”

Tarek looked at him. What kind of person was Anant? He knew what Darvad would do in this circumstance. Despite being friends and allies, Darvad would have Keshan branded in a heartbeat. Darvad’s hatred of the Parans made all other interests, even those of reform, those of friendship, secondary.

"I don't want to do this," Tarek said.

"No one wants to see their friends outcaste," Anant said.

"Do you want to know a secret?"

"If you'd like to tell me, my lord." Anant appeared worried.

Tarek ran his hand through his hair. He leaned forward to whisper. "Keshan Adaru and Jandu Paran are lovers."

Anant's eyes widened as he understood the implications. "Are they? Then Adaru really was defending his wife, so to speak."

"And now I am to punish a good man for defending his lover," Tarek said. "I want to tell Keshan to run."

"What would happen if you did that?"

It was an interesting question. "Chandamar would likely attack Afadi, and declare Darvad unfit as King. Darvad would be angry, possibly relieving me of my position. He would pursue Keshan. And the Parans would still represent a threat to Darvad's rule."

"Would Lord Keshan run if you told him to?"

"I don't know," Tarek said. "But I would let him if he did."

Anant moved closer. He smelled warm and salty, like sunburned skin. He touched Tarek's shoulder. "I think you should listen to your heart. What you do today will ruin a friend of yours. Stripping his caste can only be reversed by a king, and it sounds as though King Darvad will not do so."

Tarek turned from Anant. "You think I have a heart. But I don't. I'm going to do it. I promised Darvad I would serve him, and this is what he would want me to do."

"What has he done to deserve such unwavering loyalty?" Anant asked.

Tarek whirled on Anant. He was out of line.

But then Tarek realized it wasn't an unreasonable question. Tarek looked at Anant, and saw that he *was* a better person. Better than Darvad. Better than Tarek himself. Anant lived true to his own conscience, was not ashamed of who he was, or afraid of his own feelings.

Tarek shook his head. "I'm not like you. I took a vow. Even if my actions go against my conscience, I must stand by Darvad."

"Regardless of the cost to your soul?" Anant asked.

"Yes." Tarek sighed shakily. "I'm sorry. But I'm a horrible person."

Tarek expected Anant to look disgusted, or walk out, or reject him. He should have. Tarek deserved no sympathy. He was a man who was about to destroy his friend to follow the unkind desires of his liege.

Anant approached hesitantly. He wrapped his arms around Tarek, his breastplate rubbing against Tarek's.

"What are you thinking?" Tarek asked, awed that Anant would show affection, even after everything Tarek had done.

Anant smiled. "Honestly? I'm simply grateful that you admit to having a soul, after all."

Tarek laughed. He kissed Anant deeply, feeling the trust, the affection, radiate off of the young soldier.

This wasn't love, he reminded himself. This was nothing like what he felt for Darvad. But for now, as he made the decision to once again go against his own wishes to help Darvad, it was enough.



As the afternoon sun lowered, long shadows stretched across the sandstone of the Afadi palace courtyard. Hundreds of people filled the space, forming a circle around the ceremonial fire. All of Indarel's advisors, commanders, and Triya vassals were there, as well as the Chandamar party, and Tarek's own soldiers and ministers. The soldiers of lesser castes watched the ceremony from the outside of the circle, looking on as Indarel's priests ladled butter into the fire and chanted prayers to God.

Indarel approached, holding a long branding iron in the shape of an X. The brand was immediately placed into the fire. The crowd gathered closer, pulling in from the long shadows to watch this unprecedented scene.

## THE ARCHER'S HEART

Keshan grew very quiet as the preparations began. He kept his distance from everyone, only smiling once when Baram came over and hugged him brusquely. Tarek again prayed that Keshan would just run away, call on some Yashva magic to transport himself to safety and spare Tarek's already battered conscience. But as the brand heated in the flames, and the priests' invocations ceased, Tarek realized his prayers would go unanswered.

Tarek called the Triya caste members together, and recited the passage from the Book of Taivo on the virtue of oaths and the honor of the Triya. After declaring Keshan's sins, Tarek summoned him forward.

All Tarek could read from Keshan's expression was resolve. He walked into the ceremonial circle and approached Tarek dutifully.

"Having broken a sacred vow, you are to be formally expelled from the caste of your birth." Tarek's voice was low and carried across the hushed courtyard. Tarek nodded to two servants, who carried a large teak table to the fireside. "Place your hands on the surface," he ordered.

Keshan put his hands on the table, palms down, fingers splayed.

"No!" Baram bellowed, watching and weeping from the side.

Keshan glanced to Baram and gave him a brief, pale-lipped smile. Two Afadi soldiers held Keshan's arms in place.

Tarek removed the iron from the fire. He hesitated for a moment, the heat of the brand overpowering, even at a distance. There was a flicker of fright in Keshan's eyes.

"I'm sorry," Tarek whispered. He lifted the long handle of the brand and pushed down with force against the back of Keshan's right hand.

Keshan's arm jerked in the soldier's grasp as he reflexively tried to pull away. He groaned and seemed about to collapse, but the soldiers held him up by his arms. Tarek pressed the iron

against Keshan's skin for what seemed to be an age, making sure it burnt clean. He handed the brand to a servant, who returned it to the fire for the second strike. The smell of burning flesh sickened Tarek.

When the brand glowed yellow, Tarek raised it again and branded Keshan's left hand with the same mark. After he lifted the iron away, the two soldiers released Keshan and he swayed as if he would fall. But he didn't. His lips and fingernails looked bluish, and he breathed shallowly.

"He is casteless, and disgraced," Tarek announced. He reached forward and pulled Keshan's diadem from his head.

"He is casteless, and disgraced," answered the men around him. The Triya nearby reached forward and ripped Keshan's fine clothing from him. Ishad pushed his way forward, grinning malevolently as he violently jerked the jewels from Keshan's arms. Within seconds Keshan stood naked before them all, trying to cover his genitals with his injured hands.

All the Triya ceremonially turned their backs to Keshan. Tarek did so as well. In the subsequent silence, he heard the sound of Keshan's bare feet padding across the courtyard, and out of the palace, where he would never be welcomed again.

## CHAPTER 43

THE SUN HAD NEARLY SET WHEN JANDU AND ABIYAR REACHED Lord Indarel's palace. Despite the late hour, a vast number of noblemen congregated in the courtyard. Jandu quickly dismounted and pushed through the crowds of courtiers. A large fire in the center of the courtyard filled the air with buttery smoke, which wafted over the fading daylight in dark spirals. Tarek Amia stood nearby, looking at his feet.

"Chandamar just attacked Afadi!" Abiyar yelled, rushing toward his father. "Chandamar attacked the summer retreat! They have attacked!" Jandu quickened his pace, protecting Abiyar as they cut through the throng of startled Triya nobles and ministers.

Lord Indarel turned towards them. "What are you talking about, boy?"

Abiyar was out of breath, and in his excitement, his voice raised pitch. "Cavalry charged the summer retreat! We had no defense!"

Indarel immediately paled. "My God. My God!" He reeled on a young man dressed in Triya garb. "You son of a bitch!"

Jandu studied the young man's face. From his resemblance to Firdaus, he had to be Ishad, Firdaus' son. A slick coil of loathing crept up Jandu's throat.

"Jandu Paran saved us!" Abiyar cried out. "He killed fifty men single-handedly! He saved us, father!"

Indarel spun back to stare at Jandu.

Jandu straightened. "Not single-handedly," he said. "Abiyar fought bravely beside me. The victory is as much his as it is mine."

“Jandu!” Jandu was immediately crushed in one of Baram’s massive hugs.

“Let go!” Jandu gasped. His nose felt like it was breaking again.

“I will *not* let go! I *love* you!” Baram cried out. Those around them stared openly.

“You’re making a scene!” Jandu whispered.

“I don’t care!” Baram proclaimed, not whispering.

“You’re... crushing... me!” Jandu cried.

Baram let go of him immediately. He put his hands around Jandu’s face.

Baram looked like he had been crying all week. His eyes were red and swollen. “If Keshan hadn’t been there, I wouldn’t have just killed those fuckers. I would have tortured them first.”

Jandu searched the crowd. “Where’s Yudar?”

“Over by the fire. He looks bad. I beat the shit out of him.”

Jandu touched Baram’s shoulder.

“This is an outrage!” Indarel turned back to Ishad. “You call for a mediator, and attack us while we are negotiating a peace?”

Tarek stepped between the two men. He looked ready to murder Ishad as well. “You mean to tell me that after what I’ve just done, you have been duplicitous?”

“We have the right to defend our state,” Ishad declared, squaring with Tarek. “And what you did is the King’s will, not just ours. Keshan got what he deserved.”

Jandu grew deaf to the sounds around him. He could feel his heart exploding in his chest.

“Keshan?” Jandu turned from Baram. “What did Ishad mean—he got what he deserved?”

The deep shadows of twilight made hollows of Baram’s eyes.

“He’s gone,” Baram said, grabbing Jandu’s arm. “He’s outcaste, Jandu. He just left the palace grounds.”

Jandu shook off Baram’s arm.



“No!” He barged into the circle beside the fire and shoved Tarek. “What did you do, you bastard? What did you do!”

Tarek’s expression was drawn. “I’m sorry, Jandu. I had no choice.”

“Looks like you’re going to have to find a new husband to defend you, Janali,” Ishad sneered.

“You motherfucker!” Jandu lunged at Firdaus’ son.

Jandu felt Tarek grasp him, pulling him backwards, and panic surged through him. He elbowed Tarek with all of his strength. Tarek gasped, releasing his grip. Jandu broke free, drew his sword and charged Firdaus’ son.

Guards closed ranks around Ishad and the movement caused the entire crowd to cry out in fear. Baram caught Jandu brusquely and knocked his sword from his hands.

“No, Jandu! Stop it!” Baram shouted in his ear. “Don’t!”

Jandu struggled out of his brother’s grasp.

“Calm down! Everyone just calm down!” Indarel cried, raising his hands up, urging the soldiers back from each other. “Please, Prince Jandu! Calm down!”

Jandu could barely hear him, the blood pumped so loudly in his ears.

Indarel suddenly bowed before him. “Please! I beg your forgiveness, Lord Jandu, and give you my utmost gratitude and respect for saving our city from treachery!” Indarel had tears in his eyes.

Yudar stepped forward. Jandu could see evidence of Baram’s fist all over his eldest brother’s face. It brought no tinge of sympathy, however. Just looking at Yudar made Jandu flex against Baram’s hold, desperate once more for his sword.

“Royal Judge, we have fulfilled the terms of our exile honorably and truthfully. Now that my brother is with us, I demand that you escort us to Prasta.” Yudar spoke proudly. His glance flicked to Jandu, his eyes begging forgiveness.

“Let go of me!” Jandu hissed. He broke free of Baram’s arms and picked up his sword. Everyone watched him.

“I will escort you to Prasta,” Tarek said, coughing as he recovered from Jandu’s strike. He looked to Jandu. “This can be resolved with the King.”

Jandu stared at the men around him. Greedy, maneuvering, cowardly bastards, one and all. He sheathed his sword and pushed his way out of the crowded courtyard to find Keshan.

Long shadows filled the open streets. Jandu squinted in the darkness for some sign of Keshan. He had no idea where the untouchables of Afadi even resided.

A few blocks from the palace gates, hiding within the darkness of an alleyway, Jandu saw a group of them, their clothes in tattered, filthy rags. As Jandu approached they backed away, leaving Keshan standing there, half-naked, trying to tie on a blood-stained dejaru that one of the other outcasts must have given him.

“Keshan!” Jandu rushed to him. The Jegora lingered deep in the shadows, watching. Jandu didn’t care. He reached out to embrace Keshan but Keshan took a very deliberate step back into the alley.

“Don’t touch me.” Keshan’s voice sounded strained. “I’m Jegora now.”

Jandu closed the distance between them and pulled Keshan into his arms. Keshan let out a sob of relief and clutched Jandu desperately. Jandu could feel tremors through Keshan’s body. His skin felt cold and clammy. He held his hands away from their embrace.

Jandu pulled back and brushed sweaty hair off of Keshan’s forehead. “You’re sick. You need a doctor.”

“No physician will treat me,” Keshan said softly. As he drew back, his dejaru came loose. He caught it with a jerk of his terribly burned hands. The sight of them made Jandu almost sick. He couldn’t imagine how much pain Keshan was in.

“Stop that for a minute.” Jandu carefully placed his palms against Keshan’s and whispered the words of the healing sharta Keshan taught him back in Tamarus’ home. The words flowed

through him, the rhythm clear, pushing the sounds out of his mouth to settle like mist over Keshan's angry wounds. Keshan's hands ceased to tremble, and though the brands did not completely heal, the red edges of the burns seemed less angry.

Jandu reached down and tied Keshan's dejaru for him. He grimaced. "This smells."

"At least I'm not completely naked."

Jandu reached to his side and untied his breastplate.

"What are you doing?" Keshan's voice was weak.

"Giving you my vest," Jandu told him.

Keshan shook his head. "I can't take it. If someone sees me wearing silk I will be stoned."

Jandu paused, looking down at Keshan. What were they going to do now? He retied his armor. He had to come up with a plan.

Keshan moved deeper into the alleyway and sat on an upended urn. Jandu sat beside him, and put his arm around him. Keshan leaned over slowly, and rested his head on Jandu's shoulder. From the shadows he could feel eyes on him. He wondered what the other Jegora made of this scene.

One by one, the implications of life as a Jegora hit Jandu. Keshan could never return to his beautiful palace in Tiwari. He could never ride a horse again, or wear any of his clothes again, or eat with any family member. He was banned from temples and from courts of law, from all academies and hospitals. The only work he would find would be as someone who cleaned the outhouses and latrines, or dressed the dead bodies, or cleaned up the funeral pyres. From this point forward, his only contact with animals would be disposing of carcasses and skinning dead cows.

"You could go to the Yashva kingdom," Jandu said, although the idea of being separated knifed through him.

"I can't. Firdaus locked me out before I killed him."

Jandu felt vomit rise in his throat at the very mention of Firdaus' name. Rage filled him, but there was nowhere to vent

it and slowly, Jandu let it go. He didn't need anger now. He needed to help Keshan.

Keshan's skin was still clammy and pale. Jandu wrapped his arms around him, holding him tightly.

"You're an idiot," Jandu told him. "The second you realized what they were going to do, you should have kicked their asses."

Keshan snorted, but he kept his eyes closed. "If the King declares me untouchable, then I will become untouchable. It is inevitable, Jandu." Keshan swallowed painfully, and licked at his lips.

"Hold on a moment. I'll be right back." Jandu left Keshan in the alley and ran towards the gates. He returned a few minutes later with a gourd full of water. He helped Keshan drink from it so he didn't have to use his hands. Jandu sat down beside him again and Keshan leaned his head against Jandu's shoulder once more.

"Thanks."

"How do your hands feel?" Jandu asked.

"Like someone just burned them with a branding iron." Keshan closed his eyes.

"If I had gotten here only a few minutes earlier..."

"...You would have been killed for interfering," Keshan said. "And all of this would be for nothing."

Jandu brushed Keshan's bangs off of his forehead, and blew on Keshan's skin. Keshan closed his eyes again. "That feels nice."

They sat there in silence for a while, Jandu blowing on Keshan's forehead, and methodically brushing Keshan's bangs with his fingers. He heard the popping screech of a Malabar Hornbill in the distance, the lazy lowing of cattle, the rustle of vermin in the alley. Jandu looked down at Keshan's face. Color finally returned to his cheeks and lips, but he appeared sound asleep.

"I can't believe everything you've given up for me." Jandu said quietly. "I am unworthy of such loyalty."

Keshan opened one eye. "Have you been disloyal?"

"That's not what I mean." Jandu rubbed Keshan's back.

"What have you and Abiyar been up to these last few days?" Keshan tried smiling.

Jandu gently slapped Keshan's back. "Nothing, thank you very much. I'm as faithful as ever. You, on the other hand, are the one with the reputation."

"I doubt I'll get much play now. It's one thrill to fuck a Triya lord. It's another circumstance entirely to screw a branded casteless untouchable."

Jandu looked around, but no one was there, so he ran his hand along the inside of Keshan's thigh. He could feel the tension quivering in Keshan's muscles. "You're still sexy as hell. I'll screw you, Jegora or not."

Keshan laughed quietly. "Thank God."

"Do you want me to fetch a wet cloth for your hands?"

"No, I'll be fine."

"It's beginning to turn nasty colors."

"It's a burn, Jandu. It's going to look awful for a while."

"I'm so sorry." Jandu rested his head against Keshan's. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Keshan said. "I would have given up more than just my caste to protect you." Keshan looked at Jandu, eyes wet with emotion. "It's so good to see you back in your body. I'd almost forgotten how handsome you are."

Jandu heard men approaching, so he reluctantly untangled his arm from around Keshan's waist and pulled his hand from Keshan's thigh. Keshan didn't bother to lift his head from Jandu's shoulder.

Baram and Yudar appeared at the entrance of the alleyway.

"Adaru!" Baram shouted. "Are you all right?" Jandu noticed that neither of them dared enter the alleyway. Baram was concerned for Keshan, but even he would not let an untouchable shadow fall upon him.

"I'm just tired," Keshan said.

Yudar frowned at Jandu. "If people see you like that, they will say something. You shouldn't be touching him. No offense, Adaru."

Jandu extricated himself from under Keshan's head. He grabbed Yudar by his cotton shirt and shoved him up against the dusty alley wall.

"You will change him back," Jandu spat.

Yudar looked frightened. "What—"

"You will give me your oath now to resurrect Keshan as a Triya once you have the throne." Jandu slammed Yudar against the brick wall harder. "That is the only reason I'm not gutting you right now, you bastard."

Yudar held his hands up. "Of course! Of course I'll change Keshan back! I swear it on the prophets!"

Jandu dropped Yudar, wiping his hands on his dejaru. It disgusted him to touch Yudar more than Keshan's filthy clothes.

"I realize, Jandu, that you can't forgive me, not after what's happened." Yudar's voice shook. "But I just want you to know, I'm so sorry! I will kill myself if you ask it. Please forget this incident and live on!"

"Don't kill yourself." Jandu didn't look at him. "I need you alive to elevate Keshan back to Triya status."

"I never meant to harm you," Yudar started.

Jandu's rage flared and he glared at his brother. "You *staked* me, like a prostitute!"

"No!" Yudar fell to his knees in front of Jandu.

"You led them to my room," Jandu said lowly. "You snuck them past the guards. You opened the door for them. You *brought* them to my room to rape me." Jandu's throat locked in horror. Every time he said the word, he wanted to die. "It would have been far kinder if you had just killed me, brother."

Yudar began to cry. "I've taken a holy oath. I will never touch a set of dice again. I will never gamble again. I will not even set foot in a gaming room again. That is my promise to you."

Jandu said nothing, and Yudar continued, crawling on the street towards Jandu's feet. "I am in a trance when I am playing! I didn't think. I didn't mean to harm you. I honestly thought..." he paused, choking on his tears.

"You thought what?" Jandu said coldly.

"I thought... I could win." Yudar covered his eyes with his hands and sobbed.

Jandu stared down at his brother. There had been a time when he had loved Yudar more than anyone on this earth. This was his brother, his king. The man had practically raised him. He had been Jandu's hero.

Jandu tried to find a flicker of compassion in his heart. But now he felt nothing.

Yudar reached for Jandu's feet, but Jandu pulled them away.

"Don't touch me." Jandu backed away from Yudar. "I will come with you to Prasta. I will protect you from harm and I will fight for your throne if need be. But until you give Keshan back what was stolen, I will not forgive you." Jandu moved to Keshan's side protectively. Jandu glared at Yudar, daring him to say something about the unhygienic contact.

Yudar nodded. "I'm sorry, Jandu." He stood shakily. He turned to Baram, wiping his eyes. "We should prepare for the journey to Prasta."

Baram nodded, but he hesitated in the alleyway after Yudar left. "Your sacrifice will never be forgotten by me, Adaru."

Keshan smiled weakly and waved as Baram left. When they were gone, Keshan dropped his head on Jandu's shoulder once more.

Jandu kissed the top of his head. "Listen to me."

Keshan yawned. "All right."

"Whatever happens in Prasta, I want you by my side," Jandu said. "I don't care if you're disgraced. I don't care what people say."

“Well, I’m certainly not staying in this alley.” Keshan smiled with a hint of his old assurance. “You may need me. I doubt Darvad will just give up half of Marhavad without a fight.”

Jandu nodded. After the last three years he’d endured, he looked forward to the fight.



## CHAPTER 44

THE ROYAL JUDGE'S PROCESSION LEFT THE CITY OF AFADI amidst the local populace's fanfare. The long, dusty snake of chariots, soldiers, cavalry, oxen, carts, and servants stretched ahead of Keshan in a long procession. The only people behind Keshan were the other Jegora, clustered together at the rear, eyes staunchly cast downward. But even among them there were whispers of Jandu Paran's triumph over the Chandamar cavalry. The story had begun with Abiyar and then steadily passed down through the ranks of servants and soldiers. Now even Jegora stole furtive, worshipful glances at Jandu as if he were a prophet of old.

Jandu started at the front of the procession, traveling with Tarek, his brothers, Indarel, and Indarel's sons. He was the hero of the city. A young man next to Keshan described how Jandu had ripped a chariot apart with his bare hands and killed hundreds of men with a single word. Keshan just nodded and smiled. Stories describing Jandu's effort to save Afadi were repeated everywhere Keshan went.

As they neared the river, Keshan saw Jandu walking counter to the procession, coming to join him at the rear. A fist tightened around Keshan's heart at the thought of Jandu's loyalty.

The monsoon rains still hadn't fallen and the earth was dry, begging for water. The skies bloated with moisture, and yet none fell. Dirt puffed around Jandu's feet as he walked.

The heavy sun glinted off of Zandi, strapped to Jandu's back, and the bow seemed like a streak of light piercing Jandu's silver armor. Layers of dust covered Jandu's armor and skin.

He had taken off his heavy helmet in the morning, and now his hair was gray with dirt. All around him, Sua and Chaya stooped to take dust from Jandu's feet.

Jandu smiled at Keshan. He didn't cower from the other Jegora, a testament to how much Jandu had matured, that he could walk alongside the untouchables without flinching.

"Keshan." He reached out and touched Keshan's bare shoulder affectionately.

Keshan smiled back, loving the way Jandu's low voice rumbled his name, the soft, yet fierce way Jandu always spoke to him. Even the quick touch they shared gave Keshan strength. He was a tactile person, and not being able to touch people hurt his pride more than he wanted to admit. He was truly beginning to feel the impact of the sacrifice he had made.

"How do you feel?" Jandu asked, falling in place alongside Keshan. The procession marched forward slowly. Those at the beginning crossed the bridge over the Patari River.

"I'd feel better if you didn't ask me that every hour," Keshan teased. "What's happening up at the front of the line?"

Jandu shrugged. "Politics. Nothing of interest." He flashed Keshan a wicked grin.

"Oh come on, tell me," Keshan said, laughing.

"Yudar is attempting to woo Tarek to his side. Indarel has attached himself to our family like glue. And messenger pigeons were sent to Prasta, alerting them to our pending arrival." Jandu reached into the quiver strapped to his back and pulled out a roll and a wedge of cheese bundled in cloth. He slipped these into Keshan's hands.

The softness of the bread brought tears to Keshan's eyes. For the last two days, as the Parans had prepared to journey east, Keshan had discovered the brutal truth of how unpleasant untouchable food was. The quality of the ingredients was poor and the choices few. Keshan immediately sank his teeth into the bread, luxuriating in the crisp, toasty outer layer contrasting with the buttery insides of the bread, melting in his mouth.

“Thank you,” Keshan whispered, as soon as he was done with his roll and cheese. Jandu said nothing. He just walked alongside his friend, squinting off into the distance.

As the long procession crossed the river, their pace slowed. Soldiers took in the scarred earth, charred ground and scraps of decaying carrion remaining from Jandu’s battle with the Chandamar raiders. Even with the dead men and horses cremated, a stench of decay permeated the air. Keshan felt the leftovers of shartas in the atmosphere like scars. The very air seemed thinner, fragile, as if stretched to breaking.

Jandu grew silent as they walked by the sight of his carnage. He adjusted his sword belt self-consciously.

Keshan furtively touched Jandu’s fingers. “You did a good thing here.”

“Ah. Well...” Jandu blushed, and looked towards the summer retreat. “There was no alternative.”

Keshan watched Jandu’s cheeks grow flush with a combination of pride and shyness, yet another sign of how different he was from when Keshan had first met him. The Jandu he had known years ago would have bragged about this victory to every man he met. Now Jandu looked pensive, keeping his eyes focused on the retreat.

Women poured from the summer house, and the procession halted. Baram already stood beside the gate with Suraya at his side. They scanned the crowd, obviously looking for Jandu.

As soon as she spotted him, Suraya ran towards Jandu, throwing her arms around him.

“How are you?” she asked, pulling back to look into Jandu’s eyes.

“Fine.” He smiled and touched her head. “You?”

“Ready to return to Prasta.” Suraya turned to Keshan with an equally large smile. “It’s wonderful to see you again, Keshan.” She reached out to hug him, but Baram suddenly jerked her back.

“Wait, Suraya,” Baram said quietly.

Suraya froze, staring in shock at Keshan's hands. He self-consciously looked down himself at the blackened, charred marks. The pain had subsided greatly since Jandu had used the Yashva cure, but every time he flexed his hands the skin cracked and broke the scabs, causing a sharp sting.

Suraya stood like a statue, her arms still outstretched to embrace him, her glance glued to his hands.

"Hello, Suraya," Keshan said amiably, trying his best to act like nothing unusual had occurred. "You look ravishing as always."

Jandu smirked. "Don't listen to Keshan. You look like shit, Suraya. Did you stop eating or something? Why are you so skinny and pale?"

Jandu rubbed her back affectionately, which seemed to break Suraya out of her stunned immobility. She shook her head as if to clear it, dropping her arms to her sides.

"I was worried about you, you fool." She frowned at the Jegora all around them. "Keshan? What are you going to do now?"

Keshan shrugged. "I'm taking it one day at a time."

Jandu put his hand on Keshan's shoulder. Keshan didn't miss the small gasp of surprise from Suraya.

"When we get to the capital, I'll help him find lodgings," Jandu said.

"I can manage on my own, Jandu," Keshan said.

Jandu's blue eyes burned brightly. "I'm coming with you, like it or not."

Keshan sighed. He was going to become a burden to those who loved him.

"I packed our things from the summer house," Suraya said. "Some of the belongings are yours, Keshan. What should I do with them?"

"Keep them," Jandu spoke for Keshan. "He'll want them back when he's Triya again."

Suraya bit her lip as she looked at Jandu sympathetically. She turned away.

“Suraya?” Keshan called out.

“Yes?”

“Can you fetch my saddle bag for me? There’s something I want Jandu to have.”

Suraya smiled, and then left.

The procession began its way forward once more, moving slowly past the retreat. A few minutes later, Baram returned, carrying Keshan’s bag.

“Here you go,” Baram said, handing the bag to Jandu so he wouldn’t have to touch Keshan. Keshan knew better than to be offended, but he felt it all the same. “I should join Yudar and Suraya up at the front.” Baram looked to Jandu. “Are you coming?”

“No. I’ll walk with Keshan a while.”

Baram grimaced at the Jegora around him. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Jandu’s expression was hard.

“I’ll see you later, then.” Baram returned to his proper place as a Triya, at the front of the line.

Jandu opened the saddle bag. “What’s the present?” He pulled out the small tin of rose oil that they had used when making love. A rich blush covered his cheeks. “Is this it, you pervert?”

Keshan laughed. “No.” He took the bag from Jandu and searched through it. He handed Firdaus’ dice to Jandu.

Jandu scowled at the dice. “What are these for? To remind me of all the terrible things that have happened?”

“They’re Firdaus’ dice,” Keshan said. Jandu immediately looked sick at the very mention of his name. Keshan’s voice softened. “They’re enchanted.”

Jandu narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean? They’re Yashva dice?”

“It’s a simple Yashva curse. He must have used them at both the dice games in Prasta, and with your brother in Afadi. He can use a spell to select the side that is rolled.”

Jandu clenched them in his hands. “That bastard.”

“Give them to Yudar,” Keshan told him. “If there are any problems with his ascension, use them as evidence.”

Jandu sighed angrily, and then pocketed the dice. He walked in stony silence for a few more minutes. When he spoke again, he kept his gaze up ahead toward his brothers.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

“What for?” Keshan asked.

“For everything.” Jandu sighed. “For saving me. For staying by me while I went to pieces. For finding these. For all that you’ve given up. Thank you.”

The other untouchables around them watched with interest, and so Keshan could not give in to his desire to kiss Jandu then and there. But he did furtively squeeze his fingers once more.

“You know, when you agreed to fight beside me if there is a war, I never asked if you wanted to,” Jandu said. He kept his glance up ahead at the cavalry. “After all, you are allied with Darvad. I shouldn’t have assumed anything.”

“Darvad will not let me fight, ally or no.” Keshan held up his hand. “I’m dead to him now. I’m dead to everyone.”

“That’s to my advantage then,” Jandu said, smiling. “Besides, we’ve never had a chance to try Mendraz’s chariot.”

“That’s true,” Keshan said.

“But changing your allegiances...”

“You are fighting to free me from being Jegora,” Keshan interrupted. “And I’m fighting to free you from Darvad’s endless obsession with seeing you dead. It’s a fair trade as far as I can see.”

“If you think so,” Jandu said.

“I do. Now you should probably go back up to the front,” Keshan said, although he feared being abandoned, forgotten, at the end of the line. The Jegora who he traveled with had been very kind and accommodating, giving him a place to sleep and sandals from a man who had only recently been killed—perhaps even one of the lives that Jandu himself had

claimed on the battlefield. But they were strangers, and Keshan felt a desperate loneliness with them.

“I don’t want to,” Jandu said. “I’ll take my place in the chariot once we enter Prasta, but until then I’ll stay with you.”

“People will talk.”

“Let them. All that matters from this point forward is what my heart dictates. And it is very clear on the issue of you.” Jandu smiled, and touched Keshan’s shoulder once more, lending Keshan his strength.

Keshan blinked. He reminded himself that he once thought Jandu shallow and stupid. *And now look at him*, Keshan thought. *He’s turned into my hero.*

“What?” Jandu looked at Keshan quizzically. “You’re looking at me funny.”

“Can you get me another one of those rolls for dinner?” Keshan asked, changing the subject.

“Anything you desire.” Jandu noticed that one of the untouchables nearby stared at them openly. “What about you? You want a roll?”

“M...My lord...” the man shrank back in line, as if he could step away from Jandu’s piercing gaze.

“I’ll bring enough for two,” Jandu whispered to Keshan.

Keshan just shook his head.

“What?” Jandu asked.

“You are not the same Jandu I fell in love with,” Keshan said.

Jandu’s mouth quirked up. “Is that a bad thing?”

“You are better. Wiser.” Keshan squeezed Jandu’s fingers softly. “And I love you more for it.”

## CHAPTER 45

JANDU HAD NEARLY FORGOTTEN HOW BEAUTIFUL PRASTA WAS.

The city opened to his eyes like a fanciful childhood memory, the low stone walls and large marble temples, and in the center of it all, the sprawling red island of the palace. The monsoon had blessed Prasta where it had ignored Afadi, and now all the trees bloomed in brilliant color, their foliage thick, their bows laden with fruit. The fragrance of blossoms filled the air, and the ground was fresh and clean with the last of the rainfall behind them.

Jandu was home.

And it was a joyous homecoming, as thousands of citizens poured into the streets to greet their long lost Crown Prince. Jandu and his brothers feared what sort of support they could expect after the dice game. But it was clear that many were still loyal to the Paran family, and now flowers and silk cloths rained down upon their procession as wild cheers chanted Yudar's name through the streets.

Yudar looked like a king once more. He was far skinnier than when he left, his hair streaked with gray, his eyes sunk, and still bruised from Baram's rage, but he stood erect and proud, smiling and waving to the crowds serenely. Their progress to the palace slowed to a crawl as Triya lords in their chariots joined the procession, allies of Yudar riding alongside him and offering their blessings.

Jandu yearned to return to the back of the line. He wondered what Keshan was doing now. He wouldn't be allowed into the palace. On Jandu's insistence, they arranged a meeting location for later that night, so that Jandu could help him find



lodgings. But Keshan's absence now made the homecoming less sweet.

At the palace gates, former servants and courtiers for the Parans greeted them affectionately. Jandu smiled as men bowed before him and touched his feet. The attention flustered him. In the crowd, Jandu made out the silver hair of his Mazar, and pushed his way towards him. Mazar saw him at the same time and the two hugged.

Jandu dropped and touched Mazar's feet, emotion welling deep inside of him. "Blessings upon you, Master," he said.

Mazar looked too choked up to speak. He shook his head and lifted Jandu up.

"My dear boy! How I've missed you." They hugged once more, and then Mazar greeted Baram and Yudar. He offered the sign of peace to Suraya and she touched his feet.

Jandu followed Mazar, his brothers and Suraya through the palace. Faces he had all but forgotten appeared. He was stunned by the opulence. They passed a chair studded with rubies, a statue of pure gold, miles of silks draped casually around the airy interiors. It was obscene. Jandu realized he could have fed the entire village in Pagdesh with one foot stool from this one corridor in the palace.

Darvad and his courtiers awaited the Parans in the reception hall. Jandu steeled his expression as he looked upon his rival.

Darvad purposefully wore the crown of Marhavad and sat in the throne. "Brothers. Welcome home."

"Greetings, Darvad." Yudar brought his hands together in the sign of peace. "We are pleased to return, after having served our three years of penance."

Darvad smiled thinly. "Please, take a seat. Mazar, will you join us?"

Baram, Suraya, and Mazar joined Darvad on the dais. The room quickly filled with lords and courtiers. Jandu stood behind his brothers, leaning against the wall. They were all tired and dirty from their travels, but it was obvious that no

respite would be had now that they returned. It was straight to business.

Mazar fawned over the Parans and had servants bring tea. Indarel and his sons took seats in the hall, along with the other lords of Marhavad who were in the capital. Jandu caught Abiyar's eye as he sat nervously beside his brothers. Jandu winked at him. Abiyar grinned back happily. Soon the room was filled to capacity, everyone expectant.

Mazar cleared his throat, and held out his arms to bring the room to silence.

"Great lords of Marhavad," he began, "let me welcome King Shandarvan's sons back from their penance. Their dedication to righting the wrongs of three years ago has served as a great example to the entire nation, and I look forward to a peaceful future with both Yudar and Darvad leading our country to peace and prosperity."

Darvad coughed.

Mazar looked to him, annoyed. "Yes, King?"

"We have some issues which must be addressed before we divide the kingdom." Darvad turned slightly to face Jandu. "But before we go into details, I must ask for a report from my Royal Judge."

Tarek stepped forward. He looked weary. He embraced Darvad, and Darvad offered him a seat beside him. "Are the rumors I've heard true? Was Firdaus killed by Keshan for raping Jandu?"

Jandu wanted to sink into the floor and disappear as everyone in the room looked to him. Their snickers and heated whispers rankled. When he saw Darvad smile, he realized Darvad had said it for just that purpose.

Baram stood up in fury. "Leave Jandu out of this!"

"It is true," Tarek said. He frowned at Jandu. For a moment, Jandu thought he saw sympathy in his eyes. But then Tarek turned to face Darvad once more. "Keshan assisted the Parans during their exile, and has been branded an outcaste and stripped of his Triya status."

The noise in the room grew.

Darvad frowned. "That is very unfortunate. But it is the law."

"However, no one else aided the Parans, and they have served out their three years in anonymity," Tarek added.

Darvad gave Tarek a sharp look. "That isn't for you to decide."

"The terms of the dice game stated that my family and I would spend three years in exile as penance, as set forth in the example of the great Prophet Sadeshar," Yudar interrupted. "We have done as we promised. And now we return to Prasta to fulfill the wishes of Regent Mazar, and claim our half of the kingdom." Yudar stared hard at Darvad. "As you promised."

Darvad shook his head. "I would love to honor your request, Yudar, but you broke the terms of the penance."

"No we did not." Yudar's face flushed with emotion. "We have suffered greatly, and deserve forgiveness for my sins."

"They have fulfilled the terms of the game," Mazar repeated.

Darvad smiled. He nodded to a servant who came forward and handed Darvad an arrow. The tip bent awkwardly and the fletching was stained with blood. But Jandu still recognized it as one of his own arrows. He felt suddenly sick.

"Recognize this, Jandu?" Darvad said, holding out the arrow. "It was pulled from the throat of Druv Majeo, lord of Pagdesh. He found you on the mountain, and rather than start your exile over, you murdered him."

Yudar and Baram turned and gaped at Jandu, the shock clear.

Jandu crossed his arms over his chest. "That is a lie. That arrow could have been collected anywhere, from any of the Chandamarian soldiers I killed. Or from an animal carcass."

"I saw Druv's body with my own eyes!" Darvad cried, the vein in his forehead pulsing. "You killed him!"

"It is your word against mine."

"I have witnesses!" Darvad screeched, his voice rising in his anger.

Yudar had been staring at Jandu with a look of pain on his face. He looked betrayed. Jandu thought he deserved it. But then Yudar reached into his pocket and pulled out Firdaus' dice. "Whether or not that arrow was taken from Druv does not matter. The cheating began long before Druv met his end." Yudar handed the dice to Mazar.

Mazar frowned. "What are these?"

"Enchanted Yashva dice," Yudar said calmly. "Keshan Adaru took them from Firdaus. They were used at the dice game."

Jandu was grateful his brother at least had the tact not to mention the other game they were used at.

"What nonsense!" Darvad said. "Those could be taken from anyone as well! Keshan himself may have enchanted them!"

Mazar shook his head. "So much deception. What hope has Marhavad, when its noblest sons cannot be honest?"

As the voices began to rise again, Yudar stood. "We have served three years, Darvad. I demand my half of the kingdom, as is my right."

Darvad's face was red with rage. "I will not give you Prasta!" Darvad shouted. "I will not give you anything! Not a fucking village! Do you understand me? Go back into exile!"

"No." Yudar took a deep breath. His expression was resolute. "You force my hand in this, half-brother. But as we have fulfilled our end of the agreement, it is up to you to fulfill yours. Either I am given back my half of the kingdom or we declare war."

There was a dangerous silence. The men in the room watched Darvad closely for reaction. The vein in his forehead bulged angrily.

"I will give you *nothing*," Darvad hissed.

"Then it is war," Yudar said, his voice shaking slightly now. He raised an eyebrow towards Mazar. "Master?"

Mazar had tears in his eyes, and was shaking his head. "Yudar... I swore an oath when Darvad became King to fight at his side. It is my fate!"

## THE ARCHER'S HEART

Jandu could no longer stay silent. "Has it ever occurred to you, oh great Master, that fate can be changed, if only strong men are willing to question it?"

"What are you saying?" Mazar asked.

"That you should follow your heart."

"My heart and my vow are on different paths." Mazar closed his eyes. "I cannot retract a holy oath. You know better than to ask me to do so."

"You'll fight me?" Jandu asked softly. "Fight us all?"

Mazar didn't answer. He covered his face with his hands.

Darvad suddenly stood. "We should set a date at the end of the monsoons. You will rally your allies, and I mine."

"Two months time, then," Yudar stated. "Astrologers will identify an auspicious day. We shall bring our forces to Terashu Field."

Darvad nodded. "Two months time, I will see you on the battlefield."

## CHAPTER 46

NIGHTS WERE CHILLY IN PRASTA AND WITHOUT A VEST OR even a harafa to keep him warm, Keshan shivered in the darkness.

He looked east, to the section of the city where his townhouse was, warm and full of comfort. Iyestar would be there, no doubt already into his second jug of wine. He wondered if Iyestar would let him stay there, if the servants would hide him.

A pair of Triya caste women passed by the alleyway Keshan stood in, and when they saw his dejaru and his brands, they scowled and crossed the street. Keshan withdrew deeper into the shadows. Night time was easier for the Jegora, and Keshan didn't worry about his shadow crossing the upper castes, but it was still rife with potential insult that could get him killed.

The sound of a temple bell ringing out in prayer came from nearby, and Keshan wondered if he could find other Jegora outside, begging for food. He needed more clothing, badly, and they could help him. But he was supposed to meet Jandu here.

It took all of Keshan's will power not to pick at his scabs, or focus on the filth around him, or think too much about being locked out of the Yashva kingdom. The future had become nightmarishly bleak for him, and the only way Keshan succeeded at his pretense of unconcern was by not thinking about it. But now, alone for the first time in days, huddling in the dark with no place to live and no prospects for dinner, Keshan was smothered in self-pity.

"Hey."

Keshan turned, and restrained himself from running to embrace Jandu. The hours apart had dragged endlessly, and the fact that Keshan had no idea what was going on inside the palace rankled him.

Jandu looked tired. He carried a large pack on his back. "You're shivering."

Keshan wrapped his arms around himself. "I'm just cold. How did it go?"

Jandu gave him a hard look. "Two months, Terashu Field."

Terashu Field was the traditional battleground of the great Triya kings of old, a large, grassy field about fifteen miles from the capital and hedged in by the Ashari Forest. "I suppose it was inevitable," Keshan said.

Jandu shrugged. "What's done is done. Come on, let's find some place to sleep tonight."

Keshan offered to take some of Jandu's belongings. Jandu handed Keshan bowls of rice and fried vegetables, and another full of fruit. "These are for you."

"Did you raid the palace pantries?" Keshan asked.

"They're from my admirers," Jandu said with a smile. "I was on my way here and women kept thrusting hot meals into my arms."

"Little did they know they would be used to feed an untouchable scoundrel," Keshan said, sniffing the warm food appreciatively. "I don't suppose you brought any wine, did you?"

Jandu pointed to his pack and Keshan smiled.

Jandu started down the road and Keshan followed a step behind him. "Should we try the market district first?"

Keshan shook his head. "They barely tolerate having Chaya nearby. I'll definitely be run out. Let's go further south."

Jandu's expression hardened, but he led the way nevertheless. They walked together for over an hour, searching for lodgings. The first half a dozen places they tried greeted Jandu

with obsequious obeisance and then rejected Keshan on sight, more afraid of harboring a Jegora than they were of offending a Triya. They moved even deeper into the city, to the parts where the lower castes resided, but even the Chaya would not give lodgings to a Jegora. At last they found a seedy-looking hostel on the fringe of the city. It wasn't clean or convenient, but the owner was willing to provide Keshan a room, as long as Jandu paid in advance and Keshan didn't enter through the front of the building.

Keshan's heart sank with every passing minute, but he tried to make light of his new environment. He didn't want Jandu to feel bad for him. The room was narrow and dark, with a mud floor. It was next to the building's outhouse and the smell wafted in through the small slit window near the low ceiling.

"At least the smell outside overwhelms the smell inside." Keshan held up a stone water pitcher, and noticed the pitcher was cracked.

Jandu unrolled the bed mats on the floor, and shuddered as fleas and bed lice jumped from the blankets. "This is worse than the forest."

Keshan yawned. He sat down on the mud floor, ignoring the bugs. "As long as it's soft, it will do."

Jandu unpacked his gifts. He laid out a cloth and put before Keshan a basket of fruits, bread, and cheese. He pulled two stone cups from his bag and decanted a large jug of wine. Jandu held his cup up to Keshan, a smile lighting his face. "To our success in the war."

Keshan raised his cup as well, and then quickly drained it. The wine was sweet. He closed his eyes and savored the taste in gratitude.

Keshan noticed that Jandu had bathed, and his skin had a slight red flush, suggesting that he had been drinking back at the palace as well. His short hair curled slightly at the edges from the humidity, and his clothes smelled like cardamom.



He looked stunning in the light of the butter lamp, his skin a golden hue, his eyes striking blue and bright.

A year's worth of longing flooded him, and a need to have someone touch him, treat him like he was used to. Keshan lunged, pinning Jandu to the bedroll. Jandu's wine slipped from his hand.

Jandu smirked up at him. "Feeling a little frisky, are we?"

Keshan didn't bother to answer. He kissed Jandu's throat slowly, his tongue lingering along his skin.

"Aren't you hungry?" Jandu whispered, his voice shaking. He leaned back further to expose more of his throat.

"The food isn't going anywhere," Keshan said. He held Jandu down by the shoulders and pushed his mouth forcefully on Jandu's. Keshan moved carefully, afraid of bumping Jandu's nose. But Jandu's fingers dug into his flesh, his teeth fiercely, carelessly, grazing and nipping at Keshan's face, and all gentleness fled from Keshan's mind. He wanted to claim Jandu as his own again, scrape his initials on Jandu's body.

Keshan kissed Jandu deeper. As his weight settled over Jandu, Keshan noticed Jandu suddenly squeeze his eyes shut.

Keshan paused, staring down at Jandu's face. "Jandu?" He pulled back and shifted his weight so he laid alongside Jandu, not on top of him.

Jandu opened his eyes. "It's nothing." But Keshan could see fear there, lurking in his expression.

Keshan cursed his own selfishness, and slid further away from his lover. "We don't have to do this."

"I want to." Jandu took a deep breath and reached for Keshan again. Keshan kissed him more tenderly this time, letting his tongue play loosely along Jandu's mouth, caressing his lips. Keshan could feel the tension in Jandu's grasp, but the sensation of Jandu's heated skin against his own was too good, he couldn't stop. He laid down on Jandu to feel every part of his body, and thrust his erection into Jandu's thigh.

Jandu bolted upright.

“I’m sorry!” Keshan froze.

“I—”

“It’s my fault, Jandu. I’m sorry.” Keshan crawled off the bed roll.

Jandu threw himself back down on the bed and draped an arm over his eyes. Keshan shook with unspent sexual desire. That bastard Firdaus was ruining their lives even from beyond the grave. Jandu slammed his fist against the bedroom wall.

“We’re going too fast,” Keshan said. “We have time. Besides, I’m hungry.” He smiled weakly.

A small band of light from the fires of an open kitchen across the street filtered through the slit near the ceiling. The two butter lamps in the room flickered unevenly and filled the corners with foreboding shadows. Jandu rose and pulled linens from his pack. He covered Keshan’s bedroll with his own sheets. Keshan watched him, a smile on his face.

“I didn’t know you knew how to make a bed.”

“I had to as Janali.” Jandu smoothed out the finely woven cotton with the palm of his hand. “My roommate Rani showed me how after she saw what a mess I made of my first attempt.”

“Do you think she ever suspected the truth about you?” Keshan scraped the bottom of the clay bowl greedily. He moved on to the basket of fruits.

Jandu shook his head. “No. I wasn’t a good woman, but I was consistent. I think that’s all that mattered.” Jandu sat down on the freshly made bed. “I tried to see her before we left, but she wouldn’t talk to me. Maybe she’s embarrassed that I saw her naked.” Jandu shrugged. “I’ll send her a letter. I don’t want Rani thinking I’m her enemy.”

Keshan’s fingers were sticky with mango juice. He dampened a cloth and wiped his hands carefully.

Jandu smiled at him sweetly. “Keshan, how can you be so fastidious when you’re sleeping in this shit hole?”

Keshan laughed, but continued with his ritualistic cleansing. He could see Jandu's eyes take on his piercing gaze of arousal. Keshan sat beside Jandu on the bed.

Jandu leaned in, holding Keshan's head in his hands. "Help me erase the bad memories with good ones." He kissed Keshan, pushing his tongue into Keshan's mouth.

Keshan relaxed in Jandu's embrace. Jandu moved slowly, gently lowering Keshan onto the bed. Keshan's body absorbed Jandu's heat. He worried when the first stirrings of his arousal rubbed against Jandu's thigh, but Jandu didn't seem to mind as much when he was on top. Jandu ground his hips down to meet Keshan's, and Keshan's entire body slackened, melting back into the sheets. Keshan opened his lips wider.

Jandu kissed him again, and Keshan tasted Jandu's hot mouth, hoping the warmth of his own desire could thaw the chills that had racked Jandu's body at their first embrace. Jandu fumbled with Keshan's waist sash, and then slid his hands around to Keshan's backside to pull down his dejaru.

Jandu placed feather-light kisses down Keshan's torso, and Keshan moaned. Every brush of Jandu's skin against Keshan's caused shivers of pleasure. It had been so long since he had luxuriated in the smell and taste of Jandu's flesh, so long since he was able to witness how his own touch made Jandu shake with anticipation. Jandu's body had perfected into manhood after his transformation, each muscle defined, tense with unspent power, his skin flush with desire.

Jandu gently traced the outer edge of Keshan's nipples with his thumbs, and Keshan arched up to meet him, moaning with the delicious contact.

Keshan's hands groped at Jandu's dejaru. Jandu quickly undressed, and then straddled Keshan, their shafts alongside each other. Keshan saw the pulse of Jandu's heart beating wildly in his chest.

Keshan took a deep breath, smelling and taking in the sight of Jandu's body, his mind lingering on the erotic curve of

his cock, the firmness of his thighs, the small slopes of Jandu's hip bones, the tautness of his chest.

Jandu leaned down and brushed his face along Keshan's cock. Arousal rushed through Keshan's senses like liquid fire. His cock twitched towards Jandu. Jandu pulled him into his mouth.

It was that simple, really. He realized that, regardless of Firdaus' crimes, this was the two of them. Nothing aggressive could live in the soft embrace of these caresses. Jandu swallowed Keshan into the back of his throat. Keshan moaned like he was slowly dying. Jandu's hand flirted along Keshan's backside, gently kneading his muscles, slipping a finger inside.

Keshan reached blindly towards his saddlebag on the floor, and extracted the small jar of rose oil that they had used years ago. Keshan handed it to him breathlessly.

Jandu opened the jar and looked inside. "There's less here than I remember." He smirked down at Keshan.

Keshan laughed. "Oh, shut up. It hasn't been used since you left Tiwari."

Jandu held the jar up to the candlelight and squinted one eye to examine the volume more closely. Keshan poked at Jandu's ribs impatiently.

"Come on, come on," Keshan said. "Don't stop now."

Jandu dipped his fingers in the oil and circled a finger inside Keshan, moving slowly, and then with more urgency as Keshan bucked against him. Keshan wanted to return this favor, get his hands on Jandu and please him, but Jandu resisted his touches. Keshan realized that Jandu needed to be in control of this moment, reinstate his dominance, and this was more important than Keshan's own desires to stake claim to him. Keshan's vision blurred as tremors shook his body.

Keshan shifted to roll over, but Jandu stopped him, holding Keshan down on the bed by gently pressing his shoulders. "No," Jandu whispered. "I want to see your face."

Jandu lifted Keshan's legs onto his shoulders. He stared at Keshan intensely. "All right?"

Keshan nodded, anticipation fluttering through him.

Jandu opened Keshan wider and then slowly, carefully, pushed the tip of his cock inside of him.

Keshan gasped. Jandu immediately froze, a look of concern on his face.

“Does it hurt?”

“No! God no... do it some more,” Keshan whispered. He put his hands under him to tilt himself higher, to take more of Jandu into him.

Jandu grabbed the small pillow from the bed and put it under Keshan to open him wider. He sank deeper, moving slowly, watching Keshan's face carefully.

Keshan's body stretched and tightened, filled with Jandu's thick heat. The feeling was so good Keshan thought he would ignite from pleasure. Jandu stretched his body along Keshan's, his body trembling, his breathing rapid, desire flushed across his face.

Jandu moved rhythmically within Keshan, and Keshan's body constricted around him, clenching tight. Jandu buried his nose in Keshan's hair, and began to make the small, inarticulate whimpers that Keshan longed to hear. Jandu sank deeper, and Keshan's cock rubbed tightly between their stomachs, engorged with the pressure.

Jandu thrust powerfully now, matching the thrusts with kisses, his tongue deep inside Keshan's mouth, and it was all Keshan could do to hold back the mounting orgasm flushing through his body. He wanted to extend this feeling forever. He had waited a long time for this. He had suffered for this. This was everything to him now.

Keshan's fingers dug into Jandu's back. He came in an explosive gasp, his eyes closed, his whole body tensing, clenching down on Jandu. The warmth of his orgasm poured between their bellies.

Jandu reached down to push Keshan's legs further apart and then thrust impossibly deep into him, until he came in one long, sweet moment, his body arching with ecstasy. He lay on Keshan, eyes closed, and stayed inside of his lover.

They held each other silently, panting, and the rest of the world seemed to grow silent. The noises of the street disappeared, all of the bird calls died, the neighbors moved away, the flies landed. Even the smells faded. The only world left was theirs, their chests rising and falling in the aftermath of their romance. Jandu slowly slipped from inside of Keshan, and rolled onto his back.

Keshan rose and used a cloth to clean Jandu and himself. He shook out his dejaru, wishing it were cleaner. He ran his hands through his hair to bring it to order, wincing as the motion caused a shock of pain on the backs of his hands.

Jandu sighed and stood as well, returning once more to his pile of supplies. As he walked across the room naked, Keshan admired his tight backside, the loose hang of his genitals.

Jandu tied his dark green dejaru loose, like a long skirt. He wrapped a green and gold sash around his waist, and pulled on a white silk vest. He strapped on his sandals and then smiled shyly at Keshan. Jandu looked so beautiful, strong and sleek.

Once Jandu was fully dressed, he reached back into his sack and pulled out a black cotton shirt. It was long and looked like it belonged to a Marshavi tradesman. The fringe frayed slightly, but it otherwise looked and smelled clean.

Jandu handed it to Keshan.

“I can’t wear that if it isn’t from a dead body,” Keshan said.

“So tell people it’s from a dead body. People won’t really notice unless it looks nice, and this looks old.” Jandu raised an eyebrow at him. “Don’t tell me after a lifetime of lying you have suddenly chosen a path of honesty?”

Keshan pulled it on, relieved by its cleanliness and the warmth. It had been weeks since the top of his body was covered; he hadn’t realized how vulnerable he had felt since he had been stripped back in Afadi.

“Thank you. For everything,” Keshan added. “For the food, the clothing... bringing clean sheets, for God’s sake.” Keshan looked down at his tunic. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Jandu hugged him. "You're suffering this because of me. But I swear I will fix this. I will make it right for you once more." He tenderly stroked Keshan's face.

"I have to go see Iyestar." Keshan steadied his resolve. "I have to tell him what happened."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Jandu asked.

Keshan shook his head. "I think this will be less horrible if it's just my brother and I." He pulled from Jandu's embrace.

"What do you think he's going to do?"

"I don't know." Keshan took a deep breath, and then opened the door.

"Be careful. I'll be here when you return."

"I'll be back soon." Keshan hesitated in the doorway. In here, despite the gloomy atmosphere and smell, he was safe. Outside, he was hated once more. But waiting would not make Iyestar any less angry.

Keshan slipped outside, and made his way home.



The news of impending war already passed from house to house, and as Keshan walked down his old street, he saw more neighbors than usual outside, discussing the impending battle with their fellow lords.

Keshan cursed his own popularity. As he slunk from shadow to shadow, he tried to go unnoticed, but his face was too recognizable, and too many lords and ladies caught sight of him and whispered.

At the Adaru townhouse, activity filled the brick courtyard. Chezek was there, obviously just back from some task for Keshan's brother. He lounged against the chariot, chewing betel leaves, and barking orders to the stable hands. When he turned and saw Keshan at the gate, his face broke into a smile and he ran to open the gate for Keshan.

"My lord! Welcome home!" Chezek leaned down to touch Keshan's feet.

He quickly stepped back, so Chezek would not touch him.

Chezek straightened, looking hurt. “My lord?”

Keshan straightened his arms. Chezek grabbed his lantern and hovered the light over the backs of Keshan hands. Even in the dim lamplight, Keshan saw Chezek pale.

“My lord! I can’t believe... So it’s true.”

“Would you fetch my brother for me?” Keshan asked anxiously.

Chezek closed his eyes and shivered. When he looked back at Keshan, he had tears in his eyes. “I’m so sorry, my lord.”

“You have to stop calling me that,” Keshan said quietly. God, he was going to have to go through this painful moment a hundred times or more. “Call me Keshan. I’m not a lord anymore.”

Chezek licked his lips. “Keshan.” He seemed uncomfortable with the word. “I’ll fetch Lord Iyestar for you.”

“Thank you.”

As soon as Chezek left, Keshan moved to the front of the chariot and stroked his horse’s face. The horse snorted and nuzzled Keshan’s palm affectionately. His other stallion bent his neck and gave Keshan big soft eyes, begging for attention.

“Oh fine, hello to you too,” Keshan cooed to them. As soon as he heard the front door open, he stepped back quickly. He wasn’t sure if Iyestar would forbid him from touching their animals.

Iyestar stormed out of the building, his hair wet from his ablutions, his eyes blurry with alcohol. When he saw Keshan at the gate he smiled widely.

“About time!” Iyestar scolded him, hands on his hips.

“There’s going to be a war between the Parans and Darvad,” Keshan said.

Iyestar stopped smiling. “So I’ve heard. Will you fight with Darvad?”

“No. I won’t be fighting at all.” Keshan took a deep breath and held his hands out for Iyestar to see them.

At first, Iyestar didn’t believe it. He kept shaking his head. “This is one of your sick jokes.”



"I wish it was."

"It's impossible!" Iyestar suddenly exploded. "Keshan! You fucking idiot! What have you done?"

The stable hands all froze in place, watching the confrontation.

"I think we should discuss this somewhere more private," Keshan said quietly.

Iyestar stormed towards the house. Keshan reached out to touch him, and then stopped.

"Wait, Iyestar." Keshan sighed in annoyance. "I can't go in there."

"Damn you! God damn you!" Iyestar had tears in his eyes. He raised his fist as if to strike Keshan, thought twice about it, and instead reached down and took off his sandal. He threw it at Keshan's head. It glanced off of Keshan's arm. "You fucking idiot!"

Keshan made his way back behind the stables. It was one of the few places where the Jegora were allowed to come and go freely. Several other Jegora were there working and they cowered as Keshan rounded the corner. Iyestar followed him, cursing the entire time, and then finally took off his other shoe and hurled it at Keshan.

Keshan leaned against the wall behind the stable and slid to a crouch on the ground.

Iyestar looked around, broke a low branch off the nearby banyan, and swung it at Keshan. Keshan blocked the blow, but Iyestar was fast at hand-to-hand combat, and whacked Keshan a second time in the face.

"Are you done?" Keshan snapped at him.

"No!" Iyestar was crying now. He beat at Keshan. Keshan huddled into a ball and curled his arms around himself protectively. "You are such a bastard! What are we going to do now? What are we going to do?" Iyestar's voice broke with a sob. He dropped the branch and went to pieces, collapsing to the ground and sobbing into his hands. Keshan watched him cry, his body stinging from his brother's blows.

Iyestar's performance attracted all of the nearby servants. "Go away!" Keshan hissed at them. They scattered immediately, leaving the back entrance to the two brothers alone.

Iyestar's whole body shook. Keshan wanted to hug him. But he couldn't. The fact that Iyestar was actually abiding the rules of his brother's casteless state knifed through him. He had hoped for more loyalty. He had hoped Iyestar would embrace him and offer him his old room back. It was the ultimate irony, Keshan thought, that of all people, only Jandu ignored Keshan's brands.

Everything was over for him. He knew it was vain to care about how people thought of him, but that was just the way he was. And now the people whose respect he wanted the most were staring at him like he was trash. It was too much to see. Keshan lowered his gaze to the ground, grateful that his hair hung over his face, obscuring it from sight.

Iyestar finally wiped his eyes and stared at Keshan. "I'd heard rumors, but I truly thought it was some joke of yours. Tell me what happened."

Keshan explained about Firdaus, Jandu, and the curse. Iyestar seemed to calm down slightly as Keshan finished the story.

"Jandu has asked me to be his charioteer in the war, and I accepted. Until then, I will live in rented lodgings," Keshan said. "If Yudar becomes king, he will elevate me to Triya once more."

Iyestar's eyes were red. "If there's a war, I have to fight on Darvad's side. I'm his ally."

"I know."

"We'll be fighting on opposite sides."

"I know." Keshan swallowed.

Iyestar shook his head. "I can't believe Darvad let this happen. He can change you back right now. I'll beg him to change you back."

"It won't matter what you say. It was part of his conditions, he has to stand by them." Keshan sighed.

“So you would fight for that bastard Yudar?” Iyestar asked.

“No.” Keshan needed his brother to understand. “I would fight for Jandu.”

“And what of your mission, Keshan?” Iyestar sneered. “I thought that was all that mattered! Our entire life, you have risked everything for your cause. You have driven us all mad with your singular purpose. And now you have forgotten everything? You will go and fight for a man who opposes the very equality you have fought so hard for?”

“My powers are gone,” Keshan said. “I can do little now, in the state I am in. Everything is gone. All I have left is Jandu.”

Iyestar grimaced. “And what about us? Ajani, and mother and I? Your family?”

“Will you let me inside?” Keshan asked.

Iyestar closed his eyes. “Don’t ask me to do that.”

“Will you?” Keshan’s fear and sadness gave way to his sense of betrayal. “I am still your brother, am I not? Will you open your door to an untouchable, and let the world see that the Tiwari household continues to love his noble son?”

“We’ll be ostracized,” Iyestar said quietly. “We’ll be disgraced.”

Keshan’s heart felt pulverized. “So it doesn’t matter, does it? I’m dead to you anyway.”

Iyestar shook his head. He wiped his eyes once more and then motioned towards Keshan’s brands. “I hope Jandu is worth it.”

Keshan nodded. “He is.”

## CHAPTER 47

TAREK AWOKE TO WARMTH.

The smell of almonds, warm hair, sun-burned flesh. Dark and musky smells, masculine smells. Tarek looked at Anant's sleeping face, and something light and joyful ignited in his heart. It wasn't fire—this was not like his all-consuming, bone-shattering passion for Darvad—this was weaker, quieter. It didn't glow, but it was present, persistent, safe.

It was enough.

Since Tarek's return to Prasta, he had spent most of his time working with Darvad to prepare Darvad's allies for the impending war. But the little time he had to himself, he saved for Anant. There had been no need for apologies with him, no need to prove his worth. Even when Tarek did something as disgraceful as brand a friend for acting honorably, Anant forgave him. Anant accepted Tarek wholly. Knowing that someone loved him, unconditionally and truthfully, gave Tarek the strength he needed to sit through the countless meetings and strategy sessions with Darvad and his commanders.

Of the eleven states of Marhavad, six would fight in support of King Darvad. Only five states allied with the Parans, giving Darvad the advantage, especially since some of the Paran allies had little or no military experience at all.

Priests in Prasta identified an auspicious date to begin the war. As if knowing that time was short, the monsoon finally arrived. The skies burst and rains drenched the north of Marhavad with endless torrents of fresh water. Streets turned into rivers. Splashes of mud appeared in the driest of places. The world seemed to weep for the fates of the 100,000 men who would fight and die to decide, once and for all, the king of Marhavad.

The numbers overwhelmed Tarek. There had never been a war this large in all of Marhavad's history. Even Tarek's warrior's blood chilled at the thought of so many men, in such a small arena of combat.

Tarek had tried to impart upon Darvad the importance of changing those last few laws regarding caste, now, before the war. With the laws as they currently stood, the Suya and Chaya would only be able to fight men of their own castes. But the Triya would have uncontrolled reign to slaughter the lower-caste men at will. It was as tradition as old as the Triya. But after Tarek's own humiliation with Lord Sahdin, when he stood practically defenseless before the man's attacks, his will to change the law was paramount.

Darvad nodded and agreed that the rules should be changed for the war, but when it came down to actually making it into law, Darvad never had time. No matter how hard Tarek pressed him, Darvad found other preparations to take precedence. Not for the first time, Tarek thought of Keshan Adaru, and how he used to hound Darvad. The thought made Tarek try harder. He had to pass these laws, if only to help assuage his guilt over ruining Keshan's life.

As the first harvests came after the swelling monsoon, Tarek refocused his energies into organizing the Dragewan soldiers to assist with the harvest. Even he took part, traveling to Dragewan to confirm enough food could be collected to feed the massive beast that was becoming Darvad's army. Grains and hay were loaded onto hundreds of carts to be taken to the battlefield. Horses began their journey to Terashu early, to set an easy pace that would not exhaust the animals before the battle had begun. The armory worked day and night forging shields, swords, and helmets.

And in the evenings, after an exhausting, endless routine of tense preparation, Tarek would return to find Anant waiting for him, eager, eyes wide and bright, ready to take Tarek's mind off the future, and what predicaments awaited within it.

Now, on the morning of his departure, Tarek roused to the smells and sights of his lover, and found that he was pleased with his decision. Anant had been the right choice. Anant did not instill in Tarek the kind of dangerous obsession Darvad did, but Anant reciprocated. He understood.

Tarek rarely had the luxury of addressing his morning desires. But now he could. He reached his hands down, under the sheets, and watched Anant wake up slowly, his eyes shooting open in surprise when Anant realized what Tarek was doing.

They smiled at each other. Quiet, safe, sweetness.

Tarek rolled Anant over, stroked his back tenderly, his powerful thighs, the musky darkness between. Tarek started their lovemaking tenderly enough, but he was always consumed with a desire to ravish Anant by the end of it, take him forcefully, almost violently. There was something about Anant's passivity that brought brutish desire to the forefront of Tarek's mind. He bit at Anant's skin, his hands groping him fiercely in the morning light, and Anant became still, his eyes dilated, his own member heavy and demanding attention.

Tarek tried to remember the delicacy of Keshan and Jandu's secret kiss. The sweetness of their embrace. But when his hands touched Anant's flesh, his senses enflamed, and tenderness fled from his mind. He forced himself upon Anant, taking what he needed greedily, slamming his body into Anant as Anant responded with utter acquiescence. When Tarek came, he flushed with immediate guilt, and sought to pacify his lover by gently returning the favor.

But Anant's eyes burned with a fiery, injured intensity, and Anant pushed himself into Tarek's mouth savagely, encouraging Tarek to continue with his frenzied assault. Anant liked it rough. He wanted Tarek to treat him wildly. Tarek's fingers clawed into Anant's thighs, he used teeth, he attacked Anant with all of his fury until Anant wept and cried out and came at the same time, his whole body shuddering.

Tarek panted, ashamed at what he had done to such a quiet, beautiful morning.

But, amazingly, Anant reached down and gathered Tarek up into a tender embrace. Tarek almost wept for joy. That he could be so brutish, and get such love and understanding in return—it was more than he had ever dreamed of. Anant accepted him, in all his berserk misery. Anant understood him. This potent embrace was the greatest gift Tarek had ever received, and that included his title, his Triya caste from Darvad. Nothing had made Tarek feel so safe, so wanted.

“I’m not lonely,” Tarek said to himself, amazed with the realization. Like the slow easing of a chronic pain, his mind was whole. Tarek laughed and held Anant to him.

Anant wore a puzzled grin. “You have me, my lord,” he said finally.

“Tarek.”

Anant blushed. “Tarek.” He kissed Tarek’s neck slowly, his tongue gently darting out to touch Tarek’s skin. Even though he had just finished, Tarek felt his body stir once more. “Tarek,” Anant whispered, as if testing out the word, his lips traveling downwards, his tongue quick and searching, and Tarek closed his eyes and listened to Anant whisper his name as he kissed Tarek in places he never imagined to be kissed, as he showed a gentle trust and openness that Tarek had only dreamed of.

“Any man who kisses me there gets to call me Tarek,” Tarek said, smiling. Anant snickered.

“That’s the first funny thing I’ve ever heard you say,” Anant told him. He grinned seductively and leaned down to continue his kiss.

Tarek smiled to himself, proud to have been funny for once. Life was so sweet and sexy and hilarious and comforting and beautiful, in the arms of this man. He laughed himself, and opened his body up to his lover, and realized, that no matter what happened from this point forward, with the war or with Dragewan or with Darvad, Tarek had, at the very least, this one perfect, happy moment.

## CHAPTER 48

KESHAN CARRIED A BUCKET OF WASTE FROM THE KARVAZI Bazaar outhouse into a waiting cart, to be hauled away by Tamarus Arundan's son Lazro. He kept his grip on the bucket's handle light but firm. He didn't want to drop it in the crush of busy people. He slopped the filth into the stinking cart and turned to go for another. He dodged shoppers and the other Jegora who also worked this job. That he had adapted to his job surprised him. He'd never thought the stench of human feces would ever be bearable.

Of course, the knowledge that he would only be hauling shit for a very short time helped his attitude. The battle for the throne of Marhavad was only a week away and after that he would be a Triya or he would be dead. It was a comfort that he was lucky to have. His fellow Jegora had nothing but a lifetime of such drudgery to look forward to.

Lazro looked over his shoulder as Keshan banged his bucket on the edge of the cart to knock a recalcitrant lump free.

"Don't you know some magic that will make outhouses clean themselves?" he asked.

"I prefer not to use shartas unless I have to," Keshan replied. Only Jandu and Iyestar knew about Firdaus' curse, and Keshan preferred to keep it that way, knowing that fear of his Yashva powers kept him safe.

Lazro owned the cart and was popularly known in the impoverished district of Prasta as the "vanishing man." He made things disappear, whether broken axles, burned coal, or excrement. Jegora from all over the city adored him, because



he owned his own mule, dumped their refuse, and treated them decently.

Keshan liked Lazro because he was a prolific conversationalist, and a young man fascinated with the world outside his own Chaya caste. As Keshan struggled with the other three Jegora responsible for keeping the outhouse clean, Lazro leaned against his cart and chatted with Keshan, seemingly undisturbed by the stench, the filth, or their untouchable status, as long as they never physically touched him.

“Are you really going to be Jandu Paran’s charioteer and fight King Darvad?” Lazro asked him.

“I’ll be charioteer, but it’s against the rules of war for me to fight Darvad.”

“So what happens if two Chaya meet on the battlefield?” Lazro asked.

Keshan dumped another bucket into the cart and wiped his brow.

“All the rules are established in the Book of Taivo,” Keshan told him. He smirked. “Didn’t your father make you read them?”

Lazro scuffed his bare foot on the ground. “I don’t read much.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t read them to you, then.” Keshan picked up his bucket. “Your father has a love of reading long passages to anyone in his company for longer than five minutes.”

Lazro laughed. Keshan smiled back, and then turned once more to make the trek through the alleyway to the back of the public market.

The main streets swarmed with shoppers. With the battle to begin in less than a month, people desperately purchased essentials in fear that the war would lead to shortages. Keshan remained out of sight of the Chaya and Suya caste citizens, sticking to the narrow alley with the rest of the Jegora as he completed his filthy task.

At the outhouses, an older man handed Keshan two more buckets. Keshan nodded and then trekked back once more to Lazro’s cart.

“But I don’t understand how Chaya are supposed to fight if they can’t fight the warriors.” Lazro picked up the discussion as if Keshan had never left. He liked Lazro’s conversational style. Lengthy pauses meant nothing to him.

“According to the rules, no Chaya warrior can fight against a Suya or a Triya, which means they will be relegated to foot soldiers,” Keshan explained. “They can fight other Chaya foot soldiers only.”

“But a Triya can fire upon them?” Lazro asked.

“Yes.” Keshan dumped his buckets. “The Triya can shoot you with arrows, and cut you down with swords, or club you with maces. And you can do nothing to them, on pain of death.”

“But that’s madness!” Lazro spat the betel leaf he was chewing on the ground. “Why even have Chaya and Suya soldiers?”

“To create larger forces, and to provide physical barriers against the other Triya.”

“So Chaya and Suya are just human shields.”

“Essentially. It’s just a reinforcement of the same pecking order you’ve always known, Lazro.” Keshan looked at his hands, and shivered in revulsion. Even though he had been meticulously careful about not sloshing the contents of his buckets, a trickle of sticky urine dribbled down his palm. He crouched and scrubbed it off in the dust at his feet.

“You’re too fastidious to be good at being a Jegora,” Lazro teased him. “Or even a Chaya.”

“I’ve improved greatly over the last month.” Keshan smiled mirthlessly.

“But this war could change everything, couldn’t it?” Lazro asked.

“Yes.” Keshan retrieved his buckets and headed back to the latrines.

Lazro’s curiosity bothered him. As he made several round trips to the cart, Keshan realized that Lazro must be considering joining the battle. He would have to talk him out of it.

Most of the lower caste soldiers were conscripts, forced into service by the lords of their state as part of their servitude. But the Chaya and Sua of Prasta were exempt, as they served no lord other than the king. It was one of the few benefits for the lower castes living in the crowded capital.

By the time dusk approached, Keshan was exhausted, both with his job and with Lazro's conversation. He never thought he'd grow tired of explaining things to anyone, but the last month had been hard on him, and he was a different person now. Bitterness crept into his soul, only amplified by the suspicion that, despite everything he told Lazro this day, the boy would probably join the soldiers anyway. There was glory to be had in war, and enough money to last a poor Chaya a lifetime. If he survived, Lazro could look forward to more respect in his community, and enough wealth to support his father and all of his sisters.

But the risk was monumental, and Keshan feared for him. He worried what Tamarus would do, if his only son went to war. Tamarus' wife had died a few months after Keshan last saw her, and now his old friend lived alone, supported only by Lazro and his garbage-hauling business.

"Do you want a ride home with me?" Lazro asked Keshan. Keshan used the precious gourd of water he had with him to wash his hands. He looked at the heaping wet refuse in the back of Lazro's cart and grimaced.

"After I dump this, of course!" Lazro laughed.

Keshan smiled. "No, but thank you. I'll walk."

Lazro waved and then moved to the front of his cart. He sat in the high seat and cracked his whip, forcing the old mule forward.

Keshan watched him go. His body ached. He stank. He couldn't wait to get back to Tamarus' house and take a bath. His friend's unexpected generosity had given Keshan the little comfort he needed to endure this month of hardship, and his friendly, light-hearted conversations had helped ease Keshan's

loneliness. But what Keshan appreciated most of all about staying with Tamarus was the bath. The bath was everything to him now, now that he spent every day feeling so unclean.

Keshan mostly walked alleyways to return to Tamarus' house, but there were a few public streets that he had to cross. He slunk in the long shadows, hoping to remain as inconspicuous as possible.

A man dumped a bucket of waste water out into the street and nearly splashed Keshan. He turned to rebuke Keshan, but then saw the small blue ribbon sewn on Keshan's shirt, and quickly looked away. Keshan darted across the street, smiling to himself.

Everyone in town knew what that ribbon meant.

Four weeks ago, after Keshan had been assaulted by Draya children on the street in front of Tamarus' house, Jandu had made a city-wide proclamation that anyone harming his cousin would be cut down like a dog. To assure there would be no confusion, Jandu personally stitched the symbol of his arrow onto Keshan's shirt, warning the public that Keshan was protected by the prince himself.

Keshan thought the gesture was sweet but pointless. He never imagined anyone would abide by it. And yet here was more proof that the declaration worked. People feared Jandu's wrath, and stayed as far away from Keshan as he tried to stay from them.

As Keshan headed down the muddy alley of Tamarus' house, he saw men fleeing the road rapidly, and heard whippers so frantic they echoed like shouts. He looked up and saw Jandu himself, arms crossed and glaring, as he waited outside Tamarus' door.

"Jandu!" Keshan called and hurried to him.

Jandu's mouth curled up in a smile. "There you are. I've been waiting here ten minutes. Why is the door locked?"

"Tamarus is helping a family move," Keshan said. He quickly fumbled for Tamarus' large iron key. "Sorry to keep you waiting, but I wasn't expecting you."

"I suppose if I said I was just in the neighborhood, you wouldn't believe me."

Keshan laughed. "No." The keyhole was rusted, and Keshan struggled with the lock. When he finally got the door open, he waited for Jandu to enter, but Jandu didn't follow him. Instead, he scowled at a group of Jegora across the road.

"What's wrong?" Keshan asked.

Jandu jerked his thumb towards the Jegora. "They're wearing my symbol."

Keshan swallowed. "I know. Are you angry?"

Jandu frowned. "Just puzzled." He stepped inside, and Keshan closed the door quickly.

"Once word got out that you were protecting me from assault, other Jegora began to make counterfeit symbols and wear them as well, in the hopes that they too would not be beaten." Keshan watched Jandu for a reaction.

Jandu continued to frown in silence.

"I don't think I can stop them," Keshan continued. "But if you want, I could—"

"—No." Jandu shrugged. "Let it be. If something as simple as a fake badge can keep them from harm, let them have it. No one else is doing anything to protect them. I might as well."

Keshan felt stunned. Jandu stood there in Tamarus' courtyard, as he had all those years ago, and look at him now. He was willing to let the untouchables wear his personal symbol, to keep them safe.

Keshan bathed in the courtyard, filling Tamarus' narrow iron basin with water heated from the fire. As he lathered and washed his hair, Jandu leaned against the courtyard wall, filling Keshan in on all the details of the war preparation that was taking place in the palace.

Before, Keshan had felt a great sense of loss whenever Jandu discussed politics. It was once Keshan's world, a world he was no longer part of, and he missed his old life like a phantom limb. But now, as Jandu leisurely chatted, and as Keshan bathed,

Keshan felt a soft, easy contentment he didn't think he could find in such a situation. He felt at home.

And Keshan came to the truth. He had thought that his mission was to change all of Marhavad society. But really, he only ended up changing one man.

But at moments like this, when Jandu yawned and gossiped and told rambling stories, absent-mindedly weaving strands of long grass from Tamarus' garden into some form of dinner plate, leaning against the wall and smiling at Keshan in the bath, Keshan realized, yes, it might all be all right. This one man might be enough.

## CHAPTER 49

TERASHU FIELD WAS A LARGE BASIN, FLAT AND UNREMARKABLE save for the way the dry grassland sloped upwards to meet the edge of the Ashari Forest. The forest formed the western boundary of the field and curved north, following the path of the river. The northern portion of the forest remained blackened with soot, a reminder of the great fire that Jandu and Keshan had started years ago for Mendraz. But even in three short years, vegetation sprang forth from the ashes, and saplings burst from the forest floor, lining the edge of the battlefield.

The Uru camp claimed the northern boundary of the field. The Parans and their allies staked the south. Far to the east, the fallow grazing lands stretched out in a seemingly endless view of wildflowers and grasses. Yudar ordered a trench dug across the eastern edge of the battleground to protect the grasslands from the spread of fires any shartas might cause.

The battlefield itself burst with delphiniums, blue poppies, and dozens of other wildflowers. The blooms waved enthusiastically to the camping armies, their colors as varied as the many brilliant standards and banners of the gathered Triya noblemen.

But the machinations of men quickly thwarted the rejuvenation. Within two days the flowers were ripped from the earth, and all traces of foliage vanished, leaving a dusty bowl as teams of oxen flattened the ground and prepared the field for chariots.

In the Paran camp dirt roads were leveled, dividing the sections and creating an instant city, almost one hundred thousand people and animals gathered together to watch, participate in, and facilitate this war. Infantry, cavalry and

charioted officers were housed closest to the battleground, while the edge of the camp housed the numerous kitchens, medical tents, bathhouses, storage carts, animal stables, blacksmiths, carpenters, servants, and others who now tied their fortunes to the Paran princes.

Yudar's tent marked the center of the camp, and was a large, circular structure of white wool suspended on nine poles, with a separate smaller tent attached for Yudar's private chamber. Inside, furniture from neighboring allied states and thick carpets damped down the dust. The room became the central planning office for the war. It was comfortable, despite the slightly off-putting, wet wool smell.

Jandu chose a tent near the charioteers and archers. There were five units in the Paran army. Jandu assumed he would lead one of them, and was surprised instead by Yudar's decision to appoint him general.

"You know more shartas than any man on this battlefield," Yudar said proudly. "And you have proven yourself numerous times against insurmountable odds. I want you to lead our army to victory."

Jandu's emotions had flickered at Yudar's compliments, a moment of love and gratitude breaking through the wall that Yudar's betrayals had forged.

He worried that Baram would be insulted, having been passed as second eldest for the position. But Baram had merely hugged Jandu fiercely and told him it was the wisest decision.

In his new position, Jandu was kept busy and for days he had seen little of Keshan. The Jegora part of camp was behind the latrines, and they had little access to the rest of the makeshift city. Every attempt Jandu made to visit Keshan was quickly thwarted by a not-so-subtle request from Yudar, for Jandu to oversee the archers in their practice, the distribution of provisions, or the repair of chariots. All it would take was Jandu to look to the far southeast corner of camp, and Yudar



would immediately grab his arm and throw Jandu at some problem.

On the eve of battle, both Paran and Uru armies met in the middle of the field to take the oath of honorable combat.

The beat of a thousand drums vibrated the blood in Jandu's veins. Enormous energy radiated from Terashu field in sound waves. One hundred thousand men, bound by promises and fealty, gathered to swear themselves to the laws of war. Jandu scanned the crowd for a sign of Keshan, but it was impossible to spot him. There were over fifty thousand soldiers fighting for the Parans and past them, in the sea of faces, Jandu could not make out any individual.

Jandu stood beside Baram on a raised dais and watched Yudar and Darvad ceremonially greet the priest Onshu, who would officiate the battle.

Onshu made the sign of peace to both Darvad and Yudar. The priest's purple robes fluttered in the light wind. His hair was thick with red sandalwood paste.

Onshu sang a brief prayer. Yudar and Darvad closed their eyes and brought their hands together to pray. Yudar was adorned in his golden armor, his forehead smeared with holy paste, his hair oiled and slicked back under his golden helmet. Jandu stared at him, a now-familiar sensation of disgust and pride washing through him.

Jandu felt a heavy hand on his shoulder, and looked up to see Baram, smiling down at him with tears in his eyes.

"I have been waiting for this moment since the first time that bastard Firdaus rolled the dice," Baram whispered hotly. Jandu nodded in response.

Onshu finished his prayer and unrolled a large scroll. He began to recite the traditional Triya rules of war.

"Two warriors may engage in personal combat only if they carry the same weapons and they are on the same mount," Onshu said. His words echoed back to the edges of the crowd in repeated whispers.

“No warrior may kill or injure any warrior who is unarmed, unconscious, or whose back is turned away, as this is dishonorable in the eyes of God. None may raise a weapon against a warrior of higher caste than himself lest he offend God.”

Jandu’s eyes narrowed. The professional armies of each of their allied states were Triya, but the rest of the soldiers, almost half of them, were Suya and Chaya caste. That meant they could only fight their own equivalents on the battlefield. But they would be sitting ducks for the Triya in chariots and on horseback.

Jandu shook his head. “They’ll be slaughtered.”

Baram merely shrugged. “What did you expect? It’s the traditional rules of war.”

“Yudar should change them,” Jandu stated.

“Yudar isn’t going to change anything set down in the Book of Taivo,” Baram told Jandu. “Besides, look at Darvad. He’s the one who is supposed to be the champion of the lower castes, and he isn’t challenging the rules either.”

It was true. Darvad simply nodded with the ruling. Jandu noted, however, that Tarek Amia, who stood by Darvad’s side, looked ready to kill Darvad. Tarek had obviously expected Darvad to treat his Suya and Chaya warriors more humanely.

“No battle may continue beyond the light of day for this is the time the Lord has allotted for war. No harm may be done to a man, ally or enemy, who comes to pay respect at the funeral pyres of the fallen,” Onshu intoned. “Any man who uses a sharta to endanger the lives of civilians outside this battlefield will be put to death.”

“But at least we’re allowed to use them,” Baram said. He slapped Jandu on the shoulder. “You know more than anyone. It will definitely be to our advantage.”

“Mazar knows more than me, I assure you,” Jandu whispered, looking across the dais at his weapons master.

Jandu had spoken to Mazar several times in the weeks leading up to the battle, hoping to convince his old master to

fight with the Paran forces. But while Mazar did not hesitate to express his remorse at having to fight against Jandu, he refused to break the holy oath he had made to King Darvad.

At first, Jandu was hurt, but his resolve had hardened over the weeks. Keshan was right. Holy oaths and vows that made no sense, when they justified actions that went against a person's own moral standings, were pointless and dangerous. If there was one aspect of Triya culture that Jandu could change, it would be this slavish adherence to illogical oaths.

Onshu finished his litany of rules and then led Yudar and Darvad in a second prayer. As the priest blessed the two sides of the war, and prayed to God for justice, both armies joined in the prayer and the ground itself seemed to shudder with the thunderous timbre of so many voices. The drummers resumed their beat, and then the horns and conches joined in, a cacophony of battle cries and prayers and music and cheers and insults, and Jandu could feel their words in his scalp, tingling across his flesh. He spoke in unison with the soldiers, his body bombinating with excitement and adrenalin, to be here, at this moment, in history, with all these men.

Jandu's prayers grew more fervent. He added a prayer to Mendraz, king of the Yashvas, hoping the demon would favor Jandu's side of the war. Jandu knelt and supplicated himself and the men around him followed. Like a great wave, the entire Paran army prostrated itself on the battlefield, laying their heads to the ground and praying as if they all knew that this ground would also cradle their heads in death.

Onshu lit incense and poured butter onto the ground, and the ceremony concluded. Darvad and his advisors left the ceremony in one direction. Yudar touched Mazar's feet in respect, and then led his own men to the Paran camp without a glance back.



That evening, in darkness, Jandu bathed and then wound his way toward the latrines. He traveled an already well-trod dirt

path behind the outhouses. He carried a butter lamp, as this part of the camp did not have lamps strung along the roads.

The Jegora camp consisted of ramshackle tents made of cotton fabric. Most of the men and women slept out in the open, on thin bed rolls gathered around open fires. As Jandu searched the faces in shadow for Keshan, most of the Jegora drew back, frightened of Jandu's attention. A few who wore his blue ribbon offered him tentative, shy smiles.

"Keshan?" Jandu cried, looking upon the bleak faces around him. What used to disgust him now simply filled him with sympathy. He watched a woman wash her pan out with the one gourd of water she had, her hands clawed with age. She was beautiful once, Jandu realized, staring into her eyes. She had lovely hair, but her face was wearied with age and the elements, and she shied from Jandu's glance quickly.

"Keshan!" Jandu called again.

"I'm here." Keshan rushed to his side, looking out of breath. His hands were covered in soil and his black tunic was dirty, but his face lit with a smile when he saw Jandu.

Jandu raised an eyebrow. "Where have you been?"

"Digging." Keshan patted dirt from his tunic. "One of the oxen died. I'm helping bury him."

"I have something more important for you to do." Jandu took Keshan by the elbow and led him past the latrines, toward the soldier's section of the camp. Although many people were out, it was dark enough between the lamps that few noticed Keshan's clothing or brands.

When they reached an open area of the charioteer's section of camp, Jandu turned to Keshan.

"You still want to be my charioteer?" Jandu asked nervously.

Keshan smiled brightly. "Of course I will be."

"Can you summon Mendraz's chariot now? I'd like to have it ready for tomorrow," Jandu said.

"I don't know if it will work," Keshan said. "Since Firdaus' curse, my shartas haven't been what they used to be."

"That's why I think you should try it now, when it's quiet."

Keshan nodded. He knelt to the ground and closed his eyes. His lips moved slightly as he whispered the prayer Mendraz had taught him all those years ago in this very forest. Jandu watched anxiously. Keshan finished and nothing happened. There was a flicker of light, but that was all. Keshan tried again. Sweat beaded his forehead.

Mendraz's celestial chariot finally appeared soundlessly. Only the thump of one of the long reins against the ground made any noise. Jandu and Keshan both stared, wondering at Mendraz's magnificent vehicle.

The wood was lacquered yellow and red, and then gilded in sweeping patterns of vines, the gold trailing up the sides of the car and forming a golden banister all around the edge of the car. In the center of the chariot, a thick mast provided balance, and Tiwari's own peacock standard flapped above the yellow silk canopy stretched atop the vehicle. Even the seats were magnificent, crafted from silk and stuffed with feathers. It was the vehicle of the gods. And now it would be Jandu's in battle.

"I had forgotten how beautiful it was." Keshan admired the chariot, a soft smile on his face. Jandu stepped forward and ran his hand along the warm gold of the chariot lip.

"With you and this chariot and Zandi, we will be invincible." He turned and smiled at Keshan who grinned back.

"Not without horses we won't," Keshan replied. "Nadaru has promised you horses, yes? Let me pick out the best for you."

"All right." Jandu nodded. "I have to talk to Yudar, but I'll meet you back here within the hour."

"I'll see you then," Keshan agreed. He looked radiant with his success at summoning the chariot and when he walked away he moved with the graceful pride that had seemed lost since his branding.

Jandu threaded his way through the evening crowds of soldiers and servants. The night before the battle, the entire camp burst with revelry. Yudar distributed wine to keep morale high. Women visited their husbands and sons, and Jandu felt an overpowering affection for all these people, gathered so bravely at the edge of an abyss, risking their lives for the fate of his family. As he passed through the crowds, people bowed to him or touched his feet. Here, he was a prince again, a royal Triya, fourth in line for Marhavad's throne, and the years of servitude and starvation on the mountain seemed like they happened to another person, in another life.

Jandu reached up and touched the break in his nose. He would not let himself forget anything of the last three years. He needed that anger to fuel his strength tomorrow, on the battlefield.

Yudar's tent was guarded by soldiers loyal to the Parans for many years. Jandu couldn't remember the names of the two men who stood on duty now, but their faces were very familiar. They had protected Yudar since he had been a teenager growing up in the palace. Jandu remembered them crying when the Parans left for the forest. And now here they were once more, straight and proud at Yudar's door, and Jandu couldn't help but reach out and touch them both affectionately on the shoulders. The men looked shocked, that a Triya would do such a thing, but then they smiled and stood straighter.

"My Prince," one of the guards said. "Shall I announce you?"

"No. I'll just join the crowd." Jandu made his way into Yudar's tent.

It was filled beyond capacity. The space that had seemed too large to Jandu when they first erected the tent now looked laughably small, filled with so many commanders, advisors, sages and priests. Yudar sat in one of the gilded chairs they had brought from Afadi, and men gathered around him, talking at once and listening as Yudar issued order after order. Jandu

crossed his arms over his breastplate and stood against the wall of the tent, watching his brother. Yudar responded to each person individually, as if they were the only person in attendance. Yudar made eye contact, nodded somberly, listened to sides and then made a decision without hesitation. His self-assurance and born leadership was what had brought all these people to their side in the first place. Once again, Jandu struggled with combating emotions of pride and fury.

“Prince Jandu?”

Jandu turned, and saw one of Yudar’s guards eyeing him nervously. Jandu walked over to the man and leaned his head down, to hear him better in the throb of voices in the room.

“The untouchable is outside, wanting to speak with you.”

Jandu’s hands involuntarily clenched into fists. He excused himself and followed the guards outside. It was infuriating that Keshan had to be addressed as such. Everyone here knew who Keshan was. They knew he was a lord in his own state, a hero they all would have bragged about meeting only a few months ago. Now he was not even allowed the dignity of his own name.

At the tent entrance, Keshan stood, looking uncharacteristically nervous in the torchlight. His expression was a mixture of annoyance and shame.

“They won’t let me touch the horses,” he said quickly.

Jandu squeezed Keshan’s shoulder, ignoring the gasps from the guards. He and Keshan marched together towards the stables.

“You found horses for us?” Jandu asked.

“I think so.” Keshan scowled ahead of him. “But I can’t tell much without being able to longe them, or at least see them move.” Keshan ground his teeth. “It’s very frustrating.”

It was the first time Keshan had admitted his dissatisfaction with his new status. As they walked towards the stables, Jandu looked around for a quiet corner, but none could be found. On the eve of the battle, everyone was out and about,

with friends, family, comrades-in-arms. Finally Jandu made do with a narrow, dark space between two pitched officer's tents and dragged Keshan into the shadows. He said nothing; he just hugged Keshan to him in silence.

Keshan was tense in Jandu's arms, his whole body quivering with anxiety. But within moments he seemed to melt, slumping into Jandu's embrace and resting his head on Jandu's shoulder.

As soon as Jandu felt Keshan let go of his tension, he leaned forward and kissed Keshan. It was meant to be nothing more than a brief, reassuring kiss, but a flair of heat coursed through Jandu's body as Keshan hungrily returned it, throwing his arms around Jandu's neck and pressing his body close.

"The stable hands will leave soon," Jandu whispered. "We have to pick our horses."

Keshan immediately pulled back, and shot Jandu a look of utter disappointment. "I know. I know." The two of them returned to the main road.

At the stable, Jandu used Keshan's advice to select four stallions, all of them muscular with large heads. Three of them were brothers. They were more temperamental than Jandu would have chosen for himself, but he knew that Keshan had a way with strong-willed horses and therefore didn't worry. He patted the dappled gray and almost lost his fingers for the gesture.

It was nearly midnight by the time the camp celebrations settled down. Fires were extinguished, and across the acres of tents, lamps blinked out like dying fireflies. Jandu and Keshan reviewed their own weapons, the chariot, and battle plans. They made their way back toward Yudar's tent.

The guards were still outside, but the rest of the visitors had left. Jandu stepped past the guards. They moved as if to stop Keshan from following. Jandu shot them a dangerous look and they both backed away.

Inside, Yudar still conferred with Lord Indarel, the two of them leaning over a large side-table with a map and small



stones representing the units. Yudar smiled when Jandu entered the tent. But as soon as he saw Keshan, the smile slipped from his face.

"I need to speak with my brother alone," Yudar told Indarel. Indarel nodded and left quickly, avoiding looking at Keshan altogether.

Jandu moved forward, as did Keshan. Yudar scowled at Keshan. "I said, alone." Yudar grabbed Jandu's arm and led him into the small private chamber of his tent. Inside, the space was warmly lit with a dozen butter lamps and incense burned on the floor. The bed was a thick stack of mats and cotton sheets, and looked invitingly comfortable. But Yudar would not be sleeping in his bed tonight. As was tradition, Yudar and Darvad would both sleep in their chariots, at the edge of the battlefield, until their armies joined them at sunrise.

"What is he doing here?" Yudar whispered.

Jandu frowned. "Who? Keshan?"

Yudar sighed. "Jandu, he is outcaste."

Jandu squared his shoulders. "Not to me. I will not treat him as such."

"I appreciate your loyalty to our cousin," Yudar spoke carefully, choosing his words as if expecting Jandu to punch him. "And I stand by my promise to restore his caste once I'm king. But until then, I must ask you to not be seen with him in public."

"I don't particularly care what you think I should do." Jandu crossed his arms.

Yudar glared. "What do you think this war is about? How are we going to fight for and maintain the honor of our family if you are flaunting your disregard of the status of caste?"

Jandu clenched his jaw tightly to keep from saying all the curses he wanted to spew at his brother.

"You are going to ruin the reputation of the Paran household at the very moment we need to blaze as representatives of morality and tradition," Yudar continued. "You *must* keep your distance."

“Keshan is going to be my charioteer,” Jandu told him.

Yudar’s eyes widened. “You can’t be serious.”

“Of course I am.” Jandu walked away from him. He angrily pushed through the cloth flap and entered the main tent.

“Jandu, wait!” Yudar followed him. “Think with your head, not with your heart!”

Baram and Suraya suddenly entered the main tent, laughing, flushed from their evening exertions. War or no war, they were enraptured with their renewed marital state. But one look at Jandu’s expression had them both frozen in place.

“What’s going on?” Baram demanded. He let go of Suraya’s hand.

“Keshan has volunteered to be my charioteer.” Jandu stood beside Keshan defiantly. “And I have accepted.”

Yudar sank in his gilded chair. “That is unacceptable. The charioteers have pride, Jandu. They will be offended if we allow a Jegora to act as one of them.”

“I can give Jandu an advantage no one else can.” Keshan spoke so softly that Jandu could barely hear him. “I have the boon to summon the chariot of Mendraz, King of the Yashvas. And only a Yashva can drive it.”

“I’m sorry, Adaru.” Yudar spoke lowly, like he did when he was Royal Judge, passing an unfavorable judgment. “But we cannot sully our family’s name, not now when so much hangs in the balance. We must regain the Prasta throne first. Until I am king, you are Jegora and must remain in the Jegora part of the camp. We are all grateful for the sacrifices you have made. But if you love Jandu as much as we do, you will keep your distance from him, and allow him to find an honorable charioteer.”

Keshan bowed his head again. His lips had gone white. “I want nothing that will hurt Jandu or sully his name.”

Keshan moved to leave. To see Keshan accept defeat so easily sparked deep anger in Jandu. Yudar would, for the sake of honor, turn his back on a man who’d lost everything for helping their family. He grabbed Keshan by the wrist.

"You aren't going anywhere." Jandu was surprised by the calmness in his own voice. His heart hammered in his chest, but his words came out smoothly, almost dully. He looked his brother Yudar in the eye. "Keshan and I will not be separated."

"You need to leave Adaru alone!" Yudar shouted. "He will disgrace us all!"

A ringing filled Jandu's ears. "No, I will not leave him."

Yudar slammed his fist against the arm rest of his chair. "How dare you—"

"Keshan is my lover."

It was as if the world stopped spinning.

The eyes of his family turned toward him. The tent, the camp, the music and the chanting all seemed to fade. In the maddening quiet, Jandu heard the grunts of horses over twenty meters away.

"What?" Yudar stammered.

Jandu spoke without emotion, spoke as if stating the weather. "Keshan and I are lovers. We have been lovers for years. Nothing will separate us."

The terrible silence continued.

And then Baram roared. He exploded towards Keshan, grabbing him by the throat. "How dare you!"

Automatically Jandu's hand went to his sword and in one fluid motion he had the blade pressed against Baram's neck.

"—Let him go, Baram," Jandu said. "It's not his fault."

"He's corrupted you!" Baram hissed.

"It was my choice as much as his." Jandu watched revulsion wash across Baram's face.

Baram released Keshan and Keshan came to Jandu's side.

Jandu lowered his sword. Keshan, usually so self-assured, looked frightened. Jandu nodded to him. Whatever happened next, they would endure together.

Yudar had gone white at the first mention of the word "lover." Now color was coming back to his face, bright red and angry. Jandu watched the flush creep up his face, watched his eyes bulge.

“What have you done?” Yudar hissed. He stared at Jandu as if he were a stranger. “What have you done!”

“It doesn’t matter what Keshan and I do in private,” Jandu said. “What does matter is this war. Together, Keshan and I are the most powerful weapon in your arsenal. I need him beside me to win.”

“You have been lying to me all this time?” Yudar demanded.

Keshan stepped forward. Baram and Yudar looked at him with sheer disgust. “We have never lied, Yudar. We have never spoken falsely of our friendship.”

Yudar shook with rage. “There is a difference, Adaru, with saying you are friends and saying you are fucking each other!”

Silence filled the tent. Jandu was shocked by the hatred in Yudar’s voice. He had never heard Yudar swear before.

“Do not pretend for one moment that you bear no stains on your conscience, Yudar,” Jandu said lowly. “You gambled your family into exile. You staked me like a whore in a game of dice.” Jandu felt a sudden, nauseous wave of hatred, and had to focus on Yudar’s face. “Your crimes have been against *us*. Keshan and I have never hurt anyone with our relationship.”

“*Relationship*? You are talking about an act that is so sinful, I cannot even speak of it.” Yudar curled his lip in disgust.

“You need us to win this war,” Jandu said. “If Darvad takes the throne the entire nation will suffer. And you well know that Suraya and Baram will both be killed, which means you must swallow your pride and allow us to fight for greater morals today.”

“Don’t you *dare* speak of morality.” Yudar’s voice was low and dark. “I have dedicated my *life* to morality. And the fates have seen to test my dedication and fortitude by taking the brother that I love and turning him into a faggot.”

In three strides Jandu reached his brother’s throne. He grabbed Yudar by the breastplate and slammed his fist into his brother’s face, all reason gone, all fear and shame superceded

by rage. Yudar's hands flew to Jandu's throat and he dragged Jandu down onto the ground with him. The two scuffled and kicked at each other until Baram pulled them apart.

Yudar coughed and stood shakily. The left side of his face was red and blood trickled from his nose. He wiped his hands on his *dejaru*, as if they were stained.

"It chills my skin to touch you," he hissed. "I swear, I will not have your depravity sully the reputation of our army."

"Without me you have no army!" Jandu struggled against Baram's grip. "Mazar's *shartas* will destroy them in a day!"

Yudar glared at Jandu, no love left in his eyes. "I never want to see you again," he said hoarsely. "You are banished from my sight."

At Yudar's declaration, Keshan let out a small gasp and stepped back to the edge of the tent.

Jandu stared at his brother in shock. He knew Yudar would be appalled and angry. But he never imagined his brother to be so stupid that he would throw away Jandu's fighting skills to prove his point.

Suraya suddenly knelt at Yudar's feet. "Please don't do this to him!"

"Shut up, Suraya," Yudar snapped. He rubbed at his eyes as if a great pain were lodged there.

Baram broke the silence by punching a clay statue of the prophet Tarhandi on Yudar's side table, smashing it to pieces. "Jandu! I can't believe you did this to us!"

Yudar turned away. "Get out of here. Both of you. Before I do something more drastic."

"You cannot win this war without me!" Jandu shouted.

A tremor ran down Yudar's throat. He turned and looked over to where Jandu stood, blocking Keshan from Yudar's wrath.

Yudar spoke quietly. "I would rather lose this war, my pride, and my kingdom, than ever accept the disgusting deed you have committed behind my back. You have killed us all

today, Jandu. And if we lose, it is on your head, not mine. Think about that while you rut like an animal.” Yudar turned and left the tent.

## CHAPTER 50

JANDU STOOD STILL AS A STATUE, TOO SHOCKED TO MOVE. Suddenly, Suraya ran to him, gripping him fiercely, sobbing onto his breastplate.

“It’s all right,” Jandu said, rubbing her back, although he didn’t know why he said it, because it wasn’t true. “It’s over.”

Suraya’s reaction seemed almost strange to him. A deep, icy coldness welled up inside him. Yudar’s words were too cruel to ever be forgiven. If Jandu felt anything at all, it was almost relief, relief that Yudar could no longer break his heart, because he had no love left for his brother.

But he still loved Suraya, so he comforted her as if the insult was hers.

Baram’s eyes filled with tears, but he squeezed them constantly, as if letting tears fall would be an admission to something unacceptable. Baram said nothing to Jandu, but he spat on the ground by Keshan.

“You have taken my brother from me,” he growled. And then he left the tent.

Jandu wanted to go to Keshan. Keshan looked more fragile than he had ever seen him, standing by the tent flap, eyes dark with pain. Jandu disentangled Suraya’s arms from around him. He wiped her face and tried to give her a reassuring smile.

“At least he didn’t have us executed,” Jandu said. “Not that we would have stayed around for that.”

Suraya shook her head. “I can’t believe you told him! I just can’t believe it!” She wiped her eyes. “What will you do now?”

Jandu picked up his helmet, which had fallen off in his tussle with Yudar, and brushed off the sand. “We’ll go to the forest outside

the camp. I'm not leaving the battlefield, regardless of what Yudar says. If there's a way I can help from the sidelines, then I will do it."

Suraya nodded, as if making a decision herself. "Give me a few minutes. I'll pack you some provisions."

Jandu kissed the top of her head. "What would I do without you, Suraya?"

"I will speak with Baram," Suraya said. "Maybe he will see reason." She left the tent.

Jandu wanted to pull Keshan to him, but something about Keshan's expression stopped him.

"We should go quickly before word spreads," Keshan said.

Jandu nodded. It would only be a matter of time before everyone in camp knew what happened. Yudar would be required to give some explanation as to why his brother, the general of his army and fourth in line for the throne, was suddenly banished. Jandu doubted that Yudar would tell the whole truth, but he also knew Yudar well enough to know he wouldn't lie outright. So as Jandu numbly made his way towards his tent, he began to imagine what all these people would think when they saw him again. Right now, he was a respected leader of men, a hero about to begin a war for his family's honor. By tomorrow, he would be, at best, an exile shunned by his family, and at worst, a sexual deviant.

Inside Jandu's tent, he and Keshan worked quickly. They packed anything that could be eaten or that could kill. He stuffed his bedding and his clothes in a trunk. As he reached for his quiver, his hand hesitated, and he stared at the arrows inside with a sudden, absolute, sense of loss.

He wasn't going to fight tomorrow.

He wasn't going to kill Darvad, or get his revenge on Chandamar. He would have to watch his family fight Darvad, Mazar, and Tarek without him. All his expectations of sweet justice, revenge, victory, it had all, in one moment, been taken from him.

Jandu's sank to his knees. Yudar had stolen Jandu's freedom, gambled away Jandu's body, and now had robbed Jandu of his



right to justice. Jandu choked on this bitter, last betrayal of a man who he had once loved.

“Jandu?”

He quickly stood back up and took a breath. He had to remain calm, for Keshan's sake.

Keshan hesitated at the flap of his tent. “Are you ready?”

Jandu nodded. The two of them silently pried loose the tent stakes and folded the large fabric, leaving the furniture inside exposed to the dust and wind. Jandu rolled up the carpets and stacked them on his trunk. The few men still awake gathered around, watching by torchlight and asking questions which neither of them answered.

It was an awkward trek, the two of them carrying their belongings through the warm, breezy darkness of the camp. Suraya met them at the western gate and lighted their way into the thick forest with a torch. Jandu picked a soft clearing in the woods near the stream for camp, and Suraya started a fire as Jandu and Keshan pitched the tent and laid down the carpets. Suraya helped them unpack bed rolls and left them a large basket of food, several lamps, and wine.

Suraya fretted over the campsite like a mother hen, smoothing down the fabric of the flap, double checking the thickness of the bed rolls, and adding more branches to the fire before finally allowing Jandu to steer her home.

“Baram will worry if you're gone too long,” Jandu said, urging her through the woods back to the bright safety of the camp.

Suraya stepped carefully over the uneven surface of the dark forest. Jandu recalled the awful night she had tripped on just such a thick forest floor. The memory was like a physical pain.

At the gate, Suraya cried again. The guards watched the two of them as they embraced. Finally Jandu kissed Suraya's cheek and told her to go. He watched her small frame until it disappeared behind the tents of the infantry.

In the darkness, Jandu made his way back to Keshan.



By the time Jandu returned, Keshan had finished setting up camp. He had a pot of tea on the fire, and as soon as Jandu sat on one of the logs near the flames, Keshan handed him a cup. The tea was overly sweet, one of Keshan's bad habits whenever he prepared something, but Jandu decided now was not the time to tease Keshan about his sweet tooth. Keshan sipped at his tea, and then placed the ceramic cup on the ground. He covered his face with his hands and hunched over.

"Oh, Jandu, how can you bear to be with me?"

The question was so unexpected Jandu choked on his response. He crossed his arms and stared at Keshan.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Keshan's voice was muffled by his hands. "I've ruined you! I've destroyed your life!"

"Listen to me." Jandu crouched beside Keshan, and put his hand on Keshan's knee. "I'm fine, I'm alive. Nothing has been destroyed, other than my tolerance for Yudar's hypocrisy."

Keshan shook his head. "I thought I was here to make a difference. To change our society. It turns out I am nothing, Jandu. I'm a fool with delusions of grandeur." Keshan stood and stared at the distant lights of the Uru camp. "I had such unshakeable faith that my vision of the future would come true. And now, look at us! My brother is over there. And I cannot touch him. And here you are, living off leftovers with an untouchable lover, hiding from your own family." Keshan's expression broke, and the tears finally fell.

Keshan sat on the forest floor and sobbed into his hands. Jandu watched, unsure what comfort he could offer. There was nothing he could say that would alter the truth. They had sacrificed everything to be together.

Jandu sat beside him and let him cry. When Keshan's breathing finally slowed and his tears stopped, Jandu placed his hand on Keshan's lower back.

When Keshan didn't respond, Jandu continued. "Nothing that has happened changes the truth of your words. You told me

once that it would take the death of the entire Triya class to bring about this new era. We cannot change these people. We may not have imagined the cost we would pay to fulfill your vision. But we will make it happen, I swear to you.”

Keshan lifted his head from his hands, his eyes red-rimmed, his breathing ragged. “What if... What if I am wrong?”

“You’re not.”

“How can you know this?” Keshan cried. “How? When I don’t even know myself? I’ve ruined your life for nothing!”

Jandu moved his hand upwards to cup the back of Keshan’s neck. He forced Keshan to face him. “You’re not wrong.”

“Why not?” Keshan cried.

“Because... you’re Keshan.”

A flicker of annoyance flashed across Keshan’s eyes, and Jandu felt relief. Annoyance was a great improvement over fear. It was much more like the Keshan he knew.

“I believe in you,” Jandu said emphatically. “I believe you. That’s all that matters.”

Keshan pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them. Jandu left his hand on the back of Keshan’s neck, massaging the tense muscles there.

“I don’t feel like a man with a mission from God,” Keshan said quietly. “I don’t even feel like a man. I feel dead inside. Heartbroken.”

“What you feel right now will pass,” Jandu assured him. “It can’t change who you really are.”

“But if I am truly doing God’s work, then why does this hurt so badly? Why couldn’t I have protected you better?”

Jandu leaned forward and kissed Keshan’s cold lips. “You have saved my life, and my honor,” Jandu said with conviction. “You and I are destined to be together.”

Keshan leaned into Jandu’s shoulder. Their shadows flickered against the tree limbs. Jandu waited for Keshan to find his inspiration again.

For a moment, Jandu thought Keshan had fallen asleep. There was no sound from him, no movement. His face was buried into Jandu's neck. Jandu's arm muscles strained in such an extended position, and there was a twig or a rock cutting into his thigh, making him want to move. But he stayed there, waiting.

Finally, Keshan sniffed. "Remember when we were last in this forest?"

Jandu smiled. "That was the most exciting night of my life."

"I was a different person then." Keshan sounded sad.

"Me too." Jandu sighed. "But that doesn't change what we set out to do back then. You wanted justice. I wanted vengeance against my cousin. And here, at Terashu Field, we will have both."

Keshan looked up then. Lines of exhaustion creased his face. "I'm so sorry, Jandu. For everything."

"Don't be."

Keshan sighed. "What will we do now?"

Jandu was silent for a long time before answering.

"My whole life, I've been told to do one thing—to support my king, my brother, and I have done that." Jandu poked at the fire with a stick. "I've been through too much in the last three years to let anyone, even Yudar, stray me from my path. Yudar will be king and he will fulfill his oath to restore your caste or I will kill him myself."

A flicker of light suddenly appeared behind Keshan. Jandu jumped up, unsheathing his sword.

In silence, the ethereal glow moved closer. The light surrounded their camp, coming in from all sides, small pinpricks at first, growing larger.

For one irrational moment, Jandu thought Yudar had told the army that Jandu was an invert and they had formed a mob to kill him. But as the eerie blue light expanded, it took on the vague shape of men and women, marching towards them, surrounding their camp and standing still, as if on guard.

“What’s going on?” Jandu whispered to Keshan.

Keshan stood as well. He narrowed his eyes. “Yashvas.”

Suddenly, one of the lights burst into their world, so brightly that Jandu had to shield his eyes with his hand. He heard Keshan drop to his knees beside him.

“King Mendraz!” Keshan said.

Jandu dropped to his knees as well, peeking through his fingers at the demon as his glow lessened. In the human world, he was still painfully bright, especially in the heavy darkness of the forest.

“King Mendraz,” Jandu mumbled, lowering his head further. “You honor us with your presence.”

“Rise, Jandu and Keshan,” Mendraz spoke, his voice heavy and accented, filling Jandu’s ears painfully. Jandu stood once more. He helped Keshan stand beside him.

Mendraz offered them the sign of peace. “I have not forgotten your assistance, friends of the Yashva, and I am here now to honor that friendship. Our Yashva army will fight beside you in the war.”

Jandu felt stunned with the honor. In a thousand years of Marhavad history, no human army had ever been supported by the demons. To have Mendraz’ support now was the greatest tribute Jandu could ever have hoped for.

“My lord,” Jandu said, his voice heavy with emotion. “While you have honored me greatly with your allegiance, it is my sad duty to inform you that neither Keshan nor I will not be fighting tomorrow.”

Mendraz’s face seemed to frown, although it was always hard to tell with him, his eyes spinning, his blue-colored flesh flickering like phosphorescence.

“What has happened?” Mendraz demanded.

Jandu bowed his head. “My lord, I have been banished from Prince Yudar’s army after informing my brother that Keshan Adaru and I are lovers.”

Mendraz and the rest of the body-shaped lights in the forest flickered in silence for a long, agonizing minute. Then he said, “Does he not find Keshan’s Yashva blood suitable to your station as a prince? He is of very good lineage.” A note of affronted Yashva pride sounded in Mendraz’ voice.

Jandu sighed. “My lord, I have every intention of staying in this forest and protecting the Paran army as best I can. But I will not be able to fight with you on the battlefield.”

“Then we will not be on the battlefield either,” Mendraz stated. “We are allied with you, not your brother. My personal guards will stay here in the forest and protect you, and should you join the battle, they will be with you.”

Keshan bowed low. “Thank you, my lord, for your support in our time of need.”

Jandu wondered why the other Yashva did not materialize. They remained shrouded figures of light, hovering between the human and Yashva worlds. Jandu realized that half of them would probably be fighting in this war, against their will. Mazar’s knowledge of shartas alone could call all of them into action.

Mendraz made the sign of peace once more. “Be well, brave Jandu. Come here, Keshan.”

Keshan approached Mendraz, head down. Mendraz reached out and pulled Keshan into his arms. Jandu stepped back as light blazed through the Yashva’s body and into Keshan’s. Thunderous words crashed through the air around them as Mendraz and Keshan burned in the darkness. Jandu clamped his hands over his ears. Alarm filled Jandu.

“You are forgiven for your offence against Firdaus,” Mendraz said.

And then Mendraz let go, and stepped backwards, his light fading as he shrank back into the Yashva kingdom. He joined the hundreds of other lights surrounding them. They did not disappear, however. Their camp remained washed in a bluish light as they stood guard around Jandu and Keshan’s tent.

“Are you all right?” Jandu asked, gripping Keshan’s shoulders.

Keshan look startled, his eyes wide. But then he smiled.

“Wait a moment.”

“For what?”

Keshan closed his eyes, raised his arms up, and then faded from sight. Jandu squinted in the darkness, but could only see a glimmer of light where Keshan had stood. A moment later, Keshan returned, laughing.

“I’m back!” Keshan cried.

“What do you mean?”

“I can enter the Yashva kingdom again!” Keshan laughed, and curled his arm around Jandu’s waist, pulling him close.

Jandu embraced Keshan, nuzzling his sweet-smelling hair. “A celestial army! Immortal Yashva! We would have been invincible.”

Keshan finally smiled, looking like the self-assured man Jandu fell in love with on his wedding day. “We still will be.”

## CHAPTER 51

THERE WAS NO HORIZON—ONLY AN OCEAN OF MEN.

Tarek took in the sheer size of the Paran forces. Over fifty thousand soldiers stretched in formation from one end of the battlefield to the other. Their troops clustered in the center, tapering to flanks that ended at the edge of the forest and the eastern trench. Tense, warriors shifted from foot to foot, their armor glinting as the rising sun reflected off highly polished metal. Tarek felt the army in his bones. Hundreds of glittering chariots, thousands of cavalry, and an endless array of faces, framed by gold, silver, and bronze helmets, weapons raised, ready for the first conch shell to signal the beginning of the battle.

But for all the size and grandeur of the Paran army, the Uru forces were greater. Tarek looked east at the line of Darvad's troops, awed by the magnitude of their own numbers. Behind him stood the Dragewan army, under his command and in tight formation. Seven charioted archers led each unit of infantry under Dragewan banners. Anant bowed slightly to Tarek as they made eye contact.

The night before, Mazar had assigned Tarek and his army to the right flank. Tarek would lead an offensive against the Paran left flank, and clear a path for Mazar to capture Yudar. Once Yudar was theirs, the war would be over.

Tarek turned to confirm Darvad was safely protected. He stood in his chariot, fiercely guarded on all sides by Bandari soldiers. Chandamar, under their black banners, made up the center column along with the Tiwari army, united under Mazar and his white standard. Penemar and Pagdesh took



position at the left flank. Tarek had to trust they were in proper formation—the straight line of soldiers prevented a clear line of sight to the edge of the battlefield.

As the last of the soldiers, cavalry, and chariots established their positions, Tarek faced the Paran forces once more. They were too far away to make out individual faces, but Tarek could see the colored banners that separated the five units on the Paran side. The Jagu Mali troops were dead center. The left flank was made up of the Karuna army, under Suraya's father. The right flank consisted of the small armies of Jezza and Marshav, being led by Baram since Tarek had killed both their lords. And Afadi's soldiers, under Lord Indarel, protected Yudar from behind the central forces.

Tarek strained to see who led the Paran army. Last night, spies reported that Jandu had been banished for his relationship with Keshan Adaru, and would not be fighting. While spontaneous celebrations broke out across the Uru camp, and Darvad had wept for joy, Tarek felt sick and disappointed—sick that Jandu was more loyal to Keshan than Keshan's former allies, and disappointed that Tarek would not be fighting Jandu as an equal, as he had always wished.

But the loss was surely more terrible for the Paran troops, who now lacked their greatest shartic warrior. The Uru spies had been unable to discern who took Jandu's place at the head of the Paran forces. But Tarek could now see Rishak Paria's standard flying where Jandu's would have been.

The first conch shell pierced the morning silence. A tidal wave of sound surged forth as every warrior in a chariot raised their conch shells and blew. Tarek pushed his helmet low on his head, reached for his own shell, adding to the resonant whole. As the drums joined in, goose bumps jumped up on Tarek's flesh.

Tarek uttered a prayer to his bow, and then raised his arm in signal to his men.

“Forward Dragewan!”

The horses whinnied and rushed forward. Dust rose on the battlefield as hundreds of horses and chariots and men turned up the recently ploughed soil. Tarek's charioteer, Satish, whipped the horses forward. Through the dim gray cloud of dust, Tarek could barely make out the moving line of the advancing army.

The Paran foot soldiers crashed against the Uru army first. Immediately, skirmishes broke out as both forces fought to punch through the center line. Tarek blew his conch, signaling his men around the fray and into the Paran's left flank.

Enemy foot soldiers threw themselves out of the way of his chariot, and Tarek shot down anyone close to his car. His seven commanders and their cavalry stayed tight behind him. Their speed outmatched the foot soldiers, who fell back to hold an escape route for the Dragewan cavalry and chariots. Tarek blew his conch once more and shouted to Satish for more speed. The horses broke into a frenzied gallop. The chariot bounced and jerked over the ground and great plumes of dust rose in its wake.

Tarek braced his feet against the edges of his chariot as they surged upon the orange banners of the Karuna army. Arrows rained down upon Tarek's chariot canopy and clattered against his armor. Their whistles were lost under the first shrieks of horses and dying men as Tarek cut through the foot soldiers and returned a storm of arrows of his own.

He drove a wedge into the center of the Karuna flank. Through the dust and chaos he caught sight of Lord Nadaru. Tarek drew his bowstring taut, steadied his mind, and then loosed his arrow. It sang as it flew from him, and sank deep into Lord Nadaru's throat.

With Lord Nadaru dead, Tarek and his commanders savaged the Karuna army, slaughtering the commanders to a man. The clash of weapons and screams of men and beasts deafened him. Chaya infantry fell beneath Tarek's chariot; a mulch of blood, filth, and flesh caked the wheels. The Karuna cavalry

splintered before Tarek's assault. Tarek's blood pounded in his ears. He led his army deeper into the enemy line. All around his chariot, bodies writhed as his own foot soldiers clashed with Karuna infantry.

Tarek caught a brief glimpse of the red banner of Yudar's chariot. A heady excitement rushed through him.

Now was Mazar's moment to charge through the gap and claim Yudar. Tarek scanned the gray horizon for Mazar's white standard.

But the general was nowhere to be seen. Something had gone wrong. None of the other Uru forces were there to take advantage of the gap Tarek had won. He and his cavalry would have to take Yudar themselves.

The sound of Mazar's conch broke Tarek's concentration. Mazar blew a short succession of notes, followed by a long wail; a call for retreat.

Mazar blew the notes again. Tarek swore under his breath and turned his own forces back to the Uru line. He looked yearningly one last time at Yudar's banner, before cutting through the remains of the Karuna defense and racing to Mazar.

When Tarek finally caught sight of his general, Mazar looked like a prophet, with his flowing white beard, his sparkling silver armor, his enormous helmet, and his blazing white chariot. He was very far from where he was supposed to have been in the morning's plans. He looked furious. He pointed across the lines of battling troops and Tarek saw why he had been recalled. A Paran banner blazed in the midst of the Uru defensive lines.

"Support Penemar's army! They're collapsing! The Parans are going to capture Darvad!"

A pure, absolute fear shot through Tarek's body. "East!" he ordered Satish.

His chariot plunged into carnage and his men followed him. They cut down any obstacle, Suya and Triya alike, without

challenge or bravado. He surged into the whirling madness where the Parans had broken through the Uru's defenses in pursuit of Darvad.

Arrows fell like rain upon Tarek's car, nicking his flesh and hammering his armor. One arrow sank deep into his thigh. He swore and tore it free. Suddenly Tarek jolted forward as a Paran chariot rammed his own. Fear coursed through Tarek as he fell with the chariot. The horses screamed.

Tarek rolled to avoid being smashed by the standard mast. The ground trembled with foot beats. He scrambled to his feet. His horses screamed to be cut loose from the tipped chariot. Satish, bloody but alive, chopped through the horses' harness.

Men surged upon Tarek and he fought through the sea of soldiers. He was drenched in sweat and blood. Weariness crept to the edges of his senses but he pushed it back.

At the center of the melee Tarek saw the large, golden figure of Baram Paran. Baram was war incarnated. Penemar infantry lunged at him, only to be crushed under the weight of his mace. Even amongst the screeches of horses, Tarek could hear the revolting crack of their bones breaking beneath Baram's blows.

Baram looked up and saw Tarek, and a sneer crossed his face.

"Suya whore!" Baram cried. He leapt from his chariot car and charged Tarek.

Tarek raised his sword, blocking the blow that Baram hammered down.

The impact shattered through Tarek's arm, vibrating his joints. Tarek dodged and swung but Baram blocked his blow effortlessly. Baram looked filthy but he didn't seem to carry even half of the exhaustion that burdened Tarek.

A loose horse galloped past them but they only shifted slightly. Baram snarled in feral rage, roaring as he swung his blade at Tarek. Tarek blocked the blow again but nearly buckled beneath the force.

Suddenly thunder cracked the sky and a vibrating hum sang through the air. The world seemed to darken. And then light burst to the right of them. A storm of small, shimmering particles fell down upon them all, a fine white powder that glistened like glass, but when it touched him, nausea infiltrated his body.

Tarek hunched over and threw up explosively. The sudden sickness was so violent he nearly dropped his sword. He gagged and wiped his mouth.

To his relief, Baram, too, hunched over, gagging loudly and horribly. He desperately clung to his sword and tried to swing it at Tarek, but then he leaned over again and vomited.

Tarek tried to summon the sharta Firdaus once taught him, to fend off the effects of other magical weapons, but the nausea continued to pulse through him and was too strong for him to focus on anything else. Tarek saw that every man within one hundred paces crumpled to the ground, retching uncontrollably.

This was not a sharta Mazar had planned to use today. It had to be the Parans. Fear washed through Tarek's senses. He had to get his army to their feet, they had to hold.

The ground shook as the Paran cavalry stormed over the prone bodies of the afflicted. Within seconds, Paran troops were upon them, slaughtering the sick Uru who wallowed on the ground. Tarek forced himself to stand and gasped out to his men.

"Stand and fight!"

The Penemar once again failed to hold the line, but Tarek's own troops rallied, fighting through their sickness. And the Paran cavalry began to fall back. Tarek's stomach calmed. He turned, searching for Baram, but he was too late. Baram had taken a loose horse and escaped with the Paran troops. Tarek's victory against Baram would not come today.

But even so, Tarek took a moment to breathe deeply and feel satisfied. Despite the fact that the Parans had used a celestial weapon, the Dragewan army had defended Darvad and

held the flank. The Penemar now fell in alongside Tarek's own men, killing the stragglers of the retreating Paran forces.

Tarek slipped in vomit and blood. He barely caught his balance, and only then realized how bone-weary he was.

"My lord!" Anant appeared, leaping from his chariot to Tarek's side. He steadied Tarek with a firm grip. "Let me take you to camp and see to your leg, my lord."

Tarek looked down. His right trouser leg was red from blood loss.

"I will, after I secure this breach—"

"It is secured, my lord," Anant interrupted him. Dirt caked Anant's face and armor. Tarek could only clearly see Anant's white teeth. "Commander Hadiv will ensure that our men support the Penemar infantry."

Tarek didn't have enough energy to argue. He stepped into Anant's chariot. As they made their way north, around the army to the Uru camp, Penemar's men chanted Tarek's name.

It echoed across the flank like a religious cry. Dragewan soldiers pounded their shields and shouted his name, and conch shells blew out victory to alert the rest of the Uru army that the breach had been secured.

Tarek basked in the glory. His pride felt like it would burst through his armor. He smiled and shook his fist in victory towards the men of Dragewan and blew his conch as well, a triumphant note that he knew Darvad could hear even deep in the center of the battlefield.



That evening, Tarek limped from the medical camp to his own tent to change out of his blood-stained and torn clothing. His leg was numb, stitches and a liniment bandage mingling to create a stiff, tingling sensation where the arrowhead had been removed.

As Tarek made his way in the fading sunset, he watched dozens of women and medics file out of camp to stack the Uru

dead for funeral pyres. The sounds of wailing already echoed through the blustery evening breeze.

Out in the forest, an eerie glow illuminated the trees and cast unnatural shadows on the ground. The same light had been seen the night before. Tarek overheard soldiers whispering that the lights were from the prophets, watching over the Urus. Others feared that the forest was inhabited by Yashvas, and they would all die for disturbing them. Spies scouting the area had found nothing other than what seemed like a ring of illumination, surrounded by foreboding darkness.

Back in his tent, Tarek changed into a loose dark dejaru and threw a yellow harafa over his shoulders. His tent flap suddenly opened and Anant walked in, beaming a smile.

Anant clearly had not been back long. His face was still blackened with dirt and dried blood, and his hair was pressed damply to his scalp, dark with sweat.

Tarek didn't care. He hooked his hand around the back of Anant's neck, kissing him with fierce joy. Anant's body responded immediately, grinding into Tarek's groin.

"You were magnificent today," Tarek said.

A smile lit Anant's face. "And you, my lord. The entire Uru army is talking about your skills. You have made Dragewan legendary."

"We would have been heroes if we had just been left to capture Yudar." Tarek shook his head. "He was in my sights! I could have had him!"

"Yes, but at what cost?" Anant smiled ruefully. "It was masterful. But we paid a heavy price for that maneuver."

Tarek frowned. "How many died?"

"Almost all of our Dragewan lower caste infantry were killed by the Karuna Triya."

Tarek's mood darkened. The only way he could bear his rage towards Darvad for not challenging the rules of battle was by not thinking about it. Now the anger bubbled to the surface, choking him with regret.

“I should have forced him,” Tarek said to himself. “I should have been adamant.”

“He doesn’t care,” Anant said, placing his hand on Tarek’s arm.

“Yes, he does! Darvad wants the laws changed.”

Anant narrowed his eyes. “I find that hard to believe. Otherwise he would have done it.”

“He had many things to think about, he didn’t have time,” Tarek said. “If it is anyone’s fault, it is mine. I should have pressed him.”

Anant shook his head. “You’ll take the blame for him for anything, won’t you?”

A rush of outrage made Tarek’s hands curl into fists. He breathed slowly to still his temper. “I’d do anything for him.”

Anant looked pained, but he nodded. “Don’t shoulder more burden than is yours, my lord.”

A soldier entered the tent and announced the arrival of the king. Anant quickly stood at attention, his expression blank as Darvad entered the tent.

Tarek turned to face Darvad, who greeted him with a grand smile. When he saw Anant, Darvad’s smile faded.

Anant bowed low. “Your Royal Highness.”

Tarek sighed. “You can go, commander.”

“Yes, my lord.” Anant walked stiffly past Darvad, but at the entrance, he turned and gave Tarek a small smile before he left.

“Who is he?” Darvad asked. Uninvited, he plopped onto Tarek’s bed. He looked weary, despite the fact that he hadn’t fought that day, protected within his shield of Bandari soldiers.

“One of my commanders,” Tarek said. He poured a glass of wine for Darvad and one for himself. “He just reported that our Suya and Chaya soldiers suffered heavy losses today. He wanted to know if the rules can be challenged.”

“For God’s sake. Let’s not start on that again.” Darvad collapsed backwards on the bed and rubbed his eyes. “I came here for a respite, not a lecture.”



“But Darvad,” Tarek pressed, “if we ask for the rules to change, we are at an advantage. We have more men than the Parans.”

“—Stop it. Just stop it!” Darvad shouted, standing up suddenly. He looked furious. “You have become as annoying as Keshan!”

Tarek took a step back. “I apologize.”

Darvad grimaced. “Once my throne is secure, I will do whatever the hell it is you want me to do. That’s my promise. Do you accept it?”

“I accept.”

“Perfect.” Darvad smiled then, a tired smile, and Tarek wondered why it no longer mattered if he himself was happy, it only mattered that Darvad was. He sat down beside Darvad, and listened to his jokes, and ignored the churning ache of his own conscience.

It was something Tarek was getting very good at.

## CHAPTER 52

In the daylight, Jandu's Yashva guardians faded, but they did not disappear.

They remained vigilant, barely perceptible as transparent shifts of light. If he concentrated, he could make out vague faces on some. Others were mere hints, existing as pockets of warped landscape.

Keshan told Jandu that their ability to appear in the human world depended on their own strengths. Some could materialize in the human world at will. Others were limited to the human world by their shartic forms alone, watching humanity pass by, summoned only by the dangerous words which would transform them into reckless energy.

On the first day of the war, Keshan left Jandu and spoke with their Yashva allies from their own kingdom. He returned with a look of triumph.

"We have almost all of the weapons here," Keshan told Jandu.

Jandu peered at their ghostly faces in interest. "Really? I always wondered what the guy who turned into the Manarisharta looked like."

Keshan laughed. "Manari is female. And, like Zandi, she looks better in her shartic form."

Jandu brimmed with curiosity about his new allies, but the battle quickly drew his attention.

Directly above their campsite, Keshan had found a thick horizontal branch on a massive banyan tree that provided a sweeping view of the battlefield while keeping them hidden from sight. They had both watched the battle unfold on day

one, as Dragewan nearly took Yudar's position. Jandu sagged in relief when Tarek was forced to retreat to defend Darvad.

On the morning of the second day, Jandu awoke to find Keshan already perched in the tree, surveying the early formations of the armies as he played absentmindedly with one of Jandu's arrows. Keshan was a dexterous tree climber, moving like a monkey between the branches as it suited him. But Jandu had no natural skill. He climbed slowly, cursing under his breath as he scratched his arms on branches and struggled to keep his balance.

Jandu swung his legs over the branch to sit beside Keshan, but clung to the tree trunk for support.

"Did you eat the cheese I left you?" Keshan asked. He focused on the battlefield.

"No."

Keshan frowned, but Jandu just smiled. "I have no appetite. If I eat anything, I'm going to be sick and fall out of this hazardous perch."

Keshan grinned. "Balance is part of being a good warrior. Didn't Mazar teach you that?"

Jandu shoved Keshan playfully, but Keshan was far too comfortable sitting in tree branches to be disturbed by a little movement. He made as if to shake Jandu from the tree, but then both Jandu and he turned towards the battlefield as the first conch of the morning bellowed out.

The sight of the armies filled Jandu with longing. He wanted to be out there so badly it hurt like a physical wound.

"There's Mazar's chariot." Jandu pointed to the silver car at the center of the Uru line.

Keshan watched Jandu with a frown.

"What?" Jandu asked.

"The only way to win this war is to defeat your weapons master," Keshan said. "Jandu, he is your enemy now."

"I know." Jandu watched the white banners of Mazar's chariot flutter in the wind.

“You know it in your mind. But your love for him lingers in your heart.”

“Of course it does.” Jandu sighed. “The man has been like a father to me. I will always have compassion for him, even if he is now my enemy.”

“You must kill your compassion,” Keshan said.

Their conversation was cut off by the sudden roar of a thousand conches, blasting through the air to call the start of the day’s battle.

Yudar had appointed Suraya’s brother, Rishak Paria, to be the general of his army after Jandu’s banishment. Although young, Rishak was an experienced warrior. Still, Jandu worried that Nadaru’s death the day before would affect Rishak’s judgment. No doubt Suraya was devastated by the loss of her father. But now Jandu watched his brother-in-law lead the Paran army proudly, his chariot bursting into the center of the battlefield with confident speed.

Jandu monitored the Paran flank and was relieved to see that Rishak had refortified the line to prevent a repeat of yesterday’s breach. Far across the battlefield, Jandu noted that Mazar placed a majority of his cavalry to the right flank and was once again attempting to split the Paran forces into two.

As the battle progressed, Mazar’s forces pushed into the Parans with a great thrust. The full strength of the Uru force charged past the forest edge to hammer into the Paran left flank. Chaya and Suya infantry fell in huge numbers. And far from the forest edge, Rishak led the Paran offensive, carving deep into the center of the Uru line.

Amongst the Paran warriors, Jandu caught sight of Afadi’s banner on one of the chariots and expected to see Indarel. Instead, he spied the lanky figure of Abiyar, struggling to take aim as the vehicle jostled over the rutted field.

Horror rushed through Jandu, and it must have shown, for Keshan reached over and touched the side of his face.

“What’s wrong?”

"Abiyar is out there!" Jandu couldn't believe Indarel's carelessness, allowing the boy his own chariot. The idea of someone so inexperienced amongst all the battle-hardened warriors sickened Jandu. "He's too young."

"He's a Triya warrior," Keshan said. "He would be offended to hear you speak of him this way."

"I have no doubt that one day he will grow into a great warrior," Jandu countered. "But not now. For God's sake, he's just a boy!"

"And how old were you when you first fought for Mazar?"

"Eighteen."

"Seventeen." Keshan smiled. "I remember hearing about it. What makes you think Abiyar feels differently at his age than you did?"

Jandu shook his head. "I've always been talented. But Abi needs so much work."

Keshan looked out at Abiyar's chariot and nodded. "Well, inexperienced or not, he seems to be holding his own."

Jandu watched Abiyar's chariot follow behind Rishak as they cut through the enemy flanks, heading towards Darvad. Only his anxiety for Abiyar's well-being tempered Jandu's growing excitement over the mounting successes of his army.

As more Uru cavalry galloped along the edge of the forest, Jandu realized they were in range of his arrows. Jandu wondered if he could jump down to fetch Zandi without hurting himself.

As he looked down, gauging the distance, Jandu caught one of the shimmering figures beneath him burst into light and then disappear.

"What was that?" Jandu asked.

Keshan's eyes narrowed. "More importantly, *who* was that? Someone recited a sharta."

The sky charged and wretched. A loud crack of thunder

boomed overhead. The air surrounding Mazar caught afire and blew outwards, covering dozens of soldiers in flames. The air reeked of scorched flesh.

To Jandu's amazement, Mazar summoned the sharta again, pushing his advantage to divide the Paran line. The flames spread outwards, blackening the air and creating a wind that sucked towards the conflagration, pulling soldiers to their deaths. The air grayed with ash.

Jandu started the counter-curse, but Keshan stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Save your strength, it's too late. He's firing another one!"

Jandu concentrated on Mazar's moving chariot, hoping to feel the sharta. Goosebumps raised on his skin. He recited the sharta backwards, the counter-curse flowing into his consciousness after years of training.

Keshan watched his fellow Yashva, and saw another disappear. "That was Tarhi. It's the Tarhisharta."

Jandu closed his eyes and focused on the words of the Tarhisharta. His mouth filled with blood. His head pulsed with pressure. He spat the final word out and watched as nothing happened on the battlefield.

"I did it!" Jandu cried happily. He spat blood.

"Jandu! Another one is coming!"

Jandu gripped the tree trunk and uttered the counter-curse again. His head ached with the effort.

He broke the sharta and immediately, the Yashva Tarhi reappeared beneath him. Tarhi looked up at Jandu and smiled. Jandu smiled in return.

"Got you back," Jandu said affectionately.

Tarhi uttered something incomprehensible in the Yashva tongue and Keshan burst into laughter.

Tarhi turned and pointed to another Yashva.

"It's Barunaz," Keshan said. Keshan closed his eyes and began uttering the Barunazsharta counter-curse.

The air felt brittle and snapped like sparks crackling from dry wood. Jandu could not stop. His guardians flickered into shartic weapons at a disheartening pace.

All day Jandu spoke with a bloody mouth, a pounding headache, and trembling muscles as he and Keshan countered every sharta that Mazar released. Jandu had never appreciated the value of such a role. Away from the chaos and threat of the battlefield he could concentrate on just the shartas and defend the Paran troops far more successfully than if he had been among them.

Beside him Keshan broke shartas quietly, his expression rapt with concentration. To anyone who didn't know him, it looked as though Keshan meditated. But the beads of sweat on his forehead and the slow trickle of blood from Keshan's nose told a different story.

Jandu passed into a trance, breaking sharta after sharta, oblivious to the world around him. At one point, he opened his eyes, and watched several Paran soldiers run underneath their tree, fleeing the battle through the forest. Loose horses charged through their camp, and later, Uru soldiers carried an injured comrade through the forest and deposited him among the leaves. Jandu's Yashva guard turned to eye the soldiers warily.

Keshan seemed oblivious to everything below them. Suspended, mouth unceasingly moving, he countered shartas until his voice grew ragged. At sunset, three shartas manifested at once. Keshan wiped blood from his nose, flicked it upon the arrow in his hands, and threw it into the air with a hoarse curse.

The world burst into light, startling the animals. Soldiers shielded their eyes. A vortex opened the sky. The wind howled, pulling the shartas away from the field as the last sliver of sun vanished. The Draya priests sounded their conches, declaring the end of the day's battle.

Jandu watched, stunned. He never knew a person could dismantle several shartas at once. But the toll was clear. Keshan leaned forward and almost pitched out of the tree. Jandu shot a hand out to steady him.

“Keshan?”

Keshan’s face was white. “Need to rest.”

Keshan climbed down and Jandu practically fell after him. Once on the ground he lay panting in the leaves, too tired to move. Keshan draped his arm over Jandu’s chest.

Jandu fell asleep immediately. It was dark by the time they roused enough energy to wash in the river. They fell on their cold leftovers of cheese and rice like starving animals. Even after bathing and eating, Jandu’s body felt stretched and weak. His chest felt bruised. He barely formed grunts in response to Keshan’s questions.

As the cry of mourners permeated the darkness, and the creak of the carts loading the dead for funeral pyres rolled by their camp, Jandu and Keshan made tea and sat close together, staring at the flames and saying nothing.

Jandu heard the rustling of branches as someone approached. He recognized the three Uru men he had observed earlier that afternoon.

The glow around Jandu and Keshan’s camp surged to a blazing ring, and three Yashva slipped through the barrier into the human world. These Yashva weren’t beautiful like Mendraz, or Umia. They were feral things, ugly, covered in teeth and with unnaturally extended jaw lines. They had the size and bulk of Zandi, but without any of her female charm. They pounced upon the terrified Uru soldiers and gripped them by their throats.

“Wait!” Jandu jumped to his feet. He held out his hand to the demons.

The Yashvas’ spinning eyes whirled rapidly in their excitement. “What shall we do with them, my lord?” one of the Yashvas asked.

The Uru men wept and writhed in the demons’ grasp.

Jandu unsheathed his sword. “What do you want?” he demanded of the Uru men.

A tall, gaunt Chaya brought his shaking hands together in the sign of peace.



“Please do not kill us, Prince Jandu! We mean you no harm! We have fled the Uru army.”

Keshan stood as well. He spoke in Yashva. The demons released the men and then faded back into glowing lights as the humans prostrated themselves before Jandu and Keshan.

“Forgive us!” another soldier said. His face was dark with dirt and blood. “I have a family, my lord...there is no one to care for them if I die. We heard you were here in the forest with Keshan.”

Suddenly Jandu realized he was looking at Lazro, Tamarus Arundan's son. It seemed Keshan, too, had just recognized Lazro, because he started forward but Jandu held Keshan back. Such an action would be an easy way for Darvad to place spies in their camp.

Jandu frowned at Lazro, trying to radiate Triya regality. “Are you such a coward that you would desert your army? Where is your pride?”

The tall man next to Lazro lifted his head and glared. “We are not cowards!”

“Keshan, please believe me. You told me yourself about the rules of battle but I didn't understand.” Lazro held his shoulder tighter and Jandu could see blood seeping out between his fingers. “Bravery is foolishness in the face of a sharta. I am an honorable man, but I am not a fool. I will return to my family in one piece. There is no honor in dying like a dog on that field and leaving my father alone.”

Jandu stared down at the men with a sinking sensation in his gut. He felt ashamed for his own family's role in determining the rules of war. He resheathed his sword and brought his hands together in the sign of peace.

“Join us at the fire,” he offered, making room for the men. “Lord Keshan can see to your wound, Lazro.”

The men prostrated themselves low, and then approached the fire, thanking Jandu profusely. Jandu caught Keshan's eye briefly, and Keshan raised an eyebrow at him.

Jandu served the men the leftovers of their rice and tea while Keshan rummaged in their tent for his herbs.

“What are your friend’s names, Lazro?” Jandu asked.

“I am Warash, Lord Jandu,” the man’s tall companion said.

“I am Ohendru, my lord,” the third man spoke.

Jandu nodded. Keshan emerged from the tent and then sat beside Lazro. He stared at the young man’s wound, but did not touch him.

Jandu watched Keshan nervously hesitate on the edge of action. He clearly waited for permission, but Lazro was obviously in too much pain to realize he needed to give it. Finally, Jandu spoke.

“If Keshan is to tend to your arm, he needs to touch you.”

Lazro nodded.

“Do you understand what you are doing by allowing him to touch you? Are you willing to become tainted?”

Lazro nodded again. “My lord, I think my wound will hurt me more than Lord Keshan’s tainted caste.”

Jandu and Keshan both laughed. Jandu’s tension subsided. He leaned back against his log as Keshan whispered shartic prayers and rubbed herbs into Lazro’s wounds. Jandu asked the men about the war, about the Uru camp, and about Darvad, and they honestly responded, enthusiastically revealing details about the layout of the camp.

The three soldiers helped Jandu and Keshan wash their pots and tend to the fire, so it seemed natural for Jandu to offer them a place to stay in the camp.

“I cannot guarantee anything about the future,” Jandu warned. “But as long as you are in my camp, I will protect you, deserter or no. Caste means nothing to me now, so you will be respected here for your own merits.” As he said the words, Jandu couldn’t help but smile. Five years ago, he would have laughed out loud if someone had predicted he would have said such a thing. Jandu went to his tent, and returned with a single blanket. He gave it to Lazro.

"You may use this blanket if you would like," he offered. He watched the soldiers carefully. "Keshan and I sleep together."

The soldiers looked at each other immediately. Lazro blanched, but then nodded his acceptance. The other two soldiers seemed to follow his lead. They busied themselves with cleaning the campsite, but didn't raise a word of objection.

"Good night," Jandu offered, letting out the breath he was holding.

"Good night, Prince," Warash responded. Lazro and Ohendru also bid them a good night.

Keshan entered the tent quietly after Jandu, lighting his way with a butter lamp. After Jandu and Keshan settled themselves under their remaining blanket, Jandu turned to Keshan, and found him grinning.

"What?" Jandu whispered.

Keshan buried his face against Jandu's shoulder to muffle his laughter.

"What's so funny?" Jandu demanded.

Keshan's eyes danced with joy. "That was a very subtle speech."

"I was testing their loyalty."

"Good decision. Testing the loyalty of enemy deserters we just met by declaring we're sexual deviants." Keshan laughed again.

"What would you have me do? Turn them away? If the Urus find them, they'll be executed. If the Parans find them, they'll become slaves. I'm willing to give them a blanket and my protection. But in exchange, they have to accept that we're together, and that you are not beneath them. That's all I ask."

Keshan kissed Jandu. His tongue flirted briefly in Jandu's mouth, and then pulled away as he grinned once more.

"Remember when I told you that the world would change?"

Jandu nodded. "Yes. I'm glad to see you are back to remembering and believing it as well."

“What you did out there, Jandu, was light the pyre on this era. The death of this age just officially begun. The Triya are over, starting with you, me, and those three frightened men.”

Jandu snorted. “What a pitiful beginning to the new age.”

“Wait until you see what we can become.”

“I believe in you.” Jandu pulled Keshan closer, relishing the heat of Keshan’s body.

“Believe in us. You are the one who has begun it now.”



“Jandu!”

Jandu groggily awoke from his slumber. For a moment, he thought he was back in the mountains of Pagdesh again. But then he opened his eyes and saw Keshan asleep beside him, curled up in a ball and hogging all of the blanket. Jandu gently tucked a lock of hair behind Keshan’s ear, and then fumbled in the darkness for his sandals.

“Jandu!”

Jandu recognized Baram’s voice. He rushed out of the tent to see his massive brother struggling against half a dozen Yashva who had him pinned him to the ground. The three Uru deserters stood over Baram’s prone body, spears leveled. Their loyalty warmed Jandu’s heart, and calmed his nerves about this impromptu visit from his brother.

“He’s all right,” he assured the men. Warash and the others immediately lowered their weapons. The Yashva, however, held on.

“Jandu!” Baram cried, sounding almost frightened.

“Let him go,” Jandu said in broken Yashva. He had learned that much from Keshan, at least.

The Yashva immediately released Baram, and bowed to Jandu before slipping back into their world.

Baram jumped up angrily, his expression black with rage and fear.

“What the fuck was that!” He swung his fist at the ghostly bodies, but his arm simply passed through their light.

Jandu yawned, trying to pretend that his heart wasn't hammering in his chest. "Mendraz, King of the Yashvas, has offered his allegiance to me. They are my bodyguard."

Baram's eyed widened. Jandu could see his excitement. But then Baram turned and glared at the deserters. "And who are these people?"

"My men," Jandu said.

"They look like deserters," Baram said, scowling at them.

"They're mine now." Jandu crossed his arms. "Have a seat."

He and Baram moved towards the low embers of the fire. Warash, Lazro and Ohendru watched warily.

"Would you give my brother and I five minutes alone?" Jandu asked them. The three soldiers bowed, then sidled off into the darkness.

Jandu fed branches onto the coals of the fire as Baram took a seat. Baram sniffed at the empty cup beside the log, and then tossed it aside.

"What are you eating?" Baram asked gruffly.

Jandu shook his head. Of course Baram's first question would be about food. "Rice and cheese that Suraya gave us when we left. We're almost out."

Baram didn't look at him. "Here." He stuck out his hand, in which miraculously had appeared a roll stuffed with meat and yogurt. Jandu took the roll without a word. He tore it in two and set one half aside for Keshan. Baram fed twigs into the embers of the fire and little flames leapt up. As the light increased, Jandu noticed the bandage wrapped around Baram's left bicep.

"How's Suraya?" Jandu asked.

"Mad at me," Baram said. "She called me an asshole. I guess I have you to blame for encouraging such foul language."

Jandu didn't respond.

Baram picked at the log beneath him. "She's also refusing any sexual favors until I apologize to you."

Jandu snorted. "I've been your loving brother for twenty-nine years, and you repudiate me, but Suraya refuses to sleep with you for twenty four hours, and you are suddenly contrite."

Baram smiled slightly. "Well, she's hotter than you."

Jandu sighed. "Baram, what do you want to say? It's late, and I'm tired."

Baram moved closer to him, then crushed him in a hug.

Jandu's roll leaked yogurt down the front of his cotton shirt. He was annoyed by this. And then, realizing what his brother was doing, forgave him.

"I'm sorry I shouted at you," Baram said.

Jandu leaned back and wiped the yogurt off his shirt "It's all right."

"I spoke out of shock, not out of anger," Baram said.

"It's fine."

"I love you, Jandu."

Jandu stopped wiping his chest and studied his brother's expression. He saw honest regret in Baram's eyes. Jandu hadn't considered how much Baram's rejection had hurt him, but now, seeing him genuinely penitent, affection flooded Jandu and he forgave his prior callousness. He smiled. "I love you too."

"Even if you are a big faggot."

Jandu continued to smile. "Thanks. So much."

"But you have lost all your Suraya privileges, understand?"

"I wasn't really using them, you know," Jandu replied.

Baram added extra kindling to the fire. "Suraya's pregnant again."

Jandu shook his head. "God, you two work fast. Congratulations."

Baram grinned back.

Keshan emerged from the tent, looking sleepy, with crease-lines on one cheek. Jandu couldn't help but smile.

Keshan tensed as soon as he saw Baram. "What's going on?"

"Baram is sharing his leftovers with us," Jandu said. He handed Keshan his half of the roll.

"Is it poisoned?" Keshan smirked.

Baram stiffened at Keshan's words. Baram may have made peace with Jandu, but it was obvious that it would take more time before he was ready to exchange banter with Keshan.

"I assume you two are responsible for so many of Mazar's shartas failing today," Baram said. He turned back to face Jandu, obviously ignoring Keshan's remarks.

Jandu nodded. "We tried to get them all."

"Our spies report that Mazar is furious," Baram said. "They are planning a massive assault tomorrow, using all the celestial weapons they know."

"You need to kill Mazar," Keshan stated. He stared into the fire, his expression grave. "There is only one way you will win this war, and that is by removing the general of the Uru army."

Baram shook his head. "Every time someone gets near him, he spits out a sharta. And he is well-guarded."

"Have you tried the Tunufisharta?" Keshan asked.

Baram scowled. "Only Jandu knows it."

"That's a pity." Keshan leaned back with a smirk on his face.

Jandu touched his brother's knee. "I could speak it from here but it won't do any good unless Mazar is in range."

"I could drive him close to your position," Baram said.

"He doesn't know we're still here in the forest?" Jandu asked.

Baram shrugged. "I'm not sure. The rumors are all over the place. Some soldiers believe you are fighting in the guise of another."

"If Jandu was fighting, everyone would know exactly who he was," Keshan said.

Baram threw his stick into the fire. "Look, if I can get Mazar to drive by the edge of the battlefield, can you use your sharta?"

"If he goes slowly enough," Jandu said.

"It would be better if he stopped completely," Keshan said. He continued to stare into the fire with a bemused grin on his face.

Jandu narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"If Baram can push him into the forest, I will be able to stop Mazar long enough for you to shoot him," Keshan told Jandu.

Jandu turned to his brother. "Can you do it?"

Baram thought for a moment, and then nodded. "I will get him to you tomorrow."

"Good." Keshan yawned and stretched. "Then I'm going back to bed." He smiled at Jandu, and then withdrew back into their tent.

Jandu touched his brother's arm. "Do you think you can bring us some more food tomorrow?"

Baram frowned at the tent, but when he turned to Jandu his expression softened. "Certainly."

"I need enough to provision my men," Jandu said. It felt good to say the words, to point out that he had supporters. "What will you tell Yudar?"

"As little as possible. Rishak is our general now and he's all but said he'd take you back if it weren't for Yudar." Baram nodded to himself. "Just be ready for Mazar."

"I will."

Jandu walked with Baram back to the Paran camp, feeling a reassuring burst of pleasure, striding alongside his brother once more. Two nights ago, Jandu had thought he had lost his family. Now Baram was beside him, brusquely slapping him on the shoulder. Things would never be the same between them again, Jandu knew, but now, at least there was honesty between them and it gave Jandu hope.

"Baram. Thank you." Jandu bent down and touched his brother's feet in respect. In response, Baram ruffled his hair.

"You will always be my little brother, Jandu," Baram replied with a smile. Then he turned and strode into the Paran camp.



## CHAPTER 53

AT DAYBREAK, MAZAR LED HALF OF THE URU ARMY IN ONE direction, and Tarek Amia and his allied states led their troops in the other, creating a pincer around Yudar's location. Keshan watched the battle transpire, breathing deeply, preparing himself for another grueling day of battling shartas.

But he was more worried about Jandu, and whether he would actually kill Mazar.

Jandu had said little that morning, rising and completing his ablutions without a word. Jandu greeted the half a dozen new faces who had joined the other deserters in the dead of night. He spoke with them briefly, and offered them a little food and learned their names. Most were Chaya, though they came from both Paran and Uru forces. Jandu assigned them duties: building shelters, foraging for food and collecting water from the nearby stream.

Now, perched beside Keshan on the tree limb, Jandu was silent once more, Zandi held loosely in his hands.

"As soon as Mazar is within range, I will hold him," Keshan told Jandu. "I'm not sure how long I will be able to maintain the curse, so you must act fast."

"I'll be ready." Jandu showed no outward hesitation.

Keshan heard someone say his name, and looked down to see more deserters, pointing up at Jandu and Keshan with an expression of hope in their eyes. Several were burned from the previous days' shartas. Keshan knew some would die before the end of the night. But for now, they looked to Jandu to save them and to treat them with respect.

The Yashva kept constant vigil in the surrounding forest, monitoring the humans, their devotion to Jandu and Keshan unwavering.

Jandu pulled an arrow from his quiver. He nocked it into place and practiced his aim. Keshan realized he'd seen this moment in time before, in a premonition when he was still just a child and then later, time after time. But in his premonition the man's face had always been obscured, like the face of a Yashva blurred in the human world. And so he hadn't recognized it until that small motion, when the man beside him took aim.

It was him. *Jandu*. This was the moment which would change history, that Keshan had spent his entire life striving for. This was where he was meant to be. His changed world, it wouldn't have come from Darvad after all. Keshan had been wrong.

It was Jandu, all along. The savior of Marhavad sat beside him. Keshan's branding, his abandonment of the Uru side of the war, it was all intended, and now, having given up his vision, Keshan's destiny would come true after all.

Keshan had waited for this moment since he was six years old. Now, he couldn't contain the tears of gratitude and love that filled his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Jandu asked, his hard expression softening for a moment.

"Nothing," Keshan said, smiling and wiping his eyes.

Jandu glanced down at the growing crowd of deserters. "By the time the day is over, we may have more infantry than Darvad."

Keshan smiled down at the men. "One of them told me he joined us because of a rumor that you are forming a revolutionary army in the forest to challenge both armies and remove the distinction of caste from society altogether. The rumor even mentions demons on your side."

"Close enough." Jandu leaned over and kissed Keshan briefly on the lips, then surveyed his surprised troops with a

smirk, issuing his own challenge. Many of the men shifted or averted their eyes, but none of them left.

Keshan turned his attention back to the battlefield before him.

The earth was dark with gore. Mazar's shartic rampage left a trail of severed heads, limbless corpses, and great spills of blood. Horses slipped on the remains of gutted humans, and trampled over charred bodies. Cratered ground, littered with corpses, marked where a minor sharta had been used to clear the path of foot soldiers. Bodies were scorched beyond recognition. Melted metal helmets and armor glittered amid the ash.

Almost worse than the carnage on the battlefield was the fact that the Triya did not pay the gruesome display any heed. Chariots rolled over limbs and men not even dead as they charged forth towards their targets, no longer bothering to steer clear of the wounded.

Unlike many of the warriors, who appeared weary from three days of battle, Baram still charged in top form. He abandoned his chariot and now galloped the battlefield on horseback. At first, his tactics confused Keshan. If he was trying to steer Mazar towards the forest, he was failing. But as noon came, Keshan saw logic in Baram's frantic movements. He turned the Paran forces perpendicular to their initial line, separating the Uru army into halves.

The noise from the field and plumes of dust wafted towards the forest, and for minutes at a time, Keshan could barely make out the shapes of men and beasts in the melee. And then, at last, as Baram galloped by the forest edge, shouting insults, Keshan caught sight of Mazar riding in pursuit.

In the afternoon sunlight, Mazar's silver armor refracted the sunlight and made him shine like a star. His silver chariot negotiated the obstacles of the field with agility and speed. Mazar's arm constantly pulled back and released an assault of arrows in a steady, even rhythm.

"Be ready," Keshan told Jandu. He stood on the branch, using the central trunk to keep his balance.

Jandu nodded. He turned his arrow anxiously in his hand.

Keshan looked down, just in time to see his brother Iyestar gallop past the forest edge. Homesickness filled Keshan. But then Mazar's white banners drew close.

Baram and his troops circled back to push Mazar's chariot into the trees. As if sensing a trap, Mazar's charioteer whipped the horses faster. They galloped ahead, leaving the rest of the Uru forces in the dust.

Keshan signaled to Hafed, the Yashva he was about to transform into a weapon. Still in the Yashva kingdom, Hafed closed his eyes, bringing his hands together in meditation.

The very moment that Mazar's chariot came within firing range of the tree, Keshan shouted the Hafedsharta and thrust his arms out, his palms facing outwards, his elbows locked.

Hafed's shining form disappeared and then reappeared as a shimmering wave of air, shooting from Keshan's palms, rolling like steam around Mazar's chariot. The shimmer expanded and swallowed the chariot.

Mazar's horses slammed into the invisible wall. They topped forward, shrieking, but stopped mid-fall, frozen.

The chariot axle broke and the car flew forward, suspended over the backs of the horses, hanging mid-air. Everyone around the chariot stared in shock.

The battle almost ceased completely around them. Warriors looked in horror at the hanging chariot. The charioteer dangled by the reins, until he let go with a cry and crashed to the ground. The horses whinnied and rolled their eyes in panic, but remained frozen.

All of Mazar's weapons and his shield tumbled out of the upturned car. Mazar desperately clung to the central pole, hanging there by both arms, his legs kicking as they grappled for the sides of the car to steady him.

"Now!" Keshan hissed through clenched teeth. His arms shook as he held them out, and his face broke out in sweat. He felt as though he were holding the chariot aloft with his own arms.

For one frightening moment, Keshan feared the worst. Jandu would not go through with it. He loved Mazar too much to kill him.

But then Jandu aimed and loosed his string. The arrow whistled through the air and sank deep into Mazar's throat. He shot three more arrows into his chest, to the lungs and heart. Blood bubbled from Mazar's mouth.

Mazar finally let go as he died, and his body dropped to the ground. It hit the hard soil with a thump and crumpled.

Keshan let out his breath and lowered his arms. Mazar's chariot slammed down atop the war master.

Arrows whizzed by his face and arms. The Uru had spotted them. Jandu didn't seem to care.

"We have to get out of this tree," Keshan said. "Now, Jandu!"

Then Keshan heard the Uru army sounding a retreat, and the archers fell back from the forest edge. Jandu followed Keshan down, dropping the last few feet to the ground. He looked sad but resolute.

"Prince Jandu!" Warash, the unofficial leader of Jandu's troops, bowed before Jandu and Keshan. "Lord Baram has sent supplies. What would you like to do with them?"

Jandu's expression remained stony. "Please see that every man who needs food gets it. Keshan will attend the injured as soon as he is able." Jandu looked Keshan over. "Assuming you are strong enough."

"I am." Keshan smiled at Warash. "Lead the way."

Keshan followed Warash through the camp, turning only to see Jandu look up at the fading afternoon light. He stared at the sky in silence, sighed, and then stepped into their tent.



As darkness closed over the woods, the ethereal light of the demon guards formed a ring of illumination in which the humans gathered, talking amiably over their fires. The mood was pleasant, as Baram's load of supplies included wine, and

the men shared stories and got to know each other under the flashing vigil of the Yashvas.

Keshan used all the magic he knew to help the injured, but there were several men who would die regardless, and one who had already passed away. When Keshan asked for volunteers to help build the man a pyre, he was shocked when one of the most recent soldiers to join them, a Tiwari Triya, volunteered. Keshan did not know the man personally, but the man respected Keshan enough that he decided to join him in the forest rather than fight any longer for the Uru.

Now Jandu approached from the river, wearing his mourning attire. His white dejaru and white shirt seemed to glow in the Yashva light. He had removed all his jewelry, and his cropped hair was wet from his evening ablutions.

As he walked, a dozen different men offered him refreshment or their help. Jandu asked for a torch, and as soon as one of the men brought him one, he bowed politely and said he would return.

Keshan caught him at the edge of the clearing and matched his stride. "Where are you going?"

Jandu frowned. "My master's funeral pyre. I want to pay my respects." Jandu spoke as though the answer was obvious and Keshan should have known. "Is there some problem with that?"

"No." Keshan hurried to catch up to Jandu's long steps. "I just don't want you to be hurt."

"It's against the rules of the war to injure someone attending a funeral pyre."

"I meant with words, not with weapons."

"Insults mean nothing to me now," Jandu said.

"Can I come with you?"

"If you want to." Jandu kept walking toward the distant firelight.

Keshan noticed that Jandu's torchlight seemed dim and saw the bluish glow of the Yashva, taking flight and gathering around him like massive, whirling fireflies.

The relatives of soldiers, physicians, and Jegora scavengers filled the dark battlefield, wielding hundreds of torches as they loaded corpses onto carts.

Keshan had seen the carnage from above. But here, on the battlefield itself, the smell overpowered his senses. Flies buzzed incessantly, and carrion birds gathered on exposed flesh in great clusters. As he and Jandu walked by, the birds took flight carrying chunks of their prizes.

The worst smell came from the Chaya and Suya funeral pyres up ahead. Hundreds of bodies were burned each night. Wailing widows and friends gathered around the great mountain of fire and filled the night with their cries. Looking south, Keshan saw a similar scene on the Paran side as they burned their own dead.

Mazar's pyre was outside the gates of the Uru camp, presumably since Darvad knew the Parans would want to attend. The gates behind the pyre were doubly fortified with soldiers, as if Darvad feared any Parans meandering over under the excuse of paying respects to Mazar and slipping inside.

A large crowd had gathered around Mazar's pyre. The Uru commanders stood on the outside, hands pressed together to pay respects to their leader. Inside an area cordoned off with holy icons, Mazar's immediate friends gathered, dressed in white, bowed low to Mazar's corpse, which lay on a bed of straw and branches. The wood glinted in the torchlight, wet with oil. Onshu, the officiating priest, stood beside the pyre with his torch ready. He led a series of prayers.

On one side of the pyre, Darvad stood, weeping loudly as he leaned on Tarek Amia for support. On the other side stood Jandu's brothers, shrouded in white, heads bowed respectfully. Indarel and Rishak had also come to pay their respects.

Keshan stopped just outside the first holy icon, and remained in the shadows. Jandu touched his hand briefly, and then marched into the center of the gathering.

The moment Jandu stepped into the group, the prayers ceased, and all eyes turned to him.

He looked magnificent, Keshan thought. The Yashvas who guarded him turned into pricks of light, which danced around him, protecting him in tight arcs of illumination. Many of the men brought their hands together in hasty prayer. Jandu looked like an ancient prophet, and they treated him like one as he approached Mazar's broken body. Onshu stepped back, watching the Yashvas with awe.

Yudar looked at Jandu with disgust. The fact that he did so made Keshan want to kill him, then and there.

"What are you doing here?" Yudar growled at Jandu.

Jandu stared down at Mazar's face. "Paying respects to my weapons master."

"Master Mazar would be ashamed to have you here after what you've done!" Yudar told him.

Jandu took a handful of marigolds from a golden bowl beside the pyre and placed them lovingly on Mazar's chest. He whispered something to the corpse that Keshan could not hear.

"Get out of here!" Yudar hissed.

"This is a pyre for family." Darvad's expression twisted in a sneer. Keshan had never known Darvad to look so cruel. The fact that Keshan once thought Darvad would save them all mocked him. How could he have been so wrong?

"I have allowed my half-brothers here out of respect for Master Mazar. But the casteless do not belong." Darvad pointed at Keshan. And then he made eye contact with Jandu. "Nor do filthy sodomites."

Keshan almost had to smile. Yudar couldn't lie, even when the truth was so shameful.

"Shut the fuck up!" Baram howled in rage and started forward, but Onshu quickly stepped between the families.

"Respect! Respect!" Onshu chanted, ushering Baram and Darvad into their corners.



Jandu bowed his head and prayed, the Yashvas speeding up as they circled him, their anger palpable to Keshan.

"That's enough." Darvad's voice was dark and angry. "Time for all disgraced to leave this holy pyre. Even your own brothers don't want you here. All Triya are dirtied by your presence."

"Be quiet, Darvad." Tarek suddenly said. "It is his right to be here."

Keshan could not believe it. Tarek spoke in a low voice, his expression icy.

"That's enough gloating for one day," Tarek told Darvad.

Darvad's forehead bulged with anger, the vein in his head rising up like an angry 'V'. He seemed to hesitate, looking between Tarek and Jandu. Then he suddenly grabbed a mace from one of the Triya at his side and lunged forward.

At once, the Yashvas surrounding Jandu took form. An explosive wind blew the mace from Darvad's hand and caused Jandu's hair to fly around his head, his eyes cold and angry. Dust shot out from around him into the aghast crowd. The Yashvas' faces transformed into those of beasts, spiraling eyes and gaping mouths. As one, the entire crowd around Mazar's pyre stepped back, many of them crying out in fear as the Yashva surged.

Jandu turned to leave. As he did so, he made brief eye contact with Baram and winked.

At the last icon, Jandu reached out for Keshan and purposefully put his arm around him. "Let's go." Jandu's voice was rough with suppressed emotion.

As they walked silently back towards the forest, the Yashvas dissipated into a less threatening presence of light once more. Many of the Triya must have made tributes to Mazar, for it was several hours by the time Keshan saw smoke rise from Mazar's pyre.

Jandu stayed up late, checking on the men in his camp, and consulting with the Tiwari Triya man to make sure all of the deserters were armed and armored in case of any retaliation

from either Uru or Paran camp. It was near midnight by the time Jandu crawled into their tent. Keshan watched him enter, his long, sleek frame revealed slowly in the moonlight as he peeled his mourning clothes from his body. Jandu crawled under the blanket with Keshan and pressed his naked body close, spooning against Keshan's back. The feeling was as close to heaven as Keshan could ever imagine.

## CHAPTER 54

“*NEVER INSULT ME LIKE THAT AGAIN!*”

Darvad’s face contorted in his fury. He spat at Tarek. “How *dare* you defend my enemy in front of our own forces! I am your king, you treasonous bastard!”

Tarek took a step back, sinking further into the small congregation of soldiers. Mazar’s body incinerated in the distance, filling the air with the stench of burning hair.

“I’m sorry.” Tarek bowed his head.

Darvad’s hands clenched into fists. “That cock-sucking bitch isn’t worthy of any compassion, and I will not stand by while a perverted faggot sullies my master’s funeral!”

Darvad’s words sliced through Tarek like blades. He felt the blood drain from his face.

Darvad pointed at Tarek. “What were you thinking, defending a fucking queer?”

Tarek’s throat was too dry to speak. But Darvad did not wait for a response.

“If you *ever* censor my commentary again, I swear I will turn you back into a Suya without a moment’s hesitation.” Darvad stormed into the enveloping darkness. Tarek stood still, too shocked to move.

“To your posts!” Anant cried suddenly, scattering the stunned audience of soldiers. As one they fled the scene, heading to watch towers or their tents. Only Anant remained by Tarek’s side.

Tarek ignored him. He walked towards his own tent in a daze. He had never seen Darvad so angry, or ever imagined such vengeful words would be directed at him.

Once inside his tent, Tarek reached for his jug of wine. He drank straight from the jug itself, seeking numbness.

“My lord?” Anant said softly from the tent flap.

Tarek didn’t respond. He swallowed, wiped his mouth, and then took another long gulp.

“Tarek?” Anant asked again, stepping inside.

Tarek put the jug down and nodded to Anant.

“What is it?” he said, colder than he intended. His body felt icy.

“Do I have permission to speak freely, my lord?” Anant asked. His face was tight with anger.

“Do as you please. I’m not going to cast you down to the Suya for something as small as stating your opinion.” Tarek snorted mirthlessly.

Anant removed his helmet. His dark hair lay flat against his scalp. “How can you stand by him after what he just said? The man is a devil!”

Tarek clenched his eyes shut. “He didn’t mean it.”

“Tarek, don’t be blind!” Anant cried. “The man hates our kind. He would hate you if he knew what you were. It makes me sick to think of fighting for him!”

Tarek glared at him. “You would desert him? Where’s your honor?”

“Honor! Ha!” Anant spat. “How about Darvad’s honor? What about the rule not to attack anyone at a funeral pyre? He just broke the rules of war, an offense that would have any of the men under my command hanged as traitors!”

Tarek knew Anant spoke the truth. The attack was inexcusable. Peace at a memorial was one of the most sacred tenets of the Book of Taivo. For a moment, he wanted to agree with Anant.

But he couldn’t. He couldn’t. “I took an oath,” Tarek said weakly. “Do you understand? An oath! To defend the man at all costs, even at the cost of my life! I cannot abandon him, even if he hates me, even if he is a hypocrite!”

Anant grimaced. "You once told me you agreed with Lord Keshan, that the old ways should change."

"I never said that," Tarek snapped. "That was Keshan, not me."

"But you want change, don't you? How can you change this world if you remain so stuck in your own religious dogma?"

"It isn't that simple!" Tarek shouted. He lowered his voice, fearful others would hear them. "You don't understand, Anant."

Anant narrowed his eyes. "Yes I do. You love him."

Tarek closed his eyes.

"But you love a man who would kill you if he knew your true nature. A man who is breaking all of his promises of change, who has broken the rules. If he defiles his promises, why can't you?"

Tarek opened his eyes, and saw Anant's desperation. But Tarek felt nothing anymore, not for anyone. Even Anant wasn't enough to change the man Tarek had become.

"It's pointless," Tarek said. "This is who I am. I owe Darvad my allegiance, and it's too late to alter my path now."

"It is *never* too late to follow your conscience," Anant urged.

"He made me a Triya, Anant!" Tarek shouted. "A Triya! Do you realize how much power this man has given me?"

"And he just demonstrated he will take it away at a moment's notice!" Anant shouted back. He made as if to say something else, but clenched his jaw instead. He straightened. "So you will not leave him."

"No."

"Despite everything he has said, everything he has done."

"No."

Anant breathed heavily in the silence. "Fine then. I'm leaving." Anant put his helmet back on and turned towards the tent flap.

Panic swelled through Tarek. "Wait!" He grabbed Anant by the arm. "Where are you going?"

"To the forest," Anant said. "To Keshan and Jandu. I won't fight for a king who deserves no allegiance."

“You are deserting?” Tarek gasped, unbelieving. “You would give up your honor as a Triya and shame your family for the sake of Jandu Paran?”

“Not for Jandu Paran. For myself and for the future,” Anant said. “Come with me. Please. Put aside your old loyalties, and your old hatreds. Fight for the noble cause you claim you believe in. Come, and be with me. Openly. We can stop hiding like criminals.”

Anant’s lips were so close, Tarek could kiss him easily. He smelled intoxicating, he looked gorgeous. He wanted nothing more than to make love to Anant and forget this horrible night ever happened. But Anant’s eyes pleaded, demanding a response.

“I can’t,” Tarek said, regret breaking his heart even as he said the words.

Anant’s eyes filled with tears. He leaned over and kissed Tarek once, tenderly, on the lips.

“I love you.” Anant sighed. “But I’m leaving.”

Anant left the tent.

Tarek stood there, staring at the closed tent flaps a moment longer. He grabbed the nearest object, a quiver of arrows, and he threw them at the tent post. He ripped through his room, tearing through objects, breaking everything in his hands. His anger boiled through him and out of him, but nothing stopped it, nothing slowed his heart, he was so full it burst out of him, great waves of rage. He slashed at his tent with his sword, he smashed his wine jug to pieces, and then standing there, in the midst of his destruction, Tarek realized he had descended into the person he hated the most, the hypocrite, the blind follower, useless, unloved, and worthless.

He burst from the shreds of his tent in blind wrath. He ran towards the gates of the camp, hoping to catch Anant before he left. But at the late hour, the only men still standing were the guards, who watched Tarek’s madness in fear.

Anant was gone. Tarek had lost everything.

## CHAPTER 54

ANOTHER TRIYA WARRIOR HAD JOINED JANDU'S CAMP IN THE night. Keshan made an effort to greet each one. Partly it was because he knew what these men sacrificed by joining them. Partly it was an affinity for men like him, who had grown up in similar circumstances.

But mostly it was because he and Jandu needed their battle training. Since they had begun amassing troops in the forest and dispelling shartas, they worried that either Yudar or Darvad would send a unit into the forest to kill their deserters. Keshan knew the Yashvas were loyal to Jandu, but he doubted they would extend much effort to a scraggly collection of other human beings.

The newest Triya arrival was a young, handsome man with dark eyes and heavy shadows from not shaving the night before. He seemed familiar, but Keshan couldn't place him. His armor gleamed in the morning light as he stood stiff at attention. A dozen or so soldiers followed him, all of them wore the insignia of the 8th unit of the Dragewan army. These were Tarek's men. The thought of Tarek, combined with the insignia brought it back. This commander had accompanied Tarek to Afadi, and he'd been present at Keshan's trial.

"Lord Keshan!" the warrior greeted him. He reached down and touched Keshan's feet, an action which so shocked Keshan that he had to take a step back.

"You don't have to do that," Keshan said. "I'm Jegora now, as you well know."

"Yes, my lord," the commander said, his eyes glinting.

Keshan smiled back. He liked the man already. "You and your men are welcome. What is your name?"

“Anant, my lord,” the soldier said, returning to stiff attention. “I was commander of the 8th unit of Dragewan’s army, and these are soldiers loyal to me. We have come to fight alongside you.”

“You realize that those loyal to us will almost certainly lose their caste,” Keshan said. “If you would prefer to return to your homes, Prince Jandu and I will not stop you.”

Anant’s eyes blazed fiercely. “I have come to fight with you, my lord.”

“Please call me Keshan.” Keshan looked out to the nearly one hundred men that sprawled through the makeshift camp. “Most of the soldiers here are Suya and Chaya, with little or no battle training. We need men like you to lead the others if we have to fight.”

Anant nodded. “I will help in any way I can, my lord. Only...”

“Yes?”

Anant drew close so that only Keshan would hear his voice.

“My lord, I humbly beg your forgiveness, but I cannot fight Lord Tarek Amia. I will do anything else, but I will not harm him.”

Keshan raised an eyebrow. “Why not?”

Anant swallowed. He kept his eyes focused just to the right of Keshan’s head. “We were close.”

“Close?”

Anant’s voice dropped to a whisper. “We were lovers. I asked him to join me here, but he would not break his oath to King Darvad.”

Keshan’s surprise made him momentarily speechless.

“Tarek knew you were deserting and he let you go?” Keshan had never imagined Tarek was like him. No wonder Tarek couldn’t stand by and listen to Darvad insulting Jandu. Sudden sadness filled Keshan. He and Tarek could have been so much closer as friends if they had known they had this in common.

“I won’t ask you to do anything against your conscience,” Keshan finally said. “But if the Uru forces attack us, you may have to reconsider your decision.”



Anant let out his breath. "Thank you for your understanding."

Keshan looked up at the predawn sky. Gold colored the few clouds. Any moment, the sounds of conches would fill the air and the fourth day of the war would begin.

Anant's gaze followed Keshan's, and he frowned as he looked at the battlefield, his grief plain.

Keshan steadied him, a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "About Tarek, I mean."

Anant nodded, swallowing. "Thank you, my lord."

"You should go to Warash, and he will help assign you and your men supplies and duties in the camp. He's the Chaya over there in the gray uniform." Keshan raised an eyebrow. "Unless you object to taking orders from a Chaya?"

Anant's initial look of surprise was quickly smothered by a look of weird excitement. "Your army truly is making a new future."

Anant bowed low, and then signaled his men to follow him.

Keshan smiled after them. As he made his way to his banyan tree perch, he wondered what Jandu would make of Anant, and the news of Tarek's nature. And then he realized that it no longer mattered. Tarek had made his choice.

## CHAPTER 55

MORNING LIGHT DID NOT DIFFUSE TAREK'S ANGER. AND THE news that Anant had taken twelve soldiers of the Dragewan army with him into the forest only exacerbated his rage. He never knew he could hold so much fury inside of him. He trembled with violence. He stared at the morning formation of the Paran army, wanting to slaughter them all.

Darvad smiled at Tarek that morning, and mumbled an apology for his harsh words. He then asked Tarek to take Mazar's place as general of the Uru forces. Tarek barely looked at him. He could not let Darvad too close to him, when he was so full of rancor.

"Take position behind the Bandari," Tarek said curtly. "I'll lead the charge." Without another word, Tarek jumped into his chariot and took his place at the front of the line. The stench overwhelmed all other senses. Body parts were identifiable in the mud only by the swarms of flies and the carrion birds.

The battle opened with the shrill of conches, and Tarek's charioteer Satish charged recklessly towards the Parans. Mazar's death inspired the Parans, and they pushed into the Uru line ferociously, chariots storming through and dispatching Uru foot soldiers in great numbers. Tarek drove them back. He shot arrow after arrow, striking his targets with cold precision.

A sharta rocked his chariot, earth exploding and burning all around him. Tarek wiped a spray of dirt from his eyes. He screamed at the Dragewan soldiers to follow the charge against the Paran line. The Parans held fast, and Tarek advanced slowly, hacking through the tight Paran formation, crushing men and spearing horses with his arrows.

Tarek bellowed for Satish to push through a gap in the Paran defense, leading one of two main thrusts into the line. Ishad, Firdaus' son, led the other charge.

Up ahead, Tarek heard the Paran troops cheering Baram as his chariot rushed forward to meet Tarek's. Tarek glared at Baram's golden armor. Tarek wanted to kill Baram, for helping capture Mazar, for being Jandu's brother. Baram became the focus of Tarek's hatred. He felt almost cheated when a spear felled one of Baram's horses. Baram leapt from his chariot as it flipped over. He raised his mace and continued to fight on the ground. He swung his mace, his stance wide, his face ferocious.

The Suya and Chaya foot soldiers who could not fight back against the bulk and rage of Baram's attack broke before him. He plunged deep into the Uru line. It was clear that Baram had no idea of how isolated he had become from the rest of the Paran force. Dust and smoke from a sharta cast a haze over everything.

Without hesitating, Tarek closed his eyes and whispered the Korazsharta that Darvad had taught him long ago, words to conjure the magical Yashva spear that never missed its target. Darvad had given it to Tarek to kill Jandu, but Tarek needed to expel his rage now, and Baram was here.

The spear appeared in his hand, the shimmering bluish metal hot to the touch. It shone like a bolt of lightning in his hand.

Tossing the spear felt like nothing, like air, but the spear sang as it flew, a high-pitched wail that sounded like a newborn. It flew with tremendous speed, and struck Baram in the gut, tearing through his armor.

Baram howled in rage as he stumbled backwards. But he did not fall. He dropped his mace and used both hands to pull the long spear from his body. The moment he dropped it, the spear disappeared.

Baram screamed and gripped his wound, his face clenched in rage. He reached down and grabbed his mace.

“Coward! Who attacked me?” Baram shouted.

Blood poured from his wound, but he lifted his mace.

Tarek notched an arrow and took aim. It was against the rules of war to shoot Baram when he was armed only with a mace, but Tarek no longer cared. Fuck the rules of war. He loosed his string and the arrow shot straight through Baram’s arm. Baram howled, dropping his mace.

Tarek charged him. He shot Baram once more in the neck as his chariot swept past. Then Tarek leapt from the chariot and took up Baram’s fallen mace. His first blow sent Baram’s helmet flying. He swung again and Baram collapsed to the ground.

The blood rushed in Tarek’s ears, and the battlefield receded. He beat Baram on the ground with his own mace.

Baram moved slowly, trying to deflect the blows.

Tarek smashed Baram’s right knee cap. Baram cried out, an animal scream, wild with hatred and panic.

A part of Tarek told him to stop, to just kill him, end it, but his rage was still unsated, he needed Baram to suffer, and as Baram continued to weakly resist, his right fist clenched and waving, Tarek swung back the mace and smashed it down into Baram’s face.

The Uru soldiers around Tarek cheered. Tarek pulverized Baram’s face, crushing his large features to a pulp. His head caved in with sickening softness. Blood and brains sprayed the dismembered torso. Tarek struck again, and again, until nothing resembling a head was left, until his arm cramped. He dropped the mace, breathless.

There was no way Baram’s corpse could be properly burned now. It seemed as though hours had passed since the battle began, but the sun had barely moved in the sky. It was as if time had frozen for everyone else. Only this beating had lasted forever.

With Baram’s death, the Paran army’s morale crumbled. Tarek watched as his troops rallied to press their advantage. They cheered Tarek and pushed the Parans into retreat.

Conch shells blasted Tarek's victory across the battlefield, but he remained where he was, coursing with adrenalin. He stepped from Baram's body, sick with himself.

"My lord!" Satish stopped the horses beside him. "You must return to the chariot quickly! We are moving forward!"

Tarek forced his body to move. Satish clucked the horses into a canter even before Tarek was fully in the chariot. Tarek followed his units as they curved eastward, joining up with Ishad's men to crush the remnants of the Paran line.

Tarek gripped the central pole of his chariot. He wished someone would shoot him. He begged God to let someone kill him, now, before he fell any lower.

But, despite his prayers, Satish successfully navigated Tarek back into the center of the Uru line. The real battle was only beginning. Tarek heard Darvad's conch and looked over to see Darvad's chariot rush towards him.

With the Bandari shielding them both, Darvad leapt from his chariot and into Tarek's, talking quickly, laughing and hugging Tarek, celebrating Tarek's gory triumph. All cruel words were apparently forgotten in the face of Tarek's foul deed. *This is what it was to be Darvad's friend*, Tarek thought. Rewards for those who rent their souls apart. Grace for only his sins.

The soldiers cried out Tarek's name in triumph. But it brought no pride to Tarek anymore. All it brought was regret.

And now, with Anant gone, there was nothing Tarek could do to rein it in, so he let it thrive. Regret was all he had left.

## CHAPTER 56

JANDU SPENT THE MORNING CAPTURING A PAIR OF TERRIFIED horses who had escaped the battle and now rampaged through their camp, kicking over tents and smashing water jugs. By the time the horses were calmly in Warash's care, the day's conflict was well underway.

The wild triumphant blare of Uru horns sent a shiver through him, and he made his way quickly to the banyan tree, looking up to Keshan for some sign of what happened.

Keshan looked nearly green. He leaned over as if he were going to be sick.

"What is it?" Jandu felt his throat tighten. "Is it Yudar? Did they capture him?"

Keshan didn't say anything. He made his way down from the tree morosely. When he reached the forest floor, he looked Jandu in the eye, his expression grave.

Jandu's heart beat faster. "Tell me!"

"I'm so sorry, Jandu," Keshan said. "Baram is dead."

The words fluttered through Jandu's consciousness, like moths in darkness.

"It can't be true." Jandu felt small tears, black and aching, where the words had fluttered through him. Pain began to build inside him, small at first, blossoming outwards, filling his mind, his ears. He shook his head. "It can't be true," he said again, willing the words away.

Jandu scrambled up the banyan tree. Smoke obscured the battlefield, but he could see chariots circling off the left flank, and could hear Urus cheering. The Paran line folded inwards as the Urus pressed their advantage.

Paran soldiers wept as they gathered around a bloody mass on the battlefield. It took a long moment for Jandu to realize it was a body, and even longer to realize it was his brother.

Jandu climbed down the tree. His throat felt as though it would close against the black ache pooling inside him. The men of the forest gathered around him, sympathy radiating off them as word quickly spread. Jandu shut everything, all of them, the blackness inside him, out. He couldn't think or feel. That would happen later. For now, he had to act.

"Who did this?" he asked Keshan, his voice breaking.

Keshan hesitated. Jandu grabbed Keshan's harafa and pulled him closer. "Who was it?"

"Tarek," Keshan whispered.

White hot rage filled Jandu. He pushed past Keshan and marched into his tent. He strapped on his silver armor. He pulled on his finger guards and strung Zandi. He attached his quiver and his sword, and then grabbed his shield and helmet as he darted from the tent.

Keshan stood mutely outside, eyes wide. Men and Yashva all watched Jandu, waiting for some signal.

Jandu pulled on his helmet, then turned to Keshan.

"Get armor."

There were half a dozen charioteers in the forest, and all of them helped Keshan harness the two horses they had just calmed to King Mendraz's chariot. Jandu heard the men whistle at the sight of the celestial vehicle, but he couldn't take pleasure in it. He needed to be doing something right now, or any moment, the reality that Baram was dead would fill him and he would suffocate with grief.

Jandu felt the presence of the Yashva swarm around him like fireflies. Behind him, the men of his camp watched warily, armed and ready to follow him.

"Stay here," Jandu instructed. "Stay protected."

He tapped Keshan on the shoulder and they charged out onto the battlefield.

If Jandu thought about Baram, he would be sick. He focused on the unnatural smoothness of Keshan's celestial chariot, the way it gleamed in the light, and the rhythm of the horses' gallop. Keshan whispered soothing words to calm them and pull them together.

As soon as they entered the melee, they were surrounded by Uru soldiers. They were like fish swimming upstream, fighting against the current of so many bodies.

Jandu burned with frustration. "We must go faster!" he bellowed.

And then, from behind him, he heard a call.

"Prince Jandu!"

A hundred men charged around the chariot, shouting his name and flinging themselves upon the infantry in his path. The men of the forest attacked Paran and Uru forces without regard.

*Jandu's* men. They were back in the melee for him, cutting a swathe through the two armies. Jandu briefly caught the eye of the new young commander, Anant, and Anant waved to him and then ran, charging into a cluster of soldiers.

Keshan shouted out a string of words and the Yashva took form. The air shimmered around their chariot and bodies of light sprang forth and pulled the infantry apart. The sky rained body parts as invisible hands rended the Uru into corpses. Soldiers around them fled in terror.

As the Yashva and Jandu's men cleared a path, Keshan urged the horses ahead. They broke into long, graceful movements, as if they, too, were relieved to be free of the congestion. Keshan drove them towards Tarek's chariot.

Arrows fired at Jandu's chariot fell from the air as if batted aside by invisible hands. Flashes of light burst over the field, emanating from his chariot, as Jandu's Yashva guardians protected him from assault. Jandu returned fire on any who opposed his advance. Lord Ishad, Firdaus' son, appeared alongside them. Jandu took aim and shot him in the eye. Firdaus' line was extinguished from the earth. The thought did little to warm his cold heart.



“Lord Jandu!”

Keshan swerved the chariot to meet the Paran messenger who rode up alongside their chariot. Jandu lost his balance momentarily, and glared down at Keshan. But then he readied his bow once more, and pointed the arrow at the messenger.

The messenger wore the colors of Jezza’s army. He looked frightened.

“Prince Yudar demands that you leave the battlefield at once!” the messenger cried. He was out of breath, legs squeezing his horse desperately as he tried to keep pace with Keshan’s horses.

“You are not fighting for the Parans,” the messenger continued. “And you will be fired upon as an enemy of the Paran army if you do not leave the battlefield at once!”

Keshan turned the chariot suddenly, causing the messenger to veer off in the wrong direction. When he returned to their side, Jandu stopped shooting at soldiers long enough to shoot an arrow at the ground in front of the messenger, in warning.

“Tell Yudar that I am not here for him,” Jandu growled lowly. “I am here to avenge Baram. Until I kill Tarek Amia, no one, including Yudar, will get me off this battlefield.”

The messenger turned his mount aside, riding back for the Paran line.

Keshan whipped the horses forward. In the distance, Jandu could see Tarek’s chariot. They were close.

Tarek shouted orders at his surrounding troops as Jandu approached. Jandu closed his eyes and began one of the worst curses he knew, the Fazsharta, over his notched arrow. He could feel his skin burn hot, his face darken, the words themselves shivering through him. The words formed letters like bursts of soot.

His grief over Baram churned within his belly like poison, and fed the curse, giving it power. Blood pooled in his mouth.

Keshan stopped within bowshot of Tarek’s chariot. One of the Yashva burst into the human world and tore into Tarek’s charioteer like he was made of paper. Tarek nocked an arrow.

“Jandu Paran,” he bellowed. “Beware!”

## CHAPTER 57

AT LONG LAST, THE FULFILLMENT OF A LIFELONG DESIRE WAS upon him. Tarek had an arrow nocked and aimed at Jandu Paran's face.

But he felt nothing. No pride. No victory. His own rage was spent.

Anant had been right. All that mattered was following your heart. Anant had chosen the right side. Tarek, blind with lust, desperate to become a different person, had given up all that had made him who he was.

And now everything had collapsed. Tarek shared more with his enemy than his best friend. Even this war twisted upon itself, devolving into a desecration.

Tarek tried to build rage in his mind. Only heavy, oily, grief remained.

"This is for Baram," Jandu shouted. His eyes brimmed with tears.

Tarek released his arrow first. Despite the accuracy of his aim, bursts of light interceded and the arrow shattered mid-air.

Jandu's arrow streaked a black trail as it flew through the air. Tarek barely noticed. The arrow shot through his armor, straight through his chest. An excruciating burn blossomed in his lungs, radiating outwards, and Tarek's legs crumpled. He tumbled out of the chariot, landing hard against his right arm. All he could feel was the agonizing fire of the celestial weapon, blackness spreading through him, consuming him.

*So this is how I die*, Tarek thought. He looked over and saw horse manure. *How unattractive*. Tarek closed his eyes.

## CHAPTER 58

A CIRCLE OF DECAY Oozed from TAREK'S CORPSE AS POISONS from the blackened body rose into the air. The world smelled rank and defiled. It created a gap in the center of the battlefield, and so now armies clashed around Jandu in tight confines.

Blood from a nick above Keshan's ear trickled down his face, mixing with the dust to form a sickly dark paste. Keshan's lips were cracked and dried, and his voice had gone rough from shouting at the horses.

Jandu wanted to give him reassurance, but his heart wasn't in it. His heart had frozen at the sight of Baram's ruined corpse. He felt locked in the same, endless, moment.

A dozen warriors attacked Jandu at once. He dispatched his enemies silently. He could not have stopped even if he had wanted to. Uru warriors hounded him. Jandu took their lives as if they could buy back Baram's.

The shadows stretched, and it became harder to determine the color of banners, the identification of armies. Keshan turned the chariot to face every Uru army commander who challenged them. Jandu slaughtered them, one by one, with shartas and arrows. Only once did Keshan turn away from a chariot. Jandu saw Iyestar inside. Keshan's brother frowned at the them as they rushed past, but he did not pursue them.

Jandu's muscles trembled as he fired his arrows. His body felt stretched to breaking point. The Fazsharta had hurt him, internally he felt like he was bleeding. But he wasn't sure how much of his pain was physical, and how much was grief.

Through the dust and twilight shadows, Jandu caught sight of Darvad.

“You bastard!” Darvad’s face was streaked with dirt and tears. He had vomit on his breastplate, he had obviously been uttering magical weapons. “You will pay for Tarek’s death!”

The long notes of conches filled the air, signaling the end of the day’s battle. Jandu glanced behind him, and saw Lord Indarel, looking exhausted. The sun was below the horizon, and only the dim red glow of its aftermath provided the light to see. Jandu’s own men were fewer than fifty now, but they still kept pace with his chariot. Many were bleeding badly, their armor cracked and their weapons caked with gore.

“Anant!” Jandu called to the young commander. “Get our men back to camp!”

“Yes, sir!” Anant replied, signaling the men to retreat.

As he saw them leave the battlefield, Jandu allowed himself a moment to feel relief. His body and his heart ached, and he wanted to stop, to grieve and hold Keshan.

The Uru and Paran armies also turned to return to their respective camps. But instead of blowing his conch, Darvad growled out another sharta.

Jandu dropped to the floor of his chariot and began to recite the counter-curse. Words filled his mind, along with unwanted images of death and destruction. This was one of Mazar’s darkest weapons. What was Darvad doing, uttering this at the close of the day’s battle?

Jandu spat out the end of the counter just as Darvad finished as well. There was a noticeable silence. Every soldier seemed frozen for a moment.

“Continue fighting!” Darvad shouted across the battlefield. His nose bled, his eyes bled, he looked half-dead as he pointed at Jandu in his rage. “This war ends tonight!”

Uru warriors charged forward and Paran troops were forced to turn back and defend themselves.

“This is madness!” Keshan cried out. He whispered to the horses. They were lathered in sweat, but they dutifully took off after Darvad’s chariot.

Through the clashing masses of Uru and Paran warriors, another of Yudar's messengers appeared on horseback. Jandu hardly glanced at the man. His Uru enemies commanded all his attention as he fired arrows through the waning light. The messenger screeched commands. Keshan answered for both of them by turning the horses around and charging the messenger. The messenger fled.

As darkness fell upon the battlefield, torches were lit. But it was becoming impossible to make out targets. The armies clashed in close confines once more, and Jandu had to slow down his assaults to check the colors of each banner before firing. Urus and Parans mingled in the blackness.

"I don't know where to shoot!" he yelled.

Keshan said something quick and dark in Yashva. Jandu's Yashva guards appeared as men once more, glowing and ethereal, and tracked Jandu's enemies, providing him the light he needed to take aim. Men fled from Jandu in panic. They turned away the moment one of the Yashvas' ghostly forms came close; Jandu's arrow would inevitably follow.

Keshan pulled the horses to a halt as another chariot almost rammed them. They turned once more and got within sight of Darvad. Jandu readied Zandi. But the second he nocked an arrow, Darvad collapsed to the floor of his chariot.

For a moment, Jandu paused, stunned. Was Darvad actually *hiding*? Was he truly that much of a coward?

But then his skin tingled, and a bluish hue radiated from the chariot car.

A burst of green light shone from Darvad's chariot. Jandu stared at it, desperate to determine which sharta produced such a beautiful, startling effect. As he tried to recall his lessons with Mazar, an icy, sinking fear began to fill him. He clutched Keshan's bicep tightly, but the panic did not subside.

"Oh God!"

Jandu froze, fear creeping through his bones. He couldn't speak, he couldn't move. Icy fingers gripped a hold of his heart.

He tried to scream out, but terror crippled his voice, left him motionless. Zandi slipped from his hand.

Fear spread through the soldiers surrounding Darvad's chariot like a gust of wind. Foot soldiers dropped their weapons. Cavalrymen cried out as their horses bolted. His own team reared, broke free of the harness and galloped into the shadows. Jandu leapt from the chariot as it lurched forward. He crouched on the ground, too terrified to do anything else.

Keshan climbed free of the chariot and knelt beside him. He lifted Jandu's head.

"Darvad released a fear sharta!" Keshan shouted. "Fight it!"

"I can't!" Jandu cried. He collapsed on the battlefield, head in his hands. Around him, hundreds of men fled the field. Only the wreckage of their chariot sheltered Jandu and Keshan from the stampede. Jandu heard Lord Indarel cry out as hundreds of his own men trampled over him. There was a riot now, pure chaos. Fright had turned the Paran army against itself. They ran screaming, senseless, stepping over each other in the darkness.

Keshan grabbed Jandu by his armor and pulled him up. "Jandu! I need your help! You have to protect me while I recite the counter-curse!"

Jandu fought off the heavy, drugged panic in his mind. He drew his sword and stood in front of Keshan as Keshan bowed in supplication on the muddy battlefield.

Keshan chanted under his breath, his body breaking out in a sweat, strain plain across his face.

"Hurry!" Jandu drove aside Paran and Uru soldiers alike. Some sobbed like children. Others shrieked as they fled. The men closest to Darvad's chariot tore at their eyes and ripped the hair from their heads. Some killed themselves in their fright. The horror radiated outwards, and those out of range of the sharta fled in fear of the terrorized armies that ran screaming towards them in the darkness.

Keshan took an arrow from Jandu's quiver. He whispered to it and then flung it into the earth, arrowhead first. A soft,

green light shot from the shaft and spread over the battlefield like smoke.

Jandu felt the icy fingers that had gripped his heart let go. His mind cleared. Sheer exhaustion was the only sensation that remained. Jandu sheathed his sword and saw Keshan sway on his feet. Jandu lunged out to catch Keshan as he collapsed.

Keshan was limp in Jandu's arms.

"Keshan!" Jandu shouted.

"I'm fine..." Keshan swallowed painfully, his lips and mouth parched. "...I'm just tired."

"You broke Darvad's sharta," Jandu said. "It's time for us to go home."

Keshan sat up weakly. "I'll drive the chariot."

Jandu shook his head. "The horses are gone."

"I'll get them."

"You can barely stand up."

"We need the chariot to get out of here any time soon. Just let me rest a moment." Keshan leaned against the toppled chariot.

An eerie silence filled the darkness as the counter-curse made its way across the field. As their panic lifted men stilled. The screaming ceased, but quiet realizations of pain rose in their place.

"My brother," one man whispered, tears streaming from his eyes as he cradled a limp body in his arms. "I killed my own brother!"

Jandu felt bones break beneath his foot. He looked down and, seeing Lord Indarel, cried out in horror. Nearby, Indarel's eldest son, his pride and joy, Ramad, lay dead, his neck twisted and broken. Jandu leaned down and closed what was left of Indarel's eyes. His body was flat in terrible places. Jandu tried to drag his corpse to their chariot, to save it from further desecration, but as he pulled on Indarel's arm, the limbs separated, so beaten that Jandu was afraid his arm would rip off. Jandu fought back vomit. Abiyar would be devastated.

Jandu stepped away, unsure he could bear any more of this.

Keshan whistled in the dark, and to Jandu's surprise, their two stallions came towards them. The steeds had calmed, although their coats were white with sweat. Keshan moved like he were half-dead as he reharnessed them, using his harafa as a strap to replace the one that had broken.

Jandu jumped into the car while Keshan again took the reins.

Jandu tried to conjure a light sharta to see by, but his tongue was so swollen and cut from the dozens of shartas he had uttered, he could no longer make it form the sentence he needed. At least the darkness was no longer complete—fires from fallen torches lit the landscape. Keshan called the Yashva back and their luminous bodies cast a blue glow.

Keshan pointed east. "Darvad."

In the thin light, Jandu recognized Darvad's banner as well as his brother Yudar's. Darvad's chariot approached Yudar with alarming speed. Few soldiers blocked his path.

"The war is about to end," Keshan said. "Do you care who wins anymore?"

"It can't be Darvad, not after what he's done to his own people tonight."

Keshan nodded. He cooed to the horses and they snorted back at him, moving into an exhausted trot. A few more soothing words helped them collect themselves. They picked up speed. The battlefield was a sea of bodies now, but the horses no longer paid heed. They trampled over soil and flesh alike. Keshan drove them towards Yudar.

Jandu's weariness made even holding Zandi unbearable. He remembered when he had first changed into a woman, how his bow had grown into a bulky, unwieldy thing, beyond his ability to lift. He felt the same way now.

They sped across the battlefield unchallenged. Of Darvad's eight commanders, only Iyestar remained, his chariot surrounded by the poor remains of Tiwari's army.



Up ahead, Darvad's horses collapsed. Darvad bounded from his chariot, armed with his sword and bow, and raced towards Jandu's brother.

Yudar sat in his chariot. His guards lay dead around him.

Although the rules of war had been broken over and over again, Yudar stepped from his chariot, so as to fight Darvad on even ground. Even now, the rules of the Triya were killing him.

A thin soldier rushed to Yudar's side and unsheathed his sword. It took Jandu only a moment to recognize the boy's armor. Abiyar stood beside Yudar, the last protection of their side of the war.

Jandu felt sick to his stomach. It was all for nothing. They were going to lose. Baram had died, and they were still going to lose. Yudar must have been thinking the same thing, for his expression suddenly faltered. He froze, watching Darvad's approach. Abiyar rushed ahead of him, charging Darvad, his sword aloft.

"No! Abiyar!" Jandu leapt from the car of chariot and sprinted forward. The Yashva rushed alongside him like an army of ghosts.

But Darvad only had eyes for Yudar. He pushed Abiyar out of the way without a second thought. Abiyar tumbled to the mud and Darvad pressed onward, screaming and charging Yudar with his sword ready.

Yudar made no move to draw his sword or raise his shield. Instead, his eyes closed and mumbled under his breath.

Jandu couldn't hear what Yudar said from this distance. But suddenly his Yashva guard flashed and then disappeared, one by one. They looked shocked as they turned to Jandu and then vanished. Only one sharta called down so many Yashva at once.

"Yudar! No!" Jandu shouted. He watched his brother's lips move as if in a trance. The words clashed together in Jandu's mind, and he could feel his heart break open. His brother was uttering the Pezarisharta. But there was no way Yudar would

be able to control it. It was too big for him. It wouldn't just kill Darvad. It would destroy the entire battlefield, and then spread across the countryside.

"Stop him!" Keshan screamed from behind Jandu. Even Darvad seemed stunned. He stopped running.

Yudar finished speaking, breathless. The sky turned dark red. The ground shook under Jandu's feet.

And then the weapon set the sky on fire.

## CHAPTER 59

AN EXPLOSION OF NOISE AND LIGHT SENT JANDU SPRAWLING to the earth. He gasped for air as the sky roiled and burned. Keshan rushed to Jandu's side, arms raised, speaking lowly.

Wind surged around Keshan's palms, driving the flames back. Jandu, Abiyar, Darvad, they all watched flames roll out around them as the Pezarisharta engulfed the battlefield. The trees at the edge of the forest exploded like kindling.

Overhead, the air churned into a firestorm, spiraling like a cyclone. Keshan trembled, hands stretched out. High-pitched wails screamed in the sky, sounding as if all the Yashvas fuelling the weapon were begging for the curse to stop. The sharta continued outwards, setting fire to the Uru camp. The fence and tents ignited. People trapped inside the camp shrieked and burned.

Yudar stood in the epicenter of the burning cyclone, his face convulsed with wonder and horror.

"Jandu!" Keshan gasped. His body shook. "You have to stop this! I don't have the strength."

Jandu knew he was right, but the only way he could save them would be to kill the man who uttered the sharta, to kill his brother.

Jandu crawled on the ground towards Yudar. The air howled around them. Keshan followed behind him, shielding Jandu from the fire.

Yudar trembled as he stared at the expanding cyclone of fire. "What have I done?" Yudar whispered.

Jandu stood and locked his arm around his brother's neck, clasping him close. Dry, scorching wind whipped around the two of them. Dust flew in Jandu's eyes, making them water.

Yudar leaned into Jandu's embrace. His bottom lip quivered.

“I’m sorry.”

Jandu’s tears blurred his vision. He pulled his brother’s head back. Yudar didn’t struggle.

“Forgive me,” Yudar choked out.

“I forgive you,” Jandu said, his voice hoarse.

Jandu jerked Yudar’s neck sideways and back, and felt it snap. Yudar’s head lolled forward as he slumped to the ground, his body dropping like a sack of millet.

Keshan seized Jandu by the shoulders and yanked him down onto the ground. The frenzied air swept down upon Yudar’s body. Jandu sank his fingers into the soil and gripped the mud. Wind screamed and flames seared down into Yudar’s body, as the sharta retracted back to its source, burning it to ash. And then the sharta stamped itself out.

All that remained was the silence of death.

Jandu rose to his knees, surveying the field. Everything within a half mile radius had been scorched to charcoal. Jandu knelt by the smoking remains of his eldest brother, gripping his stomach. He didn’t cry. He wasn’t even sure if he was sad. All he felt an icy emptiness, leaving him cold and vacant.

Survivors stumbled at the edge the blackened battlefield. Jandu watched them distantly.

“Jandu stay down!” Keshan shoved him forward and then collapsed to the ground.

Jandu heard a low-pitched whistle and felt the thump of the arrow scratch across the back of his armor. He spun around, placing himself between his attacker and Keshan.

Darvad glared at him, his face wild, his eyes bloodshot. Blood ran down both arms. He looked as ferocious and demented as a demon of revenge.

“Jandu Paran!” Darvad screamed. His voice sent a shiver through Jandu’s soul. It was inhuman. Darvad lifted his bow, aimed his arrow at Jandu’s face.

Then Darvad grunted, his bow suddenly slack in his hand, the arrow dropping into the ground. Darvad crumpled to the

## THE ARCHER'S HEART

earth. His face smacked into to the mud, an arrow buried deep into the back of his neck.

Behind Darvad, Abiyar stood, breathing heavily, holding his bow, face streaked with ash and tears.

“Good boy,” Jandu said hoarsely.

Despite his tears, Abiyar smiled at him. “Thank you, King Jandu.”

Jandu covered his face with his hands and wept.

## CHAPTER SIXTY

FEW BODIES REMAINED TO BE CREMATED AFTER THE PEZARISHARTA.

Onshu and the other priests who oversaw the battle held a coronation ceremony at the edge of the field. Darvad was dead, killed by a Paran, therefore the Parans had won. And since Yudar and Baram died in battle, Jandu inherited the throne. Marhavad was his.

The priests poured holy water onto Jandu's hair, and they wrapped his neck in a garland representing all the lands of Prasta. Jandu endured the ceremonies silently. His body hurt in so many places, it all came together as one deep pain. Keshan stood by him, looking half-dead with exhaustion himself.

Of the eleven lords who had brought armies to Terashu Field, only three survived. Jandu's brother-in-law Rishak, Keshan's brother Iyestar, and Olan, the lord of Bandari, joined other hastily-appointed representatives from the other states to pay homage to their new king. They swore fealty and offered tokens—diamonds, rubies, gold armor, and horses—to show their allegiance. They did so somberly, most still stunned by the horrific end.

Soldiers, attendants and servants cheered loudly, exulting in both their own survival and Jandu's ascension to the throne.

After the ceremony, Iyestar hesitated before Keshan.

Jandu closed his eyes. "Keshan is no longer Jegora." He turned with a sigh to Onshu and nodded. "Perform the ceremony now."

Onshu stepped forward and chanted prayers over Keshan. It seemed interminable. Once Onshu declared Keshan's Triya status restored, Iyestar rushed forward and embraced Keshan,

weeping loudly. All around them nobles, servants and soldiers renewed their cheer.

Jandu called his men to him. Anant, Lazro and Warash led them. They were ragged, most beaten and filthy, but they marched with pride. Jandu appointed them as his personal guard and distributed gold tokens and new weapons to them. They bowed before him, joy and relief illuminating their dirty faces.

Onshu chanted a prayer of peace and blessing for the new king. And the gathered throngs of Paran and Uru survivors joined him.

At the close of the ceremony, Jandu limped off with Keshan to the Paran camp. At once he was thronged by physicians. He let them rub salves into his wounds. He took a bath and threw up blood. He noted absentmindedly that the entire left side of his stomach was purple and bruised, injured internally from uttering so many shartas. He left Keshan in the physician's care.

When he found Baram's tent, white mourning flags hung from it. Inside, Suraya knelt in prayer. The moment she saw Jandu, she rushed to him. The two of them collapsed together on the rugs. With Suraya's tears egging him on, Jandu wept for Baram. He even wept for Yudar. He wept for everything the two of them lost, for all the sacrifices that had been made, to make a man who did not want the kingdom king.

"I miss Baram," Suraya cried. Jandu pulled her to him so tightly, he suddenly worried that he was hurting her. But Suraya clung with equal strength.

"Me too," Jandu said. He wiped his eyes. "But we have survived—you, me, Keshan..." Jandu touched her belly affectionately. "And Baram's son will be king one day."

Suraya smiled. "Or queen."

Jandu nodded. "It doesn't matter. Boy or girl, I'll love them."

He helped Suraya pack her belongings for the journey back to Prasta. He didn't know what else to do, or say. She had lost

two husbands and her father in this war. He was relieved when her brother Rishak arrived, dressed in white mourning clothes, and took Suraya in his arms. For all that she had lost, Jandu was grateful that she still had family.

Outside, Jandu found Keshan, tending to the two stolen horses that had served them through the previous night. Keshan spoke to them tenderly as he washed their legs with a sponge. Keshan looked clean and refreshed, and wore Triya clothes once more. He smiled as Jandu approached.

Jandu did not smile back, but he brought his hands together in the sign of peace.

“Has anyone given you trouble?” Jandu asked. His own voice sounded distant, even to himself.

Keshan shook his head. Jandu reached out and placed his hand on the top of Keshan’s head. Keshan’s hair smelled like coconut; it was warm and clean.

Keshan closed his eyes and leaned towards Jandu. He swayed slightly on his feet, showing his exhaustion.

“Lie down with me,” Jandu said softly.

“Of course.”

Jandu led Keshan into Yudar’s tent, back into the inner chamber. He fell asleep immediately, Keshan curled hotly in his arms.

In the morning, Jandu was awakened by Anant, who informed him that the armies were preparing to depart, but needed his orders. Jandu dressed and let Keshan sleep a little longer. He met briefly with the ministers and lords, officially releasing them from their duty to the battlefield. Jandu told them to return to their families, and then congregated in Prasta. They had a lot of work ahead of them, rebuilding the nation after so much strife.

By noon, the roads away from Terashu were crowded with caravans of carts, chariots, riders and people on foot. Jandu took one look at the lines of soldiers, merchants, craftsmen, servants, and priests heading back to Prasta, and made a decision.



"I do not want to return home in this procession."

The priests and surviving lords were surprised, but did not object.

"I will meet you all in Prasta," Jandu informed his lords and generals.

This was beyond all conventions, but Jandu had no doubt that by now they all knew he was unconventional. Already there were men who called him a prophet and to Jandu's surprise, several Draya priests were among them. Jandu left with Keshan and a small party of his bodyguards. For the most part, the guards gave them space, scouting ahead through the meadow and fields or riding far behind, keeping their distance. They seemed to understand that Jandu wanted time alone with Keshan.

They passed through fields overgrown with flowers and followed small roads that wove along the streams that fed the river. The farther they rode from Terashu field, the more lush, more fragrant the land grew. Vibrant green pastures and explosions of colorful wild flowers spilled out between groves of fruiting trees.

Jandu did not speak as they rode. He still felt a crippling numbness. He had wondered how a person stayed whole after a night like the close of battle. And now he feared that one did not remain whole. One was forever tainted. Even the beauty of the surrounding landscape did not soothe him.

As the sun hung heavy and hot above the horizon, they stopped to rest beside a tranquil, isolated lake. White cranes and small swallows watched them water their horses, and secure them under the shade of a nearby willow tree.

Keshan jauntily walked to the water's edge and unbuckled his sandals with the enthusiasm of a teenaged boy.

"Come on, let's bathe."

Jandu felt ancient. His feet dragged, his heart ached.

Keshan's warm, dry hand encircled his wrist. Keshan's eyes shone as he led Jandu to the water.

“You’ll feel better when you’re clean,” Keshan said assuredly.

Jandu swallowed. “I feel like I’ll kill anything I touch. The fish are doomed.”

Keshan’s mouth quirked into a smile, but his eyes stared at him, large and serious. “You have touched me more than anyone, Jandu. Am I dead?”

“No.”

“Then trust me and get into the water.” Keshan began to strip.

Jandu reluctantly removed his sandals and helmet. His arms felt leaden, his fingers clumsily untied the leather strings of his armor. As soon as his breastplate was off, every part of him felt lighter. He took off his shirt and unwound his dejaru. Its blood red color chilled him.

Keshan waited for him in the water. He stood, up to his waist in the lake, his dark skin glittering with droplets. He held out his hand, and Jandu walked towards him. He stepped slowly, sucking in his breath at the frigid crispness of the water. After the initial shock of cold, the water felt marvelous, refreshing in the late afternoon breezes that were still warm and hot on his dry skin.

Jandu’s nerves revitalized in the deliciously cool water. Standing beside Keshan, he let the aches and knots of his muscles unwind.

Keshan plunged down under the water. A few seconds later he dramatically reemerged, sputtering and splashing and hooting, pushing his wet hair back from his forehead, grinning from ear to ear.

Keshan reached under the water and jerked Jandu’s ankle. Jandu fell backwards into the water. He was engulfed in crisp renewal. He stayed submerged, blowing out air to sink further, letting the cool purity of the lake cover his battle-worn body.

He felt alive.

And that was all that mattered now. Life, in its chilling, surprising, glorious fullness. Jandu had survived. His body

screamed it out with each second he held his breath. He was alive, and out of danger. He was free.

Finally, out of breath, Jandu shot out of the water and gasped for air. He had gotten turned around, and couldn't see Keshan.

Keshan snaked his long arms around Jandu's waist from behind. His hands rested protectively on Jandu's chest.

Jandu leaned back into the burning warmth of Keshan's body. Keshan rested his chin on Jandu's shoulder. They stood together, watching long reeds blowing in the hot wind.

"Feel better?" Keshan whispered.

Jandu's back vibrated with Keshan's words. Jandu turned slowly and wrapped his arms around Keshan as well. They held each other, their bodies pressed tightly together, cool water lapping at their waists.

"Yes." Jandu reached out and wiped a rivulet of water from Keshan's cheek.

Keshan smiled and squeezed Jandu tighter. Keshan leaned in and kissed Jandu with exquisite sweetness. When he pulled away, Jandu's body pressed forward, drawn for more.

"I am here, more alive and more whole than I have ever been, and all because of you, Jandu," Keshan whispered.

Jandu's mouth sought Keshan's once more, thrusting into the sweet, drunk warmth of Keshan's heat. Jandu's body thrummed as he felt Keshan's immediate arousal. It was so easy to see the signs of Keshan's love. Keshan's body loosened like warm butter, melting into Jandu's arms, gripping Jandu to him with a desperate desire.

"Never leave me," Keshan said huskily. His lips caressed Jandu's lips, his hips grinding Jandu's with mounting urgency.

"I won't." Jandu's voice was choked with emotion. He needed Keshan's heat enveloping him now, completely. "I love you. I will be with you forever."

"Forever," Keshan repeated solemnly. He pulled Jandu downwards, and then they were spiraling in the water, swimming,

clinging to each other and laughing, sheer joy radiating from them. As they swam towards shore, Keshan's hands wandered over Jandu's naked body, stroking him and feeling inside of him, and every nerve tingled and screamed out for Jandu to let Keshan consume him now, whole, take him once and claim him forever.

Jandu pulled Keshan onto the soft, wet grasses of the bank and pulled Keshan on top of him. He cradled Keshan's head in his hands and kissed him, mouth open, spreading his legs wider in invitation. Keshan settled his weight between them, their cocks rubbing together, hot, delirious pulses of desire radiating upwards through Jandu's chest and arms.

Keshan ran his hand on Jandu's backside, cupping his bottom, and then fingered him, Jandu's skin slick and wet with the lake's water, easing Jandu's passage. Jandu arched upwards.

Keshan leaned down and slowly kissed Jandu's chest as he fingered him, his lips teasing Jandu's nipples, his stomach. He kissed Jandu's bruised side tenderly. Jandu lifted his legs higher. Keshan's fingers scissored inside of Jandu, and Jandu shivered. Keshan slowly pushed his engorged cock into him, kissing Jandu's sensitive neck at the same moment.

Jandu's skin stretched, the delicious sting of being filled so completely causing him to gasp. He was immobilized by the high heat of Keshan's cock. Jandu's senses swallowed in the smell and feel of him, the glorious intimacy of their connection. His scrotum and cock pressed against Keshan's hard stomach.

As Keshan slowly moved within him, Jandu rocked his hips, pulling Keshan deeper. Jandu lost his sense of time and place, drowned with the electric current of this warmth and affection, his body responding to Keshan's mounting thrusts.

Keshan pulled Jandu's legs onto his shoulders and pushed deeper. He reached forward with his hand and pumped Jandu's cock in time with his thrusts. A mounting explosion of ecstasy shattered through Jandu, it coursed out of his body in great, shuddering pulses.

Keshan didn't bother to be quiet. He moaned as he came, his climax throbbing inside of Jandu hotly. Keshan shook, his skin flush and hot to the touch. The water from their swim seemed to have evaporated in their heated lovemaking.

Keshan rested his head on Jandu's shoulder. Jandu liked the feeling of Keshan's cock retreating from within him. It was slow, soothing, and quiet.

"I love you," Keshan whispered.

"Good," Jandu said. "Because I think I'm going to be sore tomorrow, and it better have been worth it."

Keshan smiled lazily, his eyes closed. "We'll just have to do that more often. Then you won't be sore."

Jandu looked up at the sky. It was perfect, blue, not a cloud in sight. The silence, the sweet smell of berries and sex and Keshan filled his senses. "Where shall we do this more often? Prasta, or Tiwari?"

Keshan laughed. "So many choices. So many places to do it."

"Do you have a preference?" Jandu asked.

"No, Prasta is fine. I just want to be where you are." Keshan finally slipped from Jandu completely, and he rolled over, lying alongside him.

"Good," Jandu said. "Because I want you to be my Royal Judge."

"I know."

"You do, do you?" Jandu felt relieved to see such a smug expression on Keshan's face.

"Yes, last night I saw our futures, the elevation of Jegora, the public hospitals and schools, our many impressive nights of passion..." Keshan grinned. "You'll bring it all about."

Jandu stretched against the soft grasses. "Not just me. I'm going to rely on you. I want your vision of a new Marhavad, but you're going to have to help me. I can't do this alone."

"You won't be alone."

A warm wind blew over them, rustling the reeds.

“Am I still attractive in this future vision of me?” Jandu asked with a grin.

Keshan’s eyes remained closed, but his mouth curved into a lazy smile. “Very. Although you are going to go gray prematurely.”

Jandu sighed. “Well, at least I’ll still have hair. What about you?”

Keshan laughed. “I still look magnificent.”

“It wouldn’t matter you know. I’d still love you even if you were bald and fat and wrinkled.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

The two of them lay on the bank of the lake and stared upwards. A smile played across Keshan’s mouth, and he lazily closed his eyes and nuzzled his face into Jandu’s neck.

Just then, a large sarus crane flew overhead. He blocked out the sun with his massive white wings, his red and black head looking down at Jandu and Keshan with vague interest. And with sudden, resounding volume, the crane sang out. From a distance, other cranes called back and the air was filled with music.

Jandu stroked Keshan’s face, and the beauty of this moment, it became eternal. Death and life, the dejection of the spirit and the courage to triumph—all these timeless experiences and emotions, like pigment in oil, were encapsulated, preserved forever, in this one second of a life.

He was alive. Keshan was alive. And now they could begin.



## CHARACTERS

**Abiyar Lokesh:** Third and youngest son of Indarel Lokesh, Lord of Afadi.

**Ajani Alamar:** Wife of Keshan Adaru

**Anant Sarkumar:** Commander in the Dragewan army

**Azari:** Pseudonym of Suraya Paria while hiding in Afadi

**Baldur Tanaraf:** Lord of the State of Penemar

**Bandruban:** Prophet of the Shentari faith

**Baram Param:** Second son of King Shandarvan by his first wife Kari; brother of Yudar and Jandu; husband of Suraya Paria

**Bir Soridashen:** Lord of the State of Jagu Mali

**Bodan:** Pseudonym of Baram Paran while hiding in Afadi

**Chezek:** Keshan Adaru's charioteer and servant

**Darvad Uru:** Son of King Shandarvan by his second wife Farashi; half-brother of Yudar, Baram, and Jandu

**Druv Majeo:** Lord of the State of Pagdesh

**Esalas:** Pseudonym of Yudar Paran while hiding in Afadi

**Eshau:** Abiyar Lokesh's weapons master

**Farashi Uru:** Second wife of King Shandarvan; mother of Darvad Uru

**Firdaus Trinat:** Lord of the State of Chandamar; brother of Hanu; father of Ishad

**Hanu Trinat:** Chandamar Ambassador in the State of Afadi; brother of Firdaus

**Harami:** Prophet of the Shentari faith

**Indarel Lokesh:** Lord of the State of Afadi; husband of Shali Amain; father of Ramad, Parik, Vaisha, and Abiyar

**Inaud Adaru:** Uncle of Iyestar and Keshan Adaru

**Ishad Trinat:** Lord of the State of Chandamar; son of Firdaus

**Iyestar Adaru:** Lord of the State of Tiwari; brother of Keshan Adaru

**Janali:** Pseudonym of Jandu Paran while hiding in Afadi

**Jandu Paran:** Third son of King Shandarvan by his first wife Kari; youngest brother of Yudar and Baram; husband of Suraya Paria

**Kadal Kardef:** Lord of the State of Marshav

**Kari Paran:** First wife of King Shandarvan; mother of Yudar, Baram, and Jandu

**Keshan Adaru:** Younger brother of Iyestar Adaru, Lord of Tiwari; husband of Ajani Alamar; cousin of the Parans



## CHARACTERS

- Koraz:** Yashva demon of the forest
- Laiu:** Tarek Amia's servant
- Lazro Arundan:** Son of Tamarus Arundan; friend of Keshan Adaru
- Linaz:** Mother of Lord Iyestar and Keshan Adaru
- Mazar Hamdi:** Regent of Marhavad; weapons master to the princes of Marhavad
- Mendraz:** King of the Yashvas
- Nadaru Paria:** Lord of the State of Karuna; father of Rishak and Suraya
- Ohendru:** Chaya soldier in the Uru army
- Olan Osasu:** Lord of the State of Bandari
- Onshu:** High priest of Marhavad
- Parik Lokesh:** Second son of Indarel Lokesh, Lord of Afadi
- Ramad Lokesh:** Eldest son of Indarel Lokesh, Lord of Afadi
- Rani:** Servant in the Afadi palace; Janali's roommate
- Rishak Paria:** Son of Nadaru Paria, Lord of Karuna; brother of Suraya; brother-in-law of the Parans
- Sadeshar:** Prophet of the Shentari faith
- Sahdin Ori:** Lord of the State of Jezza
- Satish:** Tarek Amia's charioteer
- Shali Amain:** Wife of Indarel Lokesh, Lord of Afadi; mother of Ramad, Parik, Vaisha and Abiyar
- Shandarvan:** Former King of Marhavad; father of Darvad Uru, and Yudar, Baram, and Jandu Paran
- Suraya Paria:** Daughter of Nadaru Paria, Lord of Karuna; sister of Rishak; wife of Yudar, Baram, and Jandu Paran
- Taivo:** Prophet of the Shentari faith
- Tamarus Arundan:** Chaya spiritual leader and friend of Keshan Adaru
- Tarek Amia:** Lord of the State of Dragewan
- Tarhandi:** Prophet of the Shentari faith
- Umia:** Yashva demon consort of Mendraz, King of the Yashvas; aunt of Iyestar and Keshan Adaru
- Vaisha Lokesh:** Daughter of Indarel, Lord of Afadi
- Warash:** Chaya soldier in the Uru army
- Yudar Paran:** First son of King Shandarvan by his first wife Kari; brother of Jandu and Baram; husband of Suraya Paria; Royal Judge
- Zandi:** Yashva demon and Jandu's bow

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- Adri Mountain:** Mountain in Pagdesh; location of holy retreat
- Ajadusharta:** Magical weapon; repels other weapons
- Alazsharta:** Magical weapon; knocks enemy unconscious
- Ashari Forest:** Forest outside Prasta; home to Yashva demon Koraz
- Barunazsharta:** Magical weapon; brilliant light
- Chaya:** Unskilled labor and servant caste of Marhavad; lowest caste
- Dejaru:** Long piece of cloth worn by men, either secured under a belt and sash and made into loose trousers, or tucked loosely and left long like a sarong
- Draya:** Priestly caste of Marhavad; second-highest caste
- Fazsharta:** Magical weapon; arrow with endless range
- Hafedsharta:** Magical weapon; freezes opponent
- Harafa:** Long piece of cloth worn either as a scarf or wrapped across the upper torso
- Hedraan tree:** Magical Yashva tree that grows in the Ashari Forest
- Jegora:** Untouchable caste of Marhavad; casteless
- Korazsharta:** Magical weapon; spear of unfailing accuracy
- Manarisharta:** Magical weapon; burst of electricity
- Pezarisharta:** Magical weapon; sets fire to the sky
- Prasta:** Capitol city of Marhavad
- Rajiwasharta:** Magical weapon; creates a sucking vortex
- Rebo:** Three stringed musical instrument
- Sharta:** Magical weapon; form of a Yashva demon in the human world
- Shentari:** Primary religion of Marhavad
- Suya:** Merchant and skilled labor caste of Marhavad; third-highest caste
- Tarhisharta:** Magical weapon; explosive wall of force
- Terashu Field:** Traditional battleground of Marvad kings
- Triya:** Warrior and king caste of Marhavad; highest caste
- Tunufisharta:** Magical weapon; burns any individual to ash
- Yashva:** Immortal demon from the Yashva Kingdom
- Zahari:** a blouse and long piece of fabric wrapped around the body to form a woman's dress
- Zandisharta:** Magical weapon; any instrument or tool of metal

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