

THE
ARCHER'S HEART

BOOK TWO OF THREE



ASTRID AMARA

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BY
ASTRID AMARA



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Edited by Nicole Kimberling
Cover art, illustrations, and maps by Dawn Kimberling
Proofreading by Tenea D. Johnson

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This book is dedicated to Angus.

MARHAVAD



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CHAPTER 19

YUDAR, ALONE, SHOULDERED THE BURDEN OF FINDING THEIR home. He believed he should be the one to suffer for their embarrassing exile. Jandu followed, asking no questions, offering no opinions. He was still too angry to speak to Yudar, too shocked by the turn of events.

Every step they took from Prasta further solidified the precariousness of their situation. In the back of Jandu's mind, the true gravity of their situation still hadn't set in. But as they hid from travelers and plunged deeper into the untamed countryside, the stark realities of exile became more and more apparent.

Yudar chose a spot far removed from civilization, in the foothills of the great northern Ekavi mountain range. Jandu, Baram and Suraya followed him up a trail tangled with vines past a small village. The trail was mostly used by pilgrims and ascetics to visit a remote holy retreat on the side of Mount Adri. The pilgrim's trail wound uphill for a day and a half before it reached the retreat and a large, placid lake that was frequented by cranes.

On the opposite end of the lake, they found a small, flat clearing in the thick of the forest, where ripe and bursting foliage drooped, thick-bowed and full of fruit, over the banks of the water. On one side of their new home, Jandu could see the smooth lake surface and the mountains beyond. On the other side was a steep drop down into a gorge cloaked by verdant palms. Trees clung to the cliffs with roots stretched across the rocks like talons. Merely looking down into the valley gave Jandu vertigo.

High above them in the dense canopy of trees, there came a constant rustle of monkeys, showing off daring feats of acrobatics.

With the monsoon hot and heavy upon them, their need for permanent shelter was dire. Their clothes and the few possessions they brought immediately began to mold. Even the leather of their shoes and belts turned green and stank with the moisture of the jungle.

Yudar took the task of building their house upon himself, speaking infrequently, working all day until his arms shook with exhaustion.

“I won’t beg your forgiveness,” he said, almost proudly, “because there can be none for the sin I have committed.” He was in a mode of extreme self-flagellation, a look of serenity on his face as he tortured his body with the kind of hard labor a king was not raised to endure.

But Jandu and Baram did help him, because they were drowning in the monsoon. Their pitiful first attempts at shelters did little to keep them dry. None of them knew how to build so much as a hut, nor which materials held up best against the sultry, powerful winds. Their walls blew away or caved in during downpours, or rotted before their very eyes. It took months to finally construct two huts from bamboo and sandalwood that could bear the brunt of the oppressive, temperamental climate. They laid a roof with wood and thatched over this with wide leaves. They built the main hut large enough for two of them to sleep on the earth floor. An enclosed area to the side of the main hut formed their open-roofed kitchen. They crafted rough wooden boards into benches for sitting, and cleared an area against the back of the hut where they could view the calm waters of the lake while they ate.

The other hut was for the couple. It was smaller, just room enough for a bed and a small table constructed of sandalwood, and their small traveling chests. Baram and Suraya slept in there, while Jandu roughed it on the main hut’s floor with Yudar.

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Their new home was beautifully lonely. But even with a roof over his head, Jandu was painfully aware of his own degeneration. He was accustomed to servants taking care of menial tasks, and so now, on his own, he'd brought all the wrong things. He carried his armor and weapons up the mountain, but hadn't thought to bring a bucket. Picking banana leaves to use for plates was an all-day venture into the lush thicket. He struggled with sharpening his razors. His clothes never dried in the oppressive humidity, and when he tried to use fire to this purpose, his *dejaru* caught aflame.

The smell of hot, rotten feet was always around him.

Flies were everywhere, as were mosquitoes. Monkeys screamed through the trees and baboons stole their drying clothes. Worst for Jandu, the forest floor crawled with beetles. He hated beetles. And now he slept with them, worked with them, accidentally ate them. His nerves twitched with constant repulsion.

Baram made those first few months even worse. He could not bring himself to forgive Yudar for the crime of gambling away his throne and his brothers, and ceaselessly reminded Yudar of his offense. Yudar responded with a sullen calmness that he had affected shortly after the dice game, and his passivity further enraged Baram. Baram spent hours sitting beside the lake, skipping rocks, eyes raw and red with resentment.

Yudar seldom ate anything. He rarely said anything. He would just sit whispering that this wasn't Baram's fault, or Jandu's fault, or Suraya's. It was his. He had ruined them. And he was going to pay for it, he promised them.

But it was cold comfort to Jandu, who still loved his brother. Yudar's guilt brought Jandu no pleasure since he wanted to forget the dice game ever happened. Jandu knew Yudar was not himself when dice were in his hands. A trance consumed him, pushed logic and feeling from his mind, and he acted on some alien urge to gamble regardless of consequence. It was a sickness Jandu had witnessed prior to that game, but never thought could go so far.

With their need to remain hidden foremost in their minds, Jandu and his family minimized contact with other people. They did not befriend the Draya at the nearby retreat, and avoided speaking to pilgrims on the trail. The only contact they had was in the village, and on Jandu's first solo voyage to purchase necessities, he realized the true precariousness of even that. Every single villager stared openly at Jandu's blue eyes. Blue eyes were a rarity even among princes; here, in the remotest corner of Marhavad, they had never been seen before. All it would take is a rumor of a blue-eyed man with scars on his arms in a remote village to bring Darvad's henchmen.

Jandu found the costs of goods in the village appalling, especially salt, which had been commonplace in the palace but out in the wilds seemed more precious than gold. After counting the coins they brought, he realized their money would not last a season. He had to choose between an iron pot for heating water and a bag of millet. He chose the pot.

Other than the game Jandu hunted and the fruits Suraya gathered they relied on dried grain purchased in the village, and by the end of the third month, there was only a handful of rice left and no money to buy more. Jandu could do nothing but brood and watch his brothers grow thinner, soaking with sweat and rain in the monsoon heat, his proud armor tarnishing in the choking organics of the forest.

Yudar developed a cough that rattled deeply, distantly, like a faraway stranger. It kept Jandu up at night, along with the cries of baboons, the mating of tigers, the singing of peafowl, and the endless patter of insect feet.

Gradually, Jandu got better at surviving in the wild. Although he had never fetched his own meal from the palace kitchen, he could now weave his own platters in an evening. Jandu fortified and improved their hut, and they all crafted small household items for Suraya, trying to make life a little less wretched with every spoon they carved, every trap they constructed.

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As always, Jandu was an impeccable hunter, although he never before had the distasteful experience of dressing a kill. Gutting a deer in the woods and carrying the bloody carcass over his shoulders for miles on end was an entirely new repugnance. Within minutes flies swarmed Jandu's entire body, the oppressive forest heat pushing the carcass limply onto his shoulder blades. Returning home, he would desperately want to change clothes after bathing in the lake, but he only had a few choices, and his other pair of trousers was already tearing at the cuffs and stained.

On one of Jandu's hunting trips, he found a small clearing in the forest, about fifteen minutes walk from the lake. Large camphor trees circled the clearing's edges, and cashew nut and horse flowers hedged the cool forest floor. A faceless, waist-high stone sculpture stood sentinel in the center of the clearing. Jandu had no idea who the statue was of or who built it, but it appeared very old, time having worn its surface smooth, decades of rain washing the finer carvings into nothing but soft lines in a vague human shape.

Jandu claimed this reclusive space in the jungle as his own, and went there daily, seeking a moment's respite from the constant haranguing of his depressed family, luxuriating in the cool shadows of the large trees. He leaned against the statue and stared up at the canopy and the thick clouds, pregnant with moisture, and succumbed to the only peace he'd felt since the dice game. Even the ever-present shrieks of forest life seemed quieter in this tranquil refuge.

But even these stolen moments of solitude did little to soothe Jandu's burning heart. Losing Keshan amplified Jandu's anger, turned it into pain. More than any other reason, his forced separation from his lover was the fuel that fired Jandu's craving for vengeance. Darvad's crooked game had pried Keshan from Jandu's arms. And for that alone, he would pay.



One day after a successful hunt, Jandu returned home with a barking deer, large enough to feed them for several days,

but not so big that its meat could go bad before they could eat it all. Baram skinned and cleaned the carcass, while Jandu washed in the lake. He chased off two baboons that tried to make off with his blue dejaru, and stepped on a fire ant as he gracelessly pulled on his once-white trousers. By the time he sat down with his family to eat, he was in a terrible mood. His head ached from the heat and heartache. Keshan's absence felt like a physical wound.

The rest of his family were in equal dispirits. Yudar's new religious stoicism prevented him from eating meat, and so he once again went hungry. And Baram spoke, for the hundredth time, of war.

"It isn't right for us to be sitting and rotting in a shack!" Baram cried, his fists shaking as he spoke. Suraya dodged his flailing arms as she ladled out broth and handed each of her husbands a banana leaf plate piled with roasted venison on top. Jandu noticed the rough callouses on her hands.

"We should declare war, Yudar." Baram pointed a finger at his older brother. "It is the Triya thing to do."

"We must serve out this penance," Yudar said calmly. He sipped at his broth, refusing the venison. "Only after we fulfill the agreed-upon conditions of the dice game can we ask for our half of the kingdom back. If Darvad refuses us, then we may discuss war."

"We have few allies now," Suraya commented.

Jandu didn't understand how Yudar could refuse the venison. He stuffed his mouth with the sweet, hot flesh, feeling his bones strengthen with the direly needed food. The meat sat rich and warm in his stomach, radiating energy through his limbs.

"I don't care," Baram sulked. "I'd rather lose a war that is justified than languish here in the wilderness."

Suraya sighed. "Your brother made a promise." Suraya had a habit now of not addressing Yudar directly. "We must honor that promise."

"The game was rigged." Baram repeated the sentence like a mantra. He said it every day, dozens of times a day, staring into space, feeding his own fury. "The game was rigged."

Jandu widened his eyes in mock-surprise. "The game was rigged? You don't say!"

"Don't, Jandu," Yudar said quietly.

"Tell me more, Baram! I had no idea." Jandu threw his banana leaf into the fire.

"We will get our vengeance, Baram," Yudar told Baram. "Just be patient."

"Patience!" Baram shook his head and stomped into the hut.

Jandu looked at Baram's half-finished plate, and reached over to steal some of his venison. Suraya slapped his hand away.

"Bad," she said. She smirked at him.

Jandu took a smaller piece, putting it on Yudar's plate.

"Yudar, you must eat something," Jandu said.

Yudar smiled sweetly. "I had broth. It was delicious, Suraya."

"You're skin and bones," Jandu said.

"Nonsense. I still walk for miles every day."

Jandu looked to Suraya for help, but she wasn't yet willing to forgive Yudar either. She barely acknowledged Yudar's presence. Now she sat down beside Jandu and started her own meal.

Jandu sighed, and then put the piece of venison back on Baram's plate. He knew Baram would be back later to eat what was left behind. Baram used to consume three or four meals for every one Jandu had. Baram's chronic hunger aggravated his surly disposition.

Jandu helped Suraya clear up after dinner. Afterwards, as Yudar read his holy scrolls in the fading light, Jandu searched for Baram.

He found his brother by the lakeside, skipping rocks. The sun set over the jungle, lending the air a magical pinkish glow. It reminded Jandu of Keshan's Yashva home.

Waves gently massaged the small circular pebbles of the bank with a quiet hiss. Jandu squatted beside his brother, chewing on a blade of grass like Keshan used to. Even that small gesture seemed to bring Keshan closer to him.

“Are you all right?” Jandu asked Baram.

Baram didn’t look at him. He kept throwing stones. “You know I’m not mad at you.”

“I know.”

“I just... I can’t let it go.”

“Then don’t,” Jandu said. “But keep it to yourself.” He sighed. “We have to be here for three years. Don’t make every dinner a nightmare. Please, if only for Suraya’s sake.”

Baram dropped the stones in his left hand. “I won’t pretend, Jandu. I won’t act like everything is fine when it isn’t. We’re starving and poor and miserable.”

“I know that!” Jandu swallowed to control his own anger.

“It’s Yudar’s fault for landing us here, and Darvad’s fault for his trickery.”

“Reminding him of it every five seconds will not change anything.”

“I’m not going to pretend like this isn’t the nightmare it is.”

“Then stop sulking and do something with your anger,” Jandu said. “Hunt. Build. Stab fish. Whatever. Just do something.”

Baram suddenly whirled and threw a rock into the overgrowth behind them.

Jandu looked at Baram like he was insane. And then he heard a voice.

“Ouch!”

In an instant Jandu and Baram were up, charging the figure hidden in the bushes. Baram knocked him to the ground before he could speak and Jandu stood ready to punch him.

“My lords! It’s me, Rishak! Rishak Paria!”

Jandu squinted at the man. He was dressed as a pilgrim, in plain white trousers and a white shirt. But nearby, Jandu saw a healthy, well-muscled horse, laden with goods.

Baram hauled Rishak up by his collar and glared at him.

“Suraya’s brother! Rishak!” Rishak cried again, holding his hands together in the sign of peace.

Baram threw his arms around him and lifted him in the air, laughing. Jandu smiled as well, although Rishak’s sudden presence made him nervous.

“Our apologies, we didn’t recognize you!” Baram cried, finally letting Rishak free of his hug.

Rishak brushed leaves from his clothing. “I’ve been traveling in disguise.”

“Rishak!”

Suraya ran from the direction of their hut and threw her arms around her brother’s neck.

None of the brothers knew Rishak well. He was two years younger than Suraya, but renowned as an accomplished fighter despite his youth. He oversaw the State of Karuna’s massive army, and personally led several battles against the barbarian lands to the west. He was lithe and tawny, but had Suraya’s thick hair and tear-shaped eyes.

Rishak hugged his sister tightly and smiled at Baram and Jandu. Within a moment, Yudar came out as well, alerted by the commotion.

“How can you be here? How did you find us? Why are you here?” Suraya laughed and cried as she barraged him with questions.

Rishak kissed his sister’s cheek. “Keshan Adaru found out where you were and sent me.”

Jandu felt months of anger, frustration, and resentment evaporate.

“If he can find us, so can Darvad,” Baram said, scowling. “We should leave.”

Silence filled the evening air. Jandu couldn’t bear the thought of leaving after it had taken them so long to build the tiny home that they had.

Suraya served her brother hot broth and offered him the wood bench in the hut. Illuminated by firelight, her face looked dark and beautiful.

Rishak sat with the other men and scoffed at their concerns. “Do you know how hard it was to find you? No one will be able to repeat what I have done. Besides, I had Keshan’s help, and he was only able to locate you after he had a vision of Jandu at the priest’s retreat on the other side of the lake.”

As Rishak drank his broth, he told them of King Darvad’s oath-taking ceremony, and the clause that required all lords to swear not to help the Parans or face becoming outcaste.

“Did no one protest?” Baram asked.

Rishak shrugged. “No one openly said anything. But trust me, there was plenty of grumbling. Most of your allies believed you were tricked, Yudar, and still support you in their hearts, even if they cannot with their words.”

“Darvad is king for now,” Yudar said, looking grave. “It would be foolish of them to disagree. How they act in three years, however, is another matter.”

“Did you take the vow?” Suraya asked, refilling his cup.

“Father did,” Rishak said. He kissed his sister’s hand. Suraya glowed for the first time since the dice game. “Everyone did.”

“Even Keshan?” Jandu couldn’t help but ask.

“Iyestar took the oath on behalf of Tiwari,” Rishak said. “So, yes, even Keshan has promised not to help.” Rishak grinned. “But, in typical Keshan style, he immediately broke that promise by asking me to give you gifts from him, should I find you.”

“Gifts?” Suraya smiled. “Did you bring soap?”

Rishak laughed. “Father said that would be the first thing you would ask for.” He looked to Jandu. “Can you help me unload the horse?”

They had tied his horse to a nearby tree. Jandu and Rishak un-strapped the heavy saddle bags, and then unsaddled his horse. The last of the sun disappeared as the Parans gathered

around Rishak's bags anxiously, like children awaiting sweets. Rishak first pulled out a thick roll of paper, which he handed to Jandu. "Keshan asked me to give this to you." Rishak looked at Jandu with curiosity. "And he sent a small chest for you."

Jandu only half-listened to Rishak's words. He was too busy staring at the letter Rishak brought to him from Keshan.

Rishak presented Suraya some new zaharis from their father and, as if reading her mind, a flagon of jasmine oil and several cakes of soap, along with spices and ghee for cooking.

Jandu opened Keshan's chest and tears came to his eyes. Keshan sent gold coins. Jandu wasn't sure if the tears were for shame at taking money from his friend or relief at not needing to starve any longer.

Despite the long journey, Rishak could only stay for a night, worried that his absence would be noted and someone alerted to the Paran's location. He let his sister serve him leftovers from their dinner. As he discussed politics with Yudar, Jandu made an excuse to depart and practically ran from his family into the dark forest.

It was harder for Jandu to find his secret forest clearing in the dark, but the large moon provided enough illumination to go by shadows, and he brought a torch along to read the letter. The sounds of night wildlife crept around him, but he no longer cared. He had a letter from Keshan. All threats seemed paltry.

Jandu propped his torch against the statue and then unrolled the scroll. Keshan's handwriting was smooth and curvy, sexual, and he wrote each letter with careful deliberation, the layout carefully planned, as if this were the third draft of a composition.

My beautiful, beloved Jandu—

I wake up and think about you, the smell of your skin, the taste of your lips, the way you walk, a tiger about to pounce, so graceful, so lithe in your movements, so confident, and yet so calm, lazy almost, a luxurious grace that defines what it means to be a prince.

Iyestar is yelling at me right now. I'm supposed to be sitting downstairs in the reception hall, working out a land agreement between the Sharnas and the Chafri. But my heart isn't in it. I want to be with you. The need weighs upon me like a wound, constantly reminding me of its presence, aching for attention.

There is not a moment of the day I don't feel your long fingers upon my flesh, your hot mouth upon me, taking me deep inside of you. Nights are a torment of heated memories. The gentleness of your caress, the roughness of your entry. My skin is on fire, imagining you kissing the places that are yours alone, your fullness penetrating both my body and my soul.

Jandu - I declare my absolute affection for you. I have become out of sorts in your absence, my desire for your touch driving me mad with need. I hope you have more restraint than I. My family is used to my lascivious ways, but you are living with a king who wishes he were a sage. I hope he never suspects what it is I burn to do to you.

I wish there were some way I could ease your terrible burden. I hope the gift I've enclosed provides some assistance to you, although I know nothing I can send will give you the relief you deserve. The fact that you are being punished for your brother's sins insults my sense of justice, and fuels my hunger for change. We have to hope for a different Marhavad, where a man is guilty of his crime alone, and that a family should not be forced into such torment because of the sins of one.

I would tell you of my successes in getting Darvad to acknowledge some of my legal changes, but I know exactly what you would do. You would roll your eyes and say, 'for God's sake, stop talking politics.' And then you would kiss me, and I would realize, yes, you are right, there is no need to focus solely on politics. There are other beautiful things in this world worth savoring. And one of them is you.

Yours, in this life and all others, Keshan.

Jandu laughed, eyes brimming with tears. Words that would have scandalized him a year ago now sent bolts of desire

through him. He returned to the huts and used the last of their writing cloth and ink to quickly draft a return response to Keshan. As Rishak shared a wineskin with his sister and other brothers-in-law, Jandu sat by candlelight in the other hut, putting to words his hunger for Keshan's heart. He wrote briefly of their tormented three months in the forest, the agony of seclusion, of starvation. He thanked Keshan copiously for his generous gift, and then he made a request.

Jandu described in detail the location of the stone statue he had found in the dense forest. He even drew a map. He understood the risk; if anyone but Keshan received the letter, their location could be discovered and they would be undone. But Jandu's desperation for correspondence with Keshan was beyond reason. He didn't care about the risks.

Jandu asked Keshan to send a servant when he could, to pick up a letter from Jandu and to leave a letter in return. That way, they could stay in touch over the three years.

Jandu signed the letter and, as a last minute decision, drew a picture of himself trying to shave without a mirror and using his sword. Jandu had always been good at simple illustrations, and the picture was amusing enough that it left him grinning from ear to ear as he sealed the letter and brought it to Rishak.

In the morning, he begged Rishak to keep the letter secret and safe, and then stood with his brothers and Suraya to thank Rishak for his much-needed visit. As he disappeared from sight, and the rains started dumping as if on cue, only Jandu remained upbeat within their family. He was going to continue his relationship with Keshan, regardless of distance, vows, or logic.

CHAPTER 20

THE ROAD CONNECTING PRASTA WITH THE STATE OF MARSHAV was wide and well maintained. Nevertheless, the season's unusually strong monsoon pitted the soil and crumbled cobblestones. Two bridges washed out and Tarek's contingent was forced to take alternate routes for long stretches, delaying him further. Tarek's chariots crawled northwards, every rainstorm the cause for another delay in another infernal village.

If Tarek traveled alone, he would not have minded. On horseback, he was swift. He could have delivered King Darvad's demands to the errant lord of Marshav as scheduled.

But as Royal Judge, Tarek now had an entourage to travel with, including ministers from the royal palace, servants to tend to their camps and food, and a detachment of Dragewan soldiers for his protection. He traveled endlessly. In the two months that he'd held the position, he'd been home less than four days at a time.

And everywhere they went, people stopped him, demanding an immediate court where their cases could be heard.

After days of protracted travel and endless repairs to the chariots, the rains finally ceased. Tarek hoped to make up for lost time.

With a clear sky Tarek saw the countryside's bucolic beauty. North of Prasta, Marhavad rolled in lush plains between the Yaru and Patari rivers. Rice fields spanned the horizon, and small, brightly-painted houses clustered along the roadside in welcoming villages. They passed through the small State of Shiadi and then cut across the fertile expanse of Karuna. They passed fields of sugar cane, orchards ripe with

mangoes and oranges, and vineyards stretching to the river in long tunnels of vines.

Tarek had never been this far north. The people began to look different. Their skin was browner, less olive, and the sun bleached their black hair into shades of dark red and mahogany. Karuna mother-of-pearl decorated the doors of every house, and the women draped strings of bells around their waists and wrists, creating a music that jangled through the village. The men wore kohl paint under their eyes, and the Draya priests sported flamboyantly decorative tattoos on their foreheads and cheeks.

They stopped that evening at a larger settlement, a village near a lake, nestled within soft hills covered in green tea bushes. The air smelled fragrant, and a herd of cattle heralded their arrival.

The bright blue wooden structures of the village clustered around a mill beside the stream that fed the lake. Tarek waited in his chariot as servants saw to the best lodgings for their lord. If none could be found, he would be sleeping in his tent again.

This was not a hardship. Tarek almost laughed when Darvad first showed him what a Triya's tent could be like. Layers of animal skins covered the vast space, and the thick, brightly dyed wool kept out the wind and the elements. Large pieces of teak furniture stood amongst burning stands of fragrant sandalwood torches. It was more luxuriant than the nicest house in Tarek's old village.

"My lord." Tarek's servant, Laiu, bowed low at the foot of the chariot. "The innkeeper has a guest house worthy of Triya accommodation, and invites you to stay there."

"I accept." Tarek stepped from the chariot, stretching his arms as he did so. Long journeys on bumpy roads made his back ache. He rolled his shoulders.

Laiu noticed. "My lord, I will dispatch men to prepare your chambers for you. Would you like me to send a masseuse to you this evening as well?"

Tarek smiled. “Why not?” After all, he deserved it. He was running this errand for the King, he might as well get something out of it himself.

Tarek told Laiu to instruct the villagers that he would hear petitions before departing in the morning, and then he slunk off to his room for a bath and a rest.

As he sat, soaking in hot water scented with rose petals and rosemary, Tarek pondered Darvad’s decision to make him Royal Judge.

Within the first week of his new post, Tarek strove to keep his promise to Keshan Adaru. He used Keshan’s cleverly researched and worded documentation to propose sweeping changes to Darvad.

But Darvad urged caution instead. “Not yet, Tarek,” he said. He smiled benevolently. “Be patient. Let us enact one law at a time, slowly, so as not to alienate anyone. Besides, I have a more pressing matter for the Royal Judge to attend to.”

Darvad asked Tarek, as his first task in his new position, to go to the State of Marshav and demand an oath of fealty from Lord Kadal, who had not attended the oath-taking ceremony.

While this didn’t seem like the most pressing matter for Tarek, it apparently ranked high enough on Darvad’s list of unfinished business to justify the trip and expense. It was Darvad’s first demand of his friend as King. At the same time, Darvad had demanded that Druv use his network of spies to find the Parans, and cautioned Tarek to keep an eye out for any clue, however small, on his journey north.

“Everything depends upon us finding the Parans in the next three years,” Darvad said. “If you hear so much as a whisper that sounds intriguing, let me or Druv know. We will find them.”

Tarek did not linger on the unpleasant obsession Darvad already had on maintaining a throne he had only just received. Instead, Tarek focused on the job at hand, convincing Lord Kadal that an oath of fealty was better than war.

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Tarek thought the journey would be easy. He had no idea how popular the Royal Judge was, or how every villager would seek him out to be heard.

Now, in this quiet Karuna village, Tarek dreaded the idea of going outside and being thronged by those desperate for justice. He stayed in his bath until the water grew cold, and ate his dinner alone in his rooms. One of the servants massaged Tarek's tight shoulders into butter, and he luxuriated on the soft bed, the warm autumn breezes, thinking he could just stay there until dawn, and then dash out before anyone noticed him.

But he grew restless alone in the big house. Tarek finished his ablutions and read some of the documentation he hoped to memorize as Royal Judge, but his heart wasn't in it. He could hear the Dragewan soldiers singing outside his house. They set up tents in front of the home, and were now eating their dinner and playing music softly by a campfire. The sounds of men reveling downstairs plunged Tarek into loneliness. What was he doing here, in this house in the middle of nowhere, so far from Darvad, so far from his own family?

His soldiers raised a familiar tune from Tarek's childhood. It lured him outside, away from his solitude. A few men patrolled the camp, but most huddled around the campfire, sharing glasses of cheap rice wine and singing along with the beat one of them tapped out on a small drum.

When Tarek stepped out of the house, they stopped the music and stood to bow before him.

"Please, sit down, sit down," he said. "I just wanted to enjoy the music with you."

Tarek sat next to the young commander whom he had slept with several months before. As soon as Tarek made eye contact with the young commander, the commander blushed crimson.

Tarek was mad at himself for not remembering the man's name. But he could not tactfully ask any of the other soldiers without raising suspicion.

“Hello,” he said to the commander.

The commander’s face brightened further. He bowed low. “My lord. I trust my men have not kept you from your sleep.”

“No, I wanted some fresh air and company,” Tarek told the man. The commander looked years younger than the other soldiers, and yet he was in charge. He had to be quite a warrior to have advanced to his rank at such a young age.

“Your presence honors us,” the commander said.

Tarek stared at the man’s helmet. He had polished it to a gleaming gold. Tarek couldn’t remember seeing anyone else with such a finely cared-for head piece. It made him smile. “I’m sorry—what is your name again?”

The man looked up at Tarek in surprise. “Anant.”

Tarek smiled. “Right. Anant. I’m sorry.” He touched the commander’s shoulder briefly.

Nervously, the drummer began to play again. After a few drinks, the men ignored Tarek.

The commander sat beside him, looking at Tarek out of the corner of his eye. Tarek found it endearing.

“How old are you?” Tarek asked him in a low voice. He needn’t have worried about his question carrying—several of the men who had been trying to sleep woke up from the loud singing, and now joined in, shouting with equal verve.

“I’m twenty one, my lord.”

“You seem young to be a commander, Anant.” Tarek liked how the name played off his tongue.

Anant smiled proudly. “My father was a commander in the Dragewan army before me. He taught me well. I advanced quickly.”

“I see.” Tarek turned to face him. Anant smiled back readily. Tarek couldn’t remember how he had first flirted with this man, having blacked out most of that night, but now he realized that it couldn’t have been hard. Anant was very receptive to flirtation.

“Are you happy in Dragewan’s army?” Tarek asked. He was suddenly curious about what the common people said about him.

Anant nodded his head enthusiastically. “We have the finest army in Marhavad, considering our size.” He grinned. “You are spoken of as a wise and strong leader.”

Tarek studied Anant’s features, thinking that maybe the young commander had been the one to start flirting with him that first night. Anant had thick black hair pulled back neatly in a knot, and dark, almond-shaped eyes with long lashes. Anant stretched his arms upwards. He wore an armored breastplate, but Tarek could still admire the tightness of his stomach as the armor slid upwards. Anant’s skin was strongly masculine, covered evenly in dark hair, his face already darkened with stubble.

“Your defeat of the other lords who challenged you is a testament to both your own prowess as a warrior and to the State of Dragewan,” Anant continued. “And the fact that you had to fight unfairly has inspired all of us in your army.”

Tarek smiled. “It didn’t feel inspiring at the time.”

Anant lowered his eyes. “Of course, my lord. But I, for one, admire King Darvad for raising your caste and showing the world that true greatness is in the person, not the social standing.”

Tarek swallowed. He really wanted to take this young man into the house. But mentioning Darvad’s righteousness curbed Tarek’s primal desires.

Tarek adjusted himself and then stood up. “I should turn in.”

“Would you like me to accompany you?” Anant asked quietly.

Tarek liked the man’s nervous honesty. “Not tonight. I’m on a holy mission for the King.”

“Of course.” Anant’s face burned. He lowered his head. He stepped back from Tarek.

Tarek quickly put his hand on Anant’s arm, and looked around to make sure no one paid them any attention. He leaned down to whisper in Anant’s ear.

“But when we return to Dragewan, we will have to find some time to know one another better.” He smiled, and with relief, saw Anant smile back.

“Good night, my lord,” Anant said, bowing with his hands together.

“Good night, Anant.” Tarek took one last lingering look at the young man, and then forced himself to turn around and return to the house.



The remainder of their journey north passed swiftly, now that the rains ceased. Large Karuna fields gave way to smaller crops, separated by low stone walls. As they entered the State of Marshav, Tarek could feel the difference in the very air. People seemed more aggressive here, more on edge. Lord Kadal was renowned to be supported by the people but tyrannical in his rule, swiftly punishing those out of order. The straight lines of the Marshav fields bore testament to the vassal’s deep sense of symmetry.

They made camp in an empty field beside the road that evening, and Tarek once more joined the soldiers around the fire. He got to know more about the young commander in his army. Although somewhat naïve and by no means sophisticated, Anant was both kind and enjoyable company. He came from an ancient Triya family that had much prestige in Dragewan but little money. Anant’s honest, fierce loyalty to him despite his Suya birth gave Tarek a boost of confidence he had not known he needed.

Their approach to the city did not go unnoticed. A scout for Lord Kadal appeared on the horizon at dawn and then turned swiftly at a full gallop. The road congested as it met the Patari River and followed the water’s edge into Marshav itself, an ancient walled city where the lord sat in a towering fortress at its center, surrounded by a garrison of the Marshav army.

Tarek strung his bow and had it ready in his chariot car. With the banner of the Royal Judge on his standard, Tarek

attracted his usual attention. But here, people appeared wary, eyeing the soldiers with practiced caution.

At the heavy wooden gate to Lord Kadal's fortress, Tarek brought his entourage to a halt. The door opened automatically, and a steward appeared, groveling lowly before Tarek.

"Blessings upon you, Royal Judge!" the man cooed. He prostrated himself. "I have been asked by Lord Kadal to show you immediately to his reception hall. He is honored by your visit and offers you the best of Marshav hospitality."

Tarek and his ministers made their way inside the fortress as Anant and the soldiers guarded their chariots and watched over Tarek's servants. A heavy tension made the air thick. Tarek's hands twitched beside his sword hilt.

The fortress was sparsely decorated but vast in size, and Tarek's party walked a long corridor before coming to Lord Kadal's reception hall. Inside, Lord Kadal sat on his dais, fanned by servants and surrounded by his ministers. As soon as Tarek entered the room, Kadal rose from his seat and bowed low to Tarek.

"Blessings upon you, Royal Judge," Kadal said, bringing his hands together in the sign of peace. Kadal was older than Tarek, in his forties, but he was strong and fit. His eyes burned intensely.

"And to you, Lord Kadal." Tarek returned the gesture.

"I trust your journey was pleasant?"

"It was long, and delayed by the weather."

"I am sorry to hear that." Lord Kadal motioned to a servant off to the side. "See that Lord Tarek and his men have the finest housing and our hospitality for their stay." Kadal turned back to face Tarek. "May I inquire as to the nature of your visit? Your presence is an honor, but we were not informed of your journey."

"I had no time to send word ahead," Tarek said carefully. "I have come on behalf of our King, who has asked that I collect your oath of fealty."

Kadal did not react. Tarek assumed he must have known the reason for his appearance.

“Of course, my lord,” Kadal said, smiling. “I did send a messenger to Prasta apologizing for my absence at the ceremony. Unfortunately, my health is a fickle thing, and I found myself too ill to leave for any extended journey during the oath-taking. However, I am more than happy to offer my fealty to you now.”

Relief coursed through Tarek. He had not wanted a fight. But Kadal still had not read all of the terms of the oath. As Tarek handed Kadal the scroll with the oath, he watched Kadal closely. Kadal had been a staunch supporter of Yudar, and would not like the clause preventing any help to the Parans. But Kadal was a skilled diplomat. He showed no reaction to the document, merely nodding when he reached the end.

“I will abide the contract and welcome the new King as my leader,” Kadal said.

“You read the clause stating that you will need to make changes to the way the Suya are treated? We will be initiating new laws regarding their status as land owners and their rights in the courts.” Tarek could not help but ask the question. It might not have been pressing to Darvad, but it was to him.

“Naturally,” Kadal said with a smooth smile. “I read the document entirely. I will abide your new laws as Royal Judge as I abided the laws of your predecessor.”

For a moment, a giddy sense of excitement coursed through Tarek. Perhaps Keshan’s changes would not be as difficult to press through as Darvad had feared. Perhaps Tarek could actually make changes that would improve the situation of a great number of people.

Kadal was a traditionalist, Yudar’s ally, and a religious conservative. And if he was willing to make the changes in concurrence with the law, then anything was possible.

Tarek rose from his seat and offered Kadal the sign of peace.

THE ARCHER'S HEART

“Then it is my great honor to stay with you this night, and return to Prasta in the morning to share the good news with the King.”

“Tell King Darvad he has my blessing, and my loyalty,” Kadal said, standing as well. The two bowed to each other. “Now, let me show you to your quarters.”

“Thank you.”

And as they walked the cold stone hallway, Lord Kadal—Shentari traditionalist, a man who would have barred Tarek from entering his chambers only a short month ago—reached out and touched Tarek’s shoulder.

“I look forward to your changes with anticipation,” Kadal said. He gave Tarek’s shoulder a squeeze.

It felt like absolution.

CHAPTER 21

FOLLOWING RISHAK'S VISIT, JANDU TOOK SOME OF THE GOLD Keshan gave them and set off for the village. He returned with a cow, lentils, rice, and seeds to start their own garden.

He also returned with a small roll of parchment and ink.

The parchment cost dearly, but Jandu justified the secret expense as his only way to remain sane in the forest. The night he returned, he started a letter to Keshan. Baram and Suraya had retired for the night, and Yudar slept fitfully on his grass mat on the floor. The thin light of the butter lamp cast shadows everywhere. The rough parchment jarred his pen nib, and the ink blotched in parts and ran in others. But Jandu wrote anyway, desperate to confess his hidden feelings to somebody.

Jandu heard a stifled moan from his brother Baram in the other hut. He smirked. Even the deprivation of living impoverished in the forest hadn't cured Baram and Suraya of their sexual appetites.

Jandu wrote down the explicit things he wished Keshan could do to him. A warm heaviness filled Jandu as he described the places he wanted to kiss on Keshan's body. He furtively glanced at Yudar's sleeping form, realizing that if he got caught with this letter, he was doomed.

Jandu signed the letter, flush with desire. In the spirit of his former letter, he also signed this one with a little stick figure drawing, showing Baram and Suraya screwing in one hut, Yudar sleeping next to him, and Jandu sitting on the floor by a candle writing. Again, the picture was so absurd he couldn't help but smile. He knew Keshan would love it.

THE ARCHER'S HEART

He gently rolled the letter and placed it in a sandalwood box he had made that morning. He had originally planned on delivering the letter in the daylight, but he was too excited to sleep, and had grown used to walking to his secret statue in the darkness. He slipped out of the silent hut and plunged into the jungle darkness.

Jandu kept Zandi strung and his hand free to reach his quiver in case a wild animal approached. The other day he had been startled by a panther, which had looked at him oddly and then simply walked away. The panther had been far too beautiful to shoot, although Yudar chastised him later, saying the panther's skin could have been a luxuriant addition to their measly home.

It took twice as long for Jandu to find his statue than it did in the light, but once his eyes adjusted to the clearing, he spotted the smooth stone sculpture with ease. He put the letter box in an alcove at the statue's feet. It would take a person over a month to travel from Tiwari to this location. Jandu calculated that, in the best case scenario, it would be at least two months for Keshan to get back to him. After all, Rishak still had to travel all that way back.

But Jandu was willing to wait. After all, he had three years to fill—what were a few months?



Life fell into a mundane routine of chores.

Yudar tended their cow, fished, and maintained their small garden plot. Baram cooked and crafted items for their house from what they could find in the forest. Suraya swept and cleaned their clothes, she sewed patches and washed cooking pots and tried her best to fight back the constant threat of being consumed by the jungle.

And Jandu spent most of his time hunting and foraging. He gathered firewood. He sharpened their weapons. He set traps throughout the woods and checked them daily. He worked with Baram to make constant improvements to their roof, which

leaked over the monsoon and now, during the dry winter, kept blowing away in sudden gusts of wind. He slunk down to the village to watch the Jegora tan hides, and after learning their secrets, became adept at the process. Suraya's hut filled with furs. Baram accused him of trying to woo her before his year, but only jokingly, since he slept on the furs as well.

And he waited for news from Keshan.

Each day, he checked the clearing, only to find his box still there. He wrote more letters, one every few days, so that the box nearly burst with them, gathered at the base of the stone sculpture like an offering, each letter detailing the daily monotonies of his difficult new life, each letter sweetened with sex talk, each one accompanied by a clever line drawing at the signature, a small sketch of Jandu and his troubles in the forest.

Every time Jandu saw his own letters, his heart broke a little more. It had been over two months since Rishak's visit—Keshan had to have received his original request by now.

And then finally, one morning, Jandu stood, frozen, as he stared at the cream-colored scroll that lay on the forest floor, replacing Jandu's box of letters.

Jandu laughed out loud and fell upon the scroll like a starving cat on cream. The scroll wrapped around two beautiful silver dowels, and the cloth itself smelled perfumed. Incense and ocean water and Keshan's own unique coconut butter smell seemed to waft off the scroll, and it brought tears to Jandu's eyes. This letter had been touched by Keshan's own hands, making Jandu flush with longing. He ran his fingers over the text over and over again, rereading each word to see if he could extract more meaning. The letter began with Keshan admonishing Jandu for being so careless.

My sweet Jandu,

You are an idiot! What is wrong with you? I can't believe you were foolish enough to send me a map to your location. That may be the stupidest thing you've ever done, not to mention

beginning this dangerous correspondence. This is very risky. I hope you understand what is at stake.

Having said that, I now solemnly swear to write you as many letters as I can. I will have my loyal servant Chezek make the journey north to your location as often as I can spare him. Write me constantly. Write me dozens of letters. I want Chezek to return with chests full of your words. I want to feel you through your letters.

I feel terrible for the burden you are going through (although I still think it's funny that none of you remembered to bring a bucket to the forest). It sounds as though you are suffering, and it makes me sick in my heart to think of you in such need.

Your drawing was fantastic. I love your artwork—you should do more illustrations, Jandu, you have true talent.

Now, let me tell you what I want you to draw a picture of. I want an image of you, your great body and fantastic cock, pinning me to the earth, pushing deep into me, your breath on the back of my neck as you fuck me senseless. I want you to make me feel it with your drawing, and as you draw, think of my fingers upon you, trailing up the insides of your thighs, stroking the irresistible softness of your scrotum, my fingers dancing upwards, pulling your shaft into my mouth—can you feel this?—and I pull you to the back of my throat, the warmth and wetness of my lips upon you, milking you to a sweet, strangled release that echoes through that infernal forest.

I'll send Chezek back for a second round next month. Meanwhile, Iyestar is drunk as usual and I can hear him down the hall starting an argument with my mother.

Iyestar visited Darvad in Prasta a week ago. He says Mazar does poorly in your absence. Apparently, the great Mazar talks of nothing but you, Jandu, your bravery, your archery, and your nobility. Know that you and your brothers are missed dearly by those you left behind in Prasta.

Write me soon. My flute feels dead in my hands without you to inspire it.

With eternal love, your Keshan.

At the end of the letter, Keshan had been inspired by Jandu's line drawing to draw a small cartoon of his own. It was of Keshan, kneeling, hands together, promising not to help the Parans. Then, right next to it, it showed an extremely graphic image of the same Keshan stick figure sucking on Jandu's penis.

Jandu laughed out loud. He touched the letter over and over, moved beyond words. Jandu looked over his shoulder, terrified of detection. But he realized that no one in his family knew of the glade, and so he felt safe.

But keeping the letter was another issue.

The logical thing would be to burn it. But Jandu couldn't imagine doing such a thing. This letter gave him hope. It brought Keshan to him. Without it, he might as well just commit suicide, as he would never be happy again.

But he couldn't take it home. Even though Jandu kept a small chest of personal belongings in the hut, it was still available to anyone in his family. If Yudar found this letter, complete with a drawing of Keshan sucking Jandu's cock, it would be beyond horrible. Yudar would probably just kill him. The memory of the execution Jandu had seen in Prasta shuddered through Jandu.

There were moments, like this, when reason fled Jandu. A desire to run away from his family suddenly overwhelmed him. After all, it was Yudar's fault he was here. And if his brother knew anything about what dark secrets lurked in Jandu's heart, all of Jandu's fidelity would mean nothing. Yudar would banish him, at the least, and kill him at the worst.

I could leave them.

The thought flowered and then died in Jandu's heart. Escaping his family to go live with Keshan was a fantastic idea, but would never be more than a fantasy. Regardless of how Yudar would feel about Jandu's secret, Jandu still owed his older brother loyalty. It was the responsibility of family, and his duty as the youngest prince. And he would serve his brother first, and then see to his own needs afterwards.

Besides, even if Jandu left his family, he would still have to serve the rest of his exile before returning to Tiwari or risk making Keshan an outcaste. Better to be in exile with people he loved than completely alone.

With great emotion, Jandu slowly rolled up Keshan's letter. No, he wouldn't burn it. He wouldn't do that, even for Yudar. But he would hide it. He stashed the letter in a tree until he constructed two more sandalwood boxes—one to bury his beloved letters from Keshan in, and the other to hold the new set of letters Jandu couldn't wait to write.

These letters became more than just a correspondence with his friend. They were Jandu's life line, his connection with someone in the real world, away from the poverty of the forest, away from exile. The letters gave Jandu strength. And in this strength, Jandu's optimism returned.



Over the next six months, Jandu received three letters from Keshan. Each word from his lover raised his spirits far above the damp and dreary places the forest dragged him into. Their food supply waned again, but Jandu didn't care. He traveled farther from home each day in order to find hunting grounds, but it didn't matter. His heart was full with Keshan's love. In his mind he repeated each sweet word over and over until his eyes shone with his inner happiness, and his joy radiated outwards, lighting his family as well, giving to them the strength and courage they needed to survive their terrible first year of privation.

One morning, he decided to write an entire letter to Keshan comprised entirely of drawings. He packed a satchel of his ink and some prepared birch bark, having run out of writing cloth several letters ago. On his way to his secret glade, he kissed his brother Baram's forehead, as Baram separated a pot of milk into curds and whey.

He whistled the tune he had learned in Tiwari and went down to the lake, where Suraya washed their clothes. Jandu

snuck up behind her and tickled her under her arms. She screamed and threw a wet towel in his face.

Jandu pranced around the side of the hut, to the small clearing between the lush forest and their hut. Yudar tended their cow, speaking to her soothingly.

Jandu gave Yudar a slice of his rose apple, and smiled. Jandu had discovered that Yudar ate more if he were offered small snacks throughout the day. Yudar wouldn't sit down to a large bowl of soup. But he would greedily partake in small servings of curds, or fresh fruit, and several cups of broth, as long as they were brought to him in little increments. Suraya didn't have the patience to do it, but Jandu did.

"I'm off," he announced, waving to his family as he headed down the small muddy path that led to the pilgrim's trail. Yudar, Baram, and Suraya waved back, all of them smiling, Baram and Suraya looking at each other with the unspoken question as to why Jandu suddenly snapped into such high spirits.

Of course, none of them had idea why Jandu had sprung out of his depression. But Jandu returned to his old self, laughing all the time, telling jokes, and spontaneously singing and bragging about his magnificence. And once he stepped free of his melancholy, they all did. Jandu brought Suraya flowers every day, and she couldn't help but smile. Jandu agreed to practice the mace with Baram, and although Jandu ended up with a bruised rib and a nasty headache, Baram felt like a conqueror again. Even Yudar's cough finally disappeared.

Jandu wasn't sure exactly when he had let all the leftover anger at his brother go, but like the easing of a chronic pain, one day he just noticed it was gone and he was glad. It was hard to hate his family. He needed Yudar and Baram to be his allies, and when he was angry at Yudar, the world seemed darker to him.

Jandu deftly made his way through the thicket, following the pilgrim's trail north towards the retreat. Along the route, he passed by two groups of holy men, chanting prayers as they

made their way to the religious retreat. Jandu bowed to them as they passed, keeping his head low and his eyes partially closed. He held his arms close to his body, hoping no one would notice his archery scars. He hid Zandi behind his back.

As soon as he could, he stepped off the main trail and pushed his way deeper into the jungle. In Prasta, the heart of winter would be cold and windy. Here, in the rain canopy of the mountains, even December brought an early morning heat that hovered over the earth like a hot breath. Jandu was sweating by the time he made his way to a small stream secluded in the brush. The water's edge teemed with birds—wood sandpipers and shelducks, yellownapes and barbets—singing uproariously as they splashed in the cool, thin trickle of mountain water that rushed over the rocks.

Jandu found a shady spot on a fallen log and took out his birch bark paper. He began a cartoon of his family, showing Yudar's bones protruding from his sides, Baram's eyes bugging out of his head from hunger, Suraya's hard and calloused hands chopping wood with their sharp edges. Jandu dwindled hours away, cracking himself up with his drawings. He drew one page of himself jerking off in the woods, and he realized that he was so far removed from the Jandu who had been raised by his strict and severely religious master, Mazar. The Jandu of a few years ago couldn't even contemplate the immorality of masturbation, let alone jokingly draw himself in the act, giggling as he added lurid flourishes. The sun beat on the back of his neck and he drew, heedless of time, but not entirely oblivious to the steady rhythm of forest life.

A gray junglefowl strutted by, waking Jandu up from his artistic trance. He swiftly pulled an arrow from his quiver and shot the bird from a few feet away.

"Sorry," Jandu told the bird. "But you are going to be a delicious dinner."

Jandu packed up his writing materials and made his way back home, breathing in the deep, mushroomy smell of the forest.

Baram was ecstatic about Jandu's kill, and set about preparing a grand feast, seasoning the rice they had left with cardamom pods and cloves, making a cream sauce for the bird, adding a touch of early season mango to sweeten it. They shared their dinner outside in the clearing between the hut and the lake, where they could enjoy the view of the water splashing against the base of the sharp peaked mountains, and listen to the calls of peacocks and quails in the forest.

They sat back after their meal contentedly, watching the color of the sky blush a brilliant pink, the humidity finally dropping to a warm balm. Jandu took out his sharpening stone and sharpened his sword, as Yudar unveiled the final pieces of the chess set he had spent the last ten months carving. Baram and Yudar huddled around the crudely drawn teak board as Suraya served warm milky tea and leaned against the hut wall, staring at her husbands.

"I'm pregnant."

No one moved. Even the air around them seemed shocked—the gentle breeze died as soon as the words were out. The night filled with silence.

Suraya smiled at Baram, then at Jandu and Yudar.

Jandu held his sword in the air, like he would stab the roof of the hut.

Baram went to her. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Suraya grinned widely. "I wasn't sure until this week. But it's been two months since I've had my menses. Baram, we're going to have a child."

Baram cried out in joy and lifted Suraya into the air as the two of them laughed. Yudar, once he overcame his initial shock, stood up as well and offered his congratulations.

Jandu carefully put his sword back in its sheath and joined them in a group embrace. But he smiled for an entirely different reason. His year with Suraya just got a whole lot shorter.

Jandu had watched the approach of August and his nuptial night with growing anxiety. He loved Suraya dearly, but he didn't

think of her in a sexual way. And while there were nights with the beetles on the hard floor of their hut that Jandu realized life could be better, in bed with Suraya, it seemed like a betrayal of Suraya's trust, to sleep with her because he had to. It seemed wrong to not want to have sex with her, and yet to do it anyway.

And, after all, Suraya was his brother's wife. Over the last year, through thick and thin, Suraya and Baram had suffered together. Suraya's feelings towards Yudar seemed to have waned, but her love for Baram was stronger than ever. Jandu didn't want to get in the way of that.

Suraya's pregnancy offered a way to get out of sleeping with Suraya entirely.

"This is such wonderful news!" Jandu cried. He pounded on Baram's shoulders affectionately. "Good going." Jandu patted Yudar's shoulder as well. "Better luck next time, champ."

Baram and Suraya burst out laughing, but Yudar gave Jandu an icy stare.

Jandu took a deep breath. "I have a suggestion."

Everyone turned to stare at him.

"I wonder... since she's pregnant with your baby, Baram... perhaps your year should extend?" Jandu spoke quickly, his hands stroking the sheath of his sword nervously. "After all, it seems strange for Suraya and I to be together when she's carrying your child."

Baram nodded, looking deep in thought, but Yudar didn't give it a moment's consideration.

"No." Yudar scowled. "No. We keep to the rules. It is the only way to maintain peace between us. Remember? We swore an oath when we married. It would be one year for each of us consecutively, regardless of circumstances."

"But we didn't address the issue of children..." Jandu started.

Yudar cut him off. "—Yes we did. We specifically talked about it. Weren't you listening?"

Jandu scratched his head, pretending to look at the lake.

Now that he remembered it, he was off flirting with Keshan when all of the big decisions were being made.

“We made rules,” Yudar stressed. He looked upset. “We’re living together in one shared hut, and we share a wife, for God’s sake! We have to maintain the rules, or else we will fail as a family!”

“It should be up to Suraya,” Baram said, his voice rising.

“I agree with Yudar,” Suraya said shyly. She smiled at Jandu. “We will have our year together, and nothing will change.” She blushed a furious red. “I mean, there will be some changes, but...”

Baram hugged Jandu tightly. Jandu groaned.

“Thanks for the thought, but it’s not fair to you,” Baram said. He had tears in his eyes, still glowing from the news of that he would be a father. “This will be our son, all of us together.”

“Or daughter,” Suraya said quietly, but the brothers ignored her.

Jandu sighed. He couldn’t slip out of this so easily, then.

“Fine,” he said. “So it is.” Suraya and Baram hugged again.

Yudar sat back down at the chess board, watching the two of them with a frown. “How are we going to feed a baby?”

Baram and Suraya let go of each other and stared at him.

Yudar gestured to the bones of the bird they just consumed. “Suraya, you barely get enough to eat now. If you’re pregnant, you’ll have to eat more. And when the baby is born...” Yudar looked around them, at the forest which had provided them so little.

“We’ll move,” Baram said. “After Suraya has the baby, we’ll move to a city. Somewhere large where we can find work.”

Jandu closed his eyes. The idea of living in a city again seemed like a distant dream. “We’ll have to find somewhere we don’t know anyone well. Darvad has spies all over the country.”

“How do you know?” Suraya asked.

Jandu blushed. He knew this because Keshan had told him so in a letter. But none of his family knew of his correspondence.

He shrugged. “Druv Majeo is his friend; he has to have spies.”

Yudar nodded. “Jandu is right. We have to find a place that is not allied with Darvad. And if we can get work in a palace, we may be able to find a place to provide for the child and Suraya.”

Baram and Suraya were snuggling together, too in love to really participate in the conversation.

“Where do you suggest?” Jandu asked his brother.

“Afadi comes to mind,” Yudar said. “When I visited Afadi as Royal Judge, I noticed that Lord Indarel had a large staff at his palace. We could say we used to work for the Parans in Prasta, and get work there.”

“Brilliant,” Baram said. He touched Yudar’s head fondly.

“Afadi?” Suraya frowned. “It’s so far south. And neighboring Chandamar is Firdaus’ land.”

“No one will expect us to go to such a small kingdom, where we have no connections,” Yudar countered.

Suraya nodded. “It will be up to you. As long as we can provide what is best for the baby.” She rubbed her belly fondly.

The next morning, Jandu woke early and went to his private retreat, and saw that Chezek had come during the night to replace his box of letters with another scroll from Keshan. Even in the early light, the silver dowel was warm to the touch.

Jandu unrolled the scroll on the forest floor. This time, Keshan had rolled two cloths in with his existing message, to provide Jandu with something to write back on. He obviously tired of deciphering Jandu’s scrawl on birch bark.

Jandu no longer read the letter first. He scanned the end of the scroll to find the drawing. Both he and Keshan now devoutly drew each other small diagrams of what they were doing. Keshan couldn’t stop talking in his letters about how talented he thought Jandu was, how Jandu should have been an artist.

Jandu could not say the same for Keshan's artwork, which was usually obscene and badly sketched with blotting ink. But it always made him laugh.

This time the large picture took up several rolls of the scroll. It showed a meeting in what appeared to be Tiwari's reception hall. The man with the extravagant diadem was obviously Keshan. He sat on a large pile of letters. Other than the exaggerated erection he drew himself with, there was nothing very sexy about this drawing.

Jandu read the letter and found out the reason why. Darvad's spies had heightened their efforts to find the Parans. Now that almost an entire year had passed and no sign of the Parans, Darvad increased the count of his bounty hunters and had infiltrated Tiwari with hundreds of spies. Darvad knew how fond Keshan was of Jandu. And he assumed that Jandu and his family would turn to Tiwari for aid.

Worse, Keshan informed him that even the Yashva kingdom was no longer safe. When Keshan tried to visit Jandu through the Yashva space, Firdaus' cousins had been there, following him.

The news sobered Jandu, and he buried the letter quickly. He walked home in a daze, pondering the warnings of Keshan's letter, and also the last lines, which Jandu assumed were meant to be romantic, and yet had somehow failed in their delivery: *Your heart will split this world into a thousand pieces.*

In his next letter, Jandu almost asked Keshan what he meant by the line. But then a sick feeling of self-doubt filled him. If it was another one of Keshan's prophecies, Jandu decided he didn't want to know.

CHAPTER 22

IN AUGUST, BARAM MOVED HIS SMALL COLLECTION OF POSSESSIONS out of the couple's hut. Suraya spent the morning cleaning the room and preparing it for her nuptial night with Jandu.

Jandu spent the day hunting.

He swore to himself as he searched the forest vainly for food. The religious sages in the retreat had stripped the forest of game. The Parans' food stores ran out the previous week, and now they were living off milk and whatever greens and fruit they could gather. Jandu realized they would have to start begging soon, if he didn't have better luck finding deer.

Hunting kept his mind off the upcoming evening, at least.

His family, hunkered down in panicked hunger, was desperate to make the rest of their communal living pleasant. Baram and Yudar never fought anymore, and all of them enthusiastically supported this previously agreed-upon switching of marital partners in an attempt to keep everyone else content. Even though Jandu knew Baram and Suraya were truly in love with each other, both of them were willing to sacrifice their mutual happiness in the name of harmony with the family.

But now, on the eve of consummating his marriage, Jandu decided they were all fools. It had been fun to think of how close they had all grown, living together and depending upon one another in the wilderness, but it was unreasonable to expect that harmony to continue purely based on some ideas they had the day they had met Suraya. What was it about Yudar and his damned devotion to rules?

Jandu was angry at himself for not being more adamant about abdicating his year with Suraya. Now, in the name of

family peace, Baram would stifle his jealousy and be torn from the woman he loved. Suraya would have her third sexual partner in as many years. And Jandu would sleep with someone he didn't want to.

Jandu decided that he would not go through with it on the grounds that Suraya was pregnant with his niece or nephew. The mere thought left him chilly with horror. He had to make them understand.

But his courage faded as he returned home and ate dinner in silence. He didn't want his brothers to suspect the real reason he didn't want to sleep with Suraya. He didn't want anyone doubting his masculinity.

Baram had boiled down milk to thicken it and added roasted barley to make a porridge, seasoned with tamarind. They drank whey. They remained hungry after their plates were cleared.

Baram's attempts not to appear hurt or angry made dinner more uncomfortable. Jandu knew his brother too well. Baram kept skipping stones, a sure sign of his unhappiness. Yudar picked at his dinner. He looked sunken into himself, deep in thought.

Only Suraya seemed calm. She drifted between the backyard and the hut, gathering their leaf plates and throwing them into the fire, sweeping the inside of the hut, putting away the few food stores left. She showed no apprehension on her face, only a calm serenity. Jandu half-suspected she had secreted a bottle of wine somewhere and had drunk herself into a pleasant coma.

A bottle of wine was exactly what Jandu needed now. Anxiety washed over him in sweeping waves. He looked at Suraya's body, which had grown thinner but was still voluptuous and curvy, her large, round breasts threatening to burst through her zahari top, and tried to focus on how sexy she was. But he had known her too long in too fraternal a fashion to conjure any lust.

Suraya casually picked up Jandu's chest of personal belongings. She struggled with its weight.

"Jandu," she said softly. "Can you help me carry your things into the other room?"

Jandu felt his face redden. "Sure." He grabbed the chest from her, and followed her out of the hut into the other building.

He had spent little time in this separate room. Its coziness contrasted with the drafty hut he'd slept in for the past year. The sandalwood bed gave off a sweet scent. The mattress was small, made of cotton cloth stuffed with grass and leaves, and strewn with the furs Jandu tanned months ago. Suraya's zaharis hung around the small space, serving as decoration as well as storage. The room had a feminine touch, and smelled sweetly of camphor and butter.

"Where should I put it?" Jandu asked. Suraya pointed to a bare corner of the room. Baram's chest had lived there only a few hours ago. The thought brought a sheen of sweat to Jandu's forehead.

Suraya sat on the edge of the bed, and looked to Jandu coyly.

Jandu put his chest down and then stiffly sat beside her.

"This is uncomfortable," he admitted.

Suraya laughed. She put her arm around him. "Remember how you once comforted me when I became Baram's wife?"

Jandu grinned down at her. "Yeah. You were scared out of your wits."

"I'm not scared now," Suraya whispered.

"No. But I am."

Suraya laughed again. She hugged Jandu to her tightly.

Jandu hugged back, hoping she didn't notice the tremor in his body. Their embrace felt nice. He always loved holding Suraya. If they could just do this, everything would be fine.

But Suraya slowly lowered Jandu's body on the bed. She stared down at him.

"You don't have to do this," Jandu said quietly.

"I want to," Suraya said.

“But Baram—”

Suraya broke his speech with a kiss.

Suraya had her eyes closed. Jandu stared at her. Keshan always stared back at Jandu when they made love.

Jandu quickly shut the thought out of his mind.

Suraya kept her lips on his, wanting more. Jandu’s skin crawled with revulsion. He didn’t want to stick his tongue in her mouth. But Suraya wasn’t giving up. She prodded his lips with her tongue, seeking entry. Jandu realized he would just have to go with it. He closed his eyes and thought of Keshan.

As his hands explored her body, the differences were too stark to let his imagination wander. Where Keshan’s muscles were firm, his arms tight, his flesh taut, Suraya was soft and curvy, smooth. Jandu preferred lying still, letting Suraya touch him, imagining her hands were Keshan’s.

Suraya reached the hem of Jandu’s trousers, and hesitated.

Jandu swallowed. He closed his eyes firmly, and then quickly undid the knot of his dejaru.

He turned quickly, crouching over Suraya. He kept his eyes closed, and blindly felt for the knot of her zahari. He untied it by feel. He opened his eyes and looked down at her face.

Suraya stared up at him, a look of fear on her face. Jandu realized he was going about this all wrong. He was rushing her, not taking his time, not kissing her or showing any affection at all. But he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He would go through the motions, but he was incapable of pretending to feel something he didn’t.

He reached down to open Suraya’s legs, and with clumsy anxiety, entered her. Suraya sucked the breath back into her throat. Jandu looked at her long enough to make sure she wasn’t crying, and then pushed inside of her, scrunching his eyes tight again, imagining the flesh was Keshan’s flesh, imagining he tasted Keshan’s skin, smelled his coconut clove scent, felt his muscles underneath his hands.

Jandu sped up his actions, and then, after intense concentration, he came quietly, stifling any moan he would normally make.

Jandu wasn't sure if he should continue his actions or not, but he didn't really think Suraya enjoyed this any more than he, so he stopped moving, pulling out of her quickly.

He rolled beside her and pulled up his *dejaru* quickly, retying the knot.

Suraya retied her *zahari* and stared up at the ceiling. She looked pale and horrified.

Jandu burned with shame. He knew this had been a bad idea. Now Suraya would hate him for being such a terrible lover.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Suraya didn't answer. She continued to stare at the ceiling, as if in shock.

"I don't think this is a good idea." Jandu rolled over on his side.

"What do you want to do, Jandu?" Suraya asked. There was pain in her voice, accusation. "You find me so disgusting, you can't even look at me."

Jandu's eyes widened. "What? That's not it at all!"

"You are the one who won me."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." Suraya turned her back to him and curled up on herself, knees to her chest. "It just means that you're the one I chose, and yet you're the one who is most distant."

"I won you because I wanted to win. I wasn't trying to win you, especially."

"How romantic."

"I'm sorry," Jandu said, "but I'm being honest."

Suraya had tears in her eyes. She stared at him, heartbroken. "If it isn't me, then, what is it?"

Jandu sighed. He reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair from her face. "Suraya, for the last two years that I've known you, you have been my *sister*. I think of you as my sister.

You're pregnant with my brother's child. However depraved I may be, I am not a *sister fucker*."

Suraya's eyes grew wide at the expression.

Jandu swallowed. "The truth is, we've been friends for too long for me to think of you in any other way."

Suraya studied Jandu's face carefully. Color came back to her cheeks.

"I see."

"I'm sorry about all of this," Jandu said. "But it's better to be honest."

Suraya seemed to let out a thin breath she had been holding. She pulled the thin cotton sheet around her, and nodded. She tried smiling.

"Sister fucker, huh?" she said quietly.

Jandu laughed. "Yeah. That's what I feel like."

"I think I understand," Suraya said.

Jandu stroked her head. "I do love you, Suraya—as a sister."

Suraya reached out and stroked Jandu's shoulder. "All right."

Jandu smiled shyly. "You know, if you want to go back to Baram, I'm all for it."

Suraya studied Jandu's face. Her gaze was so intense, Jandu began to panic.

"What?" he asked nervously.

"Nothing." She smiled slightly. "You are just... surprising. That's all."

Jandu closed his eyes, luxuriating in the softness of the pillow beneath his head, the warmth of the shared sheet. "I'd prefer to pretend like we're man and wife, however, just so I can stay here in this comfy bed of yours."

Suraya rolled over and placed a soft kiss on Jandu's cheek. "It's all right by me if you stay. We can just keep each other company in the dark."

Jandu put his arm around her, and closed his eyes again. "That sounds perfect."



Their marital life fell into an easy pattern. During the day, Jandu made sure his relationship with his wife was loving and enjoyable. He didn't want his brothers to suspect anything, and so he showered affection on Suraya every chance he had. He included Suraya in almost every activity, and the two of them walked the lake shore, collected interesting plants together, and made up stories about their enemies. Their favorite game was, "what disease does Darvad have?" where the two of them would sneak off by themselves for hours, drink milky tea and crack each other up with new, imagined ailments that pocked Darvad's skin and bloodied his sex life.

At night, the two of them settled comfortably together in the bed, curled around each other in the small space, and slept soundly. Jandu never tried to touch her after their wedding night. And Suraya never again made any advances either.

Life would have been pleasant, if they weren't desperately starving. By the time Suraya's pregnancy showed, they had no food stores left, no fresh meat, no fish, and only a thin supply of milk from their cow. Baram looked Jandu in the eye one morning, and then pointed his finger at him.

"You are going to have to beg," Baram told him. He pointed to the door. "So go. Beg."

Jandu scowled. "Why do I have to do it?"

"You want Suraya to beg?" Baram shouted.

"No!" Jandu glared. "I want *you* to beg! Or Yudar!"

Yudar held out his hands in the sign of peace. "I cannot take anything from pilgrims. I would rather starve then lead them to starvation."

"Starve, then," Baram spat at him. "But someone is going to have to feed the rest of us, and so it's up to you Jandu."

Jandu stood up and approached his brother. Even though Baram was several inches taller than Jandu, Jandu still looked angry enough to make Baram back up a step.

"Why don't *you* beg?"

Baram smiled. "You're the youngest. You do what I say."

"But—"

"Besides, I look intimidating. You look like an innocent, malnourished peasant in ripped clothing."

"No. You have to come with me. I'm not doing this alone!"

Jandu grabbed an empty rice pot angrily, and stormed out of the hut.

Baram did come with Jandu the first few times, walking down the pilgrim's trail several miles from where Jandu sat, begging rice and grain off the travelers. But Baram was right, he looked too big for people to easily pity him. Alone, Jandu received twice as much. Soon Baram stopped accompanying him.

Jandu hated begging. The indignity devastated him. He had passed by beggars in the street back when he was a prince and despised their sad, pitiful eyes, detested the way they reeked of spoiled milk and soiled clothes, found their whole presence demeaning. Now here he was, the son of King Shandarvan, a fucking beggar. The shame was unbearable and yet it fed him and his family.

"Please help me," Jandu grumbled, holding out his begging bowl to the holy pilgrims, keeping his head down so that they couldn't see his blue eyes. No one would ever have guessed he once slept on feather beds. His clothes were stained and torn, his skin had darkened in the sun, and his hands had grown rough and calloused with chopping wood. The bones of his cheeks and ribs stuck out prominently.

"Help," Jandu mumbled. Occasionally someone would stop long enough to pour some rice from a sack into his bowl. It was considered bad luck to ignore the pleas of a beggar while on a holy pilgrimage. For once, their proximity to the retreat worked in their favor. But many pilgrims chose not to stop. There were too many hungry mouths, too many desperate people in these times to help every one of them.

When someone did give Jandu food, he fell to his knees and touched their feet, as was tradition. He had done so for

several days before he realized that none of the pilgrims were Triya. He was touching the feet of Suya and Chaya caste men and women, soiling his purity.

Jandu tried to resurrect some of the old indignation he would have felt, dirtying himself with lower caste skin, but the truth was, a foot was a foot. The Parans might have been the only Triya on the mountain, but they were the ones that were starving. Suddenly, religious status seemed unimportant.

Jandu pushed the thought from his mind, but he couldn't help but notice that the clearly Chaya-caste pilgrims were more likely to give him something to eat than the better-off, Suya merchant caste. The poorer were more generous with the little they had. It made Jandu feel ashamed of the way he used to mock the Chaya. It also made Jandu miss Keshan even more, hearing Keshan's chiding voice in his mind.

Once, late one evening when Jandu had struck out with every pilgrim who wandered on the trail, Jandu followed a lone merchant making his way to the retreat to sell herbal medicines.

"Help me," Jandu pleaded, walking alongside the man with his bowl out.

The man was shorter than Jandu, and older. He eyed Jandu warily. "Leave me alone."

Jandu followed him. "Please. My wife is pregnant."

"Bugger off." The man quickened his steps. Jandu kept pace. The man watched the way Jandu strode up the hill and frowned. "You do not walk like a beggar."

"I don't?" Jandu looked at his feet.

"You walk like a thief."

Jandu narrowed his eyes. "What kind of fucking thief follows assholes like you up a mountain begging for a handful of some fucking rice?"

The man stopped and glared at Jandu. Jandu squared his shoulders and stared back.

"Fuck you," the man said finally. He spat in Jandu's face

and walked up the hill. Jandu's fists tensed, and he dropped his begging bowl.

Jandu's face clouded with rage and he took off after the man. He caught the older man easily, grabbed the man's shoulder and spun him around.

"If I wanted to take your money I'd have fucking well done it and left you dead on the side of the road. You want to know why I don't? Because I'm better than that, you prick." He let go of the man's shoulder, and watched him sprint up the trail in a panic. Jandu waited until he was out of sight, and then stooped down to pick up his begging bowl again.

He felt beaten.

But he continued to beg the rest of the winter. He thought the humiliation would wear off. He thought that spicing up his begging with telling jokes, or offering to read palms, would bring some joy into the situation. But there was a constant, sinking, understanding that Jandu was as low as he could get. It would have been easier if only he had gotten a letter from Keshan, but none came.

The winter months passed and as the air sweetened with blossoms and fruit finally hung throughout the forest, and the sky tumbled and rumbled with the threats of monsoon rain.

But still no new word from Keshan arrived.

Jandu's letters collected under the stone statue in his forest clearing like the leftovers of an abandoned library. He built a bigger box to store them all. Mice had gotten into the box and chewed on the pata cloth, ruining one of his better sketches. Three months without word from Keshan turned to four, and Jandu's optimism, the spark that had heated his family through the chilly first year and a half and brought a little light into their dark situation, faded from his heart completely.

On his way back from begging one evening, he checked the forest clearing to find that his box of letters had been knocked over by some wild animal, his precious words strewn around the forest floor like leaves. He let out a strangled cry and rushed

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through the glade, picking up his letters and putting them back in the box with trembling hands. When he returned the box in its place, with all letters accounted for, Jandu leaned against the statue and covered his face with his hands. Something broke in him. He could feel it, in his heart, a gentle snap, and he covered his face with his hands and wept. He lost his sense of righteousness, his sense of duty, his pride. And, worst of all, he had somehow lost Keshan too.

CHAPTER 23

JANDU HADN'T HEARD FROM KESHAN IN FIVE MONTHS.

Had Keshan found someone else? Someone who could touch Keshan in the ways that Jandu, hiding in the forest, could not?

Or, worse, had something happened to him? In Keshan's last letter he had mentioned the spies who swarmed through Tiwari, looking for signs of the Parans. Perhaps they caught Keshan and were torturing him now, trying to get information of the Paran's location. Maybe Keshan would break, and he would show them the map to their hiding spot. Jandu could be responsible for leading his family's enemies straight to them.

Not knowing drove his paranoia. Only the soothing continuity of Keshan's letters had given Jandu complacency. Now, without them, the bleakness of their situation became painfully obvious.

Jandu visited the statue daily on his way to beg on the pilgrim's trail, but his letters remained, with no word from Keshan. Jandu grew angry at being forgotten. And then depression set in.

Jandu wrote more letters, as if sheer volume would draw Keshan's servant. He wrote one every other day. They always started with deep affection, and then grew more and more hostile at Keshan's continuing silence.

And then, one morning, Jandu walked out to the clearing, and noticed all his letters were gone. His heart skipped a beat.

But nothing replaced them. Chezek had taken the letters but brought nothing in return. Jandu furiously searched the clearing but found nothing. Chezek had traveled for weeks to

this point, and he didn't even bother to bring back a single sentence for Jandu?

His fury tumbled into fear as other, more horrible scenarios came to mind. Darvad's men captured Chezek, and their location had been discovered. His letters were found, and were making their way to Darvad this very moment. Or Chezek had been killed before he could drop off Keshan's scroll. Only terrible endings could explain such an odd occurrence.

Jandu couldn't sleep. He kept Suraya awake at night as he tossed and kicked off the cotton sheet, worry preventing him from even being able to enjoy dreams.

One night Suraya stared at Jandu as he rested his head on his hands and glared up at the ceiling of the hut, watching a trail of ants make their way from a hole in the thatch work along the ceiling and down the wall.

"What's wrong?" Suraya asked sleepily. She rubbed his shoulder gently.

"I can't sleep," Jandu said.

Suraya turned to face him as best as she could. Her large belly made the bed much smaller.

"Why not?" Suraya asked.

"I'm just worried." Jandu looked at her. Anxiety over Keshan's silence gnawed at him. He wanted to tell her so badly he almost blurted it out. And then, as always, he realized the insanity of his primary instinct. That would be the worst thing he could do. "You have to eat for two. You aren't getting enough for one."

Suraya watched his expression closely. "You need to stop worrying about me."

Jandu smiled falsely and kissed her forehead.

"Good night," he said, turning away from her.

"Sleep." She whispered it in his ear, as if a command. And for once, it seemed to work.

But Jandu awoke before everyone, before dawn. Unable to rest in bed any longer, he rose and wrote another letter to

Keshan. At dawn he left the letter under the statue, praying that Chezek had only been scared off and would be back any day to leave a note from Keshan.

But weeks went by without another word. Jandu's letters collected under the statue again, and then, as before, they disappeared one day, nothing left behind to suggest they were ever there.

Jandu swore, and searched the glade frantically. What the hell was going on? Why would Chezek come all the way from Tiwari to pick up his letters and yet leave nothing behind?

Unless something really had happened to Keshan. Jandu knelt suddenly on the damp forest floor and prayed for Keshan's safety.

With his eyes closed, he heard soft footsteps behind him. He stood and whirled around quickly, drawing his hunting knife.

Jandu's eyes widened. He lowered his knife.

Standing there, in the middle of the morning forest, was a woman.

She seemed ethereal. Her skin shimmered and swam, and Jandu instantly knew she was a Yashva. Her golden sheen, her flawless perfection, and her swirling eyes made her clearly inhuman.

She was beautiful, like an exaggerated effigy of a goddess. Her waist seemed impossibly thin between the voluptuous curves of her breasts and hips. She wore only a thin golden belt around her waist, barely covering her groin.

Her breasts were heavy and round, with large nipples pointed straight at him. Her thick black hair reached all the way to her lower back in a shiny straight curtain. Her eyes were almond shaped, spinning and flashing in a way that made Jandu dizzy.

He felt his cheeks grow hot with embarrassment at her nudity. Why did she stare at him?

"You must be Jandu," the Yashva whispered seductively. She stepped towards him. Jandu looked down and noticed she

had no sandals. Her bare feet and hands were painted with henna patterns, and she wore gold anklets.

“Who are you?” Jandu asked. As she walked towards him, he backed up slightly.

“My name is Umia,” the woman said, coyly blinking her eyes. “And I love you too.”

Jandu froze. “Excuse me?”

Umia laughed quietly. She had a tinkling laugh that sounded like bells. “I love you too. I’ve received all your letters, sweet Jandu. I have shown myself to you to proclaim my equal affection.”

Jandu felt the color drain from his face. “My... you read my letters?”

Umia nodded. She pointed to the statue in the middle of the clearing. “You left them at my effigy.”

Jandu looked at the ancient, worn statue, and realized it was, indeed, of a woman. Age and rain had washed off her features, but the hips were now noticeably curvy.

“Umia, you are... a goddess?” Jandu asked, staring at her in awe.

Umia laughed again. She stood next to him, so close Jandu could smell vanilla in her hair.

“I am a Yashva,” she whispered, “and one of Mendraz’s consorts.” She reached up and ran a hand along Jandu’s bare chest. “And although I rarely have anything to do with humans, I can’t resist you.” She brought her lips close to his. “You are the most beautiful human being I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

Jandu stared at her, feeling faint. *Oh God, now what?*

“Umia, I’m flattered.” He backed up. The backs of his calves hit her statue. “But I’m afraid those letters, they weren’t... I mean, I wrote them to someone else.”

Umia smiled lasciviously. “Nonsense. I read them. Only I can inspire such lust in mankind.” She raised an eyebrow. “You have quite an imagination. And you are very specific about what you’d like to do to me.” Umia frowned. “Although some of it I didn’t quite understand *how* I was supposed to—”

“—Umia,” Jandu interrupted quickly. He knelt at her feet, bowing his head. “Please forgive me!”

Umia knelt as well, her breasts shaking as she did so. She held Jandu’s face in her hands. “There’s nothing to forgive. You love me, and I love you. I want you.” She leaned closer. “Kiss me.”

Jandu’s mind raced on how he would get out of this situation. The last thing Jandu wanted to do was sleep with Mendraz’s consort. Mendraz was his ally, the king of the Yashvas.

Umia kissed him. Jandu stiffened. After a moment, Umia pulled away, looking confused.

“Jandu,” she said quietly, “are you not attracted to me?”

Jandu started to sweat. He didn’t want to offend her. Who knew what power she had? But he also definitely didn’t want to screw her either.

“Umia, you are the mother of all beauty. I see you as a mother, and worship you as one.” Jandu brought his palms together and bowed low to her in respect.

Umia didn’t say anything, but she stood quickly. When Jandu looked up at her, she shook with rage.

“How *dare* you insult me like this!” she spat. Her hands were in fists. “You compare me to your *mother*?”

Jandu held his hands in the sign of peace. “Please! I mean no offense! I just look at you as such a heavenly being, I would never propose to think of you in any way other than as something to be worshipped.”

“Then worship me!” Umia glared down at him. “And make love to me, as I command! Be a man!”

Jandu’s heart was in his throat. “I’m sorry, Umia. I... I cannot.”

Umia’s shock was plain. She obviously rarely had her requests denied.

“As you wish! Don’t be a man.” A soft blue tint surrounded her body. Her eyes glowed blue. Although Jandu had never seen it happen before, he had heard stories of demons with the

power to curse. All the stories warned that demons turned blue first. Jandu blanched in horror.

She glared at Jandu. "If you are going to act like such a woman, I curse you to be one!"

"What!"

Umia pointed at him, the other hand on her curvy hip.

"I curse you, Jandu! You flirt with your words, and then scorn me with your body! Since you are so selfish with your manhood, you will lose it and be transformed into a woman!"

A gray mist of curse words formed around her head, and then exploded towards Jandu. Jandu covered his face with his arms as the shower of misty words fell on him, turning his skin cold, making him shiver to the marrow of his bones.

And without another word, Umia stormed out of the forest glade.

Jandu knelt there on the forest floor, too stunned to move.

"My God, my God!" He clenched his hands into fists. This was the worst thing that could ever have happened to him. "No!" He kicked the statue of Umia and ran back to his family, desperate for Yudar to think of some way out of this situation.

The whole way back, Jandu's mind raced. A curse was impossible to remove. And Yashva curses always came true. "God!" Jandu made a fist as he burst into the main hut and startled Yudar and Suraya, who were drinking tea and talking inside, away from the brutal afternoon sun.

Breathlessly, Jandu gave Yudar and Suraya an abbreviated version of what had just happened, skipping the part about the letters, and just stating that Mendraz's Yashva consort tried to seduce him, and when he refused, she cursed him. Suraya started laughing, but Yudar went pale.

"Holy beings have the power to curse," Yudar said. "It will come true, you realize."

Jandu kicked a wooden stool in frustration.

"Why didn't you just sleep with her?" Yudar demanded.

Jandu looked at him like he was crazy. “What are you talking about? She belongs to Mendraz,” Jandu snapped. “And I want Mendraz to be our ally!”

“You should have done as she asked,” Yudar said.

“Besides, I’m married to Suraya,” Jandu protested. Suraya gave him a strange look, and Yudar did not appreciate Jandu’s fidelity. Yudar paced the room, looking more worried about the situation than Jandu.

“This is bad, bad!” Yudar cried. “Jandu, you are a fool!”

Baram came in, having heard the shouting from outside. When they retold the story to him, he just shook his head at his younger brother.

“Why not just sleep with her?” he asked.

Jandu moaned and sank to his knees, covering his face. He felt a tickle on his chest and, in a total panic, rubbed his chest frantically to make sure he hadn’t spontaneously developed large breasts.

“You need to pray,” Yudar said. Jandu wasn’t looking at him, so Yudar knelt down and shook Jandu by the shoulders. “Listen to me! You need to pray to Mendraz. Ask for help, Jandu. You helped him in the forest. Maybe he will help you now.”

Jandu nodded. He stood shakily. “I’ll try.”

“Hurry,” Yudar said.

Jandu didn’t need the encouragement. He quickly made his way to the main path through the forest. He found an isolated spot and knelt down, closing his eyes and praying with all his heart to Mendraz.

Jandu brought his hands together, and called to Mendraz over and over. He had no idea if the Yashva could hear him, but Keshan once told him that Mendraz watched over the world, both the human one and the Yashva kingdom.

Jandu prayed for hours, long after the hot afternoon sun had set, after the sounds of the nocturnal animals filled the forest air, the loud croaking of frogs from the nearby stream, the hoot of owls, the constant rustle of undergrowth.

Jandu's knees ached as they pressed against the uneven stones and ground. He kept his palms glued together as he prayed, his eyes shut, focusing all his concentration on his one goal. Mazar had taught him that praying sincerely was a lot like shooting a bow accurately. It had to do with clearing one's mind of all extraneous thought, and meditating on one's only purpose. Jandu breathed deeply, calming his mind, focusing his energies.

Mendraz.

"I see you have angered another Yashva."

Jandu's eyes shot open in surprise. He saw nothing but the jungle around him.

And then, blurry, flittering through the jungle, Jandu could make out the towering blue figure of the King of the Yashvas. Mendraz stood before him, but was in the Yashva Kingdom. The King stepped forward, and brightened. Jandu shielded his eyes as the King stepped into the human world as if he were stepping over a fallen log.

"I'm impressed," Mendraz said, his accent thick, his voice booming. "You can see me even in the Yashva world. You have many impressive powers, mortal Jandu."

Jandu's eyes hurt with the brightness of light emanating from the demon. Jandu's heart beat wildly, and his throat seemed to close in fear. Even though he had seen Mendraz before, the sight still awed him. Mendraz's face and arms faded in an out of clarity, swimming through the air as if seen through warped glass, never fully in focus.

Jandu narrowed his eyes, to try and find Mendraz's face. "My Lord Mendraz!" Jandu prostrated himself low before the King.

"And one of your powers seems to be your uncanny ability to anger my people." Jandu thought he could detect amusement in his voice.

Jandu looked up. Mendraz appeared to be smiling, although his teeth vibrated, sharp and shining.

“I don’t mean to cause any strife among the Yashva,” Jandu said, bowing his head once more. “I cause enough problems in my own world.”

Mendraz did laugh this time, a frightening sound that made Jandu think twice about being clever again.

“It is not surprising,” Mendraz commented. “You are the first human in generations who is able to see into our world. You are bound to cause mixed feelings amongst my kind.”

“My lord, I humbly request your assistance,” Jandu begged. He spoke quickly, telling Mendraz of Umia’s curse.

When he finished, Mendraz sighed. “Rise, Jandu. You’re not a peasant.”

Jandu stood up and looked expectantly at Lord Mendraz. “My apologies, lord! I didn’t know what to do.”

“Umia is very persistent when she sets her heart on something,” Mendraz said. “I should congratulate you—of all the mortals Umia has fancied, you’re the only one who refused her. Tell me though, if your letters were not meant to seduce Umia, who were they for?”

Jandu clenched his mouth shut. But Mendraz continued to stare, obviously willing to wait for an answer.

“They were—” Jandu flushed, closed his eyes, and prayed that Keshan had been telling him the truth about the freedom of the Yashva kingdom. “I wrote them for Keshan Adaru.”

“I thought as much,” King Mendraz said. “He has been praying for your safety every night for months. It’s very wearying.”

Jandu swallowed the burst of affection he instantly felt for Keshan. He folded his hands in supplication. “I am sorry. Can you help me, lord?”

Mendraz looked bemused. “Well, I cannot remove the curse entirely. It is her shartic power, that once her curse is uttered, it cannot be revoked. However, I can change it.”

“Change it? How?”

“I can reduce the curse to one year. It will be any year of your choosing. Just pray to me, and I will let the year begin.”

Jandu smiled weakly. "Thank you."

Mendraz looked like he was smirking. "I'm sure you will make a lovely woman."

"Thank you," Jandu said, his cheeks burning in shame.

Mendraz moved towards him quickly. Jandu braced himself. Mendraz reached down and put his hand on Jandu's head.

Nausea washed through Jandu as Mendraz touched him. He felt like his stomach was pulled up his throat. A rocking seasickness filled him, and then his mind pulsed as dozens of Yashva words shouted into his ear with shocking volume.

Jandu closed his eyes tightly. His head felt as though it would explode.

And then Mendraz lifted his hand off of him and disappeared.

"Be strong, ally of the Yashvas," Mendraz told him from the darkness.

Jandu steadied his balance, and shook his head to clear it. He had a pounding headache. And he couldn't see anything, his eyes still blinded by the brightness of the demon.

Jandu swallowed. Feeling slightly better, Jandu returned back to his family, and shared the news. Once the immediate disaster had been averted, his brothers chided him, first about not sleeping with a beautiful immortal, and secondly to guess what womanly attributes Jandu would develop. He shot nasty glances at them, and hit Baram in the head when Baram suggested that Jandu would be an adorable maiden.

The comments hurt Jandu's pride, and he groaned as they got worse, the rest of them laughing hysterically as they imagined a female Jandu. He almost snapped completely and told them all to fuck off.

But then he realized that, for the first night in ages, none of them complained about their hunger. And for the first time in what felt like a year, Jandu hadn't worried about Keshan. The rest of their lives were so miserable, a smaller tragedy lightened their mood.

So Jandu let them mock him, taking it diligently until he realized it would never end unless he hit Baram. This started a friendly brawl and ended with a broken bench and an angry wife, who demanded that they fix it.

It was sad when bad news was better than horrible news, but Jandu reveled in that one night, where he felt almost safe. Mendraz had helped him, and although he was not completely out of danger, at least the worst had been averted.

CHAPTER 24

NOT FOR THE FIRST TIME, KESHAN FOUND HIMSELF WAITING to see King Darvad.

Over the past year, Keshan had been treated warmly by Darvad. He and Iyestar enjoyed a place within Darvad's inner circle. Keshan split his time between Prasta and Tiwari, taking over pressing business at home when Iyestar was in the capital, and pushing his own agenda within the royal palace.

But recently, Darvad seemed hesitant to see him. Keshan suspected it was because he pressed his legal agenda every time he had a chance to meet with the king. Keshan knew he sounded repetitive, but it was the only way he could get his message through.

Tarek always took the time to listen to Keshan's concerns, and he kept his promise to push forward Keshan's legislation. When Tarek was in Prasta, he and Keshan built an easy friendship, based on a shared vision of the country's future. But now Tarek was away again, off on another errand for Darvad, subjugating the lords who balked at Darvad's rule.

Darvad's changes were not being accepted without challenge. In addition to Keshan's improvements, Darvad was also making sweeping revisions to the traditions of their culture. He lessened the control of the temple over the land. He reduced tithing to Shentari priests. He forced the Draya to pay more in taxes. And he required absolute fealty to his rule.

Each small outbreak of resentment was immediately answered by dispatching the Royal Judge. Tarek was a rare sight in the palace now, too busy traveling the country running Darvad's errands and forcing Darvad's heavy-handed rule amongst the lords.

Tarek's absence made Keshan's job harder. And now Darvad kept Keshan waiting for an audience, knowing full well why Keshan was there.

Keshan played his flute as he waited in a luxurious sitting room in the palace. At least he didn't have to wait for Darvad's attention in the reception hall, with the rest of the courtiers. Servants brought Keshan food and wine, and one of Darvad's stewards checked on him every half hour, begging forgiveness for the delay, assuring Keshan that he had not been forgotten.

But the wasted time rankled Keshan.

Finally, Keshan gave up waiting. He tucked his flute away and grabbed his scroll, and headed down the marble hallway in search of Darvad himself. He would interrupt the king if need be.

Keshan found Darvad in one of the palace gardens, talking quietly with Druv. The two of them sat around a chess board, but neither of them played. Blossoming orchids filled the garden. One of the palace cats sat on the low plaster wall, blinking lazily into the sunlight. The two men sat at a table on a bench with their backs facing Keshan.

"I have absolute confidence that they are not in Jagu Mali or Bandari," Druv said. "My reports from Marshav are not complete, but I have heard back from my scouts in two thirds of the state, and no one can report any sign of the Parans there either."

Darvad threw one of the chess pieces across the garden. The cat immediately leapt off the wall.

"Damn it, Druv! It does me no good to tell me where they *aren't*. I need to know where they are, and quickly! Half of their exile is over and there is still not a sign of them! You must try harder."

"I am using the full extent of my contacts, Darvad. But finding four people in the entire country, especially four people who are trying not to be found, isn't easy."

“How hard can it be? They stand out like demons! Three men and a woman, traveling together? One the size of a house, another with blue eyes? For God’s sake, do I have to do this myself?”

“Darvad, I am trying. Have faith in me. We will find them in time.” Druv suddenly looked back and saw Keshan. “It looks like we have a guest.”

Darvad turned his head and glared at Keshan.

“Keshan!” Darvad’s glare lessened slightly. “You surprised us. I didn’t know you were waiting.”

“I’ve been waiting for two hours,” Keshan said. He smiled and made the sign of peace to both of them. “I decided I would come and find you myself before I grew old.”

“Please, sit down and join us.” Darvad gestured to the bench across from him and Druv at the table. “Were you given any refreshment?”

“Yes, I have had plenty of time to eat, thank you.”

Druv stood. “I’m sorry, I have to concede the game to you, Darvad. Besides, you threw my queen across the courtyard.”

“I would have beaten you anyway,” Darvad said.

“Perhaps.” Druv bowed to Keshan. “Excuse me, but I must leave you both. I must follow up on some errands.”

An uncomfortable silence followed as Darvad accompanied Druv out of the garden, and then turned back to Keshan. His face darkened.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting, Keshan, but I have been very busy.”

Keshan raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I heard a little of what is occupying your time. I also heard that Tarek is leading a confrontation in Jagu Mali. How does it go?”

“It isn’t much of a confrontation. Tarek is simply ensuring that Lord Bir is collecting the appropriate levels of taxes from his citizens. You should be pleased. Apparently Bir did not like the new laws lessening the punishments against the Chaya. Tarek is making sure he sees the light.”

Keshan nodded. "I am glad to hear it."

"I have not forgotten your requests," Darvad said.

"I know. And I am grateful." Keshan passed over his scroll. "But there is so much more to be done. We still need to establish funding for schools for the Chaya."

"We have already made great strides with the Chaya."

"You are watering down my changes until they are meaningless!" Keshan realized his voice was rising, and took a deep breath. "We have only begun our work. What about getting priests to bless the Chaya temples without unreasonable payoffs?"

"It is next on my list of things to do," Darvad said wearily.

"And the changes to the status of the Jegora?"

Darvad rubbed his eyes. He was silent for a long moment. And then he stared at Keshan wearily.

"Keshan. Listen to me. We have to do this carefully. We cannot rush into anything."

"I hardly think it is rushing," Keshan said.

"These radical changes take time. The Jegora are despised by God. To embrace them in our culture is the equivalent of telling the priests that we shun the word of God. It is one thing to help the Suya and Chaya; they are God's children. But the untouchables? No one wants to include them, Keshan. Not even my most radical allies."

"But they have it worst of all," Keshan urged. "Even if we make small changes, we can improve their lot. Today, the untouchables are only allowed to wear the clothes of the dead. What if we remove that law? How does that harm anybody?"

"That isn't the point," Darvad said. "The Jegora wear clothing from the dead because it is in the Book of Taivo. The Shentari faith is based on the precepts in the Book, and if we ignore one of the precepts, then we are opening ourselves up to change them all."

"Yes."

Darvad sighed. "I cannot commit to that. Every law we have enacted still allows the Shentari faith to keep its precepts.

Once we start picking and choosing which of the holy tenets we abide, we may start a war. The Draya won't like it. The faithful won't like it. And I can't afford to lose everyone just to change the wardrobe of ten percent of the population."

Keshan stifled his bitter response. It would do no good to fight Darvad on this. Darvad was king, and Keshan would lose. He would have to try a different tactic.

"What about making changes that do not go against the Book of Taivo? Nowhere does it state that God encourages the beating of the Jegora, and yet this happens all the time. If we passed a law saying that harming the Jegora will result in punishment, we have not broken any religious belief, and we have made an immediate improvement to the lives of thousands of men and women across this country. Darvad, we live in a country where a Jegora woman may be dragged from her house and raped and there is no punishment or shame cast upon her attacker. They have no rights."

"They are untouchables. They have never had rights. I know this is hard for you to accept, but we cannot fight their battle just yet. Let us improve the plight of the Suya and Chaya for now. Please?"

Darvad looked sincere. And suddenly, Keshan felt sickened by the whole thing. Darvad *was* sincere. He wanted change. He embodied Keshan's hopes for a new world. And yet even he could not imagine a world where a Jegora was treated as a full human being. The idea was as foreign as it was to ask a cow for permission to milk her. The cow was there to serve human beings. And the Jegora were there to take care of dead bodies and clean up the sewers. Keshan suddenly felt like giving up. Weariness passed from Darvad into him. So many months of working so hard. So many trivial annoyances that he let go of. The dozens of spies which followed him daily, hoping that he would lead Darvad to the Parans; the madness of trying to communicate legal changes to a Royal Judge who was never there; and the more personal troubles. Iyestar and

he fought constantly now. Ajani's frustration with him grew to new heights. And his inability to communicate with Jandu, all of this mounted into a moment of crippling frustration.

"Thank you for your time," Keshan said brusquely. He left the scroll with Darvad and made his way to the gate.

"Don't be angry with me," Darvad asked. He followed Keshan to the gate and touched his shoulder. "I cannot bear it. Too many people hate me already. I need you. I need you on my side."

Keshan smiled weakly. "I am not angry. I am frustrated, yes. But not angry."

Darvad smiled back. "Good. Then you know how I feel." He embraced Keshan briefly. "Thank you for coming. I will make sure you do not wait so long the next time."

Keshan turned and left the palace. As he suspected, the moment he got into his chariot, a rider on horseback mounted and trailed him. Druv's spies were obvious. Keshan wondered if it wasn't deliberate, a way to keep Keshan in line.

The thought fuelled his anger. Because of them, he hadn't heard a word from Jandu in months. Druv's spies had caught Chezek the last time he had returned from the mountains. And while they did not hurt Chezek, and although Chezek managed to keep Jandu's letters safe out of their hands, the risk was just too great.

But the months of silence gnawed at him constantly. For all he knew, Jandu was dead. Frustration coiled within him, made him reckless.

"I'll just visit him myself." As soon as he mumbled the words, Keshan realized that he would break all the rules and actually do it. He no longer cared about the repercussions. His brother could be angry. Darvad could suspect him. It didn't matter now. He needed to alleviate the worry in his mind, or else he could not concentrate on anything else. He needed a break from the palace, and from politics. And no one was as good at making Keshan forget his troubles than Jandu.

As his chariot wound through the dusty streets of Prasta, a giddy excitement built in him. Once he had made his decision, he thought himself a fool for waiting so long. He could not be gone indefinitely, but at least he could have something to refresh him, rejuvenate him, after months of stagnant frustration.

That evening, he met with his loyal servant Chezek in private. Chezek had been Keshan's charioteer since he was a teenager, and he trusted the gruff man with his life. Only Chezek held the secret of Keshan's relationship with Jandu, and he never questioned it. Chezek's loyalty was unwavering, and so it was with him alone that Keshan plotted.

The following day, Chezek left the palace on the premise that he had an urgent message to deliver for Keshan. He returned, anxious, and urged Keshan that his good friend in Pagdesh was ill, begging Keshan to tend to him.

Keshan made the excuse to Iyestar, who eyed Chezek and Keshan both with an air of suspicion.

"I had no idea that you were so close to Gerevan Handari," Iyestar said, looking at the parchment Chezek had delivered.

"We have maintained a steady correspondence since he visited us in Tiwari," Keshan said calmly. "I owe him my attendance if he requests it."

Iyestar ground his teeth. He handed the letter back to Keshan. "Fine, go then. But no longer than a week. I need you here."

Keshan bowed to his older brother, and hid his smile of triumph until he was safely out of Iyestar's quarters. Immediately, he packed his belongings and sent Chezek to the market to purchase additional items, gifts for Handari's extensive family.

All of his preparations were watched carefully. It irked Keshan that even in his own townhouse in Prasta, Druv's spies monitored him. Servants Keshan once thought of as honest suddenly appeared in his chambers, looked through his documents. Keshan fought the urge to fire them, realizing they would only be replaced with other spies.

Men followed his chariot out of the city, and when they reached the open roads to the east, crossing the thin branch of the Yaru River that separated Prasta from the State of Karuna, new men arrived, tradesmen with an eerie sense of pacing who managed to change their route in accordance with Keshan's own.

They were followed through Karuna. By the time they reached the border, a group of men traveling as religious ascetics on pilgrimage were suspiciously close behind them.

Again Keshan wished he could just go through the Yashva kingdom, but human spies, no matter how tenacious, could not match the tracking ability of Firdaus' Yashva cousins. They had a better chance of success in the human world.

Keshan and Chezek detoured off the main route to Pagdesh, instead heading northeast along the narrow, winding roads of the State of Marshav. As soon as they were convinced that they had temporarily lost their trackers, Keshan sold the chariot and purchased two horses instead. He and Chezek loaded them down with the goods for the Parans and left before sunrise. The rest of their journey seemed free of spies, but they still took extra precautions once they reached the mountainous state of Pagdesh.

It had been years since Keshan had traveled this far north, and while he wished he had time to take in the sights, to see the towns and people he had only heard about, he had no time to spare. They crossed through herds of brightly painted cattle and flocks of sheep that scattered at their horse's canter. They didn't sleep in towns, resting past nightfall in secluded fields far from the sight of the road.

Once they reached the village at the base of Mount Adri, Keshan donned Chezek's heavy black turban, the trait of the Marshavi people, and put on his heavy long black tunic and baggy trousers. Delicate silver embroidery decorated the cuffs and front buttons. Chezek put on Keshan's own clothing, his bright yellow silks and bangles, even wearing Keshan's diadem.

THE ARCHER'S HEART

Anyone looking closely at either man would know the deception immediately. Chezek was too old and grizzled to ever be mistaken for his master. But from a distance, they wore their parts well.

Keshan had never seen his servant in anything other than black, so seeing him now in gold embroidery and a tight yellow vest made him smile.

“Don’t laugh,” Chezek grumbled, straightening his diadem. “You’ll need your energy for the mountain.”

The two day trek up the mountain to Jandu’s rendezvous point proved to be physically draining, but mentally soothing. The rhythm of steps leading endlessly upwards, and the steady beat of his horse’s hooves, became a form of meditation, each footfall taking him further from the trials of his life, closer to Jandu.

As a young boy, Keshan spent months like he was now, in the middle of nowhere, alone with nature. He had loved it. He had learned how to detect weather changes from the slightest breeze, predict oncoming storms from the shapes of clouds, he had deciphered dozens of bird calls, discovered hundreds of plants, befriended wild animals, and spent lazy afternoons with cows.

All of that seemed a lifetime ago. He couldn’t remember the last time he had taken a stroll even in his own garden in Tiwari. Even his daily swims in the ocean with Iyestar had become infused with unspoken tension.

Keshan rolled his shoulders back and closed his eyes as he walked, his horse’s lead rope loose in his hand. Thick humid air engulfed his body like a warm bath and he let the calls of nature overwrite the quarrels and debates of court in his head, embracing the noisy silence of the forest.

When the sun went down beneath the mountains and darkness made it impossible to continue, he found a spot along the pilgrim’s trail that looked amenable for a camp fire, and settled down for the night. He fed his horse and lit a small fire,

noticing signs of previous campers. He wondered if Jandu had slept there. The thought filled Keshan with wanting. He was almost there.

In the morning, he left at first light and walked quickly. He hoped that Jandu would visit the glade that he had described in his first letter. Neither Chezek nor Keshan knew the exact location of the Parans' house, although Keshan figured it had to be nearby.

Keshan finally stumbled into the clearing in the forest that Jandu and Chezek had described a little past noon. He saw the statue first—stone blackened with age and worn smooth, the shapely curves of a woman's body barely detectible. But there were no letters beside it. Keshan grew alarmed.

He heard a rustle in the trees, and froze in fear. What if he had been followed? It seemed unlikely; there were parts of the pilgrim's trail where he could see down the mountainside for nearly a mile, and no one had been behind him.

But caution flooded him. He tied his horse in the thicket and hunkered down against a large tree. He closed Chezek's long-sleeved coat tighter around him and pulled the end of the black turban down, wrapping his face and obscuring all but his eyes. Crouched beside the tree, Keshan's had an unobstructed view of the clearing, but he was well-hidden behind a flowering bush. The rustle of someone approaching grew louder. His heart beat faster as he crunched his body tighter.

Jandu appeared in the glade, scowling.

It had been a year and a half since Keshan had seen him, and the changes startled him. Jandu seemed taller. His arms had developed lean and clearly defined muscles. But he was shockingly thin. The high cheekbones in his face were very prominent, his eyes seemed slightly sunken with hunger, and his stomach was as flat as a board. His thick black hair had grown longer and, unrestrained without a diadem or crown, seemed wild and unruly. His bangs fell into his eyes. Jandu pushed the hair back from his face angrily.

His dark blue cotton dejaru was stained and ragged. His old blue sash had faded nearly to white. The harafa he wore on his upper body was woven from rough cotton, and was also badly stained. Jandu draped it partially over his head like a beggar would.

Jandu's expression seemed fiercer to Keshan as well. His blue eyes burned with an intensity that startled Keshan. He looked angry at the world, which didn't surprise Keshan. The world had shat upon him, and now he was fumbling through a dense and unfriendly forest, looking desperately for news of his lover.

This thought constricted Keshan's throat with emotion. He knew he had missed Jandu, but now seeing him, scowling at bushes and furiously swiping at mosquitoes, he realized how much his own life had suffered without this temperamental man by his side.

Keshan shifted, and a branch cracked under his sandal.

Jandu narrowed his eyes in Keshan's direction. He stalked towards Keshan with startling speed.

"What do you want?" Jandu roared, suddenly grabbing Keshan by the throat and pulling him from his crouched position. He slammed Keshan against the tree trunk, holding him up by his neck.

As soon as they made eye contact, Jandu's eyes widened. He immediately let go of Keshan's throat.

"Keshan!"

"Hello. I—"

Jandu grabbed Keshan by the collar and jerked him forward, kissing him with almost painful force.

Keshan gave up trying to speak. He wrapped his arms around Jandu. Jandu pressed him back against the trunk of the tree and pinned Keshan there, grinding his hips into Keshan as he thrust his tongue deeply into Keshan's mouth.

A year and a half of desire rushed through Keshan's system, making him respond to every touch from Jandu's hands.

They felt different, calloused. But they touched Keshan's flesh with a familiarity that sped Keshan's heart.

Keshan tried to pull his mouth away from Jandu to speak, but Jandu's lips wouldn't let him go. Jandu bit Keshan's lip gently, forcing the contact. Jandu kissed him as if his life depended upon it.

Finally, breathless, Jandu pulled his lips away and stared down at Keshan.

"You fucker!" he said. There were tears in his eyes. "Why didn't you write me?"

"It was too risky," Keshan said. "Druv's spies caught Chezek."

Jandu's eyed widened. "Is he all right?"

"Yes, and they didn't find the letters. But we couldn't risk coming back."

Jandu studied Keshan's expression. "Then why are you here now?"

Keshan swallowed. "I needed to see you."

Jandu kissed him again. Keshan let his knees relax and he slid down the trunk of the tree, Jandu crouching down with him, never breaking contact with his lips. Keshan lay back upon the forest floor and Jandu crouched above him. He could feel Jandu's erection pushing against his thigh.

"I thought you were dead. Or tortured." Jandu's words were whispered between frantic kisses. "You have no idea how I've worried..."

"Well don't worry any longer. The only torture I've endured is of sexual deprivation."

For the first time, Jandu's mouth broke into a hesitant smile. He rolled off of Keshan and lay on his side beside him. Jandu reached out and pushed Keshan's turban off his head. He ran his hand through Keshan's hair, closing his eyes. "God, I missed doing this." He left his fingers entangled in Keshan's locks. "Turbans don't suit you."

"Well, neither does that harafa over your head," Keshan said, laughing. "You look like a Bandari street beggar."

Jandu pulled his hand back as if burned.

Keshan felt a fool.

“God, Jandu, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“—That’s all right. I *am* a fucking beggar. It’s appropriate that I look the part.”

“I didn’t mean that. I was trying to...” Trying to what? Keshan suddenly realized that the way he used to speak with Jandu would no longer work. Jandu didn’t have the same sense of humor he used to. Nothing about his current situation was particularly funny, after all. “I’m sorry.”

Jandu ground his teeth. He looked as though he were about to speak, and then suddenly changed his mind.

“Talk later.” Jandu pulled Keshan on top of him and kissed his mouth, a tremor of anxiety still coursing through his body. Even in the midst of all the political turmoil of Prasta, Keshan had never felt Jandu so on edge. The Jandu he knew was mellow, self-assured. This man was jumpy as a jack rabbit and his pride easily injured.

But Keshan’s worries faded as the intensity of their embrace increased. Jandu’s eyes slanted as his mouth ravished Keshan. Keshan savored the erotic roughness to his cheeks, the unbearable softness of his pink lips. Keshan ran his hands along Jandu’s neck, feeling each bone, running his hands along his sternum. He gently circled Jandu’s nipples with his fingers, listening for Jandu’s telltale gasp that he enjoyed this. Jandu always made strange, inarticulate noises when they made love. It was one of his more endearing traits.

Keshan leaned down and flicked at Jandu’s right nipple with the tip of his tongue. Jandu let out a small, peculiar groan, and a smile broke across Keshan’s face.

Touching Jandu after all this time was an erotic mixture of familiarity and strangeness. He knew the smell of Jandu’s body, the taste of it, his color and texture, and what spots on his body made him shout out in desire. But his body had changed. His ribs were prominent, declaring themselves across his chest. He had

more hair on his chest than before, but it was dark and small, huddled in shy curls. Jandu's hips seemed narrower, due to the fact that his thighs had grown in size with all his walking.

"Keshan," Jandu moaned.

Keshan's own hardness urgently pressed against his tightly wrapped dejaru. He ignored it, instead sitting up to slowly, patiently, undo the sash across Jandu's waist.

Jandu watched him from beneath lowered lashes.

Keshan untied the knot of Jandu's dejaru slowly, drawing out the effort. He felt like he was unwrapping a present. The anticipation of seeing him naked made his own body shiver with desire.

He slowly pulled down the fabric wrapped around Jandu's waist, revealing his thick, slightly curved cock.

Keshan didn't touch it. He instead placed kisses around it, listening to Jandu's small noises as he squirmed to get Keshan's mouth closer to the tip. Keshan gently licked the salty skin of Jandu's inner thighs, loving the scent of maleness about him. Jandu was so masculine here, where small hairs darkened the soft sweet flesh of his legs, where his scrotum hung heavily and loose, the skin soft and salty to the tongue.

Keshan took his time with Jandu, not wanting to rush this. He had only a week at most to be with him, and he didn't know how much time alone they would be able to find.

And this was Suraya's flesh now, Keshan realized. He wondered absent-mindedly if she had ever done this to him—pulled his testicles into her mouth, her fingers playing close to his entrance, her breath hot on the sensitive base of his cock.

Keshan smiled to himself. Somehow, he knew this was his space here. This was his closeness to Jandu, their secret spot. When Keshan closed his lips onto Jandu, and Jandu hissed in pleasure, Keshan knew that this was a pleasure he alone in the world had. He let Jandu raise his hips up, let him thrust into the back of Keshan's throat, searching for the deepest place, the moment when he knew that Keshan had swallowed him whole.

But Jandu was Jandu. He rarely took his pleasure without seeing to Keshan's needs first. He had a boyish smile on his face, his eyes sparkling. "Come here," he said huskily. He sat up. His hands shook as he helped Keshan out of his trousers. Keshan knelt and let his cock touch Jandu's, loving the way that slight movement made Jandu's entire body go rigid with pleasure.

Jandu's naked body was so firm and masculine, so defined, but the way it trembled with anticipation was almost feminine. Until he met Jandu, Keshan hadn't realized his sexual desire could be whipped into such a frenzy.

After all, sex was fun with anyone. But sex with Jandu was so erotic, it made everything else seem limp and empty, it made everything else just fucking. But Jandu was a living, pulsing, definition of sex to Keshan—the noble yet languid way Jandu moved, the taste of him, from the salty flesh of his testicles to the sun-burnt sweetness of his neck, the rigid firmness of his stomach muscles and his strong arms, the infinite softness of his lips and inner thighs, the strong musky scent of his flesh—it was as if he were born simply to bring Keshan to his knees with craving.

Jandu grasped Keshan's member in his hot hands and pressed it against his own. He wrapped his hands around them both, stroking them together, his movements lubricated with Keshan's saliva.

Pleasure rocked through Keshan's entire body. Jandu nudged Keshan's legs wider with his knee, spreading Keshan open, speeding his pumping. With his other hand he gently stroked Keshan's testicles, his finger gently brushing backwards until he pressed into Keshan.

Keshan moaned. He leaned forward and kissed Jandu deeply, his hands gripping Jandu's shoulders. Jandu's blue eyes locked on Keshan's own. Jandu was the only lover Keshan had ever had who watched Keshan while making love. Keshan pushed back against Jandu's finger, pressing him deeper inside.

The feeling caused Keshan to come in one long explosion, his mind reeling by the force of it. How had he gone so long without this feeling?

Keshan reached down to help stroke Jandu to completion as well, their fingers intertwining around his swollen flesh, their palms wet with Keshan's cum.

Jandu let out a strangled moan and released in a long arc onto his own chest. Jandu collapsed backwards onto the forest floor, pulling Keshan down beside him. Keshan kissed him once more. Love fluttered in his breast as Jandu kissed back lazily and sweetly, his tongue making long strokes along his lips.

Keshan threw his leg over Jandu, suddenly exhausted. "You taste like berries and deer."

Jandu laughed.

Keshan retied his dejaru. Jandu looked reluctant as he did the same.

They lay there together, on the forest floor, holding hands and staring at the canopy of trees as Jandu caught Keshan up on everything that had happened since their last correspondence. Keshan wanted to lay in the warm glade forever. Moments stolen with Jandu felt like moments of escape. And he needed to escape his stressful life of politics in Tiwari as much as Jandu needed to escape the poverty and humiliation of exile.

"I hope you have dozens of letters for me," Keshan said.

Jandu sighed. "They're gone."

Keshan frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I had all those drawings... they've been collecting for months beneath that statue." He glared at the statue angrily. "And then *she* came and took them all."

"She? Who?" Keshan's eyes widened. "Suraya?"

"God, no!" Jandu looked just as horrified at the idea. "No, Mendraz's bitch of a consort, Umia! It's her statue. She thought I wrote the letters to her, and took them."

Keshan blinked at Jandu for a few moments, and then burst out laughing. Umia was his aunt. He grew up with stories of her human conquests.

“What did you do? I assume she wanted you to fuck her.”

Jandu closed his eyes. “Yes. She wanted me to, but I didn’t. So she cursed me.”

Keshan froze. Umia’s curses had been the scourge of their family for generations. He had never thought she would harm anyone he cared about. He quickly glanced over Jandu’s body, looking for abnormalities.

“What curse?”

“I’m going to turn into a woman,” Jandu said between gritted teeth. “I begged Mendraz to help, and he reduced the curse to one year of my choosing.”

Keshan simply stared. The expression on Jandu’s face warned Keshan against making light of the matter.

“I’m sorry.” It seemed like such an empty, useless thing to say.

Jandu sighed, and squeezed Keshan’s hand. “It’s the least of our worries, honestly. Suraya’s pregnant, and she isn’t getting enough to eat here.”

Jealousy flooded Keshan, but he forced himself to smile. “Congratulations.”

Jandu quirked an eyebrow at him. “It isn’t mine. It’s Baram’s child.”

“But this is your year with her, right?”

“Yes. She was pregnant before me.”

“Are you sure?”

Jandu smirked. “I know how to count.” He leaned back and smiled at the sky. “Besides, I’m too in love with you to pretend with anyone else.”

Keshan stroked Jandu’s hair. “What are you going to do?”

“Yudar wants to go to Afadi and hide as servants. I don’t particularly care where we go, as long as there is food and I don’t have to beg anymore.”

Keshan could feel Jandu's shudder. He leaned over and kissed Jandu sweetly.

But Keshan's stomach grumbled, announcing the late hour in the day. Jandu smiled shyly. "Are you hungry? We could go back to the house and see what Baram made for dinner. It probably won't be much, but it usually tastes good. He's mastered the art of making stale rice exciting and flavorful."

Keshan lowered his lips to kiss Jandu's neck. He was loath to give up this moment, the two of them, alone in the world. But Jandu had apparently made up his mind to feed his guest. He sat up and brushed the leaves and sticks from his clothing.

"I've brought some food as well," Keshan said. Keshan saw Jandu's eyes brighten, and then watched him try and hide his enthusiasm. Everything Jandu did right now was perfect. Keshan grabbed his hand again and kissed him.

"I love you," Keshan whispered.

Jandu smiled crookedly. "I love you too."

Keshan rested his forehead gently on Jandu's for a moment, sighing, and then the two of them left the forest glade.

CHAPTER 25

ONE LOOK AT THE PARAN'S HOME IN THE FOREST CONFIRMED Keshan's worst fears: he had not brought enough to help them. They were going to die of deprivation.

His heart ached as he realized he hadn't done enough. And yet they still welcomed Keshan into their home with the enthusiasm of puppies, all of them bounding around Keshan and touching him and laughing, sweeping the floor under his feet and offering him seats, handing him water and what little food they had. Even Yudar seemed honestly pleased to see Keshan, despite their differences.

But there was no comfort to be had in this bleak place. Jandu's letters had lied, hiding the level of their desperation.

Keshan saw they had sold everything they had of value, other than the chest in the corner that held their weapons and armor. Their clothes were in tatters, their sandals worn and held together with rawhide string. The hut leaked and it stank of mold. They had one pot and the few jars they had for food stores were cracked and stained. Their cow looked sickly, her coat patched with bites and her ribs prominent.

Yudar had changed most of all. Where he had once been the symbol of a healthy, strong Triya king, he now resembled an ascetic walking the last steps of his life. He had grown a beard, and his long hair was loose, oily and turning gray. His stomach and eyes sunk with hunger, and his arms had lost the muscles of a warrior. His ribs shot out in an angry display of malnutrition.

Baram was still intimidating, even starving, but his hair had thinned dramatically and his skin was riddled with cuts and

bruises, thorns angrily eating at his flesh, a heat rash on his ankles, his body rejecting the humidity of the jungle. Suraya was hugely pregnant. Her hair was still fiery and beautiful, and her eyes had their liquid, smoldering sensuality, but dark circles had formed under them and her skin had taken on a yellowish tone.

“It looks like an outhouse, doesn’t it?” Jandu asked Keshan softly.

Keshan tried to smile. “A cozy outhouse. With a nice smell.”

“That would be all the sandalwood.” Jandu helped Keshan move his saddlebags inside as Baram took care of Keshan’s horse. Yudar offered Keshan a grass mat to sit by the water’s edge. Their location was stunning—great green-covered mountain peaks jutted from a lake so calm the surface seemed like crystal. Keshan sat with the Parans and caught them up on world events, knowing they were desperate for news, hungry for a new face around the fire.

Keshan didn’t disappoint. He was a fantastic, florid storyteller, his eyes growing wide and expressive, his hands moving in jarring, exaggerated gestures, as he mimicked the king and his lords, recounted disputes and whispered gossip. As he spoke, he could feel Jandu’s eyes upon him, watching his gold bangles jangle with each flick of his wrist.

Yudar ate up the news of the kingdom hungrily, his eyes shining brightly. His expression remained rapt and focused, only clouding over when Keshan mentioned the numerous small skirmishes being led by the new Royal Judge, Tarek.

Yudar seemed poised to ask a question, but then thought better of it. He shook his head and smiled. “I never thought I would miss the position of Royal Judge as much as I do.”

“I thought you were in line for the position, Keshan,” Baram stated. He sat down beside Keshan and offered him another glass of water.

Keshan shrugged. “I think my politics are too radical for even Darvad. But Tarek is a good man, and I believe he will do what is right for Marhavad.”

There was an uncomfortable silence. Jandu poked at the dirt with a stick, clearly bored by the discussion already. The idea made Keshan smile. At least one part of Jandu's personality had not changed.

"I have some small gifts for you," Keshan told them, retrieving his saddle bags.

"Adaru, your presence is a great enough gift for all of us," Yudar said, bringing his hands together in the sign of peace.

Keshan dug through the bags and handed out gifts. He offered Baram a bag of aromatic basmati rice from the south, salt and palm oil. He opened a cask of wine and shared it with his cousins, and while Baram and Yudar weren't looking, pressed into Jandu's hands a small leather purse of gold coins. He gave perfume and a new zahari for Suraya, as well as a bolt of white cotton cloth. While she admired the zahari, Keshan inquired after her baby.

Suraya rubbed her belly fondly and smiled. "I think it will be three more months." She shook her head. "That's all I can take, too. This child is heavy."

"He's Baram's child, what do you expect?"

After their meal, Yudar and Baram made Keshan a bed on the floor of the main hut by piling their grass mats and their blankets together for him. Keshan protested when he saw that this meant they would sleep on the packed-earth floor, uncovered, but they insisted. Jandu rested his hand on Keshan's head for a long, sweet moment, and then reached down to take the dust from Keshan's feet before he turned in for the night. It was such a formal gesture, and one that Keshan had always hated. Now though, in front of Jandu's family, Jandu made the gesture seem almost erotic, the emotions behind the touch true and overpowering. Jandu's hands resting on Keshan's feet a second longer than tradition, as if holding him to make sure he were real, as if transferring to him his love and hope. Then, with a sad smile, Jandu left to sleep with Suraya.



As soon as the sun rose the following morning, Baram left for the village, taking some of the gold Keshan brought. After drinking tea with Suraya and Yudar, Jandu begged Keshan to hunt with him. They walked down the main pilgrim's trail until Jandu jerked to a halt, tilting his head to hear something. He quickly pulled Keshan into the dense forest and the two hid behind bushes until a group of holy men passed by.

Keshan hadn't thought much about what it must be like to hide from every passerby. Now he watched the tension harden Jandu's muscles, his shoulders pull in, watched the way Jandu's eyes darted up and down the trail for other witnesses. Keshan wearied of the anxiety in minutes. He couldn't imagine living this way for over a year.

"Come on." As soon as the trail was clear, Jandu led him back along the path until they cut once more into the woods. They walked together in companionable silence, and Keshan relaxed alongside him, enjoying the way Jandu's body moved through the forest like a predator, on edge yet assured.

After felling two junglefowl, Jandu settled down in a mossy clearing to rest.

"Play me a song," Jandu said. He grinned at Keshan, pointing at the velvet pouch on Keshan's belt that always held his flute. "Play that Jandu song you wrote. It's your best song."

Keshan smirked. "Of course you'd think so. But I better not play. I think I better teach."

Jandu frowned. "What do you mean?"

Keshan took out his flute and used it to point at Jandu.

"You are going to spend the last year of your exile hiding in Afadi, right?"

Jandu nodded.

"And you will be looking for work with Lord Indarel?"

"That's the plan." Jandu leaned against a log and stretched his long legs on the mossy ground.

"Is that when you will be hiding as a woman?"

Jandu looked away. "I haven't thought about it."

“It seems like as good of a year as any. No one will suspect you in such a disguise. Darvad’s spies are looking for a man with blue eyes, not a woman. And if you do go to Lord Indarel as a female servant, you will need to have a skill. Archery and combat training will not get you work if you are wearing a zahari and have your hair up in ribbons.” Keshan blew a solitary note on his instrument. Several birds above them took off in surprise.

Jandu narrowed his eyes. “What are you getting at?”

“Become a music teacher,” Keshan said. “That’s a respectable profession for a young woman, and one that is always needed in noble palaces. Indarel has teenaged children. I’m sure he would love a tutor for them.”

Jandu shook his head. “I don’t know anything about music.”

“Exactly. So I’m going to teach you now.” Keshan blew a long, trilling note. “Besides, it could help your begging. People always prefer to get something for their donation.”

Jandu snorted. “Keshan, you may be a good teacher, and I have a brilliant mind. But I doubt we have enough time for me to master the flute.”

“You’re a quick learner.” He handed Jandu the flute.

Jandu looked down at the instrument. “I don’t know about this.”

“It’s easy.” Keshan leaned forward so his breath fell on Jandu’s neck. “Just put your lips upon the tip and blow.”

A soft pink tint colored Jandu’s cheeks. He raised an eyebrow. “Is that all?”

Keshan smiled coyly. “Put your fingers along the shaft. Like this.” He helped position Jandu’s fingers on the flute. Their fingers moved together along the smooth silver. Keshan could hear Jandu’s breathing change.

“Good.” Keshan gently guided the flute to Jandu’s lips. “Blow.”

Jandu produced a sour note that once again set the white-throats to complaint. He shook his head and handed the instrument back to Keshan. He put his hand on Keshan's leg again.

"I'd rather blow something else."

"Later," Keshan said, although he was sorely tempted. "You have to work at this. Now practice."

"This isn't going to work. I don't even have a flute."

"You could borrow mine," Keshan offered, although the idea of being parted from his beloved instrument hurt.

Jandu shook his head. "Absolutely not. That would be like taking my bow away from me. Maybe I could be the first woman archery teacher in Marhavad..."

Keshan suddenly had an idea. "Zandi!"

"What?"

Keshan put his own flute down and reached around Jandu, grabbing his magnificent bow. Keshan placed Zandi on the ground before them and whispered a sharta.

They watched silently as Zandi slowly compressed and turned into a pool of liquid metal. The pool shrank further, coalescing into a long flute, the metal shimmering and shifting in the light, swirls of burnished color dancing between the valves.

Keshan laughed. He gently lifted Zandi. "Just ask her to change when you need her." Keshan stroked the instrument. The metal was still warm, and the valves seem to anticipate his touch, depressing effortlessly. "It's almost a shame to waste such a beautiful instrument on you."

Jandu gaped in horror. "What have you done? Turn her back!"

Keshan whispered to Zandi, stroking her as he gave a simple Yashva spell for change. The flute vibrated in his hand, and metamorphosed into the bow once more. The second the bow returned, Jandu pulled it away from Keshan.

“Stop playing with my things.”

Keshan raised an eyebrow. “Glad to see you haven’t become completely humble in your exile.”

Jandu slumped against the log once more, stroking Zandi protectively. “I’m going to be emasculated enough when I turn into a woman. Did you think I would look forward to you taking my weapon from me as well?”

Keshan stretched his legs alongside Jandu’s. “I’m not taking it away, I’m just transforming it. This way Zandi can remain by your side.”

Jandu snorted. “You can’t defend a kingdom with a flute.”

“And you can’t defend a kingdom if you’re in permanent exile either,” Keshan pointed out.

Jandu conceded that this was true. “And it is a clever way to keep Zandi with me all the time,” he added. He looked at Zandi affectionately, and then nodded. “All right. Teach me how to change her.”

Keshan taught Jandu how to transform Zandi, and then forced him through scales on the flute. He taught Jandu how unique colorations could be conjured for each individual note. Keshan didn’t realize how much he enjoyed teaching flute, but he grew warm and content as he watched Jandu struggle through the lessons, his mind working on all the new information, his fingers adjusting to the feel of the instrument. Learning came easily to Jandu, aided by Zandi’s magical nature. It was almost as though Zandi was playing herself.

But, like any good teacher, Keshan had to know when enough was enough. After an hour Jandu’s eyes began to glaze over.

“Enough for today,” he stated. He took Zandi from Jandu and whispered to convert her back into a bow. As soon as she changed, Jandu immediately strung her and slung her over his back.

Jandu stretched, his arms long and sleek, a golden brown in the forest. Keshan noted that he wore no jewelry anymore. And how could he? Yudar had lost everything of value to Darvad.

Impulsively, Keshan reached up and unclasped the pearl and gold pendant he always wore. The metal was warm in Keshan's hands, and slightly sticky with his sweat.

"Here." Keshan smiled. "I want you to have this." He pressed the necklace into Jandu's palm.

Jandu held it far from his body, as if it were volatile. "I can't take it. It's worth too much. It's too expensive."

"It's only a pearl," Keshan said. "You used to have dozens of them."

"I had no idea what a pearl was worth. Now that I know, I'm sure I can't accept such a gift," Jandu said. "Besides, look at me! People will think I stole it."

"Then just keep it in your pocket," Keshan urged. He pressed his hands around Jandu's, closing Jandu's hand into a fist around the necklace. "Just wear it secretly, close to your body."

Jandu's eyes welled with tears. He finally nodded and carefully put the pendant in his pouch. He wrapped his arms around Keshan's shoulders.

"You know, I never got my reward for being a good student," Jandu whispered.

"A pearl isn't enough? What sort of reward were you thinking of?"

Jandu peeled Keshan's vest from his shoulders and dropped it to the ground.

Keshan reached down and ran his hand slowly along Jandu's broad chest, down to the knot in Jandu's dejaru. He slipped his hand inside and within a moment had Jandu gasping for relief. Jandu leaned back against the forest floor and winced. He sat back up, pulling a burr from his shoulder.

Keshan watched Jandu for a reaction. He had seen this moment before, ages ago. Jandu studied the burr between his fingers, and then smirked at Keshan. "Hmm."

Keshan flicked the burr from Jandu's fingers and pushed Jandu back against the forest floor.

Keshan kissed Jandu with exquisite softness, his tongue gently probing Jandu's mouth, as light as a feather. He reached down into Jandu's trousers again and Jandu's member sprung loose. Keshan placed Jandu into his mouth, the same, excruciatingly slow and gentle teasing of his tongue now along Jandu's shaft, the flirtation of wetness and warmth. Jandu raked the soil with his hands.

"Jandu?"

Jandu and Keshan jerked apart as they heard Suraya call out. Jandu had barely enough time to stuff himself back in his trousers before Suraya pushed her large body through the bushes, coming across the two of them on the ground.

Even with Jandu's dejaru closed, Keshan realized they had been caught. There was no way to explain why they were doing so close together on the ground. Keshan felt a tremor of horror shake down his throat but composed himself. While Suraya's attention was on Jandu, he ran his fingers through his hair to straighten it and unclasped his earring, tossing it aside.

Keshan made a show of feeling through the leaves around him. "You haven't seen my earring, have you?"

"Wh—what?" she stammered.

"My earring." He pointed to his left earlobe, now bare. "I think I lost it around here."

"Earring?" Suraya repeated Keshan's word as if he was speaking a foreign language.

"It has great sentimental value," Keshan explained. "My mother gave them to me on my sixteenth birthday."

Jandu looked away from both of them. Keshan could see that his face was a brilliant scarlet.

Keshan watched Suraya's gaze lingering on Keshan's discarded vest.

"Can you help us search for it?" Keshan asked her sweetly.

"...Sure." Suraya frowned. She started pacing the area, seeming relieved to look at nothing but the forest floor.

Jandu stood frozen, his back to both of them.

"Come on Jandu, help me," Keshan said, searching the underbrush with energy. Keshan and Jandu made brief eye contact.

"It's over here!" Suraya cried.

Suraya bent over with great difficulty, and triumphantly lifted the small golden ring from the forest floor.

"Thank God for your sharp eyes!" Keshan cried, running up to her.

Suraya handed Keshan his earring and looked at him sharply. "I came to tell you that Baram is making dinner."

"Thank you," Keshan said.

The two of them stared at each other silently for what seemed to be a full minute before Suraya said, "You should be more careful."

Keshan finally broke eye contact and nodded. "I will be."

"You could lose something much more precious than gold," Suraya said.

"I know." All the mirth left Keshan's heart. In its place was a heavy, dank fear.

After Jandu's wife and brothers went to bed that evening, Jandu and Keshan sat by the glowing embers of the evening fire, poking at the charcoal with sticks, talking about foolish things that neither would ever waste paper in their letters to talk about. And in the night, with the company of the low, grumbling hoots of fish owls and the distant rustle of insects, Keshan found that peace that came with Jandu beside him. They didn't touch, what with their close encounter that afternoon and with Yudar and Baram sleeping on the other side of the hut wall. But they sat

next to each other contentedly until the last of the embers died, and they were simply shadows to each other in the humid darkness.

“When I’m with you,” Jandu whispered, “I feel like my heart has been broken open and music has burst into the silence.” Jandu sighed. “I don’t know how those around me can’t see what you’ve done to me.”

Keshan didn’t say anything for a long time. He reached out and placed his hand on Jandu’s chest, and held it there, pulsing heat and love through his fingers, his touch sending a message far more powerful than any words.

Finally, Keshan spoke, overcome with emotion.

“There is nothing that can ever explain, ever show, ever contain the strength of the love I have for you, Jandu.”

Jandu cradled Keshan’s face in his hands, and kissed him once, a slow, lingering kiss that had the fire of all the feelings that thundered through Keshan’s body.

And then Jandu got up slowly and made his way in the darkness back to Suraya. He turned at the hut entrance and waved, and Keshan watched his shadow retreat, drawn in by the curtains of the darkness, his silhouette powerful, proud, perfect.

The next morning Keshan departed for Tiwari.

CHAPTER 26

AS THEIR SECOND YEAR OF EXILE DREW TO A CLOSE JANDU TOOK Keshan's advice and played Zandi while begging. Although it did not increase the generosity of many pilgrims, it made those who gave him something happier.

One morning, Jandu came across a magnificent black buck grazing, his twisted, striped horns and black and white body so beautiful, Jandu hesitated killing him. But he thought of Suraya, about to give birth, and how much he could sell the horns and hide for in town. Jandu reached for an arrow.

Zandi's splendor looked out of place in the lush greens of the forest. Her shimmering gold danced in the rays of light as Jandu silently strung his bow, watching the buck carefully, his hands deft and knowledgeable upon the brace. He drew back the string to its full release and let loose the arrow, the high-pitched whistle his only warning to the deer. Jandu shot him straight in the eye, and the buck collapsed immediately, twitching for several seconds.

Jandu sighed. He unstrung his bow again and hooked it behind his quiver, and pulled out his belt knife. Jandu gutted the deer, and then grunted as he slung the heavy animal over his shoulders. In seconds, the flies found him. He made his way home, filthy, distracted by insects, and inexplicably saddened by the death of the buck.

He left the skinning and cleaning of the animal to Baram, and plunged himself into the lake to bathe. When he went into Suraya's hut to change clothes, he noticed that she still lay in bed, unmoved since Jandu left early that morning.

“Suraya?” Jandu shook her shoulder. Her face was white. Cold fear gripped his heart.

“Jandu...” She reached beneath their thin sheet and pulled her hands back out, smeared with blood. “Something’s wrong.”

“Baram!” Jandu bellowed at the top of his voice. Jandu searched the room for something, anything to help her, but realized he had nothing. He knew nothing.

Baram and Yudar both barged through the door, dusty hands caked in earth.

Baram rushed to her side, falling to his knees. He took her hand as she started to cry.

“She needs a midwife,” Yudar said, hovering in the doorway.

“I’ll go to the village!” Jandu ran for the pilgrim’s trail.

Jandu sped as fast as he could down the path, brushing past pilgrims without stopping to pay respects. Even running as hard as he could, it was nearly dark by the time he reached the village. The muddy main road through the center of the congregation of homes was nearly vacant, and only a few merchants still tended their booths at the market. Jandu asked one of them where the midwife lived. When he reached the midwife’s house, her husband answered the door, a stout, elderly man who glared at the intrusion.

“Please!” Jandu was out of breath, and leaned his hands against his knees. “I need the midwife. My wife... there’s a problem with her pregnancy. She’s bleeding.”

The man nodded, and shut the front door on Jandu. Jandu heard voices inside, and a moment later, the man returned with his small wife by his side.

“Where do you live?” the woman asked. She was older than Jandu imagined, and overweight. It would take her two days to get up the mountain.

“By the religious retreat,” Jandu said. He took a breath to steady his voice. “Please. You must hurry!”

The midwife looked at her husband, and then shook her head. “There is no way I can leave now. It is already dark.”

“But she could die!” Jandu’s frustration overflowed. He punched the side of their mud wall with force. The midwife backed into the house and her husband stepped forward.

“She can’t help you,” he said crossly. “Now go home.”

Jandu shook with anger. “She will help me. I order her to come help me!”

The man looked at Jandu’s clothes, took in his disheveled appearance, the rents in his dejaru, the fierce burn of Jandu’s eyes. He snarled coldly.

“You *order* her? Who the fuck do you think you are?”

It hit Jandu like a slap in the face. He was not a prince anymore. He couldn’t order anyone to do anything no matter how dire the circumstances.

“Please,” he said, lowering his voice to sound less frantic. “I’ll pay you in work. I’ll do anything for you. Please. My wife is bleeding, and she could die.”

The midwife reemerged from behind her husband, sticking her head from behind his large girth.

“I can leave in the morning,” she said quietly.

Jandu ran his hands through his hair. “Is there anything I can do? What should I do?”

“She needs vasaka leaves to coagulate the blood,” the midwife told him. “Do you have any malabar trees that high in the mountains?”

Jandu searched his memory of the forest, but couldn’t recall seeing any. He moaned in frustration.

“You may be able to buy some from Yarain, if he is still in the market,” the midwife said. As she spoke, her husband glared down at Jandu. “You need to make a tea from the leaves. You can also give her cinnamon for her nausea, and if she starts having contractions early, give her lodhra.”

“Lodhra...cinnamon...vasaka...” Jandu struggled to remember everything in his panicked state.

“I’m sorry I can’t do anything more,” the midwife said. She smiled sympathetically as her husband shut the door on Jandu.

Jandu kicked the door in fury, and then sprinted to the end of the village road to the market.

Almost everyone had gone home. Jandu grabbed a man walking through the empty stalls and asked him where he could find Yarain. The man pointed to the end of the row.

The herbalist had already packed his wares into leather skins and was walking away from his stall.

"Wait!" Jandu chased Yarain down.

"I'll be back tomorrow," Yarain said. He took in Jandu's disheveled clothes and sneered.

"I need vasaka," Jandu said. "I need lodhra, and cinnamon. Please, my wife is bleeding."

Yarain put his leather skins down on an empty wooden table. "Vasaka flowers in the winter. I have only a few left, from the south."

"I'll take them," Jandu said.

"They are very expensive," Yarain said, raising his eyebrow at Jandu's clothes.

Jandu froze. He didn't have any money. What had he been thinking? He looked up at the mountain in desperation.

Suraya is dying as I stand here.

A tremor of horror shook through Jandu's bones. He had never been so helpless, so powerless. He looked at the man, and considered just taking his bags, but he wouldn't know which herb was what.

"Wait! I have this!" Jandu pulled out the pearl pendant Keshan had given him.

Yarain took the pendant and studied it closely. His mouth gaped when he realized it was pure gold, with a pearl worth more than all the buildings in the entire village.

"Give me all that I need," Jandu ordered.

Yarain scratched the gold with a dirty fingertip. "Is this real?"

Jandu slammed his fist against the wooden table so hard he splintered the end of it. "Damn it! Of course it is!"

Yarain narrowed his eyes. “You stole this.”

“It was a gift,” Jandu said, choking on his frustration. “Please hurry!”

With a dramatic sigh that obviously disguised the tremble of excitement in his hands, the merchant quickly pocketed the gem and opened up his leather skins. He took his time, sorting through endless bundles of dried and fresh leaves and roots, until he removed a small-leaved branch from a bush, dotted with small white flowers.

“This is the *vasaka*,” Yarain told Jandu. He handed Jandu a box of cinnamon, dried into curled sticks. “Here is the cinnamon.” He finally found the *lodhra*, and gave the whole lot of it to Jandu. He even wrapped up all of Jandu’s purchases in one of his small leather skins.

“A bonus,” Yarain said, smiling toothlessly, “for a good customer.”

Jandu grabbed the bundle and raced back up the mountain, knowing that he had another day of running ahead of him.

He reached Suraya and his brothers the following afternoon only to discover that Suraya’s bleeding had stopped on its own. Jandu collapsed on the floor of the hut in exhaustion, limply pointing to the herbs and explaining to Baram what the midwife had told him to do.

Suraya tried to put a pleasant face on for Jandu, saying she was fine, that she wasn’t in any pain, but Jandu knew her too well now to believe her. There was a sick sheen to her face, a pale undertone that didn’t go away regardless of how much she ate or slept. Her eyes developed heavy purple bags under them, and during the day she would pause, standing stock still and her eyes would clench shut as she held in whatever pain racked her body.

A week later, Suraya told Jandu that a midwife she once met recommended black horehound mint for nausea and bleeding. Suraya didn’t say she was nauseous, or still bleeding, but the hairs on Jandu’s arms stood erect as she asked him to try and find some in the forest.

THE ARCHER'S HEART

Baram, Yudar and Jandu all volunteered to scour the forest to find mint for her. It was ridiculous, Jandu thought to himself, this desperate need to forage—but he saw how it soothed them all, to replace uselessness with action.

It was nearly dusk by the time Jandu finally found a patch of the herb. He hurried back home along the pilgrim's trail. Just as he was about to leave the road, he heard someone approaching on horseback. Riders rarely journeyed this far up the mountain. He stared down the hill warily.

The horse trotted up the slope at tremendous speed. Before Jandu could react, the rider was upon him, stopping his horse right in front of Jandu and dismounting.

Jandu took in the rider's golden armor, his pink silk trousers, his arm bands and bejeweled diadem. He then looked into the man's face.

"Jandu Paran." Druv Majeo, lord of Pagdesh, and Darvad's closest ally, smirked at Jandu with steely eyes. "Look at you! If it weren't for your demonic blue eyes I would have thought you were a shit cleaner."

Jandu glanced past Druv, looking for more riders. Druv had apparently come alone, which meant that he had not been completely sure of finding the Parans on the mountain. A tremor vibrated under Jandu's skin. He reached for Zandi on his back.

"God, how careless can you be?" Druv reached into his pocket and pulled out the pearl that Keshan had given Jandu. "Selling Keshan's pendant in such a backwater?" He put the pendant back in his pocket. "Looks like your three years of exile are going to begin again. Not to mention this little trinket is incontrovertible evidence that Adaru has helped you. You may be the world's best archer, but you are dead stupid."

Rage filled Jandu. All the humiliation, all the powerlessness of the last two years, it coalesced into something cold and sharp in his heart. He didn't think. Jandu swung Zandi around and nocked an arrow.

“Beware,” Jandu hissed, the traditional Triya battle cry. Druv stopped grinning. He backed up a step.

Jandu loosed the arrow. Druv choked as he fell back, the arrow lodged deeply in his throat. His hands groped at the shaft. Then he ceased to move.

Jandu had to move fast. He had just killed a lord, and Darvad’s closest friend and ally. He reshouldered Zandi and unstrapped the horse’s saddle bags. He unbridled the horse quickly and then slapped him on the rear, sending him whinnying back down the mountain in fright.

Jandu retrieved Keshan’s pendant from Druv’s pocket, and then reached down to Druv’s belt and removed his coin purse. There was enough gold inside to finance their move to Afadi at the very least. Jandu attached the purse to his own belt, and threw the saddlebags and Druv’s diadem on Druv’s stomach.

He dragged Druv’s heavy body for what felt like an hour, sweat blurring his vision. He finally reached the edge of a large gully, filled with date palms and too steep to enter. With a grunt, he shoved Druv off the cliff. He watched the body tumble downward, breaking saplings and thumping on rocks, until it was out of sight.

Jandu stopped at the stream on his way back to his family and washed his face and hands of sweat and Druv’s blood. His mind was numb, but his hands shook uncontrollably. It was nearly sunset by the time Jandu made it home. Yudar, Baram, and Suraya were drinking tea inside the hut, and all looked up when Jandu entered. He imagined what their expressions would be when he told them what had happened. And he couldn’t do it.

“We have to leave now!”

Yudar would be furious and humiliated if he discovered that Jandu had broken the rules of their exile and murdered Druv. But Jandu also knew Yudar was too rigid to do the truly honorable thing, which was to keep them safe. It was the pragmatism of poverty. His own honor was less important than the

safety of Suraya, Baram, and Yudar. It would be Jandu's sin, this lie, but it wouldn't matter because he knew he had done the right thing for them all.

"I ran into a soldier on the pilgrim's trail, loyal to Yudar," Jandu said. "He informed me that Lord Druv of Pagdesh and a contingent of his men are on their way here, right now, up the pilgrim's trail. He gave us some money and begged us to flee immediately."

The reaction couldn't have been greater if Jandu had set himself on fire.

All three of them jumped up in panic. Baram immediately drenched his cooking fire. Yudar opened the fence to let their cow wander free. They threw their belongings into two traveling chests. Baram carried the heavier chest himself, and Jandu and Yudar shared the burden of carrying the other.

"We can't risk the pilgrim's trail," Jandu repeated. The loose horse would summon Druv's entourage, but hopefully nightfall would slow them.

"We can try the valley," Yudar said. They all walked to the precipice that had formed the farthest limit of their property for two years. It was a sheer drop down over a hundred feet into the valley.

"No way," Baram said, shaking his head.

"There may be an easier route further south," Yudar said.

They walked along the ridge until they came across a less treacherous decline into the valley. But it was still steep and Jandu and Yudar stumbled frequently as they struggled with the chest.

"We have enough money to buy a horse and cart when we get to the village on the other side," Jandu said.

"If we survive this short cut," Baram grumbled. He slipped on the loose rocks but regained his balance, and then shouldered the chest and held out his hand for Suraya.

The path grew steeper towards the bottom of the valley, the palms and champak trees so thick along the slopes that they could barely make out their direction.

Suraya, breathless, flushed with exertion, hurried ahead. And then suddenly she tripped on an exposed root. She flew in the air, crashing on her face and extended belly, sliding down the hill headfirst until a large root stopped her slide.

“Suraya!” Baram dropped their chest of armor and ran to her side.

Suraya didn’t get up. Yudar and Jandu dropped their chest as well, running to her aid.

Suraya moaned. They turned her over to see what seemed like an impossible amount of blood coming from between her legs. She was completely white.

“No!” Baram began to cry as he stroked her face. Suraya writhed and convulsed. The last of the sun slipped behind the thickening clouds, and soon they were engulfed in shadow, the cries of the macaques reaching a hysterical screech.

Suraya cried out to her mother for help. Jandu helplessly groped in the darkness, feeling nothing but blood, until his hands suddenly closed on the deathly still body that emerged from between Suraya’s legs.

CHAPTER 27

TAREK'S TRIUMPHANT RETURN TO PRASTA WAS HERALDED with a celebration in the streets held in his honor, followed by a grand feast in the palace.

But all of this paled in comparison to the joy and love Tarek saw in Darvad's eyes. Darvad greeted Tarek at the gates of the city himself, leaping from his chariot to hug Tarek.

"Don't," Tarek cautioned, although he wanted nothing more than to hold his friend closer. "I'm filthy with travel and I smell terrible."

"I don't mind," Darvad said with a smile. He patted dust off of Tarek's breastplate. "You look like victory."

Darvad tailed Tarek through the palace and into Tarek's private suites as Tarek bathed and shaved, desperate for every detail of Tarek's most recent campaign.

Tarek had just led another show of force, this time in the small, feisty state of Bandari, where a group of Triya noblemen unfairly taxed the merchants and farmers well beyond the limitations established by King Darvad. Unlike previous confrontations, this one amounted to an exchange of forces. Darvad's own men, fighting alongside Dragewan's army, quickly quashed Bandari's rebellion.

After Tarek cleaned up, he wanted nothing more than to lie in his bed and sleep for a straight day. Months of travel and endless hours in chariots racked his body with aches and made him yearn for the comfort of the palace.

But Darvad had other plans. As Tarek wiped his face of soap and prepared to change, Darvad gripped Tarek's arm affectionately. There was a mischievous glint in Darvad's eyes.

“Wait a moment. Don’t change into your nice clothes yet.”

“Why?”

“Let’s do something fun.”

Tarek swallowed. “What?”

“I want to enjoy myself in Prasta.”

“Doing what?”

“You’ll see.” Tarek saw laughter lines on Darvad’s face that he hadn’t noticed before. Darvad’s demeanor had changed in the Parans’ absence. Without the need to compete for superiority or attention, Darvad was a kinder, happier man. His spirit lifted in their absence; he seemed younger, lighter, and there was a spring in his step as he left Tarek’s rooms and returned with an armful of plain cotton clothes.

“Put these on,” Darvad said. He had his own bundle of cotton garments that he plopped on the bed. He undid the jewelry on his arms.

Tarek narrowed his eyes. “What are we doing?”

Darvad grinned. “We’re pretending to be merchants.”

“Oh?”

Darvad took off his necklace. “We’re going to anonymously explore the city and see what trouble we can find.”

Tarek’s lips twitched into a smile. He studied the cheap cotton cloth in his hands. “You know, pretending to be lower caste isn’t as thrilling to me as it probably is to you.”

Darvad laughed. “That’s true. But do it for me anyway. It will be fun. We can hand out money and be anonymous saviors to the people.”

“Anonymous saviors would never wear these clothes,” Tarek grumbled under his breath. Nevertheless, he put on the loose cotton blue vest that Darvad had given him.

Tarek tried not to stare as Darvad removed his fine white silk trousers. Tarek worked hard to cleanse his mind of unnatural, lustful thoughts. But they all came back as Darvad stood naked before him. Tarek had never seen his best friend without trousers on, and now that he saw the tightness of his

back side, the firmness of his muscles, and how his legs tapered to his dark pubic hair, Tarek's skin prickled with desire.

Darvad tied on a black *dejaru*. Tarek quickly pulled on his borrowed dark trousers, worried that Darvad might catch a glimpse of Tarek's arousal.

Darvad giggled like a school boy as they completed their outfits with old shoes and dusty turbans. Tarek felt dirty and exhilarated. Dressing down was fun with Darvad by his side. They left the palace through the servant's corridor. Darvad smelled nice. Even in dark cotton, he looked powerful and attractive.

Tarek had spent most of his life walking through squalor in cheap clothes, anonymous, and unnoticed. But Darvad hadn't. His smile beamed as they made their way past fruit vendors and the meat market, and through the temple district, attracting no more attention than any other pair of raggedly dressed men in the streets.

But unlike the rest of the men wandering that sunny afternoon, Darvad and Tarek were on a mercy mission. Every time they came across a beggar, Darvad's smile widened and he reached into his hidden purse to present the man or woman with gold coins. The looks on the recipient's faces lifted Tarek from any lingering exhaustion from his seemingly endless crusade. Life was beautiful when people were made that happy. Men and women would bow before Darvad, hold his hand, hug him. And he ate it up. Darvad seemed to glow from within, and the same generosity that Darvad had showed to Tarek the day they first met now melted Tarek's heart, made him remember why he had taken his vow to stand by this man's side forever, why he loved Darvad so intensely.

Darvad tossed money into the streets, he pretended to read people's palms, he bought food from street vendors and gave it out to children. That which he didn't give away he splurged on Tarek and himself. They stuffed themselves with the grubby riches of street dining, the food tantalizing with its spicy smells and hot sauces.

Tarek took pity on an ancient man vending large jugs of wine who looked as though his back was broken from years of hard labor. Tarek bought two jugs, one for Darvad and one for himself, and then gave the man ten times the asking price. The old man cried, telling Tarek that his generosity would save his family from starvation for the rest of the year.

Tarek and Darvad found a shady tree outside one of Prasta's smaller Shentari temples and they drank wine from the bottle, making up stories of the lives of each of the passersby.

By the time the two of them stumbled back to the palace, they were drunk and giddy with all the good wishes they had been blessed with. They noisily navigated the palace corridors, arms around each other as they sang a lewd song the street kids of Prasta had taught them that afternoon. The servants and guards of the palace eyed them suspiciously, but Tarek didn't care. He didn't care what anyone in the palace thought of them, sloppily wasted in each other's arms. It was as close to a dream coming true as Tarek ever had.

When they turned the corner from the servants' hall to the royal suites, they literally ran into Mazar, who nearly fell to the floor. He glared at them as they started laughing. Mazar took in their clothing and shook his head, disapprovingly.

"What are you two doing?" Mazar asked, disgust clear on his face.

Tarek shrugged. "Singing."

"Your clothes are stained," Mazar pointed out.

Darvad clucked his tongue. "Can't get anything past this guy, can we Tarek?"

Mazar shook his head again. "That is no way to speak to your teacher."

"You haven't taught me anything in ages," Darvad pointed out. His finger wavered in the air as he pointed, his eyes lidded with inebriation.

Mazar straightened. "Years after he completed his training, Jandu used to announce himself as 'Mazar's pupil, Jandu Paran' at every engagement he attended."

Darvad's joy seemed to be sucked from his body. He went rigid with insult. "Jandu better not be announcing himself anywhere right now." His expression turned cold. "He could find it leading to three more years of banishment."

"Nevertheless, the respect he shows for me as his former teacher has never waned, and yet yours has disappeared completely," Mazar complained. He shook his head at his former pupil. "Your manners are deplorable."

"I respect people who help me now," Darvad said. He smiled at Tarek. "Tarek's loyalty to me has never wavered. You, on the other hand, can't sit through a meal at my table without mentioning those traitors to my face." Darvad's lip curled up, ugly and threatening. "You need a lesson in manners as much as I."

Mazar looked poised to speak further, but Darvad grabbed Tarek's hand and dragged him forward. "Let's go." Tarek allowed Darvad to lead him to his own suites.

That evening, Darvad held a private dinner for Tarek and invited his close allies within the palace. Tarek did not know these men; these were new friends of the king, people who Tarek had only been introduced to once or twice in the past. Druv was in Pagdesh, personally investigating a rumor of the Parans' location, Firdaus was home in Chandamar, and Iyestar attended another function that evening. And while Tarek never really enjoyed sharing Darvad's company with the other lords, at least he knew them and what to expect. This was an uncomfortable gathering, brash young diplomats who praised Darvad lavishly and pandered to his sense of humor. Tarek wondered how Darvad could not see through their slick ruse of false companionship. Then he realized that, even if he did see, Darvad had few choices.

Darvad summoned dancing girls once servants had cleared the food. Tarek sat beside him, his jealousy hidden. Darvad's new friends were brash men weary of tradition, men who loved drinking and women as much as Darvad did. There were some things that Tarek could not share with his

best friend, and, like so often with Darvad, Tarek felt lonely abandonment. He was a fool for loving a man who could never love him the same way in return.

Darvad laughed uproariously at the rude jokes his companions made, and they drank sweet grape wine as the musicians started another set and the scantily clad women dancers began their act.

Tarek drank. He watched the women undress more with each dance and he drank more. Darvad's expression glazed over as the women stripped, and he and his friends hooted loudly as the girls shook their wares provocatively in the front of the room. Tarek wished he had gone to sleep after their afternoon together. He didn't want to be sitting here, watching Darvad inelegantly lunge after the women who came within reaching distance.

It was deep into the night when the musicians finished playing. Darvad invited a few of them back to his private chambers for more drinks. Tarek knew he shouldn't go but did so anyway, too drunk to stop drinking, too lonely to be away from Darvad's side. In Darvad's rooms, Tarek sat with the other men and drank until his mind blanked of feeling, until everything around him swam, blurry and distorted.

The last of the other guests left and it was just Tarek and Darvad, and two of the dancing girls. One of them sat on Darvad's lap and kissed him. Tarek watched Darvad's long finger snake along the girl's collar bone, inching closer to her breast. The other girl sat next to Tarek, trying to strike up a conversation.

Tarek ignored her. He kept his eyes on Darvad, who deepened his kiss with the dancer. He wore no shirt and so Tarek could see all the muscles in Darvad's stomach and back shift and tighten as he brought the girl into his embrace. He watched Darvad's hips moved towards her, watched his eyes glaze with arousal, watched him fondle her breasts.

"I'm going to bed," Tarek announced to no one in particular. Darvad and his girl didn't notice. Tarek stumbled as he stood,

his body spinning with drunkenness. The girl beside him offered to accompany him to his room, but he refused.

"I prefer sleeping alone," he said to her. She looked hurt, but Tarek didn't care. He took one last look at Darvad kissing the dancer, and then headed down the hall to his guest chambers for the night.

Tarek's body raged with unspent desire. He felt like an arrow nocked into place—a breath of wind would set him loose, send him in a destructive path, flying with speed and anger. Tarek quivered with frustration as he made his way towards his rooms.

He heard footsteps coming around the corner and tensed. It was far too late for any of the older courtiers to be up, and the hallway only served Darvad's personal chambers and the guest chambers that Tarek stayed in when in Prasta. That meant the person could be coming to see him, and he was in no mood to talk to anyone.

Tarek rounded the corner and saw Anant.

The young commander bowed respectfully and held out a scroll. He breathed heavily, apparently having rushed through the palace to pass on the urgent message. Tarek recognized the scroll seal as that of his chief minister. He stared at the seal with vague curiosity.

But he was more interested in the pink blush that washed over the commander's face as he stood before Tarek.

Tarek reached out and grabbed Anant by his armor. He dragged him into his bedroom. Anant cried out in surprise. Tarek shut the door and locked it.

Anant stuttered. "My lord, I..."

Tarek pushed Anant against the wall with all his strength and kissed him, hard. All the heated lust, the jealousy, it poured from Tarek's mouth into Anant's. His tongue darted inside Anant's hot mouth, to the back of his throat, to the soft, hot space deep within him.

Anant went very still.

Tarek, blind with sexual hunger, let his hands run over Anant's body. He breathed quickly and deeply, taking in Anant's strong masculine scent, a musky sweetness mixed with dirt and sweat. Tarek fumbled with Anant's waist sash.

Tarek was afraid to look at Anant's face, because he didn't want to ask permission to do this. He had to fuck someone, right now, and if he saw fear or rejection in Anant's eyes, he wasn't sure he could stop himself from continuing. At last, however, he looked up and his gaze met with Anant's. Tarek couldn't read the expression in Anant's glare. Was it fear?

Tarek froze. What would Anant do? Run? Punch him? Tarek suddenly wished he would. He wanted Anant to understand how he was being used, a replacement for another, and he wanted Anant to beat him senseless.

But Anant leaned forward and kissed Tarek instead. Tarek responded with strength. He undid Anant's dejaru as they kissed, running his fingers over Anant's thighs, reaching between them to the warm, musky center of him.

Tarek closed his eyes. He thought of Darvad, the way his chest flexed and moved as he held the dancing girl. He visualized Darvad's light flesh, the intensity of his brown eyes, his rich brown hair.

Tarek grabbed Anant's shoulders and turned him around, pushing him against the wall. He brusquely kned Anant's legs apart, holding him pinned.

Anant's breathing was quick and irregular. A tremor ran through Anant's shoulders and legs. He put his palms against the wall to support himself.

Tarek untied his dejaru and spat on his hand, rubbing himself before pushing into Anant. Tarek made love to him with closed eyes, hearing Darvad laugh huskily in the other room, visualizing Darvad's large hands. Tarek imagined his own hands resting on Darvad's hips, imagined that the pliant

flesh he pushed into was Darvad's flesh, the cries Darvad's cries.

Tarek shuddered and came quietly, gritting his teeth against the carnal yell in his throat. He pulled from Anant and realized, guiltily, that Anant had no part to play in Tarek's thoughts. Anant faced the wall, panting heavily, unmoving.

Flush with guilt and sexual release, Tarek spun Anant around and then knelt. He brought Anant to climax with his mouth, quickly and uncontrollably, a quiet moan of surprise escaping Anant's lips, as if this was his first time, as if he never knew this could be done to his body. Anant pushed himself deeper and then came hotly down Tarek's throat.

Tarek stood and dressed himself. He forced himself to look Anant in the eye. "Thank you."

Anant seemed unable to speak, unable to breathe.

Tarek finished tying his dejaru and stepped towards the door.

Anant followed Tarek with his eyes but made no move to follow.

"You should dress now," Tarek said.

Anant's neck and face flushed bright red. He nervously retied his dejaru, his eyes firmly locked on the carpet.

"I'm sorry, my lord." Anant couldn't tie his sash. His hands shook. "I'm sorry."

Tarek watched the young man fumble nervously in front of him, and again guilt flooded his mind. He fucked Anant and thought of Darvad. It was wrong. Compassion inspired Tarek to walk over and tie Anant's sash for him.

"There." He straightened Anant's sash, and when Tarek looked up, he saw infatuation in Anant's eyes. A slick horror crept through Tarek's senses. Anant stared at Tarek like he would jump in front of a chariot for him.

Tarek backed away. "You have something for me?"

Anant frowned, not understanding.

"The scroll?"

“Oh!” Anant nervously reached down to retrieve the scroll from where he had dropped it. He handed it to Tarek. “I’m sorry, my lord.”

Tarek took the scroll and walked away. One of his ministers who oversaw a network of legal informants reported that Lord Kadal had broken the new laws, executing commoners for minor infractions. The news filled Tarek with anger. Kadal had smiled when he promised he would respect Tarek as Royal Judge. He had patted Tarek on the shoulder. And less than a year later, he had broken his oath and gone back on his promises.

Tarek felt revived as if someone had splashed ice water into his face. The troubles of his heart could be set aside. He had more important matters to address right now.

Tarek looked up, surprised to see Anant still standing there, sheepishly staring at the floor.

“What?” Tarek barked, colder than he intended.

Anant swallowed. “The minister asked me to wait for a reply.” He sounded deflated.

Tarek rubbed his temple. The way Anant looked at him was why Tarek had long ago made a rule never to screw people he knew. Things got complicated. He could already see the brewing storm of emotions in Anant’s eyes, the love, hurt, and hope flashing like lightning. It made Tarek sick to his stomach to realize he was the cause.

Tarek shook his head. He didn’t have time to worry about Anant’s feelings right now. He handed the scroll back to the commander.

“Tell the minister and my general to prepare the army. I will be there shortly.”

Anant bowed. “Yes, my lord.”

Tarek watched Anant hesitate at the door. He was so transparent, this man. He stood waiting for a kind word, some confirmation of feelings, some hope of a reprieve.

“Go now,” Tarek commanded. He couldn’t coddle warriors.

Anant flushed again and bowed lower. "Yes, my lord." He hurried from the room.

Tarek stretched, crackled his knuckles, and then marched back down the hall to Darvad's chamber. He knocked on the door loudly.

"What?" Darvad sounded irritated. Tarek heard the dancing girl giggle quietly.

Tarek cleared his throat. "It's me."

Tarek listened as Darvad whispered something to the girl and padded across the room. The door opened slightly. Darvad popped his head out, his bright green dejaru held closed around his waist.

"What's happened?" Darvad asked.

Tarek stared at Darvad's partial nudity, took in the smell of sex on him. He felt his body stir. "War," he told Darvad. "I need you."

Darvad stepped out into the hall and shut the door behind him. A slow smile spread across his face, lighting him up from within, his face glowing, truthful, beautiful.

"You have me." Darvad put his arm around Tarek's shoulder. Tarek filled him in.

CHAPTER 28

THEIR FIRST MEAL AFTER CREMATING THE BABY WAS THE MOST depressing Jandu had ever experienced. His family stared at the flames of their camp fire in silence. The last fire they had lit had burned the tiny body of Suraya's dead child.

Jandu pushed his food aside. He had no hunger, just a vague sickness, and a disbelief that he could feel any lower.

"Does anyone want more tea?"

Suraya spoke quietly, as if nervous about disturbing the silence. No one answered her. They sat together around the fire, although the heat was sweltering and the clammy sky pushed their sweat-soaked clothes against their skin. A roar of thunder echoed overhead. The sky brimmed with moisture.

But the darkness disturbed him, and Jandu turned to the fire gratefully. His body ached from their desperate scurry down the mountain. He and Yudar had carried Suraya most of the way, on a makeshift palanquin of branches and a zahari, until they reached a small farming community where they traded Jandu's stolen gold for a horse and cart. Grief accompanied them down the mountain like a physical presence, breathing on their necks, tearing at their hearts.

"I'll have more tea then," Suraya said under her breath, as if to herself. Jandu looked at his siblings, saw that no one had touched their dinner.

Baram hadn't said a word since his son was born dead. All day Baram had walked ahead of the rest of them, slashing at undergrowth that grew overnight to block the worn pathways south. Now he stared into the flames blindly, his shoulders tense.

He had scratches on the backs of his hands and blisters on his palms. He seemed bent on destroying the forest root by root to express his anguish.

Suraya looked terrible—her skin pale with dark circles under her eyes. She could only stand for a couple minutes at a time. She held her breasts and winced in pain as her milk dried up.

But as they had moved out of the mountain jungle and reached the plains of Pagdesh, Suraya pushed them all forward, assuring them she was fine, her eyes unwavering towards Afadi.

In silence, they extinguished their fire and made camp near a rocky outcropping that had a series of natural shelters, protected from the elements by a tremendous jut of stone. Baram and Yudar found places to sleep under the rock, and Jandu huddled with Suraya in a smaller cave-like shelter that had a soft bed of moss. It wasn't large, but it was dry.

"Are you all right?" Jandu whispered.

"I will be." Suraya leaned her head against Jandu's shoulder. She was quiet for a moment, and then spoke softly. "The baby was part of our years on the mountain. I need to leave him, and all that darkness, behind."

Jandu kissed the top of Suraya's head. "You are very brave," he said. "Braver than me even."

"I don't have much of a choice, do I? What I've lost..." Suraya squeezed Jandu's arm. "No. I'm not going to talk about it anymore. What's happened has happened. There was nothing to be done for it."

Jandu watched the rain fall in sheets, the water reflecting the half moon to make thousands of glinting droplets in the sultry darkness. "I failed you."

Suraya stared at Jandu. "What are you talking about?"

Jandu swallowed. "I wish I could have protected you." He turned and gripped Suraya's shoulders. "Will you forgive me?"

Suraya leaned in and kissed Jandu on the lips. Jandu stiffened, but he realized it was meant to be friendly.

“You did everything you could to help me,” Suraya said with force. “So let’s look forward.”

“To Afadi,” Jandu said, smiling.

Suraya smiled back. “Afadi.”

Jandu hesitated. “And Baram?”

Suraya watched the brilliant flicker of rain. “I have no idea what I can say to make him feel better. I think he blames me.”

“He blames himself.”

Suraya sighed.

“Just talk to him,” Jandu said.

“And say what?”

Jandu shrugged. “I don’t know. If I were you, I’d just hit him about the face for a while and call him a fool, and when he finally starts crying like a baby, then you can forgive him and pull out your womanly charms.”

“Oh?” Suraya laughed. “So hit him in the face, then pull out my charms.”

Jandu flashed her a grin. “That’s my girl.”

Suraya shook her head. “I don’t think it will work.”

“If you want, I can hit him for a while. When we were kids, I used to smack him under the chin and make him bite his tongue. Even though he was bigger and stronger than me, I could make him cry. He hated it, but he would fall for it *every* time.” Jandu laughed quietly, remembering. “Those were good times,” he mused to himself.

“There will be more good times ahead,” Suraya whispered back. She closed her eyes and leaned against Jandu to sleep.

“Yes, there will be.” Jandu stroked her head. “I promise.”

But not for me, Jandu thought to himself, realizing that his year as a woman would have to begin.

As Suraya fell asleep against him, Jandu’s arm around her shoulder, he looked at her body and steadied his resolve. He could do this. It was only for a year. A woman’s body wouldn’t be that bad. He looked at her breasts, her hips, the way her bones protruded below her neck, the smallness of her feet. He had no choice.

Jandu slowly extricated himself from Suraya's sleepy grasp and found himself a secluded spot in the tall grass to give his penis five minutes of a fond farewell.

"Take care, fella," he told it. He knelt down in the rain and prayed to Mendraz as the Yashva king had instructed, and asked for his year of Umia's curse to begin. Then he went back to his camp and fell asleep. Jandu had hoped that, as soon as he made the request for the curse to kick in, he would wake up that morning and find he was a woman.

He was wrong.

"Of course," he said to himself, scowling under his blanket at his still-present penis. "That would be too easy."

Instead, as they made their way towards Afadi, Jandu had to watch as he gradually shifted gender.

This was not the only change. Every step they took away from the mountains exorcised a little more of the grief that haunted them. Baram no longer walked by himself, instead staying by Suraya's side. Suraya regained her health—Druv's gold ensured them enough food now—and Yudar took pride in leading their cart and horse. Baram spoke gruffly at first, demanding help or asking someone where something was. There was a shadow across his eyes, a grief that Jandu realized he would never be rid of. But Baram was Baram, and he rallied along with the rest of them. He and Suraya sat together, sharing quiet words, and Jandu wondered to himself what had happened between them to make them so comfortable together again.

As they traveled, Zandi got heavier. And then one morning, Jandu couldn't string her. He looked at his arms as if for the first time, and realized they were much thinner. The change over the week had been so gradual he hadn't noticed. But now he saw his biceps were as thin as Suraya's, and his arms had svelte, tiny wrists. The scars on his arms from the bowstring were still visible, but they were thin and faint, barely detectible under strangely soft skin.

Jandu burned with the bitterness of not being able to shoot her anymore. When he whispered the words to change her into a flute, he felt emasculated.

And he was shrinking, too. He kept tripping over his own feet, which changed shape in the night. He lost eight inches. The world grew around him.

Jandu's transmogrification was just the kind of thing the rest of his family needed to take their minds off Suraya's miscarriage. Baram needled Jandu, providing daily commentary on his appearance. He gleefully measured Jandu's shrinking torso against his own, and laughed for the first time since they left the mountain when he realized Jandu only came up to his chest. It seemed the only way Jandu's family could cope with the long, tiring journey through the rain was through mockery. And they were relentless.

Jandu's changes accelerated, growing more painful each day. His body ached constantly, and his muscles shook from exertion, even after he had been sleeping. Everything about him was sore, as if fevered—his jaw, his fingers, his pelvis. He had let his hair grow out ever since Druv discovered them, but now it lengthened faster, furiously making up time, until it hung down past his shoulders, forming shining, straight locks. His eyelashes grew. The hairs on his arms thinned, and his chest hair fell out. And, more painfully, his bones changed as his hips protruded, his shoulders thinned, his jaw line shifted.

And if this wasn't bad enough, the worse changes were yet to come. Jandu followed his family through forests and along rivers and down muddy streets, and tried not to complain, but there were terribly uncomfortable sensations pulsing from his groin, and with horror he realized his chest hurt like hell because he was developing breasts.

On the outskirts of the State of Karuna, they stopped a mile or so off the main trail for the evening. Baram immediately started a fire and Yudar went with Suraya to gather water from

a nearby stream to start dinner. Jandu sullenly went off to care for the horse. He tied her to a tree and brushed her down, giving her water and hay for the night.

Around the fire, he ate rice and curds in silent fatigue. Jandu hadn't spoken a single word all day. His body ached so badly he wanted to lay down and die. There was a sharp, chronic throb at his groin, but he didn't dare look to see what was going on down there. He sipped weak tea and crossed his arms over his soft, bulging nipples, hoping no one would notice his latest development.

But of course Baram never missed anything. He was oiling the horse's harness at the fire, when he saw Jandu sulking. He smirked.

"Lift your arms up, Jandu," Baram said.

"No." Jandu curled his arms tighter around himself. He blushed as Suraya smiled at him. Her spirits had lifted since Baram started talking again.

"Oh come on, Jandu, don't be shy," Suraya teased.

"I hate you all." The second Jandu said the words, his eyes grew wide and he covered his mouth.

All three of them burst out laughing. His voice had changed. It had risen suddenly, gotten high and girly. It wasn't him at all.

"Fuck!" he cried out, sounding like a sixteen year-old girl.

Yudar had tears in his eyes. "No wonder you haven't said a word all day!"

"It would have been easier to have just screwed that demon, you know," Baram said. He slapped Jandu on the back.

Jandu flew forward, almost falling in the fire. He glared at Baram, thinking he had been unusually harsh. Then Jandu realized he himself was just unusually weak. He couldn't sit through Baram's affectionate swings anymore.

Jandu promptly walked away from his family. He found a secluded spot behind some bushes and urinated. He had purposely avoided looking at his penis during this transformation,

but now, in the fading evening light, he saw that his penis was almost gone. It looked pitiful and childlike. His testicles had shrunk as well, dwarfed by his thighs. It was the worst thing that could happen to him. He bit back a cry of horror, but he couldn't stop tears forming at the corners of his eyes.

Jandu looked around to make sure none of his family was around, and then he hastily touched himself, hoping the shrinkage was an illusion, maybe he could coax his cock back to its former grandeur. But this was worse. Fully erect, it remained a stub of what he once had. He measured it against his palm. Panic flooded his mind.

Jandu quickly retied his *dejaru* and sank to his knees, breathing heavily. He was ashamed, both of his body and of his own behavior. How could he be reacting so badly to something that was, in many ways, insignificant? Suraya had lost a child, and she acted stronger than he. But Jandu's whole body shook with anxiety. What if his penis never came back? What if he remained a woman forever?

Jandu tried to calm himself by noting that at least Keshan could still love him. After all, Keshan claimed to love both men and women. Maybe he wouldn't mind Jandu's strange new body. But this was cold comfort to a man who was staunchly proud of being a man, who had loved his body, and the bodies of other men. Losing his penis was like losing his mind. Worse even.

"What's wrong with you?"

Jandu jerked his head up and saw Baram looking down at him. Jandu was on his knees, his face in his hands.

"Are you all right?" Baram asked, more quietly.

Jandu accepted Baram's outstretched hand and stood up. He brushed the soil from the knees of his trousers and looked away. He knew his face burned red with his embarrassment, but he didn't want to talk about it with anyone.

Baram tried to lighten the mood by running his hand along Jandu's long black hair. "Hey, at least you're turning into a beauty."

“God!” Jandu buried his face in his hands and began sobbing.

Baram’s smile disappeared. “Oh, shit. Jandu, I’m sorry.”

“Fuck off!” Jandu walked away, wiping his eyes, desperate to hide.

But there was nowhere to go. Darkness sank down from the sky and the world seemed sinister. Jandu sat by himself in the darkness, letting his grief mingle with the aches in his body, until he grew cold.

His brothers and Suraya were very quiet when he returned to the camp fire. Jandu despised the pity he saw in their eyes. He wanted nothing more than to go through this horrible transformation alone, but here they all were, constant witnesses to his humiliation. Suraya silently handed him a cup of tea, and Jandu curled in on himself, his eyes downcast. He worried he’d start crying again.

“So how are we going to disguise ourselves once we’re in Lord Indarel’s palace?” Suraya asked. She stretched upwards as she yawned, trying to act casual as she directed attention away from Jandu.

“We should make up new identities,” Yudar said. “Now is your chance to be that someone you’ve always wanted to be.”

“I’m going to call myself Azari,” Suraya said. She smiled. “I’ve always loved that name.”

Yudar smiled at her. “Oh? And what will you tell the lord?”

“I shall tell him that I was a handmaiden to Princess Suraya, back in Prasta.”

“You’re too pretty to be a handmaiden,” Yudar said.

“I had pretty handmaidens in Prasta,” Suraya said. “Remember Ami? And Kera? She was gorgeous.”

“I never saw them,” Yudar said. He looked into Suraya’s eyes. “Every other woman seemed plain to me once I met you.”

Baram poked at the fire with a stick.

“What about you, Yudar?” Suraya asked. “What will your name be?”

Yudar shrugged. "I'll go by the name Esalas."

"Esalas?" Baram raised an eyebrow. "Wasn't he the kid that used to come around and sell us toys in Prasta?"

Yudar nodded.

"I remember him," Baram said. "He once sold you a set of dice that were painted, not carved. Remember? The numbers rubbed off the first week you had them."

Yudar smiled. "He was smart."

"He was a con," Baram said.

"I liked him," Yudar said. "So I'll name myself Esalas. Maybe I can offer my services as a dice instructor."

Jandu's stomach churned, but he didn't say anything. He hated the idea of Yudar near dice. But he had to remind himself that Yudar played dice his entire life and had never gotten them in trouble until the match with Darvad. And he wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

Yudar's voice was very soft as he spoke. "Since Jandu will be a woman, then perhaps you should be my wife, Suraya. Your year with Jandu is almost over anyway."

Jandu watched Baram for a reaction. Baram shredded his banana leaf plate silently.

"Who will you be, Baram?" Suraya asked. Jandu saw her pleading with him.

"I don't know," he snapped.

"Maybe you could cook?" Suraya suggested. "It's something you enjoy doing."

"And you're good at it," Yudar added.

They all were trying so hard, Jandu realized. It was pitiful.

Baram sighed. "Okay, then I'll be Bodan, the cook."

"Can't get beyond 'B', huh?" Jandu said. He winced at the high pitch of his voice. He looked around the fire, daring his family to comment, but Yudar only asked what name Jandu preferred to use.

"Who cares?" Jandu took out his knife and worked on smoothing an arrow shaft.

Baram smirked. "Your name will be Janali."

Jandu shook his head. "That's an ugly name."

"Well, you're going to be an ugly girl," Baram said. "Janali sounds like a girl version of Jandu."

"So do a lot of names," Jandu said.

"Janali sounds exotic." Baram touched Jandu's shoulder softly. "I could love a woman named Janali."

Jandu shrugged off Baram's hand and his laughter. He stabbed the sharpened end of the stick he just whittled into the earth over and over, as if this would somehow prove his manliness. He realized this was just the beginning of the humiliation yet to come.

"God," he said, impaling soil, "I'm really, really going to hate Afadi."



By morning, Jandu realized he could not get out from under his blanket without causing a ruckus. He wrapped his harafa around him tightly and quietly shook Suraya awake. He whispered in her ear that he needed to borrow a zahari, or at least a zahari top.

And by the end of the week, his penis was gone, replaced by strange folds of skin that looked alien to him, scary and unfamiliar. By the time they crossed the Patari River and entered the State of Afadi, it was all over. Jandu was a woman. He looked, smelled, and talked like a tiny young lady, with large blue eyes and curling black lashes.

Afadi was drier than Jandu had imagined, and as they made their way towards the city, Jandu noticed that the surrounding pastureland seemed desiccated, even in the midst of the monsoon season. The older parts of town nestled closely with the tiled domes of the palace inside the thick white walls of the city, but newer residences popped from the earth like brown mushrooms along the river banks.

The rest of the state was filled with hundreds of herds of prized Afadi cattle. The cows were beautifully adorned, their

horns painted red, bells and tassels hung around their necks. The cattle were the state's greatest wealth, coveted throughout Marhavad as the finest dairy-producing stock and sought after for their hardy natures. Jandu and his brothers made their way through endless herds of cattle, winding their way along well-trod paths towards the trailing line of the city.

At the river's edge, there was a large gated mansion, and a small cemetery down the road. Yudar stopped their horse and unfolded the large deerskin he had been saving for this moment.

"We should hide our weapons here."

Baram and Yudar took off their swords and placed them in the deerskin along with their armor, shields, spears, knives, and other weapons. Jandu reluctantly contributed his inexhaustible quiver after Yudar informed him that he could not just pretend it was a lady's handbag. At least he was able to keep Zandi with him. Still, anxiety tore at Jandu when Suraya sewed the deerskin shut.

In the ancient Afadi tradition, someone had hung a corpse on one of the Sami trees surrounding the cemetery. The smell was unbelievably foul. Baram grimaced as he hefted the heavy leather bag over his shoulder and climbed the tree. He placed the bag between two strong branches that wouldn't break, and made sure it was sheltered enough so that rain would not penetrate it.

"If someone can get past that stench to get my armor, they deserve to keep it," Baram cried.

At the city gates, Baram and Jandu waited with the horse and cart while Suraya and Yudar made their way to Lord Indarel Lokesh's palace. After the lord accepted their offers of service as a hand-maiden and dice teacher, Yudar sent a messenger to his "sister" Janali and "cousin" Bodan, and Jandu and Baram entered the palace a day later.

Jandu hooked his arm in his towering older brother's, and took a deep breath to steady his resolve.

THE ARCHER'S HEART

“Let’s hope Keshan taught me enough on the flute to be passable as a music teacher,” Jandu said.

Baram reached down and pinched Jandu’s cheek fondly. “I’m sure they’ll hire you, even if you can’t play a note. You’re so cute, Indarel will want to eat you.”

Jandu narrowed his eyes.

Baram led the way through the gate. “But you are still my little sister, so I’ll be there to protect you.”

“You’re enjoying this too much,” Jandu mumbled.

“I’m just trying to make light of a dark situation,” Baram said.

“Yeah, well, I get my muscles back in one year, fucker. Don’t forget it.”

CHAPTER 29

TAREK SURVEYED THE CARNAGE OF THE BATTLEFIELD.

Corpses lay scattered across the barren Marshav plain like giant leaves, their bodies puffing in the monsoon heat, the smell overpowering the sweetness from the blooming camphor.

Over five hundred men from Marshav died after their failed attempt to rebel against King Darvad. Darvad and Tarek had arrived two days earlier, heavily armed and accompanied by both Dragewan and royal soldiers. The battle had been bloody and quick, Marshav's unskilled army no match for Dragewan's well-trained military. Tarek and Darvad fought in chariots along with Darvad's general and three other commanders, cutting large swathes of dead as they galloped the muddy fields surrounding the city. Tarek's arrows rarely missed. Inspired by his performance, Dragewan's archers led the attack, killing half of the insurgents before the foot soldiers even had a chance to enter the melee.

Tarek's blood sang with the battle.

The only disappointment came in the fact that they had not captured Lord Kadal himself, since Kadal had fled once the battle turned to favor the King. Darvad's spies reported seeing him flee to the State of Jezza, where Lord Sahdin was a close ally.

Tarek had never before fought beside Darvad, and the experience was glorious. If Tarek ever had any doubt about who he was, what he was made for, it was gone now. He was meant to fight, beside Darvad. The two of them worked like an expert team of horses, understanding each other's intent as

they led charges against the rebels. Darvad's general oversaw the dirty task of cleaning up the mess, allowing Tarek time to relax and revel in his high spirits.

Tarek and Darvad were now bound together by friendship and by war. They retold their triumphs, vibrating with pride, each thrust and fired arrow recounted in grand detail.

Drunk with victory, Darvad quickly decided to lead the victorious army north into Jezza itself. They would hunt down Kadal, and punish Jezza for harboring a traitor to the throne. Tarek eagerly embraced the idea, looking forward to another opportunity to trounce Lord Sahdin for his insults years ago.

That evening, Tarek and Darvad played dice and drank wine in Darvad's tent. A gentle hum radiated through Tarek's bones. He realized it was pure, unadulterated happiness. They sat around the board, moving game pieces and reliving their recent exploits, when Darvad grew unusually quiet.

"What are you thinking about?" Tarek asked. He sipped his wine slowly, not wanting to get too drunk too fast. He realized he enjoyed the pleasures of wine too much these days.

"There's another reason I think this invasion is a good idea," Darvad said.

"Oh?" Tarek didn't need any more reasons. Fighting beside Darvad was enough.

Darvad's eyes had a wet sheen. "Do you remember Sahdin's daughter Aisa?"

Tarek frowned. "I don't think so. Have I met her?"

"She came to Mazar's birthday party with her father." Darvad's expression turned dreamy. "Tarek, you have not seen beauty until you have seen Aisa. She is like liquid fire. Her skin glows, she has large doe eyes, and her bosom..." Darvad sucked air through his teeth.

Tarek rolled his dice. He moved his piece across the board.

"I want her," Darvad stated. "I want her as my prize."

"The women should not be harmed in the invasion," Tarek said stiffly. "I don't want that kind of war."

Darvad threw down his dice. “I’m not going to just rape her,” he spat. “Good lord, Tarek. This girl means a lot to me. I’ve fantasized about her for years.” Darvad studied his dice, and growled as he threw them back in his cup with disgust.

“Are you going to marry her?” Tarek asked incredulously.

Darvad shrugged. “Why not? It is the traditional Triya way to find a bride. Invade and carry her off.” He poured them both more wine. “It will honor her. She will be Queen of Marhavad. It is a position all women of Marhavad crave.”

Tarek studied the palms of his hands to cool his furious heart. Jealousy, white hot and piercing, twisted in his throat and lungs. It wasn’t as though Tarek never imagined his love would be tried like this some day. But he didn’t want to deal with it now. Not now. Not when his own happiness seemed so fragile.

“So,” Darvad said, obviously noticing Tarek’s icy silence, “can I rely on your help to keep the men away from her until I can claim her?”

“I will do what I can,” Tarek said. He threw down his dice, and won the game. Darvad shook his head in disgust, but Tarek felt no victory that evening.



The following morning, as Darvad prepared to move the army, Tarek made rounds among his men, speaking with the commanders of each unit. Tarek felt the power he held as lord as if for the first time. To these men, he was no longer just a ruler forced upon them by the will of mighty Prasta, or the Royal Judge. He was a hero. They watched him walk through their ranks and they bowed low, pride burning in their eyes, their stances assured.

Tarek spoke quietly with his commanders, inquiring about the health of his men, their families. He never vented his anger or seemed anything other than assured in the company of his commanders. It was something he learned from his father, a master horseman who believed that quiet strength was more impressive and effective than rowdy bravado.

Tarek caught Anant's eye towards the end of the formation. Anant looked away hastily, and then ordered his men together to form a tighter rank. Tarek had only seen a glimpse of Anant's battle techniques in Marshav, but what he had seen was impressive. What Anant lacked in experience he made up for in sheer courage. Anant drove into the enemy as if heaven awaited him on the other side.

"Anant."

Tarek called him by his first name. This was not how he addressed his other commanders, but the strength in Anant's arms, the proud way he assembled his men, something about it made Tarek soft and amiable. He didn't smile at Anant, but he did bring his hands together in the sign of peace.

"Are your men ready?"

Anant nodded. "Of course, my lord. However I regret to report that we lost several spears in the battle. The men will replenish our supply, but it will take time."

Tarek smiled slightly. It was endearing, Anant's care for trifling things. A trait that both Tarek and Anant shared, having once lived with very little.

Tarek put his hand on Anant's shoulder. "You did very well. I'm proud of you."

Anant swallowed and looked down at his feet. Tarek watched, amused, as bright pink crept up Anant's neck.

"Tarek!"

Darvad strode towards him. The ranks of soldiers bowed low to their king, but Darvad didn't spare them a glance. He looked ready to murder someone.

"Bad news," Darvad said.

"What?"

Darvad looked down at Anant, who still stood rigid by Tarek's side. Darvad dismissed him without a second glance.

"A messenger has just arrived from Pagdesh. Druv is missing, presumed dead."

Tarek never really liked Druv, but the news came as a surprise. "What happened?"

The vein in Darvad's forehead pulsed with his anger. "It is unclear. The last he was heard from, he had strong evidence of the Parans' location and went to investigate himself. He had a pendant that had been brought to his attention and purchased from a poor herbalist in the rural mountain jungle. The pendant was worth a fortune, and had been crafted in Tiwari."

Tarek narrowed his eyes.

"He recognized it as Keshan Adaru's," Darvad continued, "and assumed that Keshan gave it to the Parans before their exile. He had direct evidence of their location. And now he is missing. Doesn't that sound suspicious?"

Tarek swallowed. "That is a leap of logic. The pendant could have been stolen, Darvad. It could have been a ruse. Yudar is not that stupid."

"Druv heard that a family moved to the mountain two years ago," Darvad said. "Three men and one woman. One of the men had blue eyes."

Tarek cursed under his breath. Why did the Parans have to appear now, when everything was going so well? Tarek could already see the glint of anger in Darvad's expression. Darvad's obsession over his half-brothers would always come between them.

"Send a messenger to Pagdesh," Tarek suggested. "Confirm these reports. There are so many suspicious rumors these days."

"No. I must go myself, and see if it's true. Not only to find the Parans, but to validate whether or not Druv is dead. He is one of my closest allies, and if he has been murdered then I promise to string up and hang whoever is responsible."

Disappointment flooded Tarek. "But we are on the verge of war, Darvad."

Darvad took off his diadem angrily and ran his hand through his hair. "I know. I know! But you must understand how important this is to me." Darvad replaced his diadem crookedly. Tarek fought the urge to straighten it for him.

“Look,” Darvad said, “If I lose to the Parans, I lose my entire kingdom. I must find them!”

“You lose half the kingdom,” Tarek corrected. “Remember, the kingdom will be split once the exile is over. You will still be a king.”

“No!” Darvad shouted. “Mazar never should have divided it. It is all mine!”

“What do you want me to do?” Tarek looked around him—at the chaos created under Darvad. Courtiers and soldiers and servants rushed around as last minute preparations were made to invade Jezza. “You want me to tell everyone to go home, come back later, we’ll attack Jezza when the King’s schedule clears up?” Tarek couldn’t hide the antagonism from his voice. “This is a bloody war! I can’t just stop it for a moment while you rush up the mountains to sniff out a rumor.”

Darvad looked shocked by Tarek’s words.

“I’m not asking you to postpone the war,” Darvad said. “Just to let me take care of this.”

Tarek pursed his lips. “So you will not join me.”

Darvad frowned. “No.”

“You will go chase after Druv’s dead body instead.”

“It could lead me to the Parans,” Darvad urged. “And he was too good of a friend to leave rotting without an investigation.”

“Fine. Go.” Tarek turned away from him.

“Tarek...” Darvad started.

“Leave,” Tarek said, his voice low. “You have made your priorities clear. Defending your new laws, your ‘New Marhavd’, is less important than tormenting the Parans.” And with that, he stormed to his tent.

Alone, Tarek realized his foolishness in speaking so brashly. Darvad was king, after all. Tarek had led several skirmishes on his own, without Darvad’s support, and had succeeded admirably. He did not need Darvad by his side. And he should have been pleased to see Darvad’s personal attention to the possible death of one of his allies.

But these thoughts didn't make him feel better. Fighting beside Darvad had been the pinnacle of his existence, the very definition of who he was. He had looked forward to it, and once again, the prospect of hunting the Parans had dashed his hopes.

"My lord!"

"What is it?" Tarek growled. He looked up to see his personal servant Laiu. He held a scroll in his hand.

"A message from your household in Dragewan, my lord," Laiu said. "Your attendants have asked that I wait for a return message."

Tarek rubbed his eyes. He couldn't handle any pressing matters in his own state right now. He grabbed the scroll with unnecessary force. As he read the message, he felt the blood drain from his face and his knees go weak in shock.

His father was dead.

All these months on the road, all these precious hours wasted running around the kingdom, and Tarek had all but abandoned his sick father back in Dragewan. Now his father had died, all alone, in a strange city with no one by his bedside.

"God." Tarek knelt down. "God!" He brought his hands together to pray. Grief flooded him.

Laiu waited beside him silently.

Tarek had to pull himself together. He wiped his eyes and stood again, although he still felt weak in the legs.

"Tell them..." Tarek swallowed. Tell them what? His father was gone. He couldn't pass on any messages to the one who wanted them most. And now, with the war, he would not even be able to attend his father's funeral pyre. "Tell them to cremate him in the honorable Triya tradition."

Laiu frowned. "But my lord... your father was not a Triya, and they may protest—"

"—Tell them to do it!" Tarek shrieked, too upset to control himself. "Tell them to do it, and if they don't, I will see them executed!"

"Yes, my lord!" Laiu fled the tent.

Tarek covered his face with his hands. He needed to be there. He needed to be with his father now, at least, in death.

"Tarek?"

"Oh for God's sake, what now?" Tarek yelled.

Darvad walked in, eyes wide in surprise. "I'm sorry. Am I intruding?"

Tarek closed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Darvad. I didn't realize it was you."

"My chariot is ready to leave. I wanted to apologize, and..." Darvad narrowed his eyes. "Are you crying?"

Tarek looked at him wearily. "My father has died."

"My God! I am so sorry!" Darvad reached out to touch Tarek's shoulder, and then hesitated. "Tarek, what can I do?"

"Nothing. It's all right. I'll be fine." Tarek sat down on his bed.

Darvad sat beside him. "What are you going to do?"

"What can I do?" Tarek snapped. "I'm going to war this very day. It's a week's journey to Dragewan."

Darvad touched Tarek's knee. "I will tend your father's funeral pyre."

Tarek blinked. "You will?"

Darvad nodded. "Of course. I am heading back to Prasta, to gather supplies before I go to Pagdesh. Before I leave, I will see your father put to rest."

All of Tarek's anger faded. He let his body go limp against Darvad's. The two of them sat there in silence.

"Thank you," Tarek said finally.

"He will have all royal honors," Darvad promised.

"And I will find Kadal and Sahdin for you," Tarek responded.

Darvad smiled weakly. "I wish I could be in both places at once."

"Me too." Tarek sighed.

"You will be magnificent on the battlefield, Tarek," Darvad said. "Your father will be proud of you in heaven."

Tarek's heart melted slightly.

“Remember to bring Aisa to me,” Darvad asked.

Tarek’s heart hardened again. “I’ll try my best,” he said, lying.

Darvad put his arm around Tarek’s shoulder. “What a great joy it would be, to return having found the Parans, forcing them into three more years of exile, and to celebrate the memory of your father with a victory in Jezza and my marriage to the prettiest girl in Marhavad!”

“Yes,” Tarek croaked, “how joyful.”

Darvad let go of Tarek and left the tent. Tarek followed him outside to watch him jump into his chariot. The horses whinnied in protest. Darvad tapped his charioteer on the shoulder and they left.

Tarek turned to see his general. They bowed at each other.

“We’re ready, my lord,” the general said.

Tarek watched Darvad’s chariot disappear around a dusty bend. His family was dead. His only loyalty now was to the man driving from the battlefield. Tarek took a deep breath, steadied his resolve, and turned back to his general.

“Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 30

JANDU STRUGGLED WITH HIS HAIR.

He fussed in front of his mirror for almost an hour, but he still couldn't force it into an attractive braid.

In frustration, he threw the ivory brush against the wall of his room, imagining the force would shatter the handle in two. Instead it limply smacked the white plaster wall and tumbled, unscathed, to the carpet. It didn't even mark the wall.

"Fucking pitiful," Jandu growled at his reflection. He examined his arms in the mirror for the hundredth time, both amazed and repulsed by their thinness, the frailty of his wrists, his tiny fingers.

He sighed and got up to retrieve his brush.

Jandu sat back down at the dressing table. His room was furnished with two small beds, two camphor chests, and several bright green sitting pillows on a plush green floor. He shared the room with another female servant, a young girl named Rani who had so many hair ribbons, brushes and accoutrements they poured out of the dresser's meager drawer and littered the surface of the table. Jandu pushed aside her cheap jewelry, her pink ribbons, her brushes, and set to his own hair again, determined to get it into a braid.

It had taken only one experience crossing Afadi palace's courtyard without one for Jandu to realize how many intricacies there were to being a woman. When he first strolled through the large palace courtyard, Jandu had been the instant fascination of every man in sight. For a fleeting moment, he had sweated horror—they all somehow *knew* he preferred men. The lust in their eyes was unbridled.

But then he had realized that the men stared because he was masquerading as an unmarried woman and walking around with loose hair and with a zahari top that was far too small.

This would be the only time in Jandu's life that he could openly look at men around him. But Jandu didn't have to be a woman long to understand the implications of his actions. Looking back at men expressed interest. And with his hair loose and his expression brazen, he was taking an unnecessary risk.

Jandu stared at his reflection as he inexpertly twisted his hair back. He had to admit he had turned into quite a catch. His body was petite and curvy. His breasts weren't large but they were taut and perky, bursting from the borrowed zahari top in an attempt to proclaim their existence to the world. His face was thin, his hair framing his skin like ebony surrounding a pearl.

In fact, the only part of Jandu's body that still showed the warrior inside was his eyes. They were the same intense, cold blue they had always been.

But he wasn't a warrior any more, he reminded himself. He was a music teacher—a music teacher who had been summoned to meet Lord Indarel, his wife Shali, and the child who Jandu would tutor. And if he was going to have a royal audience, his hair had to be in order.

"Fuck this," Jandu grumbled. He took a strap of leather and tied his long locks back like a soldier would.

A soft knock rattled his door, and Suraya peeped her head around the corner.

"Hello?" She smiled at Jandu.

Jandu dropped his brush and rushed to Suraya, pulling her in the room and slamming the door behind her. He yanked her into a forceful hug. It had been two days since he had seen her or any of his family. All of them had been dispersed to separate quarters throughout the palace.

"Jandu!" Suraya gasped, laughing.

“God, I’ve missed you,” Jandu said. He used to kiss the top of Suraya’s head when he felt affectionate. Now that he was shorter than her, he made do with pecking her on the cheek.

“How are you?” Suraya asked.

Jandu just grinned. He hadn’t realized how much he missed his family until this moment. He originally thought that solitude would be a welcome relief after the years of having his family constantly around him. But he missed Suraya and Baram like a physical pain. He even missed Yudar’s religious lectures. It was that bad.

“I’m trying very hard to keep a low profile. I’m worried someone will detect I’m an imposter,” Jandu said.

Suraya shook her head. “Not by the looks of you. No one will guess you are a man, Jandu. They may think you are strange, but you’ll be a strange woman. So don’t worry.” Suraya looked around his room. “Your room is nice. Ours is off the courtyard, it’s noisy.”

“It’s all right,” Jandu lied. Compared to the last two years, his room was luxury incarnated. Even as a servant, Jandu was entitled to quarters in the single women’s quarters of the palace, light and cheery, with white walls, a plaster ceiling, and large, open windows high on the wall to let sunlight in.

“Do you share this room?” Suraya asked, noting the extra bed and chest, and the plethora of brushes and hair ribbons on the dressing table.

Jandu nodded. “Her name is Rani. She’s one of the lady’s maids and spends most of her time in the laundry. She seems nice.”

Suraya frowned. “With a roommate to watch your every move, you are going to have to be careful.”

“It makes everything more difficult. I have to pretend all the time.”

Suraya narrowed her eyes at Jandu, suddenly taking in his appearance. “You are not going to meet Lord Indarel looking like that, are you?” She sighed. “Jandu, you have to put some effort into this.”

“I’m trying!” Jandu scowled. He looked down at his plain yellow zahari. “But what can I do? Your zaharis are too big, this one is too small, and I can’t make a pleat for shit.”

Suraya tried to hide her laughter. This just made Jandu angrier.

“Don’t laugh!” he yelled.

“I told Lady Shali your chest of belongings was stolen on the way here,” Suraya said. “She will send her tailor to have a few zahari tops made for you.”

“Thank God.” Jandu squeezed his breasts. “I think they’re going to pop out any moment.”

Suraya blushed. “It’s the style these days, dummy.”

“Yeah, well, it’s gross.”

“We should go,” Suraya said. “I’ll give you a quick tour before we go to the reception hall.”

Jandu hesitated. “Oh... Suraya?”

“Hmm?” She paused at the door.

Jandu stared at the floor. “Can you show me how to...”

Suraya waited while Jandu remained silent.

“Uh...” Jandu blushed.

“Jandu, are you menstruating?” Suraya’s eyes grew wide.

“Ew! No!” Jandu scowled.

“So, what?” Suraya smiled coyly. “Having difficulty peeing?”

“Well, yeah, but that’s not what I was going to ask you.”

“What?”

“Can you show me how to braid my hair?” Jandu’s voice was a girly whisper.

Suraya laughed. “Good lord. You can’t even do that?”

“I’m a warrior!” Jandu made two fists. The henna on his hands made his fingers look even more delicate.

“Oh, *so* tough,” Suraya mused. She came behind him and ran her hands through Jandu’s hair. “Sit on the chair, warrior, in front of the mirror.”

Jandu sat back and let Suraya run her hands through his thick hair as she stood behind him.

"Your hair is so pretty," she said. "I wish you would keep it long once you switch back."

"Long hair gets in the way when fighting," Jandu said. He closed his eyes and leaned back into Suraya's hands. Her fingers on his scalp felt wonderful.

"It doesn't bother Baram," Suraya said. She let go of Jandu's hair and reached up to undo her own braid.

"Baram fights with a mace like an animal," Jandu said. He watched Suraya in the mirror. "I fight like a god, with a bow. Hair is distracting."

Suraya snorted. "I don't know any animals that fight with blunt objects."

"Baboons."

"You're calling your older brother a baboon?"

"Among other things."

Suraya laughed. She positioned herself next to Jandu, and showed him how to braid her hair, and then his own. The sweet smell of the champak blossoms outside his room, and the soft ray of sunshine mellowed him to the point that his muscles felt like warm butter.

When Jandu's hair was finally in a tidy braid, Suraya led him out of his room and through an open walkway to the main courtyard.

Like Prasta, Afadi's palace consisted of numerous separate buildings, clustered around a large paved courtyard with a fountain in the center. The lord's suites were in a sculpted marble building on the east side of the courtyard. Stone buildings to the north and west housed the palace staff, one for married couples and the other for all of Lady Shali's endless young female servants. Jandu's building and the lord's suites were protected by quiet Afadi guards who huddled in the shadows of stone awnings to avoid the sunshine.

The fourth building around the courtyard, to the south, was the public reception hall. It was the only structure built directly

into the great white walls of the palace grounds, allowing access to the city outside.

Suraya shook her head as she watched Jandu. “You need to work on your walk. You move like you’re stalking something.”

Jandu shrugged. “I’ve been walking like this my whole life. I can’t change now.” But he slowed down his pace, and tried to mimic Suraya’s body movements.

“Well, try to be more lady-like.” Suraya pointed to a smaller building behind the main servant’s quarters. “Those are the kitchens. That’s where Baram is.”

“Have you seen him?” Jandu asked.

Suraya nodded. “I saw him preparing lunch when the lady asked me to bring her some lemon water.”

“Does he look happy?” Jandu frowned at two men who watched his and Suraya’s passage through the courtyard with wanton interest.

Suraya shrugged. “Not really. I think he works really hard.”

“And you?”

Suraya smiled. “I’m working like hell, but I don’t mind. It’s still better than washing your blood-stained clothes in that freezing lake with no soap.”

Jandu smiled and put his arm through Suraya’s. “Sorry.”

“Well, don’t be,” Suraya said. “Besides, I think you have your own work cut out for you.”

“Why?”

“Wait until you meet Lord Indarel’s children.”

Jandu halted. “What? Are they horrible?”

Suraya grinned mischievously and led him into the public chambers.

Jandu entered the reception room and bowed low, along with Suraya. He looked up to study his new masters.

Lord Indarel was older than Jandu expected him to be. He had a neatly trimmed gray beard and thinning hair tucked behind

a small but ornate diadem, complete with gold-encrusted images of the Shentari prophets.

Beside him sat Lady Shali, many years younger than him. She was not pretty, but she was elegant, with a refined nose and piercing brown eyes. She held her head high, her chin jutting out in challenge. Jandu wondered how such a small neck could support all her hair, rife with jewels pinned in every lock.

“Come closer,” Lord Indarel commanded, beckoning Jandu towards him.

“Azari recommended Janali, her sister-in-law, to teach music to the children,” Shali said.

“She taught children in Prasta,” Suraya explained. “She is a wonderful tutor.”

Indarel studied Jandu carefully. Jandu felt himself flushing under the scrutiny. He looked at the floor, worried his indignation at being examined like a piece of meat would show in his eyes.

“Look at me,” Indarel ordered.

Jandu looked up. Indarel caught the smolder in Jandu's eyes, and he frowned.

“Do you *want* to work here?” Indarel asked.

“Yes, my lord,” Jandu said. He looked down at his hennaed feet.

“What will you teach them?” Shali asked.

“Flute, my lady,” Jandu said.

Shali smiled. “Lovely! I've always thought flute refined a person.” She settled back into her chair. “Let's hear you play something.”

“Yes, my lady.” Jandu steadied his breathing as he reached down to the pouch on his belt and pulled out Zandi. The metal warmed in his fingers, as if Zandi expected his caress.

Jandu closed his eyes, and concentrated on the song Keshan taught him on their last day together. It had been the most complicated of all the songs Keshan taught, and it captured a variety of emotions through its sweeping notes. Jandu played the song well, letting his mind toy with the sounds as he

thought of Keshan, the smell of his hair, the taste of his skin, the deep, red softness of his lips.

“That was beautiful.”

Jandu opened his eyes, and saw that Indarel and Shali were both smiling down at him, their enthusiasm clear.

“You should teach our daughter, Vaisha,” Indarel said.

“No.” Shali shook her head. “Vaisha has no interest in music. But Abiyar does. Perhaps she can teach him?”

Lord Indarel did not seem pleased with the idea of his youngest son learning flute. But he also appeared to be completely under the power of his wife. “As you wish,” he said to her.

Shali smiled in triumph. “Good! Then you will instruct Abiyar. Please stay with us and tutor him.”

“Of course, my lady.” Jandu bowed. “Thank you.”

Suraya led Jandu out of the reception hall, and then took him to the servant in charge of Indarel’s three sons as well as his young daughter, Vaisha.

Jandu met his student later that afternoon in one of the palace sitting rooms, a small room stark of color but lavishly furnished with plush couches and pillows.

His student, Abiyar, was fifteen years-old and strutted in as if he were King of Marhavad. He dressed like a noble hero, but his bravado contrasted dramatically with his scrawny, teenaged frame. His body was thin with lanky arms jutting out from under his armor like stalks. There was a fire in Abiyar’s eyes, a soft burning, that showed both his intensity and his ultimate sincerity. His slightly slanted black eyes, long black hair, and excessive jewelry made him seem almost feminine in his young male beauty.

After introductions were made, the servant in charge of Lord Indarel’s children excused himself and left Jandu alone with Abiyar and a guard. Abiyar’s demeanor changed slightly. He nervously drew himself in and sat down shyly.

Jandu smiled at him. “Have you played any instrument before?”

Abiyar shook his head.

"The lord said you enjoy music," Jandu said. He took out his flute.

"I like music," Abiyar said quietly. His voice was soft. "But I've never learned to play any. My father says that men should learn the art of war, not music. Music is for girls."

"Not true," Jandu said. He pointed to the boy with his flute.

"I know a Triya prince who has conquered at many battles, and is braver than any warrior I know. And he is very adept at playing the flute." Jandu held out the instrument.

Abiyar took it warily. He looked at the guard standing silent against the wall, and blushed.

"I should learn weapons," Abiyar said, forcing anger into his voice.

Jandu smirked. "Of course you should. But that doesn't mean you can't learn flute as well, my lord. After all, you seem to be an intelligent young man."

Abiyar frowned down at the flute. "This will take time away from my military training."

Jandu raised an eyebrow. "Did you have practice scheduled right now?"

Abiyar scowled. "No."

"So there's no problem then." Jandu nodded to the flute. "Put it to your lips."

"I don't want to."

"Well, your parents want you to. And so you have to. Do it."

Abiyar put his lips to the flute and blew. His angle was off, and so no sound emerged. Jandu reached up and adjusted the angle of the flute, and as he did so, a powerful blush spread across the boy's cheeks. Jandu scooted back immediately.

"Try it again," Jandu said.

Abiyar blew. A weak, trembling note came from the flute. He looked at Jandu and smiled widely.

Jandu smiled back. Abiyar curled in on himself in an embarrassed jumble of long limbs, his emotions undisguised behind an honest face.

“Shall I show you the notes?” Jandu asked.

Abiyar nodded. Jandu went through the basic scale with his student, noting that he seemed thrilled every time he succeeded at something, and became closed and withdrawn when he failed.

Although their initial lesson was only an hour long, Jandu felt completely exhausted by the end of it. He never realized how mentally straining teaching someone could be. It didn't help that Abiyar seemed disturbed by the whole lesson. Half of the time, Abiyar paid close attention to Jandu, listening to his notes, trying to mimic the sounds, memorizing the positions of the fingers. The other half of the time he stared at the guard by the door, watching him for a reaction, as if expecting the guard to drop his spear and start pointing and laughing at him.

When Jandu finally returned to his room, he was startled to see his roommate there. They had done a good job of avoiding each other for the last two days, but now Jandu realized that he would have to learn to live with her there.

“Hello,” he said, smiling shyly and slipping past her to grab a towel from his traveling chest.

Rani was barely eighteen, and rather ugly. She had pretty black eyes but her skin was pocked and rough, and her hair was dry and a dull black in color. She smiled when Jandu walked in.

“Janali! How was your meeting with the lord? Will you be staying?”

Jandu nodded. “I think so. I gave Abiyar his first flute lesson today.”

“Wonderful!” Rani nodded to Jandu's towel. “Are you going to wash up? Have you been to the bathhouse yet? It's beautiful. Come, I'll show you where it is!”

Jandu smiled politely. He wanted to be alone, have five minutes of not pretending. But Rani hooked her arm in his and led him down the hallway to the bathhouse.

As they walked, arm in arm, it suddenly hit Jandu that Rani was a Suya servant. Jandu was about to bathe in the same

water as a lower caste servant girl. He tried to muster some sense of indignity, but he realized there was no point. He didn't feel it, not after his two years on the mountain.

Jandu learned that Lady Shali had an obsession with hygiene, and this was apparent in the design of the women's bathhouse. In her love of ornament, she spared no expense in granting her female servants the same luxury as she herself had, providing a roomy stone bathroom complete with constantly hot water, pumped in from a hot spring.

Jandu had heard of hot springs before but had never seen one in his life. The bathhouse enclosed the spring's waters with floors of tile and marble counters. A large, slatted dome let sunlight drift down into the room in striped patterns across the floor.

Rani raved about the bath house, how it was the finest in Marhavad, how lucky they were to have it, who frequented it, when it was busiest, when not to go, which soap to use, on and on she talked, she barely came up for air. But Jandu only half-listened. He was too distracted by the sudden, amazing sight of a room full of naked women.

He could feel himself blushing from his toes to the roots of his hair, but there was nothing to be done about it. In front of him were half a dozen women, chatting amiably with one another in varying states of undress. They washed their hair, dried, and changed clothes, the chatter constant and upbeat, whispers echoing through the stone chamber loud enough for everyone to hear.

Jandu had seen very few naked women in his life. Now he was stunned by the variety of women's bodies, the different shades and shapes. Men's bodies were beautiful to him, but women seemed strange and alien, the darkness of their nipples, the weird dimples and marks on their skin. He hastily looked away, following Rani's lead as she put her towel down on one of the marble benches and started to undress.

He took off his clothes quickly, nervous about showing off his own body. He practically ran for the bath water. Once

submerged, he relaxed somewhat, leaning against the white marble and casually watching Rani beside him as she went about her daily ablutions, her mouth never shutting for longer than a few seconds at a time.

Five minutes in the bath, and Jandu was a convert. Hot springs were the best thing on earth. The fact that he was sharing bath water with the lower caste entered his mind and left with no sense of outrage, only a mild curiosity. If the Shentari faith had gotten the distinctions of caste so wrong, how else had the religion been misinforming him? His skin would not peel off in rejection of Rani's presence. The only thing that seemed in danger was his hearing, as Rani listed the grooms in order of handsomeness, as she warned which guards were mean and which were kind, and described in detail the latest scandal between a kitchen maid and one of the gardeners.

"So tell me about the lord's son," Jandu asked casually, picking up on the fact that Rani loved to gossip about everyone around her, especially her masters.

"Which one?" Rani asked. She took a deep breath and dunked her head under water, washing the soap from her hair. Jandu lathered his head and did the same.

"The young one. Abiyar," Jandu said.

Two of the women in the bath with them turned and joined Jandu's conversation uninvited.

"Well, he isn't much use, is he?" one of them said.

The other woman nodded. "I've heard that Lord Indarel is thinking of sending him to Chandamar as an ambassador. But it's mostly because he figures Abiyar can't do anything else."

The women laughed, and Rani scooted closer to Jandu. The heat in the air and the water soothed Jandu to the bones. He sunk lower, letting the soft, meaningless conversation wash over him like a balm.

"The lord loves his sons," Rani said, nodding to herself. "But he definitely has preferences. Everyone loves Ramad, the eldest son. You should see him, Janali! He is beautiful. And

Parik, Indarel's second son, will be one of the most respected astrologers in Marhavat. All of the lord's advisors say Parik has a gift. He can read the stars better than the Draya."

Jandu closed his eyes and nodded. "And Abiyar?"

"Well..." Rani splashed water on her face. "No one really says much about him. He's quiet, and bad with weapons, I hear. He isn't very smart."

"Oh." Jandu understood a little better why Abiyar was so nervous about appearing to enjoy flute lessons in front of the palace guard.

"But he's nice," Rani added. "Unlike Ramad. He's a stuck up snob and he torments his younger brother."

Jandu smiled to himself. Being the youngest of three royal sons, Jandu had a pretty fair idea of what it meant to be third in line for the seat of power, and the most exposed to the taunts and torments of older brothers. But Yudar and Baram, relentless as their insults might be, loved Jandu fiercely, and he knew it. Their comments were always in jest, and never meant to really harm him. Perhaps Rani simply misunderstood the nature of brothers chiding each other.

Or, judging by the insecure way Abiyar held himself, maybe he really was insulted. It wouldn't be the first time that brothers were honestly mean to each other.

By the time Jandu and Rani emerged from the water, their flesh was pruned and bright red from the heat. Stepping from the steamy bathhouse into the cooling evening air was one of the most energizing feelings Jandu had ever experienced, and for a fleeting moment, he allowed himself to feel content with his situation. He was a woman, true, and in hiding, yes, but at least he now lived in a beautiful place, with what seemed to be nice people. Rani chatted loudly with him all the way back to their room, and then she did her hair quickly and left for the night, working as one of Shali's evening attendants.

That night, Jandu was startled from sleep when the door of his chamber opened. He saw the shadow of the person entering

the room, and realized immediately that this person was far too big to be Rani. Jandu shot out of bed, and grabbed Zandi. Then he realized that, even if he did change her back into a bow, he had no, arrows. He clenched his fists, hoping the few muscles he had been left with could fend off an intruder.

Baram shut the door behind him. He looked down at Jandu and smiled sheepishly.

“Did I wake you?”

Jandu scowled at him. “What are you doing here?”

Baram smirked. “I’ve snuck past the guards into the single women’s quarters, what do you think I’m doing?”

He laughed as Jandu sneered at him. Jandu crawled back into bed.

“How are you doing?” Baram lowered his voice. He grabbed the two green pillows from the floor and made himself comfortable on the floor.

“All right.” Jandu turned on his side so he could see his brother.

“Have you been in the women’s bathhouse? I hear it’s beautiful.”

“You’d love it,” Jandu said. “At any given time, there are about ten naked women in it.”

“God.” Baram sighed contentedly.

“Sometimes they wash each other.”

“God!” Baram stretched. “You lucky, lucky bastard.”

“Good thing I don’t have anything to get up anymore,” Jandu said, yawning. “The charade would be over in no time.”

“How come you get to spend your days surrounded by naked, soapy women?” Baram whispered angrily. “I have to cook with this nasty old man from some western fishing village. He thinks the only way to prepare anything is by boiling it in water and then throwing handfuls of curry powder on it.”

“You could improve upon that technique,” Jandu said, and he meant it. The food he had eaten in Afadi had been bland

and unsatisfying. "I tried to find you this afternoon, but you must have been out."

"Really?" Baram smiled. "I would have liked to see you. I miss you guys."

"Me too." It was the most heart felt conversation Jandu could ever remember having with his brother, and it made him instantly suspicious his mind was turning into a woman's as well. He immediately switched topics. "So when will you improve the menu?"

"I would if I could get the old bastard to trust me. He doesn't like the looks of me," Baram said. "He says I'm too strong to be a cook. He says I'm going to kill him in his sleep."

"It's a fair fear," Jandu said. He closed his eyes. "You're big, mean, and ugly. I wouldn't trust you as far as I could throw you."

"You can't throw a jug of water any more," Baram said.

Jandu sighed.

"At least Yudar seems to be having a good time," Baram added.

"You've seen him?" Jandu asked. Suraya had informed him that Yudar was often by the lord's side, the two of them playing dice until late in the evening, but Jandu still hadn't seen a glimpse of his brother.

Baram nodded. "He looked very content. It's unfair. While I'm busting my ass, he sits in palatial suites and plays dice all day. And you get to sit around with naked chicks."

"I have also apparently become babysitter to the palace loser," Jandu said. "Its not all leisure for me."

"How's Suraya?" Baram asked.

Jandu shrugged. "All right. I think she's happy to be in a palace again, although she works very hard. Shali is a bossy bitch. She has Suraya running all over the place, gathering her clothes, bringing her refreshments, fetching one of the dozens of other servants in the household."

Baram said nothing, and so Jandu cracked open an eye to look at him. Baram looked furious.

“Baram?” Jandu whispered.

Baram shook his head. “She should never have to be a servant. She is a queen.” He punched the pillow. “I hate this.”

Jandu sat up. “Do you think I like it?” He pointed to his chest. “Look, you fucker! I’ve got fucking tits!”

“I’m trying not to look,” Baram said. “It’s been over a year since I’ve screwed anyone, you know. I’ll be traumatized if I have even a fleeting erection inspired by my baby brother.”

They both started laughing.

Jandu laid back in the bed, and Baram stretched out on the floor, yawning.

“I think Suraya is better though,” Jandu added at last. He wasn’t sure how to talk about what had happened to her in the forest. But he thought Baram should know, and they had spent so little time alone together since their desperate escape. “But if you see her, I mean—you really should talk to her. I know she misses you.”

“Why me?” Baram spat. “I’m not her husband anymore.”

“Because she loves you more than Yudar or me,” Jandu said plainly.

Baram sat up. “Jandu...”

“...Look.” Jandu sighed. “I don’t want to get into a long discussion on this, but I just want you to know the truth.” He looked at his brother. “She’s yours. She wants you. She loves you. I’m not going to get in the way of that.”

Baram had tears in his eyes. He stared up at the wooden ceiling, his mouth working wordlessly, as if he were forming and rejecting sentences.

Jandu closed his eyes again. “So are you going to spend the night here and ruin my reputation, labeling me an incestuous slut, or are you going to find some other young maiden to sleep with tonight?”

Baram laughed weakly. Jandu heard him sniffing in the darkness.

“Although if you stay, I still get the bed,” Jandu said softly.

THE ARCHER'S HEART

"I'm a girl now. I've got tender skin."

Baram snorted. Jandu heard him wipe his nose, heard him pull himself back together.

"Okay," Baram said at last. "I'll leave you and your reputation alone. I'll go sleep in the kitchen, where I'm supposed to."

CHAPTER 31

THE FULL NOTE OF TAREK'S CONCH SHELL BLEW OVER THE CITY of Jezza.

Outside the brown brick walls of the city, Tarek's army waited for the Jezzan lord to show himself. The Jezzan army remained out of sight, tucked inside the city's fortifications. Tarek surveyed the walls and saw they had been designed for defense but not offense. There were no raised platforms from which archers could mount an attack.

Tarek stood in his chariot, just outside the city gate. Behind him, fanned out, were his commanders. Beside him, in his own chariot, was Regent Mazar.

Mazar had joined Tarek only the evening prior, bringing along a contingent of Prasta soldiers. Tarek was surprised that the grizzly old warrior would journey so far from the palace after all these years of peace, but Mazar explained that he felt it his duty. He, too, had taken a vow to serve the king of Marhavad.

Tarek had only known Mazar as Regent, had only seen him in silk robes. Now, donned from head to toe in ancient-looking armor, the old man appeared fierce. His silver breastplate and helmet glinted in the unforgiving sunlight.

"If King Darvad cannot be with you," Mazar had told him, "then I consider it an honor to fight in his stead."

Tarek bowed. "Your skills and experience will be a great asset, and the honor is mine."

Now eight units of foot soldiers and archers stood behind Mazar, Tarek, and Darvad's general. Tarek was proud of the order of his men, the clean lines of their ranks, the fierceness

of their appearance. The colored banners held beside the unit commanders flapped furiously in the hot, dry wind of the plain. Over two thousand men stood ready to follow Tarek into these walls.

Tarek looked back at the barred gate.

"I challenge Lord Sahdin to bring forth the traitor, Lord Kadal, and to surrender!" Tarek bellowed, hoping his voice carried deep into the city. "Tell your lord to show himself!"

Tarek's heart beat wildly. He prayed Sahdin would be brave enough to face Tarek alone. It would save lives. But as the silence stretched into minutes, he realized that there was little chance that the lord would willingly give up Kadal, or the safety of his palace.

One arrow, ignited, flew over the city wall, falling short of Tarek. Its message was clear. If Tarek wanted Kadal, he would have to take him.

Tarek signaled to his commanders and then Tarek sounded his conch shell one more time.

Mazar and the other Triya in chariots blew their horns as well, and the sound of the notes rising brought the hairs on Tarek's arms up on end and sent a thrill of expectation through his veins. Adrenalin flooded his system.

"I can break the wall," Mazar shouted at Tarek.

"Then do it," Tarek said.

He watched as Mazar pulled an arrow from his quiver, notched it, and then aimed at the wall. Mazar closed his eyes and whispered a sharta over the weapon, the words strange and dangerous, beyond Tarek's comprehension.

Mazar loosed his string and the arrow whistled as it flew.

The arrow hit the wall. Stones exploded in a shower of dirt and flame. Dust burst upon the army and the echo of the detonation pealed over Tarek in a roar. Jezzan soldiers screamed as shrapnel bombarded them. The force of the impact carved a basin in the dry soil.

Before the Jezzan troops inside could react, Tarek charged into the gap. A roar went up from his troops as chariots filed in behind him, with his foot soldiers following suit.

Tarek's horses trampled over the explosion's crater and took off at a gallop towards the center of town. He raced for the palace. Once he killed Sahdin and Kadal the war would be won.

Dust blinded the Jezzan soldiers. Many stood, too shocked from the force of the sharta to react. As Tarek's soldiers poured through the hole, they took advantage of the Jezzan's surprise, cutting them down like sheep. Tarek had ordered two units to stay and safeguard their exit. The rest of his soldiers fought through the Jezzan defensive line.

Tarek only witnessed the beginning of the melee, as his view was quickly swallowed by the high walls and winding streets of the city. His charioteer rounded a corner and he briefly glimpsed the chaos left in his wake. Arrows clanged against helmets and breastplates. Screams rang through as the points found limbs and faces. Hand to hand combat broke out in a flurry of individual battles around the wall, down the narrow streets. There was no escape for the Jezzans, no ground to retreat to, and as his own soldiers continued to pour through the hole in the wall, the Jezzans, outnumbered, began to die in great numbers, struck down by spears, maces, and swords. The assault was monstrous and fast. Dragewan soldiers charged forward towards the Jezzan Palace, slashing a way through the remaining terrified Jezzan troops and following their lord into the streets of the city.

Jeza's streets were filthy gray, its buildings coated in decades of dust. Tarek's charioteer negotiated the tight corners and precarious angles of the stone buildings. Tarek ordered his charioteer up the main avenue while Mazar and the other charioteers split up through the other streets, each of them charging towards the palace. Two units followed Tarek. The yellow banners showed that one of the units was under Anant's command.

The road opened to a wider thoroughfare. Tarek spotted an enemy chariot racing towards him. Tarek notched an arrow and aimed at one of the two horses pulling the chariot. He loosed the arrow and the horse fell with a scream. As the horse fell, the other steed screeched in panic as the chariot bounded over the dead animal and flipped over on itself. A second chariot behind this swerved to miss the wreckage and charged Tarek. The Jezzan warrior inside shot a flurry of arrows but most flew wide.

Tarek didn't bother with his shield. He returned his own volley of arrows. The chariot flew past him and then circled around, seconds later coming back to attack Tarek from behind. Tarek took careful aim, bringing down first the archer and then the charioteer.

As Tarek raced to the palace, more chariots charged, but their forces split as they turned down different roads to challenge Tarek and Mazar separately. Chariots flew toward Tarek, but he dispatched one with another volley of arrows. The other chariot was taken down by Tarek's foot soldiers, who stabbed the horses with spears.

Tarek rushed to the palace gates.

Mazar arrived a moment later, rounding the corner of the other road. He recited over another arrow and shot this at the palace gate, and once again the masonry shattered in a discharge of mud and stone. Tarek's horses whinnied in fear but continued forward.

Tarek's chariot was overtaken by Anant's men, who pushed themselves at a sprint towards the enemy, butchering Jezzans to open a passage for Tarek.

Tarek abandoned his chariot. There were too many bodies, too much chaos to navigate a wheeled car. He slung his bow over his shoulder and grabbed his sword and shield, and jumped to the ground, pushing through the crowd of his men to make his way into the palace. Immediately his own men closed in behind him, shielding him from attack.

The palace courtyard was bricked in and small, with a pool and a statue of Prophet Tarhandi looming in the center.

Skirmishes blossomed across the courtyard, as man fought against man, soldiers falling, clubbed to death. Execution took mere seconds once the soldier was on the ground.

Given the hopeless situation, Tarek expected the Jezzans to run. But now that his forces had penetrated the palace, there was no place for the troops inside the palace to go. So they battled on, hand to hand combat bringing the men together in couples, a gory dance of blades and maces. The walls of the palace closed in the sound of the battle, creating a roaring echo which shook the ground as men screamed, as metal clanged metal, as bodies fell upon the hard stone. The dead lay in piles, especially around their broken entrance, where Tarek's men killed the Jezzans trying to flee.

Someone grabbed his arm and Tarek spun fiercely, sword raised.

Mazar panted beside him, his armor stained with the blood of his victims.

"Be careful!" Mazar said. "Sahdin knows the Pezarisharta. If he releases it, he could kill every living creature within the city!"

A Jezzan soldier charged at Mazar. Tarek and Mazar both attacked, cutting down the man in mere moments. Mazar dashed into a nearby melee.

Tarek climbed onto the base of Tarhandi's statue in the center of the courtyard. He slung his shield behind him and used his bow to cut down men from his vantage point.

To his right, he saw Anant hewing his way through a crowd of men. Two men attacked Anant at once. He dodged and managed to slice the back of the knee of one of them while evading the other. Disabled, the Jezzan fell, and Anant thrust his sword through the other soldier's neck. Blood sprayed for a dozen feet, covering Anant's armor in red. Anant wiped his eyes and surged on.

Tarek leapt down from the statue and blew his conch. Anant and his men immediately flanked Tarek.

"I need to get to Sahdin," Tarek commanded. At once Anant and his cadre of soldiers surrounded him and hacked their way into the palace. Men, both Jezzan and Dragewan, fell. But soon Tarek reached the entrance of the great hall. Few of his bodyguard remained and they spread out, wary of the dim spaces in the hall.

Suddenly a man called out.

"Judge!"

Tarek turned just as a wild-eyed Jezzan soldier, a commander, swung his mace. Tarek had no time to react.

Out of nowhere, Anant sprang between them. The mace smashed into the side of Anant's head. He crumpled to the ground. Tarek lunged forward, driving his sword into his assailant's belly.

Tarek heard Anant groan on the marble floor. Tarek knelt beside him.

"Anant!" he shouted. A shrill buzzing filled Tarek's ears.

"My lord! It's Sahdin!" someone called. Tarek swiveled to see Sahdin emerge from his throne room. His eyes burned in fury. He was fitted in his armor, his sword in his hand.

"Suya whore!" Sahdin hissed. He raised his sword.

Tarek raised his own. Unlike that evening at Druv's house in Prasta, Tarek could now fight fairly, on equal terms. Tarek blocked Sahdin's blows easily. The moment he saw Sahdin's mouth contort to form a sharta, Tarek swung with all his strength and sliced off Sahdin's head in one, clean stroke.

Only moments later, Kadal himself emerged. He wore armor as well, but it looked too small for him. He was clearly terrified.

"Royal Judge!" Kadal stuttered.

Tarek thrust his sword into Kadal's side, in between the plates of his armor. Kadal fell to his knees with a cry. Tarek grabbed his hair and exposed his neck, and then sliced his blade through.

A wail emerged from Sahdin's nearby attendants. The cry was taken up immediately by the soldiers around them, the sound rumbling into a dark roar, throughout the palace, as the Jezzan soldiers dropped their weapons and bowed to their conqueror.

The buzzing in Tarek's ears didn't stop.

Tarek called his general to give the order not to attack the unarmed Jezzan soldiers, and to take them as prisoners instead. But many of Tarek's men were blinded with blood lust, and it was several hours before the last of the skirmishes abated. Tarek meanwhile removed Sahdin's diadem and had one of his men hang it on the shattered palace gate, a reminder of what happens to traitors of the king.

In the evening, Tarek ordered torches lit and his soldiers worked to stack the bodies of the fallen Jezzans for cremation the following day. The bodies of Sahdin and Kadal were anointed and prepared for a funeral pyre that evening. Tarek allowed the lord's attendants to complete all formal respects for their former liege, who had fallen honorably in battle.

As final preparations were being made to light the pyre, Tarek addressed the mourning throngs. Tarek appointed one of his generals to oversee the safety of Jezza until King Darvad chose a new lord. He assured the people that so long as they were obedient to Darvad, no further harm would come to them.

Then a shriek, piercing and pitiful, came from a young woman, who rushed to Sahdin's funeral pyre and threw herself upon it, sobbing. One look at her bosom told Tarek that this was Sahdin's daughter, the luscious Aisa, Darvad's desired wife.

Aisa's attendants pulled her from her father's body as the pyre was lit. She sobbed loudly, uncontrollably, and her grief stirred the people around them. Jezzan citizens turned cold eyes towards Tarek.

"Get her out of here," Tarek ordered one of his commanders.

"Where should I take her, my lord?" The commander asked.

A cold, dank feeling crept through Tarek's bones. He looked at the weeping girl. This was his chance to save her for Darvad.

"Take her where you want," Tarek snapped. "It is not my concern."

The commander's eyes glinted briefly, and then he ordered his men to drag Aisa away. People stirred angrily. The situation was growing hostile.

Mazar, who had watched the proceedings by Tarek's side, stepped forward.

"On behalf of King Darvad, I offer those Jezzan citizens loyal to our beloved king the riches deserved of such fealty." He motioned to his waiting soldiers. They began to distribute coins—gold, jewels, the coffers of Jezza's lord. The crowd's atmosphere changed dramatically. Now a stampede formed, people vying for their share of the booty.

Tarek smiled coldly. "I trust you have saved enough of the coffers to pay the troops."

"Of course," Mazar snorted. He smiled at Tarek. "I may be old and weary, but I am no fool."

"You were magnificent," Tarek told Mazar, and he meant it. He wasn't sure how he would have breached the fortifications in the first place if it hadn't been for Mazar's shartas. Tarek realized that having Mazar by his side was, in many respects, more of an advantage than Darvad himself.

After the funeral, Tarek discussed securing their position with his general. He then dragged his exhausted body out to the back courtyard of the palace, where his army's tents were erected. He drank water like a dying man once he got there, and then inspected the casualties. Two hundred of his soldiers had died, with another three hundred wounded. Tarek walked past men with severed limbs, with slashed faces, with shattered bones. Tarek steadied himself, telling himself it was an acceptable level of casualties for a battle.

As he made his rounds, Tarek toughened his resolve against reacting to injury. Each consecutive soldier made it easier. Until he saw Anant.

“Oh, God!” Tarek had forgotten. Selfish, conceited idiot, he had *forgotten* that Anant had saved his life. He rushed to Anant’s side.

Anant was unconscious. His helmet had taken the brunt of the mace swing, but the left side of his face was in terrible shape. His cheek was swollen, his left eye was misshapen, and it seemed as if the distance between his eyes had widened.

The air caught in Tarek’s throat.

The physician overseeing the injuries caught Tarek’s reaction and tried to reassure him.

“He’ll survive,” the physician said. “He’s very lucky—I think he’ll keep his eye.”

“Will he... be disfigured?” Tarek thought of Anant’s deep, masculine handsomeness, so alluring when coupled with his shy blushes.

The physician sighed. “He’ll live. That’s all I can promise you right now.”

Tarek nodded. “Do whatever you can. Help him.” He stared at the physician. “He is a friend of mine.”

“Oh!” The physician seemed flustered. “Shall I take him into the palace then? The other commanders who sustained injuries are there. The accommodations are better.”

Tarek narrowed his eyes. “Anant is a commander. Why isn’t he with them?”

“He said he wanted to stay with his men.”

Tarek stared at Anant a long time before answering. “Bring him to the palace. Do everything you can.” And he left the courtyard to finish his inspection.

CHAPTER 32

WITHIN A MONTH OF BEGINNING THEIR FLUTE LESSONS JANDU realized how he could improve Abiyar's concentration. Jandu had been initially confused by the boy's strange split-personality when it came to practicing music. On the one hand, he always seemed interested, and he enthusiastically attempted every challenge Jandu presented him.

On the other hand, he often scoffed at the instrument, calling it a "stupid girl's toy" and "beneath him." He glanced nervously at the guard who was assigned to him, and every time the guard looked back, Abiyar straightened, pushing out his chest, tightening his facial features as if annoyed.

Finally, Jandu just excused the guard by asking him sweetly to step outside. At moments like this, Jandu's feminine body served him well. He fluttered his eyelashes.

The guard didn't even bother to hide the fact that he stared at Jandu's breasts. "I am not allowed to leave him alone." But he looked tempted. For a month, he had stood through Abiyar's lessons with a bored, pained expression on his face.

"He isn't alone," Jandu said. "He's with me."

"It's all right," Abiyar said. He stood and narrowed his eyes at the guard. "Wait for me outside."

"As you wish, my lord." The guard ogled Jandu one last time, and then stepped from the room.

Jandu's mouth curled into a smile. "Right. Let's see how practice goes without an audience today."

Jandu made himself comfortable on the sitting room settee. Abiyar sat beside him, folding his thin legs nervously. His awkward body, his desire to please, and his brash bravado appealed to Jandu.

Since meeting Abiyar, Jandu had heard most of the palace rumors that circulated about the boy. People considered Abiyar girlish and weak. His brothers disliked him. Jandu had even heard several of the women in the bath house accuse the boy of being a faggot.

Which, of course, only made Jandu feel more protective of his young protégé. From the way Abiyar nervously glanced at Jandu's breasts and blushed with any close contact, Jandu truly doubted Abiyar was a homosexual. But his reputation was in dire straits. Jandu wanted to help resurrect it.

"Show me what we learned yesterday," Jandu said, handing the flute to Abiyar.

Without the guard, Abiyar's playing improved greatly. Even he seemed shocked by his own performance. Jandu realized that at this rate it wouldn't be long before Abiyar's natural musical abilities would surpass Jandu's own limited skill.

Halfway through the day's scales, a servant girl knocked quietly at the door and delivered a plate of food for lunch. Abiyar dove into the bread and cheese hastily.

Jandu shook out the flute and cleaned it with a cloth. "You're very good, Abiyar," he said. He froze, realizing his error in calling the lord's son by his first name.

But Abiyar didn't seem to mind. He smiled sweetly, too grateful for the rare compliment to be concerned with decorum.

"I told you I like music," Abiyar said. "And you are a good teacher, Janali."

Jandu smiled. "Tell me about some of your other teachers. Who is your weapons master?"

"Master Devdan," Abiyar said, mouth full of bread and cheese. "He is the most renowned Triya warrior in all of Afadi!"

"Then you are in good hands."

"Of course." Abiyar fiddled with his diadem. "I only have the best."

A warm, balmy breeze smelling of roses wafted in from the window, and Jandu leaned back, enjoying the feel of the air on his skin. His midriff was bare, and the air tickled his naval.

"Has Master Devdan started training you with shartas?" Jandu asked.

Abiyar's eyes widened. "Magical weapons? What do you think he is, a prophet?"

Jandu laughed. "Regular humans can use them too."

"No they can't," Abiyar said. "That is a myth."

"They can," Jandu insisted. "You just have to concentrate. There are two skills needed in learning a sharta. You must first learn how to summon it, and then learn the counter-curse, to withdraw it. Some are more difficult to recall than others."

This piqued Abiyar's interest. He turned to Jandu enthusiastically. "How do you know this?"

Jandu burned with a desire to show off in front of Abiyar. His mind was filled with so many magical weapons, it would startle even his own family. The years of training with Mazar formed an arsenal the likes of which most armies in Marhavad had never seen.

But if there was any one thing Jandu could do to completely blow his cover, it would be to unleash a magical weapon. He leaned his head back against his hands and sighed.

"I know a lot of things." He left it at that.



In December, Abiyar began an intensive course of archery with his weapon's master in preparations for the upcoming New Year's festival. Jandu drilled Abiyar for details about his training, but Abiyar seemed almost shy about his master. Jandu would have given anything to meet this Devdan and to see some sparring. As it was, he was always stuck indoors, with a flute, or in his rooms, listening to Rani talk endlessly. And while Rani was good at giving Jandu the inside scoop on the scandals of palace life and rumors from around Marhavad, Jandu truly missed his old life, talking strategy and weapons and being around horses and swords and other men. Even Keshan, who eschewed violence and was more refined than other warriors, still sparred and shot targets in his free time. This passive life wearied Jandu.

One morning it was too brilliant outside for Jandu to sit indoors any longer. He left a message with Abiyar's servant, Bir, that he wanted to meet Abiyar outside for a change, and Bir reported back that the boy had archery practice that morning in his private courtyard. Jandu could instruct him there.

Jandu went to meet Abiyar at the scheduled time, but Abiyar was late. Abiyar's target of hay and cloth stood at the end of the courtyard. There were stone steps that led to Abiyar's rooms, and on the edge of the stone balcony Jandu found Abiyar's bow, carelessly abandoned like an unwanted toy.

Jandu lifted the bow to examine it. It was a heavy compound bow with a deep curve, and made of wood, sinew and bone, lacquered in a beautiful black diamond pattern. Pleasure rushed through Jandu's arms just holding it. Since the age of ten, there hadn't been a single day that Jandu hadn't shot an arrow. Now it had been months. Jandu twanged the string automatically.

He looked around, but no one was in sight. He promptly loosened the bowstring and adjusted its length. As he heard footsteps coming around the corner of the balcony, he quickly restrung the bow and put it on the steps.

Abiyar emerged, a large chunk of bread in his hands.

Jandu sat on the steps and pulled out his flute. "You're late."

"I was hungry." Abiyar stuffed the rest of the bread in his mouth and then reached down to pick up his bow.

Abiyar twanged the bow. Both of them reacted to the change in tone. Jandu smiled.

Abiyar studied his bow, then Jandu. "Did you do something to it?"

"I adjusted your brace height, that's all," Jandu said. "Your string was too short."

With newfound trust, Abiyar sat next to Jandu on the brick ledge, careful not to sit on Jandu's long red zahari. He held his bow out before him proudly.

"It looks different," Abiyar said.

"The lower brace height will push the arrow longer and faster. And the tauter string will result in less slap and a smoother release."

Abiyar studied Jandu's face. "Where did you learn this?"

Jandu watched Abiyar from the corner of his eye. "I was once a charioteer for Prince Jandu Paran in Prasta."

Abiyar's eyes grew wide. "You? A woman?"

"Why not? I've always been good with horses and weaponry, woman or not."

Abiyar's expression turned dreamy. "I hear Jandu is the best archer in all of Marhavad."

Jandu grinned. "He is."

"What's he like?"

"He's incredible."

"Is it true that he can hit a target from 300 yards?" Abiyar asked.

Jandu nodded. "Once I saw him hit a target 350 yards away."

"Wow." Abiyar shook his head. "I'd love to meet him."

"Maybe you will some day."

Abiyar looked at Jandu with sudden intensity. "Did Jandu teach you any other tricks? Archery tricks, I mean? I'm not so good at hitting small targets."

Jandu took a deep breath to calm his heart down. "I may be able to remember a few things."

Abiyar handed Jandu his bow. "Show me something."

The urge to show off was overwhelming, but Jandu resisted.

"Why don't you shoot at the target instead," Jandu put the bow back in Abiyar's hand, "and I'll tell you what I see."

Abiyar enthusiastically scooted off the ledge of the courtyard and took aim. He hadn't pulled the string back before Jandu was on him, standing behind him to gently correct his posture.

“Look, you’re shooting in a wind, so open your stance,” Jandu said. He moved Abiyar’s body an inch to the left. “Keep your feet placed shoulder-width apart and your toes slightly outward, otherwise you’ll lose your balance when you shoot.”

Abiyar pulled his arms back, to show him his stance. Jandu frowned, realizing that Abiyar had way too much bow for a boy his age. It might have been appropriate for a grown man, or one of his stronger older brothers, but for Abiyar, it was too powerful. His arm shook as he pulled back the string.

“Do you have another bow?” he asked.

“Only this one. My father gave it to me.”

Jandu understood that he would only insult Abiyar if he suggested a lighter one. “Well, your accuracy is ruined partially because your arm is lifting on release. Pull the string straight back until it touches your lips.”

Abiyar clumsily pulled an arrow from the quiver on the ground and, with much fiddling, notched it into place. He shakily pulled back the string as Jandu had showed him, and fired the arrow just right of the target’s center.

Jandu beamed a bright smile. “You see?”

“Wow! That’s amazing!” Abiyar jumped up in joy.

“And if you always draw the string back the same way, you should have no problem repeating that shot.”

Abiyar fumbled for another arrow, but this one he shot too low.

Jandu shook his head. “You’re not paying attention to your body. Your chest is collapsing when you shoot, so you’re losing all your back tension and not getting a fully developed draw.”

Abiyar adjusted his position.

“No!” Jandu shook his head. “Look, give it to me...” Jandu took the bow and quickly drew back the string.

“Janali!”

Jandu loosed the string, and the arrow shot directly through the previous arrow Abiyar had shot.

Jandu turned to see Suraya scowling at him. "Yes?" he said sheepishly.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Jandu handed the bow to Abiyar, who stared at the arrow Jandu had just shot, awestruck.

"Nothing." Jandu gave Suraya a big, lying smile.

"What?"

"Just helping Abiyar."

Suraya crossed her arms. "Come here, little sister."

"But—"

"—Come here."

Suraya grabbed Jandu by the ear and led him around the corner of the building. She pushed him against the wall angrily.

Suraya narrowed her eyes. "You're a woman now, Jandu. Act like one!"

"I'm trying." Jandu sighed. "It's hard."

"You're a music teacher, not an archer," Suraya told him.

"But he had his string all fucked up—" Jandu started.

"Who cares?" Suraya snapped.

Jandu straightened. "I care. I don't want him to be unprepared. He's a Triya, Suraya, and the son of a lord. Some day he is going to be in a battle. If he went out like he was today, he would be killed."

Suraya sighed loudly. "Be that as it may, I don't think you should be teaching him anything but music. Anyone could have walked by right then, not just me. You act strangely enough in the women's quarters as it is, we don't need any more attention drawn your way."

"I know." Jandu looked away, realizing she was right. Practicing archery with Abiyar had been the most fun he'd had since arriving in Afadi. Jandu scowled, and then returned to Abiyar's courtyard.

“Change of plans,” he said glumly. He sat on the stone steps and pulled out his flute. “Time for music.”

Abiyar’s shoulders sank in disappointment. “But you could teach me—”

“—I can’t teach you anything,” Jandu snapped. He sighed. “Your weapon’s master is the one to instruct you. What do I know? I’m just a music teacher.”

Abiyar was young and brash and often wrong, but he wasn’t a fool. He stared at Jandu a long time, and then said, “You got in trouble didn’t you?” Abiyar smiled. “So teach me another song. And don’t make it a love song, please. If you teach me another one of those I’m going to puke.”



In January, as part of the New Year’s festival, Lord Indarel held an annual archery competition outside the city gates in the large open expanse between the city walls and the old cemetery.

On Rani’s insistence, Jandu dressed up for the occasion. Jandu’s roommate loaned Jandu one of her nicest zaharis, a purple cloth with an intricate pattern of peacocks along the fringes. The peacocks reminded Jandu of Keshan’s Tiwari standard, and so he loved it. He even gave in to Rani’s constant nagging and let her do his hair, tying his long black mane into an intricate braid and attaching a band of small silver jewels throughout it.

Because it was a special occasion, Jandu decided to also wear Keshan’s pendant. He had hidden the pendant long ago when he took it off Druv’s dead body, but now he wore it with secret pride, letting the light dance over the pearl and his pale skin, warming with the dark colors of his gown.

The youngest age allowed in the competition was sixteen, so this was the first year that Abiyar would participate. The entire city came out for the event, and a makeshift arena was set up in the middle of the field, complete with bamboo risers for the audience to stand and better view the action.

It was also the first time Jandu had been out of the palace walls since arriving in Afadi. He walked through the city and towards the competition with Suraya and Yudar and Baram, together as a family for the first time in almost half a year.

Jandu brimmed with excitement. He had shared no more than a few words with Yudar since arriving, and now the two of them clung to each other and shared stories as they walked slowly with the long, snaking crowd through the gates of the city to the open field. Musicians filled the air with songs and the smell of roasting meat wafted over the crowd as droves of vendors sold food from carts. Hundreds of people stopped and greeted each other and shopped and laughed as the celebration for the end of winter began.

“To think you didn’t even know how to braid your hair six months ago.” Suraya shook her head in amazement, then she leaned a little closer. “You look gorgeous and that’s a lovely pendant. Did Rani lend that to you as well?”

“No.” Jandu blushed.

Suraya’s eyebrow lifted. “Who then?”

Jandu didn’t answer, and was relieved when Yudar pulled Suraya away to show her some tapestries that local women had woven for the celebration.

Jandu and his family planned to sit up in the risers and watch the show with the rest of Afadi’s citizens, but upon seeing Yudar, Lord Indarel himself held out his hand and ushered the Parans to stand at the sidelines with the lord’s attendants. Lord Indarel and Yudar had become very close over the last few months, and now they seemed almost inseparable.

Jandu scanned the Triyas in the arena, looking for Abiyar, but he couldn’t see him.

And then, beside him, he heard someone whisper. “Janali.”

Jandu turned slightly, and saw Abiyar. He too was decked out in his finest jewels, his golden armor polished to a fine gleam.

Neither of them looked at each other, they stared at the competition arena and the current archer. Abiyar held his bow up slightly.

“Does this look okay?” Abiyar whispered to Jandu.

Jandu looked briefly at the string and then back at the competitors. “Your string should have at least six twists in it, Abi,” he whispered back. “That will round it better.”

Abiyar twisted his string as he stood beside Jandu. Jandu looked around the field. But no one was paying attention to them. Indarel fawned over his two older sons, Ramad and Parik, admiring their weapons and giving them hugs. He completely ignored Abiyar, about to compete for the first time. It was as though Indarel assumed Abiyar would fail. A fierce, protective anger flooded Jandu. He put his arm around Abiyar, angry that no one helped him in his first competition, that Abiyar’s master was nowhere in sight, and that the boy’s father wouldn’t bother to take the time to ensure his son’s bow was correctly strung.

“Remember to relax your fingers when you shoot, so your hand can act independently of your wrist,” Jandu whispered.

“All right.” Abiyar looked nervous.

Jandu smiled down at him, and touched his ornate diadem fondly. “I’m proud of you, Abi. You’re going to be great.”

“Sure I will,” Abiyar said. But the tremor in his voice gave away his nerves.

Abiyar’s time to appear was at the end of the archery competition, since he was the son of the lord. This meant he endured watching dozens of other Triya sons hit their targets. Some fared better than others. Jandu lingered towards the front of the crowd of guests, watching each shot carefully, judging each archer on their stance, the way they drew their strings, their focus.

Lord Indarel’s party at the event grew during the course of the competition, and now dozens of honored guests lingered in the area reserved for Indarel and Shali, who sat in thrones,

watching the event unfold with vague interest. Lord Indarel was constantly distracted by his guests, coming to discuss politics or business as the competition proceeded. His daughter Vaisha stood beside her mother, both of them greeting the guests formally, dressed in their finest attire.

As Jandu moved closer to the edge of the box to watch a small Triya man take aim, he felt someone touch his arm beside him. He looked up and was surprised to see it was not a member of his family.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" The man, a Triya, spoke to Jandu with a glint in his eye.

Jandu immediately moved away from the man. "Yes." He pretended to yawn. "But archery is so dull." He hoped he hadn't been watching the competition too enthusiastically.

The Triya beside him laughed. "I don't believe you. I've been watching you. You look at the archers as though you wish you were with them."

Jandu narrowed his eyes. "What an absurd idea."

The man laughed again, his eyes hungrily raking down Jandu's body. "You are as witty as you are adorable." He brought his hands together and bowed low. "I am Hanu, ambassador for my brother, Lord Firdaus of Chandamar."

The very mention of Firdaus' name made Jandu flush with anger. He studied Hanu, and realized he looked like a younger, healthier version of Darvad's friend. He was tall and had large shoulders, and also carried a noticeable belly. Triya warrior he might be, but Jandu immediately dismissed him as a threat.

His dark brown eyes locked on Jandu's waist. Jandu took another step away from him. He looked around for his brothers.

"Nice to meet you," Jandu mumbled.

"And you are?"

"Janali." Jandu didn't smile. "I tutor Lord Indarel's son Abiyar."

"Ah, yes," Hanu smiled. "I heard there was a pretty young woman who managed to win Abiyar's heart. You are the

younger sister of Esalas, the lord's dice partner, are you not?"

"Yes." Jandu looked away. "Excuse me. I need to find my family." He darted off to find Suraya and the others.

Jandu spotted Yudar and Baram just as the lord's sons entered the arena to compete. When Ramad, Afadi's heir apparent, stepped into the arena, a roar came from the crowd, and they chanted his name in pride.

Ramad was heavily adorned in gold armor and a full rainbow of colored silk, yellows and peaches and greens, his thick long hair tied back with leather, his diadem almost as large as his father's. He turned and bowed to the crowd dramatically, and the cheers rose. Lord Indarel looked beside himself with joy. Ramad strutted to the center of the arena and flexed his muscles unnecessarily as he took aim.

"Asshole," Jandu whispered under his breath. Of course, he had to remind himself that he did pretty much the same thing at his own archery competition back in Prasta. But he was a different Jandu back then.

Ramad shot a tight cluster of arrows at the center of the target. The crowd roared in joy. Jandu understood now that Abiyar did not have the same weapons master as his older brother did. There was no way these two boys were learning from the same teacher.

Ramad took his time. He had himself blindfolded and shot another volley of arrows. Many missed the bull's eye, but they still hit the target itself, which was close enough to please the crowd. Although Jandu had once gloried in this kind of grandstanding himself, he now thought it tacky, and strategically pointless.

Watching his older brother, Abiyar gripped his bow tightly, sweat breaking out across his forehead. His second brother Parik whispered something to Abiyar and Abiyar flushed in embarrassment.

Jandu gritted his teeth. These boys had no right to taunt Abiyar just for being the youngest. He tried to imagine growing up in a household where Yudar and Baram persecuted him. He

couldn't imagine it. Through thick and thin, he and his brothers had always been inseparable. Since the death of their father, Yudar and Baram had protected him.

After Ramad, Parik's demonstration had less fanfare, but it was still warmly greeted by the crowds. They cheered the boy and flowers fell from the risers to his feet. Parik was not as good as Ramad, but he was adequate. His arrow groupings were accurate, although his stance needed work.

Abiyar, too, received cheers when it was his turn to compete, but many in the crowd watched him with more curiosity than reverence. This was the first time Abiyar would have to show his skills in front of his citizens. He strutted out to the middle of the arena, and from a distance, he seemed confident. But Jandu knew him well enough to see the tremor in his step. Jandu closed his eyes and prayed for his strength and courage.

Abiyar did not do as well as some of the other boys his age in the competition, and he paled in comparison to his brothers, although his performance was far from a failure. Lord Indarel barely noticed. Jandu still hadn't seen any sign of Abiyar's archery master and his anger grew when Abiyar returned to the royal grounds, and Lord Indarel did nothing to acknowledge his son.

Abiyar's personal attendants rushed to take his bow and offer him drinks. Jandu's view of his student was blocked by the sheer number of honored guests, but he caught a glimpse of Abiyar, and could see the disappointment on his face.

"I have to talk to Abiyar," Jandu told his family. He followed Abiyar's servants around the stands to a tent that had been set up for the lord's family. Jandu hesitated at the tent flap, worried it would look suspicious if he went in uninvited. But there was no one under the risers, and he felt safe.

"Abi?" He peeped his head in.

Abiyar's servant was stripping off the boy's armor. Abiyar looked devastated. He glared at Jandu. "Go away."

Jandu sighed. "Can I talk for a—"

“Go!”

Jandu swallowed, and left the tent. He bumped directly into a man’s chest.

Hanu stared down at him. Jandu could see the tremble of excitement in the ambassador’s hands.

“Janali! What a surprise.” He reached out to touch Jandu’s arm, and Jandu backed away.

“Come, don’t toy with me,” Hanu cooed. “I just want to walk with you.”

“I can’t.” Jandu backed away further. “I’m busy.”

“You are a servant of Lord Indarel,” Hanu said. “And I am an honored ambassador. I am sure the lord could see fit to order you to accompany me.”

Jandu didn’t answer. He started back towards his family.

Hanu followed him doggedly. “I know you are not married. And I am a very generous man—”

“—Fuck off,” Jandu spat. He walked faster. Rani’s fine zahari impeded his movements. It was wrapped so tight around his legs that he could only take tiny steps.

Hanu lunged and grabbed Jandu’s arm. He looked furious.

“How *dare* you—”

Jandu drove his fist into Hanu’s mouth. When Hanu cried out in pain, Jandu stomped on his foot and then dashed as fast as he could back to the arena.

His heart pounded furiously by the time he got back to his family.

He could be severely punished for punching an ambassador. Especially the Chandamar ambassador. The peace between Afadi and Chandamar had been on a knife’s edge for the last few years, and Jandu knew it wouldn’t take much to slice through the ruse of amicability.

“What happened?” Suraya grabbed his hand, noticing the blood on it.

“Firdaus’ brother just tried to molest me. I cut my knuckle on his tooth.”

Yudar and Baram instantly glared at him.

"What?" Yudar said.

Jandu took deep breaths to steady himself. "The bastard! What did he think, I would just obey him?"

Yudar fiddled with his turban. "Oh no. This is not good."

"It's bad enough being a woman," Jandu snapped. "Now I must endure this?"

"Firdaus' brother? Hanu, the Ambassador?" Suraya asked.

Jandu put his fist to his mouth and sucked on his knuckle. "Yes. What are we going to do?"

"You are going to stay out of sight, that's what you are going to do," Yudar said. "Chandamar and Afadi are on the brink of war. This kind of insult could ruin the peace Indarel has spent years developing." He shook his head. "Everything is always difficult with you."

"Me?" Jandu asked angrily. "Why is this *my* fault?"

"Couldn't you just have politely said no?" Yudar asked.

"I did. He didn't accept it."

Baram hadn't said a word. Jandu looked at him and now saw the rage in his face.

"If he lays a hand on you, I swear I'll cut his throat," Baram growled.

Jandu had the absurd desire to laugh. It was so surreal, the whole situation. Baram having to defend *him* against another man. Jandu had never feared anyone, other than Keshan, but that was for an entirely different reason.

Yudar took a deep breath and looked at Baram. "You'll both do as I tell you. Jandu, remain in the women's quarters, and go out as little as possible. If Hanu doesn't see you, then you'll be fine. Hopefully he won't ask Lord Indarel for your dismissal."

"And if he does?" Jandu let Suraya take his hand and wrap it with a cloth.

Yudar sighed. "We'll deal with that situation if we come to it."

CHAPTER 33

FOLLOWING YUDAR'S ADVICE, JANDU REMAINED IN THE women's quarters.

If Hanu told anyone what had happened between him and Jandu, no one had heard of it. Jandu asked his most effusive source of palace gossip, Rani, but she confirmed that Hanu wasn't saying anything about Janali or being punched.

Rani was wide-eyed and thrilled with Jandu's story, however. After the competition, she sat on Jandu's bed with him and begged for a blow-by-blow of the attack and defense. And after that she asked Jandu to show her how it was done. They spent a cathartic evening punching pillows and stomping on imaginary feet. Rani's expression when she practiced the moves Jandu taught her was so violent that Jandu wondered how many times she'd been in the same position but without his skill or training.

Jandu indulged her, having grown fond of her companionship. Recently, Rani had found herself a lover, one of the grooms in the stable, and so she was gone much of the time, leaving Jandu alone and bored in his own quarters.

Lady Shali, upon hearing that Jandu had sequestered himself, ordered a soldier to escort Jandu to and from his daily music lessons so that Abiyar could continue his studies. When Jandu heard about this, he felt he'd reached a whole new level of emasculation. He sought an audience with Shali to beg her not to go to such extremes for him.

"But I have to, don't you see?" Shali was having her hair done, and smiled coyly at Jandu as he stood in her doorway, awaiting her commands. "I don't know what you have done

to him, Janali, but Abiyar is absolutely enchanted with you. You are the only tutor Abiyar has ever had that he speaks of with reverence. He begged me to see to continuing his flute lessons with you.”

The knowledge that Abiyar wanted to see him sent a warm rush of happiness through Jandu. He hadn't spoken to him since the competition, and he worried that Abiyar was angry at him for some reason. Now Jandu bowed low and thanked Shali for her assistance in securing his safety.



Back in the music room, Abiyar had a strange grin on his face.

“I'd forgotten how tiny you are,” Abiyar said.

Jandu rolled his eyes. “It's been a week, Abi.”

“Such a sweet week,” Abiyar mused.

Jandu smirked back. “I'd forgotten how rotten you are.” The two of them had taken to insulting each other lightly. Jandu briefly worried that his behavior might be construed as flirtation, but he always kept his distance from Abiyar, and just prayed the boy didn't harbor any romantic intentions.

Jandu patiently sat through a full flute lesson with Abiyar. Abiyar truly had a gift for music, unlike Jandu, and it was becoming painfully clear to both of them that the student's abilities outstripped the tutor's. Jandu remembered his own archery training under Mazar, and the day both he and his master realized he had surpassed Mazar. Jandu had felt a rush of pure pleasure, but also guilt that he'd hurt his teacher's feelings. But Mazar had shown nothing but pride at his pupil's abilities, congratulating Jandu on his achievements.

Jandu thought of that now, as he listened to Abiyar play in a way that he never could. Jandu's trills were flat and unenthusiastic. Abiyar manipulated the notes like they were puffs of air, blowing them in every direction, changing them, curving them around the rhythm. When Abiyar completed his song, Jandu clapped his hands.

“Brilliant! Abi, that was fucking brilliant!” Jandu clenched his mouth shut. Cursing was definitely not lady-like. But once again, Abiyar ignored Jandu’s social transgressions.

“I’m almost as good as you,” Abiyar said.

“Don’t be modest,” Jandu scoffed. “You’re better than me.”

Abiyar sat beside him, blushing nervously. “No. Janali, I meant...”

“...It’s okay,” Jandu said. He put his hand on Abiyar’s shoulder. “I’m very proud of you. The truth is, my musical skills are limited. At the end of this year, I shall ask your mother and father to find you a more advanced music instructor who can take your training further than I can.” He smiled. “You truly have a gift, Abi.”

Abiyar, who had turned slightly pink when Jandu touched him, now blushed bright red and fidgeted with his trousers. Jandu pulled his hand back as if scalded. He recognized the boyish enthusiasm on Abiyar’s young, shy face as he stared into Jandu’s eyes. Abiyar *did* have a crush on him.

Jandu immediately changed the subject.

“Has your weapons master, Devdan, returned to continue your weapons training?”

Abiyar frowned. “He will be gone for another extended period of time. Until my father can find a replacement, I will be without an instructor.”

Jandu shook his head. “For God’s sake, why isn’t your father getting you better training? What are you going to do if there’s ever a war in Afadi?”

“I can handle it,” Abiyar boasted. But they both knew it was a lie.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Jandu said.

Abiyar shrugged. “Sure it does. My father doesn’t care if I die or not.”

Jandu’s expression softened. “That can’t be true.”

Abiyar looked resigned. “It is.”

“Well I care,” Jandu said quietly. “You may be your father’s youngest son but that doesn’t mean you should get less training

or be treated unequally. In war, you will be expected to defend your state and this kingdom as skillfully as your older brothers. You don't have to be the heir apparent to love and protect your country."

"Of course I'll defend Afadi," Abiyar said. "But it doesn't matter to my father if I die in the process."

Jandu hesitated. "You know how I told you I once worked in Prasta, for the Parans?"

"Yes."

"Well, Jandu Paran is like you. The youngest of three sons. But even as the youngest, he was given equal amounts of training by their weapons master, Mazar. Even though he was the third son, and fourth in line for the throne, it didn't mean he was worth less than the others."

"That was Mazar," Abiyar said. "This is Indarel. My father. If it isn't about Ramad or Parik, he doesn't care." Abiyar smiled sadly. "I'm not saying that to make you feel bad for me, Janali. I'm just stating a fact. Everyone knows it. Why pretend it isn't true?"

Jandu looked at the floor, trying to come up with something positive to say. He didn't notice Abiyar get up, but when he heard the boy cough, he looked up, surprised to see Abiyar holding his bow.

Jandu narrowed his eyes. "What's this?"

Abiyar smiled. "Well, I think it's about time I take matters into my own hands. Until my father finds me another weapons master, perhaps you could teach me some lessons. You have admitted, after all, that my musical abilities have surpassed yours. But your archery skills still exceed mine."

Jandu frowned. "Abi, if anyone finds out, I could get in a lot of trouble."

"It will be our secret," Abiyar promised. He walked over and locked the door.

Jandu sighed. "And what are we going to shoot at? The wall?" He shook his head. "It will never work."

“We won’t shoot,” Abiyar’s expression was almost pleading. “You can just help me with my stance and draw, that’s all.”

Jandu looked to the door. “There are guards outside. Don’t you think they are listening?”

Abiyar’s diadem came askew and tilted on his head. Frustrated with it, he took it off and tossed it onto the settee. His hair looked rumpled and shiny.

“Who cares what they think? My brother Ramad says the guards are ignorant Suya caste who have nothing to offer the world.”

“Your brother should shut his mouth about things he knows nothing about,” Jandu said. Not for the first time, he recognized the rage he felt over a lower caste insult, and realized how much he himself had changed from the days he had been a young brash prince living in a grand palace. There were times when Jandu used to tattle on sleeping guards to get them flogged. Now he went out of his way to make sure the guards in Afadi’s palace didn’t get into trouble. His whole perception of caste had changed through poverty and insult.

“Look, stupid, smart, whatever—the guards are going to hear us talk,” Jandu said, lowering his voice. “And they are going to wonder why there is no music.”

Abiyar smiled. “So we’ll take turns playing the flute while you help me with my stance.”

A thrill of excitement rushed through Jandu.

“Well?” Abiyar grinned at him, his bow held out. “I can’t do much worse than I did at the competition. How about helping me improve?”

Jandu looked at the door, Abiyar, and the bow. A slow, dazzling grin spread across his face.

“Okay. But you do everything I say.”

“I will.”

They began their practice.



It was another season before Lord Indarel finally chose another weapons master for Abiyar. During their lessons together, Jandu had perfected Abiyar's stance and the way he held his bow. But he knew his assistance was limited without being able to see Abiyar shoot. When Abiyar's new instructor Eshau arrived, a specialist in swordplay and archery and former general from the State of Jagu Mali, Jandu optimistically hoped Abiyar would at last receive the instruction he needed.

What he hadn't counted on was how seriously Master Eshau took his job. The first day he met with Abiyar, Eshau informed the boy they would practice several hours every day, and that this time was to be strictly limited to weapons training.

Abiyar missed several flute lessons before Jandu was finally irritated enough to hunt Abiyar down, intending to have a word with him about responsibility. Of course, he was also dying to meet this new weapons master, and see Abiyar shoot.

As Jandu came around the corner of Abiyar's private courtyard, he spied Eshau, a fierce-looking man, assessing Abiyar's archery skills.

Abiyar's aim had vastly improved in the months since the New Year's festival, and he struck the target close to the bull's eye, pride radiating from his lanky body in almost visible waves. Jandu smiled, allowing himself a moment of simple happiness, seeing this boy, whom he had grown to love like a little brother, perfect the basics of Jandu's favorite sport.

When Abiyar saw Jandu, his face broke into a boyish smile. "Janali!" He motioned to Jandu. "Come watch me shoot."

Master Eshau swiveled, and glared at Jandu. Jandu stuck his chin out, straightening under Eshau's withering gaze. Jandu might have been wearing pink, he might have horrid, glittery flowers embroidered on his zahari top and a white ribbon in his hair, but he still had some small shred of pride. He returned the truculent man's challenging glare.

Master Eshau shooed Jandu out of the courtyard. “No, no, no! We are training. No distractions!” He pushed Jandu toward the gate.

Jandu wanted very badly to hurt him. “Get your hands off me.”

“Janali is all right,” Abiyar said quickly. “She used to be Jandu Paran’s charioteer.”

Jandu cringed internally. Of all the excuses Abiyar could have made, this was the worst.

Eshau burst out laughing. “What lies have you been telling, little girl? I *know* Jandu Paran, and he would *never* have you for his charioteer.”

Jandu studied Eshau’s face, but he did not recognize him. “How do you know him?”

“Get out of here,” Eshau said. “Abiyar, it is bad luck to practice archery in front of women.”

Jandu looked at the man like he was insane. “What? Where did you get that bullshit? I’ve never heard anything more preposterous—”

“—Out!” Eshau shoved Jandu all the way through the gate, and slammed shut the iron metal door.

Jandu glared at him a moment longer before swearing and walking away.

“He doesn’t know the first *thing* about Jandu Paran,” he mumbled under his breath. “Name dropper. Asshole.” He was so focused on his anger he didn’t see Hanu crossing the courtyard at the same time.

Jandu froze, but then realized that Hanu would never assault him in front of so many witnesses. Not that Hanu didn’t look like he would like to try. He watched Jandu’s cautious movement back to his quarters with malice and lust.

Right before Jandu slipped into his building, he lifted his foot slightly in Hanu’s direction, showing him the sole of his sandal. It was a childish insult, insinuating that Hanu was worse than excrement that Jandu would scrape from his foot.

The effect of the insult was instantaneous. Hanu ran towards him. But Jandu was safely back in the women's quarters before Hanu could get to him.



The next morning, Abiyar met Jandu at their regularly scheduled time, but rather than carrying his flute case, Abiyar came with a bright, slightly lop-sided bouquet of pink cas-sias. After anxiously handing Jandu the flowers and pacing the room several times, he told Jandu that Master Eshau had officially cancelled Abiyar's music lessons.

Jandu could not hide his disappointment and this caused Abiyar to pace more furiously, running his hands through his hair, looking like he was about to cry. "I tried to tell him these lessons were important to me, but he won't have it, Janali! He says that flute is for girls and if I am to be a true Triya warrior, I should dedicate all my spare time to weapons, and nothing else."

Jandu gripped the flowers tightly and took a deep breath. His role in the palace had just been made irrelevant. Abiyar went on, stating that he was sure his new weapon's master would allow Abiyar time to take up flute with Jandu again, once he had improved his fighting skills.

Jandu sat on the couch and watched Abiyar work himself into a frenzy of guilt about ending their lessons. He felt a distant sense of loss. He had been passing on his knowledge of archery for months, and took tremendous pride in Abiyar's achievements. Now, suddenly, he had been replaced, and no one would ever acknowledge the work he had done.

Abiyar sat next to Jandu nervously, and looked into his eyes. "Are you angry with me?" Abiyar asked.

Jandu sighed. "No. I am angry with Eshau, but I understand." He tried to smile. "It is for the best. You have to improve your battle skills."

Abiyar was very still. He stared at Jandu strangely.

"And, if your father allows it, I will stay here in the palace until you need me again," Jandu said. He hoped Lord Indarel

wouldn't kick him out. Less than two months of their exile remained.

"Of course he will!" Abiyar said. "If he doesn't I'll—I'll—"

"It's all right, Abi. Thank you."

Abiyar suddenly leaned over and clumsily, awkwardly, kissed Jandu.

Jandu jerked away. *Oh no.*

A sinking, hot liquid dread filled Jandu's gut. Embarrassment burned through him.

"I'm sorry." Abiyar covered his face in his hands. "I'm sorry."

Jandu swallowed, feeling sick. "Look. Abiyar. You're a great kid. But..."

Abiyar stood, looking both ashamed and desperate. "I must go, but I swear you will always have a place here."

The boy rushed from the room before Jandu could even reply.

Jandu let the flowers tumble from his feeble grasp. It hit him all at once, a debilitating low that broke Jandu's spirit. The starving. The begging. Suraya's miscarriage, losing Keshan, losing his manhood, running and hiding from Hanu, being kicked out of archery practice for being a woman. All of it was unbearable. And now, breaking a young boy's heart.

Jandu left the music room laden down with melancholy. The guard who escorted Jandu back to the women's quarters looked at him oddly but didn't comment.

When he returned to his rooms, he was surprised to see Suraya and Rani sitting together on the carpet, propped up by pillows, giggling over what appeared to be an absurdly large crock of wine. Jandu didn't even have enough vigor to scowl at them.

Seeing his face, Rani pursed her lips, her hands forming fists at her hips. "You look terrible."

"And I was feeling so great before you said that." Jandu collapsed on his bed. His tight zahari top restricted his breathing. He adjusted it, frustrated and sick of this whole despicable charade.

"You need a drink," Rani said.

Jandu moaned. "Rani, I'm in no mood for—"

"Drink!" Rani ordered. "Azari agrees with me, don't you, Azari?"

Suraya nodded and handed Jandu a cup, then leaned over and lit a new stick of incense with one that was burning down. The fragrance of sandalwood and pine smoke fluttered across the room and out the open window like a streamer.

Jandu sat down cross-legged with the women and allowed them to pour him cup after cup of wine. He hadn't eaten much that day so the wine worked quickly. He was lulled into complacency as Suraya and Rani gossiped about other women in the palace, and talked about the state of affairs outside Afadi's gates.

It had been a while since Jandu had had so much to drink, and he over-estimated what his small body could handle. He noticed with detached interest that his toes felt incredibly far away, and tingled coldly despite the heat of the afternoon.

Rani leaned over Suraya's relaxed body and retrieved one of her endless sewing projects. Suraya had brought sewing work with her as well, and within minutes the two of them were drunkenly giggling and embroidering, their voices lilting and mingling in a high-pitched, constant chatter about the various downfalls of men.

The conversation shifted to men and women, and Rani filled Suraya in on her ongoing, tumultuous romance with the groom.

"I just don't understand his behavior sometimes," Rani confessed, refilling all three of their cups. Jandu noted that her cheeks were very flushed. Even Suraya looked under the influence, her eyes drooping heavy and low, a gentle, soft smile on her face.

"One minute, he treats me like a goddess," Rani explained. "And the next he acts like I am scum! Like the only reason he ever tolerated me in the first place was for sex."

Jandu drained his wine cup. "That's probably true."

"Janali!" Suraya warned him with a glare. "Don't say that."

Rani looked appalled.

Jandu shrugged listlessly. "It's the truth. Men mostly think about fucking, killing, and eating. Trust me."

Suraya burst into laughter. "That's so funny, coming from you."

"Why?" Jandu smiled crookedly.

Suraya shook her head. "You know why."

"Why?" Rani asked.

Suraya laughed. "Janali used to have a very high opinion about men. She used to think they could do no wrong."

"That's not true," Jandu slurred, holding out his cup for a refill. "I've always thought there were shitty men out there. Just not me."

Rani furrowed her eyebrows. "What?"

Suraya's glared at Jandu. "Janali is very drunk. She makes no sense when she's like this."

Jandu was too gone to care about anything anymore. He watched an ant crawl across their floor in silent fascination. Its legs were so *small*.

"So, have you had a lover before, Janali?" Rani reclined against several of their pillows, her needle bright against the orange fabric.

"That's none of your business," Jandu said.

"Come on, tell me," Rani goaded.

Jandu looked at Suraya. She wouldn't make eye contact, but she wore a knowing grin.

Other than the constant, quiet puncture of fabric, both of the women fell silent. "I fell in love with someone once," Jandu finally admitted.

Rani smiled. "Was he a servant?"

"No. A lord."

"What was he like?"

“He’s tall,” Jandu said. “Strong, but he has a lithe body. Luscious lips. Gorgeous black hair. And he can make you believe anything.”

Jandu blushed furiously. He had no idea why he just said that. The wine made his body tingle sickly. He felt Suraya’s gaze, and had to concentrate to focus on her face. She no longer smiled. Her mouth formed a grim line.

Rani wanted more. “Well? What happened?”

“Nothing,” Jandu said. “He is a Triya warrior. I’m a servant. End of story.”

“But you had sex with him?”

Jandu’s eyes grew wide. “Rani! Dirty little mind. Not everyone is a slut like you.”

Rani laughed. “Well, did you?”

Suraya’s mouth twitched slightly. “Yeah, did you?”

Jandu felt like his face was on fire. “I’m not answering that.”

“She did! She did!” Rani cried, laughing and clapping her hands. “You wouldn’t avoid the question if you hadn’t. What did his dick look like?”

“Enough! You perverts are more depraved than a room of drunken soldiers.” Exhaustion and drunken nausea washed through Jandu, and this party wasn’t much fun anymore. It had barely kept off the darkness he felt that morning. Now all of his earlier depression came flaring back, along with a strong desire to puke. Jandu’s body handled alcohol differently than it used to. Jandu was never a heavy drinker, but he at least could hold his booze. Now the room spun around him.

Luckily, Rani seemed to have reached her evening quota at the same time as well. Without as much as a ‘good night,’ she leaned back against the pillows, closed her eyes, and promptly passed out.

Once they were both sure she was really out cold, Jandu and Suraya cleaned up the mess they made and draped a light blanket over Rani, gingerly pulling the embroidery from her hands.

"I guess she'll miss her appointment with her lover tonight," Jandu said.

Suraya looked down at her and nodded. "I should probably go as well. Yudar will wonder where I am."

"I'll walk you through the courtyard," Jandu said, thinking a walk might do him good. However, he had second thoughts about moving as soon as he stood. He lurched and leaned against the wall for support.

"You okay?" Suraya watched him with a strange, calculating glint in her eyes.

"Yes." He lowered his voice. "I'm just not used to that much wine in this small body." As he closed his door behind them, his stomach somersaulted.

As they passed a small alcove in the wall with a statue of the Prophet Bandruban, Suraya pushed Jandu into the shadows.

Jandu frowned. "What?"

"I need to ask you something." She spoke in a tense whisper. She stared down at Jandu, her arms crossed. She didn't look angry, but she wasn't pleased either.

"Maybe we should talk about this later." Jandu thought the statue of Bandruban looked particularly sinister.

"No. I don't know when we'll have a chance to talk alone again." She glanced down the hallway, and then looked back at Jandu. "I deserve the truth." Suraya's voice was a whisper, but it was strong with emotion.

Nausea swelled and receded through Jandu's body like waves. "All right."

Suraya took a deep breath. Her eyes never left his face. "You were never worried about being a 'sister fucker,' were you?"

"We are *not* having this conversation." He tried to push past her, out of the alcove.

Suraya grabbed his arm and held him there. "Jandu, you owe me the truth. This masquerade as a woman fits your true self better than any of us originally supposed, doesn't it?"

Jandu's fists clenched. "No! I am a man, Suraya!"

"Who loves men," she said.

"Who loves *a* man," Jandu spat. He backed away from her, his stomach churning. Oh God, did he just say that? His back rested against the base of the statue.

Suraya took another deep breath, and then crossed her arms. "So. How long have you been Keshan's lover?"

Jandu leaned over and threw up. He held out his hand against the wall to steady himself. His entire body began to shake in fear.

And then Suraya was beside him suddenly, holding back his braid and gently rubbing his back as he retched on the ground.

"Oh, Jandu!" Suraya's face was stricken with remorse. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to frighten you!"

Jandu groaned and leaned back on his heels. He wiped his mouth with a shaky hand.

Suraya put her arm around his shoulders.

"I'm sorry! I just wanted the truth, that's all. That's all."

Jandu closed his eyes, willing his stomach to calm down. "I'm okay," he lied. This was turning out to be one of the worst days of his life.

She held him tightly. "You must know, Jandu. I will love you no matter what."

"Are you going to tell my brothers?" Jandu asked, throat scratchy and raw.

Suraya's eyes widened. "God, no! Yudar would never forgive you."

Jandu swallowed. "I'm sorry."

"Me too. I just wanted the truth." She smiled weakly. "Can you walk? I'll take you back to your room."

"Of course I can walk! I'm a warrior," Jandu said, but he did need her help walking. They turned back towards his room. His head reeled, his throat felt like it was on fire. He kept his mind focused on his door. He just had to get there.

Twenty steps at most. His goal was not to be sick again until he was alone.

As they walked, she tentatively whispered to him.

“You didn’t answer my question.” Suraya smiled at him shyly. “How long have you two been in love?”

Jandu studied her face carefully, trying to determine if she really wanted him to answer that question or not. Finally, he just shrugged. “Since your archery competition.”

Suraya snorted. “How flattering. You fell in love with someone else on our wedding day.”

Jandu laughed weakly. “I wasn’t intending anything, really. It’s all Keshan’s fault. He’s a vixen.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“I tried punching him once, but it didn’t make things better.”

“What?”

“Never mind.” Jandu leaned on her as they walked.

“Are you happy together?” Suraya asked.

Jandu saw the hope, the acceptance, the nervousness in her eyes. He felt the warmth of her love. She knew him so well. And now, with growing excitement, he realized there was at least one person in the world from which he no longer had to hide.

“Yes,” Jandu said. “We love each other.”

“That’s all I care about.” Suraya stopped at the door, and stroked Jandu’s braid. “I just want you to be happy, that’s all.”

“Thank you,” he whispered into her ear. And then he dashed into his room, slammed the door, and was violently sick in the empty chamber pot.

CHAPTER 34

IF ONLY HE COULD KILL HIMSELF.

No. Tarek shook his head. Suicide was the greatest form of cowardice.

Tarek prayed harder. Since the army's triumphant return to Prasta, Tarek had been plagued by his bruised conscience. Now he bathed and begged forgiveness from God, knowing even as he did so that there could be no redemption from the evils he had committed.

Instead of tending his sick father, he had been swooning over his best friend. He did not even attend his own father's funeral pyre. Out of jealousy, he let Aisa slip out of his hands and commit suicide. He didn't bother to check on his lover who had risked his life to save him. And these evils, they were not something he could blame on Darvad's temper, or his low caste, or any other person. They were his sins. Tarek's soul was cracking, great, black rents, fissures of self-loathing.

Tarek dressed and then made his way through the courtyards and gardens of the palace towards the soldier's quarters to check on Anant. After the battle, Tarek requested that Anant be brought back to the palace to recuperate under the care of Prasta's finest physicians. He deserved it, having fought so bravely, and Mazar never questioned Tarek's request.

Tarek and Anant rarely exchanged more than a few words, Tarek checking on Anant's progress unemotionally, hoping somehow the soft cotton sheets and the leopard skin blankets would make up for the fact that Tarek had forgotten Anant's sacrifice on the battlefield. But with Anant it was impossible to tell. The man usually expressed himself in facial gestures, but

now his face was so swollen that Tarek could no longer read his commander's emotions.

That morning, Anant remained sleeping. Tarek stood in the doorway, looking in. Anant's attending physician rushed to Tarek's side.

"He is much better," the physician whispered. "The King's Astrologer predicts he will recover completely in time."

Tarek nodded. He heard a commotion starting in the garden outside, and so he excused himself and checked to see what was happening. He recognized some of Darvad's personal attendants, carrying in the King's belongings. So Darvad had finally returned from Pagdesh.

Tarek had no news from Darvad since he had left to find Druv. He and Mazar awaited Darvad's return in the palace for a week, Mazar hungry to share news of their triumph, Tarek desperate to beg his friend's forgiveness for losing Aisa.

Tarek followed the commotion out towards the palace gate, only to discover that Darvad had arrived earlier in the morning and had not bothered to send word to him. This was not a good sign. Tarek was usually the first person Darvad sought out when he returned home. With a sense of foreboding, Tarek made his way through the palace until he found Darvad in one of the gardens, practicing mace with Iyestar Adaru.

Tarek entered the garden just as Darvad and Iyestar began to spar in earnest. They swung at each other with finely carved maces. These sparring maces were more ceremonial than effective, but they still landed blows with tremendous force. The clanging metal echoed through the high-walled yard and rang through Tarek's bones.

Tarek coughed to announce himself. "I'm sorry to disturb you," he lied. It seemed like truth constantly slipped further away.

Darvad dropped his mace, panting. He grabbed a cotton cloth from the table and wiped his face of sweat. He then went up to Tarek and hugged him, as was his custom. But there was no warmth in his eyes.

"Well?" Darvad asked.

Tarek looked at him, startled. "Haven't you heard? We won Jezza."

"Congratulations." Darvad didn't smile.

"I heard your victory was impressively quick," Iyestar said. He followed Darvad's example and wiped his face on a towel. He then immediately poured himself a goblet of wine. Tarek wanted one as well.

"How was your search?" Tarek asked. "Did you find Druv?"

"Druv is dead." Darvad went to the table and pulled an arrow from his bag. He handed it to Tarek. "This was in his throat. Recognize it?"

Tarek turned the arrow in his hands. At the base of the fletching, he saw the band of blue that marked the arrow as Jandu Paran's.

"You found them?" he asked.

"They were gone by the time I arrived." Darvad smiled coldly. "But it doesn't matter now. This arrow proves that the Parans broke the rules of the dice game. They were discovered, but instead of submitting themselves they murdered Druv. They will have to go into exile for another three years."

Tarek watched Iyestar out of the corner of his eye for reaction, wondering if Iyestar knew just how involved his brother Keshan was with Jandu.

Iyestar drank deeply from his glass. He bowed to Tarek, and then to Darvad. "I'm going to wash up," he said. "I'll see you at dinner."

Darvad nodded at Iyestar, but he then turned his cold stare back to Tarek. As soon as Iyestar was out of sight, Darvad sneered.

"How *could* you?"

"How could I what?" Tarek tried acting innocent.

"Aisa is dead!"

"She killed herself, Darvad. There was nothing I could do."

“You should have prevented her,” Darvad said. He used the rag to wipe the sweat from his hair.

“If I had to watch her twenty four hours a day to make sure she didn’t kill herself, do you really think she would have been happy carried off to be your bride?” Tarek stepped closer. “There are other women, Darvad.”

Darvad angrily shook his head. “I don’t want other women. I wanted her. She was special.”

“I’m sorry.” Tarek lowered his head, feeling the weight of his words. Darvad would never know how deeply sorry he was.

Darvad sighed, and then threw his rag on the ground. His expression lightened briefly. “Well. How did the battle go?”

“It was fast and brutal,” Tarek said. “Mazar was amazing.”

Darvad flashed a smile. Tarek felt his blood warm with that gaze. He was accepted again.

“Mazar should be the most feared Triya in all of Marhavad,” Darvad said. “He knows shartas which would turn your hair white if you knew!”

“I’m not sure we would have won so soundly if it hadn’t been for his shartas.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I saw him early this morning when I arrived. He looked ten years younger. Old warriors need battle to remind them of their youth.” Darvad slung his arm around Tarek’s shoulder. He stank of sweat, but Tarek did not mind. The mere presence of Darvad always brought a flush of love and desire that stunned Tarek by its strength. Nothing he had ever felt could rival the strength of emotions he had for this man beside him.

“I’m sorry about Aisa,” Tarek said again.

Darvad sighed. “What a waste. She was so beautiful.”

Tarek tried to find comforting words, but he couldn’t. He had done enough lying for one day.

Darvad didn’t seem to need words, however. He released Tarek and stopped at the door of his private rooms. “Join Iyestar and I for dinner.”

“Of course.” And just like that, everything was all right between them. If only the other parts of his life could be resolved so easily.



To Tarek's relief, dinner was a small affair. Darvad entertained Iyestar, Tarek, and Mazar in his own chambers, the men growing drunk and laughing together as Tarek and Mazar recounted their triumph.

Tarek spoke about Jezza proudly, but there was a sourness to the battle now. Even though he took great pride in his victory, and the thrill of battle sang in his soul, he had allowed terrible things to happen.

Darvad laughed. “I am so proud of you both! And jealous. I know my father taught us to love peace above all other things, but my body cries out for war. I want to fight again. I wish someone would openly challenge Prasta.”

Iyestar was very drunk. He slurred as he spoke. “No one is going to challenge Prasta, Darvad. It is too powerful.”

“Do you have any enemies you'd like me to dispose of?” Darvad asked him.

They all laughed. Iyestar shook his head. “If we did, Keshan would simply sweet talk them into forgiving us. My brother is the greatest weapon we have. Just put him in a room with a tyrant, and by the end of the hour, the man is Keshan's best friend.” Iyestar closed his eyes and smiled. “Why fight when you have Keshan on your side?”

Darvad nodded politely. But Tarek saw the doubt in Darvad's eyes.

“Has Keshan heard from the Parans?” Darvad asked.

Iyestar's eyes shot open. “Why would you ask me that, Darvad?” He sounded hurt. “I don't want to be in the middle of this. Leave me out of your family affairs.”

“I'm sorry.” Darvad touched Iyestar's leg affectionately and Tarek felt an absurd sting of jealousy. “I know it is unfair of me to ask these things. But I worry about it relentlessly.”

“I took an oath on behalf of all of Tiwari not to help the Parans,” Iyestar reminded him. “That includes Keshan.”

“Your brother has a tendency to break rules when he feels like it,” Darvad pointed out.

Iyestar sighed. “True. But he knows the honor of our people is at stake. Above all, Keshan is extremely loyal to those he loves.”

Tarek wondered if Iyestar knew what kind of love was shared between Keshan and Jandu. To him, it had seemed blatantly apparent. But he was more inclined than others to detect such feelings between men.

Iyestar’s large head bobbed on his shoulders, and then snapped upwards as he started to pass out. He stood up slowly. Automatically, everyone else did as well.

“I should go to bed,” Iyestar said, yawning. “It is a long trip back to Tiwari.”

“Thank you for coming,” Darvad said. The two men embraced, and then Iyestar bowed respectfully to Mazar and Tarek as he left the room. Mazar made his exit as well. When Tarek turned to follow suit, Darvad stopped him, resting his hand on Tarek’s back.

“Wait a moment,” Darvad whispered. He shut and locked his door.

Excitement flushed through Tarek’s body.

Darvad turned to Tarek, a sheepish grin on his face. “I have a present for you.”

Darvad swayed slightly as he approached Tarek. Tarek realized Darvad was drunker than he let on. He was always good at holding his liquor.

Darvad stood so close to Tarek, Tarek could smell the wine on his breath. Every part of Tarek’s mind screamed for him to reach out and forcefully kiss Darvad with all his strength. He would push Darvad to the floor and drive his tongue into his mouth. Tarek was bigger and stronger than Darvad. He could have him if he chose to.

“When I was on my way to Pagdesh, I performed sacrifices at all the temples along the way to try and earn a boon,” Darvad said. His voice was low, quivering with excitement. His hair shimmered in the flickering lights of the lamps, it glowed almost golden brown. “I was hoping to win the Gods’ favor and to successfully catch the Parans in hiding, but they did not grant this to me.” Darvad stepped even closer. Their bodies were mere inches apart. Tarek felt his throat closing with the strength of his desire.

“But one of the Draya priests at a temple near the Pagdesh border was moved by my devotion and gave me something else,” Darvad whispered. His eyes shone, bright and happy. He held out his hand, and then closed his eyes. His lips worked silently as he whispered a sharta under his breath. There was a noise—off in the distance, a sound like a thunderstorm cracking far away—and then out of thin air a small, golden spear appeared in Darvad’s hand.

Both the men stared at the weapon, awestruck. It was an unusual spear, only three feet in length, and thin, barely an inch in diameter. The metal shimmered and wavered as if it were liquid, as if the weapon itself were alive. The tip was so sharp and fine it seemed as if it tapered down into nothingness. Hundreds of ancient letters spiraled across the surface of the metal. Tarek had never seen anything so beautiful.

Tarek had to concentrate in order to speak. “What is it?” he whispered.

Darvad’s smile stretched from ear to ear. “It is a weapon of the Yashva demons, the Korazsharta. This spear is crafted with a Yashva curse, to fatally hit its target, every time.” Darvad used his free hand to grab Tarek’s own. Tarek felt like he had been shocked. The contact was so warm, so sensual. Darvad uncurled Tarek’s fist, opened his palm. He transferred the spear to Tarek’s hand.

“I want you to have it,” Darvad said.

Tarek’s hand trembled with excitement. Even though his hand twitched, the spear he held didn’t seem to move.

Watching the irregular steadiness of the weapon hurt his eyes. Although the gold looked heavy, it weighed almost nothing.

“Darvad...” he began.

“...Take it,” Darvad urged. He squeezed Tarek’s other hand. Electricity seemed to pass between them. “I want you to have it, to defeat Jandu.”

Tarek swallowed. “You should keep it. I don’t deserve it.”

“Yes you do.”

“No. Darvad...” Where could Tarek’s confession begin? Anant’s broken face? Aisa’s terrified eyes? His father’s empty bedroom? His own, disgusting urges?

“You are my best friend. Only you are worthy of such a weapon. I thought of you the moment I saw it.” Darvad smiled.

Tarek gripped the spear. “Thank you,” he said, choking with emotion. “I wish I could have... brought you something as well.”

They were both silent, both aware of the regret and disappointment of Aisa. Darvad took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. “I want your friendship more than anything else.”

Tarek weighed the spear in his hand, testing its balance. “You will always have it. You know that.”

“I do.” Darvad smiled again, large and bright, and he laughed. “Isn’t it fantastic! I can’t wait to see Jandu’s face when you toss this at him!”

Tarek smiled as well. He looked at the spear. “How do I conjure it?”

“To get rid of it, simply drop it. It is a celestial weapon, so it will not fall to the ground.”

Tarek turned his hand over and let go of the spear. It disappeared before it hit the ground. He shook his head in amazement.

“Incredible.”

“To conjure it again, you must recite the sharta I learned from the priest.”

THE ARCHER'S HEART

Emboldened by Darvad's kindness, Tarek reached out and put his hand on Darvad's armor. He let his hand rest there, on Darvad's chest. He didn't push, but the contact was there, and it made Darvad raise his eyebrows.

"Teach me," Tarek said.

CHAPTER 35

“YOU EAT IT.” KESHAN PUSHED THE LAST PASTRY ON THE PLATE towards Ajani.

“No, you eat it.” She pushed it back towards him.

Keshan lifted an eyebrow at Iyestar, who sat beside him with his eyes closed. “You want it?”

Iyestar belched. The three of them sat in Keshan’s private courtyard for lunch, catching up on Iyestar’s visit to Prasta. There was a storm brewing out at sea and large, menacing waves crashed upon the rocks below.

“Come on, Ajani,” Keshan urged. He grinned. “You need to get fatter.”

“Why, so you can make up more excuses to sleep around?” Ajani asked, smirking.

Iyestar cracked an eye open. “Hello. I’m here.”

“I see you,” Ajani chided.

“I thought I’d remind you.” Iyestar closed his eye again.

Keshan shook his head. “Fine, fine, I’ll eat it.” His loose hair blew into his eyes, and Keshan brushed his bangs out of his face. All three of them were dressed casually, enjoying a rare respite from governing for the day. Keshan reveled in the feeling of the wind rustling through his hair. He reached for the last pastry.

“You don’t have to eat it,” Ajani said. “I can call a servant to take it away.”

“No, I feel bad for it.” Keshan put the pastry on his plate. “It’s lonely, all by itself on a big empty plate. We ate all its family members. He wants to join them. He is sad.”

Iyestar shook his head. "You are insane, Keshan." He stood up slowly, stretching his long arms as he did so. "Are we going to practice or not?"

Keshan bit into the spicy pastry, closing his eyes as he did so. It was no longer piping hot as the first few had been, but it was still delicious.

Keshan looked to his brother. "I thought you would be tired of practicing mace after dueling Darvad all week."

"I'm not talking about maces," Iyestar said. "I want to practice swords, remember? We discussed this last night."

"I wasn't paying attention to you." Keshan winked at Ajani, who laughed.

Iyestar sighed. "Some day I'm going to prove to the world how evil you really are. Just wait."

"We shouldn't exercise right after eating," Keshan said.

Iyestar closed his eyes once more and tilted his face up to catch the hot July sun. At times like this, Keshan's older brother resembled a big cat.

"I'll carry you if you get a cramp," Iyestar said.

Keshan smiled. He picked up the last bite of pastry in his hand and popped it into his mouth.

Suddenly, his vision went blank.

Jandu cried out. A man's fist smashed into Jandu's face. With a dull crack, Jandu's nose broke, spurting blood across the bed.

Keshan spat out his food. The blood drained from his face.

Ajani noticed. "Keshan? What's wrong?"

He tried to smile. "Nothing."

Jandu choked as a man gripped his throat with both hands and strangled him.

Keshan stood so quickly that his chair fell backwards. Iyestar reached out and touched Keshan's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Keshan looked at Iyestar, trying to control his panic.

It always happened like this.

Whenever Keshan had visions, at first they made no sense, consisting of nothing but a jumble of images and sounds. Keshan needed to meditate in order to clarify the order of events, understand what would happen.

“I need to rest a bit,” Keshan lied. He saw the understanding on his brother’s face and the confusion in Ajani’s.

“Go then,” Iyestar told him.

As Keshan made his way to his room, he heard his wife following him, so he locked his door. He sat on the floor and tried to calm down as he sat in lotus position.

A shadow fell over Jandu’s face. He looked terrified. Jandu shut his eyes as someone jerked his head back by his long hair.

Keshan had to reach farther back in time. He had to see what had happened before.

The pink blossoms of a cherry tree blew loose across a white courtyard. Men walked past guards, led by a thin man in a turban.

Dice rolled. Someone begged forgiveness. Others laughed.

Keshan scrunched his eyes closed, concentrating on the images he saw, the sounds he heard. The vision shifted.

There was a stark but finely crafted room, with a marble floor and white down pillows. A man in a dark yellow turban set up a dice board. Three other men entered the room. One of them studied the man in the turban curiously.

“You are Esalas?” he asked.

The man in the turban nodded. “Lord Indarel is on a hunting trip with his eldest son, and his wife has asked me to entertain you until his return. Would you like to play a game of dice?”

The guest smiled. “Of course.”

Keshan recognized the man immediately as Firdaus Trinat, lord of Chandamar. It had been years since Keshan last saw him at the palace, and Firdaus gained weight. His black hair now hung in a long ponytail down his back, his face rough with a beard.

Keshan also recognized one of Firdaus' companions. Hanu was the lord's younger brother, ambassador to Afadi. The fact that the two men appeared in a vision where Jandu was hurt did not surprise Keshan as much as he thought it would.

But the servant in the turban also looked familiar. Keshan closed his eyes and focused. He could feel like he was there if he concentrated hard enough. He relaxed his body into a trance-like state, until he could no longer feel his limbs, hear the sound of the ocean through his windows, or smell the incense of his own room. He concentrated on the white room in his vision, and on the man in the center of it.

He was thin and had a dark beard, but his eyes shone clearly with intelligence. Under the turban, it was hard to see the details of the man's face, but it was Yudar Paran, much changed from his years in exile, but still recognizable if one knew what to look for.

Firdaus asked Yudar what they would gamble. Yudar protested that he had nothing of value, and would play without staking anything. In response, Hanu opened a large chest of jewels, offering these to the dice teacher.

"I have nothing to offer in return," Yudar protested.

"Yes you do." Firdaus smiled. "I hear from my brother than you have a beautiful sister."

Yudar stiffened. He backed away from the dice board.

Firdaus smiled thinly. "My brother has not stopped talking about Janali since he first laid eyes on her."

"What are you suggesting?" Yudar whispered.

Firdaus shrugged. "Wager her. Just for one night. Me, Hanu, and my friend would like the comfort someone like her can provide."

Yudar blanched. "Impossible."

Firdaus said nothing. He and his friends watched Yudar expectantly.

"Are you mad?" Yudar looked like he was about to be sick.

"Do you think I would let my sister sleep with you?"

“I mean no offense, Esalas. I just want to play dice, and I know you have nothing else to your name. And in return, I offer a great amount of wealth and jewels, which would honor your own wife.”

Yudar stared at the dice board. He was calculating, considering the odds. In his mind, he could not lose. And so he risked nothing.

“We play by Prasta rules,” Yudar stated firmly.

Firdaus laughed, and pulled out a set of ivory dice from his pocket. “Excellent!” Firdaus, Hanu, and their companion sat around the dice board.

Yudar looked at the men, and then steadied his resolve. He grabbed his dice. “I’m first.”

Keshan’s rage distorted the vision and in a moment it was gone.

He paced his room, letting the salty breezes of the ocean wash over his bare arms and chest. He angrily ran his hands through his hair. He stared at his bed for a moment, remembering the nights he had made love to Jandu under those sheets. Jandu had been so proud then, so full of life, strong and witty and brave. He thought of Jandu’s brother, a man who was supposed to protect his younger siblings, gambling Jandu away like he were silver. Keshan wanted to kill Yudar. Keshan stuck his head out the window, watching his emotions reflected in the angry sea below, churning relentlessly in the storm, crashing upon the city’s cliff like a purposeful assault.

If Keshan was going to see the rest of the vision, he had to calm down.

Keshan breathed deeply, slowly. He lit more incense, and sat on his bed, cross-legged. He listened to the waves, to the sound of his own household, the laughter of someone in a room below his, the clanking of plates, the distant whinnying of horses, and let the familiar and comforting atmosphere of Tiwari rock him into a lull, let him forget anger and fear, until he found his center of concentration again.

He closed his eyes, and imagined Yudar. The vision came flooding back to him, jagged and piecemeal. They were like images from a new memory.

Yudar held the dice.

The smell of lotus filled the air, and sweat from the men.

The sun streamed in from a high window.

Keshan focused.

Yudar was losing. Firdaus' pawns moved across the board, weakening Yudar's position. Firdaus rolled a six and the game ended.

Yudar's face was void of color. He stared at the dice board in shock, looking like a man who has been shot through the heart.

"It was a lucky throw," Firdaus said with a frown.

"No..." Yudar covered his face with his hands.

"That's the problem with dice," Firdaus said, stretching. "You can have all the skill in the world, but it means nothing if you run out of luck."

"No." Yudar's entire body began to tremble. "Please," Yudar croaked. "Forgive me! I can't bear it. Janali, she's—she's very special to me."

Firdaus' friend smirked. "You should have thought of that before you wagered her."

Yudar glared at him. "Shut your mouth, servant!"

"What are you, a Triya?" The man shot back. "Go ahead and retract your promise—we'll see what Lord Indarel has to say about it."

Yudar moaned, curling in on himself as if he were going to be sick.

Firdaus stood and stretched once more. "We'll be decent about this, Esalas. We won't tell anyone. There will be no shame on her, or on you." He put on his shoes at the door, and his companions followed him. "Will you show us to Janali's room?"

Yudar looked like he was choking, terrible retching sounds coming from his throat.

“Esalas?”

Yudar stared at the floor.

“Esalas?” Firdaus raised an eyebrow. “That is your name, isn’t it?”

Yudar looked up. “Yes. Of course. Follow me.”

The men emerged into the blazing afternoon sunlight of the southern coast. They crossed through a large white courtyard, past a blooming cherry tree, past guards who were stationed there to protect the women inside. Yudar spoke with the guards and they warily let the men pass.

Once again Keshan’s fury engulfed the vision. He jumped from his bed and grabbed his sword. If the cherry tree was blooming in his vision, then he had no time. What was going to happen would happen any day, if not right this moment. Keshan strapped on his armor.

He whispered a sharta and stepped into the Yashva world, Firdaus’ cousins be damned.

THE ARCHER'S HEART

List of 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; husband of Mishari Lam*
- 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*

ASTRID AMARA

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*

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*

Mishari Lam: *Wife of Druv Majeo, Lord of Pagdesh*

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*

THE ARCHER'S HEART

- 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*
Hedran 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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