

THE ARCHER'S HEART

BOOK ONE OF THREE



ASTRID AMARA

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BY
ASTRID AMARA



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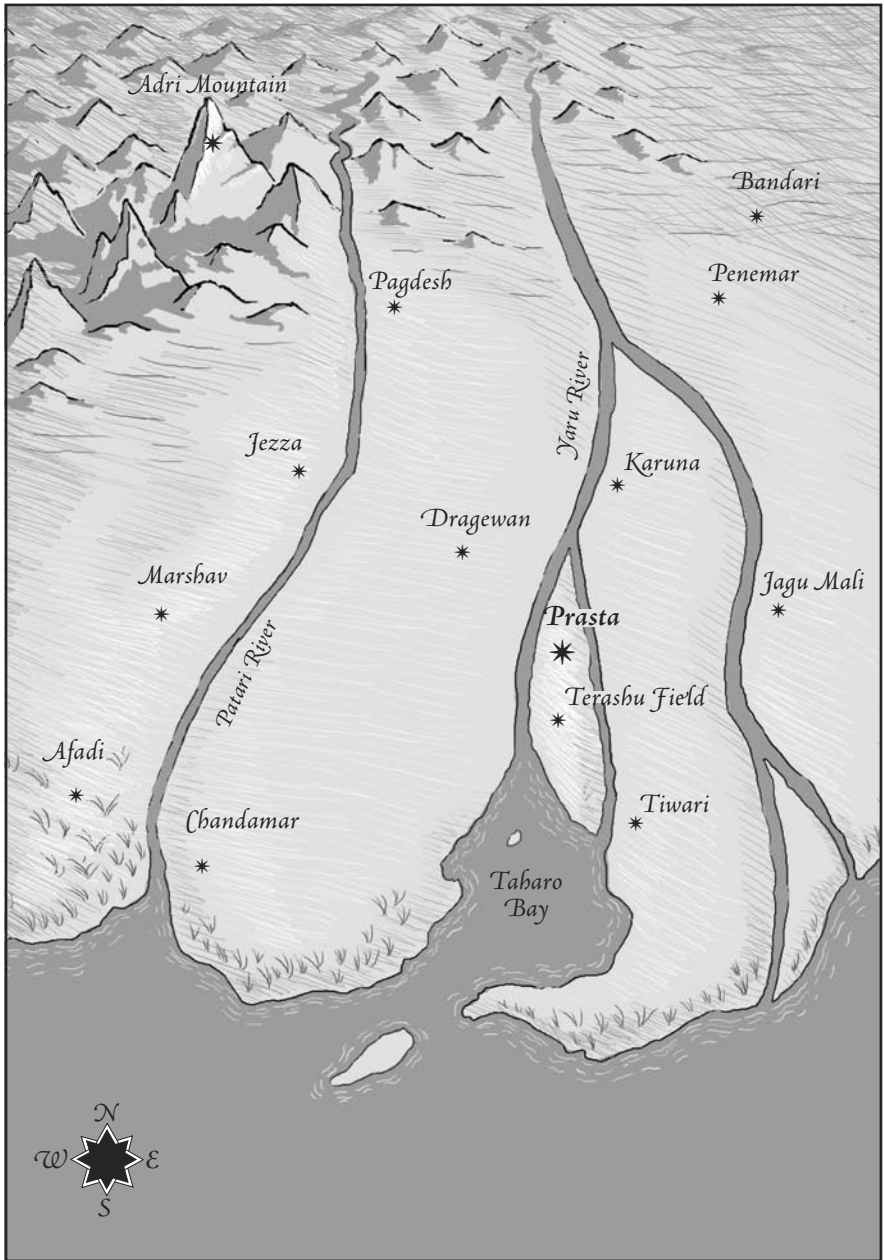
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This book is dedicated to Angus.

MARHAVAD



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CHAPTER 1

AFTER FIVE YEARS IN EXILE, THE CITY OF PRASTA'S VIBRANCY overwhelmed Keshan Adaru's senses. The sweltering streets boomed with festival music. Craftsmen and dancers mingled with pickpockets and scam artists and animal herders as they all plied their trades in the tight crowds. As Keshan drew in a breath of the humid air, the aromas of cheese, curry and roasting chicken mingled with the scent of a thousand holy juniper wood fires to make the city smell, for that one afternoon, sacred. Yet the sheer noise of the festival transformed what was considered a pious city into a place where the hot monsoon hung low and damp with the weight of unbridled revelry.

The annual monsoon festival had swollen Prasta's already burgeoning population. City hostels overflowed and the wide streets teemed with men and animals. Draya pilgrims and priests moved in violet-robed streams and both Suya caste craftsmen and lowly Chaya servants moved aside for Keshan and his brother. Hiding themselves in the deepest shadows of alleys and midden, the untouchable Jegora kept well away. They didn't even dare to raise their eyes to meet Keshan's gaze.

Born to the lordly Triya caste, he and his brother Iyestar outranked even the Draya. Men hurried to drive their oxen aside and pilgrims bowed in reverence as Keshan's chariot rolled past.

Keshan's older brother, Iyestar, nodded to the palace walls up ahead. "Who do you think is going to win Suraya?"

Keshan shrugged. "I'm not sure. It's been years since I've been in the palace. I have no idea whose skills have developed

since I was last here.” Keshan gripped the central pole of the chariot as it bounced over the rutted streets near the market. “I suppose she grew up to be gorgeous?”

“She’s the sexiest woman in Marhavad,” Iyestar said. “Add to the fact that her father is lord of the wealthiest state in the kingdom, and you can pretty much count that everyone is going to be at the competition today.”

“If either Yudar Paran or Darvad Uru win her, it will greatly improve their chances of being chosen as the next king, given Lord Nadaru’s political influence.”

“Nadaru favors Yudar,” Iyestar told Keshan. “He is a traditionalist. He’s always been supportive of Yudar’s claim to the throne.”

“Is Yudar any good at archery?” Keshan asked.

Iyestar laughed. “Are you kidding? I’d be surprised if he could string a bow. He’s too busy reading his religious texts and passing judgment to spend any time with weapons.”

Their chariot approached the western bridge across the Yaru River. The smells of fish and sewage washed over Keshan, quickly followed by the refreshing scent of jasmine, wafting from the palace gardens.

“Of course, marrying Lord Nadaru’s daughter certainly wouldn’t do our family any harm either.” Iyestar looked wistful, then glanced to Keshan. “Do you think you might try for her?”

“No. Darvad can have her, if he can win her.” Keshan shook his head. “I haven’t returned to Prasta to find another wife. I’m looking for a man.”

Iyestar’s eye went wide.

“Not so loud, Keshan!” Iyestar hissed. His gaze darted over the crowd as if anyone could hear them over cries of street performers or the booms of pilgrims’ drums.

“It’s not what you think,” Keshan assured his brother. “At least not yet.” He couldn’t help but tease a little. “The man I need is the one from my vision. I will find him here. I know that much.”

“I have no doubt that you are right,” Iyestar admitted. “But for your first day back from exile, could you at least try not to cause a scandal with talk of visions of the future and great uprisings against the Triya? The royal court is tense enough.”

“Don’t worry,” Keshan replied. “I’ll restrict myself to an evening of harmless flirting.”

“With women?” Iyestar asked in a whisper.

“I told you, I’m not here for women,” Keshan said, just to see his brother’s reaction. He wasn’t disappointed; Iyestar looked like he’d bitten into a lemon. Keshan laughed and Iyestar sighed heavily.

“I need a drink,” Iyestar decided.

“Well, the palace seems as good as any place to have one.” The vast red walls of the palace loomed up before them. The chariot rolled across the steep bridge and they passed through the ornate brass gates of the western entrance. The perfume of the royal gardens floated down to Keshan.

As soon as Keshan and his brother stepped from their chariot, Suya servants quickly led them through the halls and out to the verdant garden where Lord Nadaru Paria had chosen to stage the challenge for his daughter’s hand in marriage.

An immense silk pavilion, festooned with pink ribbons and gold tassels, dominated the garden. Groups of Triya lords had already gathered under flowering shade trees.

Many wore heavy bejeweled diadems as well as glittering, ceremonial armor emblazoned with their crests. Keshan and his brother had both decided to forego the hot confines of breastplates and diadems, choosing instead to adorn themselves with strings of abalone shell and pearls from their home in Tiwari. Keshan knew very well that the lustrous beads suited his dark skin and only heightened the impact of his short, black hair and dark eyes.

Servants scurried between the crowds with refreshments and delicacies plucked from tables loaded down with sweet pastries, fresh cut oranges and fried cheeses with chutney.

Iyestar immediately found the drink he desired, and handed Keshan a glass of wine. Keshan searched through the groups of men around him, seeking some sign that one of them might be the champion from his visions. A few were handsome but none held his interest longer than a few moments.

Of the entire crowd, only two men stood out dramatically. Both were tall, with long black hair, and Keshan was certain from their features that they were brothers. The younger of the two was a muscle-bound giant; even his voice seemed too large as it boomed across the garden. The older brother was lean, almost delicate. An expression of regal disapproval seemed etched into his otherwise attractive face. Both wore the golden armor of royal princes.

“Our Paran cousins,” Iyestar commented as he followed Keshan’s gaze. “The big one is Baram Paran, the other is Yudar Paran.”

Keshan knew of Yudar. The Prince’s dedication to traditional law was unwavering. In his position as Royal Judge, Yudar’s rulings were mercilessly devout.

Iyestar leaned close to Keshan. “Not the man of your future?” he whispered.

Keshan laughed, pleased that his brother could tease him, even here in the palace, where the holy laws were strictly enforced by both the Regent Mazar and the Royal Judge.

“Let’s see if we can’t find anyone more interesting to introduce you to inside the pavilion,” Iyestar suggested.

In the center of Suraya’s wedding canopy, dozens of red velvet chairs were placed around a pool of fragrant water. A glimmering gold bauble, cut in the shape of a fish, hung from silver wire above the pool. Even the slightest breeze caused the dangling fish to spin. Nearby, two soldiers guarded a table, upon which lay a heavy bow and a quiver of white arrows.

None of the guests had taken their seats yet. They remained at the far end of the pavilion, enjoying both the shade and the cool breezes that fluttered through the silk walls.

“There’s Darvad,” Iyestar said, pointing to a knot of brightly colored Triya warriors. It had been five years since Keshan had last seen Darvad Uru, one of the two men vying for the throne, and he hadn’t changed at all. He was darkly handsome, with a square jaw and broad, muscled shoulders. His golden breastplate glinted in the late afternoon sun.

“He’s been asking after you for weeks now,” Iyestar said. He pulled on Keshan’s arm. “Come on, let’s say hello.”

But Keshan hesitated. “Let’s not. Firdaus is there, and I don’t feel like having an argument without finishing my wine.”

Iyestar frowned. “Darvad expects me to join him.”

“Then go.” Keshan smirked at his brother. “I won’t get lost on my own, I assure you.”

Iyestar raised an eyebrow. “I’m more worried you may lose your inhibitions and end up banished for another five years.”

“I promise to behave.” Keshan knew his smirk wasn’t helping his argument.

But Iyestar relented. “Stay out of trouble.” He left Keshan’s side and joined Prince Darvad and Darvad’s friends, leaving Keshan to stand against the garden wall and watch the congregation of warriors.

Keshan didn’t have to worry about being left alone for long. Since entering the garden, he heard people whisper his name. He knew he had a reputation amongst the courtiers, and that the scandal of stealing Firdaus’ wife, five years on, was still a hot topic amongst the gossip mongers at the palace. Now that Iyestar was gone, small clusters of Triya noblemen and courtiers ventured over, to introduce or reacquaint themselves.

The sound of a conch shell broke up the mingling, and everyone was instructed to take a seat.

Keshan turned to follow the crowd into the canopy, when suddenly he saw a young man racing for the pavilion. Unlike the other Triya, who were dressed in their finest, brightest silks and armor, this man wore the plain dark cotton of a soldier.

He vaulted over the flowering hedges, his short hair mussed, his skin flushed, and his vest open.

Keshan stared openly as the man paused to straighten his clothes. Only then did he seem to notice Keshan watching him. He glared back.

Keshan sucked in his breath in surprise. The man had bright blue eyes, a rarity in Marhavad. Along with his tall body and light brown skin, the man's eyes brought an instant surge of arousal through Keshan's body. It had been years since he had experienced such a sudden, overpowering attraction to anyone. The man continued to gaze at him intently.

"Jandu! Get over here!"

Prince Baram's voice bellowed over the crowd. The handsome young man spun around. He hastily ran a hand through his mussed hair and rushed to join Baram.

As soon as Keshan realized that this was Prince Jandu, Yudar's youngest brother and fourth in line for the throne, disappointment flooded him. The Parans represented everything that Keshan had returned to Prasta to change. But even knowing that, desire fluttered through him, and Keshan decided that a little harmless flirtation might be fun after all.

CHAPTER 2

JANDU SQUARED HIS SHOULDERS AND STRODE INTO THE PAVILION. It was a spectacle of shiny baubles and pearly saucers, pink ribbons and gold tassels. The scent of jasmine and freshly cut, ripe oranges filled the air—a heady assault after the dusty archery grounds that Jandu had only just left. He hadn't meant to be late or to arrive dressed like some Suya soldier, but he had lost track of time in the midst of battle practice.

Around him, Triya warriors decked in jewels and gleaming ceremonial armor watched him stride past with varying degrees of amusement, deference, and disdain. Every man he passed wore bright silk trousers or a long silk *dejaru sarong*. Absurdly bejeweled diadems sat atop their heads like flimsy helmets.

Annoyance flared through Jandu. What was the point of all their gilded armor if not to remind them that they were born to be warriors? They were hypocrites, dressed in their gaudy armor and sneering at him, for coming late with the dust of a battleground clinging to him.

Jandu held his head high, feeling proud of himself. Let them smirk. He could best every one of them on the battlefield and they all knew it. Jandu allowed himself a satisfied smile. Then he glimpsed his older brothers. Yudar regarded him with an icy glare and Baram looked furious.

Jandu's brothers rarely looked alike. Yudar was thin and fragile, with soft gentle eyes. Baram was enormous and pure muscle, with a face that was as broad as it was long and a fierce glower to his expression. But when they both disapproved of

Jandu, they immediately resembled each other, eyebrows scrunched in unison, noses turned distinctly upward.

Jandu bowed his head and quickly slunk to his seat beside Baram.

“You are late,” Baram growled at him.

“But I’m here,” Jandu replied.

Baram shook his head. Yudar’s attention had already shifted to the man on his left. Sahdin Ori, one of Yudar’s staunchest supporters, whispered to Yudar about the new tax laws.

Jandu scanned the crowd and watched the man he’d seen in the garden take the seat next to Iyestar Adaru. The two of them bowed their heads close as they talked. But then the man seemed to have felt Jandu’s stare. He glanced back to Jandu, making eye contact and smiling widely.

Jandu leaned over to his brother Baram. “Who is that man?” he whispered.

Baram frowned. “That’s Keshan Adaru. He’s our first cousin.”

“I thought he had been banished.” Jandu stole another glance at him.

“His five years of penance are over,” Baram whispered. “But I doubt he’s learned his lesson.”

The low thrum of a gong resounded through the room, silencing all conversation.

Lord Nadaru Paria stepped beside the archery target, his hands pressed together in the sign of peace. He was thin and bony, and had a neatly trimmed black beard and kind eyes. He smiled upon the congregation.

“It is an honor to see so many of my fellow Triya lords and warriors on this auspicious day,” Nadaru began. “My daughter Suraya recently turned twenty four, and asked me to find a suitable husband for her.”

Nadaru held out his hands and two servants opened the silk flaps of the pavilion. Suraya Paria entered, followed by her brother Rishak.

Rumor had it that Suraya had been made from fire, and it seemed to be true, the way her dark eyes smoldered, the way her skin was a deep, fire-burnt brown, her hair a dozen shades of mahogany, darkening to charcoal, lightening to yellow. She was beautiful, and the men around Jandu immediately reacted. Baram shifted in his seat, and even Yudar stared salaciously.

Suraya and Rishak stood at their father's side. Lord Nadaru turned his attention back to the assembled Triya.

"Suraya and I have chosen this challenge to test the intelligence, concentration, and skill of the greatest warriors across Marhavat. Whoever wins this competition shall have the honor of marrying my daughter."

The look of anticipation on the men's faces around the room amused Jandu. Half of them looked at Suraya wantonly, like she was already their wife. And half of them were twice her age. Suraya regarded her suitors with a bemused expression.

Nadaru went on. "Here you see a pool of water, reflecting a spinning target that has been mounted on the ceiling. Your goal will be to string the bow I've provided and shoot the spinning fish that his hanging from the disk in the eye. However, you cannot look at the fish. You have to look at the reflection of the fish in the pool to win."

The room erupted in noise as the men contested the plausibility of accomplishing such a task. Even Jandu questioned whether he could hit the fish in the eye, since the eye could not even be seen from this distance.

Baram leaned backwards in his chair and glared at Jandu. "You know this challenge had to be chosen with you in mind, don't you?"

"Probably." Jandu shrugged. "But I'm still not going to compete."

"Suraya might not get married at all now."

Jandu grinned. "Especially since I'm the only one who can hit that fish." He stretched his back and prepared to watch joyously as the others failed.

“Let the competition begin!” Nadaru called out. He handed his daughter an elaborate garland of orange marigolds for her to drape around the winner.

Jandu looked to his left once more, checking on his cousin Keshan. Keshan met his gaze with a knowing look as if the two of them were sharing a secret joke. His lips were a rich red and sensual. He had gold hoop earrings, barely visible under the curl of his short dark hair. He wore the finest of Triya clothing casually, lounging in dark yellow silk trousers and a gold embroidered vest. Jandu couldn't keep his eyes from dipping to the bright red sash, slung low across Keshan's lean hips.

Jandu suddenly didn't care about the competition anymore. Keshan Adaru was infamous throughout Marhavad, and not just because his mother came from the enchanted demon race of the Yashva. Keshan had defied Firdaus Trinat, the powerful lord of Chandamar, by stealing the man's bride-to-be and it was rumored that he had spent the five years of his exile in the demon kingdom.

But what made Keshan most unconventional was that, despite being the son of a lord, Keshan consorted with people of all castes and creeds, going so far as to declare the time-honored caste system criminal. He had an open disdain for many of the Shentari religious traditions that Marhavad was founded upon.

Keshan winked at Jandu. Jandu quickly looked away, forcing himself to focus his attention on the competition.

The first man to compete was the elderly lord of Penemar, who took several minutes to make it over to the table where the bow was laid out.

“Grandpa there wants some action,” Jandu whispered into Baram's ear. Baram laughed loudly. Yudar and several of his supporters scowled at them both.

The lord of Penemar could barely lift the bow off the table, much less string it. He sat down quickly.

The routine was the same for all of the older gentleman who tried their hand at a young blushing bride who they didn't

have to bribe into their beds. Jandu shook his head, hoping he never grew to be such a deluded old fool. He yawned.

The challenge only started to get interesting once Druv, the young lord of Pagdesh, had his turn. He was the first to actually lift the bow completely off the table and start stringing it. But the bow was designed not to be strung easily. He struggled for several minutes, breaking out into an embarrassed sweat and swearing, until he finally threw the bow down.

“This challenge is rigged!” he spat at Nadaru.

“He can’t get it up,” Jandu whispered to Baram. Baram snickered.

Next up was Darvad, Jandu’s half-brother.

“Piss-drinking bastard,” Baram hissed under his breath.

“Quiet. Respect our half-brother,” Yudar whispered. He was always urging his two younger brothers to be more polite to Darvad. But Jandu had seen the hint of a smile on Yudar’s lips a moment ago and he suspected that Yudar took a secret pleasure in their rude comments. After all, there was no love lost between Yudar and Darvad. Even as children the two of them had competed intensely.

Darvad bowed to Suraya, and she smiled coyly at him. He turned to the bow and placed his hands on it.

Jandu immediately smirked at Darvad’s error. There was no excuse for it. Mazar had instructed Darvad in exactly the same battle lessons that he’d given to Yudar, Baram and Jandu himself.

They had played together, studied together, and fought together since they were all children. And yet a smile from a pretty girl was obviously all it took to wipe Mazar’s instruction from Darvad’s memory.

Darvad was the first person to successfully string the bow. Triya noblemen throughout the room broke out in applause. Jandu couldn’t believe that so many of them could have failed to recognize Darvad’s grave error.

Jandu snuck a quick glance at Keshan. Keshan watched Darvad intently. Suddenly Jandu found himself jealous of the way Keshan eyed Darvad so expectantly.

Darvad grabbed an arrow from the quiver and knelt beside the pool of water. He immediately looked up at the fish.

"You must shoot using the reflection," Lord Nadaru reminded him.

Darvad scowled. He looked down at the water's reflection and then tried to pull back the bowstring.

His arms twitched and his muscles trembled, but he couldn't pull the bowstring back. A number of Yudar's supporters snickered. Darvad stared at them as if he could kill them with the evil eye.

Darvad struggled with the bow a minute longer, and then put the bow down, breathing heavily.

"That's what you get for paying attention to the girl and not the bow, fucker," Jandu said under his breath. He loved this.

"Watch your language," Yudar whispered, but his expression was one of quiet satisfaction.

Darvad sat back down, flushed with humiliation. Jandu relished every second of it. Out of the corner of his eye he searched to see how the defeat had affected Keshan. To Jandu's annoyance, Keshan still watched Darvad and his cluster of close friends.

The herald read from his list of competitors. "Next to compete is Tarek Amia, lord of Dragewan."

Jandu didn't really know much about Tarek, other than he was of the lower Suya caste and excelled at archery. Since he kept Darvad's company, Jandu assumed that he was probably evil.

As Tarek approached the bow on the table, Jandu noticed that Keshan's interest again peaked. Jandu stared hard at his cousin, hoping to distract Keshan's attention. Someone as remarkable as Keshan didn't need to be so fascinated by a lowly Suya.

Tarek brought his hands together and prayed to the bow. Jandu had to give the Suya credit. That was what Darvad, and most of the men before him, had failed to do.

Tarek lifted the bow easily and strung it without difficulty. Jandu watched, fascinated by the balance in Tarek's movements.

Tarek was several years older than Jandu, but they both had dark, slightly curly black hair, and high cheekbones. Someone even once accused them of looking like brothers. At the time the comment had enraged Jandu, but now, as Tarek took a perfect stance and drew the bowstring back easily, Jandu could see the resemblance.

"No!" Suraya suddenly shouted. It was the first time she spoke. "I will not marry a charioteer's son."

Voices raising objections and support to Suraya's refusal flared through the room. Nadaru looked displeased and held up his hands, asking for quiet.

"He may be the only one who can win," Nadaru said softly to his daughter.

Suraya shook her head. "I don't care. I'd rather remain a maiden than marry below my caste."

Tarek looked momentarily crushed, but he regained his composure quickly. He unstrung the bow and put it back on the table, and then bowed before Nadaru.

"My apologies. I meant no offense." He sat back down, pale with the insult. Darvad patted his back and then pushed another of his friends forward to take the challenge.

Firdaus Trinat, the lord of Chandamar, swaggered to the table.

Jandu caught the immediate frown that appeared on his cousin Keshan's face. Firdaus and Keshan were said to have been enemies from the first moment they met and Jandu was sure that being banished on Firdaus' account hadn't warmed Keshan's disposition towards the man any.

Jandu watched Firdaus anxiously. The man was developing a slight gut, and his long black hair thinned at the roots. But his square jaw, massive forearms and thick chest lent him a formidable appearance. There was also something slightly

ethereal to the way Firdaus moved. It was said that Firdaus had Yashva blood, like Keshan. Firdaus lifted the bow with ease, and managed to string it as well. Applause rang through the room. Without hesitating, Firdaus loosed his arrow. A loud crash echoed through the pavilion and the spinning fish plunged into the water.

Men all around the room jumped from their seats to get a closer look at the results. But Lord Nadaru scowled as he pulled the fish from the water. The arrow jutted up from the belly of the fish.

“You have missed the eye,” he said.

“Your challenge is unrealistic,” Firdaus said. His voice was low. “It is the best a man of this earth can do. I demand my prize!”

Nadaru looked to his daughter. Suraya offered the slightest shake of her head, clearly unenthused by the prospect of being the second wife of a man almost twice her age.

Nadaru pulled the arrow from the fish and then held out his arms for silence. “If no other man here can match your skill, Lord Firdaus, you may claim my Suraya.”

The room erupted in chatter once more. Jandu felt bad for Suraya, who looked about to cry as she eyed her potential future husband. But it was not his problem. He was not here to rescue Suraya.

A few other young warriors tried, but none succeeded in even stringing the bow. A deathly hush settled over the attendees, realizing that they had exhausted the potential in the room and no one had even gotten close to Firdaus' accomplishment.

“Perhaps I made it too hard,” Nadaru said.

Jandu anxiously looked to Keshan, wondering if he would compete as well. But Keshan, like himself, only watched the festivities. Then Keshan suddenly turned and stared straight at Jandu. He raised an eyebrow, and smiled almost lasciviously. It was an inviting smile—a beckoning smile.

Into the stillness of the room, Keshan spoke. "I thought I was going to get a demonstration of Jandu Paran's legendary skill today. But I suppose he feels too underdressed to compete."

All eyes turned to Jandu.

Jandu hid his shock by casually straightening out of his slouch. "Well, cousin, if you're going to ask me that way, how can I refuse?"

Baram laughed and slapped Jandu on the shoulder so hard that Jandu had to struggle not to topple over. Suraya smiled softly at him. Nadaru positively beamed. Dread snaked through Jandu's gut, but he was already standing and all eyes were upon him.

Jandu stepped to the bow, but before he began, he looked behind him, making sure that his cousin watched. Keshan stared at him intently, his expression expectant.

Jandu brought his palms together to pray to the bow. He had learned from his master Mazar that any weapon needed to be respected in order to be wielded properly. After doing so, he lifted the bow with ease.

Jandu's heart beat faster. He braced the base of the bow with his sandal as he reached down and pulled the bowstring up and around the top. He looked briefly at Keshan as he pulled an arrow from the quiver. Keshan stared at him with his mouth slightly open, his eyes wide. He looked like he was holding his breath. Ever so slightly, Jandu nodded to him. If his cousin wanted a display of his prowess Jandu would give him one.

Jandu knelt and gazed into the water. He cocked back the arrow and pointed it upwards, concentrating on the spinning reflection of the fish.

Just before released his arrow, he realized that the reflection was deceptive. The fish spun in the opposite direction, he could tell by the reflection of his own face in the water. He smiled to himself. He concentrated on the fish, until all he saw was the fish's eye.

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He counted the spins to space the timing. And then he released his string.

The fish fell from the spinning disk with a loud snap and crashed into the water. Jandu stood as Nadaru and the surrounding men rushed to the pool. Nadaru reached his hand into the water and pulled out the golden fish, showing the rest of the room that Jandu had succeeded in shooting the arrow directly through the small eye. The room erupted in applause and cheers.

“Are you happy with my demonstration, cousin?” Jandu called out over the noise. Keshan rewarded him with a brilliant smile.

Jandu’s stomach tightened at the beauty of Keshan’s expression.

And as Suraya placed the marigold garland around his neck, Jandu realized, terribly, wonderfully, that he was, for the first time in his life, infatuated with someone other than himself.

CHAPTER 3

AS SERVANTS TIED BACK THE SILKEN WALLS OF THE PAVILION, a gust of monsoon wind rolled over Jandu, feeling like hot breath. All across the garden he could see tables strewn with succulent dishes and awaiting wedding guests. A Draya priest stood ready to perform the ceremony. Friends and strangers, dressed in their dazzling ceremonial armor, offered Jandu their congratulations.

Jandu thanked them in a daze.

He didn't know how he got into this mess and he had no idea how he would get out of it. Well, that wasn't entirely true. He got into it because he wanted to show off, as usual.

But now he was going to get married. The thought made Jandu distinctly uncomfortable. His mother had died shortly after his birth and Jandu had grown up in the sole company of other men. While he found women kind-natured and well-behaved as a rule, they confused him with their strange seriousness and lack of interest in archery.

"Congratulations, idiot!" Baram cheered lovingly. He crushed Jandu in a brotherly embrace that bordered on painful.

Yudar merely looked on, worry creasing his brow.

"I can't marry her," Jandu told them in a whisper. He didn't know how he could explain his reluctance. His unwavering belief in his own superiority? His lack of interest in women in general? His singular dedication to the warrior arts? He simply knew that this marriage was wrong for him.

"I know," Yudar said. He frowned. "It goes against the Book of Taivo."

Confused by his brother's agreement, Jandu searched his mind for the lesson on the precepts of Shentari faith, trying to recall what obscure, ancient law his brother referred to this time.

"If you were to father a son, he would be older than any child either I or Baram fathered. And since neither of us is consecrated as King, your son would have the right of primogeniture to challenge our children for the throne."

"What?" Baram looked as confused as Jandu felt.

"I have been thinking of the problem ever since the moment you pierced the fish eye," Yudar said, clearing his throat. His face had flushed almost guiltily. "I believe there is precedent to break the Shentari tradition in this case."

Jandu looked at Yudar, and suddenly, everything made sense. "You should marry her, Yudar." Jandu was certain that Nadaru would be delighted to wed his daughter to a future king.

Although Yudar flushed brighter at Jandu's suggestion, he shook his head. "I cannot. I did not compete. You did."

"I competed for you," Jandu suggested.

Baram narrowed his eyes. "No, you competed to show off. Call it like it is."

Jandu grinned. "All right. But that's all the more reason that I shouldn't marry Suraya. I didn't do it for her."

"It doesn't matter," Yudar replied. "You did not declare yourself to be competing in my stead, so legally I can't claim her. However—"

"Fellow Triya warriors! I must protest this marriage!" Firdaus pushed his way through the throng of well-wishers. He held himself tall. His friend and, no doubt, co-conspirator Darvad stood beside him as if urging him on.

"It is against our holy Book of Taivo for Jandu Paran to marry Suraya Paria. A younger prince must not wed before his elder brothers when a Regent holds the throne! It will lead the kingdom into chaos and war. So it is written."

A sudden, deathly pall stifled all conversation. Jandu felt a flicker of hope. He wouldn't have to marry Suraya now.

"What is this?" Lord Nadaru rushed to them. Suraya followed behind and stepped close to Jandu's side. Her face was pale, her eyes almost fearful. Jandu realized that if his claim to her became invalid then she would become Firdaus' second wife.

Yudar cleared his throat and stepped between Firdaus and Lord Nadaru. Though small compared to his brothers, Yudar had a royal presence that made him seem larger than he was. He held himself straight-backed with his chin tilted upwards, his dark brown eyes shining with inner wisdom.

"It is true that the Book of Taivo specifically states that under these conditions royal siblings must be married in order of age," Yudar said. "However, the laws established under the prophet Tarhandi allow for such a circumstance, assuming that all siblings marry the wife together."

The silence seemed to grow deeper and more disturbed, as everyone attempted to digest what Yudar said. Even Jandu, who had a lifetime of practice deciphering his brother's cryptic religious code, stumbled over the idea. When he finally understood Yudar's proposal, he almost choked.

He grabbed Yudar's shoulder. "What are you talking about?" he hissed.

Yudar smiled at him serenely. "With Lord Nadaru's permission, all three of us will marry Suraya."

The silence exploded in outrage. Even the baboons seemed to shriek louder in the nearby trees. It took several minutes for Nadaru to call the party to order.

Jandu wondered for an instant why they all cared so much. Why couldn't Suraya just choose some man—other than himself—and have done with it? And then he caught sight of his bride, dressed in her delicate red silk zahari dress, her eyes painted with kohl. She was absolutely gorgeous. Baram fidgeted nervously and stared at her.

Firdaus and Yudar looked as flushed and committed as men in sword combat. Head to head, they debated the issue with the kind of speed and precision that Jandu reserved for calling down a magical sharta.

"The Book of Taivo specifically prohibits this marriage!" Firdaus shouted.

"But the laws of the Prophet Tarhandi allow for polyandry should the bride choose to marry all siblings." Yudar was calm and had a little smile on his face, looking assured in the way that only scholars who knew the words of God by heart could be.

"That is an ancient law! It is hardly practiced any more. It has been over a century since a woman has had multiple husbands!" Firdaus looked genuinely scandalized by the idea.

Yudar merely raised an eyebrow. "The antiquity of the law does not negate it. The Prophet Tarhandi's precepts are well-established in the Shentari temple, and many laws dating from the same time period are used to hold up religious edicts today."

"Tarhandi's laws are about cattle thievery and agricultural disputes!" Firdaus' voice raised in anger.

Jandu just shook his head. Anyone in Prasta knew better than to challenge Yudar to a religious debate. Yudar had every single holy law memorized and an uncanny knack for knowing exactly what obscure text to cite to perfectly support his argument.

Yudar's smile widened. "The nature of Tarhandi's laws are irrefutable, as he was a prophet from God. His standards form the basis of judgments every day across this noble country. Based on this, his word is irrefutable."

Suraya's father watched the debate like an active child, jumping in place and trying vainly to butt in. Finally, he simply stepped forward.

"Prince Yudar is more than just knowledgeable about the Book of Taivo," Nadaru stated. "He is also the Royal Judge for the Regent. His decision stands."

“Unfair!” Darvad cried out, stepping forward. “He cannot serve as judge in this matter, as it affects him personally.”

“But he is the Royal Judge for the State of Prasta. I will abide his decision,” Lord Nadaru stated flatly.

Jandu cleared his throat. “Shouldn’t we ask what Suraya wants to do?”

“Shut up!” Firdaus yelled at him. “Do not interrupt!”

Jandu’s fingers itched for his sword.

But his words must have gotten through, for Nadaru held up his hands in the sign of peace and begged silence. “Please! Let me consult with my daughter. Suraya, what would you say in this matter?”

Suraya blushed, but she stood straighter. “It was prophesized upon my birth that I would marry three great men. I had not thought that I would wed them all at once but... this must be what the prophet intended.”

All of them stared at Suraya silently.

Suraya still blushed furiously. “I will do this. I will fulfill the prophecy.”

Jandu had some very strong opinions about prophecies. He didn’t like them. He didn’t believe in them. He rebelled against the idea that his destiny was not in his own hands.

Yudar nodded. “We shall all be married tonight then, it seems.” He looked at Suraya, and Jandu could see how desire already clouded his brother’s vision.

Jandu tried to imagine how it would feel to share a wife with his brothers. He’d never considered himself the marrying type anyway. He honestly couldn’t conjure any feelings of jealousy, only embarrassment at their odd situation.

Jandu felt Suraya’s hand clench around his arm. He looked to her and she faced him resolutely.

Jandu took a deep breath. “You’re sure this is what you want?”

“I’m not sure of anything,” she said. “But this morning, I could have been married to anybody.” She swallowed as she

looked at Firdaus, still fuming. “Besides, I think I’d rather die than be Lord Chandamar’s second wife.”

At this, Firdaus spat on the ground and turned and stormed away. Darvad followed him.

“I wouldn’t want to marry him either,” Jandu said.

Suraya looked at him oddly, then reached out and squeezed his hand. It felt strange and girlish and reassuring all at once. “It will be all right, Jandu.”

Jandu nodded. “Well, let’s get married then. Although, as Keshan Adaru pointed out, I’m not dressed for the occasion.” Not for the first time Jandu glanced through the crowd, searching for Keshan, but he failed to find him.

“I don’t care how you’re dressed,” Suraya assured him.

“Good,” Jandu said. “Because I’m a lazy dresser, Baram looks ugly in everything, and Yudar has no sense of style.”

Baram slapped Jandu in the back of the head, almost knocking him off his feet.

Suraya laughed. “Well, at least you’re honest.”

The wedding ceremony was brief and directly afterwards the wives, daughters, and sisters of the Triya nobles flooded the garden. Musicians followed, as did more servants who brought out further offerings of food and wine. The feast was a spectacle, with dishes formed in the shapes of fish and birds, cream custards and spicy butter sauces, tenderly roasted meats and fine cheeses. The opulence of Nadaru’s food coupled with Jandu’s dramatic triumph at the archery challenge and the resulting triple marriage were enough to guarantee that the wedding would be discussed for years to come.

For now though, the palaver dropped to a constant, steady murmuring which mingled with the clink of porcelain cups as celebratory wine began to infuse the party with true jollity.

To Jandu’s dismay, his cousin Keshan was not invited to sit at the celebration table. But his half-brother Darvad joined them briefly, offering a toast. His cadre of companions—Firdaus, Tarek, Druv, and Iyestar—emulated him, though Firdaus looked

unhappy. Then Darvad took his leave and his friends followed, to mingle and gossip at other, more welcoming tables.

The sun set and torches illuminated the night, flickering an eerie yellow glow over the guests. Perfumed smoke filled the air with the scent of sandalwood. A heavy wind blustered sweet summer warmth over the wedding party in dramatic gushes of sound and sensation.

Lord Nadaru showed a disheartening tendency towards the extravagant. Jandu forced himself not to yawn through numerous speeches and superfluous rituals, all repeated thrice as Yudar went through them, then Baram, and then at last himself. Drunken congratulations assailed Jandu from every angle.

He quickly wearied of the attention. When he at last caught sight of Keshan in the crowd of guests he desperately wanted to join him. But Jandu was a prisoner at the table of honor. He brushed his bangs from his forehead and watched his cousin Keshan mingle with the wedding guests, chatting with supporters of Yudar and Darvad alike. Jandu brooded, while his brothers ate and discussed the logistics of their new living arrangements.

“We should be husband for a year at a time,” Yudar decided, smiling at his own wisdom. “For one year, you will be my wife, Suraya. And then it will be Baram’s year, and then Jandu. That way you can get to know us each individually, and there will be no jealousy.”

Suraya nodded. Jandu noted that she hit the wine early and often.

Far across the garden a group of young men burst into laughter as Keshan told some joke.

Jandu wished he could have heard Keshan’s words. He had no doubt that they would have been intriguing, perhaps even scandalous, as everything about his cousin seemed to be. Keshan had fought a bloody battle with his uncle when he was only sixteen and after that he’d been central in relocating the

Tiwari capital city to the coast to avoid further conflict with his neighboring state. He was a famed musician and infamous seducer and, according to Yudar, the sponsor of several very dangerous amendments to the holy laws.

Jandu anxiously awaited Yudar's dismissal. It wasn't Jandu's night to be husband, after all. But Yudar was otherwise occupied. He held Suraya's hand, and an unusual glow of happiness colored his skin. He seemed bronzed by joy. It made Jandu pleased to see it. It wasn't easy to make Yudar forget his worries, but Suraya's beauty seemed to soothe his concerns, for the time being at least.

Nadaru had brought in dancers from across Marhavadd, and as they began their show, Jandu was finally excused. He rushed from the table and made his way towards Keshan.

As Jandu approached, a knot formed in his stomach. Keshan watched him, a pleased smile on his face.

"Hi." Jandu spoke quickly. "I wanted to introduce myself."

"Jandu Paran." Keshan said his name slowly, like a sigh of relief.

Jandu blushed, and was horrified. He was acting like a girl.

Jandu reached down to touch Keshan's feet in respect at the same time that Keshan bent down to do the same. They bumped heads and both stood up, startled.

"Watch it!" Jandu cried out.

Keshan scowled, rubbing his head.

Jandu laughed. "Sorry! It's my fault. But you should let me touch your feet first. I'm younger than you."

"By what, six months?" Keshan asked. "Besides, you're a prince."

Keshan reached out and fingered Jandu's plain white vest. Jandu froze at the intimate touch. His body tingled where Keshan's hand brushed against him.

"This is not typical wedding attire," Keshan pointed out.

Jandu shrugged. "I'm not a proponent of Triya fanfare when it comes to clothing."

“I agree,” Keshan said. “When I’m home alone I just walk around naked.”

Jandu cocked his head. “Really?”

“No.” Keshan grinned widely. “I just wanted to see your expression when I said that.” Keshan grabbed Jandu’s arm, and led him over to his table. “Come, sit down with me and Iyestar.”

Iyestar didn’t look anything like his younger brother Keshan. Where Keshan was svelte and elegant, Iyestar was thick-boned and muscular. He had an impressive neck and his facial features were broad and kind. Jandu wondered how they ever found diamends to fit the circumference of his skull.

Iyestar was distinguished for being a heavy drinker, and the wedding had not been an exception. With eyes half-closed in inebriation, he held an entire jug of wine carelessly, spilling aromatic purple liquid out the top with each dramatic hand gesture.

Jandu felt uncomfortable sitting there, beside one of Darvad’s best friends while Yudar and Baram were left behind, laughing and celebrating with Suraya. It seemed almost treasonous. But then Iyestar reached out and pinched Jandu’s cheeks affectionately. “Hello there, little cousin.”

At six feet, Jandu rarely considered himself little. Acknowledging Iyestar’s height, he let the comment slide.

“Are you enjoying the festivities?” Jandu asked.

Iyestar burped in response.

“You’ll have to excuse my brother, he’s an animal,” Keshan said. “I don’t believe he inherited any of our mother’s grace.”

“At least I’m not a witch like you,” Iyestar commented.

Keshan rolled his eyes. He put his arm around Jandu’s shoulders and pulled him closer to whisper. “My brother thinks that anyone who has any sort of education is enchanted and, therefore, a witch.”

“You do have magical powers though, Keshan.” Iyestar pointed ineffectively at them both. “Don’t deny it.”

"I'm not denying it," Keshan stated. "But I'm no witch."

Jandu had the distinct feeling that he was listening to some long-standing fraternal argument, and chose not to say anything. Iyestar clumsily leaned over and refilled Jandu's wine cup, splashing wine onto Jandu's hands in the process.

"Your performance today was amazing, cousin," Iyestar said. "You are a fantastic archer."

Jandu nodded. "Yes, I am."

Iyestar chuckled. "Oh, so that's true, then."

"What?"

"That you are also full of yourself."

Jandu looked to Keshan for support, but Keshan simply grinned, leaning back in his chair. Jandu checked to make sure his brothers were doing okay without him. They both stared at Suraya dotingly.

Keshan followed Jandu's gaze. "Do you want to join them?" he asked.

Jandu shrugged. "Four's a crowd."

Keshan seemed to watch him closely. "Are you angry that your brothers took your bride?"

"I don't mind," Jandu said.

"Really?" Keshan raised an eyebrow. "Surprising."

Iyestar filled up Keshan's cup from his jug of wine. "So what comes next? A honeymoon in the mountains?"

Jandu snorted. "Yudar won't leave the capital, especially not during the festival. There is too much politicking for him to miss out on a moment of it."

Iyestar nodded. "Darvad's the same way."

"And you?" Keshan asked. "What do you want to do, Jandu?"

"Honestly?" Jandu got the impression that Keshan was talking about something larger than his honeymoon. "Travel. Take on challenges worthy of my skills. Meet interesting new people. I've hardly gone anywhere. I can't even imagine what some of the states of Marhavad look like."

“Trust me, Prasta is the best city in the entire kingdom. You haven’t missed anything,” Iyestar mumbled.

But Keshan disagreed. “There are some beautiful places in this world, Jandu. Especially my capital, Tiwari. Perhaps I could take you there one day. We could walk the beaches together, and I could teach you how to fish.”

“That would be fantastic.” A warm, liquid happiness filled Jandu. He suspected the wine’s influence.

“Let’s plan on it then.” Keshan leaned over and placed his warm palm on Jandu’s shoulder. Something about Keshan’s touches, about the way he looked at Jandu, subtly affected Jandu. Perhaps Keshan’s half-Yashva blood had some magical effect? Jandu drew closer to Keshan, despite the fact that the feeling seemed dangerous.

“You aren’t returning to Tiwari right away?” Jandu asked, suddenly panicked at the idea that Keshan would leave as soon as the festival ended.

“I’ll be staying in Prasta for a while,” Keshan replied. “We should spend some time together. I think we might find we have some tastes in common.”

Again, Keshan seemed to be saying more than the sum of his words. Jandu tried but could not quite grasp the implication. Then Baram was calling him back to the table of honor and he grudgingly excused himself. Iyestar gave him a wine jug salute. Keshan only smiled.

Even though it seemed politically dangerous and almost disloyal, Jandu decided he couldn’t wait to spend time with his scandalous cousin again.

CHAPTER 4

THE PALACE OF PRASTA ROSE LIKE AN ISLAND OF SOLID ROCK from the middle of the great Yaru River, its fortified red sandstone walls formed in the shape of an elongated spearhead. Inside, multiple courtyards and marble hallways connected the dozens of buildings, architecturally distinct from one another, creating a labyrinth of pathways. Over fifty separate gardens dotted the palace, each one blocked in by walls of rooms, some structures extending up several floors to form ornately carved stone balconies that peered over the gardens or the banks of the river.

The central throne room was the seat of power for the entire nation, overseen by the Regent Mazar. But the rest of the sprawling, circuitous palace was dotted with pockets of Yudar Paran and Darvad Uru's influences. In the decade since King Shandarvan's death neither group had managed to make a decisive claim on the throne. Darvad was the eldest son, born two months before Yudar, but Yudar's mother had been the king's first and more honored wife. Neither omens read by Draya priests nor the holy texts had offered a solution. In a year both Yudar and Darvad would be thirty and the Regent's allotted reign would end. Mazar would have to appoint one or the other of the princes to be King.

As Keshan ambled through the palace grounds, he noted an architectural shift, years of careful crafting under either Yudar's supporters or Darvad's, changing the very appearance of the buildings. Keshan wandered, not minding the fact that he was lost. He hadn't wandered the royal palace at Prasta since he was a little boy. Now that the outrageous Paran wedding

festivities had finished, and most of the lords had returned to their own states, Prasta settled back into normalcy.

Keshan wound his way through the western part of the palace, where Darvad held court, admiring the sculptures and brightly painted murals showing erotic images. Darvad's world was sensual, full of images of wine and women, of peasant life and animals and great wars.

As Keshan moved east, the decoration sobered. The Paran quarters edged the eastern river bank, and stretched towards the southern gates that opened onto the vast royal forest. The Paran family artwork consisted of religious statues, and scenes from the holy Book of Taivo, displaying the multiple heads of God and the fiery shartic weapons of the Shentari prophets. The statues of prophets stared down at Keshan with what he interpreted as potent malevolence.

Several times, guards stopped Keshan, inquiring whether they could help him find his way. Some asked out of kindness. Others asked out of distrust, anxious to lead him away from more sensitive areas. In both cases, Keshan politely refused and moved on at his own pace. He liked the feeling of being lost here, here in the midst of such grandeur.

A gentle breeze blew through a carved marble hallway, which opened on both sides to stone gardens filled with fragrant orchids. Outside, another short but powerful monsoon downpour drenched the city. Safely sheltered under the marble hallway, Keshan felt the cool relief of the rain and smelled the sweet earthy scent of wet stone.

"Iyestar?" Keshan peered into one of the countless rooms. There were gold-leafed paintings of a forest scene on the plaster walls, and archery targets set up at even intervals. The targets suggested that archers would be found nearby. Following his instincts, he turned the corner down a long marble hall and nearly ran directly into Jandu Paran.

"Keshan!" Jandu dropped to the ground and touched Keshan's feet. Keshan quickly urged him upwards.

“Please don’t do that. It makes me feel old.”

Jandu blushed endearingly. “Sorry.”

Keshan took a moment to just admire the beauty of his cousin. Jandu was Keshan’s ideal of a warrior prince, both handsome and powerful. His light brown complexion glowed, and enhanced the startling brightness of his blue eyes. Even dressed plainly, in a long blood red dejaru sarong and a simple white cotton vest, Jandu appeared bold and regal. His body was tight and trim, the contours of his abdominal muscles clearly visible under his open vest. Keshan couldn’t help the flutter of attraction he felt every time he looked upon Jandu’s delicious body.

“What brings you to the palace?” Jandu asked.

“I’m looking for my brother,” Keshan said. “He wanted to be informed when I finished unpacking.”

“So you are here for good? In Prasta?” Jandu’s voice betrayed his enthusiasm.

Keshan smiled at him. “For at least the next few months. Iyestar may have to return to Tiwari, but I am free to stay behind.”

Jandu smiled back. “Come on, I’ll take you to him. He’s practicing archery in the stone garden, with Darvad and his gang of thugs.”

Keshan laughed, but he didn’t miss the obvious distaste in Jandu’s comment. It would be awkward, befriending Jandu. Darvad would not like it. But Keshan had never been one to obey the whims of anyone else.

“So how is married life?” Keshan asked.

Jandu shrugged. “Not my turn for another two years, thank God. But it suits Yudar. He and Suraya were staring in each other’s eyes all during breakfast.”

The hallway terminated at a large courtyard, surrounded by a waist-high stone wall. The cobblestones were under a good inch of water as the monsoon storm continued to pour down around them.

“We can walk around this way,” Jandu said, pointing to the left, “or we can take a short cut through the courtyard, which would be a lot more fun.”

Keshan grinned. “I don’t melt in water.”

Jandu didn’t hesitate. He vaulted the wall and dashed into the downpour, hooting as he did so, his long legs striding widely as he ran. Keshan’s silk trousers were immediately drenched but he didn’t care. The water felt luxurious after the morning’s sweltering heat, and he laughed along with Jandu as they both scrambled over the wall and skidded to a halt in the cool stony corridor of another building.

Jandu shook his head, sending sprays of water droplets everywhere. Keshan ran his hand through his own, pushing back his damp locks.

Jandu smiled at him. “Your diadem is crooked.” He straightened it, and then pulled back with a frown. Jandu turned and led them down another hallway, his sandals squeaking against the stone floor.

“I notice you don’t wear one very often,” Keshan said.

“I think they’re showy,” Jandu said.

“Like you can talk,” Keshan said back.

Jandu laughed. “I don’t know why I have such a reputation for being vain. The only thing I brag about is my archery and I have earned the right to be proud. I am the best archer in the kingdom and I know it. What’s wrong with saying so?”

If the statement had come from anyone else, Keshan would probably have disliked him. But Jandu’s self-assurance seemed charmingly honest and Keshan found it attractive. Jandu wasn’t compensating for some failing or insecurity by bragging. He truly believed he was the best.

They walked in silence for short distance. Jandu fidgeted slightly. His eyes darted to Keshan.

“You realize that Firdaus Trinat is probably going to be with Darvad and your brother,” Jandu said.

“So?”

There was another pause, as if Jandu gathered courage to continue. "Doesn't it bother you? Your brother is friends with the man who had you exiled?"

"I don't hate Firdaus. My exile was just and not hard to endure. Firdaus is no threat to me now," Keshan replied. "And Iyestar is friends with Darvad so meeting Firdaus is unavoidable. I would understand if you don't want to see him, though. He's bound to be angry with you."

Jandu didn't respond. He stared ahead, and Keshan could tell he debated saying something. After years of living with the Yashvas, who were so hard to read emotionally, it was a pleasant change to spend time with men, with their feelings so clearly displayed.

"Does it bother you that I'm Yudar's brother?"

Keshan thought of telling Jandu the truth, that it *did* bother him. Yudar represented everything that Keshan had spent the last ten years of his life fighting against. But this was harmless, Keshan told himself, this innocent flirtation. It wasn't Jandu's fault that his brother represented the traditionalists.

"I'm not interested in who your brothers are. I'm interested in you," Keshan said.

Jandu blushed, and moved forward once more, walking at a faster pace.

"Besides," Keshan added, "my political interests have nothing to do with who should be king. I am more concerned about the plight of the lower castes, and whomever can support me in improving the equality of this nation deserves my gratitude."

"Equality? Between the Triya and Suya?" Jandu grimaced in distaste.

"Between all the castes."

"All of them?"

Keshan sighed. "I know that is not your belief or the belief of your brother, who holds tradition above humanity." Keshan had the sinking feeling that his flirtation with Jandu might be

nearing its unsatisfying end. It was too bad, since he'd been so sure Jandu was attracted to him.

"Why do you care so much about the lower castes?" Jandu asked. Keshan heard no malice in his question, only curiosity, so Keshan answered him truthfully.

"It reflects poorly on the ruling class when the people of this nation struggle under such tyranny. In a society where three-fourths of the people live burdened by religious law that prevents them from equality merely because of who their parents are, everyone suffers. Only in a truly egalitarian society can all of us achieve the greatness that the Shentari faith claims to strive for."

"But you are Triya," Jandu said.

"Only because my father was Triya, and his father before him. We need to change, to herald in a new era where a person is judged on his actions, not on his blood. It is what God wants for us."

Jandu scowled. "How can you be so certain?"

"I have seen it. In a vision."

Jandu stared at Keshan as though Keshan were slightly mad.

Keshan just smiled, accustomed to this reaction.

"Say that again?" Jandu said.

"I have visions of the future. Prophecies, some may call it, although where they come from or why I will never know. Maybe it's my Yashva blood. But my entire life, I've been able to see glimpses of the future. And the future I see is one where caste no longer dictates righteousness."

Jandu looked at him oddly. Keshan felt almost intimidated by the intensity of Jandu's stare. But then the corner of Jandu's mouth quirked up and he grinned.

"You are one weird guy," Jandu said. He continued to lead the way down the hallway. "Powers of prophecy? Were you the one who predicted Suraya would marry three warriors?"

Keshan fell in beside him once more. "No, I wish my power was that useful. I wish I could predict the weather or know what will be served at the royal dinner tomorrow."

"That's easy. It's always butter chicken on Wednesdays."

Keshan laughed.

"What do you see?" Jandu asked.

"Just images, really, and sometimes accompanying sounds or smells. Often faces are blurred, or other details that seem meaningless are crystal clear.

"Sometimes I see an entire scene, and then weeks later, it happens. Or I'll catch images of something, disjointed and unfocused, and then later on I'll recognize them from a past vision. There is no pattern, and I have no control over them."

"Can you change what you see?" Jandu asked. "If something breaks in your vision, can you intercede to stop it from breaking?"

Keshan shook his head. "Half the time I don't know what I'm seeing."

"But how can you be sure these visions are telling you that everyone should be equal?" Jandu asked.

Keshan didn't miss the disapproval in Jandu's tone. "I've had a vision of the future, and of a great battle where the Triya are defeated by peasants. God chooses against us."

Jandu stayed silent for a long while. Keshan assumed Jandu to be considering this, but then Jandu suddenly asked, "Have you had any visions of me?"

Keshan almost laughed. Here he tried to explain his destiny, a mission he had from God, and Jandu only wanted to know if he had a starring role.

"No. Can't say that I have, unfortunately. Visions of you sound very appealing."

Jandu blushed again.

Keshan wanted to explain more, but he realized that his words were probably wasted on Jandu. Jandu's interest in Keshan's prophecies extended only as far as they concerned

him, so he wouldn't care to hear the more personal details about why they fuelled Keshan's mission.

But ever since he could remember, he had a recurring vision of himself, beside a man who declared the end of all castes. The two of them were armed, fighting for a new world. And although the details were hazy, and Keshan could never see the man's face, he was almost certain that man was Jandu's half-brother, Prince Darvad Uru.

Darvad Uru had openly befriended a lower caste man. In speeches, he praised the workers of Marhavad, calling them the greatest strength of the nation. He asked that merit be based on deed rather than blood.

Keshan admired Darvad's will, his disregard of tradition, and his promise to make changes to the old ways of Marhavad once he became king. Iyestar had assured Keshan that Darvad's ambitious nature was fueled by the desire to see a new world replace the atrophied one that surrounded them.

In all likelihood, Jandu would become one of Keshan's political enemies. The Paran brothers had been raised in the pious shadow of their father, and their belief in Triya superiority was unlikely to change.

But Jandu was handsome. More than handsome. Gorgeous. It had been many years since Keshan had felt such reciprocal longing from another man. Clearly he trailed this young warrior through the palace not because of his mission to change society, or to propel his own political career forward, but for desire. His body took over, flirting with this brash young warrior, and it wasn't going to do anyone any good.

"Here we are." Jandu led him through a gate into the stone garden. The downpour had stopped, and now everything steamed, baking in the hot sun.

Darvad aimed at a target across the garden that had been affixed to a bail of hay. Sweat slicked back Darvad's hair as he worked in the intense humidity of the afternoon. Beside him stood Tarek, Druv, Firdaus, and Keshan's brother.

Darvad lowered his bow and smiled at Keshan, bringing his palms together in the traditional sign of peace. The other men followed, except for Iyestar, who just came over and hugged Keshan brusquely.

“What took you so long? Did you get lost?” Iyestar frowned slightly at Jandu.

“I was just chatting with Jandu,” Keshan said, raising his hands to return the sign of peace.

Jandu bowed his head politely. “I should go...”

“Stay.” Keshan touched his arm. “I still haven’t found out how you shot the eye of Suraya’s fish.”

The other men seemed uncomfortable with Jandu’s presence, but quickly turned back to their competition. Keshan sat down on an embroidered rug that had been laid out on the hot cobblestones and, with obvious hesitation, Jandu joined him.

“Once I realized that the pool was like a mirror, reversing everything, hitting the eye was just a matter of timing,” Jandu described how he counted the rotations of the fish as it spun. Keshan barely watched the men practicing in front of him, his eyes focused intently on Jandu.

“I already knew I could do it, I just didn’t have a reason until you called me out,” Jandu said.

“I’m sorry I challenged you,” Keshan said. “I couldn’t help myself. I’m a troublemaker.”

The two of them gossiped about other lords and some of the more exotic performances that had apparently caused a scandal during the festival. Talking to Jandu came easily, and Keshan had to admit that he enjoyed the respite from constant political and religious debate.

As they chatted, they watched Darvad and his companions challenge each other. Darvad, Tarek, Druv and Firdaus took turns shooting at the target. After each round, the men would recollect their arrows, using each warrior’s unique markings on the shaft of the arrow to determine the winner. Iyestar’s role

seemed to be purely for encouragement, yelling at them while he lounged on the sidelines.

Keshan did not excel at archery. Nevertheless, he knew a good archer when he saw one. Tarek's movements were swift and seamless. Tarek always hit the bull's eye. He won every round. And when Darvad complained that it was impossible to beat Tarek at anything, Tarek volunteered to start shooting with his left hand.

"I'm surprised you aren't jumping up and joining in," Keshan said to Jandu, keeping his voice low.

Jandu stretched out and propped himself up on his elbows. He watched the competition with a bored expression.

"Well, I wouldn't want anyone to see that Tarek is actually better than me."

Keshan stared at him, shocked.

Jandu smiled. "Just kidding. But actually, I have a bad feeling it'd be close. And then I'd have to respect him. But it would be disloyal to my brother if I befriended Tarek."

Keshan started to explain that they too would have a similar problem if they remained friends. But then Jandu said, "Besides, Tarek is a Suya."

Keshan shut his mouth. What was he doing? Sitting here with a man so full of himself that he considered himself better than Tarek simply by birthright?

Keshan shouldn't have been surprised. After all, Jandu had grown up surrounded by Triya religious zealots, and the tenet they revered before all others was the Shentari hierarchy.

The Triya are God's chosen lords. The world is given to them to rule and to defend. They alone will hold the holy secrets of the Shartas.

The Draya are God's messengers. They will keep the temples and pray for their Triya lords.

The Suya are God's workers and will create in God's name.

THE ARCHER'S HEART

The Chaya are God's servants and will serve the people of God and work God's land.

The Jegora are the outcaste, scourges in God's eyes and unworthy of God.

The belief that the Suya, Chaya and Jegora were lesser people, less entitled, was so woven in the very fabric of Marhavadi culture that even intelligent, well-meaning people like Jandu found themselves incapable of thinking otherwise.

"I've competed against Tarek before, you know," Jandu said. "It was during the Mahri Competition. The challenge was open to all Triya, but usually only the sons of the wealthiest lords ever compete. And then Tarek showed up, wearing cotton, looking poor and," Jandu gave Keshan a sideways look, "—very underdressed."

"You will never forget that, will you?" Keshan asked.

Jandu smirked. "We all mocked Tarek, of course. But then he started shooting arrows with unparalleled accuracy. When he released the bowstring, he stood still as stone, his gaze unwavering. I had never seen anyone like him."

Keshan looked up to where Tarek took his turn at the target. Jandu was right; the man became statuesque, it looked as though he did not even breathe. A whirr sounded, and the arrow smashed through the wooden target to strike bull's eye once more.

"I remember being excited," Jandu continued. "My whole life, I have always been unrivaled in archery and here stood a man who could truly challenge me." Jandu looked almost wistful, a smile on his face, his eyes closed.

But then he sighed. "Then Yudar pointed out this old charioteer who had entered the arena, and announced that the man was Tarek's father. Tarek was Suya and he never intended to tell anyone."

"What happened then?" Keshan watched Tarek, feeling instantly sorry for what the man had probably gone through that day.

Jandu shrugged. “He was humiliated, of course, and thrown out of the competition. But then Darvad stood up and called him a great warrior.”

Keshan nodded. That action alone fuelled his support of Darvad.

“Darvad gave Tarek the State of Dragewan then and there, swearing lifelong friendship... completely insane.” Jandu sat back up, staring at the two men being discussed. “They’re inseparable now.”

Keshan spoke hesitantly. “Well, it would be within Darvad’s power to raise Tarek to a Triya once he’s king. Only the king can change God’s castes.”

“But he isn’t king yet and he isn’t going to be. Yudar is the rightful heir.” Jandu frowned at Keshan. “I thought we weren’t going to talk politics. I hate politics. I shouldn’t even be here.”

Jandu stood to leave, when suddenly Darvad called out to him. Jandu turned back to his half-brother, showing no dislike, but definitely no affection either.

“Go tell Mazar that I will be late to dinner this evening,” Darvad said.

“Have a servant tell him,” Jandu said.

“Mazar is in his private chambers. I need you to tell him for me.”

Everyone else in the garden stopped what they were doing. A thick tension simmered, Keshan felt waves of animosity radiating off of Jandu. But Jandu was younger than Darvad, and the same traditions that dictated Jandu’s disdain for Tarek also made it impossible for him to refuse a demand from an older relative.

“All right.” Jandu turned and frowned at Keshan. “I’ll see you later.” Jandu bent down to take the dust from Keshan’s feet.

Keshan reached down and stopped him. He held Jandu’s arms.

“Don’t do that,” Keshan said quietly.

THE ARCHER'S HEART

“You’re my elder,” Jandu said. He narrowed his eyes at Darvad. “I always respect my elders.”

“I know. But don’t.” Keshan kept hold of Jandu’s arms, feeling the sinewy muscles flexing beneath soft skin. “It doesn’t suit us.”

Jandu stared at Keshan for a moment longer, and then turned away. As he walked away, Keshan shook his head. What was he doing?

“Keshan!” Darvad called, “come shoot with us.”

He took the bow Darvad offered, forcing the excitement of Jandu’s touch from his mind. He had a mission to fulfill. And the person who was going to do that was Darvad, not Jandu.

CHAPTER 5

TAREK DREAMED OF THE RIVER.

He always dreamed of the river on nights when he had difficulty falling asleep, as if his mind returned to the source of everything.

In his dream, he was a young boy, crying for help. Other times he thrashed in the water, demanding that it stop. He was never at peace in the river. There was something timeless and unforgiving in its nature, the way it cut through everything indiscriminately, the way it never stopped to reason.

Tarek awoke in terror.

It took him a minute to get his bearings. After having spent thirty years of his life living in his parent's one-room shack beside the banks of the Yaru, it still surprised him to wake up in a broad bed with silk sheets, without the smell of the river overwhelming him. His eyes adjusted to the early morning light streaming into the room through two open balconies.

The stone sculpture of the prophet Harami in the corner of the room, the woodcarving above his bed, the garish pinks and greens of the furniture, overstuffed pillows, vases with peacock feathers—all of it had been here when he had acquired Dragewan's townhouse. Tarek suddenly felt disgusted by it all. Now that this ornate manor belonged to him, he would see the gaudy decor stripped.

"Attendant!" Tarek shouted. He was angry at himself for not knowing the man's name. Truthfully, he'd spent a month or two at most in this house since it was granted to him. Most of his time was occupied in the royal palace.

“Yes, my lord?” A squat, balding man stood with his head bowed, avoiding eye contact.

“Call the house steward. I want all the decorations in this room removed.”

If the servant found the request strange, he said nothing. “Yes, my lord.”

Tarek stretched and stepped out of bed. He realized the servant remained.

“You can go.”

The servant hesitated. “My lord? What would you like the decorations replaced with?”

Tarek frowned. “Nothing. I want bare walls. One chair. That’s it.”

“Yes, my lord.” The servant bowed deeply and fled the room.

Tarek watched him go. He should really be nicer. He wasn’t comfortable with having servants, and so he didn’t know how to treat them.

Tarek wasn’t much more than a servant himself. He was the son of a charioteer, a servant of the wealthy Triya caste. His father now resided in a large manor in Dragewan, but his hands were arthritic claws, useless after years of tightly gripping reins. His health had failed, and even with the care of the best physicians, Tarek knew his father’s death approached.

Still, Tarek had to be grateful. His father could spend the last of his days in comfort, being fed by servants of his own, enjoying the warm springs of the Dragewan palace grounds, luxuriating in the views of the perfect garden. What more could Tarek have wished for?

Well, he could have had his mother with him as well. She died two years earlier when fever had swept through their village. Tarek was not over it. He would never be over it. His parents had been his whole world.

Tarek dressed quickly, in light blue trousers and golden armor. He wore a gray harafa scarf over his chest, and put on the ruby and diamond rings that had been given to him since

he had become lord of Dragewan a year ago. He still wore the plain gold earrings he had been given by his mother, the only trace of his life prior to his rise of power.

Tarek owned several diadems. Remembering his appointment with Darvad for breakfast, Tarek chose the heaviest of them all, a golden crown studded with sapphires that would match the rest of his outfit. Darvad liked to see him in all his finery.

As his charioteer prepared the horses, one of Dragewan's state ministers approached Tarek, requesting a review of some documents. Tarek looked them over briefly, and made a few recommendations, however he left most of the decisions up to them. He was not trained in governance, and he trusted his ministers with most of the important details of running the state. Dragewan was small and by no means wealthy, but it could keep its people fed with income from its copper mines. For that, Tarek was grateful. Darvad could have granted him territory with nothing, after all.

The chariot ride from his house to the palace was short, but the journey was slow this morning as workmen with rickety wagons congested the wide, shaded boulevards surrounding Tarek's townhouse.

Once inside the palace, a servant led Tarek to Darvad's private quarters. Tarek hoped to be the first one there, as he disliked sharing Darvad with other friends and advisors. Happily, Tarek arrived early enough to catch Darvad alone. Darvad smiled as Tarek entered the room and embraced him warmly.

Darvad was pure muscle, every part of his body toned, chiseled, and perfected. He had joyful brown eyes and brown hair that remained permanently restricted under the massive gold diadem that Darvad perpetually wore. Darvad also wore large earrings, shaped like maces, and had on bright golden armor inlaid with the image of the sun.

He looked beautiful to Tarek. And that was a problem.

Tarek had known his entire life that he found men attractive. It was simply a fact of nature. He kept his desires to himself, and other than a few discreet encounters, had left his sexuality to wander off by itself, starve, and die. He had no interest in endangering the reputation of his family or himself just for a quick fuck. He had enough of an active imagination to amuse himself.

But Darvad was the first man that Tarek had fallen in love with. And he knew that Darvad did not reciprocate his feelings, which made the situation worse.

Spending all his time with someone he loved who didn't love him back hurt like a physical pain. The torment worsened the more time Tarek spent with his friend. If he stayed away from Darvad, he could purge the desire from his mind. But he missed Darvad terribly. And when he saw Darvad, his gratitude at being with him subdued his inappropriate cravings, for a time. But they would eventually flare up again, demanding attention, and it drove Tarek mad simply standing in the same room as Darvad without proclaiming his affections.

"How are you today?" Tarek asked.

"I'm wonderful. Druv and I were discussing matters last night, and we've come up with a brilliant idea." Darvad sat at the low table once more, patting the cushion beside him. "Come, sit down. Eat something."

Tarek sat down and let servants fill his cup with sweet, milky tea. Steaming jasmine rice, eggs, and a bowl of fresh mangoes were placed before him.

As Tarek ate, he studied Darvad's handsome features, letting himself indulge momentarily.

They spoke of Tarek's father, and for a moment, happiness overwhelmed Tarek. The sweet taste of mango on his lips, the sight of his best friend by his side, discussing Tarek's family warmly, it felt as though no other problems existed.

But the illusion shattered as soon as Druv joined them.

Tarek liked Druv Majeo, the dashing young lord of Pagdesh.

He was a popular and well-connected man with excessive political savvy. He shared his ample wealth with his friends and allies, and reputedly maintained a vast and powerful network of spies throughout Marhavat that none could rival. Darvad regularly sought Druv's counsel, because Druv knew the happenings in every state, at any given time.

Druv and Darvad exchanged warm greetings and then Druv took his place at the breakfast table. Tarek asked after Druv's wife, who had just given birth to Druv's third child.

But the amiable talk ended immediately thereafter. And this was why Tarek's spirits always sank when Druv appeared. A politician above everything else, Druv could not stop talking business.

"Did Darvad tell you our new plan to win over the more traditional lords to Darvad's ascension?" Druv asked Tarek.

Tarek shook his head. "I haven't heard."

"Yudar's influence over the religious lords is powerful," Darvad said. "We have to find a way to guarantee that the traditionalist states give me their support."

"And that's where you come in, Tarek," Druv said, smiling devilishly. He shoveled rice into his mouth as he spoke. "You are going to be our greatest weapon against Yudar's ascension to the throne."

Weariness washed over Tarek. He did not want to be anyone's political puppet, not even Darvad's.

But then Darvad placed his hand tenderly on Tarek's arm. Tarek's heart surged towards Darvad, hungry for the attention.

Tarek nodded. "What do I have to do?"

"Fight them." Darvad grinned, his food forgotten, focused entirely on Tarek. "Sit down with them, eat with them. They will be so offended that a Suya has shared their food that they will challenge you to duel. You fight them, with the condition that if they surrender, they must support my claim to the throne over Yudar's."

Darvad and Druv both laughed. They seemed oblivious to the notion that Tarek might not want to offend and then fight other lords.

But, Tarek reminded himself, he had taken a holy oath to stand by Darvad's side. The day that Darvad had proclaimed eternal friendship to Tarek and granted him lordship, Tarek had sworn to protect Darvad with his life. He would not break his oath.

Soon Iyestar and his brother Keshan also joined them, followed, moments later, by Firdaus. As they ate, Darvad informed them of the new plan. Iyestar didn't like it.

"You will only make them hate Tarek," Iyestar cautioned. "Not love you."

"We only need them to agree to support me until Mazar makes his decision," Darvad said. "Once he sees that even the traditionalists are supporting my claim, Mazar will have no choice but to select me over Yudar."

It hurt Tarek's pride to have to remind them of this, but it had to be said. "There is another problem. Since I am Suya, by traditional challenging rules, they can use magical shartas. They'll slaughter me."

In truth, even if Tarek were allowed to use magical weapons, he didn't know any. Only the Triya knew shartas, and these were carefully passed down generations in sacred traditions. The shartas were enchanted, said to come from the Yashva demons. They were hard to wield and even harder to withdraw. And some of them were devastating, capable of destroying entire armies, burning men to ash with a single word.

"I can teach Tarek a sharta from my people. None of the other lords will recognize it," Firdaus said casually, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. "It can be uttered before the challenge begins, and so you will be armed and ready to defend yourself."

"Brilliant!" Darvad cried. "What do you think, Tarek?"

Tarek just nodded. He would do it because of his vow, and because he loved Darvad. But that did not mean he liked the idea.

Darvad leaned over and scooped some of his food onto Tarek's plate. "I know you love the crunchy rice," Darvad whispered.

"I'll host a dinner next week," Druv announced. "I'll invite some of Yudar's supporters, and we can put the plan into action."

"What I don't understand is why you don't simply challenge Yudar yourself, Darvad," Firdaus said. "Yudar is a scholar and not a warrior. You would win easily."

"I wouldn't recommend it," Keshan said casually, nodding to Firdaus. "Jandu Paran would most likely fight in Yudar's place."

"So you think Jandu is a better warrior than me?" Darvad asked.

Keshan cocked an eyebrow. "Are you willing to chance it?"

"No," Darvad admitted.

Keshan offered Darvad a warm smile. "It's a rare man who has the wisdom to know when he shouldn't fight."

Darvad obviously appreciated the turn of the conversation but Firdaus looked disgusted.

"I've suddenly lost my appetite," Firdaus said lowly. He shot Keshan a cold glare and then made his way to the door. He left the room without another word.

An awkward silence ensued as the four men watched the heavy door fall shut.

"Good," Iyestar said, as soon as Firdaus was out of earshot. "That man is trouble, Darvad."

Druv laughed. Darvad just shrugged. "I know, he is strange. But he is powerful, and we need him on our side. Besides, he is part-Yashva, and has many tricks in his mind."

"I'm part Yashva," Keshan pointed out. "And so is Iyestar."

"Yeah," Iyestar said. "It's not all it's made out to be."

Keshan helped himself to eggs. "Your chef is fantastic, Darvad. I could eat here every meal."

Darvad smiled back. "You are welcome to."

Tarek watched Keshan eat. Tarek considered Keshan attractive, but in a soft, pretty way, rather than in the way that Darvad was handsome, masculine and strong.

"That is a beautiful pendant you have there," Druv said, pointing to the large pearl around Keshan's neck.

Keshan glanced down at the pendant and smiled. "Do you think so? My favorite artisan in Tiwari made it for me. It has the words of the Jandaivo prayer engraved on the back."

Druv admired it for a moment longer, and then turned his attentions back to Darvad.

"So we're going through with this plan? Tarek?"

"Of course," Tarek agreed.

Darvad nodded. But he eyed Keshan carefully. "It's good to have you with us Keshan, but I can't imagine that you've come just to bask in my company. There's something you want, isn't there?"

"Your company is a delight," Keshan replied. "But yes, I have something to ask you to consider."

Keshan reached into his pouch and pulled out a long scroll. He unrolled it and placed it in front of Darvad.

"I have listed here some of the current laws I would recommend changing once you become king," Keshan said. "They are the primary laws responsible for the degradation of the lower classes. I would like them abolished."

Keshan stared at Darvad, as if challenging him to disagree.

Tarek did not know Keshan very well. But he knew Iyestar, and knew that the Adaru family was noble and loyal. The idea of someone from such proud lineage working to improve the lives of lower caste members touched Tarek.

Darvad seemed somewhat annoyed to have his breakfast ruined with law, but this did not stop Keshan. Keshan began

reading the laws as they currently existed, reciting them by heart rather than reading off the scroll.

“According to the Book of Taivo, if a Chaya caste member harms or kills a Suya, the punishment shall be lashes. But if a Chaya caste members harms or kills a Triya, the punishment shall be death. If a Suya caste member harms or kills a Chaya, the punishment is only a fine, but if a Suya harms or kills a Triya outside of a formal challenge, the punishment is lashes and imprisonment.”

“I know,” Darvad interrupted. “It is unfair.”

The list went on. Darvad politely read along with Keshan, but Tarek knew him well enough to see he only half-listened.

Keshan opened another scroll. “And these are the laws regarding the Jegora.”

Darvad held out his hands. “Wait a moment, Keshan.” Darvad shook his head and chuckled. “While I fully support your agenda, I think we need to take things one step at a time. Let us work with improving the legal status of the Suya and Chaya before we start working on the untouchables, shall we?”

Druv laughed. Even Iyestar seemed momentarily embarrassed by his brother’s enthusiasm. But Keshan frowned.

“The Jegora have it worst of all,” Keshan said. “If they injure any other caste, they are sentenced to death. They face execution anytime a member of another caste feels he’s been defiled by one of them. That can take as little as letting their shadow fall on another caste member.”

“Look,” Darvad interrupted. “I know their lives are terrible. And I hope to rectify that, I truly do.” He nodded. “I will help you, Keshan. But before I make additional promises, I need to know now—where does your allegiance lie?”

Keshan looked surprised by the question. “With you, of course.”

Darvad stared intently. “You have been keeping company with Jandu Paran.”

"I like Jandu," Keshan admitted. "But I do not agree with his brother's politics, and I do not support Yudar's claim to the throne. It is you I support, Darvad."

"Then you have my support in return," Darvad said. "However, announcing my intentions to enact such drastic changes as the ones you are suggesting before I have the crown would be political suicide. Mazar wouldn't even consider giving me the throne. But I promise to address these issues the moment I become king." Darvad patted Keshan's shoulder.

The conversation drifted, and Tarek found himself wearying of the company. His days always followed this course, his desperate desire to see Darvad, and then his realization that he would have to spend hours listening to idle chatter he had no interest in. What he really wanted was more time with Darvad alone.

He wished he could get Darvad to focus on something other than the throne and his competition with Yudar. It bordered on obsession.

Darvad put his hand back on Tarek's shoulder. "After breakfast, I want you all to join me in the dancing hall. I've commanded a dance troupe to do a show for us in private." Darvad winked. "These are the most beautiful women you will ever see!"

Tarek feigned enthusiasm. As the men left, Tarek made an excuse to Darvad, saying he needed to return to the townhouse for Dragewan business.

Darvad's smile vanished. "What? But I want you to be there. Nothing is as fun without you." He smiled brightly, and honestly, and Tarek could feel Darvad's smile warming him to his bones. At moments, like this one, when the true Darvad would shine through the veil of ambition, and stun him with beauty, Tarek could do nothing but concede.

"All right. I'm sure that the business back home can wait."

Darvad hugged him, and Tarek felt, once more, at peace.

CHAPTER 6

“BEWARE.”

Jandu called out the formal warning to his opponent and pulled back his bowstring. He focused on the orchid motif of his master’s shield.

Suddenly, Master Mazar dodged to the left. Jandu held his bowstring taut, following his master’s erratic movements.

Mazar whispered a sharta.

Jandu heard the dark sound of magic words, the sensation like ice down his spine. As Jandu processed the words, he quickly recalled the counter-curse needed to stop the weapon. But Jandu finished too late. Mazar released his sharta with a last hiss of breath and the ground beneath Jandu’s feet gave way. Jandu fell, sinking up to his waist as the ground parted like water under his weight. Dust exploded in a cloud and he choked.

“Damn it.” Jandu dropped his bow to drag himself free of the dry soil, coughing and batting his hand through the air to dispel the dirt. The weight of the soil pressed against him, and it took a great deal of effort to extract himself.

Mazar approached his star pupil, grinning. “Too slow, Jandu.”

“My apologies, Master.”

“Would you like some help?” Mazar asked.

“No, I’m good.” Jandu groaned as he wriggled his hips and then his legs free. His white shirt and dark blue trousers were coated in a layer of dust.

Mazar patted Jandu’s shoulder, causing another cloud of dust to explode from Jandu’s shirt. “You have to be faster.”

“I know. Let me try again.”

Mazar studied his pupil for a moment, and then nodded. "All right. Same positions."

Mazar was thin, his muscles sinewy, and his wrinkled skin and grey beard showed his years. He kept his white hair short, and so his large ears protruded significantly, displaying the divot where the tip of his left ear had been clipped by an arrow. An impressive scar sliced across his chin.

But despite his ragged appearance, Mazar still moved with grace. His unrivaled dedication to the study of combat, especially shartas, allowed him to wield magical weapons better than anyone in Marhavad.

All of Mazar's experience made him more than just Jandu's hero. He was Jandu's father figure, the man who had taught Jandu everything he knew about archery.

"Beware!" Master Mazar called from across the practice field. The sun blazed directly overhead, and Jandu wiped sweat from his eyes.

Jandu readied his stance and took aim at his master. "Beware!" he called back.

As Mazar moved, Jandu followed him with his readied arrow. And then came the words of the sharta, shivering through his consciousness like a sinister whisper. The shartas were not of this world, and as they became real words, living words, a split rifted the sky and the Yashva world poured through.

"*Adarami andaraya epizanash ashubana darha mandria bedru mandria...*" The words shivered down Jandu's spine. He kept his eyes trained on his master as he uttered the counter-curse quickly, needing to speak the words before his master finished the sentence.

"*Mandria bedru mandria darja ashubana epizanash adaraya adarami...*" Jandu spoke the sharta backwards, speeding up towards the end, reversing the damage. He finished speaking at the same time as Mazar, and when Mazar uttered the final "*Chedu!*" to fire the weapon, nothing happened.

Jandu released his arrow, and shot the center of Mazar's shield.

"Well done!" cried Mazar, approaching his student once more. Jandu unstrung his bow proudly. He spat blood on the ground. Uttering shartas always made his mouth bleed. He noticed that Mazar did not share this problem.

"How come I bleed when I use shartas and you don't?" Jandu asked.

"Using magical weapons takes its toll uniquely on different bodies," Mazar said. He sounded out of breath, and plopped to the dusty earth below Jandu. He stretched out, looking drawn. "For me, it merely exhausts. I feel like I have just run up a mountainside. Just count yourself lucky that you don't piss blood like Baram."

Jandu sat beside his master and stared out across the empty practice field. It had once been a large citrus grove but now, the soil torn and scarred by shartas, only weeds thrived.

Jandu leaned back on his elbows, content to sit in silence with his master for a moment. The two of them rarely found time to train together anymore. "Yudar is losing his supporters in the east," Mazar said suddenly. "The lords of Bandari and Penemar are turning toward Darvad."

Jandu kicked at a clump of dirt but said nothing.

"At last night's dice game, I heard Darvad promise the lord of Bandari substantial tax benefits if he became king," Mazar said.

"What did my brother say?" Jandu asked.

"Yudar wasn't there."

Jandu raised his eyebrows. "My brother missed a dice game?"

Mazar laughed. "I know. I think it must have been the first time he has missed an opportunity to play dice in ten years. That Suraya has surely worked a spell upon him."

Jandu snorted and laid back down. He thought it impossible to distract Yudar from gambling. This marriage was really turning out to be good for him.

"It's a shame he missed that particular game, however," Mazar continued. "A lot of discussion took place between the lords in attendance."

"I'll tell him." Why was it so hard for everyone to recognize the fact that he did not want to discuss politics all day? "But I'd rather not talk about it right now."

At this, Mazar sat upright and glared at him. "Don't be so childish, Jandu. You cannot pretend as though it does not matter. This is the most important decision since the formation of Marhavad!"

Jandu cast his eyes downward. "Yes, Master."

"What makes it even more difficult is that both Yudar and Darvad know the Pezarisharta!"

"I know the Pezarisharta too," Jandu commented, but Mazar continued regardless.

"Anyone who has the power of the Pezarisharta can destroy the world. The entire world, Jandu. This is no idle power. Whoever I choose as king must be the kind of man who will take that responsibility seriously."

"I know, I know." Jandu had been drilled, day in and day out, for nearly a year in order to learn the ultimate weapon. Just reciting it took ages, and each word had to be uttered perfectly, in precise order to complete the sharta.

The Pezarisharta set fire to every living creature. It burned earth, sky and water alike.

"I can't speak for Darvad," Jandu said, "but I know Yudar does not even think about the Pezarisharta anymore. He once told me he purposefully tried to forget it. He doesn't believe any man should have such power."

"He is right."

"And yet you taught it to all of us."

"It is your birth right, as princes." Mazar stared blankly out at the dusty field.

Jandu studied his teacher. Although Mazar moved swiftly and dangerously for a man his age, the years as Regent of

Marhavah had changed him, added lines to his dry face, creased his brow. Jandu's father had thrust so much responsibility on the man, trusting Mazar with both the education of his sons, and maintaining his kingdom.

"Are you thirsty?" Jandu suddenly asked. "Would you like me to fetch you something to drink?"

Mazar turned to gaze at Jandu fondly. "Jandu, if I need something to drink, I'll ask one of the servants. You do not have to fetch for me."

"I know." Jandu blushed. "But you are my teacher. It is my duty to respect you."

"You are very good at fulfilling your duty, Jandu. It is one of the traits I most admire in you."

"I thought you most admired my modesty."

Mazar shook his head and Jandu laughed.

"Come on, let us practice once more," Mazar said, standing. "This time, I want you to initiate a sharta. Remember to concentrate. Do not lose your focus, or I will out-speak you."

Jandu stood as well. "Which should I use?" He did not like practicing such weapons on his master. Most were fatal.

"You choose," Mazar said. "Just remember, the more powerful the sharta, the more it will take from your body. Choose wisely." And without another word, Mazar sprinted out of sight, dashing into the nearby citrus grove.

Jandu quickly restrung his bow and chased after his master. He caught a glimpse of Mazar's silver armor ahead, and charged towards him.

As soon as Jandu was within range, he began uttering the Alazsharta, the words cutting his tongue as he spoke them. He could feel, rather than hear, Mazar's counter-curse forming. As Jandu ran and spoke, he pulled an arrow from his quiver.

"*Chedu!*" Jandu spat with the last word onto his arrow. The arrow brightened in his hand, and then returned to its former state. It buzzed in his hand, vibrating with power. He aimed and loosed the arrow at Mazar's shield.

The arrow struck Mazar's shield, but the sharta did not follow through. Alazsharta supposedly put the victim to sleep. And yet Mazar stood tall and proud, panting heavily but definitely conscious.

"How did you do that?" Jandu asked. He spit more blood from his mouth.

Mazar gasped in a deep breath and then answered. "I don't know." He frowned. "I did not finish the counter-curse in time."

"I did."

Jandu swung around to face the intruder. He relaxed immediately upon seeing Keshan.

"Hello." Keshan walked up to both of them, smiling. Despite having just uttered a counter-curse, Keshan looked calm, not even a bead of sweat upon his brow.

"Greetings, Adaru," Mazar said, bringing his hands together in the sign of peace.

"And to you, Regent." Keshan bent low and took the dust from Mazar's feet. When he stood, he looked sheepish. "I apologize for intruding upon your training, but whenever I feel a sharta forming I habitually dissipate it. Sorry."

Jandu hid his surprise behind a smile. "I didn't realize you were so fast."

Keshan shrugged.

"It is a healthy habit to cultivate," Mazar said. "And I am impressed. You were far out of range to be able to work so efficiently."

"I can feel them more than most." Keshan turned to Jandu. "I was looking for you, actually. I have the evening free, and wanted to see if you cared to join me for the temple acrobatic performance this evening."

Pride flooded Jandu, and he almost stumbled over his words in his enthusiasm. "I would love to." He turned nervously to his master. "Assuming it is all right with you, Master?"

Mazar nodded. "I'm too old to exercise much longer anyway. You boys go ahead." He patted Jandu's shoulder. "Besides, I have

duties of my own to attend to. But I always appreciate a respite, Jandu. Ask me to practice whenever you feel the need.”

“Thank you, Master.” Jandu bowed low. He then turned to Keshan and the two of them made their way back towards the gates of the palace.

The excitement of spending time with Keshan still had not faded. Jandu frequently sought him out, but it seemed that Keshan appealed to far more men than just himself. The second Keshan walked into any room, dozens of people gathered around him, vying for his attention. Keshan always appeared excited to see Jandu, but was also easily led away by other lords, leaving Jandu feeling uncomfortably jealous.

To make matters worse, the flirtatious, intimate way that Keshan spoke with Jandu seemed to be the way Keshan spoke with everyone. Just when Jandu thought he was growing closer to his cousin, he would watch Keshan slide up to charm a young woman, or another Triya warrior, his smile sly and infectious.

Jandu had to come to terms with the fact that he was no one special in Keshan’s world. If anything, he was an outsider who did not share his views or have a part in his mission. Often Jandu had to wait for Keshan’s attention and some days it seemed like Keshan had no time for him at all. The thought disturbed Jandu deeply.

Because whenever the two of them were together, Jandu was filled with a hungry need for more. He had never been so confused and fascinated by anyone. They sat around and made jokes, or talked about nothing, and yet it seemed like the most important discourse in the history of the world. Jandu loved everything about being with his cousin. Keshan had a wonderful, if slightly raunchy, sense of humor, and never hesitated to argue with Jandu, which lesser lords refused to do out of respect for Jandu’s lineage. Jandu could be himself around Keshan, and it was rare to find such friends in the palace, especially now.

"I thought most of the performers left last week," Jandu said, walking casually beside Keshan.

"A few acts still linger in town. Mostly because they haven't earned enough money to get back to where they came from."

Jandu scratched his arm, and as he did so, he caught a whiff of his armpit and scowled. "God, I need a bath. I better clean up before I show my face in public."

"I like the way you smell," Keshan said with a wink.

Jandu swallowed his words, choking on what should have been a clever reply. He flustered so easily around Keshan.

"But I can wait while you wash and change," Keshan said. "Besides, I've never seen your rooms. I'm curious."

"They aren't impressive," Jandu said.

Keshan reached out and tucked a loose strand of hair behind Jandu's ear. The touch startled Jandu, but Keshan just smiled. "You look pretty disheveled."

"I did just come crawling out of a dirt pit, thanks to Mazar's sharta." Jandu hoped his blush wasn't obvious. Keshan always surprised him this way, touching him in a confident, familiar manner that left Jandu weak in the knees.

"I felt that one too."

"How could you?"

"I'm half-Yashva."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Jandu nodded to the guards as they passed through the gates of the outer palace wall.

Keshan gave Jandu a surprised glance. "Do you even know what a sharta is?"

"Of course I do," Jandu said. "It's a magical weapon."

"But what it is? What it is really?" Keshan shook his head. "Triya. All they care about is the destruction. They don't care that every time they fire their shartas, they are pulling Yashvas into this world and transforming them."

Jandu frowned. "Transforming a Yashva?"

“A sharta is a spell which opens a door between the Yashva and human worlds, and then summons one particular Yashva into the human world. Every Yashva has a unique shartic nature, which is how they manifest themselves on earth. So when you use a sharta, you are pulling some Yashva from their life in their own world and transforming them into tools.”

“This way.” Jandu cut the corner between the armory and the guard tower, taking a short cut to his own rooms. “How come we are never taught this?”

“No one here cares about the Yashvas, even though they formed the world. We are only thought of as spirits, nothing more.”

“What happens after the sharta is expelled?” Jandu asked.

“The summoned Yashva reappears in the Yashva kingdom, exhausted and pissed off.” Keshan smiled. “I saw it while I stayed with them during my exile.”

Jandu wanted to ask Keshan more questions about his time in the Yashva kingdom, but Keshan’s expression had closed. Jandu let it go.

Jandu’s rooms were at the far end of one of the larger and newer buildings, overlooking a rose garden and pool that he shared with Baram. Keshan immediately wandered about, taking in the sparse decorations as Jandu excused himself and went to the bath. When he returned, refreshed and in a change of clothing, Keshan had an odd smirk on his face.

“I can’t determine anything about you by your rooms,” he said.

Jandu shrugged. “I don’t spend much time here. If it were me, I’d just have targets on the wall.”

“But who *are* you, Jandu Paran? Really?” Keshan smiled slyly.

Jandu laughed. “Just me. Handsome. Talented. Brilliant. You know the rest.”

Keshan was staring at him strangely. “Do I? What else is there to know about you?”

Jandu could feel his face turning red. "There's nothing else to tell. I'm just me. I guess I should also say I'm the youngest Paran brother, fourth in line for the throne, Suraya's third husband, on and on. But that doesn't matter."

"It doesn't?"

"Not to me. All I want to do is shoot things, and have a good time." Jandu glanced over at Keshan, who regarded Jandu with almost a hungry expression.

"Well, then." Keshan cleared his throat. "Let's go show you a good time, shall we?"

They made their way to the eastern bridge, where one of the palace guards offered to prepare a chariot for them.

"I'd rather walk, if it's the same to you," Jandu said.

Keshan agreed, and they crossed the bridge and entered the heart of the bustling city of Prasta.

As Jandu walked, he relaxed. He had always been a constant mover. As a child, his family had made fun of him for his persistent fidgeting. He always drummed his hands on tables and squirmed in his chairs. In fact the only time Jandu was ever still was when he took aim. The moment he held a bow in his hands, the constant need to be in movement ceased, and he could focus all of that reckless energy into one goal, hitting his target.

As they passed through the central market, Jandu took comfort in the sights and smells of the city of his birth. Jandu loved Prasta, which sprawled lazily along both banks of the Yaru River. Stone walls stretched for miles around the city, carved white towers thrusting up from them like sentinels. Inside the walls, streets wound endlessly around each other from the meat market all the way to the temple district.

Down one street, Jandu smelled jasmine blossoms, only to be assaulted at the next alley by open sewage.

Jandu's presence as a Triya among the lower castes did not go undetected. As he and Keshan made their way through the crowds, most people stopped and bowed low. Jandu offered

the sign of peace to onlookers, and often stopped walking altogether as some merchant or traveler bent to take the dust from his feet. Not for the first time, Jandu considered traveling incognito.

Keshan directed them into one of the poorer sections of town where Jandu rarely ventured. He felt out of place and uncomfortable, but Keshan's easy confidence and constant stream of amusing stories set Jandu's mind at ease. The streets narrowed. The mud and straw walls rose higher. Only the smells of cooking oil and the sight of washing hung on long lines across the streets proved that inhabitants dwelled within. Through the occasional open door, Jandu could peer in and see the small cobblestone courtyards where families gathered on mats, eating and fighting and cleaning and tending children as goats and chickens scuttled past.

Keshan guided him further than he'd gone before, to the very edge of Prasta. Here houses consisted of a single room, broken wooden doors, and small windows through which Jandu could glimpse dirty bedding. People drew away from them sharply, wary of such noble blood walking among them. A group of girls dressed in rags crossed the street as they saw Jandu and Keshan approach, fearful that their shadows would fall on them. Jandu rarely saw Jegora untouchables out and about, and his sense of discomfort grew.

"Where are you taking me?" Jandu demanded, interrupting Keshan's long-winded narrative of the time he stole pastries from some courtier's daughters. Jandu's fingers twitched against the hilt of his sword, causing the Jegora to cower away from him.

Keshan pointed to a simple mud temple up ahead. "An acrobatic troupe from Tiwari is performing there. Some of my friends back home recommended the show."

Jandu didn't have anything nice to say about the area they were in, so he kept his thoughts to himself. He knew Keshan liked the lower classes, but this was getting a bit too unconventional for him.

“Are you sure we will be welcome?” Jandu asked nervously.

“Are you kidding? They will be honored to have us.” Keshan linked his arm casually in Jandu’s and pulled him along.

The temple was very simple on the outside, mud bricks and shutterless windows. It was a Suya temple, and Jandu had never been inside one. If it had been Jegora, Jandu would have refused to enter, no matter how enchanted he was with Keshan’s company.

Keshan didn’t give him time to ponder the unhygienic implications further. He pulled Jandu inside. Jandu was relieved to see the images of God were the same as those that graced the most ornate of Shentari temples. The prophets gazed from the corners, and the tenets from the Book of Taivo were carved along the entrance wall, the letters painted in red, veiled by the countless streams of incense smoke.

As Keshan predicted, their appearance was greeted with disbelief, and then overbearing warmth. Temple attendants gathered pillows for Jandu and Keshan to sit upon, and a servant was sent to fetch Triya-caste purified tea for them.

Close to one hundred people already sat in the small courtyard of the temple, but an airy space was created in the center for Jandu and Keshan. At the front of the temple, near the offerings, the troupe performed their show. Five men and five women tumbled over the stone floor in dramatic twists and fanciful leaps, all to the steady rhythm of a flute and a rebo which looked to be missing several strings.

Jandu disliked the environment, but the moment the show started, he forgot his anxiety and simply enjoyed the performance. He had never seen anything like it. All throughout the piece, crude jokes were scattered, random positions spawning a series of lewd gestures, causing the audience around him to roar in delight and Jandu to blush horrifically. He never knew the lower castes reveled in obscenity.

Jandu stole glances to his side, watching Keshan’s reactions. Keshan appeared captivated by the performance. He

laughed and clapped and smiled constantly, his face lighting up every time a new number started. Jandu enjoyed his cousin's reactions as much as the show itself. Keshan shouted cheers and raunchy suggestions with the rest of the audience. Jandu was out of place here—but it was clear that Keshan felt comfortable.

The performance neared its finale. And then suddenly a loud scream and the sound of numerous horses thundered from outside the temple walls. For another minute, the acrobats continued their show. Then an explosion shook the ground, and no one could ignore what was happening outside.

The audience stood and streamed for the entry. Jandu jumped up as well, his hand on his sword, cursing the fact that he left his bow and quiver behind.

Keshan stood beside him, eyeing the frightened crowd.

"We can't let them go outside," Keshan said suddenly. He dashed for the entryway.

"Please! Everyone! Stay calm!" Keshan shouted, trying to bring order to the chaos. Jandu was momentarily terrified that Keshan would be trampled.

But the audience stopped at the door. Keshan guarded it with his body. "If you go outside, you will be harmed."

Something caught afire, right outside the temple, and now smoke drifted in the dusk and clouded even nearby people from Jandu's sight. He pressed his way through the crowd to stand beside Keshan.

"What is happening?" Jandu shouted in Keshan's ear, hoping to be heard above the panicked shouts.

"Robbers," Keshan said. "It happens in the poorer temples. Bandits block temple doors at events like this one, forcing payment from the people inside."

"What?" Jandu scanned the crowd. "These people don't have enough money to make it worthwhile!"

"The robbers pick on the poor temples because no one is going to defend them."

Lit torches were thrown over the temple walls, and the panic increased, people pushing each other out of the way to avoid the flames.

"Why isn't anyone sounding the alarm for the city guards?" Jandu cried.

Keshan glared at Jandu like he was insane. "This is a Suya temple." A loud thump shuddered against the door, causing the wood to bulge inwards. Keshan flew forward towards the fearful crowd.

"They're breaking the door!" someone cried.

"This is ridiculous," Jandu said. His bewilderment had cleared, and now he was just angry. "All I wanted to do was go and see a show, and now these bastards ruin it. Fuck this. Let's go get them."

Keshan narrowed his eyes. "There may be as many as twenty men out there, Jandu."

"I don't care," Jandu said. "I'm a fucking prince and I don't pay robbers. These bastards picked the wrong temple today."

Jandu wished he wore armor, and almost laughed at the thought. That would show him for making fun of Triya who dressed in helmets and breastplates just to attend festivities. He spotted an iron breastplate, which was part of the decorative armor of the Prophet Bandruban. He pushed his way through the crowd and untied the leather bands from the statue, grabbing the breastplate and the dull, decorative sword from the statue's hand. He returned to the door, which now pulsed and groaned with each ram from the outside. Smoke poured over the wall, choking the crowd trapped in the temple.

"Put this on," Jandu demanded, throwing Keshan the breastplate.

Keshan shook his head. "You wear it!"

"I'll be fine. Hurry."

Keshan glared at Jandu again, but quickly strapped on the breastplate. It was too large for him, and the metal was cheap, but it would be better than nothing. Jandu looked at the dull,

ornamental sword. He gave Keshan his own sword instead, keeping the prophet's sword for himself.

Keshan in armor was a strange sight—such a slim body in such bulky attire. Jandu found his mind drawn to it. More fiery torches rained down over the temple wall. People scattered and screamed.

Jandu drew his sword. “You ready, Keshan?”

Keshan nodded. He turned to the crowd. “Stay back! Back away from the door! Everyone stay inside!” He placed his hands on the bolt.

“If I use a sharta, are you going to be angry?” Jandu asked suddenly.

“There is a time and place for magical weapons. And this is both of them.”

Jandu closed his eyes and brought his hands together. He visualized the Barunazsharta in his mind, focusing all his thoughts on the poetry of the weapon.

And then he spoke. Quickly, quietly, he whispered the words he needed. He groped on the ground for a stone, which he spat the sharta onto, and then tossed the stone over the wall, into the midst of the robbers.

“Close your eyes,” he told Keshan. He shut his own.

The world exploded into light.

Shouts of surprise filled the air as the blinding light blazed overhead. Jandu immediately opened the door and pushed himself into the cluster of robbers.

“Lock the door! Lock the door!” he cried to Keshan behind him.

The bandits were still blinded, rubbing at their eyes, groping for their weapons and stumbling towards Jandu.

Keshan rushed up beside Jandu, sword drawn.

Jandu's skin raised in goose bumps, and he heard the soft, silent uttering of a sharta. Keshan spat out the curse so quickly that Jandu had missed which one it was.

The men in front of them exploded backwards, propelled by a force of air. And then Keshan and Jandu charged.

THE ARCHER'S HEART

Hand to hand combat was never Jandu's strongest skill. But he was energized this night, fuelled by the panic of the audience, by the outrage of having his evening ruined. He thrust the temple sword into the skull of one of his attackers. As the man fell, Jandu tore the sword from the man's lifeless grip. Another robber drove in with a short knife. Jandu parried his thrust with the temple sword and then stabbed his new blade deep into the man's chest. As the robber fell dead, Jandu saw fear kindle in the faces of his would be attackers. He threw himself upon them, slashing with both blades and driving them back. Bandits cried out and fell, bleeding. Their horses reared and fled. Oily smoke filled the air. Behind him, Jandu heard Keshan kill another man and then there were no more attackers left.

Jandu stood beside Keshan, watching the last remaining assailants flee for their lives. Almost twenty men lay in the street. Half of those had been destroyed by Keshan's sharta—their faces contorted by the force of the weapon's wind. Some lay bloody, staring upwards with blank, final stares, and a few groaned feebly, clutching at the dirt, unable to move but not yet gone.

The door to the temple opened tentatively, the wood creaking on its injured hinges. Slowly, the temple goers shuffled out, staring at the carnage in the street. Others came to witness, neighbors pouring from their homes, clutching children. When they saw one of the bandits still living they fell on him like animals, kicking him, spitting and cursing until he was dead. Even though Triya codes forbade this kind of dishonorable fight, these Suya needed their vengeance and Jandu let them take it. Who knew how many times these same robbers had attacked their temple? Jandu turned away.

A young woman with scorched hair bent down to touch Jandu's feet.

"Thank you," she mumbled. She looked up at him with a nervous smile. Jandu felt slightly better.

Jandu heard Keshan laugh, and turned to see him surrounded by Suya citizens, smiling as they closed around him,

congratulating him with dramatic bows. Keshan slapped the men on their shoulders without regard to their lower caste.

And then the people moved to Jandu, bowing to him, touching his feet, offering him sticks of incense, desperate in their gratitude. Almost immediately, temple attendants dragged the bodies from the road, starting a huge pyre to burn the corpses.

Jandu cleaned his sword blade on a cloth and noticed his hands trembled with unspent aggression. Keshan was far more amiable with the survivors than he. He even hugged some of them. He listened with a sad face as they explained how these same men had terrorized them for more than a year.

Jandu excused himself, stepping down an alley and leaning against a cart. A goat tethered to the cart stared up at him placidly, chewing hay as though nothing had happened.

What the hell was he doing here?

Keshan found him before too long, approaching with a wide smile.

“You are fantastic in a fight,” Keshan said. He stood very close to Jandu.

Jandu could smell Keshan’s skin, coconut and sweat and wood smoke. Jandu suddenly longed to reach out and touch him, to transfer the smell to his own hands. Jandu turned away, embarrassed. Keshan quietly stepped behind Jandu and encircled Jandu’s waist, his hands clasped around Jandu’s stomach. Jandu’s embarrassment turned to relief. He leaned back into his cousin, enjoying how Keshan’s presence made his shoulder muscles relax.

Keshan turned Jandu around to face him. He didn’t move his arms from around Jandu’s waist. Keshan reached up and stroked the side of Jandu’s face. It was such an intimate gesture that Jandu was shocked. But it felt too good to pull away.

The sun had set over an hour ago, but the street blazed in the light of the spontaneous funeral pyre. Dozens of people gathered around to discuss the attack on the temple.

What would those people think if they saw the two of them like this? Jandu shrugged Keshan's arms off. Keshan raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"Can we head back now?" Jandu asked. "I want to get away from here. I want to go somewhere clean."

Keshan offered Jandu his hand and said, "Shall we take a short cut?"

Jandu frowned. "From this neighborhood, there are no short cuts."

"You are very talented with shartas, so you should be able to do this."

"Do what?" Jandu's self-consciousness was slowly giving way to curiosity. He took Keshan's hand, relaxing further. It felt natural to have his hand linked with Keshan's.

"I'm going to show you a door. You already know the words. Now you have to craft them slightly so that they are less volatile." Keshan closed his eyes, and stretched out his arms, palms upwards towards the sky. He began reciting words, shartic words, but they were different than the weapons Jandu knew. They lilted at the end, trilled. Jandu mimicked Keshan's posture and repeated them, grateful that his mouth didn't bleed.

When the sharta finished, Jandu opened his eyes. He was still standing with Keshan in the dark narrow street. But he felt different. Something about the light shifted, shadows had appeared as if the sun still shone.

"What did you do?"

"Opened the door." Keshan grabbed his hand. "Looks the same, doesn't it? But now..."

Something blurry passed in front of Jandu, and he tensed. He grasped the hilt of his sword.

Another shadowy image rushed by. He could distinguish the shape of a body, but it was much taller than a human's, with shimmering blue skin, and the face was hazy, unformed.

"What was that?"

“A Yashva.” Keshan squinted in concentration. “This way.” Keshan stepped into the air, pulling Jandu along behind. Jandu blinked—

—and they stood in a field. An empty field, as far as he could see. In the distance, far away, Jandu made out a strange mountain range, the hills jagged and piercing in every direction, like thorns on a rose. The air was thick here, fragrant with flowers and something indefinably sweet, like rotting blackberries and rich soil. Jandu felt bathed in warmth.

“Where are we?” Jandu whispered.

Keshan laughed. “Where do you think? In the Yashva kingdom.”

Jandu gazed around him in amazement. “Really? But... how?”

“You’ve always known how, Jandu. Every time you use a sharta, you open the door between worlds. You just haven’t ever stepped through that door.” Keshan peered into the distance. “Come on.”

The field, which had seemed endless, now moved in front of Jandu as if he were flying. Perception warped here, and he felt dizzy.

“I can’t feel my feet touching the ground,” Jandu admitted.

Keshan nodded. “That’s because, technically, they aren’t touching ground. This is all illusion.”

“So how do you know where to go?”

“It’s my illusion. Every Yashva has a different interpretation of this space.” Keshan cocked his head as if thinking hard. “Think of it as your rooms back in the palace. An empty space for you to decorate how you will. You would prefer to have targets on the walls. Yudar, no doubt, has holy scrolls and paintings of the prophets. It is the same in the Yashva realm. Each Yashva has a different world, but we can interact here as well.”

As the field flew by, Jandu caught sight of more Yashvas. They were taller than him, with lanky, thin bodies, shimmering

blue skin, and dark, swirling eyes. They were beautiful, but strangely immobile, their faces like expressionless masks.

“Are they upset with me being here?” Jandu asked self-consciously.

Keshan shook his head. “No, merely curious. It says a lot about you, the fact that you are even here. You have a great deal of power. Most people cannot wield shartas, let alone summon the concentration required to enter a Yashva’s home.”

“It’s beautiful.” The field gave way to a flowing stream of rushing water, and on the other side, a collection of buildings, their exteriors pearly and turbulent in the soft, unnatural light. The fact that this was all Keshan’s world, his mind, made the entire sight even more beautiful and intimate.

“Prasta’s palace is right here,” Keshan said, stomping the ground. The gesture produced no sound. Everything was muffled, echoed and distant. “We can go back, or we can have a drink here, where I stayed during my exile.”

A giddy excitement filled Jandu. This was Keshan’s private world. No one else had seen this but him.

“Let’s stay. I want to see everything.” Jandu let go of Keshan’s hand and spun around, lifting his arms, breathing in the thick, fragrant air. His body tingled, every pore vibrating with the strange newness of the place.

“If you’re going to dance, Jandu, dance with me,” Keshan said.

“Offer me wine first,” Jandu replied coyly. “That’s how it’s done.”

“Oh, is that how it is?” Keshan’s voice was low, almost syrupy smooth. His lids had lowered slightly, and he looked suddenly wanton and husky. “Well come on then, brave warrior. Let me get you a victory cup.”

Keshan took Jandu’s hand once more and gently pulled him towards the buildings. They zoomed into focus jaggedly, and Jandu struggled with his sense of perspective. Walls loomed

at exaggerated angles as if the world had been sketched in watercolor.

The strange opalescent walls of Keshan's home glimmered and swirled in pastel colors as the eerie endless daylight played over their surfaces. The floors were laid with richly layered silk carpets in persimmon and royal blue, and dozens of silk pillows banked the walls.

A tall blue Yashva servant brought them drinks, her face blank and unreadable, her eyes blazing and seemingly shifting in her face. Jandu felt dizzy staring at the Yashva, and finally had to look away.

They drank. They shared a bottle of honey wine. Jandu couldn't tell if it the alcohol, or the sweet air which intoxicated him.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Keshan asked.

"I guess," Jandu said.

Keshan sipped his wine. "Do you mind sharing Suraya?"

Jandu shrugged. "Not really."

"Many would find that unbelievable," Keshan said.

Jandu smiled. "I'm utterly righteous. That's how I can share my wife with my older brothers without issue."

Keshan laughed.

"I wonder if they feel the same way," Keshan mused.

Jandu finished his wine and stretched up, yawning as he did so. "We set firm rules after the wedding, and one was that we wouldn't talk about our romantic relationship with Suraya. And if anyone accidentally walks in on another brother when he is with Suraya, he has to go on a pilgrimage as penance."

Keshan whistled. "That seems harsh."

Jandu nodded. "It would be harsh enough just to catch Baram or Yudar screwing anyone."

"So you're not jealous at all, are you?" Keshan asked. Jandu could tell now, by the flush of Keshan's cheeks, that he was pretty drunk. Jandu himself was feeling heavy in the head.

He wanted to talk about things he knew he probably shouldn't talk about.

"The truth is, I think I'm in love with someone else." Jandu closed his eyes.

Keshan didn't reply. Jandu opened his eyes again, and saw Keshan staring at him sharply. He leaned in close to Jandu.

"Who are you in love with?"

Jandu smiled slowly. "I'm not telling."

Keshan kept a level gaze on him. Again Jandu felt that warm rush of blood whenever Keshan looked at him that way.

"Come on. You can tell me. We're friends," Keshan said.

"No."

Keshan stared at him a moment longer, and then broke eye contact. He stretched upwards, his hand brushing casually against Jandu's as he did so. Jandu felt electrified by his touch.

"Fine then, be that way," Keshan said, shrugging. "But does Suraya know?"

Jandu dismissed the question with a wave of his hand. "Who knows what women know? Maybe she'll find out when it's my year to be married to her. I don't have to deal with that for another two years."

Keshan raised his glass. "Good for you. Put off your problems till another day."

Jandu raised his empty glass, and clinked it against Keshan's. "I feel like I did my Triya duty today. I'm allowed a few failures of character in regard to my wife."

Keshan nodded. "Of course you are. You're perfect in every other way."

Jandu flushed. The fabric beneath him was warm and cocooning. He felt as though he could sink inside of it and sleep forever.

"I don't want to leave here," he suddenly admitted. He lay back. "I want to stay in here, with you, forever."

Jandu suddenly sat upright, panicked that he had said that aloud.

But Keshan did not chastise him. He watched Jandu with a strange, liquid expression.

Jandu cleared his throat. "We should probably get back to the palace, or Yudar will notice I'm gone and start to worry."

Keshan still stared. Stared hard at Jandu's mouth.

Jandu stood. His body resisted and he almost collapsed in the effort.

With a sigh, Keshan stood as well. "Fine then. I'll take you home."

Jandu suddenly wanted to touch him. Not knowing any other way to do so without being disrespectful, he reached down to touch Keshan's feet. Keshan stopped him halfway, as he had when they first met.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to do that?" Keshan said, his voice almost a whisper. He didn't pull his hands from Jandu's arms. "You're almost the same age as me."

"It's traditional," Jandu reminded him.

"It's too formal a gesture," Keshan said.

Jandu smiled. "All right." He brought Keshan in for an embrace. He would hug him like he hugged his brothers.

Keshan hugged back tightly. Jandu's heart beat faster. Their bodies drew even closer, and Jandu could feel Keshan pressed against him, could smell his hot skin. Their embrace went on several seconds too long. Suddenly embarrassed, Jandu let Keshan go, wanting to get as far away from the other man as possible before he made a fool of himself.

"Good night, Adaru," Jandu said.

Keshan looked at him with the sweetest grin.

"Sweet dreams." Keshan leaned forward, as if he would kiss Jandu on the forehead. Instead, he whispered strange words as he gently laid a hand on Jandu's chest and gave him a slight push.

THE ARCHER'S HEART

Jandu fell but not far. He shook his head to clear it. Outside, it was dark, and the air stank of manure and sweat and rotting hay. He looked around, and realized that Keshan had just dumped him behind the palace stables.

CHAPTER 7

WORD OF JANDU AND KESHAN'S TRIUMPH OVER THE TEMPLE robbers spread quickly. By morning, lords, courtiers and their wives accosted Jandu, pressing him for details, desperate for gossip. Baram and Yudar congratulated Jandu on his bravery, and Suraya appeared quietly impressed.

Throughout the day, the tale of Jandu's defense of the temple grew in scope. Before noon, he had only killed twenty bandits, but by dusk, the ranks of defeated robbers had swelled to forty. And Jandu had killed them with his bare hands. Jandu corrected no one, choosing instead to bask in the sudden fame.

All day he waited for Keshan to appear and share the adulation, but Keshan remained absent that day and the next. Jandu even went so far as to casually find himself at Keshan's townhouse only to be told by the servants that the master had not been home. Had he stayed on in the Yashva lands? Why? How could he contact a man in another world? He could not remember the words to open the Yashva door.

Worse yet, could Keshan be with Darvad and his friends? Jandu imagined him talking about his mission while Darvad nodded in agreement, the Suya Tarek, like a dog, at his side and Druv smiling that knowing little smile of his—all of them sharing Keshan's vision of the future.

Yudar took advantage of Jandu's current popularity by asking him to entertain a party of influential gold and silversmiths, hoping that Jandu's new reputation as the defender of the people would smooth over the occasionally factious relations between Prasta's artisan guilds. Jandu agreed. He thought assisting Yudar

would help him become a more well-rounded person like Keshan, a person who could not only fight but also make peace.

But the conversation of the artisans focused entirely on money and quickly bored Jandu. Money talk irritated him, and discussing how to form strategic alliances in order to make more of it, appealed to Jandu almost as much as chatting about methods of cleaning the latrines. He endured a joyless week of excruciating diplomacy before he finally faced facts. He would never be an effortless statesman like Keshan. After falling asleep in the middle of conclusive deliberations, Yudar politely asked Jandu to stop helping.

Although relieved to be spared more meetings, Jandu wished he could have proven himself to be more than just a warrior. And this thought, in itself, depressed him. A week ago, Jandu had been the proudest Triya in the nation. But now he was suddenly aware of all his shortcomings. He wanted to be more.

He realized it all had to do with Keshan.

Keshan was so perfect. He was funny and clever and compassionate, he was a fantastic statesman and a flirtatious guest, a skilled warrior and a musician. He knew the religious texts by heart, he remained current on all the local gossip, and he dressed to kill.

What could Jandu possibly offer such an admirable companion? Jandu could shoot a bow and look handsome doing it. That about summed him up.

Finally, seeking any diversion, he found himself sorting through storage chests from his childhood. He remembered some of his old fascinations. He found several scrolls full of sketches of falcons and eagles. He used to find birds of prey fascinating, and would draw them for hours. He found other scrolls covered in letters. He had practiced penmanship devoutly as a boy. He had loved wooden puzzles, piecing them together and even designing his own, which he would order one of the servants to build for him.

But he had given up all of these interests once he started formal weapons training at the age of ten. His artistic abilities, his interest in science, his curiosity had been abandoned in his single-minded pursuit of Triya weapons mastery. And now he realized with sudden disgust that he knew how to kill people. And that was all.

Jandu threw one of his puzzles back into his chest and kicked the entire box across the marble floor.

“Burn it,” he told the servant. He slumped against the wall.

He wanted Keshan to think he was educated and talented and the kind of person Keshan would spend his spare time with. But Jandu could think of nothing to offer Keshan in return. It was an unequal friendship. And it made Jandu mad at himself for giving up all the childhood interest that could have made him a more attractive companion.

Until now, Jandu had rarely engaged in introspection. He had no experience even thinking about the kind of doubt that plagued him. So he tried to consider it in terms of something he did understand: archery.

Baram once asked Jandu how he could strike every target he aimed at. Jandu reminded his brother of the lesson they had all learned from Mazar, years ago when they were children.

Mazar had a stuffed sparrow placed on a tree branch, after which he turned to the four boys before him. Because Darvad was oldest, Mazar called on him first. He instructed Darvad to take aim, and then asked Darvad what he saw.

“I see the bird, and the branch, and the tree trunk. I see the sky behind the bird, and the grass at the base of the tree.”

“Sit down,” Mazar instructed. Darvad looked disappointed to have let down his master, but he took his seat.

Next came Yudar.

“What do you see?” Mazar asked again.

Yudar cleared his throat. He narrowed one eye. “I see the bird, and the tree trunk, and the tree. I see leaves blowing in the wind.”

"Sit down," Mazar said once more.

Yudar bowed slightly. "Yes, master." He sat cross-legged beside Mazar.

Baram tried as well, and met with the same response.

"Jandu, your turn."

Jandu had stood and readied his stance. He pulled back the bowstring and took aim.

"What do you see?" Mazar repeated.

The world darkened. "I see the bird's eye," Jandu said. The eye was in the light. Nothing else mattered.

"What else do you see?" Mazar inquired.

"I see the bird's eye," Jandu repeated.

"Then loose your arrow."

Jandu released the string. It slapped painfully against his arm, but the arrow stayed true to the target. The bird tumbled to the earth. Mazar retrieved the target, and held it up for Jandu's brothers to examine.

"Learn from Jandu," Mazar told the others. "Learn that an archer sees nothing but his target. The rest of the world is lost in shadow."

Now when Jandu put his eye to a target and drew back his bowstring, the world contracted until only a pinprick of sight remained. His target. Fragments of sound, doubt, fear and desire: everything melted into the dark. Jandu would release the string, and claim his prize.

But for the first time, Jandu needed to direct his focus towards something other than archery. If he wanted to befriend Keshan, he would have to think of himself as a hunter stalking prey, rather than just a student aiming at a target. He must lure Keshan to him, take aim and fire. But he was at a loss as to what he could use to ensnare Keshan.

Jandu's family was far too busy to indulge his self-assessment. He got Baram alone for an afternoon and went on and on about how he would never be an intellectual. Baram responded

by standing up, poking Jandu in the eye, and then walking out. Jandu then tried discussing his qualities as a human being with Yudar. Yudar listened, as he always did. He sat cross-legged in his chambers and smiled benignly at his brother, nodding as Jandu spoke as if Jandu were the center of the universe. But it seemed that Yudar had planned other activities. As Jandu described the different opportunities he had as a youth to better himself in the arts of medicine, he noticed Yudar frequently looking askance at Suraya, a blush forming across his face.

Jandu stopped talking when it was plain to see that Yudar had become aroused, trousers bulging, and it was probably not from Jandu's fourteen-year-old medical ambitions. Jandu slunk away, feeling worse when the door shut behind him and he heard Suraya giggle.

As a last effort, Jandu invited Master Mazar for a private lunch. He had servants bring tea and plied his teacher with sweets.

"I heard about your success in the temple," Mazar said. He was a glutton for sugar, and had his mouth filled with candied pastries before he completely sat down at the low table.

Jandu pushed his own plate towards his master. He himself had no interest in sweets.

"I am very proud of you," Mazar said. He smiled widely.

Jandu nodded. "Thank you."

"You are everything I have trained you to be," Mazar said.

"But I wonder—am I nothing but a warrior?"

Mazar scowled. "What?"

Jandu spoke quickly. "I just mean, shouldn't I have studied the finer arts as well? Like painting, or music?"

Mazar stared at Jandu as if he had just grown another head. "Don't be absurd," he spat. "You are the finest archer in the world. And you want more?"

Jandu shrugged.

"Do you think there is no art in using shartas?" Mazar said.

"I have taught everything you know to your brothers as well.

And yet they cannot control the weapons like you can. None of them have your focus or concentration." Mazar grinned. "Remember the bird's eye?"

"I remember," Jandu said, sighing.

Mazar threw down his honey pastry with unnecessary force. His white eyebrows drew together. "Tell me what this is really all about."

Jandu flushed. He hated being so transparent.

"I just..." Jandu looked at his feet. "I want to befriend a person who has little interest in war and I don't have anything else to talk about." The silence hung between them. Jandu felt the gravity of his own words, and wanted to curl up in shame from it all. There could be nothing more embarrassing than this.

Mazar remained silent for so long, Jandu had to look up to make sure he hadn't simply left the room. Mazar stared at his pupil with a soppy smile.

"Oh, Jandu," Mazar said, shaking his head. "This girl you desire will love you even if you don't have anything smart to say to her."

Jandu frowned.

Mazar reached across the low table and touched Jandu's shoulder. "You have a great heart. And you shouldn't underestimate the appeal of a warrior to a woman."

Mazar smiled, and Jandu smiled back at him. Mazar didn't understand the situation, but it felt good to get the compliment nevertheless.

Mazar seemed satisfied with his own answer as well, and quickly swallowed the rest of Jandu's sweets.

That afternoon, Jandu decided he would go for a walk. The sun hung low over the banks of the lazy Yaru River, and Jandu wandered along the water's edge, singing to himself. He plucked at the bushy tops of high grasses as he walked, closing his eyes to the sun in his face.

"Jandu."

He turned quickly, surprised to be discovered so far from the palace. Keshan Adaru came up to him, his smile enchanting. Nervous excitement coursed through Jandu.

“What are you doing here?” Jandu asked.

Keshan pulled a blade of grass from beside him and started munching on the end. “I wanted to find you.”

“Oh.” Jandu hoped Keshan couldn’t tell how fast his heart was beating.

“I was at the palace, discussing changes to the law with Darvad and Iyestar.” Keshan noticed Jandu’s wince, and grinned sheepishly. “Sorry, I forgot. No politics.”

“I’m just tired of hearing about it all the time.”

“Really?” Keshan said. “How relieving. That’s why I sought you out. I need to rest my mind for an hour or so.”

Jandu frowned. “So spending time with me is the equivalent of resting your mind? Am I an idiot or something?”

Keshan’s left eyebrow quirked up. “Did I say that?” He munched on his blade of grass thoughtfully, then said, “I enjoy being with you. You are what you are, and I find that refreshing.”

Jandu still felt slightly insulted, but he let the comment slide. “Surely you don’t talk about politics with your brother all the time, do you?” Jandu asked.

“Iyestar and I don’t really talk, we bicker.” Keshan hooked his arm with Jandu’s. “And you are far more pleasing to look at than my brother.”

Jandu’s pulse raced every time Keshan touched him. They walked together in silence until they rounded a bend in the river and approached the edge of the royal forest.

“There is a clear patch in the woods there where I used to practice archery as a boy,” Jandu said, motioning with his hands to the nearby woods.

“Show me,” Keshan said.

Jandu led the way through the tall grass, passing into the cool shade of the forest.

“Only Mazar knew about this spot,” Jandu said. “Once he followed me here, assuming I was up to no good, sneaking off away from the others to lurk in the forest by myself. He was surprised to discover I just came out here and practiced.”

“He probably expected to catch you jerking off.” Keshan laughed.

Jandu looked at Keshan, startled. “What?”

Keshan shook his head. “You Parans. You’ve been raised in a tower of purity. You really need to travel more, get out in the world.”

“I would love to see Tiwari one day,” Jandu said. He led Keshan through a gap in the tree line and towards a glade.

Keshan stopped Jandu by putting his hand on Jandu’s shoulder. Jandu’s shoulder heated where Keshan’s skin touched him.

“Promise me you’ll come, then,” Keshan said, staring deeply into Jandu’s eyes. “I would love to show you the city.”

Jandu felt his whole body stirring with the look Keshan gave him.

“I promise,” Jandu said weakly.

Keshan smiled widely. Then he continued his way into the forest.

Jandu followed a step behind, blushing furiously. Being alone with Keshan almost felt shameful.

But why should he be ashamed? They were just men going for a stroll together, talking about visiting each other in the future. Jandu forced himself to calm down.

“Is this it?” Keshan asked, stopping in an oval clearing in the middle of the forest.

Jandu stood beside a scarred tree trunk, punctured over and over with weathered and broken arrow shafts. He grinned. “Yes. I haven’t been here since I was seventeen.”

Keshan came towards him. “I like it. There’s a homey Jandu feel to the place. This is more personal than your rooms.”

Jandu pointed up at an abandoned heron’s nest. “I used to talk to the bird that lived here. She made a horrible racket every

time I practiced, but she'd never leave. She became a companion of mine." Jandu smiled to himself. "I haven't thought of her all these years."

Keshan sat down on the forest floor and reached in his pocket. He pulled out a small silver case. He glanced up at Jandu, a mischievous expression on his face.

Jandu eyed Keshan suspiciously. "What are you doing?"

"Showing off," Keshan said. "Or getting ready to, anyway. This is my flute. You want to hear me play something? It'll only take a few minutes."

"Of course!" Jandu sat beside Keshan, so close their legs almost touched. "You play the flute?" Jandu asked.

Keshan raised an eyebrow. "Yes. I thought everyone knew that."

"Oh wait," Jandu held up a finger. "Actually, I remember hearing some story about how you lured women to you through music."

Keshan laughed as he pieced the parts of his flute together.

Jandu observed the instrument. "So is it an enchanted flute?"

"What?" Keshan looked at him.

"Are you going to lure me somewhere?"

Keshan's eyelids lowered slightly. "Only if you want me to."

Jandu blushed. He leaned against the tree and watched as Keshan began a soft, lilting song, and Jandu closed his eyes. He wrapped himself in the sounds, letting the music take him away from the tension of the afternoon. The song flirted along the scale; it tilted and lifted and trilled. It started sweet and slow and then sped to a furious pitch and pace, energizing him.

Keshan blew one long, final note, and then stopped, closing his eyes and leaning against the tree as well. He held his flute gently in his hands.

Jandu was too moved to say anything at first. And then, nervously, he reached over and squeezed Keshan's hand.

“That was beautiful,” Jandu said, his voice thick with emotion.

Keshan opened his eyes slightly. “I came up with that song after we fought together at the temple. I’ve been working on it all week. I wanted to get it perfect before I saw you again.” He laid his flute aside. “I call it Jandu’s song. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind?” Jandu smiled crookedly. “I’m flattered.”

“Good.” Keshan stared deeply into Jandu’s eyes.

Jandu frowned. “What?”

“Never mind.”

“Tell me.”

“I think you look beautiful right now,” Keshan remarked.

Jandu’s eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

Keshan shrugged. “I mean the way your hair is mussed from the wind, and the way the forest light plays across your eyes. Your cheekbones are so strong and your nose is slender and graceful. And your body—”

Jandu pulled back. “Stop it.”

Keshan cocked his head. “What?”

“Stop talking like that.”

Keshan leaned towards him again. “Like what? I’m just paying you a compliment, that’s all.”

“I know. Thank you. I mean...” Jandu looked away, hating the way he knew his cheeks burned with Keshan’s words. What the hell was going on? He knew that Keshan had lascivious powers over women. The whole Prasta court retold tales of Keshan’s exploits with servant girls in Tiwari. But Jandu had never heard of him using his magical powers on a man before.

What burned him more was that Keshan was succeeding. Jandu noted with horror that his body reacted to Keshan’s nearness, growing more aroused than he had been his first night with a woman.

“You look worried.” Keshan’s low voice sent a shiver down Jandu’s spine.

“I’m fine.” Jandu tried to control his mounting panic.

“Are you?” Keshan moved closer. His heavy eyelids veiled his expression. He reached out and touched Jandu’s chest with aching softness. “I’m not. There is something about you, Jandu Paran, that I cannot resist.”

Jandu nearly admitted that something about Keshan seemed irresistible as well. But Keshan’s proximity unnerved him. Keshan’s eyes lidded, heavy with emotion.

Jandu filled with alarm. “What are you doing?”

Keshan leaned in and kissed Jandu. Shivers trembled down Jandu’s spine at the sweet warmth of Keshan’s lips. Keshan started the kiss chastely enough, it could have just been a kiss between friends. But then he gently pushed his tongue into Jandu’s mouth.

Keshan’s mouth tasted like coconut, sweet and earthy. All reason fled Jandu’s mind, he closed his eyes, and leaned forward to feel more of the soft heat of Keshan’s lips.

Keshan’s hand dropped to Jandu’s thigh, and Jandu felt fire ignite within him at the touch.

Jandu’s eyes shot open. What the hell was he doing?

Jandu jerked away from Keshan’s kiss, suddenly horrified by whatever magic spell Keshan’s flute had worked on him. Was this some joke Keshan would share with Darvad and Tarek? Or a bet?

Keshan opened his eyes.

“Jandu...”

Jandu backhanded Keshan across the face. All the passion he had just felt drained away to be replaced with fury.

“Fuck you!” Jandu scrambled to his feet, backing away from Keshan. “How dare you kiss me!”

Keshan’s hand rose to the spot where Jandu had slapped him. He glared at Jandu, shocked.

“I thought you liked it.”

Jandu spat. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand to erase the memory. “You’ve enchanted me somehow!”

Jandu breathed deeply to control his anger. A Triya warrior never lost control. At least, that was what Mazar had once taught him.

He glowered at Keshan. "I don't know what kind of powers you have, but they won't work on me. Go back to screwing your servants and leave me alone, you fucking pervert!"

Jandu ran half the distance back to the river before he dared turn around. He saw Keshan staring at him, stock still in the gap between the trees, the side of his face red from where Jandu struck him. Jandu felt a momentary pang of guilt. But he realized that, too, was probably part of Keshan's spell, and turned back to the palace alone.



That evening, Yudar summoned Jandu into the dice room.

Jandu disliked gambling, and he especially disliked the way the dice mesmerized his brother. Yudar, always so clear of mind and focused, lost his edge in the dice room as he obsessed over his next win.

Lords and courtiers filled the chamber, laughing and drinking and eating fruit as several games played out simultaneously. Jandu found his brother at the far end of the large room, throwing his dice and cheering at the results. But Yudar's smile disappeared as soon as Jandu appeared.

"What did you say to Keshan Adaru?" he demanded suddenly.

The guests around the dice board looked up at Jandu.

The question startled Jandu. "Nothing."

Yudar crossed his arms. "He is our cousin, and even though our views often differ, he is an honored guest in this palace. And now he has told Mazar that he will be leaving the palace grounds and will not return until invited back, saying it has something to do with you. So what happened?"

Jandu shrugged, hoping his face did not give away the sudden terror of being found out. "I have no idea."

Yudar stared at him coldly. But Jandu didn't give him any answers. Finally Yudar just waved him away, turning back to his dice game with a grimace. Jandu excused himself, feeling sick to his stomach.

That night, Jandu replayed the day over in his mind. He couldn't believe the audacity of a man like Keshan, who would dare march into a Triya's private wooded retreat and just go ahead and kiss him. Men kissing men! What kind of world did the Tiwari people live in? They were immoral, obviously.

But what bothered Jandu more than the disgust he had towards the wanton ways of the Tiwari tribe was his own immoral lust for it. That night, he couldn't sleep, haunted by the sweetness of that kiss. Everything about touching Keshan had felt right, especially when compared to the perfunctory nights he had spent with women.

Jandu swore to himself that the next day he would pray to all the prophets of the heavens to cure him of the terrible ailment that the infamous trickster Keshan Adaru had afflicted him with.

Jandu hoped he never saw his cousin again.

CHAPTER 8

LORD SAHDIN OF JEZZA OPENLY SUPPORTED YUDAR FOR THE throne. If almost any of Darvad's friends had invited the staunch traditionalist to their house for a birthday celebration, the old lord would have refused on principle.

But the birthday invitation came from Druv Majeo, lord of Pagdesh, and so even the religiously devout Lord Sahdin had no choice but to accept. Outside of the palace itself, Druv's townhouse was the center of Prasta's political circle. It was the place to be seen, the place to stay informed, and the most popular destination in town for the up-and-coming Triya courtiers. Rejecting Druv's invitation was the equivalent of social suicide.

Darvad and Druv had schemed for weeks to prepare for Sahdin's fiftieth birthday party, inviting important Triya from both the traditionalist and modernist sides to witness the festivities. As Druv oiled his diplomatic machinery, Darvad and Firdaus drilled Tarek, preparing him to duel the old Triya lord.

On the night of the party, Tarek walked into the expansive guest hall of Druv's townhouse warily, half-expecting to be accosted for daring to enter. But his gold armor, his magnificent diadem, and his rich silk clothing allowed him to blend in with the impressive crowd of Triya warriors and their wives. He promptly helped himself to wine, desperate to steady his nerves. Social functions had discomfited him when he was a poor Suya in his home village. Now that he was masquerading as a lord and attending royal benefits of this scale, it was unbearable.

Druv's townhouse resembled a beehive, with alcoves and small sitting rooms forming intimate conversation nooks, connected by marble-laid walkways. It provided the illusion of privacy without any of the benefits. Clusters of people clumped together in comfortable heaps upon mountains of pillows, drinking excessively, eating too many pre-dinner pastries, watching each other hawkishly for news worthy of passing on to allies. As Tarek walked, heads turned, whispers buzzed from lips, and glances were exchanged. He felt self-conscious until he saw the same performance repeated for every guest who entered, each new person eliciting an instant wave of observation.

Just as he began to regret his decision to come, Tarek felt a squeeze on his shoulder. He turned to see Darvad's welcoming smile.

"How are you doing?" Darvad steered Tarek to an empty alcove and reclined upon the bank of pillows.

Tarek sat beside him and downed his wine. "I don't want to do this, Darvad."

"I know." Darvad touched Tarek's arm. "I know, and I appreciate that you will nevertheless."

"It's for your sake," Tarek reminded him.

"No, it's for *our* sake," Darvad corrected. "Once I am king, I will elevate you to Triya, and you will have as much say in the future of this country as any lord."

Darvad's kind words worked faster than the wine in easing Tarek's tension.

"Are you ready?" Darvad asked.

Tarek nodded.

"Then you better prepare. Use the Ajadusharta."

Tarek left the room. Almost all of the private spaces of the townhouse were currently occupied with chatting couples or trios. On the second level, however, Tarek discovered a vacant sitting room. He shut the door and breathed out deeply, working to focus his mind on the spell.

It had taken weeks for Tarek to command the Ajadusharta. Having never used shartas before, he had needed to learn in days what took most Triya boys years of training. Firdaus, who started as a gracious teacher, quickly became disenchanted with his pupil, threatening to give up entirely until Darvad soothed him into continuing.

It was embarrassing, but it was the truth. Tarek was no good at magic. Night after night, Tarek drilled the necessary words into his mind, speaking them over and over. The Ajadusharta leant the wielder a burst of superhuman strength, mighty enough to temporarily defend against the effects of other shartas. When Firdaus demonstrated the sharta in use, Tarek could feel power radiating off of his teacher.

But no matter how many times Tarek said the words, the subsequent rush of strength never followed. Tarek began to believe it was indeed a gift from God for only Triya warriors. What else could explain why he failed at this so miserably?

Again, it had been Darvad who encouraged him. Darvad, who abandoned parties with dancers, who left official dinners early, who gave up commitments in order to spend his evenings helping Tarek. Darvad's dedication made matters worse, because now Tarek could not fail.

And then, only a few nights before Lord Sahdin's birthday, Tarek had managed to clear his mind of all extraneous thoughts and worries, and actually *feel* the words. When he uttered the "*Chedu!*" ending the sharta, he gasped as a cold shudder ran through his body. The cold was immediately replaced with a growing heat, burning slowly and steadily through his veins, vibrating through his flesh. He had held out his arms, amazed that the tremendous force trembling through him was invisible to the eye.

At Druv's house, Tarek attempted the sharta several times, failing over and over again. The noise of the celebration downstairs, anxiety over the scheme, and fears of his own failings plagued his thoughts, now when it mattered most.

Tarek downed the last of his wine, put the glass down, and then stood, shaking the tension from his limbs. He closed his eyes and meditated, drawing his thoughts into himself. He whispered the Ajadusharta's complicated string of words once more, feeling them tumble over his tongue. When he finished, he was rewarded with a sudden, hot pulse through his body that made it hard to stand still.

The sharta burned in his bloodstream. He felt as though light shone from his eyes. He reached down for the empty wine glass and it shattered in his fingers.

Tarek watched blood leak from a cut below his thumb, stunned. He didn't even feel the wound.

Tarek hurried downstairs, eager to commence the plan before the sharta wore off. He knew from his last success that when the supernatural energy left him, he would be completely exhausted, barely strong enough to walk. He needed to challenge Lord Sahdin promptly.

Luckily, dinner was already underway by the time he returned to the guest hall. Seating had been arranged in advance, and Tarek found his place next to Lord Sahdin at the table of honor.

Sahdin frowned when Tarek took his place. Sahdin clearly disapproved of the arrangements. He quickly turned from Tarek to speak with the lord of Marshav instead.

Druv's elderly father-in-law sat to Tarek's right and provided kind, meaningless small talk during the meal. Tarek nodded his responses and said only what was necessary to maintain the illusion of a conversation. It was hard to focus on anything, even eating, while so much energy percolated in his body.

The meal was served on steaming platters, set strategically in the center of the low table in colorful presentations. Golden-red saffron rice, spicy grilled chicken, mint lamb, roasted eggplant, fried bananas and sesame seeds, spinach and cheese in a milk curry, shrimp with honey-glazed walnuts, one dish

after another was laid before them until it became hard to see those sitting on the other side of the table.

During the meal, Sahdin remained turned away from Tarek. Sahdin picked at the large platters, choosing his food quickly and nibbling on his plate.

Tarek braced himself. He leaned across Sahdin to grab a pumpkin-stuffed pastry. Sahdin gritted his teeth but otherwise did not react.

The sharta pulsed in Tarek's blood stream, making him dizzy. Aggression roiled through him as well, a burning hunger to expel the energy with sheer force. He would have to act overtly.

Tarek reached over and took a chicken leg directly from Sahdin's plate.

Sahdin reacted instantaneously. He did not suppress a shudder of repulsion as he pushed back from the table and glared at Tarek in horror.

"You touched my food!" Sahdin gasped. "You filthy Suya!"

It did not matter how prepared he was for the insult, or how many times he heard it. Tarek's chest tightened with hurt and hatred.

"I am a welcome guest at this table," Tarek said. He kept his voice calm, but the sharta made his throat muscles tremble. "We are equals tonight."

Lord Sahdin stood. "We will never be equals, Suya! It is against the will of God to even utter such blasphemy!" He threw down his cup and pointed at Druv. "Your hospitality has insulted me, and all of Jezza!"

The others in the room fell silent. Druv stood and held out his hands in the sign of peace. "Lord Sahdin, forgive me! I mean no offense. Surely the actions of one of my guests cannot reflect poorly on me?"

"It is you who have insulted me," Tarek said, turning back to Sahdin. "I demand an apology."

“Apology?” Sahdin spat on the ground between them. “I challenge you, Suya filth! This insult cannot be carried away with words!”

Tarek bowed his head slightly. “I am not filth.”

Sahdin spat again. “This Suya spouts endless bullshit.”

Tarek changed his mind. He *was* going to kill Sahdin. “I accept your challenge.”

Sahdin glared at Druv. “Call your priest!” Sahdin stormed out of the dining room.

A hush hung over the gathered crowd. And then everyone jumped up at once, the exquisite meal forgotten in the excitement of witnessing a traditional challenge. Even more exciting, this challenge would be between a Triya and a Suya. And on the Triya’s birthday, no less. The guests poured out onto the large courtyard of Druv’s townhouse, gathering along the edges to watch the duel.

Tarek lingered behind the press of the crowd. As he made his way outside, Darvad threw his arm around his shoulders and whispered in his ear. “Be careful, Tarek. I love you dearly—do not let that bastard harm you.”

Darvad’s words sent a tingle through Tarek’s body, almost as powerful as the sharta in his blood. Druv patted Tarek’s back and wished him luck as well.

Sahdin wasted no time. His charioteer had arrived and provided his master with leather gauntlets, Sahdin’s battle helmet, a shield and sword. Tarek had no such armor available. But the sharta that coursed through him made him feel impervious.

A messenger had been sent to Druv’s priest, and the man appeared only minutes later, out of breath and obviously fresh from his evening ablutions. His face was wet and he looked tired, but his purple robe was clean and he had his prayer beads firmly clenched in his hands.

The priest held out his hands for silence, and then ushered Sahdin and Tarek to the center of the courtyard. The dozens

of guests formed a circle around them. Tarek could hear bets being placed, and partygoers rooting for Sahdin or Tarek. The challenge had taken on an air of a sports event, and the crowd seemed delighted.

Sahdin remained sober in his stance, however. Now dressed for battle, he looked more formidable than he had in his light yellow silks. Sahdin pulled out his sword and examined the blade.

"I ask God to consecrate this challenge, and know that if life be lost, it is lost in the name of God, and the prophets, and all of the tenets of our holy faith," the priest said. He mumbled the prayer for bravery and forgiveness, and then held his hands aloft once more for silence.

"I will now recite the holy rules of combat," the old priest said. Tarek almost rolled his eyes. When he got into fist fights back in the village, there were no long speeches. But Triya loved pomp and ceremony.

"These rules of war have been set by the Triya kings, and shall not be broken for fear of exile," the priest said. "Multiple warriors may not attack a single warrior. Two warriors may engage in personal combat only if they carry the same weapons and they are on the same mount. No warrior may kill or injure any warrior who has surrendered. Nor may a warrior kill or injure any other who is unarmed, unconscious, or whose back is turned away. No warrior may kill or injure a person or animal not taking part in the challenge."

At this point the priest turned and frowned at Tarek. "No Chaya warrior may lift a blade against a Suya or Triya. And no Suya can lift a blade against a Triya warrior."

Tarek knew the traditional rules, but the fact was, he had just been told to remain unarmed, and the outrage caused another burst of anger through him.

"Then how am I to compete in this challenge?" Tarek roared.

The priest looked surprised at the outburst. "You may defend yourself, Suya. That is all the law allows."

Lord Sahdin gave a snort of triumph and lifted his sword.

Darvad was at Tarek's side then, handing Tarek a shield. "Use mine. Let him see the crest of my house as you defeat him."

Darvad patted his back and then withdrew. Tarek stepped forward into the circle.

The priest lit incense and waved it over Sahdin's head, and then over Tarek. He made the sign of peace and then withdrew, leaving Tarek and Sahdin alone in the center of the courtyard.

Tarek could hear his heart beating. He held up his shield. He lifted his sword, although the scabbard remained over the blade.

Suddenly, Sahdin lunged. The tip of his sword thrust into Tarek's shield and the force of the blow sent Tarek stepping backwards. Again Sahdin advanced. He slashed at Tarek from an angle and Tarek blocked the sword with his own. Sahdin's blade cut deep into the leather scabbard and Tarek had to jerk his arm back to free it.

Sahdin slowly circled Tarek. Tarek parried each assault. His confidence increased. He was younger and stronger than Sahdin, and he could outlast his opponent if this was the worst he could give.

But then Sahdin, now breathing heavily, began to utter a sharta. Tarek could feel the energy of Sahdin's words, and a disturbing vibration shuddered over Tarek's skin.

Sahdin's eyes widened, seemed to almost bulge from his face, as he spat the sharta out towards Tarek.

"*Chedu!*" Sahdin cried, thrusting towards Tarek at the same moment.

A burst of fire blinded Tarek. He fell back, shielding his eyes and face. His body burned in instant pain, and then, with a sucking sound, the sensation pulled from him.

Tarek watched in horror as the fire ball that Sahdin summoned engulfed Sahdin himself. Sahdin emitted an unholy screech as his arms and the fabric of his dejaru caught afire.

Tarek's body ached and shuddered, but he forced it into action. He quickly dropped his sword and shield and ran to the entrance of the courtyard, grabbing the vase of a potted plant. He upturned the contents onto his burning opponent, covering Sahdin in water and damp soil.

Sahdin collapsed onto the ground, groaning. He dropped his sword and shield, his hands held out from his body, the skin blistered and broken.

Tarek knelt beside him and leaned in close. "Say that you will renounce your support of Yudar Paran, and I will spare your life." Killing the Triya lord was against the rules of combat but threatening him wasn't.

"Never," Sahdin hissed.

Tarek clamped a hand around Sahdin's throat. He didn't even have to squeeze. The old man's eyes bulged and tears streamed down his cheeks. The audience watched, rapt, but no one did anything to stop the duel.

Tarek released his grasp and Sahdin gasped for air.

"Say it!"

"I renounce my allegiance to Yudar Paran," Sahdin croaked.

"Say you will support Darvad Uru as the King of Marhavad," Tarek prompted.

"Darvad Uru has Jezza's support." Sahdin collapsed backward. All the fight had left him. Tarek stood, facing the onlookers.

"Help him!" Tarek ordered. Immediately, servants from the house rushed over and knelt by Sahdin's side, offering him water. Druv summoned his physician.

The focus of the crowd turned to Sahdin and his hideous burns. Tarek stiffly walked over to the edge of the courtyard. He sat on a stone step and tried to slow down his heartbeat. His arms and legs shook violently with the aftershocks of the Ajadusharta. His body felt drained.

Darvad rushed to him, carrying a glass of water and a cloth. “Are you all right?”

Tarek nodded. He took the water with shaking hands and drained the cup. Darvad started mopping his brow with the towel. Tarek took it from him. Several servants helped Sahdin stand, in preparation to place him on a palanquin. Tarek stepped forward.

Sahdin turned to Tarek. His face was contorted in pain. But he bowed his head at Tarek.

“I don’t know how you did that, Sua. But you have my apology. I concede the challenge.”

Sahdin turned away and climbed into the palanquin.

Tarek left the party immediately after Sahdin’s departure, went to his own townhouse and took a long bath. His body continued to shake, hours after the sharta had been expelled. He sank deeper in the water and forced himself to forget the shame of humiliating a Triya lord at his own birthday party. He had done it for Darvad. And the brightness of his friend’s smile had been enough to burn away any regret.

CHAPTER 9

EVERY NIGHT, JANDU FOUND IT IMPOSSIBLE TO SLEEP.

His body felt heavy and hot with longing. Keshan had stirred something inside him, sensual and craven, and now he could not rid himself of the feeling. Everything seemed erotic. His mind crashed against carnal wishes on an hourly basis. The sight of workmen repairing a particular piece of furniture, the movement of a farmer against a plough, the arrival of pages carrying in his dinner—the strangest things made him flush with sexual desire. He felt sixteen again.

It was bad enough having to pretend like his mind wasn't completely focused on sex. Worse was how often he thought of Keshan. He thought of the smell of him. The way he moved, spoke, laughed. Jandu went to bed each night shaking with unspent desire, tortured by Keshan's spell.

Jandu had always been the most sexually reserved of all the Parans. While Baram slept with every servant girl in the palace, Jandu had always maintained his self-control. Even in his confusing teenage years, Jandu transferred all his energy to archery, rarely submitting to the passions flooding his system.

Sex hadn't obsessed him. It hadn't controlled him. And now he was being completely manipulated by his dick, unable to focus on even the simplest of chores. After he failed to accompany Yudar on a social call, his older brother formally summoned Jandu so that he could explain himself.

Yudar conducted most of his private business in a large, elegantly decorated room that opened out onto a magnificent rose garden. Unlike the palace's throne room, Yudar's greeting

room had no chairs, and so guests would sit on pillows or piled silk rugs as they talked with him.

But Jandu chose to stand instead, taking his place beside the large mahogany desk in the corner. Scrolls and maps covered the desk. Parchments piled the floor, and more scrolls leaned against the walls.

Yudar stood with his back to his brother, intently reading a scroll. Jandu coughed. "You wanted to see me?"

Yudar turned and made a show of rolling the scroll he had been reviewing. He narrowed his dark eyes at Jandu. "You are not acting yourself."

Jandu froze. He hoped Yudar couldn't tell that Jandu had just been thinking about how much the paper weight on his desk looked like testicles. Jandu stared at his brother in mock innocence.

"I'm just distracted."

"By what?"

Jandu didn't answer. He stared at a map of the river on the desk.

Yudar sighed. "Fine. Don't tell me. But I can't have you sulking around the palace, ignoring my guests. Your irresponsibility is driving me insane, and I have too many problems right now to deal with you too."

Jandu straightened. "I don't need dealing with. Just give me something more to do, and I'll be fine."

"More to do? You didn't do what I asked you to do yesterday."

"Not true," Jandu protested. "I entertained those ambassadors from Bandari, just like you said."

"You called one of them a liar and then fell asleep during his daughter's flute recital!" Yudar slammed the scroll down on his desk. "And last night I asked you to accompany me on my visit to Lord Sahdin. You never showed up."

"I was caught up in an affair," Jandu said. He coughed. "I mean, I... I was involved in affairs of state."

THE ARCHER'S HEART

“An affair?” Yudar said, almost to himself. He smirked. “She must be something, otherwise you wouldn’t be turning so red.”

“It’s none of your concern!” Jandu turned to leave the room.

“I didn’t excuse you.” Yudar sounded more like a father every day. It used to please Jandu that Yudar treated him like a son. Now it drove him mad.

“Sorry, your highness,” Jandu said, sarcasm thick in his voice.

Yudar sighed dramatically, and rubbed his eyes.

“Can I go?” Jandu asked Yudar urgently.

Yudar studied him a moment longer. “I wish you had come with me to visit Lord Sadhin. He seems strangely distant. I worry that something troubles him of late.”

“Other than his burn scars?”

Yudar’s expression darkened. “I’m glad to see that you find it funny to treat our fellow Triya’s pain with such flippancy.”

“I’m sorry,” Jandu said. “Is there anything I can do now?”

“For Lord Sahdin? No. But I do have a task more suited to your skills, I think,” Yudar said. “The gamekeepers have informed me that something strange is bothering the animals in the Ashari Forest. For the last few days, the wild boar and deer refuse to cross the clearing near the bend in the river. Even the birds seem to avoid the area. Go there and find out what’s going on. Take as many of my men as you like.”

“Why me?”

“Because if it is dangerous, I’m sure you can take care of yourself.” Yudar smirked. “Besides, no one knows the forest as well as you do. You’ve been sneaking off there alone for years.”

Jandu flushed. He immediately thought of the softness of Keshan’s kiss.

“I’ll see to it,” Jandu promised and then he fled Yudar’s chamber.

Jandu hurried through the long white corridors and darted through the sculpture garden to his own rooms. His thoughts kept flashing back to Keshan touching him in the woods. Once in his rooms, Jandu shooed his attendants away and spent ten minutes alone, taking care of pressing issues. When he re-emerged, he headed towards the palace stables.

Jandu ordered his gelding, Shedav, saddled. While he waited, he mulled over the idea of spending such a crisp and beautiful day with Yudar's soldiers in tow. He elected to go into the forest alone. He strapped on his quiver and bow, and rode Shedav away from town, down along the river towards the Ashari Forest.

As he traveled, he realized he would have to change his behavior. If Yudar, obsessed with his own ascension, noticed the change in Jandu, then others might, as well. Someone might figure it out. If they learned that Jandu lusted over a man, he thought he would die of shame.

On the other side of the river, Jandu saw travelers walking the wide road that led into the heart of Prasta. But on his side of the river, the land was the private property of the royal family and so he remained alone with his tormented thoughts.

The path eventually narrowed and Jandu had to cross a branch of the river to penetrate the Ashari forest. Shedav looked at the water warily, and disapproved of crossing until Jandu found a place where the river narrowed sufficiently enough that Shedav could jump across without getting his feet wet. Jandu dismounted.

The lush sounds of forest life filled the air. Birds, snakes, a hundred species of trees, they all congregated on this marshy curve of the river, huddling against each other for protection from the arid rolling plains to the north.

Jandu heard a branch snap behind him. Shedav spooked and bolted. Jandu swiveled and instinctively pulled an arrow from his quiver, nocking it.

There was no one there.

He relaxed, but searched the impenetrable green of the forest for movement. Something had startled Shedav. Jandu called out to him, but Shedav balked.

Swearing, Jandu walked slowly towards his horse. Shedav didn't run, but watched Jandu apprehensively.

"What's wrong?" Jandu asked him. He stroked Shedav's neck, and Shedav leaned into his hand. Suddenly Shedav whinnied and reared. Jandu stepped aside as he bolted, racing back down to the river's edge.

Jandu's skin crawled, but he saw nothing. He scanned the small clearing in the woods for signs of life, but other than a small bird up in the forest canopy he saw no one.

Something darted in the corner of his eye, and he spun once more.

He saw a blur and a glint of light. Jandu concentrated on the spot where he'd seen the first flashes. The hazy outlines of two men fighting furiously in sword combat became barely visible. Sparks bloomed around the combatants heads, and the air seemed to vibrate and shimmer, ripples coursing through it like it were the surface of a pond. Their shimmering blue skin and glossy black hair made the men appear as gods, towering above him in a blurry mirage of violence.

Yashvas. What were they doing here, in his world?

One of the Yashvas thrust. The other tried to parry but lost his balance and fell backwards into the undergrowth. But the bushes did not move. Jandu suddenly realized they weren't in his world. He was watching them in theirs. He couldn't see them if he looked directly at them. But by glancing away and concentrating, Jandu made out the bright colors exploding around the demons, made out their shimmering forms. Both of these creatures looked almost human. They wore armor and carried weapons like men. But their bluish skin tone and hazy, unfocused faces showed them for what they were.

The explosions above their heads increased in intensity. Jandu's heart beat faster. He was witnessing a great battle. The explosions had to be magical weapons of some sort. Suddenly a loud boom echoed across the forest. Jandu felt the air ripple and then burst. The noise of clashing swords crashed over him.

One of the Yashvas emitted a piercing scream, and then collapsed before Jandu and grabbed hold of his ankles.

"Please protect me!" The Yashva cried out, quivering at Jandu's feet.

Jandu gasped in shock. The Yashva had dropped his sword. Blood ran from numerous wounds all over his body.

As the Yashva looked up, Jandu gasped again. This was a woman. The surface of her long black hair swirled like an oil slick. Dark, purplish blood oozed from her lips and nose.

Jandu unsheathed his sword as the other Yashva strode towards him.

Jandu's honor would not allow him to ignore the pleas of a woman, particularly not one so badly wounded. But he had no idea how to fight a Yashva. They were the weapons that Triya used in battle against each other.

"Zandi!" the other Yashva yelled. "Let go of the mortal and come back here! This is none of his concern!"

Jandu stepped in front of the cowering demon. "She has asked for my protection and as a Triya it is my duty to provide it." He stood battle-ready, looking up at his towering opponent. "I am Jandu Paran! Prepare yourself!"

"I am your death," the Yashva said, smirking. "Prepare yourself, Jandu Paran!"

"Koraz," the Yashva at Jandu's feet moaned. "His name is Koraz."

Jandu knew the Yashva's name. The Korazsharta released an indestructible spear that could strike true for an extended distance.

Koraz lunged at Jandu, bringing his sword down with the strength of an elephant.

Jandu deflected the blade with his own sword. A tearing pain ripped through his shoulder. Koraz slashed at him again and this time Jandu's legs buckled beneath him as he blocked the powerful blow. He crumpled to his knees.

Koraz grinned maliciously. "You're strong," he said.

"I'm smart too." Jandu reached out and plucked a blade of grass. He pulled it to his lips and whispered the Korazsharta.

As soon as Jandu started speaking, the Yashva became enraged. Koraz struck at Jandu, forcing Jandu to roll away. He mumbled the words of the sharta, blood pooling in his mouth.

"*Chedu!*" Blood flew from Jandu's mouth as he shouted the final word.

Koraz screamed in rage and vanished. Jandu gripped the blade of grass. It shimmered and then grew into a long spear. It pulsed in his hand, the metal expanding and shrinking, hot to touch.

"God," Jandu whispered. He pulled himself upright, his arm aching at the shoulder. He gingerly held the spear away from his body.

Jandu felt someone touch the back of his calf and he spun around, spear ready.

Zandi instantly crouched, hands together in supplication.

"Please! I mean you no harm," she cried.

Jandu immediately lowered the spear. "Sorry."

"Thank you!" Zandi touched Jandu's feet. He leaned down to help her stand. When Zandi finally stood before him, Jandu could see that she was enormous. His head came only to her chest.

Zandi eyed the spear beside them warily. "You changed him into his shartic form."

Jandu nodded. "Luckily, I know the Korazsharta. When you said his name, I thought I would give it a try. My friend

once told me..." Jandu clenched his jaw shut. He had been doing very well without thinking of Keshan.

"Your cleverness has saved my life," Zandi said, smiling despite the blood trickling from her nose.

Jandu bowed his head. "It was my pleasure." He studied the spear in his hand. "What happens if I throw this now?"

Zandi looked at the weapon with obvious fear. "You will dispel the sharta and Koraz will return to the Yashva kingdom."

"Will he come after you again?"

"Probably." Zandi shuddered. "We have fought for three days already."

Jandu wondered what she had done to earn such wrath. But it was not his concern. Getting involved in the business of the Yashvas seemed like a bad idea.

"I can't hold onto something this powerful forever," Jandu told her. "And I can't leave it laying around for someone else to find. If I give you a few days will you be able to escape from Koraz?"

Zandi shook her head. "It will be a hundred years before Koraz forgets my insult." Suddenly, Zandi reached out and grabbed Jandu's arm. "But you can hide me, beautiful Marhavadi!"

Zandi had grabbed the arm that Koraz had injured, and Jandu fought back an unmanly whimper. "How?"

"Change me into my shartic form! I will be your greatest ally," Zandi said. "I don't look it but I am a powerful weapon."

"What kind of weapon?"

"Whatever weapon you most desire." Zandi's eyes twinkled. "What form of combat do you most excel at?"

"Archery," Jandu said without hesitating.

"I will be your bow."

"But I don't know the Zandisharta."

"Do you know the Barunazsharta? It is like that, only softer." Zandi said, squeezing Jandu's arm tighter. Tears sprang to Jandu's eyes.

Jandu wondered how one uttered a sharta softly. He began speaking, changing the words of the sharta slightly, as he looked at Zandi. He wanted the sharta to fit her, feel like her, and the needed words came to him easily.

As soon as Jandu finished the sharta, Zandi began to melt. Her body softened. A shudder of revulsion shook Jandu as the flesh of Zandi's hand turned buttery and hot, and dribbled off his arm. It pooled on the forest floor and slithered together, a bluish ooze, forming a puddle that slowly began to shift and harden.

Then she took form, long and curved. Her color changed from dull blue to shimmering white gold, the surface forming patterns. Jandu crouched down and watched as delicate filigree curled over the surface of the exquisite weapon.

The forest grew silent. On the mossy ground lay the most beautiful bow he had ever seen. Long and sleek, its gold patterns moved in a slow river, the colors of its highlights and tints shifting depending on how he looked at it.

He had never seen such a gorgeous object in his life, and his heart swelled with pride that this was his. *She* was his.

"Can you hear me?" he whispered to Zandi. The gold lacquer warmed in his grip. Jandu's hands trembled with excitement as he quickly unstrung his old bow and transferred the string to Zandi. The bow bent in his hands, turning loose and liquid as he pulled the string taut. Once strung, the bow hardened again.

Jandu reached for an arrow from his quiver and took aim at a distant branch drooping with berries. When he loosed the arrow, it sang through the air. The berries exploded in the air and the branch fell to the ground.

Jandu laughed. He hugged the bow to his chest, feeling foolish, but no longer caring. He slung Zandi over his back and then reached down once more for the spear.

"Don't be such an asshole in the future," he scolded the spear. Then he threw it as hard as he could at a tree. The spear

exploded into the wood, piercing through the entire trunk before disappearing out of sight. Jandu waited in the forest a moment longer, to see if Koraz would return, but he did not.

As Jandu stood in the soft forest light, a burning desire to share this story with Keshan overwhelmed him. It was Keshan's comment about the relationship of shartas and Yashvas that had saved Jandu's life, and given him this bow. Keshan would have been proud of him.

"Keshan is a pervert," Jandu said aloud, forcing himself not to think of the sensation of kissing Keshan, rubbing against his hot flesh. Keshan wasn't the only pervert. But rather than sully this victory with forbidden thoughts, Jandu cleared his mind of Keshan, and instead set out to follow Shedav's tracks and head home.

"My brothers are going to adore you, Zandi," Jandu whispered to his bow. And as Shedav caught sight of him and walked towards Jandu, Jandu thought he could even feel Zandi respond, a slight pulse at his back.

CHAPTER 10

TAREK WALKED QUICKLY ACROSS THE WIDE COURTYARD JUST inside the west gate of the palace. He was late. He was always late these days. He felt time struggle against him, squirming out of his grasp like an impatient child.

A sweet breeze rushed over him, fragrant with new blossoms. Even this failed to inspire joy in him. The breeze merely reminded him that it was already March, and he still hadn't visited his father back in Dragewan. Tarek had put off the visit for weeks now, kept away from his familial duties by Darvad's bid for ascension. Last year at this time, Tarek returned to his home village with his father to pay tribute on the anniversary of his mother's death. It had been an emotional week, filled with the smell of fish and incense and the sound of old women crying and the recitation of prayers and the constant, incessant, beating of wet clothes against the rocks of the river. A short year later, and Tarek had almost forgotten the anniversary. What sort of son was he that could forget his family so swiftly?

But this seemed to symbolize the life he had chosen now. He constantly let down the ones he loved. He prayed every morning for guidance to become a better person, and yet here he was, once again, rushing to Darvad's side for an evening of pleasure instead of making arrangements to return to Dragewan, to see his ailing father.

Tarek sprinted the last few steps to the small gaming room attached to Darvad's lavish suites. A blast of stale male air overwhelmed him. A haze of hookah tobacco and spilled wine and roasted meats and sweat hung over the room.

Tarek adjusted from the sweet freshness outside, sinking down onto the floor pillows silently. He sat next to Darvad, who looked up from the gaming board only to smile briefly.

“You’re late,” Darvad said.

“Did I miss anything?” Tarek asked.

Darvad snorted. “Firdaus and Druv have robbed Iyestar and I blind. The wily bastards are up to something, but I cannot see what. Watch them for me, will you?”

Iyestar and Darvad sat on one side of the large ivory board, and Druv and Firdaus shared pillows on the other side. Behind them, servants wafted large feather fans to encourage the spring air to filtrate the room, but all it did was press the smell of wine and smoke closer.

Tarek snapped his fingers, and a servant hastened over to hand him a goblet of wine. The way Firdaus’ heavy eyelids drooped, and the way Iyestar’s mouth seemed incapable of closing, told Tarek he was far behind on the drinking.

“Everything is in place for tomorrow night, by the way,” Druv said casually. He nodded to Tarek.

Tarek’s stomach tightened. Druv had invited another of Darvad’s rivals over for a dinner party. Once again, Tarek would be forced to insult a lord into challenging him, with the prize being fealty to Darvad. This time it was Lord Kadal from the State of Marshav.

Tarek had not forgotten. He had just misplaced time once more. He thought the day would be in the distance, not upon him.

“I stake ten pieces of silver,” Firdaus said. Tarek noted the slur in his voice.

Darvad nodded. “And I the same.” Darvad threw down his elongated ivory dice.

The game involved moving a player’s pieces from house to house across the board. A bet was placed each move, and the highest dice roll won that round’s bet. However, if a player rolled a six, they were immediate winners and could roll again.

Darvad threw an unimpressive two. He scowled.

Firdaus blew on his own dice and threw them onto the board; a perfect six. He moved his pieces closer and then rolled again, achieving a four, the exact number he needed to land his first piece home.

“Damn you!” Iyestar shouted. “I tell you, Darvad, the snake has enchanted dice.”

Firdaus held out his dice. “You may play with my dice and I’ll play with yours. But know that I take such accusations very personally. If you play with my dice and still fail, I demand an apology.”

Iyestar grabbed the dice from Firdaus’ outstretched hands and shook them angrily. “I stake one shipment of Tiwari grain.”

Firdaus drank deeply and then nodded. “And I stake ten cartloads of Chandamar coal.” He gathered Iyestar’s dice in his palm and flicked his wrist, throwing the dice down to get another perfect six.

Druv shook his head and laughed. “Amazing! This man has the luck of the prophets on his side!”

Iyestar’s roll resulted in a measly three. Iyestar groaned, collapsing back on the pillows as Darvad sullenly moved their ebony piece three small steps.

The game continued like this, and Tarek quickly grew bored. He drank heavily, hoping to catch up to his friends, and refused food. When Firdaus and Druv won, Darvad challenged him to another round, which surprised Tarek. Darvad behaved strangely that night. He was curt and looked displeased. Tarek realized his friend was exhausted. Druv prattled on about local gossip, Firdaus cheated, and Iyestar drank. But Darvad just sat there, morosely throwing his dice and looking disenchanted with the world.

Everything changed, however, when a herald knocked and announced Keshan Adaru. Everyone immediately awoke from their trances.

“Sit down and join us, Keshan,” Darvad offered, patting a spot between himself and Iyestar.

Keshan brought his hands together in the sign of peace and greeted everyone individually. When he bowed to Tarek, Tarek noted that the man smelled like cloves and cinnamon. His hair was wet as if he had just come from the bath.

"I'm surprised to see you here," Druv said, not even bothering to hide his obvious curiosity. "I heard a rumor that you were not setting foot in the palace until you received an apology from Jandu Paran."

For a moment, something dark and painful crossed Keshan's expression. But then it was gone, and Keshan's mouth slowly spread into a languid smile.

"I'm not here to see any Paran this evening. I've only come to have a word with Darvad, if I may." He sat next to his brother. A servant offered him a glass of wine, but Keshan refused.

"Congratulations on your recent challenge against Lord Sahdin," Keshan told Tarek.

Tarek bowed his head. "Thank you."

Keshan stared at him knowingly. "Quite an achievement, especially when so hobbled by the law."

"I had some help from my friends." Tarek nodded toward Firdaus.

Keshan smirked. "Still, an amazing triumph. I hope it sets a good example to everyone how unfair the laws are when it comes to Suyas fighting."

"I did not give him the Ajadusharta in order to help your ridiculous crusade," Firdaus snapped, glaring at Keshan. "I did so to help Darvad win supporters. Stop reading messages into actions that are not there."

Darvad sighed loudly. "Tarek's success has served many purposes. Let's leave it at that."

But Firdaus sneered. "I don't understand. Keshan claims to support our faction, yet he blatantly goaded Jandu Paran into winning Suraya and stealing the victory from me."

"Calm down, Firdaus." Keshan smiled slyly. "You make it sound as though there were a conspiracy against you."

"Don't you dare tell me to calm down!" Firdaus shouted, throwing his empty goblet down. He narrowed his dark eyes, his large eyebrows coming together in a thick line. "I have been insulted again and again by you."

"You are welcome to challenge me anytime, Firdaus," Keshan said smoothly. "And I have already paid a high price for my previous affront to your honor."

"Perhaps, but what of the Parans? They insult me everyday with their unnatural marriage arrangement. Suraya should not be disgraced in that manner," Firdaus spat. "I must have justice."

"Jandu won her legally," Druv said. "And she did agree to wed all three of them."

"They should not have been allowed to marry her!" Firdaus said. "A woman should not have more than one husband."

"You want to have two wives. Druv has three already," Keshan pointed out. "Why shouldn't Suraya have as many husbands as she likes? Or even wives for that matter?"

"Is there no end to your sick suggestions?" Firdaus said, an expression of revulsion on his face.

Darvad sighed again. "Keshan, please stop." Then, turning to Firdaus. "Once I am king, you will have your vengeance on the Parans. Until then, I cannot do anything."

"Cowards and fools!" Firdaus shook his head. "All of you! Darvad would win a challenge against Yudar, and yet you refuse to do the honorable thing."

Darvad shook his head. "We've been over this before."

"The law allows for a brother to carry the burden of a challenge. Jandu would fight in Yudar's place," Keshan said. "And Darvad would lose."

Darvad frowned. "Don't dismiss my abilities so quickly."

Keshan reached over and touched Darvad's shoulder. "I mean no offense, prince. And you know I am your ally. When I say that Jandu's shartic powers go beyond yours, it's not an insult, just a statement of fact."

“Was there a reason you came in, brother, or did you just want to rile everyone up as usual?” Iyestar slurred. He remained collapsed back on the pillows, his wine glass balanced on his stomach.

“I have come because Darvad asked me to discuss the legal changes I have requested some time this week,” Keshan said. “I have been waiting for days, and have not heard from you, so I thought I would check in myself.”

Darvad held his head. “For God’s sake, give it a rest for just once, Adaru! We’re in the middle of a game. Let me have an evening off, I beg of you.”

Keshan’s expression did not change. He bowed very stiffly, however. “My apologies, prince. I’ll leave you then.”

Darvad looked up sadly. “No. Wait, Keshan. You are welcome to join us.”

Tarek felt a small kernel of jealousy burst in his gut and radiate outwards. He had no reason to feel this way. Darvad had shown no overt interest in Keshan Adaru. But there was something unnaturally beautiful about Keshan, sensual, and Tarek worried that if the two of them became good friends, he would lose his place at Darvad’s side.

To his relief, Keshan declined. “Perhaps it would be best if I took my brother home instead.”

All of them looked to Iyestar, who had begun snoring loudly on the pillows.

Darvad laughed. “Poor Iyestar. Yes, that probably would be for the best, although he’s left me to challenge Firdaus all alone.”

“I’ll be on your side,” Tarek said suddenly, moving closer.

Darvad gave him a soul-wrenching smile. “Tarek. I can always trust you to save me.”

Keshan struggled to wake his brother, resorting to slapping Iyestar across the face. Iyestar mumbled a growl and punched out his fist in response. Keshan deftly avoided the punch, and Tarek realized he must have had a lot of practice waking his inebriated brother up.

"Time to go home, Iyestar," Keshan said loudly and firmly, urging his brother into a sitting position.

"What?" Iyestar blinked. "But I don't want to go back to Tiwari right now."

"Not Tiwari, you fool, the townhouse." Keshan smiled apologetically to the group. "Come on, idiot."

"Fuck off, Keshan." Iyestar made to lie down again.

Keshan reached down and touched his brother's neck, just below his ear. Tarek did not see what happened, but Iyestar suddenly yelled out and shot upright.

"Fuck! I hate it when you do that!"

Keshan stood, offering his brother a hand up. A small fingerprint of ice melted off Iyestar's neck, and Tarek noted that Keshan's index finger was blue.

Keshan offered them a last bow before dragging his bigger brother out of the room. As soon as they left, Druv shook his head.

"They make quite a pair."

Darvad chuckled. "I can't tell if they hate each other or love each other. All I know is that they seem to be complete opposites."

"I'm surprised Keshan even showed up. I've heard Jandu refuses to speak to him," Druv said, the beady gleam of curiosity clear in his eyes.

Darvad shrugged. "I don't know what transpired. No one does. But Jandu has a temper that can rival Firdaus', and I'm sure Keshan just got in the way of it."

Firdaus rolled his dice. Another perfect six.

"You have got to be joking," Darvad said, shaking his head.

Firdaus did not look pleased, however. He moved his piece, and then glared at Darvad.

"I don't trust Keshan."

"You don't trust anybody," Darvad said.

"I still think you're a fool for putting up with all of this nonsense. Be a man, Darvad! Challenge Yudar. Be done with it. Enough of Druv's excruciatingly slow political games."

Darvad raised an eyebrow. “And Jandu?”

For the first time that evening, Firdaus smiled. “Let me take care of Jandu for you. Consider it a gift.”

“What do you mean?” Tarek asked.

Firdaus studied his dice, the smile still on his face. “I’ll make sure he steals no future brides.”

Druv frowned. “Any direct threat against the Parans will look bad, especially now, so close to the announcement of the throne.”

“I don’t like it either,” Tarek said. He assumed Darvad would also disapprove.

But to his dismay, Darvad looked merely tired and frustrated. He pinched his eyes shut. “Fine. Do what you will, Firdaus. Now, please, can we just enjoy the rest of the game and stop discussing this? My head is throbbing.”

“Of course, my prince,” Firdaus said. “Your wish is my command.” He threw down his dice. Another perfect six.

The game never really changed from there. Firdaus rapidly returned all of his pieces to home, and by the time they all stood from the board, stiff and drunk, Firdaus had won enough gifts and gold to buy Tarek’s home village twenty times over. Even after a year of such life, Tarek could not get used to the kind of money these nobles bandied about as a pastime.

Losing exacerbated Darvad’s foul mood. Drunk and bitter, he scowled as he said good night to his companions and stumbled towards his quarters. He leaned against the wall to support himself. Tarek rushed to his side. He threw his arm around Darvad’s waist and helped him back to his bedroom.

“I’m sick of it, Tarek.” Darvad tried to whisper, but his inebriated voice came out loud and echoed in the marble hallway. “I’m sick of all the in-fighting. I’m so exhausted...” Darvad leaned against Tarek. “What do you think I should do?”

Tarek swallowed. His entire body had filled with warm content at Darvad’s touch. “I think you should stop thinking about it and go to bed.”

Darvad smiled slightly. "You're right."

"You are a man, Darvad, not a god. Pray for guidance, and then go to sleep. Wake up refreshed."

"I swear, Tarek, you are the only true friend I have. Of course, you have your own motives as well, don't you?"

"Darvad, I don't care about my own wealth or position. I swore an oath of friendship to you, and that is all that matters to me. Even if I never get a penny from you, or respect from your brethren, I will be your friend."

Darvad leaned further into Tarek. "Then be a friend, and take my mind off all this bickering."

Tarek froze in the hallway. His heart stopped momentarily. And then he realized, no, he had just misinterpreted Darvad's wishes.

"I could tell you about the terrible scandal of the cow that ate the priest's ruby back in my village," Tarek offered.

Darvad looked up suddenly, an almost childish grin across his face. "Really? How does that story go?"

Tarek was a good storyteller. His village had been a hotbed of scandal— who was sleeping with who, who poisoned who's husband, what happened to the missing cow. Tarek told the story like a mystery, withholding critical details and only letting clues in here and there to who had impregnated the Draya priest's wife, and who had eventually vomited up the missing gem.

Darvad cried with laughter by the time they made it to his bedroom. Tarek wished they had farther to go together, so he could continue to make Darvad laugh. It was so good to see Darvad happy.

Darvad reached up and grabbed Tarek's hand. "Stay the night."

Wild panic and excitement rushed through Tarek once more. Darvad couldn't mean what he thought he did. Could he?

"It's too late to go home," Darvad slurred. "The blue room is ready for you next door. Have breakfast with me in the morning, and tell me more stories."

Tarek knew better than to feel crushed, but he couldn't help it. A hungry ache of longing filled him, and the bitterness of knowing he would never get to have Darvad the way he wanted. Looking at him now, so strong and dark and beautiful by candlelight, crawling into his bed, spreading his legs as he claimed his space, Tarek felt paralyzed with desire.

He had to breathe deeply to clear his mind of the sudden onslaught of unwelcome erotic imagery. "I should return home. My father's health is failing, and I need to make arrangements to bring him from Dragewan."

"All that can be accomplished tomorrow," Darvad said. He curled onto his side. His eyes closed. "I want to have breakfast with you tomorrow. And then maybe go hunting. Something away from all this infernal work, before you have to challenge Lord Kadal."

Tarek stood and silently watched his friend fall asleep. Then, despite his desire to return home, to make arrangements to visit his father, to be a better person, he simply stumbled into the adjacent blue room and collapsed. He knew he would wake up in the morning and do whatever it was that Darvad wished. If he wanted to go hunting, and eat together, and if he wanted Tarek to challenge more lords, Tarek would do it. Anything for those brief moments alone together, moments when, for just a fraction of time, Tarek could almost believe Darvad loved him.

CHAPTER 11

IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED JANDU'S TRIUMPH OVER THE Yashva demon Yudar wouldn't stop hugging him, the distance between them gone, his earlier annoyance forgotten as Yudar bragged about Jandu and Zandi to anyone who would listen. Baram, who loved cooking, made Jandu spicy pastries and followed him around all day trying to feed him more. Jandu accepted as many as he could eat, but after fifteen, he tried to refuse.

"How can you expect to win another battle against a Yashva when you're so thin?" Baram cried, handing Jandu another plate of pastries. "Eat! They are made with my love!"

Shouting, Baram looked ferocious, like he could easily rip a tree from the earth. Jandu blanched and took the pastries. Nothing terrified Jandu more than having Baram screaming that he loved him.

Jandu occupied himself by helping Yudar arrange a celebration to honor their teacher, Mazar. The party was planned for the holy day of Asherwar. Of course, the celebration had political incentives as well, as it provided an opportunity for all of Yudar's allies to gather and lavish attentions on Mazar, just before Mazar made his decision between Yudar and Darvad for the kingdom.

Yudar sent invitations all over the kingdom. Those lords who had returned to their home states from the capital were urged back, and those in Prasta were asked to spend the auspicious day in the palace's grand banyan garden.

Jandu and Baram were sent to deliver personal invitations to those lords who remained in Prasta. Jandu knew it was busy-work, better conducted by one of Yudar's dozens of ministers,

but he enjoyed Baram's cheerful company, and it pleased him to be given something to take him away from the incessant politicking at the palace.

In the evenings, however, Jandu's mind was free to wander. And it always wandered to Keshan. Keshan, his body, his hair, his voice. Despite Jandu's ardent prayers to be rid of his passion for his cousin, he still awoke every morning with a burning need to touch Keshan again. He didn't know how long he would survive with this longing.

A few days before the ceremony, Yudar asked Jandu to dine with him and Baram to discuss an urgent matter. Although they had numerous chefs on staff, Baram insisted on cooking dinner for his brothers and wife himself. That night, they ate in Baram's private quarters. Baram glowed as his servants brought out the steaming plates of lemon rice, pheasant, and vegetables that he had so carefully prepared.

"You should see the kitchen designs I have planned once Yudar is king, Jandu!" Baram said. "I met with an engineer this morning. He can build small, enclosed containers for keeping vegetables and milk fresh, it has a pump inside for water... I've never seen anything like it. It will be the most impressive room in the palace."

"Let's hope the facilities improve your cooking," Jandu commented.

Baram threw a bread roll at him. Jandu caught it deftly and dipped the bread into one of Baram's delicious yogurt sauces.

Suraya looked radiant at the table. She wore a green zahari with silver beads. The gold of her earrings and nose ring gleamed in contrast to her dark mahogany hair. She smiled shyly at Jandu.

"Haven't seen you in a while," she said coyly.

Jandu flushed. "I've been busy."

"Hmm." She smiled knowingly. Jandu blanched. What if she *knew* that half the time he wasn't at dinner he was busy

jerking off to the thought of Keshan? Maybe women had some magical powers of detection. Jandu made a mental note to ask someone about it. He had no idea who to ask, though.

"Jandu." Yudar turned his dark eyes on him.

"Yes?" Jandu poured more yogurt sauce over his rice. He noticed Baram grin proudly.

"Iyestar and Keshan Adaru will be staying in the palace for the ceremony. I've asked Keshan to bless the event for us."

Jandu froze, a handful of rice halfway between his plate and his mouth.

Yudar narrowed his eyes at him. "I don't know what happened between you two when he was last here, but you must apologize to him."

Jandu dropped his rice. "Apologize?" he sputtered. "You have no idea what he said to me!"

"It doesn't matter!" Yudar snapped. "He is more than just our first cousin, and more than brother to the Lord of Tiwari. It is crucial that Mazar sees harmony between us and that I am capable of extending my hospitality to those of differing views, and I will not have it known there is any distance between us."

"But!—"

"But nothing." Yudar pointed at Jandu. "When Keshan arrives, you will apologize. That is final!"

Jandu chewed on several things to say before abandoning the whole effort and just sighing. "Whatever."

Yudar glared at him. Jandu held out his hands.

"What? I will, I will!" Jandu cried.

Yudar smiled. "Thank you."

"I don't know what you two could possibly fight about," Baram said, digging into his own meal with fervor. He spoke with his mouth open. "You two seemed really happy together."

"I don't want to talk about Keshan," Jandu said.

"Fine," Baram said, shrugging.

“Fine,” Yudar said.

Suraya shook her head, and drank more wine.



Guests for the ceremony arrived the following morning. Those who did not have townhouses in the capital took up the offer to stay in the palace, and even some of those who had homes of their own availed themselves of the opportunity to lodge in the locus of action. Every guest room was filled with visitors.

Jandu and his family first attended the royal temple. They knelt on the rugs alongside Darvad and other lords in the city as the priest incanted songs to bless Asherwar as a holy day. Jandu submitted his forehead for a required smear of purple dye.

The palace was filled with purple lanterns, and everyone, even servants, smeared black kohl under their eyes and purple dye into their hair to celebrate God’s gift of the world. Servants hung paper lanterns in each hallway of the palace to welcome God into every space. Small gold coins were scattered along the walkways to lead demons away from God and towards the ceremonial hell constructed in one of the smaller stone gardens.

The banyan garden received the greatest detail, where Mazar’s celebration would occur. Opulent purple-dyed carpets covered the cobblestones, and long teak tables stretched from one end to the next to accommodate the hundreds of invited guests. Bright purple and red silk banners drooped from the second level balconies, and, in the wind, they waved over the trees like elegant fingers, beckoning the sky closer.

Mazar himself drifted around the palace, sweet as sugar cane, clearly flattered by the celebration in his honor. Jandu caught the look of annoyance in Darvad’s eyes when their paths crossed. Darvad clearly disliked the fact that the dinner had not been his idea.

In the banyan garden, Jandu was supposed to await the beginning of the ceremony on the raised teak dais with Mazar,

Darvad, Yudar, and Baram, but after only fifteen minutes of his chair-rocking Yudar glared at him and Jandu decided to go stand by the entrance. Suraya handed out ceremonial garlands of lotus flowers as each guest entered the garden, and Jandu took it upon himself to bow and direct guests toward lavishly set tables.

Marhavad's finest noblemen gathered on seats around tables laden with food. A soft spring breeze wafted above them, shaking the branches of the four banyan trees that circled the enclosure and rippling the silk banners.

Jandu leaned against the brick garden wall and fiddled with his silver diadem. He knew Keshan was coming. His stomach knotted every time he thought of it. Despite himself, he'd taken a long bath that afternoon and searched for his finest clothes. He wore newly made white silk trousers with a red and gold sash, and he wore a plain white shirt, which fit his chest tightly, showing off his chiseled arms. For the first time he wished for showier colors in his wardrobe. He had adorned himself with silver bangles along with his father's silver necklace and matching loop earrings. He'd chosen his heaviest, most impressive diadem, but after wearing it for all of two hours, he had returned to his quarters and exchanged it for a smaller silver one. His hair spiked out from under it in a chaotic way, but at least it didn't feel like a stack of gold bricks on top of his head.

He still looked good enough to catch glances, and that's what mattered. As the lords and ministers and their wives poured into the garden, most looked at him, obviously fascinated by the contrast of his blue eyes and deeply tanned skin. Jandu smiled and bowed to all of the guests appropriately. Jandu had brought Zandi with him, and he left her clearly visible, leaning against the wall beside him like a trophy. The guests who knew about archery raised their eyebrows at the sight of the bow, and every time someone asked about it, Jandu unabashedly informed them that it was a Yashva protecting

him in return for defeating another of her kind. Their looks of admiration somewhat ameliorated the tension of waiting for Keshan to arrive.

Jandu's stomach dropped every time the herald's horn trumpeted, announcing a new arrival. Any moment now, Keshan would walk in. Keshan would to walk in, and what would Jandu do?

He wanted to immediately pull Keshan into an alcove and beg him to kiss him again.

No. He wanted to hit him again to make sure the message was clear. And then apologize because his brother made him.

Or maybe just not look at him. Ever. That would probably be the best tactic.

And what if Keshan hated him now? What if he didn't care if Jandu refused to look at him? After all, Jandu has slapped him the last time they'd been together. What if Keshan hadn't even accepted Yudar's invitation? What if he stayed in Tiwari and snubbed them all?

The thought made Jandu break out into a sweat. If Keshan didn't come, then Yudar would never forgive him. And everything would be terrible, forever. Keshan had to come. He had to.

The announcer's trumpet blared. "His excellence, Lord Indarel of Afadi!"

Jandu sagged against the wall. He bowed politely, and motioned with his hand to an empty seat to the right.

The voices in the garden grew so loud, he could barely hear his own thoughts, which turned out to be a relief.

The trumpeter blasted another note, and Jandu straightened. "Lord Iyestar Adaru of Tiwari!"

As Keshan's brother entered the reception hall without Keshan, Jandu fought tears. Keshan wasn't going to come after all. Jandu had gotten his wish. He wouldn't see Keshan again.

An overwhelming crushing sensation filled him. Jandu couldn't remember ever feeling so heartbroken.

“The Honorable Keshan Adaru of Tiwari!”

Jandu jerked upright. He looked to the entrance and made eye contact with Keshan. He felt his face immediately flush red.

Keshan stared at him long and hard, as if trying to tell him something. But then more guests arrived, forcing Keshan forward and into the pressing crowd.

Jandu couldn't abandon his post now without it looking suspicious, and so he stood against the wall until the last of the guests arrived. It disheartened him to finally spot Keshan under one of the banyan trees, chatting amiably with Darvad's Suya, Tarek.

Jandu joined his family up on the dais. Keshan offered the blessings of Tiwari, Mazar's birthplace, and Yudar gave a touching speech praising Mazar's character and dedication to the kingdom. As he listened to Yudar's words and gazed at Mazar, Jandu felt pride and love well up in his breast. He was embarrassed at feeling so sentimental, though he was obviously not alone. By the time the speech ended, Mazar wept openly and the guests jumped to their feet, clapping and cheering the Regent. It seemed natural that Jandu would follow his brothers in bending low to touch Mazar's feet and ask for a blessing.

Mazar threw his arms around Jandu and held him tightly.

“Bless you, my favored son, bless you!” Mazar cried. He stroked Jandu's face.

Darvad, not to be outdone, clapped for attention before the guests were allowed to eat and gave an impromptu speech honoring Mazar as well, although everyone could see it for what it was, a desperate attempt to save face. Then, with a final toast to Mazar, Yudar invited his guests to eat.

The dinner feast was extravagant. Baram had overseen the kitchen preparations. He had themed the dishes after the four seasons, celebrating the natural change of the year and also the enduring permanence of Prasta.

Yudar's table of honor stood nearest the dais, and he sat with his brothers, wife, Suraya's father and brother, Mazar, and select lords and their wives. Darvad did not take up the invitation to sit at the main table, preferring a place between Tarek and Druv.

Jandu felt terribly flustered when he discovered that Keshan and Iyestar had been invited to sit at the table of honor. As Keshan walked across the garden, Jandu felt his blood thicken and warm as if drugged. He had gotten Keshan so wrong in his mind. He was far more beautiful in person than in Jandu's memory. Every step Keshan took, the small gestures of his hand, the way his voice lowered in pitch when he laughed, how he would absentmindedly fiddle with his waist sash when he listened to someone, how his eyes shined impossibly bright, the thickness of his hair, the pink hue of his lips. Jandu felt drunk with lust. He swallowed as Keshan approached their table. Jandu knew he had gone bright red again but that was the least of his problems. As long as he could control his voice. As long as he didn't allow his family to suspect his carnal thoughts.

Keshan studied Jandu with concern. Was Keshan worried Jandu would strike him again?

"Please, sit here," Yudar said, gesturing between himself and Baram. Keshan uttered a small prayer before engaging his meal.

"Keshan." Suraya said with the familiarity of a sister.

Keshan smiled at her. "You look beautiful today, Suraya."

"I hear your wife has come to Prasta with you," Suraya asked. "How is Ajani?"

Jandu froze. Wife?

Keshan nodded. "She said she couldn't wait to see you again, and would come whether I liked it or not." Keshan sipped his wine. "You two were friends as children, right?"

Suraya nodded. "Ajani and I studied religious texts together with my father's priest. I haven't seen her in years! But where is she?"

“She prefers to avoid the company of Lord Firdaus, but asked me to convey her regards and an invitation to call on her at the Adaru townhouse,” Keshan said.

Jandu understood about half of every sentence.

Wife? What the hell was going on? He knew, abstractly, that Keshan had married. It had been the reason for his exile. Keshan abducted Firdaus’ bride. But this fact never truly sank in to Jandu’s awareness until now. A bitter ache filled him.

“Wife?” he blurted out. The rest of the table looked at him. Jandu turned crimson. “I didn’t know you had a wife.”

Yudar shook his head. “Of course you’ve heard of Ajani, don’t you remember? Five years ago she was supposed to marry Firdaus, and didn’t want to, so she wrote to Keshan and begged for his help.”

“I’m sure you carried her off just for her own good,” Suraya said with a smirk.

Keshan smiled back. “Only fulfilling my Triya duty.”

“That’s why Firdaus hates him,” Baram tactlessly blurted out. He shrugged and then started on his third plate of food.

Jandu felt like vomiting. He glanced quickly at Keshan, who looked at him oddly, like he was trying to tell Jandu something telepathically.

It wasn’t working. Unless Keshan was telepathically trying to make Jandu feel like he wanted to throw up, in which case it worked perfectly.

Jandu longed to flee the dinner, but it was too late now. Yudar looked at him often and fondly, and Jandu realized that Yudar needed him here, if only to symbolize the unity of the Paran household. So Jandu forced small bites of food down his throat, and followed the bites with vast quantities of red wine.

Keshan didn’t say a word to Jandu, and Jandu didn’t speak to him. After the dinner, the entertainment began. Musicians established themselves on the dais and accompanied a troupe of actors who replayed a scene from the Book of

Taivo. The breeze cooled as night fell, but the garden remained warm with so many bodies.

Several other guests approached Keshan and Iyestar during the meal, and finally they both made their excuses and left the table. Jandu watched Keshan's move through the garden carefully. Several times, he saw Keshan look directly at him and cock his head, as if motioning Jandu over. But Jandu remained rooted in his seat.

People began to dance, and soon only Jandu remained at the table of honor. Suraya and Yudar joined the festivities, and Baram laughed madly as he danced with Lord Kadal's ancient mother. Jandu sullenly drank his wine and poked at the remnants of his rice with his spoon.

He saw Keshan approach, a look of anxiety clear on his face.

"Jandu." Keshan's eyes darted around. "Can I speak with you for a moment?"

Jandu's tongue felt thick in his throat. He didn't know what to say.

"There you are, Adaru!" Druv Majeo slapped Keshan on the back and then threw his arm around him. "Come over here, I want you to meet my second wife." Keshan gave Jandu a strained look and then let himself be led away.

Jandu tried to occupy himself by mingling with the crowd. He carried Zandi with him and explained to anyone and everyone who would stop long enough how he won her. He retold his short battle with Koraz in agonizing detail. He smiled often and laughed loudly, and secretly hoped each time he did that Keshan would hear him, and come closer.

Finally, his tactic seemed to work. Keshan maneuvered through the dancing crowd to Jandu's side. He raised an eyebrow at Zandi but said nothing about it. Instead he lowered his voice.

"I need to speak with you."

"I..." Jandu steadied his nerves. "I need to speak with you too. But not here. Come on." He led Keshan out of the crowd

and through a set of ivory trellises. A spiraling staircase took them up to the second floor, where they could watch the festivities from the balcony.

They walked over thick layers of red carpets onto the stone balcony. Jandu rested Zandi against the wall and then leaned over the edge of the banister, staring down at the noisy revelry below. Keshan joined him on the balcony, leaning close.

"You need to be careful," Keshan whispered. He gazed intently at Jandu. "I think there may be a plan to assassinate you."

Jandu scowled. "What? That's what you wanted to say?"

Keshan frowned. "I am not sure who's really behind it, but—"

"Who cares about that? I have something more important to talk about."

Keshan scowled. "Like what, your Yashva bow? I already heard the story."

"I'm sorry," Jandu blurted out.

Keshan narrowed his eyes, but his voice went soft. "Pardon me?"

Jandu swallowed. He knew he was blushing, but he had to force himself through this. "I'm really sorry. About what I said that day in the forest."

Keshan raised an eyebrow. "Are you saying this because Yudar made you apologize, or because you really mean it?"

How could Keshan read him so well? "I mean it. I've been thinking about you incessantly." The second Jandu spoke the words he wanted them back. He closed his eyes and winced at his own stupidity.

"Jandu..."

"Look." Jandu grabbed Keshan's arm. He could smell the sweet coconut and salty scent of Keshan's skin. "I was cruel and I apologize. Please don't hold my actions against my brother or my family. Yudar wants your support and respects you. Please don't let my behavior change your feelings towards him."

Keshan's entire countenance softened.

“Jandu, any feelings I have towards you have nothing to do with your brother. I’m sorry too. I acted rashly that day in the forest, but I spoke the truth,” Keshan said. “I couldn’t lie about how you make me feel.”

“Do you love Ajani?”

Keshan’s eyes narrowed in annoyance. “What has that got to do with anything?”

“I just need to know,” Jandu said.

“What do you want me to say? I care for Ajani. She’s part of my family, and one of my friends.” Keshan’s lips were close to Jandu’s face. Jandu could barely breathe. “But I don’t want her in the way that I want you.”

Jandu realized that he either just had to give in at this moment and kiss Keshan or turn away. He looked down at the party below him, at the couples drinking, laughing, and dancing. Then he noticed Yudar scowling up at him.

“I have to go.” Jandu practically ran from the balcony.

“Jandu, wait!” Keshan’s voice rose sharply behind him. “Stop!”

As he rushed to the door, Jandu felt a stranger’s hand grip his shirt. He jerked away but not before he felt something hard and sharp slash across the side of his throat. His assailant grabbed at his hair and Jandu struck out, shoving the man back, but also tripping over the leg of a chair. As Jandu fell onto the soft red carpet, he felt the wet heat of his own blood pouring down his neck. He cupped his hand over the wound.

His assailant loomed over him, knife bright in the dim light. Then Keshan was there, grappling with the dark-clad man. Just as quickly the assassin slipped Keshan’s grip. Jandu watched Keshan hit the wall with a heavy thud. Keshan slid down the wall. Jandu gained his feet in time to see the assassin jump from the balcony railing and land in the garden below. Jandu heard the shouts of surprise from the guests. Jandu rushed to the balcony, still holding his own throat, blood dripping down his arm. He caught sight of his brother, still seated at the dinner table.

“Yudar!” he bellowed down over the still-startled crowd. “Get a physician up here now!”

Jandu didn't wait for his brother's response. He rushed to Keshan. The assassin's blade was buried in Keshan's side, the tip breaking the skin through his back, just below his ribs.

Jandu gathered Keshan in his arms. He rested Keshan's head on Jandu's leg. Keshan was completely pale, but tried to smile weakly. “See? I knew I could get my head in your lap one day.”

Tears welled in Jandu's eyes. He had been a fool to think he could just block out the way he felt about Keshan. And now it would be too late. He pressed his hands to Keshan's wound, hoping to staunch the flow of blood.

Jandu bowed over Keshan, his short dark hair hanging over his eyes.

“Don't die to save me,” Jandu whispered. “I'll never get over it.”

“I won't die today,” Keshan said. He closed his eyes. “But God, it really does hurt a lot.”

Jandu closed his eyes and tried to think of a sharta that would help heal his friend's wound. But the shartic words he knew only destroyed, they did not repair. Nothing in his warrior heritage granted him the power to heal wounds, only to inflict them. Keshan was so pale, the only color left was a deep purple in his lips. He looked dead. Jandu wept, his tears falling on Keshan's cheeks.

“Please, please, Keshan, stay alive for me!” Jandu felt the remorse that had been building since the moment he had repudiated Keshan. “Please forgive me for what I said to you that day in the forest. I didn't mean it.”

“I know.” Keshan smiled weakly. “I know you didn't mean it, and I know you didn't know that you didn't mean it.”

Jandu frowned. “What?”

Keshan's eyes fell closed.

Jandu heard voices in the hallway and was relieved to see the royal physician rushing towards them, flanked by attendants.

The four men carefully lifted Keshan onto a stretcher and carried him toward the palace hospital, a set of quiet rooms tucked into the foreboding defense wall of the palace.

Jandu followed. As he ran, one of the royal doctors attempted to tend to Jandu's neck, but Jandu shoved him away. He already knew the wound wasn't deep; if it had been he wouldn't still be standing. He tried to follow Keshan into the surgery, but the royal physician firmly pushed him away, closing the doors in his face.

Yudar arrived, looking grim, followed by Suraya and Baram. Iyestar burst into the room and had to be prevented from entering the surgery, just as Jandu had. Soon onlookers crowded the hospital doorway, lords and courtiers and their wives. It seemed the entire party had moved from the banyan garden to the hospital. Finally, Mazar appeared, commanding all but Keshan's brother and Jandu back to the garden where they would not hinder the physicians in their work.

Hours passed in silence. Word came that the assassin had been caught and killed, though his identity remained unknown. Jandu allowed one of the assistant physicians to tend his wound. Iyestar sat across from him on a stool, looking sick and whispering something that sounded like a prayer.

Toward morning the royal physician summoned Iyestar and a few moments later, Iyestar returned to Jandu's side.

"How is he?" Jandu asked.

"If it doesn't get infected he should live," Iyestar said. "He wants to talk to you."

Jandu bowed and touched Iyestar's feet respectfully, and then entered the surgery. He slowly approached the bed where Keshan lay.

Keshan still lay on the marble operating table, the bloody remnants of his clothes wadded on the floor. Two assistants busied themselves bandaging Keshan's abdomen.

Jandu went straight up to Keshan and held his hand. His heart beat so quickly he wasn't sure he could slow it down long enough to get words out.

THE ARCHER'S HEART

“Keshan,” he said quietly.

Keshan opened his eyes. “Jandu.”

Jandu’s eyes burned from tears. He gripped Keshan’s hand with all his strength. He could think of nothing that he could say in front of the physicians without arousing their suspicion, so he simply raised Keshan’s hand to his lips.

The physicians looked at each other. One of them shrugged.

Keshan smiled so sweetly, Jandu thought his heart would break at the sight of it.

“I can’t wait until I’m better,” Keshan whispered, and then he winked.

CHAPTER 12

TAREK OPENED HIS EYES AND LOOKED AT THE DARK HAND on his shoulder.

He turned his head slowly, not wanting to wake the person in bed with him. His memory of the night before was foggy. One of the commanders of Dragewan's army slept soundly beside him. The man couldn't have been more than twenty, Tarek decided, studying his masculine features as he slept. He had curling black hair and thick black eyelashes. His lips pursed like a girl's, but his face was already rough with dark stubble. He wore no clothing.

Tarek was immediately aroused, but also disturbed. Tarek rarely indulged in wild evenings and never woke up with strange men in his bed.

Along with a blinding headache, the truth smacked him in the temple. Of course. That was what happened last night. He got drunk with Darvad.

Depressed by the travesty of the attempted assassination against Jandu Paran, Tarek started drinking early. He obviously had too much. But then what?

God. Tarek sat up slowly, holding his head, regretting each new revelation. Did he really say those things to Darvad? He had told Darvad that he loved him. Darvad had responded by pulling Tarek into a drunken embrace and kissing him on the cheek.

And then—Tarek did the unthinkable. He kissed Darvad on the lips.

It was a friendly enough kiss, nothing sensual about it. And Darvad laughed it off, hiding his surprise with a chuckle.

But that kiss deeply affected Tarek. Because he wanted that kiss more than anything. Now he craved Darvad more than ever.

Burning with unspent sexual desire, Tarek had taken a chariot ride home. He called this commander up to his rooms late at night, and after he had offered the young man a few drinks, talked him into bed. Tarek could always detect which men would respond to his advances. And, from his sketchy memory, he recalled that this commander acted in ways to suggest that Tarek was far from being his first male lover.

Tarek stepped out of bed, careful not to wake the young commander. He pulled on his trousers and a golden vest that his servant had left out for him the evening before. As he dressed the man in the bed yawned and opened his eyes.

He looked around him in surprise. And then he spotted Tarek. His eyes widened.

“My lord!” The man stumbled out of bed, knocking his toe against the wood frame and causing him to buckle over in pain. Tarek admired the man’s back side, and took a moment to look outside to see how late it was, and whether he could convince the commander to stay for a few more minutes.

“I’m late,” the commander said. “I’m so sorry, my lord, I—” He stumbled as he gathered his clothes from the cold marble floor. “I slept later than usual.”

“It’s all right.” Tarek yawned. “Take your time.”

“The general expected me at dawn,” the commander said.

Tarek raised an eyebrow at the sun. “Well, if there are any problems, tell the general you were with me.”

The commander’s eyebrows knotted. He clearly didn’t understand.

Tarek sighed. “Tell the general I asked you to meet with me at dawn instead.”

“Oh! Yes.” The commander blushed. “I understand.” He finished wrapping his pale blue dejaru and put on his shirt and armor. As he rushed towards the door Tarek handed the man his helmet.

The commander turned to Tarek and blushed. He wouldn't look him in the eye. "I... thank you... I mean..."

"You'll be even later if you stand here talking," Tarek said. "Go."

"Yes, my lord." The commander bowed low, and fled the room.

As soon as the man was gone, Tarek dropped to his bed and held his pounding head in his hands. What had he been thinking? He never slept with people he knew. That could prove to be a terrible mistake.

On the other hand, part of him didn't care. He was destroying his conscience for his best friend Darvad, why not destroy his reputation as well?

Tarek still couldn't remember all the details of the last evening, but he felt confident he hadn't performed his evening prayers. Tarek washed and then knelt down to pray.

As Tarek prayed, he begged for guidance. His life felt out of control. He loved his friend with such overwhelming obsession he knew he was blinded. But he also couldn't refuse it. He prayed harder.

His morning ablutions completed, Tarek finished dressing and then walked through the wide, airy corridors of his home to check on his father.

Tarek's father had arrived earlier the day before, and now Tarek's own physicians tended him. His father's proximity relieved some of his anxiety.

Tarek gave his father the largest of guest suites, with windows that opened to a spacious balcony and allowed breezes from the river to drift up and cool the air. But at this early hour, the heavy curtains shrouded the city from sight, and only a small candle provided illumination at his father's bedside.

Tarek approached quietly. His father still slept. A physician sat at his bedside, reading a religious scroll. The physician stood and bowed low to Tarek. Tarek put his finger to his lips.

His father's skin was thin and dry, and his breathing labored. He slept fitfully. Tarek reached down and squeezed his father's hand, but received no response.

Someone knocked on the doorway. Tarek scowled at the messenger, who bowed low in submission. Tarek left his father's side to whisper to the servant in the hall.

"What is it?" he asked curtly.

"An urgent message, my lord, from Prince Darvad." The messenger kept his head low. "He requests your presence immediately at the western gate of the royal palace."

"Damn it." Tarek looked back to his father. Couldn't he find just a few hours away from the palace for once? "Are you certain it is urgent?"

The messenger looked up nervously and then back at the floor. "Yes, my lord."

Tarek sighed. "Very well. Inform him I'll be there shortly."



It took longer than usual to cross the bridge to the palace. Since the attempt on Jandu's life, palace security had been fortified and now every visitor was checked for weapons. Tarek's name was on a list of cleared guests who could approach the palace armed, but this took further clarification from one of the soldiers.

Hundreds of citizens thronged the palace gates. They were the poorest of people, dressed in the ragged cotton clothing of the Suya and Chaya castes. Tarek had no idea what the commotion was about. He pushed his way through the crowd, grateful for his heavy breastplate, which repelled the flailing hands and the press of bodies.

Tarek saw Darvad a moment later, standing within a circle of palace soldiers alongside Firdaus, Druv, Iyestar, and two ministers who Tarek did not recognize. Darvad laughed expressively as he flung small cotton bags of coin to the masses. Druv distributed bread, and Druv's young wife Mishari handed out bolts of white cloth to the gathered women.

Tarek finally pressed his way to the line of soldiers.

"Tarek! Let him through!" Darvad shouted, reaching through the wall of military bodies to yank Tarek within the

circle. “We’re celebrating the end of Asherwar in a new way!” Darvad laughed as more hands reached skyward, fingers waving to catch additional coins.

Tarek watched the proceeding chaos until Darvad handed him a heavy sack of coin bags.

“Here!” Darvad shouted above the crowd. “Tarek Amia, lord of Dragewan, is one of your own people, a Suya who has proven that skill and honor are more important than birth and blood! His generosity overflows to you all on this auspicious day!”

Darvad tossed more money into the air. The crowd surged towards Tarek, and he warily stepped back as the wall of soldiers flexed inwards. He reached into his sack and began to throw coins to the expectant crowd. He smiled as a young boy and his mother snatched a purple sack from the air and cried out his name in a blessing. A slow, tingling euphoria built within him as he breathed in the positive energy, the magnanimous happiness of everyone there. Darvad and his friends laughed and spoke with the people. The crowd cried out their gratitude and their names in devotion. Only the soldiers protecting the lords seemed somewhat disgruntled by Darvad’s radical new tradition.

When the last of the gifts were gone, Darvad apologized to those left empty-handed, and promised a month of such gift-giving once he was king. The gathered crowd chanted his name and the prayer for his health and longevity.

Druv led the slow extrication back into the palace walls. They walked backwards, the soldiers protecting them from the grasping, thankful throngs until the palace gates could be shut. Even after the gates were closed, people continued to cry out Darvad’s name and clasp the iron bars.

Darvad laughed, his face transformed by merriment. Tarek smiled back at him, love radiating through him. He was so proud of his friend, so honored to be part of Darvad’s revolution.

“Whose idea was this?” Tarek asked.

Darvad smiled. "Mine. I thought that the Parans did a fine job honoring Asherwar in the traditional fashion. But if I am going to truly change the nature of this nation, I thought that Asherwar should come to represent something more. Something new. Yudar can honor the lords at a feast, but I will honor the people instead."

"It was brilliant," Tarek said. He looked at Darvad, and then hastily looked away, suddenly worried that the love he felt must be conspicuously obvious. Only last night Tarek had told Darvad he loved him. He would have to watch himself, or else Darvad might fully understand the terrible nature of that love.

"I hope you saved some of that bread for us," Firdaus told Darvad. "I'm starving."

"I have a celebratory feast awaiting us back in my suites," Darvad replied, slapping Firdaus on the back. "All of you, come with me."

They strolled along the labyrinthine palace walkways, speaking loudly. Inside the palace, Tarek could feel the heightened tension resulting from the attack on Jandu. Soldiers stood at every building, warily watching them pass. Their joy seemed insular, surrounded by sobriety.

As they passed by the central garden, Tarek caught sight of Jandu himself, speaking with his brother Baram. Both men looked up, startled, at the approach of Darvad's friends. Baram failed to hide his rage, lips curling in anger.

Jandu just watched them pass. Tarek saw the jagged cut below Jandu's jaw, the red flesh and black silk stitches standing out against Jandu's light brown skin. Tarek and Jandu made eye contact for a second. Jandu's expression was wary.

Darvad offered his half-brothers the sign of peace as he walked by. Jandu accepted the gesture with a slight bow, but he scowled at Firdaus. Everyone suspected who the culprit behind Jandu's attack was. And yet no one would come out and accuse Firdaus of the crime.

Jandu did briefly smile at Iyestar, who looked weary and sad. And then Tarek turned the corner, and the Parans, and all the turmoil outside the palace, were out of sight.

In Darvad's suite, Tarek enjoyed a meal of tea, fried cheese and vegetables, and roasted mango sandwiches. Druv's wife left them and the conversation turned back to politics. The attempt on Jandu's life along with the numerous challenges that Tarek had fought had alarmed Mazar and the regent had banned all further duels until the official announcement of the new king. Tarek expected Darvad to be angry with this. But this morning, he merely shrugged. "Mazar fears duels will exacerbate hostilities between traditionalists and moderates and could lead to open war. It's causing too much instability in the court."

Tarek couldn't help his sigh of relief. The challenges had left him feeling rotten.

Tarek noticed that Iyestar had said barely a word all morning. He had handed out gifts with the others, but now, in the tranquility of Darvad's rooms, he sat stiffly and barely touched his food. Tarek had seen Iyestar look poorly on many mornings, usually the result of wine. But this morning, Iyestar was particularly frosty, and he refused to even acknowledge Firdaus.

Firdaus seemed oblivious. He ate with both hands, his long gold necklace dangling precariously close to his plate of food.

"What do you propose to do now?" Tarek asked Darvad. "Will you wait for the announcement as planned?"

Darvad grinned. "I always like to have a contingency plan. Druv and Firdaus and I met earlier this morning to discuss what would happen if Mazar chooses Yudar over me."

A bolt of anger shot through Tarek at being excluded. Darvad frowned. "Don't be angry that you weren't there. You were too busy playing nursemaid to your father."

Tarek bristled. How could Darvad ask him to choose between himself and his father?

"It was a very boring meeting," Darvad assured him. "But we now have a strategy that will take care of all of Mazar's possible choices."

"Surely such gestures as the one today will win you support among the common people," Tarek said.

"The support of the common people doesn't mean shit to Mazar," Darvad replied. "He only cares about which lords will support me, and whether enough will do so to prevent a civil war."

"If Yudar takes the throne we all know the lower castes will revolt. Keshan has seen it happen." Druv poured everyone another round of sweet jasmine tea. "So we came up with a last challenge should Mazar make the wrong choice. It's amazingly simple, really."

"Simple because of my skill," Firdaus interrupted and Druv nodded in agreement.

"If Yudar becomes king, we offer a friendly celebratory game of dice," Druv said.

"And then we win the kingdom back from him." Firdaus smiled.

Darvad and his friends gloated in silence as Tarek absorbed the meaning of their words. They were going to cheat at dice. They were going to steal the kingdom from Yudar through gambling. The idea was so appalling that Tarek didn't even have a reaction.

But Iyestar did. Apparently this was the first he had heard of the plan as well, for he immediately stood.

"That's it." He threw his green harafa scarf over his shoulder and glared at the men. "I am leaving. I will have no further part in trickery."

Darvad instantly stood to console him. "Iyestar, old friend, don't—"

"No!" Iyestar stepped backward. "Your last foolish plan almost killed my brother! Death still hounds him. And for what? To ingratiate yourself to Firdaus so he can cheat for you?"

Firdaus stiffened. "Jandu threatened—"

“Enough.” Iyestar made the sign of peace to Darvad. “Prince, you have my loyalty. And the generous acts you engage in prove to me that you will be a worthy king. But I will not take part in any more deception. You have my secrecy on this matter, but not my complicity.”

Darvad seemed almost embarrassed. He reached out and touched Iyestar’s shoulder. “I am doing this only to guarantee that changes we all want are undertaken. You know this is for our vision. For your brother’s vision.”

“I know.” Iyestar nodded. “That is why you have my support. But do not involve me in these schemes any further.”

“Of course. Do only what you feel is right, Iyestar.”

Iyestar gave Tarek the sign of peace, and then departed. Tarek realized this was his opportunity to as well. To let Darvad know that being led by men like Firdaus and Druv would sully his reputation. To walk out as Iyestar did, still an ally and a friend, but not a conspirator.

But Tarek hesitated.

“My question is,” Firdaus dropped a few grapes into his mouth, “what was Keshan Adaru doing with Jandu in the first place? I thought Keshan was your ally.”

“Oh, give it a rest, Firdaus,” Darvad snapped. He sat down glumly, all of his joy from the morning evaporated.

Firdaus merely shrugged. He moved onto another helping of fried vegetables, and ate with his mouth open. Tarek remembered his mother smacking him on the side of the head any time he’d displayed such poor manners. Maybe Firdaus just needed a good smack.

“Do not worry yourself, Darvad,” Firdaus said loudly. “If Mazar chooses you, as he should, Iyestar will have no cause for concern. And if the dice game goes through, you will still end up looking like a hero.”

“How is that possible?” Tarek asked, unable to keep the anger from his voice. “Anyone with eyes will be able to see it for what it is.”

“But what kind of king would gamble his people away?” Druv asked. He raised his eyebrows. “We all know Yudar is addicted to dice. He will stop at nothing once he is on a losing streak. And with Firdaus on our side, he *will* lose. Once he has gambled the kingdom, it will be him that is shamed. People will not easily forgive a man who is so careless with his most valuable possessions.”

“I doubt that Mazar will idly sit by and allow the son of King Shandarvan to live out his days a penniless beggar,” Tarek said.

“Do you recall story of the Prophet Sadeshar?” Druv asked Tarek.

Tarek shook his head.

“He disgraced himself by distrusting the word of God. In the Book of Taivo, his followers send him into exile. If found within three years, his exile would begin again. But if he survived with no help from God or man in those three years, he would be considered sinless and free to reclaim his place at God’s side.”

“So the price of losing the dice game is exile?” Tarek asked.

Darvad nodded. “I must appear magnanimous, after all. Turn it into penance, and forgive all after three years.”

“But will you?” Tarek asked. “Will you really give him the kingdom after his penance?”

Darvad smirked. “If I make sure he is found during his exile, I won’t have to.”

It was still a trick. Tarek stared down at his empty plate, debating what to do. The very idea of cheating at dice was so immoral, he should have walked out on principle, just as Iyestar had.

But then Darvad threw his arm around Tarek’s shoulder, smiling in such a way that infused his very being. Darvad was so handsome when happy. And, after all, wasn’t Darvad’s vision of a new Marhavah worth sacrifices? Tarek himself tasted the joy

of Darvad's vision that very morning. Wouldn't the end of the righteousness of the Triya caste be worth a liberal interpretation of the dice rules?



Tarek returned to his house in darkness. He quickly scanned the faces of the soldiers outside his home, but gratefully did not find the commander amongst them. Perhaps he went back to Dragewan so that Tarek would be spared having to face him.

Inside, sweet beeswax candles lit the house. His father sat upright in bed with his eyes closed, but he opened them as soon as Tarek entered. His thin lips parted into a weak smile.

"My son. There you are."

Tarek dismissed the attendants, and sat in the chair beside his father's bed.

"Father," Tarek whispered, putting his mouth close to the dying man's ear. "I don't know what to do. I have sworn an oath to stand beside Darvad, but in order to keep that oath, I have to do things I don't believe in."

Tarek wasn't sure if his father heard him. His father closed his eyes and coughed loudly. But then he gathered his breath and spoke.

"An oath is a terrible burden," his father said. He weakly patted his son's thigh. "But you must keep your oath above all. The honor of a Suya is found in obedience to the lord to whom he is oath-bound. Do as your Triya lords command and you will never shame yourself nor your family."

Tarek nodded. He sat silently by his father's side until it appeared he had fallen asleep once more. Tarek leaned down and kissed his father's leathery cheek.

"I'm very proud of you, son," his father spoke so softly, Tarek could barely hear him.

Tarek squeezed his hand again and fled the room before his emotions overcame him.

CHAPTER 13

JANDU MET KESHAN'S WIFE, AJANI, FOR THE FIRST TIME THE day following the attack. After waking, Jandu practically ran to his friend's room, terrified that Keshan had died during the night.

Keshan slept soundly, but a plain-looking woman sat beside him and held his hand.

"Who are you?" Jandu asked.

The woman appeared affronted. "I'm Lord Adaru's wife!"

Jandu smiled charmingly to cover his mistake.

"My apologies," he said, bowing low to her. "I'm sorry to intrude. I'm—"

"—Prince Jandu Paran." Ajani's face was perfectly round, with large dark eyes and thick lashes. But her colorless lips lent no sensuality. Her hair was tightly pulled back into a nondescript bun. Jandu wondered how Keshan could marry her—he had his choice of any woman in Marhavad, and he had chosen this plain one?

She did have enormous breasts, he noted.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Jandu said. "Keshan and I are cousins but only met recently—"

Ajani smiled thinly. "I know. All Keshan ever does is talk about you. Day in, day out. It's quite tiring."

Jandu decided he didn't like her.

"I can sit beside him while you have your breakfast, if you like," Jandu suggested. He raised his voice slightly, hoping Keshan would wake up enough to kick his wife out.

"No, I'm fine, thank you," Ajani said. She stared at Jandu pointedly. "I'll stay with him."

Jandu nodded. "All right." He took his leave of her.

Bitch. Jandu went off to sulk by himself.

He really shouldn't resent her, he thought. She was probably nice. She was an old friend of Suraya's. When he saw the two women laughing and walking the palace grounds together, he knew there had to be something appealing about Ajani. But he didn't see it at all.

Keshan recovered quickly. He claimed it was Baram's frequent gifts of turtle soup and hot buttered milk. But Jandu also caught Keshan mumbling strange prayers in the Yashva tongue. He watched letters of ice burst from Keshan's lips and disperse like mist over his wound, melting into his flesh. It was the first time Jandu had seen Yashva magic work to heal rather than to injure.

He wanted to sit by Keshan's side and ask him about this, and a thousand other things, but the one thing he wanted seemed impossible, because Keshan was never alone.

Every time Jandu attempted to sit with Keshan, Suraya was already in his room, or Baram arrived carrying another medicinal meal, or Darvad and his entourage were there to visit, or Yudar lay prostrating himself, thanking Keshan again for saving Jandu's life.

Someone always beat him to Keshan's side. He tried arriving early in the morning, before the sun rose. But Mazar was already there, discussing philosophy and ethics with Keshan. In the afternoon, Iyestar visited, reviewing Tiwari politics. And every evening, Keshan's world filled with women. Especially his wife. And it was soon very clear she didn't like Jandu any more than he liked her.

Thanks to Keshan's Yashva skills, he could walk by the end of the week, although he remained pale and moved cautiously. To celebrate he joined the Parans for breakfast on Yudar's balcony, which overlooked the river.

The wind stirred up the surface of the Yaru in frothy swoops, and gulls dove down at dangerous angles to seize

spawning fish. Jasmine bloomed in pots scattered around the balcony, lending the air additional sweetness.

Jandu did not arrive fast enough to sit next to Keshan, so instead he picked at his food and glared at Ajani, who sat holding Keshan's hand the entire meal.

"He was so brave!" Ajani declared. Jandu tried to ignore Ajani retelling the epic tale of how she met Keshan. Again.

"We had only met once previously, at my sister's wedding competition," Ajani said. She smiled widely at Keshan. "But I sent him a letter anyway, praying to God that he would rescue me before I had to marry Firdaus."

Servants brought orange juice and lentil pancakes with sweet mango chutney. Jandu ate them without pleasure.

"Why didn't you tell your father you disapproved of the arrangement?" Yudar asked. He had won big at the previous night's dice game and now he brimmed with joy.

"You don't know my father. Firdaus' forests are more valuable to him than me." Ajani shook her head. "An alliance with the lord of Chandamar would have greatly helped my father, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't give up my heart to a man who has none."

Keshan said nothing as she spoke. He had his eyes half-closed as he always did when he tried to hide his emotions. But Jandu knew him well enough now to recognize the little smile on his face. Keshan wanted to say something and held back.

Keshan's eyes flickered briefly to Jandu. Jandu smiled at him, his whole body warmed with relief at even that little contact.

"So you wrote to Keshan," Suraya said, smiling at her friend. "And he came for you."

"Yes." Ajani grabbed Keshan's hand tightly, forcing him to relinquish his hold on his pancake. "I waited for him in the Prophet's temple. He rode in on his chariot and whisked me away. My father's entire army went after him for kidnapping, but

Keshan never faltered.” Ajani leaned over and kissed Keshan on the cheek. Keshan gazed at her, and then pinched her nose.

Jandu pushed his breakfast away.

“So how does living by the ocean suit you?” Suraya asked Ajani. She rolled a pancake for Yudar and put it on his plate.

“Tiwari is magnificent, you must come and visit,” Ajani said. She sipped at her orange juice and toyed with her long brown braid. “I was really nervous about it at first. It was during the great move, when half of Tiwari left the capital near Jagu Mali and started the new city from scratch. Moving was so unconventional, and yet Tiwari went with the decision, knowing Keshan would never let them down.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Keshan said, the first time he spoke that morning. “Half of the ministers in Tiwari opposed the idea.”

“But you convinced them,” Ajani said.

Keshan shrugged. “No, they felt compelled to go since my brother agreed with me.”

Yudar nodded. “It was a wise decision, Adaru. Unconventional, but wise.”

Keshan laughed. “Iyestar was so angry at me! For weeks he said history would call us cowards for running from the skirmishes with the Jagu Malians. But I thought, who cares? Better history calls us cowards and there be a Tiwari people than to all die out as noble corpses. If war can be avoided, it should be, at all costs.”

“It’s just another example of how practically you see the world,” Ajani said, patting her husband’s shoulder. “You defied tradition and changed the rules. It is what we all love about you.”

An uncomfortable silence hovered as Jandu and Baram looked to Yudar for a response. Yudar did not love Keshan’s tradition-defying antics, and apparently everyone except Ajani knew it.

Keshan smoothed over the comment with a shrug. "Time will show whether or not it was a smart decision. Regardless, Tiwari now has a stunning new capital on the coast. It really is a sight to see." Keshan looked to Jandu pointedly.

The sun rose high across the river bank, and the full morning heat was upon them all. Jandu immediately began to sweat.

"Just because the Triya have rules for war does not mean that we should seek war," Yudar said. He nodded to Keshan. "And it is this that I admire about you, Adaru. Even the Prophet Bandruban recognized that war is an undertaking to be engaged in only at the closure of all other avenues of reason." Yudar had that tone that Jandu dreaded, the lecturing tone. Jandu rested his face against his palm and slowly shoved a ripe tomato into his mouth.

Yudar went on lecturing on the subject of war and bored the table senseless as he recited his favorite passages from the Book of Taivo. Suraya seemed to sense that the minds of her guests were wandering, and leaned over to whisper something in Yudar's ear.

Yudar's speech ended immediately.

"If you will excuse me," Yudar said, a pink tinge coloring his cheeks. He stepped away from the table. "I promised to look over some household expenses with Suraya." The two of them linked arms and fled the balcony with record haste.

Keshan smirked as they left. Baram didn't seem to notice, busy with his fourth helping of pancakes.

"It is hotter than fresh blood out here," Baram commented between bites of food.

"We should go swimming." Keshan looked directly at Jandu as he said it. Jandu's heartbeat quickened.

"That's a great idea," Jandu said. "I know just the spot."

"Oh, let's go, it will be fun!" Ajani cried.

Jandu speared his pancake with a knife.

“You can’t, Ajani,” Keshan said quietly. He rested his hand on the top of her hair. “Remember? You promised Suraya that you would accompany her to the cloth market. I overheard her discussing how much she is looking forward to it.”

“Yes.” Ajani frowned. “I suppose I did promise.”

Keshan smiled. “Trust me, you are missing nothing. I’m sure I’ll end up having to rescue Jandu anyway. What kind of swimmer can he be with such long legs?”

“Hey!” Jandu scowled. “I’m an incredible swimmer.”

Baram burped. “You can’t even dog-paddle Jandu.”

“Shut up. Don’t listen to him, Keshan. Let’s leave him behind.” Jandu stood. Hopefully, if they took their time getting to the water, Jandu would summon enough nerves to jump in.

Servants packed a lunch basket for them and prepared a chariot. They traveled along the northern path of the royal grounds towards the Ashari Forest. Now that Jandu finally had Keshan alone, he was nervous, and said little along the way. Keshan made small talk, discussing the different plants and animals they passed by. As they both gripped the central pole of the chariot car, Keshan’s fingers accidentally brushed against Jandu’s, and the sensation was strong enough to burn through the core of Jandu’s body. The chariot bounced over the rutted dirt trail along the river, and Jandu found himself looking forward to the bumpier patches, places where he could reach for the pole and touch Keshan’s hand instead.

Jandu stopped the charioteer near the location of his confrontation with Koraz. The charioteer laid out blankets. As soon as he finished unharnessing the team of horses, Jandu sent the charioteer home, promising that he and Keshan would take good care of the team and their car. The charioteer was new, obviously proud of his position, and appeared reticent in leaving the two Triyas alone with his prized responsibility while he walked the long distance in the midday heat.

By the time the charioteer finally left, the sun was at its zenith, and the air stopped moving altogether. It sat upon Jandu like a burning ember.

Keshan leaned back on the blankets by the water's edge and grabbed a cracker. "The Yaru always reminds me of my childhood. I grew up playing in this river."

"Then let's praise it by getting in it," Jandu said, throwing caution aside. The temptation of the cool water was greater than his fear of drowning. He stripped off his vest, took off his jewelry, and lastly, removed his dejaru.

Jandu slowly waded until the lazy current lapped at his waist. Turning, he saw Keshan running naked toward the water. Keshan dove in headfirst, plunging recklessly and hooting as he emerged for air. "It's so cold!" he cried, delighted.

Jandu waded up to his neck and then slowly swam with his head out of the water. Keshan came up behind him and placed his wet hands on Jandu's shoulders.

"Are you truly a bad swimmer?" Keshan asked.

"Let's just say I'm not the best swimmer." Jandu turned and smiled at him.

"So I shouldn't dunk you?"

"Not if you don't want me to hit you again." As soon as he said the words, he wanted them back. How could he have mentioned such a sore topic?

But Keshan just laughed, and ran his hand down Jandu's arm.

Jandu's heart raced. My God, was Keshan going to kiss him? Here? In the middle of the river?

Keshan brought his arm down on the water's surface, sending a sheet of water straight at Jandu's face. Then, grinning, he lunged backward, out of Jandu's reach. Jandu launched himself at Keshan, catching the other man around the waist and dragging him underwater. Suddenly aware that their naked bodies moved together, Jandu released him. Keshan gained his feet, sputtering, pushing wet hair back from his face.

“I was sure I could escape you,” Keshan said. “I must still be feeling my injury.”

Jandu shrugged. “No one is perfect, not even you.”

Jandu climbed up the bank and collapsed back on the blankets. Now the sun felt marvelous, heating his cooled skin. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

“I think you are,” Keshan said. “Well, other than being full of yourself and too conservative.” He collapsed beside Jandu, wincing slightly as the movement pulled at his stitches.

Jandu snorted. “And you’re too much of a troublemaker.”

“I haven’t even started making trouble yet.” Keshan smirked. “And speaking of trouble, what’s that Draya doing in your private forest? Does he belong to the royal household?”

Jandu looked to the direction of the palace. A man approached them, wearing the traditional purple robes and long unkempt hairstyle of a priest. But Jandu did not recognize him. His face seemed sunken and waxy.

“I don’t think so.” Jandu retied his dejaru and pulled on his vest and jewelry. The metal of his bangles burned in the bright heat, but he didn’t want to appear unclothed before a priest.

Jandu furtively watched Keshan dress as well. Keshan’s body was sleek and dark, and Jandu felt a deep, pleasant ache through his groin at the sight of him.

Keshan tied his trousers and pulled on his vest. As the Draya approached, Keshan’s eyes suddenly narrowed. Jandu followed Keshan’s gaze to the priest. For a flicker of a second, the image of the priest faltered. It shuddered in and out of Jandu’s vision. He blinked as the priest grew blurry.

“I don’t think this is a priest,” Keshan said in a hushed tone. He took a step back.

“Blessings to you both.” The priest’s voice was jagged and harsh, and heavily accented. “Yashva Keshan, I need your service.”

Keshan knelt. “My lord, how may we help you?”

Jandu stared at the priest, whose torso took on a bluish radiant tone. Blue flame burst out in a halo around his head.

“Kneel down,” Keshan hissed. “This is Mendraz, King of the Yashvas.”

Jandu dropped to his knees and bowed his head. His mind reeled. He had only met a few Yashvas before, and none had been on fire. The Yashva king radiated no heat, only light. Jandu chanced a glance up at Mendraz’s face, and quickly looked back down at the dry soil. The king had yellow spiraling irises. Looking into them gave Jandu vertigo.

“I am sick, and need help,” Mendraz said, his voice booming above Jandu like thunder. “I must consume the sacred Hedraavan tree which grows in this forest. I sent Zandi to fetch it for me but she was unable to defeat Koraz.”

Keshan lifted his head and brought his palms together in supplication. “I am sure Prince Jandu can get you whatever you need.” Keshan stared pointedly at Jandu.

Jandu lifted his head. “Of course, your highness! You may take whatever you need.”

“Every time I attempt to consume the Hedraavan, Koraz extinguishes my blaze with rain.”

“I could recite the Korazsharta,” Jandu blurted. It worked before.

Mendraz’s melting face seemed to almost smile. “Yes, I have heard of the mortal who outsmarted Koraz. You have become legendary amongst our people. But such trickery will not work a second time. Koraz has allies in the Yashva world that will protect the forest. I need you to help me as I feed.”

“Of course, my lord. We are yours to command.” Keshan bowed low once more.

Mendraz’s fire curled forth in bulging rolls of pale blue flame. “Keep my fire burning. Do not let it go out.”

“How exactly are we supposed to stop the rain from falling?” Jandu shouted above the roar of the flame. Already dark clouds formed over their heads and the summer air turned cold.

Beside him, Keshan broke out in a wicked grin. “Maybe you should just help King Mendraz start a bigger fire.”

“What?”

“Koraz won’t stop one tree from burning when the whole forest is on fire.” Keshan overturned the picnic basket and extracted a jar of olive oil. “Give me an arrow!”

Jandu complied and Keshan dipped the tip of the arrow into the oil. Then with a word Keshan set the arrowhead alight.

“Fire at the grass,” Keshan instructed.

“This is insane!” Jandu bellowed. “I can’t burn down my own forest.”

“Trust me! ”

Jandu loosed the blazing arrow. Where it slammed into the undergrowth spires of white-hot flames shot up. Keshan ignited arrow after arrow and Jandu fired in a wide perimeter. Sparks and fire ignited the tinder-dry wood. Smoke rolled outwards in black clouds and the trees crackled as they were engulfed in shooting flames. Deer shot from the brush in panicked herds.

The sky opened up and rain pounded down on Jandu. In the distance he saw Mendraz’s flame weaken. Jandu aimed an oil-soaked arrow at the tree and fired. The arrow pierced through the sky, whistling, then sank into the tree’s trunk, igniting the bark.

Keshan handed him another arrow. The end of the shaft burned white-hot and steamed in the rain. Jandu shot another volley into the forest.

“We’re running out of arrows,” Jandu shouted, reaching into the nearly empty quiver on his back.

“Just keep shooting!” Keshan shouted back. The clouds intensified above them, swirling unnaturally, the rain falling as thick as a waterfall. The force of it drove Jandu to his knees.

Suddenly King Mendraz’s blue flames shot high into the sky, piercing the dark clouds and searing them away to vapor. The rain instantly stopped, and steam hovered over the darkened landscape.

Jandu dragged in a deep breath and staggered to his feet. Keshan put his arm around him as they watched the forest burn. Mendraz's flames licked even higher. The forest was consumed. The world itself seemed to burn. Sparks danced in the air like mosquitoes, circling above Keshan and Jandu's heads.

Jandu and Keshan quickly dried in the heat of the nearby blaze.

"Step back from the fire, I'm afraid you'll get burned," Keshan told Jandu, motioning him further away. They departed the hot noise of the conflagration and made their way back down to the river's edge. They watched King Mendraz devour tree after tree. The sun set and the world became illuminated by eerie flickering light. Keshan checked on the horses and Jandu gathered their scattered belongings back into the car of the chariot. Jandu's arms ached, but he felt happier than he had his entire life. *This* was what he was meant to do. *This* was who he was. Fighting beside Keshan, with a magical bow, defending the king of the Yashvas. How much better could life be?

Jandu heard footsteps behind him and whirled at the intruder.

Mendraz stood before them, huge and magnificent.

Mendraz's face remained blurred. His body shimmered in and out of focus, dark brown one minute, and blue the next. His eyes were impossible to focus upon, spiraling inwards. He wore the fine gold and silver of any king, but like Zandi, this metal seemed to swim, it phosphoresced and shifted as if liquid.

Jandu and Keshan immediately knelt before him.

"In gratitude for your assistance, please accept a gift." Mendraz didn't move. But he whispered a series of words, too quickly for Jandu to understand. And before him there appeared a quiver of arrows.

Jandu continued to kneel, eyeing the quiver expectantly.

"It is inexhaustible," Mendraz explained. "So you will never again fear you've run out of arrows."

Jandu itched to reach out and grab the quiver. Instead he bowed his head. “Thank you, my lord.”

“And for you, Keshan,” Mendraz said. “I grant you use of my chariot. Repeat after me and you may summon the chariot at your will.”

Mendraz recited a complex string of commands. Before Jandu and Keshan, a gold lacquered chariot coalesced from the air, opulent with precious gems, its thick iron wheels covered in Yashva symbols.

Keshan repeated the complicated string of Yashva sounds. Jandu looked up, admiring the golden glow of Keshan’s skin in the flickering light of the forest embers. When Keshan finished the sharta, the chariot disappeared once more.

“I accept this gift with honor, my lord,” Keshan said.

Mendraz’s body radiated blue light. He offered them a peace sign, and then vanished from their sight.

The forest ruins smoldered. Only blackened roots and branches remained. A gust of wind shot hot sparks from the forest floor, filling the sky with dancing red lights.

Jandu looked at Keshan shyly. He lifted the inexhaustible quiver.

“I can’t believe he gave me this.” The pliant soft leather quiver was densely packed with arrows. He pulled one out, admiring their elegant fletching. To his surprise, his initials were already carved into each shaft.

“You deserve it,” Keshan said. His voice had gotten husky. “You fought magnificently today.”

“And you.” Jandu put Zandi and the quiver down on a rock and turned to Keshan.

The winds died down, and ashes no longer blew everywhere. All the animals and demons had disappeared. It was finally just them—alone in the small fragment of forest left to the world.

Jandu could smell Keshan, his earthy, coconut smell, mixed with the sharp tang of burning wood. Keshan placed his hands on Jandu’s arms, pulling Jandu closer.

Jandu's pulse beat faster. Keshan's touch brought a sleepy, rich fire throughout his body, like he had just downed several strong glasses of wine. Touching Keshan was inebriating.

The sky was completely dark. In the distance, Jandu heard a cockatoo calling its lover.

"When I look at you, I want you with such a longing that it drives all reason from my mind." Keshan's eyes were deep and languid. As Keshan pulled the two of their bodies together, a flare of pure longing burst through him.

"What are you doing?" Jandu whispered. Pleasure spread like warm oil from his hips where they made contact with Keshan's, down his legs, pooling in his groin.

Keshan leaned towards Jandu's face, and kissed him softly on the forehead.

"Expressing my love." Keshan kissed Jandu's left cheek, and then his right cheek. Jandu stood frozen, paralyzed between fear and desire.

Keshan leaned in and kissed Jandu on the lips. Jandu's eyes widened in surprise as Keshan pushed his lips harder against Jandu's, and then slipped his tongue into Jandu's mouth.

Keshan's tongue thrust deeper and Jandu moaned. He plunged his tongue inside, wanting to swallow Keshan whole. The feeling of pressing himself into Keshan's hot mouth sped the heady waves of liquid desire through his body.

This was not like kissing women. This was unlike any other kiss he ever experienced. It was like he was melting. He filled Keshan's soft mouth, feeling the hot explosion shake through him.

Keshan ground his hips against Jandu. Jandu's fear resurfaced. He worried what Keshan would think when he felt Jandu's erection. But then Jandu noticed Keshan's own hardness against his thigh, hot and thick, demanding attention.

"Don't worry," Keshan whispered, as if reading Jandu's mind. Keshan planted kisses along Jandu's chest, sliding down his torso, until he knelt before Jandu.

The wind picked up again, sending Keshan's jet black hair flying around his face. Keshan looked radiant and inhuman. Sparks danced through the air behind him.

Jandu's whole body shook as Keshan pressed his hands against Jandu's erection. Keshan undid Jandu's dejaru, pulled out his cock and wrapped his lips around Jandu. Shock flooded Jandu, and then embarrassment, and then all emotions but pleasure disappeared. Keshan teased the tip of Jandu's cock with his tongue, hot fingers gently massaging Jandu's testicles, each touch sending a thousand spasms of pleasure through Jandu's groin and up his spine. Jandu moaned aloud, unable to help himself.

Keshan opened his mouth impossibly wide and seemed to swallow Jandu whole. Jandu struggled to keep his legs locked. He rested his hands on top of Keshan's wild black hair.

"Keshan..." he gasped, afraid he would stop breathing at any moment.

This was the feeling he had been craving his entire life. Keshan upon him, pulling him inside. Jandu moaned again, feeling his knees buckle with the force of his ecstasy.

He longed to get Keshan out of his clothing. Jandu gently eased himself out of Keshan's mouth and knelt down.

"Let me touch you," Jandu said, surprised at the thickness of his own voice. He had never been so aroused he couldn't speak before.

Keshan smiled slowly, reaching up with his bangled hands and unbuttoning his vest. He undid the drawstring on his trousers and took them off carefully, each movement graceful and natural, like this was the most banal moment in his life, undressing for Jandu beside a smoldering forest.

Jandu's eyes feasted on Keshan's nudity. His body shone in the eerie moonlight like a pool of dark water. His skin seemed almost iridescent, and in the moonlight, appeared bluish. Jandu had never admired a man's body like this, with such carnal desire, but now the masculine scent of Keshan's flesh,

the heavy width of his sex, the chiseled plains of his muscles, they seared into Jandu's mind, making him tremble with need. Jandu ran his lips and fingers along Keshan's smooth chest, down the cleft of his abdomen, watching Keshan's stomach rise and fall with his rapid breathing. Jandu nervously touched the tip of Keshan's cock.

Keshan shivered in pleasure.

"Jandu," he said his name like a mantra. "Jandu..."

Jandu didn't know what he was doing, so he let himself go by feel. He touched Keshan as he would touch himself, slowly stroking, and then brought his cock to Keshan's so they brushed together. The sensation sent shocks of electricity along Jandu's spine.

Jandu leaned down and put Keshan in his mouth. He had only imagined this, so he was unprepared for the sheer heat of Keshan's skin. The soft, velvety flesh, so hard and warm, felt better than Jandu could have ever imagined. He loved the taste of him, a mix of salt and cloves and musky skin, he loved the feel of Keshan growing impossibly large in his mouth.

Keshan's body tensed. He gripped Jandu's shoulders and then he came, Jandu swallowing the fullness of it, the taste alluringly salty.

Keshan sat up and pushed Jandu down on the grass. He brought his mouth back to Jandu to return the favor. Jandu looked up and saw the stars and sparks and Keshan's eyes, and then felt his groin shiver. Jandu exploded in Keshan's mouth, a moan escaping his lips, unable to hold it in any longer, having to give in to the feeling.

Jandu lay back, feeling dead.

His body shook with aftershocks of pleasure. The wind against his exposed genitals sent tingles down his spine. Keshan draped an arm over Jandu's bare chest.

"Keshan," Jandu whispered. "I love you."

Keshan responded by leaning over Jandu's face and kissing him so sweetly, Jandu wanted to die from it. He could taste

himself in Keshan's mouth. As they dressed quietly, Jandu's mind raced again. What had they done? Surely it was wrong. Shame burned deeply inside him for what he did. He loved Keshan. Was that how he should have treated him? Allowed him to kneel and pleasure him?

Keshan appeared unconcerned. He had a deeply peaceful expression on his face. His lips looked slightly swollen from their encounter, and the sight only enflamed Jandu's passion further.

They harnessed their horses to the chariot and Keshan talked the entire way back, rambling on about his brother, about politics in Tiwari, and about his new school. He asked Jandu to come and teach archery there for a season.

Jandu could barely follow the conversation.

"So you will teach at the academy then?" Keshan asked. He had a slight smile on his face, as if he knew Jandu hadn't been paying attention.

"What? Sure." Jandu blushed furiously.

Keshan leaned towards Jandu, his lips right above his ear. "You'll have to stop blushing every time you look at me, Jandu."

Keshan surprised Jandu further by kissing him quickly and deeply. A moment later, their charioteer appeared on the road ahead, leading a search party. Jandu thought he could see Baram's armor among the gathered Triya and couldn't help closing his eyes in dread. They had obviously seen the fire from the palace and, knowing that Jandu and Keshan were out there, assumed the worst. First an attempted assassination, now a forest fire. Yudar wasn't going to want Jandu anywhere near Keshan now.

"I suppose I'm going to have to explain to Yudar what happened in the forest," Jandu remarked, thinking for the first time of what his brother might say of starting such a fire. "He won't be happy about it."

"Just focus on the gifts from Mendraz," Keshan suggested. He raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't tell him about me sucking your cock though. I don't think he'd understand."

THE ARCHER'S HEART

Jandu stopped on the road, reeling from the obscene impact of Keshan's words. He steadied himself, concentrated on not blushing, then followed Keshan forward to meet his brother.

CHAPTER 14

THE FEELING WAS LIKE A TREMOR, STARTING SMALL AND LOW, at the base of his spine, slowly building. It vibrated through his nervous system, expanding, the intensity increasing with each stroke of Jandu's fist, each hot, wet breath. Keshan threw his head back and hit it against the boards of the storage shed wall. His fingers twined into Jandu's hair and he pushed himself down Jandu's throat. Jandu moaned and the sound made Keshan come, biting his tongue to stop from crying out loud at the exquisite explosion of pleasure.

Keshan slid down the wall, coming to a crouch. Jandu steadied him. He panted heavily, his eyes shining bright, his mouth swollen, a small drop of Keshan's moisture evident on the corner of his lip.

Keshan pulled Jandu to him and kissed him, licking away the evidence.

An immediate surge of almost frightening ardor crossed over Jandu's expression. But then it faded.

"We better go," Jandu panted. "Yudar is looking for us. Well, for you in particular. He sent me to come find you."

"And come you did." Keshan smirked at his pun.

Jandu blushed. It amazed Keshan how, after all these weeks of illicit encounters behind outbuildings, in the woods, in storage sheds like this one, Jandu could still have enough innocence to be embarrassed.

Although naïve in the ways of love between two men, Jandu was a rapid, almost frenzied learner. There was an intensity to Jandu's passion that Keshan had never experienced, a piercing

focus, as if the rest of the world melted away and only Keshan's body existed. Jandu fixated on Keshan's body like a target. His blue eyes took on a predatory sharpness, and then Jandu consumed him, a need to somehow improve and intensify dominating every moment they spent together. Jandu didn't seem to realize that making love was not a competition. But Keshan could not complain, because the fervor of Jandu's affections was staggeringly effective. Just seeing Jandu across a room was now enough to burn every nerve in Keshan's body with fiery arousal.

In the weeks following the encounter with King Mendraz, they hadn't been able to spend much time alone. Something had happened between Iyestar and Darvad, and so now Keshan spent his days relaying messages between them, talking with Darvad about his plan for changing the laws. And on top of that Ajani needed to be escorted to markets and to be entertained. That morning Jandu appeared, like an answered prayer innocently carrying message from Yudar.

That look had been there. That hungry, predatory look, and Keshan felt the blood rush to his groin, and within minutes he mumbled some excuse to his wife and followed Jandu into the nearest dark place, a shed near the stables.

Keshan warned Jandu that they needed to be cautious. Jandu merely blinked at him, as if unaware that their actions were not only considered immoral, but illegal, punishable by death. Keshan continued to urge caution, but then Jandu's long fingers snaked their way through his clothes and were gently stroking the underside of Keshan's testicles, and Keshan could feel his resolve weakening. Jandu kissed him, his tongue surging inside of him, both domineering and yet soft, and Keshan lost the thread of his argument entirely. There was no point in trying to discuss reason with Jandu when Jandu was pursuing him thus. Jandu was the most singularly focused individual Keshan had ever met, and now that Keshan was his preoccupation, little distracted him.

In the storage shed, Keshan stood and straightened his peacock blue dejaru. Ajani had purchased the fabric for him a week before and applied the golden trim herself. It was a gorgeous garment, and guilt flickered briefly in Keshan's mind as he ran his palms along the silk to press out the wrinkles.

"How do I look?" Keshan asked, straightening his diadem and pushing his hair back.

Jandu looked like he wanted to devour him. "Fucking fantastic." He leaned in to kiss Keshan once more. Keshan held him off, pressing his palm into Jandu's warm chest.

"You look like you've been screwing in a shed."

Jandu quickly straightened his own wrinkled clothing. They searched the dark shed for Jandu's diadem, which had tumbled off in their initial, frantic embrace.

"Here it is," Keshan called. He lifted the simple silver diadem and placed it on Jandu's head. Normally, Keshan didn't like silver, but on Jandu, the simplicity of the metal suited him. It emphasized the bright color of Jandu's eyes.

Jandu smiled at him. "Let's go." He took Keshan's hand and pulled him out of the shed, peering around surreptitiously for onlookers.

As they walked, Keshan concentrated on not gravitating towards Jandu's body. He forced a distance between them, exaggerating it as they bowed their heads and passed a group of Draya priests.

They circled the central garden and then passed through an open banquet, where Darvad entertained his ministers. As they walked by one of the tables, Jandu stole a butter pastry. He broke it into two, handing Keshan half.

"I'm famished," Jandu said.

"Me too. Fucking always makes me hungry." Keshan whispered it just to see the instant bloom of color across Jandu's cheeks. It was fun to taunt him this way. Jandu was uninhibited, even raunchy in closets, but in open spaces, the mere whisper of a lascivious word set his face ablaze.

The summer heat made certain rooms in the palace unbearable, and so Yudar held his court in a large room built into the wall of the palace, where the breezes from the river could drift in from the open balcony. The floor was covered in khaki and brown silk carpets, every furnishing tasteful, muted, and refined. Dozens of servants fanned the prince and his attendants with large feather fans, but this merely pushed the hot air around the room.

The herald at the door announced Jandu and Keshan.

Yudar's allies watched Keshan enter warily. They clustered around Yudar protectively.

Keshan bowed low to Yudar, touching his feet in a sign of respect.

"Prince Yudar," he said. "You have summoned me?"

"I summoned you half an hour ago," Yudar said, looking angrily at Jandu. Jandu stepped backwards into the crowd of ministers and messengers, and then disappeared from Keshan's sight completely. It was almost a relief when Jandu left the room. At least Keshan could concentrate on the task at hand.

"As the founder of the movement to refresh Marhavadi law, I thought I would turn to you for advice in choosing my successor as Royal Judge, should Regent Mazar select me as king."

Keshan's eyebrows shot up in surprise. He stared at Yudar in suspicion. He then noticed Mazar, watching the proceedings from the doorway. This was obviously a political move designed to show Yudar's ability to create consensus were he to be named king.

"I would be honored to assist you in this task, Prince," Keshan said. He kept his face carefully free of expression. He did not want Yudar to know that Darvad had already promised the position of Royal Judge to Keshan himself. "Although I admit I'm puzzled, since you must know that my legal views differ greatly from your own, and from the precedents you have set as Mazar's Royal Judge."

Yudar bowed his head. “This is true. But it is always preferable for those with opposing viewpoints to agree on a matter beforehand. Therefore I would like counsel. I have been considering my youngest brother Jandu for the position of Royal Judge. He is an apt learner and, under my tutelage, would provide a steady, reliable mediator for the people of our nation.”

Keshan froze in shock. Jandu? As *judge*? Keshan’s first reaction was to burst out laughing, but he stifled this quickly.

“I know you are friends with Jandu, and we continue to be grateful for the sacrifice you made in saving his life,” Yudar said. “Without you, Adaru, this court would be plunged into grief.”

Keshan bowed his head, mostly to give himself a chance to control his emotions. *My God*. He thought Jandu was an incredible lay, but could he ever seriously consider him in a role of power? The idea was terrifying. Brash and young, Jandu would be no more than a puppet for Yudar’s outdated policies.

“Jandu is inexperienced in matters of governance, Prince,” Keshan said, raising his head.

Yudar nodded. “I know. I would be surprised if he could recite even one passage from the Book of Taivo.” Yudar smiled indulgently. “But he is intelligent, and if given a task, he can focus with dedication and drive that surpasses even the greatest of scholars.”

Keshan knew very well how effectively Jandu could focus. A memory of Jandu, his eyes narrowed, concentrating on the tip of Keshan’s shaft, as if he could pleasure Keshan just by looking at him, washed over Keshan, and he shuddered in remembered delight.

Keshan suddenly had an idea. What if *he* were to instruct Jandu on how to be Royal Judge? Couldn’t he influence Jandu’s decisions as effectively as Yudar? Perhaps Keshan could even make Jandu understand the plight of those who were not Triya

noblemen. If he could instruct Jandu, lead him, then Jandu would be a better choice than any of the stodgier traditionalists Yudar could suggest.

"I do believe Jandu has great promise," Keshan said. "He has integrity and a good soul, and I would support such a nomination."

Yudar seemed surprised by Keshan's approval. His eyes widened, and then he clapped his hands together. "Excellent! This is wonderful news, Adaru. I am grateful for your blessing, and look forward to discussing such issues with you further."

Yudar dismissed Keshan, and Keshan left quickly. A giddy excitement coursed through him. If Mazar chose Darvad, then Keshan himself would be Royal Judge, and would be in charge of changing the society from the top down. But if Yudar was chosen, Keshan had little doubt that he would be able to influence Jandu.

Keshan wanted to begin work right away. He found Jandu in Suraya's garden, having lunch with Suraya and Ajani. Ajani rushed over to Keshan, hugging him affectionately. As always, Jandu quickly glanced away as Keshan returned her embrace.

"How have you been?" Keshan asked his wife.

"Wonderful! Join us for lunch. Suraya was just telling me about the priest who predicted she would be married to three men."

"Oh?" Keshan sat down next to Jandu, his knee brushing against Jandu's brazenly.

Ajani grabbed Keshan's hand. She had a habit of doing so, and it bothered him, but he smiled patiently. "Tell Suraya about your visions, Keshan! I'm sure she would understand."

Keshan spread a thick layer of creamy cheese onto a slice of bread. "I am going to eradicate the castes, starting with the Triya."

No one said anything. Once again, Keshan managed to bring all conversation to a halt. Keshan casually drank from his teacup. He was used to this sort of reception.

Jandu just shook his head. “The shit that comes out of your mouth...”

“It’s true,” Keshan said.

“But why?” Jandu frowned. “It doesn’t make sense.”

Keshan shrugged. “It’s the only way to improve this society.”

“And you are doing this because you saw it in a vision?” Suraya asked.

“I am doing so because it is right,” Keshan said. He disliked discussing his visions because they were so personal and powerful, but at the same time he couldn’t say if they were messages from God, telling him that he followed the correct path or just a side effect of his half-Yashva nature. Iyestar believed that they only granted him an ability to visualize the repercussions of his actions. Regardless, he knew that they were meant to be acted upon. But that wasn’t the kind of statement that would convince a man like Jandu. Words alone seemed to have little impact on him. Keshan supposed that hours of listening to his brother Yudar’s wearisome ruminations had made him immune to long speeches.

Experience informed Jandu’s actions in a way lectures never would. One look at his friend told him that Jandu already tired of this conversation.

“And what makes you so sure this new world is going to be any better or any more righteous?” Jandu smirked.

“Don’t speak to him like that!” Ajani snapped. She glared at Jandu.

Jandu frowned. “I’m just saying—”

“No, you are questioning Keshan! Can’t you tell he is special? Different from the rest of us?” Ajani’s voice rose.

Keshan moved to reassure her, but then Jandu grinned. “Different is definitely one thing to call Keshan.”

Keshan burst out laughing. But Ajani was still not pleased.

“When Keshan was five years old,” Ajani went on, “he defended a boy who was homeless on the street. An untouchable. Keshan sided with the untouchable against the son of a

priest, a Draya. And the courts of Tiwari condemned Keshan to death for fouling himself with untouchable air, and for not protecting the Draya.”

Suraya's eyes widened. “What happened?”

“I take it from his presence that the decision was overruled,” Jandu said, smirking at Ajani.

Keshan laughed again which only further infuriated Ajani.

“Yes, the decision was overruled!” Ajani said, her voice rising. “And do you know why? Because he showed them all what true compassion is! It isn't some ancient code written in a book, it is a living, active decision that people make every day! And Keshan had the power to change these high courtier's opinions, at the age of five! Keshan is no ordinary person! Can't you see that?”

Jandu looked into Keshan's eyes. Keshan felt the stare through his entire body.

“I can.” Jandu swallowed. “He is extraordinarily convincing when he wants to be.”

Ajani looked at both men, which seemed to make her even more angry. “So apologize to him! How dare you question him!”

“Oh, Ajani, calm down,” Suraya said, reaching over to pat her friend's shoulder. “Just ignore Jandu. He's always like this.”

Jandu shrugged. “I'm always like this.”

“He's obnoxious,” Keshan added.

“And rude,” Suraya said.

“And he argues about things he knows nothing about, because he has to be right about everything,” Keshan said.

“Hey!” Jandu frowned.

Keshan reached forward to pour Jandu more tea as a peace offering, but found the teapot empty.

“Shall I order more?” Suraya asked, getting up to call a servant.

“No, don't bother,” Keshan said. He stretched his arms, and looked meaningfully at Jandu. “I came to see if Jandu would run an errand with me.”

“I can accompany you,” Ajani said quickly.

“No.” Keshan leaned over and kissed his wife on the cheek. “It is in a dangerous part of town, I would not dare take you there.”

“I’m all yours,” Jandu said, standing quickly. Anticipation already pinked Jandu’s cheeks. “Shall we go?”

Keshan looked to him, and realized Jandu was going to be disappointed. He really did have an errand, one Keshan hoped would be enlightening for his new lover. But as Jandu moved to stand beside him, Keshan could almost smell the sex upon him, and Keshan’s mind whirled.

Maybe a quick delay wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

They beelined for the storage shed once more.



“Not that I don’t find your company charming, but where exactly are we going?”

Keshan strode alongside Jandu through the winding dusty streets of the leather market. Jandu was chatty enough in the chariot to the edge of the bazaar, but once they got out and started walking the narrow streets of the poorer neighborhoods on foot, Jandu’s tension increased and he grew silent.

“I wanted to show you something,” Keshan explained.

Untouchables of the Jegora caste huddled in doorways as Chaya caste merchants hawked leather shoes, bags, belts, and scabbards. The hot afternoon heat intensified the smell of freshly tanned hide and masked the stench of raw sewage. Wetted hay covered the dusty roads but did little to stop the persistent clouds of dirt that filled the air from so many bodies walking and pushing carts.

They passed by monkeys copulating and temple bells ringing and men sleeping in their carts, occasionally twitching to swat flies from their faces. In the distance, a squeaky stringed instrument called out to travelers, and a small boy was learning to play the pipe flute down the road.

At first, the crowd parted before them, dressed as they were in their silks and wearing their diadems, but then others began

to converge and beg for money. Jandu went silent. Only when one holy man offered to lift fifty pounds of stones with his penis for a donation did Jandu laugh and make a contribution.

The streets narrowed further. They passed palm readers, cows, astrologers, statues of the prophets stained with purple dye. As they crossed through a crowded intersection, the noise of chimes and chants and cocks and children and hawkers accompanied their journey. Keshan smelled horrible things, glorious things.

They reached an open square. In the center of the circle stood a pillory. It looked almost innocent in the daylight, although close observation revealed nails and blood stains. Jandu frowned at it and asked what it was.

"It's a pillory," Keshan said. "Untouchables are forced into it and their ears are nailed to the boards while people hurl garbage and feces at them. It's lawful punishment if their shadow accidentally falls upon a Suya caste member."

Jandu grimaced. "How disgusting."

Keshan shrugged. "Better than if their shadow should fall on us. They could be executed."

"If I were Jegora I'd move out of the city," Jandu said. "Too many hazards walking around Prasta."

It was the first time Keshan ever heard Jandu speculate what it would be like to be lower class, and the thought offered him a little hope.

"Of course," Jandu continued, "I'd probably want to be as far away from other people as possible, if I looked as hideous as a Jegora."

Keshan's heart sank.

Jandu always did this. He would say something meaningful, considerate, and then immediately follow it up with some insult, almost like an afterthought. Keshan doubted Jandu even noticed it.

Jandu suddenly stopped Keshan, holding his arm. "You didn't take me all the way out here to teach me a lesson about untouchables, did you?"

“Maybe.” He smiled, hoping Jandu’s mood would lighten.

Jandu stepped in a pile of cow manure. He swore and kicked his sandal free. Now he definitely was in a foul mood.

“Well, make it quick,” he grumbled. “This street is revolting.”

“It’s just poor.”

“Poor, revolting, whatever you want to call it.”

Keshan sighed. A woman approached them, eyes following her feet, and as soon as she looked up and saw them, she hastily crossed the street. Jandu stared at her branded hands, the symbol of the Jegora red and puffy, burned into her flesh.

“God,” he whispered. “She’s...”

“An outcaste,” Keshan finished for him. “Once a Triya, now untouchable.”

“I wonder what she did to deserve this kind of life.” Jandu said. “It must have been horrible.”

At a low, arched wooden door, Keshan knocked. The door promptly swung open, the hinges creaking loudly. “Lord Keshan! Come in! Come in!”

“Greetings, Tamarus!” Keshan called back. He turned and saw that Jandu watched the outcaste woman retreat down a narrow alley. His expression was grim. His frown only deepened when he looked at Tamarus.

“You cannot tell Yudar I came here,” Jandu whispered.

“I’ll add it to the list of things I’m never telling Yudar,” Keshan said. He smiled warmly at Tamarus as he led Jandu into the courtyard.

Keshan’s old friend Tamarus wore a magnificent white beard. The man was close to sixty, but his eyes still shone as bright and cheerful as they had when Keshan was a young boy.

Keshan entered the house and Tamarus immediately knelt at his feet, blessing Keshan.

“Welcome! Thank you for coming! Welcome!”

Jandu scowled as he stepped into the inner courtyard, which consisted of a shallow fire pit, densely packed soil, and

half a dozen chickens, which aggressively flocked to Jandu's sandals and started clucking.

"Jandu, I want you to meet an old friend of mine, Tamarus Arundan. Tamarus, this is Prince Jandu Paran." Keshan smiled encouragingly at Jandu.

Jandu seemed at a loss as to what to do. It was against tradition for a Triya to have to bow to someone obviously of low upbringing. But he was a guest in Tamarus' home. Jandu fidgeted, and then gave a small, curt bow of his head. Keshan smiled wider. He had to give Jandu credit for trying.

Tamarus, at least, could be counted on to revel in his good fortune. He groveled at Jandu's feet, tears in his eyes, praising God for the honor of having one of God's chosen royals in his humble abode. This attracted a gaggle of children to the doorway, whose open stares only seemed to make Jandu more uncomfortable. Jandu looked to Keshan for help.

"We don't have much time," Keshan informed Tamarus. "Let me see her immediately."

"Of course! So sorry! So sorry!" Tamarus bounced off the ground, despite his age, and rushed ahead of them to the only other doorway in the courtyard. "She's in here."

"What are we *doing* here?" Jandu hissed in Keshan's ear.

"Tamarus is one of the Chaya's most beloved religious scholars. He once helped me craft some legislation in Tiwari. But now his wife is sick, and he asked me to come and see if my Yashva healing would assist her."

Jandu sighed. "Fine. Hurry. For God's sake."

Keshan stepped inside the small room, but Jandu did not follow.

"Are you coming?"

"I'll wait out here."

"I could teach you the sharta," Keshan said.

This got Jandu's interest. His scowl diminished slightly.

"Oh?"

Tamarus knelt beside his wife's narrow cot. The low ceiling forced Keshan to kneel as well. The ground was clean and dry, but the walls were stained black with years of soot from cooking fires.

Jandu knelt beside Keshan on the floor.

Keshan reached out for Tamarus' wife's hand. He did not know the woman well, had only seen her a few times. But it was clear to see she was dying. Her face was ashen, her skin dull and unresponsive to the touch.

"How long has she been like this?" Keshan asked softly.

Tamarus reached out and stroked her hair. "Since Asherwar. The local healer removed a growth from her stomach, but she has been sickly ever since, and the wound has festered."

Keshan gently lowered the blanket and lifted the woman's thin cotton dress. The sight of the tumor was ghastly. Portions of the flesh had died and turned black.

Jandu gagged beside him. "God!" His face drained of color, but he did not turn away.

Keshan covered her up once more. He frowned at Tamarus.

"It may be too late for my help, friend."

"Anything you can do, Lord Adaru. Please!"

"Take her to a physician, for God's sake!" Jandu cried out.

"Physicians don't treat Chaya, Jandu. They have only their own priests and healers to help them." Keshan rubbed his palms together to warm them, and then placed them on either side of the woman's wound. He could feel Jandu tense beside him at the impure contact.

Keshan began speaking, chanting a low string of Yashva words, saying them slowly enough that Jandu would hear them and be able to repeat them. As he had hoped, Jandu rallied to the task.

Keshan repeated the words and then asked Jandu to chant with him. Jandu spoke lowly, saying the words with Keshan. He was an astonishingly fast learner. In three tries Jandu memorized the

complex string of sounds, and Keshan could feel the power building behind them like wind, sucking from the Yashva kingdom and breaking the barriers of the worlds to surge through Jandu's mouth.

Keshan let go of the woman and held Jandu's hands. He tried placing them on the woman's side but Jandu immediately flinched and pulled back.

"What? No!" Jandu's hands curled into fists at his chest.

"The words won't work unless you touch her," Keshan said calmly, although the vehemence in Jandu's reaction had startled him.

Jandu hesitated, looking at the woman, and then back at Keshan. He shook his head. "No. I can't touch her. It's... it's wrong."

"Then leave," Keshan said in sudden anger. "You are no use to me here."

Jandu stood and left the room.

Keshan stifled his rage and placed his hands back on Tamarus' wife, uttering the sharta, fast and with concentration. Frost burnt his tongue and the words themselves drifted out of his mouth in icy mists. He blew them on her wound, where they melted and settled like dew.

Keshan instructed Tamarus on how to cleanse the wound, and what herbs to give his wife. He promised to return in a week to see if the spell had lessened the infection. He worried it was too late to do her any real good, but at least it would ease her pain, as all Yashva cures did.

When Keshan stepped back out into the courtyard, he saw that Jandu had fled. He could be such a close-minded, selfish bastard. Keshan had been wrong to hope Jandu could be taught to care.

As he walked home alone, Keshan finally faced facts.

This affair with Jandu had to end.

His hope of turning Jandu into a compassionate revolutionary was revealing itself to be a fantasy. What had he been thinking? Jandu was a Paran. Like his brothers, like his father.

He was descended from a long line of men who abhorred equality, and revered only the laws as laid down by their own ancestors, the crusty prophets of yore.

Keshan had worked for the last ten years of his life towards this moment, towards seeing a king enthroned who would abolish slavery to religious traditions. He did not need Jandu for any of that.

Was he really going to abandon all of this for a good lay? Absolutely not.

Over the following days, Keshan distanced himself from Jandu. He attended Darvad along with the other lords who supported the Uru claim to the throne.

Keshan pretended that his brother's absence was normal. He pretended that Jandu did not matter.

And yet, despite his resolve to end the affair, Keshan sought Jandu's face whenever he entered a crowded room. He plunged himself deeper into reviewing the new laws that Yudar had established in his tenure as Royal Judge, but the additional work did little to relieve the aching hunger in his body. He wanted to hear Jandu. Touch him. Smell him. He missed Jandu's sense of humor, his fascination with unimportant things. To his shame, he found himself even missing Jandu's bragging.

Keshan excused himself from one of Darvad's casual dinners that evening, hoping to cleanse his mind with meditation and fasting. He sent Iyestar in his stead, hoping that whatever rifted his brother and Darvad apart could be repaired over a good meal. But when Iyestar returned to their townhouse, his expression was dark and dangerous.

"We're leaving." Iyestar stated. He ordered the servants to start packing immediately.

They had spent so much time in the capital city, the Tiwari townhouse now felt like home. Keshan looked around the rooms he had lived in over the past few months, saddened to even consider leaving them.

"Dress. Now." Iyestar's voice slurred.

"You're drunk."

"Surprise." Iyestar faced Keshan. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes! But why? Why now?"

"I have made my decision." Iyestar moved to the side table and poured himself another glass of wine. "I don't have to explain myself to you."

"Yes you do." Keshan grabbed the wine cup from his brother's hand and slammed it on the table. "I have worked too hard over the last few months to let you randomly choose this moment to pull me out of the action!"

"We will not stay in this cursed city a moment longer."

Keshan bit back his angry response. It was just like his elder brother to make executive decisions without consulting Keshan first.

"What has happened?"

"Over dinner, Firdaus and I exchanged words. We're leaving." Iyestar grabbed his wine once more and finished it.

"Firdaus is nothing. No one."

"He has Darvad's ear," Iyestar said. "And he suspects you."

Keshan stiffened. "I have not changed my allegiance. I am still loyal to Darvad. What—"

"He suspects you and Jandu! Good God, did you think no one would notice? Your eyes practically glaze over when Jandu enters the room! Are you seriously going to dog that Paran prick around simply because he has a tight ass?"

Keshan froze, shocked. His brother had to have a lot to drink before he would ever openly discuss Keshan's sexual preferences. It was no secret between them, rather a sore topic reserved only for conflicts.

Keshan shook his head. "Iyestar, if you are certain that Darvad will win the throne, then it is even more important that we stay these last few weeks until the announcement. I should be here to be appointed Royal Judge. Think of what that would do for our family and for our people!"

“It’s all too ugly,” Iyestar mumbled, collapsing back onto Keshan’s bed. He covered his eyes with his hands. “I’m sick and tired of Firdaus’ taunts and insinuations. Sick of this palace. Sick of your flagrant flirtations.”

“But—”

“No buts. We will be nowhere near the capital when Mazar makes his decision. We leave tonight, so say your goodbyes to whomever you wish.” Iyestar looked at Keshan pointedly.

Jandu.

Despite his anger at the man, the idea of leaving Jandu without saying farewell coiled like pain in Keshan’s stomach. He decided he must say good-bye. It was not a promise, or a compromise of Keshan’s ideals. It was only polite.

By the time Keshan reached the palace, the Parans had already retired for the night. A guard accompanied Keshan to Jandu’s suites, and stood by as Keshan knocked on Jandu’s bedroom door and announced himself.

“Come in,” Jandu said weakly, his voice low and broken from sleep.

Keshan gave one last nod to the guard and stepped inside Jandu’s room, carefully locking the door behind him.

Jandu looked charming lying in his bed, his hair sticking up wildly, his eyes heavy with sleep. Jandu shaved almost religiously, but now the beginnings of stubble broke across his cheeks and chin, and he looked roguish, rough, his body dark and lean in the moonlight. He wore only a short maroon dejaru, knotted loosely at his side and barely reaching his knees.

Keshan smiled at him.

“Keshan?” Jandu whispered. “What are you doing here?”

“Iyestar and I are leaving Prasta tonight,” Keshan answered. He sat beside Jandu on the bed. “We will be in Tiwari by tomorrow afternoon.”

Jandu stared at him in shock. His clear distress warmed Keshan’s heart.

“But why?” Jandu asked.

Keshan shrugged. “My brother has ordered it. I have to obey him.”

“I thought you did as you pleased and didn’t obey anyone.” Jandu propped himself up on one elbow. Now that Jandu was fully awake, he seemed to recall that they’d parted badly. An edge of surliness crept into his tone. “Why come tell me?”

Keshan smiled seductively, reaching up to run his hand along Jandu’s cheek. “I thought, if I couldn’t stay, at least I could give you a proper farewell.”

Jandu glanced to the door. “Did the guard notice you?”

“I’m not invisible.”

“I know, but...” Jandu looked worried.

“Relax,” Keshan said, flourishing a scroll. “I told him I needed to review some documents before I left in the morning.”

Keshan tossed the scroll he’d brought to the floor and ran both hands through Jandu’s hair. It felt magnificent between Keshan’s fingers. He looked at his lover’s body on the bed, and realized they had never done this, never made love somewhere comfortable. Keshan leaned forward and kissed Jandu softly. Jandu responded hungrily, pulling Keshan to him and immediately claiming Keshan’s mouth.

Keshan had planned on taking his time, savoring this last sweetness. But Jandu’s eyes lit with fierce greed, and suddenly Jandu gripped Keshan’s shoulders and pressed him back against the bed. Jandu crouched above Keshan and devoured Keshan’s body with kisses, lingering on each nipple, his hands deftly working loose the ties at Keshan’s waist and pushing Keshan’s trousers off.

Keshan had no choice but to lay back, stunned once more by the ravenous onslaught of Jandu’s passion. Jandu was rough and soft all at once, tongue flicking gently as his fingers raked over Keshan’s sensitive skin. His mouth lowered, sinking below Keshan’s hip bone, laving the spot where Keshan’s legs met his body. Jandu roughly spread Keshan’s legs apart and pressed

himself into Keshan's crotch, kissing until finally opening his mouth to swallow Keshan down his throat. Keshan moaned. Spasms of pleasure shot through his body like electrical arcs, he felt burned with sensation. He fought to not cry out, fearful of who in the palace might hear them.

Keshan forced Jandu away from him long enough to tear off Jandu's dejaru and expose him before Jandu intensified his actions.

"Jandu... you want to try something?" Keshan's voice was so thick with lust he could barely speak, the words broken and hushed.

Jandu didn't say anything, he just nodded. His tongue made lazy swipes along the insides of Keshan's thighs, along his shaft.

Keshan pulled away slowly, cursing himself for not thinking ahead. He quickly stood and searched Jandu's room until he found a jar of aloe oil.

Jandu watched him carefully, his eyes intense, his stare unbreakable.

"What are you doing?" Jandu asked.

Keshan scooped some oil onto his fingers and then reached behind him, preparing himself. Jandu grew very still, watching Keshan, his pupils dilating, his breathing growing ragged. Keshan didn't know if Jandu suspected what he was going to propose, but Jandu seemed very interested regardless.

"Let me do it," Jandu croaked, his voice breaking. He took position behind Keshan, and suddenly, Keshan could feel him, his long fingers gently stroking at the outside, not seeming to understand what he was meant to do. Keshan pushed back onto Jandu's fingers until one slipped inside. Jandu froze. And then he probed deeper, pushing in until Keshan gasped in pleasure.

Keshan arched his back and presented himself to Jandu.

Jandu hesitated. Keshan worried he might have moved too fast, expected too much. And then suddenly Jandu gripped Keshan's hips and hoisted him upwards into position. Jandu's

look became focused, predatory once more. Keshan felt the heat and width of Jandu at his opening, a pause, waiting at the entrance.

And then slowly, carefully, Jandu plunged inside.

Keshan groaned. It had been so long since he had done this, felt this fullness, this heat, his body expanding to accommodate the width of Jandu. It didn't last long. Jandu trembled, his hands shaking as he grasped Keshan's hips, a delightful, inarticulate moan coming from his lips. Jandu reached around and took hold of Keshan's dripping member. Jandu's thrusts intensified with each pump of his fist. Keshan's world expanded and contracted around each penetration, his pleasure building until he felt the heavy heat of Jandu's scrotum slap against his own. That was all it took for him to shiver in a long spasm and come uncontrollably into Jandu's palm.

He clenched down, driving Jandu's orgasm from him as well. Jandu stayed buried deep inside of Keshan for a few minutes as they caught their breath, but eventually, Keshan felt him pull out. The loss left Keshan feeling empty, incomplete.

Keshan collapsed onto the bed, and Jandu fell beside him. Jandu kissed him. Keshan thought that now, at least, his passion could fade, but Jandu's kiss made him light-headed, he wanted more, he wanted it all the time, this taste, all of it, all over him.

"You all right?" Jandu asked breathlessly.

Keshan nodded. "I'll be back in a moment." He rose and padded barefoot through the side hall to Jandu's private bath, looking for a towel.

He was gone for only a few moments, and when he had left the room, Jandu had been smiling. But when he returned, he found Jandu with his hands covering his face, leaning against the bed, sitting on the floor.

Keshan rushed to Jandu's side. "What's wrong?"

To Keshan's further shock, Jandu had tears in his eyes. "I am so sorry I defiled you."

“What?” Keshan blinked at him in surprise, towel dangling limp in his hand. And then he laughed. He couldn’t stop. He crouched down and pushed the hair back from Jandu’s face to kiss his forehead. Of course Jandu would think that this was defilement. His strict religious upbringing wouldn’t allow him to view it any other way. Compassion welled in Keshan.

“My God, Jandu, you can be such an idiot.”

At these words some of Jandu’s pride rekindled. He wiped his eyes. “No I’m not. I just—”

“I *liked* it, you fool. It’s what I wanted you to do.”

Jandu searched his face. “Truly?”

“Truly.” Keshan laughed again. “And you didn’t dishonor me. Quite the opposite, really.”

Jandu leaned his head back against the bed and closed his eyes. “We could still be killed for what we just did. It is against all laws.”

“It is, but it shouldn’t be,” Keshan said.

Jandu breathed a heavy sigh. “How can you expect me to believe that everything I have learned as right and wrong no longer applies?” Jandu ran his hand through his hair. “Not just now. The other day as well, at your friend’s house. I know you expect more of me, but I just couldn’t. I am not like you. I will never be like you.”

Keshan smiled at the simplistic honesty of the statement. “I know. I shouldn’t have pressed you. All I am asking you to do is judge your decisions by your own heart. That is all. Every day, ask yourself if you are acting on tradition or if you truly believe in what you are doing. When you do something, is it because it is how you have always done it, or because you feel it in your bones that it is the only choice you can morally make? That’s how we all need to live our lives.”

Jandu seemed calmer, but his eyebrows still came together, showing his frustration.

Keshan continued. “Do you think you are a bad person?”

“No.”

“Do you think I am?”

“Perhaps. But I love you anyway,” Jandu said vehemently. Keshan smiled at the conviction in his voice.

Keshan almost told Jandu he loved him as well. The words stuck in his throat. Did he really feel that way? Suddenly, Keshan was sick with the realization that he did. *My God*, it had happened, hadn't it? He had fallen in love with Jandu. What was supposed to be nothing more than a distraction, nothing but a quick fuck, had turned into a love affair.

Keshan stroked Jandu's face. “So why do you think it is wrong for us to love each other, in any way we like? Who are we hurting?”

Jandu hesitated. “It's just... God says it is wrong.”

“In the Yashva kingdom, men may love men,” Keshan told him. “Women may love women. And they are also the children of God. So why are we being held to different rules?”

“I don't know,” Jandu sighed. “I don't know.”

Keshan gently urged Jandu down onto the bed. He wrapped his arms around him, swinging his leg over Jandu's to pull their bodies closer. Jandu held him tightly. Keshan could feel his anxiety. Keshan had to remind himself that this was all new to Jandu. He was asking his lover to see the world differently, see himself differently.

“It's all right,” Keshan said suddenly, knowing it was what Jandu needed to hear. Jandu nuzzled his head against Keshan's shoulder.

“So you aren't mad at me for what happened at your Chaya friend's house?” Jandu asked quietly.

Keshan shook his head. “I'm not mad.”

Jandu smiled shyly. “And you enjoyed what we just did?”

Keshan pulled Jandu tighter. “I loved every second of it.”

“So, maybe we should try it again?” Jandu's smile curled at the edges of his mouth.

“Oh, if only all religious debates could be won so easily.” Keshan leaned in and kissed him. He knew this affair was

dangerous. But now that he was in love, he had no choice but to accept it as he would have accepted one of his most beautiful and frightening visions.

CHAPTER 15

IT HAD BEEN A YEAR SINCE SURAYA'S MARRIAGE.

Rather than have any sort of ceremony, Yudar, Baram, Jandu and Suraya downplayed the year's change, attempting to make Suraya's shift from Yudar's wife to Baram's seem inconsequential. But Jandu could tell that Suraya was as nervous as Baram was excited.

After all, Suraya and Yudar had obviously grown to love each other. Suraya seemed to be able to read Yudar's mind, she glowed when he was around, and she acted like a proud, strong queen. Yudar was a calmer, happier man with her by his side. The marriage had been just what Yudar had needed to relax into the prospect of his rule.

Now that it was Baram's year with Suraya, she would not be giving up the title of queen, if Mazar chose Yudar for king—but she would be spending her nights in Baram's chambers. And though neither she nor Yudar said anything, Jandu knew them both well enough to see that the impending separation pained them. He understood that pain. Keshan had been gone for a little over a month and Jandu keenly felt a physical loneliness, which he'd never acknowledged before.

To distract himself, he sought out work. Once he was relieved of his role as regent, Mazar intended to establish a new academy for warriors in Prasta's temple district, and had requested Jandu's help with the school. He and Mazar spent hours developing the curriculum, and choosing the best young Triya warriors from around the nation to attend. The school would be a testament to the Triya people.

Keshan's words about ending the Triya caste returned to Jandu when he thought of Mazar's academy. But such thoughts hardened his resolve to improve the academy. Even if Keshan's premonitions were correct, to give in to Keshan's philosophy would be disloyal to both Mazar and Yudar. And Jandu was nothing if not loyal.

Jandu could successfully put Keshan's radical ideas out of his mind, but he failed when it came to Keshan himself. Jandu felt incomplete without Keshan. Yet there was nothing he could do about it. Yudar wouldn't even engage in a conversation about Jandu going to visit Tiwari. Since the assassination attempt, Yudar's naturally tight grip had become a stranglehold.

Unspoken tension suffused their family dinner the night that Suraya would leave Yudar's bed. Jandu hoped Yudar wasn't resentful, and hoped even more that Suraya didn't regret her decision. Their dinner conversation was uncomfortably stilted.

Before they turned in, Jandu decided to have a glass of wine on the balcony outside the dining room. He poured a second glass and held it out for Suraya, who joined him.

They stared over the balcony in silence, admiring the clear sky that revealed every star. Trees along the Yaru rustled as monkeys clambered their branches, and in the distance, they could hear cows crying out for their evening milking.

"Are you nervous?" Jandu asked finally.

Suraya didn't meet his gaze. She tugged at her heavy silver-threaded zahari as if it was uncomfortable.

"I'm scared out of my wits," she said finally. She looked to Jandu and smiled nervously.

Jandu brushed a loose hair from the side of her face. "That's normal. I'd be scared too, if I were you."

Suraya studied Jandu's expression. "You know, I wouldn't be this nervous if you were next. I don't know what it is about you, Jandu, but I feel very close to you. We have a different relationship than the one I have with Baram or with Yudar."

"I'm more lovable," Jandu said.

She shook her head. "No, you snot. It's not that. You look at me differently." She dropped her voice to a low whisper. "You treat me differently."

"I'm different," Jandu said, coughing to cover his embarrassment.

"Yes you are," Suraya said.

Jandu hugged her to him, a friendly hug. He didn't want Baram getting jealous now that it was his year. Jandu could see Baram pacing in the dining room, watching Jandu and Suraya in the starlight.

"You know what?" Jandu whispered in Suraya's ear.

"What?" Suraya had her eyes closed, her face close to Jandu's, close enough to kiss.

"Baram loves you so much he will treat you better than you've ever been treated before."

Suraya opened her eyes and stared at Jandu. For a moment, Jandu detected a flicker of disappointment. With horror he understood that Suraya had wanted him to kiss her.

"Baram will make a wonderful husband," Jandu continued.

"Yudar is a wonderful husband," Suraya said, sighing. She pulled from Jandu's embrace. "I just got used to being Yudar's wife, and now I have to learn all over again."

"Nothing big is changing, Suraya. Just the penis, really."

Suraya's jaw dropped. She stared at Jandu with wide eyes.

Jandu smiled. "And, having seen both Yudar's and Baram's dicks, I can assure you, they're pretty much the same."

Suraya turned completely red.

Jandu couldn't stop, though, now he verged on laughter. "Although I would caution that Baram has developed some unsightly back hair which you may want to address the first few weeks you're in bed with him."

Suraya reached out and smacked Jandu on the arm, and then started laughing hysterically.

“You’re awful! I can’t believe you! You’re so disgusting!” Suraya had tears of laughter in her eyes now, and she hit Jandu weakly on the arm over and over. “What kind of person are you? Didn’t you listen to the whole conversation we had about not comparing or talking about... *that?*”

Jandu shrugged. “When have I ever paid attention to Yudar’s conversations anyway? Besides, I thought I’d put your mind at rest.” He looked through the window at Baram’s angry, towering figure and shook his head. “I don’t want you to think that just because Baram is built like a monster the rest of his body is freakishly large as well.”

Suraya wiped the tears in her eyes and laughed again. “Well, thanks for the warning.”

“Yes, yes.” Jandu swilled the last of his wine and then put his arm around Suraya and led her back to the dining room. “Now, we better go inside before Baram thinks I’m talking up my own dick a year too early.”

That night Jandu slept fitfully, as he had since Keshan left. Palace life seemed meaningless without him. Dressing in the morning became a chore now that he didn’t have to think about how Keshan might respond to his appearance. Even the hard week when Keshan avoided him had been less painful than this. At least then there had always been the chance that he would run into Keshan, or see him in some crowded hall. But now even that slim hope was gone.

They had exchanged letters, but other than some carefully disguised romantic innuendos, Jandu remained loveless since Keshan’s departure. He practiced with Zandi daily. He spent hours with Mazar working on the academy, desperate to keep his mind occupied enough to not dwell on his heartbreak. But that night, as Baram finally conjugated his marriage, and Suraya explored a new man’s body, Jandu was painfully aware of his separation from Keshan, and it tore at his gut like an ulcer.

In the morning, he anxiously awaited Suraya's presence for breakfast. When she finally showed up, she seemed pleased, although tired.

Before his brothers got there, Jandu went to her and kissed her on the top of her head.

"No sleep, it seems. Busy night?" He winked.

Suraya grinned slyly. "My God. I'm going to be dead of exhaustion by the end of this year."

Suraya's prediction came perilously close to the truth. The following week, every time Jandu tried to find Baram or Suraya, they were locked together in Baram's private chambers.

There had to be such a thing as too much sex. It was unnatural. But then again, if he had Keshan around, wouldn't he be screwing Keshan every moment he had?

"Jandu! There you are."

Jandu turned to see Yudar striding purposely towards him. Yudar dealt with his loneliness as he always dealt with problems, plunging deeper into work. He slept little and woke early every morning to serve out the last of his tenure as Royal Judge in the palace's courthouse.

"I want you to come with me today," Yudar said, fondly touching Jandu's shoulder. "It is about time that you see what transpires in the courthouse, and how a Royal Judge must act."

"Why?" Jandu noticed that his brother had been discussing the position with him often, even alluding to his wishes that Jandu would take a greater interest in the law. Jandu had a sinking suspicion that his brother hoped Jandu himself would sign up for the post. In Jandu's opinion, he couldn't think of a more horrible job. Sitting for hours on end, in day-long meetings, mediating disputes about cattle and wives and property? Even just thinking about it made him shudder.

"I told Mazar I would finalize the design of the new wrestling arena with Baram first, and then—"

"That can be done later. You are my guest today. I insist."

The courthouse was across the river from the palace, between the holy temple district and the public market. A white limestone courtyard dominated the entrance and was the location of all the executions in the capital. The original building burned a hundred years ago, and so the current structure was heavily influenced by the rich architectural designs of the eastern states. Engravings of the prophets glared down from dozens of stone alcoves, and detailed paintings of the laws adorned the plaster walls. Inside, the floor was bare marble, but the few spaces on the walls where the Book of Taivo was not written were covered in colorful tapestries depicting the great battles of the kings from a century prior.

Even at this early hour, a long line of plaintiffs and defendants snaked around the courthouse. One of Yudar's ministers sat at a table near the entrance, recording the names of those requesting mediation and the charges brought forth. Soldiers flanked the entrance, ensuring orderly conduct and to escort any convicted criminals to the bailiffs for transport to the jailhouse on the outskirts of Prasta.

Inside, citizens and ministers filled the available seats and lined the walls. Everyone stood and bowed respectfully as Jandu and his brother made their way to the front of the room. Jandu had originally hoped he could watch from the sidelines, but Yudar made it clear he wanted Jandu with him at the front of the room.

Jandu refused one of the three intimidating large velvet chairs, choosing as always to lean against the wall behind his brother. As soon as Yudar took his seat, the court session began. The first case was a man accusing his wife of adultery, but after the man failed to produce any evidence to support his claim, Yudar dismissed the case. At the second hearing, some Prastan merchants brought forward a thief caught stealing their goods. After them, Yudar was asked to determine compensation on the loss of a cow, accidentally poisoned when one farmer dumped refuse into another farmer's well.

Jandu's fingers tapped out a rhythm on his thigh in the hopes it would keep him awake. He couldn't remember ever being this bored before. He scanned the crowd for attractive men, and wondered which ones Keshan would find the most pleasing. He counted how many men in the crowd were balding. Then he counted how many sported facial hair. Then he guessed how many women dyed their hair with henna. And, eventually, he even began listening to the trials.

Yudar exhibited endless patience, his face sympathetically torn with grief at tales of loss, appropriately outraged at injustices, perfectly cold and determined when dictating punishment.

Yudar thrived here. He knew the laws and recited dozens of prior cases for any situation. If a man's chicken had been killed by another man's dog, Yudar quoted the exact paragraph in the Book of Taivo that applied, recited four examples of similar judgments made by the prophets, and then stated his decision. Yudar looked magnificent in the large chair, head held high, eyes blazing, hands pressed together as he concentrated.

Before the court now were two men, chained to guards with their heads bowed shamefully. They wore the dress of the Chaya caste, farmers who looked to have come from the west of Marhavad.

Another man, a horse trader, explained their crime to Yudar. Jandu wasn't really paying attention, busy as he was figuring out why his hair was so wild and unruly this morning and fiddling with his clothes, until he heard a word that drew his attention.

"...homosexual activity the likes of which I am morally opposed to describing," the trader said, sneering at the two men. "In the middle of the rice field! Where my children could have seen their depravity!"

Jandu's eyes widened. The horse trader brought out another witness, who confirmed that the two men had been copulating in a rice field at dusk.

Yudar looked appalled. He curled his lip in disgust as they told their story.

“Is this true?” Yudar asked the accused men. “Are you guilty?”

The two men looked at each other. One of them cried, his hands folded in supplication, but the other looked straight at Yudar with a stony expression.

“Yes,” he said.

His companion hung his head and sobbed.

Jandu watched his brother’s face. Yudar looked like he had been poisoned. He recoiled from the men as if he were somehow personally infected by their mere presence.

“Then by the laws of Marhavad, I hold you accountable for the unholy foulness you have engaged in,” Yudar said to them. His lips set grimly. “I sentence you both to execution, and I hope you come to terms with God for the abominable crime you have committed.”

Jandu stood against the wall until the criminals were led away. Yudar announced he would cease hearings to attend the immediate execution, as was his custom. Yudar believed in swift justice, and beckoned Jandu to join him.

Outside, Jandu asked Yudar to excuse him for a moment. He then politely bowed to the courtiers, left the courtyard, and ran around the corner where he vomited in the bushes. Memories of entering Keshan swarmed through his brain like a madness, making him shiver in horror at his own longings.

By the time Jandu rejoined Yudar in the courtyard, his hands had almost stopped shaking. Jandu folded his arms, hoping that Yudar would not notice his paleness.

Yudar’s expression was grim. “I’m sorry you have to see an execution on your first day at court,” he told Jandu. “But we must show the people that we fulfill sentences swiftly and efficiently.”

There was no delay in carrying out Yudar’s sentence. Citizens awaiting trial gathered around a large wooden platform to watch the execution. Most seemed eager for the diversion. Several women standing nearby already wept. Jandu guessed

they were relatives of the condemned. One of the condemned men tried to wave to an older man who looked to be his father. A guard jerked the man's hand down and led him onto the platform.

Bailiffs brought Yudar and Jandu ornate chairs to sit on. This time, Jandu took up the offer, unsure if his legs would hold him up. Soldiers surrounded them, keeping the growing crowd at bay.

A bailiff blindfolded the men and then led to the platform where they were forced to kneel before the chopping block. In Yudar's Prasta, there was no grace period. The convicts had no chance to look at each other or say good-bye to their families. Such rights were revoked.

Jandu said nothing to his brother. He sat, still as stone, and stared at the two men, concentrating on not throwing up again. He said nothing as the crime of sodomy was publicly announced, along with their family names in order to disgrace their families throughout the kingdom.

His brother grimaced at the men and called them a "moral sickness."

The executioner swung back his large blade and lopped off the head of one man, followed by the other. The second required two strokes.

Jandu walked stiffly towards their chariot. Yudar followed, concern plain upon his face.

"Jandu, do you feel all right? You're completely pale." Yudar put his hand against Jandu's forehead, feeling for a temperature.

Jandu jerked his head away.

Jandu felt panic rise through his body like a fever, from his legs through to the tips of his fingers. He and Keshan could be executed like that, that quickly. Those men had families, loved ones who would never live long enough to escape the shame that the crime had brought upon them. That was him. Him and Keshan.

Jandu forced himself to speak. "I'm just sick, that's all."

"God, why didn't you tell me this morning?"

"I thought I'd be fine."

"I should never have taken you to the execution," Yudar said, shaking his head. "It always turns my stomach, even now."

"I'll be fine," Jandu said through gritted teeth. Though he knew that he wouldn't. He couldn't be. The call of sodomy above the crowd echoed in his ears. That was him. His brother would kill him, that easily. The circle of soldiers around him seemed sinister. The sound of the crowd cheering as the executioner held the two heads aloft, the screams of the old woman whose son lay dead, the impressions closed in around Jandu in a jumble of sick guilt.

"I've forgotten how shocking the executions are, especially when unprepared for one. I'll call you a doctor," Yudar said.

Jandu shook his head. "I just need to get out of this crowd, that's all. I'll return to the palace now, if it is all right with you."

"Of course." Yudar frowned. "I have to stay for the rest of the hearings, but I'll see you at dinner this evening." He watched Jandu with a look of pity.

Jandu numbly climbed into his chariot and told the charioteer to take him home. Prasta's wide royal avenue lay before him, but Jandu could barely focus on anything.

I have to calm down. Jandu tried to focus on what he wanted, what would make him feel better. Keshan came to his mind like a symbol of salvation.

I need him. Jandu closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands. How could he now, minutes after seeing two men die for their love, be thinking of Keshan?

But there was a bitter truth, Jandu realized. Like it or not, Jandu needed Keshan. There was no longer any question who he was. At least that had been determined the night Keshan left the palace. And part of being Jandu meant being in love with a man rather than a woman.

The image of the executioner's axe falling came again to his mind. Why had he just sat there and watched? Couldn't he have said something to Yudar, asked for leniency for them? Was he that much of a coward?

The second Jandu thought he had his emotions under control, the reality of who he was would smack him in the face again, and panic would rise through his body, making it difficult to breathe. He was suffocating on his own self-realization. Once home, he ordered the servants out of his rooms, and locked the door to his bedroom. He sat on his bed until his shaking subsided, and then he took some deep breaths.

"I have to see him," Jandu said aloud. He called one of his servants to ready a horse and bring a saddlebag.

Jandu changed into clothes better suited for riding. He put on a dark cotton dejaru and a blue embroidered sash. He combed his hair down and pushed aside his bangs, which were long enough now to fall into his eyes. He removed his silver diadem and looked at himself in the mirror. He looked like a terrified version of himself. Where was Jandu the brave archer now?

"Jandu fucks men," Jandu whispered to his reflection. He closed his eyes and fought back tears. He had to find Keshan. Keshan was the only one who could help him.

He slung Zandi and his quiver across his shoulders and packed clothing and gold coins into the saddlebag. Anxiety propelled him forward. He opened his door to leave and found Suraya standing there, hand raised as if to knock.

"The servants say you are ill." Suraya looked at the bow and saddlebag. She raised an eyebrow. "Is everything all right?"

"I have to get out of the city." Jandu shouldered his way past her and started down the hall.

"Where are you going?" Suraya chased after him, her sandals clacking on the marble floor. "Jandu—wait!"

"I will be back in time to hear Mazar's decision," Jandu said.

“Tell me where you are going!” Suraya demanded, her voice rising in anger that Jandu had never heard her express before. She darted in front of him, arms out to block his way. The silver threads in her zahari flashed in the mid-morning light.

Jandu’s hold on his emotions was too tenuous to stay and chat. He tried to move past her but Suraya did not budge.

“Suraya, please.” He teetered between anger and tears. “You can’t help me.”

Suraya’s arms lowered. She searched his face, seeming to read for the first time his true emotion. “You’re going to Tiwari, aren’t you? To see Keshan.”

To Jandu’s horror, he felt his lip trembling. He didn’t trust himself to speak so he nodded.

“And you’ll be back before Mazar’s announcement?” she asked.

Jandu nodded again.

“All right.” Suraya sighed. “But if you aren’t back in one week I’ll personally drag you back to the palace myself. I am your wife, remember.”

The idea of skinny-armed Suraya overpowering him was so absurd that Jandu broke into a laugh. Suraya smiled back at him. He knelt down to touch her feet and she told him to stop being so stupid, embraced him and let him go.

Jandu mounted Shedav and rode through the city. Life burgeoned around him, thriving and noisy, the air thick with the smells of the market, the fragrance of late summer jasmine, the stench of the sewers and burning milk, but none of it touched him. He would not rest until he saw Keshan.

Once through the white sentinel walls of the city, and surrounded by recently harvested fields, Jandu finally calmed. He continued along the main road leading out of the city until he reached the crossroads. To the north, the road followed the Yaru River to Karuna. To the east, it rolled through endless wheat and corn fields to Jagu Mali. Jandu took neither of these. He urged his horse toward the road leading south, through the forests and into Tiwari.

CHAPTER 16

TIWARI WAS A DAY'S JOURNEY FROM PRASTA, AND SO LEAVING AS late as he had, Jandu had to pitch a tent halfway and wait until dawn to continue. After hours of nothing but dark, looming forestry, the main road hit the coastline and the world around Jandu exploded into lushness. The spiked yellow and scarlet clusters of sorrowless tree blooms blew across the roadway, mingling with purple silk blossoms and violet plums to turn the road into a spectacle of color, reds and whites and yellows, with the irresistible scent of roses mixing with the white stars of jasmine and wild vanilla.

The city of Tiwari was built high up on a bluff, whose jagged cliff edge dropped to a dangerous precipice and an even more dangerous shoreline, rugged with sharp rocks. At the entrance to the city, the sound of the crashing surf drowned out all other noises.

But a quieter sandy beach stretched to the south of the city, and beside it the city's main market and most of its population lived. Jandu jumped from his horse and cupped his hand to scoop up star-shaped petals and the fading pink blossoms of a nearby clematis.

Along the street, a sturdy row of white-barked trees spun their whorled leaves like tops in the ocean breeze, their slender tips striking each other to mimic the sound of rainfall. It was as if Jandu had entered a botanical paradise. The salt in the air mingled with the scent of dozens of fragrant bushes in the private gardens, the scent of someone baking fish in a clay oven, and a street vendor frying bananas. Beautiful, painted cows wandered the streets brazenly, their udders round and low.

Jandu led his horse down the street in a daze. The sun beat down on his spiky black hair, and bronzed his skin. It was early morning and people had just begun to venture out into the streets. The Tiwari people shared Keshan's light olive-colored skin, his slightly slanting eyes. There was a fierceness to their countenance that Jandu didn't recognize in his own royal blood. Something about the Tiwaris seemed almost combustible. And yet they were the nicest, most welcoming strangers he had ever met. As he made his way up the main boulevard, individuals ran out to offer him a cool glass of water or to bring grain for his horse. Jandu didn't know if it was just him, emanating a princely Triya demeanor with his fine horse and saddle, or if it was just the Tiwari way, but whatever it was, it made Keshan's capital a welcoming city.

As Jandu approached the Adaru palace, he started to worry about surprising Keshan.

What if he found Keshan with another lover? Keshan did, after all, have a reputation. Was Jandu really to believe that Keshan loved him and him alone? As Jandu made his way along the wide main boulevard, he saw more proof of how ridiculous such an idea was. This was an entire city built on the love of Keshan. These people had moved across their state to build their homes against this ragged cliff as a testament to that love. Keshan had to be shared with everyone.

And their time in Prasta—it had been a month ago. Forever in the highly malleable state of romance, Keshan could have moved on. Maybe Jandu's feelings were no longer reciprocated.

His stomach was in knots by the time he reached the palace entrance. Tiwari's seat of power was carved directly into the cliff's edge, with a long stone garden that doubled as a wall, stretching along the coast towards the center of the city. The palace jutted from the bluff like a challenge to the sea. Magnificent, lush flowers bloomed around the building softening its harsh red rocky face. Ivies intertwined across the vertical surface, covering every brick under a curtain of organic life. Giant palms shaded

Jandu from the sun's increasing heat, and coconut trees thick with fruit clustered at the main gate.

A soldier stopped him at the entrance, eyeing Zandi warily. "State your name and business."

Jandu hadn't bothered to wear his diadem. His head was sweaty and the cool salty breezes coming off the coast felt marvelous.

"I'm here to see Keshan Adaru. I'm his cousin," he said.

Apparently, that answer was not good enough, for the soldier signaled behind him and several other soldiers emerged from a guardhouse.

"What is your name?" the soldier asked.

"Jandu Paran, Prince of Marhavad."

The soldier frowned at Jandu's dirty sandals and his sun-tanned face.

"Lord Keshan is in the reception hall with Lord Iyestar, Prince," he said warily. "Follow me." The man nodded to another guard, who took the reins of Jandu's horse. After removing his saddlebag and throwing it over his shoulder, Jandu followed the soldier into the main house and down a long wooden hall lined with colorful portraits of animals.

Tiwari's main reception hall was a lot smaller than those in the Prasta palace, but it was opulent, with a gilded ceiling and glittering crystal along the sides, detailed murals painted on each wall, and a dramatic curving balcony that jutted from the side of the cliff and overlooked the frothing ocean below. Thick, overlapping carpets padded the floor. The room had two long rows of seats for visitors, leading up to the dais where Iyestar and his ministers sat. There were two petitioners in the room, talking quietly with a clerk in the corner.

Jandu peered behind the soldier and got his first good look at Keshan in a month. Keshan looked much more serious, he noticed. He leaned forward to speak with his brother, his hand resting on his hip, elbow thrust out in a domineering position. A golden yellow dejaru with embroidered trim clung to his

long legs and a red sash emphasized his slim hips. Over his bare chest he wore a gold and red embroidered vest. Bands of beaten gold enclosed his tanned arms. Keshan's gold diadem was small, but dramatic, set with numerous rubies.

Keshan spoke intently with Iyestar; his eyes were nowhere near the entrance. Jandu stared at Keshan's face, at his dark hair, which had grown just past his ears, the beauty of his large brown eyes. As Keshan spoke, his lips moved slightly, full and round, and Jandu felt dizzy staring at him. His stomach somersaulted.

The soldier spoke to the attendant in the doorway in a voice so low Jandu couldn't hear him. He turned abruptly and returned to his post at the front gate.

The herald nodded at Jandu. "Prince Jandu Paran?" he checked.

"Yes."

The herald blared his trumpet, causing Keshan, Iyestar, the petitioners, and the ministers to turn and glance at the entrance in surprise. "Prince Jandu Paran!" the herald announced.

Jandu looked at Keshan anxiously.

All of Jandu's worries disappeared the moment he saw how Keshan's expression changed. It seemed like a weight lifted off of him, and a smile reached from ear to ear.

"Jandu!"

Keshan practically ran to Jandu. They met halfway along the hall. Keshan laughed. They embraced tightly, tears coming to Jandu's eyes.

"This is a wonderful, wonderful surprise!" Keshan cried, hugging him again, not caring about the spectacle that they made in the middle of the room.

Keshan put his hand on the saddlebag slung over Jandu's shoulder.

"Did you ride here alone?" he asked.

Jandu nodded.

“God, you must be tired.” Keshan put his arm around Jandu and led him up to Iyestar.

Keshan beamed a magnificent smile. “Brother, look who has traveled all this way to visit us at last!”

Jandu knelt to take the dust from Iyestar’s feet.

“Blessings to you, Lord Adaru,” Jandu said ceremoniously.

Iyestar snorted. “I don’t think you have to grovel to me, Jandu. You’re a prince, even if you are in my city.” Iyestar smiled. “Welcome. We are happy to have you.”

Jandu doubted the sentiment, given Iyestar’s close relations with Darvad, but he was too happy, touching Keshan, to care.

“Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Iyestar, I’m afraid I must take my leave of you,” Keshan said.

Iyestar nodded. “Once you’re settled, please take dinner with our family this evening, Jandu.”

“Thank you.” Jandu bowed once more. Keshan took Jandu’s arm and led him out of the room.

Outside of the reception hall, Keshan asked a servant to take Jandu’s saddlebag to the guest room adjacent Keshan’s own chambers. Then, without stopping, Keshan led Jandu through a long hallway, up a dramatic staircase, and along another corridor.

The view was phenomenal, overlooking the sea, the sound of the crashing waves shooting up the side of the cliff and straight into the room. Pelicans circled above Jandu’s head.

“Come on.” Keshan led Jandu up another flight of stairs that spiraled around a large statue of the Prophet Bandruban to the tower.

“Where are you taking me?” Jandu asked.

“To my room.” Keshan looked over his shoulder at Jandu. “I have a present for you.”

Jandu felt momentarily dizzy with that look.

“I think you’ll like it.” Keshan said.

“I’ve traveled all day to get here,” Jandu said. “I need a bath and a bed.”

“I’ve got the bed,” Keshan said.

“A bath would be nice,” Jandu smirked at Keshan.

“I’ll give you one,” Keshan whispered. They finally reached the top of the spiral staircase and Keshan pushed open the door.

Inside was the massive chamber that made up Keshan’s quarters. It had balconies on three sides, overlooking the land and the sea. The walls were half-open, letting a gentle, warm breeze pass through the room.

Jandu took in the details of Keshan’s private world. He saw Keshan’s desk in the corner, crowded with scrolls and writing utensils. There was a map of Marhavad, and Jandu could make out the corner of the last letter he wrote to Keshan, hiding under a blotter.

Jandu smiled to himself. He unstrung Zandi and propped her up in the corner, and shrugged off his quiver. He walked around the room, admiring the inlaid wooden floor, the fine paintings of horses and cattle on the walls, and the massive canopied bed. It, like all the furniture in the room, was made of dark cypress and emitted a fragrant scent.

A small hallway led to Keshan’s private bathroom, and across from that was a small rooftop garden he called his own, filled with lemon and juniper trees.

Jandu looked at the large marble bath and sighed contentedly.

“Shall I call servants to fill the bath for you?” Keshan asked.

Jandu smiled. “Well, now that I have you alone I want to—”

Keshan pushed Jandu against the wall and kissed him. Jandu savored the sweetness, the coconut earthy saltiness of Keshan’s skin, the roughness of his cheeks, the softness of his lips. Keshan thrust his tongue deep into Jandu’s mouth. Jandu kissed him back with equal fervor, and then pulled away and smiled.

“I guess you missed me, then,” Jandu said.

Keshan laughed. “Missed you? All I think about is you. It’s torture.”

"Tell me about it," Jandu said.

"It's been the same for you?"

"No, tell me about it," Jandu said, grinning. "I love hearing about me."

Keshan shook his head. "You're the worst." He leaned in to nuzzle Jandu's neck. "I missed you so much that my dick got hard just reading that letter from you. I missed you so much that I wished I'd made a bronze mold of your cock so that I could—"

"—on second thought, talk later." Jandu grabbed Keshan's shoulders and pushed Keshan against the wall. He stifled Keshan's cry of surprise with a penetrating kiss. He didn't stop until he felt Keshan writhe against him, his hips involuntarily thrusting out for more contact.

Jandu didn't think when he kissed Keshan. He could only feel. And this was what he needed, after the terrible day before, full of self-awareness and introspection. Jandu needed to forget his brother, his own crime. He needed only this, a focus of his desires, and this realization made him grip Keshan even harder, slow and deepen his kiss, hoping to direct all his energy to Keshan's beautiful body.

When Jandu broke the kiss, Keshan stayed frozen, a delightful smile on his face, his eyes closed in pleasure. Jandu pulled down Keshan's dejaru. He knelt, staring for a moment at Keshan's cock, erect and pulsing with the need to be tended.

Jandu grasped Keshan's hardness, which was firm and warm in his hand, glistening at the tip. Jandu ran his tongue along its shaft, luxuriating in the musky taste of him. He tenderly bit the loose skin at the base of Keshan's scrotum and Keshan cried out loudly, shocking Jandu enough to make him freeze.

"Shouldn't we be quiet?" Jandu whispered.

"Not in my own house." Keshan pushed his hips closer to Jandu.

Jandu filled himself with Keshan. Keshan breathed out and closed his eyes once more, leaning his head back against the wall.

“Jandu...” Keshan tried to touch Jandu but Jandu pushed him back against the wall hard, forcing Keshan to stay where he was.

Keshan moaned in ecstasy. “Please...”

Jandu’s mind blanked of everything but the feeling of Keshan in his throat, the taste of him on his lips. He kept his eyes open, working harder and faster until he could feel Keshan begin to shake, until he knew he was about to come. Then he let Keshan go. Keshan’s eyes shot open in disappointment.

Jandu pulled Keshan to the bed. Keshan watched as Jandu removed his clothing and lay down.

Keshan straddled Jandu and kissed him deeply. That familiar feeling of drunken warmth coursed through Jandu’s blood, causing every touch from Keshan to make him break out in a sweat of desire.

Keshan leaned down and licked at Jandu’s nipples, playing with them using his teeth. Jandu sucked in air at the sweet pain of it.

“Keshan...” Jandu’s body vibrated with pleasure.

Keshan spread Jandu’s legs apart and laved Jandu’s testicles with his hot tongue. Jandu lay speechless, stunned with the feeling, his body shivering.

Suddenly Keshan stopped his ministrations and reached over to pull a small glass jar from the bedside table.

“What is that?” Jandu asked.

“Rose oil. Use it.” Keshan collapsed onto the bed, grinning proudly.

Jandu sank his fingers into the oil and let its coolness grease his fingers. He circled Keshan in his arms. He reached around and inserted one finger inside of Keshan, capturing Keshan’s hiss of pleasure with another kiss. Keshan bit gently at Jandu’s lower lip in response.

Jandu was so aroused his vision blurred. He prepared Keshan with two fingers now, slowly at first, and then slightly faster and deeper.

He touched Keshan in such a way that Keshan cried out, turning languid. Jandu wondered what it felt like, suddenly curious. He would have to find out later. But right now, with Keshan flush with desire, and his own needs screaming to be fulfilled, he could wait. Right now, he wanted to see Keshan make that face again.

"I want you inside me," Keshan whispered, his hot breath on Jandu's lips. He slipped his tongue inside of Jandu's mouth and ran it along his own tongue. "Please..." Jandu enjoyed the control he had over Keshan at the moment.

"Not yet," he said. He turned Keshan over and instead worked him slowly with his fingers, all the while massaging his erection with his other hand.

"Jandu, please... I'm going to come."

Jandu tortured him like this for another minute, until he could feel Keshan about to climax. At that moment, he spread rose oil on his own member and thrust it deep inside of Keshan.

Keshan came almost immediately, groaning in pleasure. Jandu thrust only a few times before coming himself, loving the feeling of it, Keshan's flesh tight around him, vividly hot, the musky sweet smell of him, the sight of Keshan's gorgeous body prone, open, his for the taking.

Jandu still shook as he pulled out, tremors of pleasure coursing through his nervous system. Keshan rolled over and looked as content as a sleeping cat, his eyes closed and a soft smile on his face.

"I thought you'd like that oil," he said.

Jandu snuggled close and rested his head on Keshan's chest. "I do like it. Only it makes me wonder why you have a jar so readily available at your bedside."

Keshan laughed. Jandu loved the feel of that laughter, rumbling through his belly, raising Jandu's head with each muscle contraction.

Jandu smiled at Keshan. "Have you been practicing your skills on other boys?"

"I don't like boys, only men."

"Well then?" Jandu raised an eyebrow. "What man is the oil for?"

"It's for you." Keshan ran his fingers lazily through Jandu's hair. "I bought it as a present for you. It's been sitting here ever since I got home, waiting for just the right person to announce himself in our reception hall."

Jandu stretched alongside Keshan, kissing Keshan's neck as he nuzzled closer.

Keshan closed his eyes. "Not that it matters to me, but out of curiosity, why are you here? I thought Yudar would kill himself before he let you out of his sight."

Jandu's mood cooled as he recalled his departure from Prasta. "I didn't ask."

Keshan opened his eyes and studied Jandu's face carefully.

Jandu stared at the ceiling. "Yudar made me attend court with him yesterday morning. There were two men he sentenced to death."

"Oh." Keshan's unspoken question was obvious.

"They were lovers," Jandu told him.

"I'm sorry." Keshan continued stroking Jandu's head.

"I just sat there and watched," Jandu said. "I didn't even try to plead with Yudar for leniency. I was too afraid he would suspect me. I hated myself."

Keshan stared at Jandu but didn't say anything. He scooted down on the bed and brought his head to Jandu's, touching their foreheads together and throwing his arm around Jandu. They held each other for a long time, not speaking.

Finally, Keshan sat up. "If you want, we can stop this." He tried smiling, but Jandu could tell it was forced. "This romance is dangerous, I won't lie."

Jandu sat up as well. "I can no more stop this than I can stop my heart from beating."

Keshan sighed. "Poetic, but not very realistic."

"I don't know what to do." The panic Jandu felt back in Prasta swelled in his throat, made it hurt to swallow. "I came here hoping you would tell me."

"All we can do is be careful."

"And if we're caught?"

"I won't let your brother kill you." Keshan stated it firmly. "Not because of me. It won't happen. I love you. No matter what happens with your brother, with the kingdom, with your wife or my wife or the future of this country. I love you. Never doubt that."

Jandu smiled. Keshan's conviction gave him strength. "That's all I needed to hear."

"Well, good." Keshan plopped his head back down and grinned slyly. "Because I don't have anything better to say."

That evening, the Adarus held a feast in Jandu's honor. He sat at a low table on cushions, surrounded by Keshan's friends and family. Keshan's mother, Linaz, sat beside Keshan. Keshan's father had died several years prior, but his Uncle Inaud was there, a bizarre old man who sat next to Jandu and yelled in Jandu's ear the entire meal.

Keshan's mother was Yashva, and yet she looked almost human. Her skin was dark brown, but there was a bluish tint to it, and her eyes, while the right size and shape, still had that unnerving spinning effect that drew Jandu in, and made him feel like he was being hypnotized.

But what was most important was that Linaz had a good sense of humor and laughed at all of Jandu's jokes.

Dinner with Keshan's family was very different than eating with Jandu's own. Where even their private meals in Yudar or Baram's rooms were courteous and calm, Keshan's family shouted at each other and spilled wine and gestured emphatically with their arms, honored guest present or not. They were wild people, the Tiwari. He let Iyestar refill his wine glass over and over and tried to get into the spirit of things. When Iyestar

leaned over and poked his finger in Jandu's chicken, yelling at him that he was a pussy for not trying the hot chutney, Jandu swallowed his extreme shock and just decided to kick Iyestar under the table. This started Iyestar laughing, great thunderous belches of happiness, making him spill his drink down his mother's zahari.

Jandu's Aunt Linaz didn't seem upset. She rolled her eyes, dabbed at the stain with a cloth, and continued to shout loudly into Ajani's ear.

Jandu looked around him and laughed. Now that the meal was over, six separate conversations competed for volume amongst the eight people at the table. It was madness. He smiled across the table at Keshan, who stopped shouting at Iyestar long enough to catch Jandu's eye and smile sweetly back.

"Did I tell you the story about the time I found a turtle?" Keshan's Uncle Inaud said suddenly, gripping Jandu's hand. Since Jandu had agreed to sit beside the old man, he had been subject to the random conversational whims of Keshan's obviously senile relative.

Although Inaud hadn't told Jandu the story, Jandu nodded anyway. "Yes. Yes, you did." He had to shout to be heard above Iyestar, who was roaring with laughter and shaking his fist at Keshan. "What a wonderful tale!"

Inaud smiled. "And all for the love of a coin!"

"Ah, yes."

"But who knew where the physician would take me next?"

"Who knew?" Jandu shrugged in an exaggerated manner, barely keeping back his laughter. Iyestar initiated yet another round of drinks, and competed with his brother and Jandu to see who could drink theirs the fastest. Keshan obviously practiced this game before, and spilled half his drink into another cup hidden under the table whenever Iyestar wasn't looking. Jandu shook his head at Keshan across the table. Keshan put a finger to his lips, urging Jandu into complicit silence.

Jandu wondered how Keshan could lie to his family and also be so honest with them at the same time. No one even raised an eyebrow at the blatant affection Keshan lavished on Jandu. They just accepted Keshan the way he was, and therefore, by association, Jandu as well. They may not have understood the kind of love the two of them shared, but they accepted Keshan's Jandu obsession casually.

Jandu thought he was close to his brothers, but now he saw true closeness—Iyestar and Keshan beating each other up at the table, both of them finishing each other's sentences, laughing like identical twins.

This was by far the best party Jandu had ever been to, and it amazed him that this was just an average family dinner for the Adaru's. He realized he was jealous. These were people that talked loudly, openly expressed their emotions, did not believe in prudishness, and had no real cares for the strictness of Shentari faith. And yet as well-trained Triya warriors they upheld the warrior code when they left the palace. Jandu fell in love with all of them by the end of dinner.

Jandu leaned back in his chair and rubbed his stomach, full from a delicious meal. Dancing girls appeared and a large troupe of musicians started a well-loved Tiwari tune, which everyone in the room sang along to. Jandu didn't know the words. Keshan's mother sat beside Jandu and whispered them in Jandu's ear, which only tickled and made Jandu laugh harder.

The lyrics were ridiculous, a long, corny ballad about the beauty and bounty of Tiwari's sea. At the chorus, the entire room, servants included, started shouting out the words as loud as they could.

*"Tiwari! Oh, Tiwari! The homeland of my dreams!
May your plentiful shores feed us, may your blue skies
oversee us!
Oh Tiwari, as long as I can see the sea,
I see who I'm supposed to be!"*

“You’re not singing!” Linaz scolded him.

“Sing! Sing!” A chorus broke out across the table. Jandu turned bright red. He couldn’t sing at all. He barely mumbled prayers in public. But the chorus of would-be fans would not relent, and he was drunk enough to let Keshan’s mother drag him upwards to stand on the table.

This alone would be worthy of a beating in the Paran house. Standing on the table? And yet here was Keshan’s very own mother, kicking off her shoes and standing with him, wrapping her bony arms around Jandu’s waist and dancing with him on the table as she repeated the lyrics. The musicians began again, and Jandu just decided to hell with it. He would sing.

“Oh, Tiwari, Tiwari, land of... lyrics screamed ...” Jandu filled in. The audience rolled on the floor. “May your frightening shores feed me, may your rocks... not thrash me into smithereens as I try vainly to escape your horrendous undertow... As long as I can see the sea, I really need to pee...”

Even Iyestar cried tears of laughter by the time Jandu was done with his terrible rendition of their state anthem. Keshan kicked off his shoes, one of them flying out to hit one of the attendants in the shin. Keshan ran over and apologized to the woman, and then dragged her on the table with him, forcing her to dance.

As the tempo slowed, Keshan switched partners with his mother, so that he and Jandu could dance together and his mother danced with the servant. No one seemed to find this the least bit scandalous. Keshan pulled Jandu closer. Jandu wanted to kiss Keshan then and there, but didn’t. This was enough. Enough to get arrested in Prasta. And enough to ease his self-doubt over his own inverted nature, make him feel better, feel alive.

By the time the music stopped, Jandu was so completely drunk he could barely stand. Keshan put his arm around him and weaved them up the grand staircase towards Jandu’s room, which was directly below Keshan’s quarters at the top of the tower.

They sang bawdy lyrics loudly until Ajani reappeared, blocking their way on the landing of the stair.

She seemed more beautiful than Jandu remembered. Maybe it was being in her own home. But Ajani had a relaxed, carefree look about her, her hair down loose around her round face. Her scowl, however, was the same scowl she had favored Jandu with every chance she got in Prasta.

She bowed to Jandu, and Jandu brought his hands together in the sign of peace.

"Ajani," Jandu said. "You look lovely tonight."

Ajani smirked coldly. "Thank you. I see you two have been falling for Iyestar's tricks."

Keshan waved his hand in every direction. "Oh, don't blame Iyestar, he was just happy to see Jandu too." Keshan pinched Jandu's cheek.

Ajani crossed her arms. "I've been waiting for you, in my chamber," she said quietly. She looked pointedly at Jandu. "Good night, Prince."

Jandu frowned. "But Keshan and I aren't done drinking yet." He laughed at the sound of his own voice, which cracked and wavered.

Keshan nodded. "It's true. I promised Jandu a night cap, and then I will come to you directly, sweet princess."

Ajani didn't move. "You—"

"—Shh." Keshan let go of Jandu and put his arms around Ajani. "When have I ever lied to you?" He whispered in her ear.

Ajani rolled her eyes. "Yesterday. And the day before. You lie to me every day, Keshan."

"But you still love me."

"Fool that I am." But Ajani softened at Keshan's words. Her coquettish expression sickened Jandu.

Keshan leaned towards Ajani's face, his lips just above her ear. "Let me make sure Jandu is settled for the night, and then I'll be there as soon as I can, all right?"

Ajani closed her eyes. “All right.” She wandered off as if in a daze.

When she was gone Keshan grabbed Jandu’s arm and practically ran up the stairs to Jandu’s guest rooms. “Quick!” Keshan whispered. “Before she comes back!” He shut the door behind him and locked it, laughing.

Jandu laughed as well, but with guilt. “I’m stealing her husband. That makes me a bad person.”

Keshan scoffed. “I would have fallen asleep as soon as I got into bed with her, that’s what I always do.” He moved towards Jandu seductively. “All my love is for you.”

“Lucky me.” Jandu looked around the guest chamber, marveling at its rich colors. Everything about the palace burst with vibrant patterns. The guest room was small, consisting of a bed and a few small cushions together on a carpet, with a small cypress table and chair in the corner. The balcony looked out to the sea, where the constant crash of the waves broke through the night and made even the blackness seem alive. Jandu had never slept with such a loud noise. He wasn’t sure he would be able to.

Jandu sat tentatively on the guest bed, poking at the goose-feather mattress and shearling bedding. “This is nice.”

Keshan didn’t hesitate to sit beside him on the bed. Up close, Jandu could smell the wine on Keshan’s breath, see the bleary effects of alcohol in his eyes. *Or maybe*, Jandu thought, *it’s my sight that’s gone blurry and he’s just fine.*

“Listen to me,” Keshan said. He grinned crookedly. “We’re going to make it through everything, you and me. I can see the future, you know.”

Jandu smirked. “What am I about to do?”

“Pinch my ass.” Keshan laughed.

Jandu froze for a moment in surprise. He *was* going pinch Keshan on the ass, which was creepy. Instead he just flicked him on the arm.

“Wrong,” Jandu said.

Keshan grinned. “Liar. I can see the future. And you know what I see?”

“What?” Jandu leaned closer to Keshan.

“I see you and me making love in a forest.”

“We did that already.”

“This is a different forest.” Keshan slurred. “You have a burr digging into your shoulder blade.”

“How sexy.” Jandu’s lips hovered beside Keshan’s.

“Therefore I know we’re going to make it,” Keshan said emphatically. He shook Jandu’s shoulders for effect. “Whatever happens with Mazar’s announcement, with your brother, with me, never forget this: you and I are going to make love in a forest.”

“With a burr in my back?”

“Yes.” Keshan closed the distance and kissed Jandu. Like a wave, desire crashed over Jandu’s body, drowning him in languid warmth.

“I’ll remember,” Jandu whispered.

And, for the rest of that week, Jandu held on to that thought. He spent his mornings teaching archery to his cousins, and in the afternoons he and Keshan walked the city, dining with Keshan’s noisy family every night. Keshan and Iyestar taught Jandu how to swim without being pummeled to death by the waves, and Jandu learned how to fish. And, every night, there was the greatest escape of all, in Keshan’s body, the taste and smell of him overwhelming Jandu’s nights, making him burst with the joy of life. There was no need for fear, with Keshan in his future.

For the first time in his life, Jandu wanted to believe in destiny.

CHAPTER 17

THE NIGHT BEFORE MAZAR WAS TO ANNOUNCE WHO WOULD inherit the throne, most of the city of Prasta indulged in celebration. The night air filled with the sound of revelry and the cries of sheep being slaughtered for feasts. Music broke out in courtyards across the city, the notes of rebo chords and wind instruments wafting above the high clay and mud walls.

The impending announcement cast a heavy pall over the palace. Yudar spent the night in meditation. To respect the silence, Darvad celebrated elsewhere, at Druv's townhouse. By the time Tarek joined his friends, they were well into their festivities. Even Firdaus Trinat seemed drunk, and he rarely lost control.

Darvad lavished Tarek with praise and attention. They practiced archery in Druv's garden, and when it got too dark to see, they watched a dancing troupe inside. New food and wine flowed continuously. Darvad seemed in high spirits, although he admitted that he missed Iyestar and wished he had come.

"I am sure he means no offense by his absence," Tarek told him.

Darvad nodded. "I know that. It is the way with the Adaru family. They have their own traditions, they are not like us."

Despite the fact that his fate hinged on tomorrow's decision, Darvad glowed with optimism. It rubbed off on Tarek.

"You promised you would show me how to do the Salafani dance." Tarek was drunk, he knew it, and a part of his brain warned him that he could easily go too far in such a state, press his luck, press Darvad's friendship.

But Darvad was not offended by the request. He clapped Tarek on the shoulder and stood. "Of course! I did promise you, didn't I?" Darvad dashed to one of the female dancers. He grabbed her by the arm and swung her out into the middle of the room. The poor woman looked startled by Darvad's sudden grab.

"You dance Salafani-style?" Darvad asked her, smiling wickedly.

The woman nodded. "Of course."

"Then let's show my friend how it's done."

Tarek reclined on the pillows and watched, stifling his disappointment that Darvad had not volunteered to show him the moves personally. The dance started traditionally, with the two of them circling around each other, arms weaving in the air, legs deliberately strutting across the room. As the tempo increased, they drew closer together, each gyration in tandem, until they were nearly touching, their bodies pulsing and twisting in synchronicity. It was a very erotic dance. Tarek watched the movements of Darvad's body hungrily, the way his arms flexed, the careful placement of his feet. Darvad's eyes burned as they stared wantonly at the half-clad dancer, and Tarek imagined what it would be like to have such eyes turned on him.

"Let me try," Tarek said, standing up. He moved to Darvad, but the dancer quickly spun and grabbed his arm, misinterpreting him. Tarek struggled through the steps with her. She was patient. But Tarek's sexual frustrations only made his poor dancing skills worse, and he quickly tired of trying.

Darvad found another dancing girl, and stalked her like prey. Tarek didn't have the stomach to watch Darvad pursue a lover that evening. He slipped out of the room, wandering through Druv's house, his head spinning with wine.

Tarek decided to go for a walk and dispel the dizzying buzz. Druv's townhouse seemed too close; he needed air.

Sounds of merrymaking drifted from behind every wall. The wide, shady boulevard was home to a majority of Marhavad's

lords and courtiers, and so each occupant anticipated either trepidation or celebration the following day. Tarek was not the only lord wandering the street in the darkness. He passed by carousing groups of young men, Triya warriors dressed in their finest, he passed musicians and merchants making late deliveries. Everyone offered him the sign of peace as he passed, and it touched him. On the eve of a decision that might spark a civil war, all parties were filled with hope, filled with something close to affection for each other. Anything seemed possible.

The street circled round a large park, and Tarek followed the curve of the road, strolling down a quieter side street. Here were the houses of the ministers of Prasta, wealthy Triya who were not soldiers, but professional politicians. While celebration could still be heard, the scene was more subdued, and Tarek embraced these moments of serenity as he sorted through his raging heartbreak.

Tarek passed by the red-painted gates of a temple and he decided to stop inside. The shrine itself was tucked back away from the street within a thick stand of coconut trees. The prophets gazed down at him, and the face of God, illustrated as a shining sun, wrought in pure gold, glittered from the ceiling of the incense-strewn temple.

Tarek lit a fresh stick of incense off a dying ember. He rubbed paste on his forehead and then knelt in prayer.

He lost himself in his mumbled words. Religion always comforted him, and now it served as a buoy, keeping him afloat in the tumultuous world of being the lord of Dragewan. He prayed for guidance. He prayed for strength.

Tarek heard voices and turned. Two priests walked together down the path. They paused when they saw him praying there, and turned aside to give Tarek privacy. They stopped within a three-walled wooden shelter near the gate, where Tarek had smelled buttery tea being heated.

Tarek continued his prayer, but the priests' presence intruded on his meditations. They no doubt assumed from his

dress that Tarek was Triya, but if they found out a Suyu was sullying their temple grounds, he could be punished. Darvad would defend him, as Darvad always did. But Tarek did not want to burden his friend with extra responsibilities, especially not on the eve of his ascension to the throne.

Tarek bowed his head low to God and then stood. His knees popped. He was getting out of shape, all this feasting and so little exercise.

In order to bypass the priests, Tarek walked a circuitous route back to the front gate, through the coconut grove, enjoying the perfumed warmth of the summer air.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tarek saw the flash of armor hidden behind the trees. He wasn't the only warrior hiding in the temple that night.

His first thought was that it was some reveler relieving himself against a tree, but then he heard the voices of two men. It was late for such congress, and Tarek approached warily, worried the men were up to no good. Temples had been desecrated over the last few months by young rabble-rousers.

Then he saw them.

Keshan Adaru and Jandu Paran stood whispering together. Keshan reclined against a tree casually, and Jandu stood close to him, his hand beside Keshan's head as he leaned on the tree for support. The two of them spoke in low voices, their armor and fresh clothes gleaming in the moonlight.

Tarek moved closer to hear what they were saying, keeping to the shadows, making no sound.

"...I can't." Keshan shook his head. He looked agitated.

"I want you there," Jandu pleaded. "I need you there. Please. Yudar won't mind. Hell, even Darvad would prefer you come to the ceremony. You've traveled all this way already."

Keshan shook his head. "No. I promised Iyestar I would accompany you to the city gates, no further. And look! I've already broken my promise."

“So break it all the way. Come with me to the palace.”

“No. I’ll spend the night in the Tiwari townhouse, but I must leave first thing in the morning.”

The two of them stood awfully close together, Tarek thought.

“What does it matter?” Jandu asked. He ducked his head to look into Keshan’s face, seeming to notice Keshan’s obvious discomfort for the first time. “Are you all right?”

“Listen, I need you to do something for me,” Keshan whispered.

“Anything,” Jandu whispered back.

“Give me Zandi, just for a little while. You can get her in Tiwari after the ceremony.”

The request clearly shocked Jandu, for he straightened, his hands leaving the tree. “Why do you want her?”

“A feeling.”

“What feeling?”

Keshan sighed. He ran his hand through his hair. “I have a premonition that Zandi will be taken from you if I don’t protect her.”

“Keshan—”

“—Do you trust me?”

Jandu nodded. “Of course I do. Take her. Keep her as long as you wish.” Jandu slid Zandi off his shoulder and rested her against the bark of the tree.

Keshan suddenly kissed Jandu.

Tarek stood, transfixed, mouth agape in shock.

Jandu thrust his tongue into Keshan’s mouth. They drew closer together. Jandu pinned Keshan to the tree trunk, his hands on either side of Keshan’s face.

Tarek never witnessed two men kissing before. Despite the fact that Tarek disliked Jandu, he couldn’t deny that they were both exceptionally attractive men. The sight aroused him. Tarek watched them embrace, their breastplates grinding

quietly together as they pressed closer, kissing slowly, lazily, as if they had all the time in the world, as if they had every right to be there, making love in the open.

When Tarek kissed men, it was always a furtive act, hasty and aggressive. He had never done this. The two of them made love with such gentle sweetness, their mouths caressing each other, their bodies trembling with a tremendous balance of strength and tenderness.

Watching them, Tarek awakened to the idea that love between two men could be something beautiful and pure, and not a desperate craving satisfied in darkness and in urgency.

Jandu whispered something to Keshan, and Keshan laughed, he let Jandu pin his body, hip to hip. Keshan licked at Jandu's lips, and Tarek suddenly felt a deep grief unlike anything he'd ever experienced. This was a sweet moment he would never know. There was a purity in this secret embrace, and now that he knew it existed, Tarek wanted to experience it more than anything else in his life.

A bone-deep sadness tore through him. He would never have this. Not with Darvad. It would forever be out of Tarek's reach, as long as he continued to love a man who could not—would not—love him back.

Tarek decided to leave the two lovers alone. His voyeurism, and his own arousal, disturbed him. This was a private moment, and Tarek ruined it by spying.

He heard a low voice from behind him, and realized that the priests approached. Despite his anger towards Jandu, Tarek determined that nothing should pollute this moment. He wanted Keshan and Jandu to have it, if he never could.

He leaned down and found a stone, and threw it close to the lovers. Jandu and Keshan broke apart immediately. They spoke again to each other, and then Jandu turned to leave. As they parted, their fingers touched briefly, and they walked in opposite directions, Zandi held in Keshan's arms.

Tarek waited a few seconds, and then continued through the trees towards the temple gate. He watched Jandu stealthily depart.

He still didn't like Jandu. Jandu gained admiration for his bloodline, rather than his talents. And while he was a good archer, Tarek was better. Yet Jandu would always receive more praise, and more credit, because of his lineage.

But, with this new revelation, a part of Tarek's heart softened toward Jandu. They had more in common than Tarek had originally supposed.

Keshan departed next, sneaking through the gate, Zandi bright on his shoulder. Not for the first time, Tarek wondered whose side Keshan was on. He clearly preferred Darvad's politics, and yet he had taken a lover from the opposite camp.

Once they were gone, Tarek made his own exit, abandoning Druv's party and deciding to walk the rest of the way home. He knew Darvad would miss him, but in all the wrong ways.

There was a peace there, in that temple, that could have washed away everything and left his heart healthy and whole.

But it was not meant for him.

CHAPTER 18

JANDU ASSUMED YUDAR WOULD BE ANGRY WITH HIM FOR arriving back in Prasta at the last possible moment. Baram certainly had been. He'd almost punched Jandu for leaving, but Suraya restrained him, cautioning that a bruise would look bad at the formal ceremony.

Jandu got no chance to speak with Yudar the night he arrived home, as Yudar meditated in the palace temple. Therefore he sought Yudar the following morning, as his brother dressed into his formal wear alone.

"I'm glad you're here," was Yudar's only comment. His expression showed the anxiety that an entire night's meditation had not erased.

"Where are your servants?" Jandu asked.

"I sent them away. I wanted some quiet." Yudar looked over at Jandu and smiled almost ruefully. "You aren't the only one who occasionally requires solitude."

"Do you want me to leave?" Jandu asked.

"No. Stay." Yudar smiled at him. "I mean it, it's good to have you here. I feel like I'm missing something precious when you're not around."

"Flatterer." Jandu turned to Yudar's full-length mirror and adjusted his breastplate. He wore full armor this morning in honor of the importance of the ceremony. Jandu's heavy silver diadem already bothered him, and he'd only had it on for an hour.

"Did you have a pleasant journey?" Yudar struggled with the leather ties of his breastplate. He never developed the knack of tying knots out of sight.

“It was lovely,” Jandu told him. “There are places in Marhavard where no one cares what happens today.”

Yudar chuckled. “I wish I was there.”

“Let me help you.” Jandu took over tying Yudar’s breastplate and back plate. They stood together in amiable silence.

“Hand me your gauntlets,” Jandu said.

They were beautiful, gold and leather, with the Prasta crest of the sun emblazed across them, studded with a large black pearl. Jandu laced them tightly.

“Thank you, Jandu.” Yudar reached out and hugged Jandu to him. Yudar shook slightly.

“Are you all right?”

“Just nervous,” Yudar said.

“You’ll be fantastic,” Jandu told him, patting him on the shoulder. “You were born for this. You’ve been trained for this. No one could be a better king than you.”

Yudar expelled a large breath of air. “Well, let us hope that Mazar feels the same way.”

“Mazar is no fool.” Jandu raised the massive, jewel-encrusted diadem from Yudar’s table and placed it carefully on Yudar’s head. “This is going to give you a headache.”

Yudar smiled. “Some of us are used to wearing formal attire, Jandu.” He looked at himself in the mirror. Gold adorned him, head to toe. His red silk trousers shimmered with gold thread, and his gem-encrusted sword hilt glittered magnificently. Even his shoes bore elegantly embroidered suns. He looked like a god.

“Let’s go find out if I’m king.”

“Good luck,” Jandu said. He hugged his brother once more, and then followed him into the waiting entourage.

A procession of lords, ministers, messengers, soldiers, and relatives trailed Yudar as they made their way towards the large central garden. As Jandu walked, he tried to let the feeling of peace he acquired in Tiwari remain paramount.

But already, Jandu’s week in Tiwari faded like a dream. That glorious warmth and confidence and sense of belonging suffered

under the tension that strangled the palace. Jandu found it ironic that he felt more like himself there, in Tiwari, than he did here, in his own home. With lords and ministers and priests surrounding him, Jandu felt trapped. Real life anxieties chewed away at the thin edges of Jandu's memories.

Jandu's body sparkled in the sunlight as the morning rays hit his armor of burnished steel and silver, decorated with small golden suns, protecting his chest, back, and upper arms. He wore matching silver bands on his wrists and lower arms. The metal grew hot, but for once Jandu didn't care. Armor seemed like a wise decision on a day as tense as today.

Jandu had attended his share of formal announcements, but he had never seen anything like this. The garden was wall-to-wall bodies. Below, on the banks of the river, thousands upon thousands of citizens lined the roads and parks, looking up to see whether the Paran or Uru flag would be raised. Jandu took his place behind Yudar, alongside Baram and Suraya, at the front of the dais. Thousands of people stared at him, him and his family, and he brushed self-consciously at the curl of hair sticking out in front of his ear.

Baram matched Yudar in gorgeous gold armor. His diadem, too, shimmered with sapphires and pearls. And Suraya spared no detail, her diamond nose ring connected to her diamond earrings by a beautiful stretch of silver and pearls, her eyes darkened with kohl, henna on her hands, her dress luxuriant purple silk and silver embroidery.

"You look sexy," Jandu whispered in her ear.

Suraya smirked behind her painted hand. "Behave, Jandu."

On the other end of the dais stood Darvad Uru, resplendent in his own golden armor, alone. Nearby, his friends Tarek, Druv and Firdaus hovered, but on the dais, Darvad looked overwhelmed by the Paran's unity.

And between them, old and tired, was Regent Mazar.

"Today is an auspicious day, a day where God has granted me the wisdom to choose the best course of action for our

beloved nation,” Mazar began. “It is no easy task, because all the sons of King Shandarvan are fine men, noble men, with excellent hearts and strong arms, the Shentari faith within their souls. Choosing between Darvad Uru and Yudar Paran is like choosing between night and day, water and earth. Both are needed to bring balance and wholeness to our world, both are equally valuable to the people, and to my own heart.”

Jandu stifled a groan. *Just say it already. Just get it over with. Everyone is waiting on one word.*

“I have had one long year to contemplate the repercussions of choosing one over the other, knowing that the wrong choice could lead to instability and war. Since the great battles of our forefathers, we have lived in relative peace under the banner of this palace, and I have no wish to darken the royal name or bring the wrath of God upon me by instigating a war. I have prayed for guidance, and this morning, God has taken me by the hand and shown me the path by which I must follow.”

The silence hung over the entire city.

Mazar rubbed his eyes. And then he looked out at the crowd. “Because I cannot choose between night and day, between earth and water, or between my heart and my soul, I have determined that I *will not* choose.”

Jandu’s breath caught. *What the hell did that mean?*

“I will split Marhavad into two kingdoms,” Mazar said. “And let both sons of Shandarvan share in the bounty, and grant us their wisdom.”

There was a stunned silence. And then, instantly, chaos.

Darvad’s face turned red and that vein in his forehead pulsed angrily. Even Yudar, who remained calm and controlled in public, seemed flustered by the announcement. He frowned and looked at his hands, as if God planted a message for him there.

“What total bullshit!” Baram exploded, fists raising. “If anything will cause civil war, this will do it!”

Luckily, Baram’s exclamation was lost in the overwhelming drone of everyone else shouting at Mazar. Boos echoed across

the garden. Lords shuffled and looked to Yudar or Darvad for support.

Jandu breathed heavily. He had no idea how to respond. He hadn't even considered this an option. No one had. He looked up and almost had to laugh as the flag raisers tried to raise both Paran and Uru flags on the pole at the same time.

Mazar cowered as the volume of verbal assault increased, as shouts filled the air.

"Please! Let us all calm down! We must have peace!" Yudar held his hand up over the crowd, begging for order, but no one could hear him above the roar of outrage. It took both him and Darvad together to finally still the masses, and even then, their eyes turned cold on Mazar for even contemplating dividing the nation into two.

Yudar bowed respectfully to Mazar and brought his hands together in the sign of peace. "We will abide your decision, Master Mazar, and beg God's blessings for this new chapter in the history of our beloved nation."

Darvad bowed as well, although the vein in his head still throbbed.

Darvad helped usher the tumultuous guests to the adjacent garden, where the celebratory feast was ready and waiting. Few seemed in the mood for food. But the wine was immediately opened and passed, and everyone eventually took their seats, rage crystallizing in the icy silence.

Small conversations took place, speculations, but the main table where the Parans and Darvad sat along with Mazar was about as far from the Adaru's reckless and delightful dining experiences as Jandu could get.

Jandu knew his old master well enough to recognize the strained grimace on Mazar's face. Once, when Jandu was just a boy, Mazar gave him a leather ball to play with. Jandu managed to toss it into the river less than half an hour later. Jandu tried to retrieve it and fell into the water instead, nearly drowning. Mazar discovered him and helped Jandu to shore, where he

then beat Jandu mercilessly, shrieking at him for being so careless with his own life.

But what Jandu remembered most about the incident was the way Mazar looked about ten minutes after beating him. He'd worn a haunted expression of remorse and sick self-reproach.

The same sick apprehension enshrouded Mazar's expression now, as the uncomfortable official celebration slunk into its second hour. Mazar should have made a choice. And he didn't. Rather than alienating half of Marhavad, he had estranged everyone in one fell swoop.

The stilted conversations, whispers, and anxious glances between lords grew into an unbearable level of tension.

"I cannot bear this any longer," Darvad announced suddenly and loudly, standing up dramatically. He put his hand on Yudar's shoulder. "Yudar, you are my half-brother, and now my co-leader in this great nation. Let us put aside our differences and work together, in the spirit of cooperation."

Yudar returned Darvad's smile. "My feelings exactly, Darvad. I wish you no harm and look forward to working with you." Yudar stood and the two embraced. A nervous applause broke out.

"Come, let us celebrate the proper way. May I challenge you to a friendly game of dice, to show the good will between us?"

Yudar's eyes glinted. "Wonderful!" He clapped his hands.

"I don't want to play alone," Darvad told Yudar. "With your permission, I'd like to invite my friends to join me."

"Of course," Yudar said. He turned quickly to Jandu and Baram. "Both of you, come with me."

Jandu almost protested. Yudar knew how he felt about gambling. But Baram violently shoved Jandu in Yudar's direction. "Shut up and do what you're told, for once," Baram mumbled.

Outside, the spectators crowded around, following the two kings through the garden and into the gaming room at the edge of the courtyard. Those at the feast got up and practically ran to the gaming room as well.

Baram was still spitting in rage, but Jandu's anger had turned into a coil of apprehension, sitting cold and slick at the bottom of his stomach.

Servants prepared the room for the impromptu game. Someone fetched Yudar's own exquisite gaming board.

Jandu sat down cross-legged alongside his brothers on one side of the board. Yudar's pieces were carved of ivory, and Darvad's were made of ebony. A lone pair of dice lay on the board.

Jandu leaned forward to speak to Yudar from behind the great blocking girth of Baram.

"Yudar." He kept his voice low. "I have a bad feeling about this game."

Yudar sighed. He leaned forward to whisper into Jandu's ear. "I cannot refuse a challenge; you know that."

"But —" Jandu was interrupted by applause as Darvad himself entered the room. He quickly sat across from the Parans, flanked on either side by his friends Tarek, Druv and Firdaus. Darvad handed the long dice to Firdaus.

"Firdaus will roll for me," Darvad said. Just the presence of Firdaus made Jandu's skin crawl. Firdaus had overdone even his own usual opulence, wearing a garland of carnelians over his armor. Amber studded his diadem so thickly that the heron emblazoned across the gold surface was barely visible. A playful expression lit Firdaus' dark skin, and lifted his drooping moustache.

"And Jandu will roll my dice," Yudar said, already entranced by the sight of the board.

Jandu frowned. He didn't want to have anything to do with the game.

"Please take the first turn." Darvad offered Jandu the dice, then positioned his own ebony game piece. "I stake one hundred gold pieces from my share of the royal treasury."

Yudar nodded at Jandu as if to reassure him. "And I will stake the same."

Jandu felt the uncomfortable intensity of hundreds of eyes upon him. Lords and courtiers jostled each other to squeeze into the small gaming room. Already the warmth of their bodies coupled with the summer heat to make the space feel almost stifling. Jandu threw the dice.

“Five!” Yudar declared.

Firdaus scooped up the dice, rattled them in his hands, and then blew on them gently. He threw them down on the board.

The dice rolled a four.

Yudar’s mouth was locked in a small, non-descript line. The intensity of his stare was the only evidence of his excitement. Whispered speculations rose through the crowd. Jandu could hear them placing their own wagers on the outcome of the game.

Still, the game went well for Yudar. Darvad’s bets grew in size, but he continued to lose. He scowled when Yudar won his ruby collection, and Firdaus even had the decency to look embarrassed when he rolled a two, forfeiting Darvad’s newest prized possession, a white stallion from the great stables of Chandamar.

Mazar joined the spectators, seating himself to Yudar’s left. Anxiety still lined his face, but as the game progressed he seemed to relax slightly.

Baram laughed and taunted Darvad. Yudar sat stiff and still, but Jandu could see the thrill building in his eyes.

Every time Firdaus blew on the dice, Jandu thought he saw tiny flashes of light in the corner of his eye. Jandu looked around him, but no one else seemed to notice it. Jandu recalled that Firdaus was part-Yashva and his nervous tension grew.

Yudar only lost a few wagers toward the end, but he won the overall game. The spectators cheered him on. Jandu saw courtiers whose own fortunes hung in the balance of this new, precarious friendship watching the game closely. When Darvad asked Yudar for another round, and a chance to win back his horse and his rubies, Yudar agreed.

"Let's stop while we're ahead," Jandu whispered. He did not like Firdaus' flickering fingers, even if they hadn't helped Darvad win.

"We're just getting started," Yudar replied, smiling calmly. He put the dice in Jandu's hand. "May the prophets continue to bring good fortune to your hand!"

This second round, Yudar did worse. He soon lost his prizes from Darvad, as well as his own collection of precious onyx statues of the prophets. He lost their family's cloisonné pottery, their formal saddles, their silver and diamond-studded bridles, their chariots.

Each roll, Yudar did not hesitate to up the stakes. He won back the chariots and Darvad's mace, but he then began to lose again, losing more.

Yudar's expression did not change, whether he won or he lost. His eyes glazed over and he mumbled out stakes in a low voice.

As Darvad continued to win, Firdaus' expression grew euphoric. He grinned with every roll of six, and Darvad and Druv cried out happily, laughing at each new triumph. Only Tarek sat still, his grim face mirroring Jandu's own.

Firdaus rolled a six.

"The dice are loaded," Baram said. He glared at Firdaus.

"Such a claim is an insult to me," Firdaus stated loudly. "But if you feel so, we will switch to yours."

Baram grabbed the dice from Firdaus' hand and slammed them next to Jandu. He pushed Yudar's dice over to Darvad's side of the board.

The room grew hotter in the afternoon sun and the water in their glasses sweated profusely, but Yudar did not stop. By the time another hour had passed, Yudar had spent every penny he had.

Jandu had never seen Yudar like this. The stakes had risen so quickly, so quietly, that everyone seemed taken by surprise. It felt surreal, except that the room was too hot and the smells

of sweating men too strong for it to be a dream. Yudar gambled all the time, but he rarely lost control like this.

"I stake all of my weapons and my armor," Yudar said quietly.

"Maybe you should stop," Baram told him.

Yudar refused. Jandu knew he would not stop because he understood how Yudar thought. His brother honestly believed he could win it all back, that all he needed was one lucky break. One bad throw of Firdaus', and then Yudar could use his skill to gain back his fortunes and more. Jandu suddenly realized that Yudar would not quit until he lost everything.

"We have to stop now." Jandu resolutely placed the dice on the board.

"No." Yudar's eyes never strayed from the board.

"I won't throw the dice anymore," Jandu hissed to Yudar.

"Fine, I'll roll myself." Yudar picked up the dice and cast them out on the board.

Yudar won, and relief swept through the room. Jandu swallowed to try and regain moisture in his throat. His body ached with tension. Darvad conceded all of his armor, and then staked some of Yudar's possessions back to him. When Yudar lost again, his confidence waned slightly. A sheen of sweat formed on Yudar's forehead.

Firdaus rolled a three, the exact number they needed to bring their piece home, and Yudar lost the game. Without pausing to think or have a drink of water, Yudar nodded frantically to Darvad. "Again. Let us play again."

"Are you sure?" Darvad asked. "I already own almost all of your possessions."

"You must at least give me a chance to win them back," Yudar said.

"That is enough," Baram told his brother. He put a large hand on Yudar's shoulder. "You've already gone too far."

"I know what I am doing," Yudar growled.

Baram frowned but relented.

Darvad and Yudar rolled to go first, and Yudar got the lead. But he soon lost the advantage as Firdaus miraculously threw sixes, fives, and the exact points he needed to reach each of the board's houses.

Jandu felt sick to his stomach.

Yudar licked his lips. "Baram's sword," he said quietly. "I stake that."

"No!" Baram shouted. "It's my sword, not yours! Gamble your own!"

"I'm your elder brother," Yudar snapped back, his voice rising. "What you own is mine."

Baram growled. "Yudar, stop now."

"Baram's sword," Yudar said again, nervously tapping the board. He looked anxiously at Firdaus. "Roll the dice."

Firdaus rolled a six.

Mazar moaned loudly and held his face in his hands. Jandu gaped as Baram, fuming, handed his sword to Darvad.

Yudar continued. He staked their gold, their jewels, their lands. He staked the finest breeding stallions and Jandu's horse, Shedav. He staked the crops they tithed, and he staked the last of their chariots. He went farther than he'd ever gone before, gambling away things that belonged to his brothers, his wife.

Finally, he said, "I stake Zandi, Jandu's bow."

Darvad grinned at Tarek.

A chill ran down Jandu's spine. "You cannot stake her," he told Yudar.

Yudar regarded Jandu blankly. "I will win her back for you, I promise."

"She isn't mine anymore. I gave her to Keshan." Jandu felt like throwing up. Did Keshan see this? Did he know this would happen?

Yudar ground his teeth. "Fine then. I stake my half of the kingdom of Marhavad."

"What?" Baram shouted.

“No, you cannot!” Mazar yelled at him. He crouched beside Yudar. “It is not yours to gamble away. It belongs to the people. It was given to you by God!”

“I am offering Darvad a chance to possess the throne in its entirety, the way our father intended it to be. I stake the kingdom.” Yudar sweated profusely, and his eyes darted, but he still spoke calmly.

“No!” Jandu shouted. He couldn’t take it any longer. “Yudar! Don’t be so stupid!”

“How dare you speak to me like that!” Yudar hissed. His tense, calm façade shattered, replaced with rage. “I am your older brother, and your king!”

“Which is why I’m making you stop,” Jandu said. He reached down to grab Yudar’s arm, but Yudar pulled from his grasp. He stood in a flash and leaned in close to Jandu.

“I have it under control,” Yudar whispered angrily into Jandu’s ear. “You have to trust me! I know what I’m doing!”

Jandu stared at him. “You just bet our kingdom!”

“I’m going to get it all back, but I can’t if I stop playing!” Yudar said, resuming his seat. He straightened his sash and stared at Darvad. “What do you stake?”

Darvad raised his eyebrow. “All your own possessions and all of mine.”

“Fine,” Yudar said. “Roll.” He looked so calm, so assured that for a moment Jandu wondered if Yudar possessed some secret—knew some trick that would win everything back.

Firdaus rolled a three. The room gasped collectively. Even Firdaus looked stunned.

Jandu watched, holding his breath.

Yudar rolled the dice.

Two.

Shocked dismay echoed throughout the room. For the first time, Yudar began to look afraid.

Jandu rushed to his brother’s side. “Get up, Yudar.” He pulled on his arm. “Get up.”

Yudar stared ahead of him, as if in shock. "I can't."

"You must!" Jandu cried.

Yudar shook his head. "I have no choice now. I have to keep playing. It's the only way I can get back the kingdom."

Jandu fought back the urge to punch his brother in the face.

"This is madness," Baram cried. He shook Yudar fiercely. "We have lost everything!"

"It is the only way!" Yudar started shaking. He looked at Firdaus and pointed at Firdaus' dice. "Roll again!"

"But you have nothing left to wager," Firdaus said.

"I stake my youngest brother, Jandu."

The room went silent. Darvad stopped smiling. He stared at Yudar in clear horror. Jandu felt his bones go cold, as if he were turning to ice. He couldn't believe Yudar's words. This couldn't be happening.

"Have you gone mad?" Baram shook with rage. "Yudar, think!"

Firdaus smiled. "You are willing to make Jandu a slave?"

Yudar clenched his fists. "Roll the dice!"

Jandu's throat had gone completely dry. He watched Yudar as if in a dream.

Firdaus rattled the dice in his hands, the sound deafening in the utter silence of the room. Then Darvad gently took the dice from Firdaus' hands.

"This stops now," he said.

"Darvad, let him gamble away his own flesh and blood if he wants to," Firdaus said.

"No," Darvad said. "Jandu is my half-brother. I will not see him enslaved."

"But we must continue!" Yudar was panicked now. He stood, his hands shaking. "The game must continue!"

"Yudar," Darvad said calmly. "You just staked your own brother."

"Enough!" Mazar stood. He looked furious. "This is one of the most despicable scenes I have ever had the displeasure

to witness, and I thank God that your father is not alive to have seen it!”

As if suddenly awakened from a dream, Yudar snapped his attention up from the dice. His eyes went to Mazar and then Jandu.

“I didn’t mean...” Yudar began, but didn’t go on. Jandu could only stare at his brother, feeling betrayed. Then as if the shame had not been enough already, tears began to pour down Yudar’s cheeks. He cupped his hand over his eyes. Baram leaned against the back wall, holding Suraya, who appeared to be on the verge of fainting.

“But what is to be done?” Druv asked.

“What can be done?” Firdaus shrugged. “Darvad is king now of all of Marhavad. The Parans have nothing left.”

“I will not allow that!” Mazar’s voice trembled with anger.

“But we cannot allow a man who would gamble his people and land away so carelessly to be king!” Druv gestured emphatically.

“I have a suggestion,” Darvad said. “Perhaps Yudar may look to the example of the Prophet Sadeshar, and win back the favor of God and his people.”

Jandu searched his memory for Prophet Sadeshar. He recalled something about an exile, but could dredge up no details.

Yudar obviously remembered. He went pale. “No! It’s too much!”

“I don’t think so,” Darvad said smoothly. “Considering you’ve just given me control over the entire nation, I think it is very fair to ask you to serve penance for your recklessness. And, once the penance is served, I will grant you back your half of the kingdom, and we will be equals once more. I will not steal from you, Yudar.”

Yudar glanced again to Jandu and all his pride seemed to crumple. He covered his face with his hands again. “Yes! By the grace of God, I will repent! I will follow the Prophet Sadeshar’s actions!”

“Good!” Darvad cried. “You must go into exile and suffer three years of anonymity. No one may help you, or they will face the wrath of God and be banished from the Triya caste. And if you reveal yourselves, your penance begins again.”

Jandu caught a satisfied look between Firdaus and Druv, and realized this was too perfect. They had this planned.

Jandu lunged at Darvad, grabbing him by the neck.

“You fucking prick! You set this up!”

“Guards!” Darvad choked. Suddenly hands were upon Jandu, yanking him backwards. He struggled to free himself. One of the guards punched him in the eye. Jandu’s vision went black. He fell to his knees.

“Don’t make this worse, Jandu!” Baram hissed in his ear. He pulled Jandu back towards the wall.

“The game was rigged!” Jandu cried.

“Enough! It is clear that we have all disgraced God on this day! But none more than Yudar Paran! I agree to the terms of Darvad’s settlement.” Mazar glared at Yudar. “Yudar. You and your family will go into exile. And, like the Prophet Sadeshar in the Book of Taivo, if you survive by the grace of God, you will emerge from your exile sinless, and prove yourself worthy of your noble birth once more.”

“I will forgive everything after the exile,” Darvad said, hand over his heart.

Yudar controlled his weeping long enough to look up and raise his palm to the sky. “I swear, to our beloved God, and on the Book of Taivo, that I accept this exile, and this punishment, for my sins.” He looked to Darvad. “But please, do not punish my family as well.” He knelt at Darvad’s feet. “Let Suraya, Baram, and Jandu stay.”

“You played this game as a family, and you have all lost as a family,” Darvad spat. His voice rose above the crowd. “The Parans must go into exile this very day, or else they forever forfeit their right to this kingdom. They are to take only what they

can carry. And anyone found helping the Parans in their exile will be disgraced and outcaste.”

“So be it,” Mazar said. He shook his head. “Make way for the Parans to leave us.”

The room was a flurry of activity. People poured out of the gaming room to pass on the news.

Baram let go of Jandu. “You better get your things.”

Jandu’s vision was starry. He pushed his way through the crowd, heading for the chamber that was no longer his room.

Take only the things you can carry.

Jandu tried to move, to start packing. But his body would not obey. He was too shocked to do more than sit there on the edge of his bed, wondering how his world had tumbled to such a disastrous end, so quickly.

It seemed only moments later that Baram and Suraya found him. Together they hastily packed their belongings. He worked quickly to keep his mind off how angry he was with Yudar and of how frightened he was of the next three years.

Bailiffs came to escort them out of the palace.

Yudar said nothing as the four of them left the palace in stately procession. They wore white cotton trousers and shirts, the color of pilgrimage. Servants and allies and friends wept openly. They touched their feet and some rushed to offer them small tokens of their support. Jandu walked, eyes forward in a daze.

As they made their way to the city gates, a steady stream of grief-stricken nobles and wealthy Suya followed them. Many wailed as if at a wake. It was the most depressing sound Jandu had ever heard. The city wept for them. But there was nothing to be done. Yudar had sealed their fate.

At the outskirts of the city, a chariot pulled up alongside them. It stopped suddenly and Keshan jumped out. “I came as soon as I heard.” He took one look at Jandu and his face darkened. “Who hit you?” he demanded.

“Did you know this would happen?” Jandu suddenly asked, rounding on Keshan. “Did you see this in your premonition?”

“No.” Keshan’s eyes were wide. “God, no. I knew Zandi was at risk. That is all.”

Jandu felt immensely relieved. At least Keshan hadn’t betrayed him.

Keshan glared at Yudar. “What kind of man are you?”

Yudar still said nothing to anyone. He cried silently, his face bowed. Baram and Suraya walked behind him, Baram’s arm around Suraya as she too cried. Baram whispered to her but Jandu couldn’t hear what he said. Jandu gazed forward, feeling perilously close to tears himself.

They had reached the crossroads. The procession behind them stopped, weeping and waving and throwing palm leaves toward them.

Keshan’s charioteer kept his horses at a steady walk alongside the Parans. Keshan reached into the chariot and pulled out Jandu’s bow.

“Take her back.” He handed Zandi to him.

Jandu swallowed. Two days ago, he was happier than he had ever been in his life. The idea of running away from his family, here and now, suddenly flashed through his mind. He would go and live with Keshan in Tiwari. He could find happiness once more.

But then the stark reality hit him. Keshan, like the other lords of Marhavard, was forbidden to aid any of them. He risked worse than exile—becoming an outcaste if he defied Darvad.

“You should go,” Jandu told him. “You cannot help us. You will be outcaste.”

“I will talk with Darvad.” Keshan said. “I will do all I can, Jandu, I promise.”

Jandu turned and hugged Keshan tightly. He blinked back tears.

“I love you,” he whispered into Keshan’s ear.

“I’ll find a way to help you, I swear to God.” Keshan’s fingers twined in Jandu’s hair. And then he let go. He gave Suraya a brief hug, and Baram as well. Then he stepped back into the chariot. “Chezek, let’s go.”

Keshan’s charioteer cracked the whip, and the horses broke into a startled canter.

Jandu watched Keshan go, and realized Keshan took his heart with him. But there was no turning back.

CHAPTER 19

THE THRONE ROOM GLITTERED WITH GOLD ARMOR AND SHONE with bright silky colors. Sunlight reflected off the dozens of bejeweled diadems, breastplates and gauntlets. Men with sword hilts encrusted with rubies and sapphires sashayed past platters of grapes and bowls of spiced chutney served with toasted breads. The sound of the lords of Marhavad rumbled like the grumbling of hungry bellies, all these Triya pressed together to form one shimmering image of incandescent power, gathered to submit to Darvad's oath-taking ceremony. Keshan felt sick inside, but gave no external evidence. He circuited the room, socializing, scandalizing, his smile bright, his sense of humor wicked. And silently he counted. Which lords and courtiers looked disgruntled, which ones whispered rumors. Some lords were noticeably missing from the ceremony entirely.

Keshan had assumed that Yudar's despicable behavior at the dice game would sway favor towards Darvad. But while most agreed Yudar went too far, others susurrated in discreet groups, questioning how someone as talented at dice as Yudar could have been beaten so soundly. Yudar's continued hold over the lords surprised Keshan.

Keshan flirted with the two unmarried daughters of the lord of Penemar until a trumpet blasted, urging the assembled to take their seats.

Keshan found his seat, next to his brother Iyestar's in the honored front row of the throne room. The throne itself sat high upon a gold-lacquered dais. Beneath it, one hundred velvet seats formed an oval that faced the dais. The seats were divided into four rows in which the guests seated according

to rank, Shentari caste striation infiltrating every part of their culture.

After the dice game, Iyestar was happy to return to Prasta. But a new tension instilled Iyestar's personality, and even now Keshan could feel his brother's anxiety.

"Yudar's allies whisper that Darvad cheated at dice," Keshan said conversationally to his brother. Iyestar stiffened at his side, but said nothing. This told Keshan as much as words would have.

Keshan gave Iyestar a hard look. "Is that the reason we left Prasta?"

"I told you why we left Prasta," Iyestar said.

"Was this a contributing factor in our decision to leave Prasta?" Keshan kept at it.

"I was not at the game," Iyestar said carefully. "And I won't stoop to conjecture. Regardless of what Darvad may have done, it was Yudar who staked his kingdom and his brother. There is no excuse for it."

"No, but it may explain why there is more tension here than I expected." A clamorous chorus of trumpets interrupted their conversation and Darvad strode into the room, trailed by royal staff.

As he took his seat on the throne, Darvad looked splendid. He looked like a king. His expressive face showed kindness, but his hard-cut body illustrated the strength and power of will underlying that kindness. More than ten years had passed since anyone wore the crown, and now it sat resplendent on Darvad's brow. The crown was covered in diamonds, set in delicately engraved gold and silver, with the fur of a leopard forming a soft base.

Darvad brought his palms together in the sign of peace. Keshan and the others immediately fell from their seats and bowed low, heads on the floor, in supplication. When Keshan sat back, he made eye contact with Darvad, who smiled at him. Keshan winked back.

“Great lords of Marhavad,” Darvad began, “today, I ask all of you to take a holy oath to defend this kingdom, and to serve as my loyal vassals. You swear by this oath to abide the laws of Marhavad, and to care for our people. You swear to uphold the law as established by my Royal Judge, and to act in your positions as lords with honor befitting the Triya race.”

Darvad listed the traditional requirements of a lord of Marhavad in serving his royal master, and Keshan scanned the room. He still could not find the lord of Marshav. Lord Kadal was one of Yudar’s most loyal supporters, and his absence was not going unnoticed. Keshan also could not find the lord of Jezza.

“You swear by this oath to fight alongside me should this kingdom face an enemy from the untamed territories.” Darvad read from a scroll. He cleared his throat and looked to the audience. “And you swear by this oath not to aid nor assist the Parans during their three years of exile. Anyone caught helping the Parans during this period will be breaking a holy oath will be branded as a Jegora untouchable and outcaste from our Triya society.”

Keshan tensed. It was the first inclusion of a new oath to the ceremony in decades. Of all the new ideas to bring about, why would Darvad choose this first?

“By this oath, you also swear to reconsider the status of the lower castes in your state, through proper security of their livelihood, safety in their neighborhoods, better sanitation, and better health care.”

It was almost as though Darvad wrote that for Keshan alone, softening the blow of abandoning Jandu with a plea to help thousands of Suya, Chaya and even Jegora.

One by one, the lords of Marhavad stepped forward and bowed before Darvad, taking the oath to serve him in accordance with his specifications. Darvad’s closest allies were the first in line; Tarek Amia, lord of Dragewan; Firdaus Trinat, lord of Chandamar; and Druv Majeo, lord of Pagdesh.

Keshan remained sitting, thinking. He was more than willing to take an oath and break it if need be. That was part of his character. He would not be pinned down by vows. But it bothered him that so many other men who he knew would die before breaking an oath stood and swore their obedience without hesitation.

The lords formed a queue. The room grew noisy once more. Iyestar stood and stretched. “Will you take the oath with me?” he asked Keshan.

“You are the lord of Tiwari, not me,” Keshan said.

“I want Darvad to see your loyalty.”

Keshan joined him in line. He hummed a small tune to himself as they waited. Each lord prostrated himself, took the oath, and was dubbed by Darvad’s sword. The line moved slowly.

“You heard the oaths, didn’t you?” Iyestar whispered.

“I have ears.”

“And the one about helping the Parans.”

Keshan shrugged.

Iyestar stealthily grabbed a hold of Keshan’s arm and squeezed. “You must abide it. You—”

“—Don’t worry. If you need me to take the oath with you, fine, I’ll take the oath. But I will still do what is right, dictated by my heart, not by Darvad or by you or by anyone other than God.”

Iyestar hissed into Keshan’s ear. “This is serious, Keshan. I don’t want you breaking this vow. In any case, I don’t know why you would want to. Yudar gambled his people and his own brothers away.”

“I have no interest in helping Yudar,” Keshan whispered back. “You know very well I’d only help Jandu, and—”

“No.” Iyestar jerked him out of line. Keshan let himself be dragged to the corner of the room. Iyestar glared down at him, his voice low and dangerous. “This is the end of your affair. Do you hear me? You will not interfere.”

“It is not Jandu’s fault that—”

“Listen to me, brother, and listen closely.” Iyestar’s voice barely controlled his anger. “I am taking the King’s oath on behalf of all our people, you included. You will forget the Parans. They will endure their penance and return in three years, and then you can do whatever it is you wish with our cousin. But until then, you are not to see him. You are not to help him. You are not to even think about him, is that understood?”

“Iyestar, I am merely asking you to question—”

“My word is final!” Iyestar hissed through clenched teeth. “By God, do I have to find one of our cousins who has the power to curse to bring you in line? I will do it, I swear. Aunt Umia promised me that she would use her shartic curse on anyone if I asked her to.”

“Will she curse me with the power to read minds?” Keshan asked, hoping levity would raise his brother from his rage.

Iyestar glared. “I’m serious. If I have to make her remove your ability to walk, or talk, or leave my sight, I will do so. Don’t push me.”

Keshan opened his mouth to reply but Iyestar was already gone, bristling as he stomped to join the line of lords once more.

He watched Iyestar bow low before Darvad. Iyestar spoke the oath clearly and carefully, and when it was over, he reached down and touched Darvad’s feet. Darvad leaned down to help Iyestar stand, and then hugged him, his smile wide and honest.

“Iyestar, old friend, it is good to see you again.” Darvad whispered something in Iyestar’s ear, and the two laughed.

By the end of the oath-taking, it was clear which lords had not made it to the ceremony. Lord Kadal of Marshav sent a messenger begging the King’s forgiveness and claiming illness. Lord Sahdin of Jezza sent a similar message.

Once the lords completed the oath-taking, they milled about the room, looking yearningly towards the garden where

a feast awaited them. But Darvad held them back, begging their indulgence. He whispered something to an attendant, and a minute later, Royal Priest Onshu appeared, dressed in flowing violet-colored robes, his knotted hair thick with henna, his face marked with the tattoos of the Draya caste.

“My loyal lords,” Darvad said, holding his hands out. He motioned for everyone to remain. “I would like to bring High Priest Onshu to the dais, along with my dearest friend.” Darvad turned to Tarek and smiled. “Tarek? Come here please.”

Tarek approached the dais with a self-conscious air.

“As God’s representative here in our world,” Darvad said, “I have the power to grant a rebirth to those souls worthy of blessing our noble Triya race. I have asked Draya Onshu to perform the rebirth ceremony for Tarek Amia, lord of Dragewan, to raise him to full Triya status.”

Although many expected this, it still seemed to surprise some in the assembly. Tarek’s eyes looked glassy with emotion as he stepped forward and bowed low before the priest.

Onshu prayed and washed Tarek’s hair with holy water. He then rubbed sandalwood paste on Tarek’s forehead. Tarek held out his hands and the priest lined them with henna markings. And then, in the boldest statement of all, Priest Onshu knelt before Tarek himself, hands on Tarek’s feet.

“I grant you the power to protect my caste, o Triya, and trust you use the gift God has given you wisely.”

Tarek could barely speak. “Thank you, Draya.” The two made the sign of peace to each other, and then Onshu left.

Darvad had tears in his eyes. He and Tarek embraced, and the room broke out into applause. Keshan clapped along with them. He smiled, grateful that Darvad had chosen to do this. Of course he truly hoped that one day such gestures would be meaningless—that Suya or Triya, each man would be treated the same. But for the time being, it was as noble and equal gesture as the current laws allowed, and Keshan was proud of Darvad for it.

Darvad turned to face the lords once more, arm tight around Tarek's shoulder. "Let all men here know that Lord Tarek Amia of Dragewan is fully Triya, to be accorded all rights and honors as such. In addition, I now take this opportunity to appoint Tarek as Royal Judge for this throne, to bring justice to our kingdom, and to oversee my laws in the way only a man as noble and pure of heart as Tarek can."

Keshan felt momentarily winded. Shock flooded him, then anger. The position of Royal Judge was the most powerful in all the nation after the King, and Darvad had promised it to Keshan himself.

Keshan quickly concealed his anger. He clapped with the rest of the lords, who looked as stunned as he. Tarek was still a good choice, Keshan reassured himself. No one would be more sympathetic to the plight of the lower classes than a man who had suffered inequity himself. And Keshan hoped Tarek would be receptive to his ideas.

"I have kept you waiting long enough!" Darvad laughed. "Please join me for a feast to celebrate the occasion!" He gestured towards the garden, and immediately the men pushed their way towards the food and wine.

Keshan took his time leaving the throne room. Outside, the sun was setting, and the wind picked up. Keshan wrapped his harafa tighter around his torso, scanning for Tarek.

Even though it was Darvad's ceremony, Tarek was the man of the hour, and Keshan wasn't alone in his desire to speak with him. He made brief eye contact, and Tarek swiftly disengaged himself and came to Keshan's side.

They exchanged the sign of peace, and Keshan smiled.

"Congratulations, Lord Tarek."

"I hope you are not disappointed," Tarek said.

"Me? Upset?" Keshan smiled. "I'm delighted! I can't think of anyone who will be a fairer judge than you. And if you need any assistance from me, you know I will provide it." Keshan

squeezed Tarek's shoulder. "You have to do all the hard work now—I get to simply pass you my recommendations."

"And I will treat them with the gravity they deserve," Tarek said solemnly.

And unlike any of the other sycophantic court Triya, Keshan believed him.

"We will change this world, Tarek. You, me, and Darvad."

Tarek nodded, and gave Keshan a proud smile.

"I look forward to it."

To be continued in The Archer's Heart Book Two

CHARACTERS

Abiyar Lokesh: Third and youngest son of Indarel Lokesh, Lord of Afadi.

Ajani Alamar: Wife of Keshan Adaru

Anant Sarkumar: Commander in the Dragewan army

Azari: Pseudonym of Suraya Paria while hiding in Afadi

Baldur Tanaraf: Lord of the State of Penemar

Bandruban: Prophet of the Shentari faith

Baram Param: Second son of King Shandarvan by his first wife Kari; brother of Yudar and Jandu; husband of Suraya Paria

Bir Soridashen: Lord of the State of Jagu Mali

Bodan: Pseudonym of Baram Paran while hiding in Afadi

Chezek: Keshan Adaru's charioteer and servant

Darvad Uru: Son of King Shandarvan by his second wife Farashi; half-brother of Yudar, Baram, and Jandu

Druv Majeo: Lord of the State of Pagdesh

Esalas: Pseudonym of Yudar Paran while hiding in Afadi

Eshau: Abiyar Lokesh's weapons master

Farashi Uru: Second wife of King Shandarvan; mother of Darvad Uru

Firdaus Trinat: Lord of the State of Chandamar; brother of Hanu; father of Ishad

Hanu Trinat: Chandamar Ambassador in the State of Afadi; Firdaus's brother

Harami: Prophet of the Shentari faith

Indarel Lokesh: Lord of the State of Afadi; husband of Shali Amain; father of Ramad, Parik, Vaisha, and Abiyar

Inaud Adaru: Uncle of Iyestar and Keshan Adaru

Ishad Trinat: Lord of the State of Chandamar; son of Firdaus

Iyestar Adaru: Lord of the State of Tiwari; brother of Keshan Adaru

Janali: Pseudonym of Jandu Paran while hiding in Afadi

Jandu Paran: Third son of King Shandarvan by his first wife Kari; youngest brother of Yudar and Baram; husband of Suraya Paria

Kadal Kardef: Lord of the State of Marshav

Kari Paran: First wife of King Shandarvan; mother of Yudar, Baram, and Jandu

Keshan Adaru: Younger brother of Iyestar Adaru, Lord of Tiwari; husband of Ajani Alamar; cousin of the Parans

Koraz: Yashva demon of the forest

CHARACTERS

- Laiu:** Tarek Amia's servant
- Lazro Arundan:** Son of Tamarus Arundan; friend of Keshan Adaru
- Linaz:** Mother of Lord Iyestar and Keshan Adaru
- Mazar Hamdi:** Regent of Marhavad; weapons master to the princes of Marhavad
- Mendraz:** King of the Yashvas
- Nadaru Paria:** Lord of the State of Karuna; father of Rishak and Suraya
- Ohendru:** Chaya soldier in the Uru army
- Olan Osasu:** Lord of the State of Bandari
- Onshu:** High priest of Marhavad
- Parik Lokesh:** Second son of Indarel Lokesh, Lord of Afadi
- Ramad Lokesh:** Eldest son of Indarel Lokesh, Lord of Afadi
- Rani:** Servant in the Afadi palace; Janali's roommate
- Rishak Paria:** Son of Nadaru Paria, Lord of Karuna; brother of Suraya; brother-in-law of the Parans
- Sadeshar:** Prophet of the Shentari faith
- Sahdin Ori:** Lord of the State of Jezza
- Satish:** Tarek Amia's charioteer
- Shali Amain:** Wife of Indarel Lokesh, Lord of Afadi; mother of Ramad, Parik, Vaisha and Abiyar
- Shandarvan:** Former King of Marhavad; father of Darvad Uru, and Yudar, Baram, and Jandu Paran
- Suraya Paria:** Daughter of Nadaru Paria, Lord of Karuna; sister of Rishak; wife of Yudar, Baram, and Jandu Paran
- Taivo:** Prophet of the Shentari faith
- Tamarus Arundan:** Chaya spiritual leader and friend of Keshan Adaru
- Tarek Amia:** Lord of the State of Dragewan
- Tarhandi:** Prophet of the Shentari faith
- Umia:** Yashva demon consort of Mendraz, King of the Yashvas; aunt of Iyestar and Keshan Adaru
- Vaisha Lokesh:** Daughter of Indarel, Lord of Afadi
- Warash:** Chaya soldier in the Uru army
- Yudar Paran:** First son of King Shandarvan by his first wife Kari; brother of Jandu and Baram; husband of Suraya Paria; Royal Judge
- Zandi:** Yashva demon and Jandu's bow

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- Adri Mountain:** Mountain in Pagdesh; location of holy retreat
- Ajadusharta:** Magical weapon; repels other weapons
- Alazsharta:** Magical weapon; knocks enemy unconscious
- Ashari Forest:** Forest outside Prasta; home to Yashva demon Koraz
- Barunazsharta:** Magical weapon; brilliant light
- Chaya:** Unskilled labor and servant caste of Marhavad; lowest caste
- Dejaru:** Long piece of cloth worn by men, either secured under a belt and sash and made into loose trousers, or tucked loosely and left long like a sarong
- Draya:** Priestly caste of Marhavad; second-highest caste
- Fazsharta:** Magical weapon; arrow with endless range
- Hafedsharta:** Magical weapon; freezes opponent
- Harafa:** Long piece of cloth worn either as a scarf or wrapped across the upper torso
- 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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