



Twelve Kings in Sharakhai (Song of Shattered Sands)

By Bradley P. Beaulieu

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The Song of the Shattered Sands: Book One

Sharakhai, the great city of the desert, center of commerce and culture, has been ruled from time immemorial by twelve kings -- cruel, ruthless, powerful, and immortal. With their army of Silver Spears, their elite company of Blade Maidens and their holy defenders, the terrifying asirim, the Kings uphold their positions as undisputed, invincible lords of the desert. There is no hope of freedom for any under their rule.

Or so it seems, until Çeda, a brave young woman from the west end slums, defies the Kings' laws by going outside on the holy night of Beht Zha'ir. What she learns that night sets her on a path that winds through both the terrible truths of the Kings' mysterious history and the hidden riddles of her own heritage. Together, these secrets could finally break the iron grip of the Kings' power...if the nigh-omnipotent Kings don't find her first.

From the Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Twelve Kings in Sharakhai*:

Best Book of 2015 by Amazon | Barnes & Noble | BuzzFeed

“Çeda and Emre share a relationship seldom explored in fantasy, one that will be tried to the utmost as similar ideals provoke them to explore different paths. Wise readers will hop on this train now, as the **journey promises to be breathtaking.**”

—Robin Hobb, bestselling author of *Fool’s Assassin*

“I am impressed.... An exceedingly **inventive story in a lushly realized dark setting** that is not your uncle’s Medieval Europe. I’ll be looking forward to the next installment.”

—Glen Cook, author of *The Black Company*

"Fantasy and horror, catacombs and sarcophagi, resurrections and revelations: the book has them all, and Beaulieu wraps it up in a package that's **as graceful and contemplative as it is action-packed and pulse-pounding.**" —NPR

"Beaulieu's **intricate world-building and complex characters** are quickly becoming the hallmarks of his writing, and if this opening volume is any indication, [this series] will be one of the next great fantasy epics."

—B&N SF&F Blog

“Beaulieu has crafted **a rich, fascinating world**, filled it with compelling characters, and blended them into an epic tale that grabbed my attention on the first page and refused to let go. I look forward to more stories of Sharakhai.”

—D.B. Jackson, author of the *Thieftaker Chronicles*

“**Sumptuous and incredibly entertaining**, Beaulieu has created memorable characters in a richly imagined world.”

—Michael J. Sullivan, author of *The Riyria Chronicles*

“Beaulieu’s new fantasy epic is filled with **memorable characters, enticing mysteries, and a world so rich in sensory detail** that you can feel the desert breeze in your hair as you read.”

—C.S. Friedman, author of *Dreamwalker*

“A memorable heroine, a **poetically told tale of revenge**, and superb worldbuilding make *Twelve Kings in Sharakhai* a splendid read.”

—John Marco, author of *The Eyes of God*

“*Twelve Kings in Sharakhai* isn’t the same as the last epic fantasy you read. Like the desert sands of Sharakhai, this first volume of Beaulieu’s new series is a constantly shifting narrative of betrayal and friendship, loyalty and vengeance. Leave the farm boys to their chickens and the scullions to their pots, because Çeda’s bringing a knife to this fight. It’s **vivid and diverse, full of complex relationships, eye-opening magic, and world building** for this new age of fantasy that’s broken out of its medieval shackles.”

—Aidan Moher, A Dribble of Ink

“A lavish epic featuring gods, gangs, gladiators and everything in-between. With its deliciously original magic system, vast new world, reckless heroine and sinister array of ageless villains, this is **a must for fans of Brandon Sanderson.**”

—Jared Shurin, Pornokitsch

“An excellent example of what a fantasy author can achieve when he has a talent for storytelling and has courage to add originality to the story.... The story is **full of depth, fantastic scenes, and intriguing characters....** *Twelve Kings in Sharakhai* may well be the best epic fantasy novel of the year.”

—Rising Shadow

About the Author

Bradley P. Beaulieu fell in love with fantasy from the moment he began reading *The Hobbit* in third grade. While Bradley earned a degree in computer science and engineering and worked in the information technology field for years, he could never quite shake his desire to explore other worlds. He began writing his first fantasy novel in college. It was a book he later trunked, but it was a start, a thing that proved how much he enjoyed the creation of stories. It made him want to write more. He went on to write The Lays of Anuskaya series as well as The Song of Shattered Sands series. He has published work in the *Realms of Fantasy Magazine*, Orson Scott Card’s *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, *Writers of the Future 20*, and several anthologies. He has won the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Award and earned a Gemmell Morningstar Award nomination. Learn more about Bradley by visiting his website, quillings.com, or on Twitter at [@bbeaulieu](https://twitter.com/bbeaulieu).

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IN A SMALL ROOM beneath the largest of Sharakhai’s fighting pits, Çeda sat on a wooden bench, tightening her fingerless gloves. The room was cool, even chill compared to the ever-present heat of the city. Painted ceramic tiles lined the walls. A mismatched jumble of wooden benches and shelves that had clearly seen decades of abuse made it feel well loved if not well cared for. Were Çeda any other dirt dog, she would have sat in one of the rooms on the far side of the pits, the ones that hosted dozens of men and women. But Çeda was given special dispensation, and had been since winning her first bout at the age of fourteen.

By the gods, five years already.

She tightened her hands into fists, enjoying the creak of the leather, the feel of the chain mail wrapped around the backs of her hands and knuckles. She checked the straps of her armor. Her greaves, her bracers, her heavy battle skirt. And finally her breastplate. All of them had once been dyed white—the color of a wolf’s bared teeth—but now the armor was so well used that much of the leather’s natural brown shone through. *Well and good*, Çeda thought. It felt used. Lived in. Kissed by battle. Exactly the way she liked it.

She picked up her bright steel helm and set it on her lap. She stared into the iron mask fixed across the front—a mask of a woman’s face, cold and expressionless in the face of battle. Affixed to the top of the helm was a wolf’s pelt, teeth bared, muzzle resting along the crown.

Echoing down the corridor came a voice that sounded old and hoary, a mountain come to life. “They’re

ready.” It was Pelam.

Çeda glanced toward the arched doorway with the blood-red curtains strung across it. “Coming,” she said, then returned her attention to the helm. She ran her fingers over the many nicks in the metal, over the mask’s empty eyes—

Tulathan grant me foresight.

—stroked the rough fur of the wolf’s pelt—

Thaash guide my sword.

—then pulled the helm over her braided black hair and strapped it tightly on.

As the weight of the armor settled over her, she parted the heavy curtains and hiked up the sloping tunnel into the heat of the noontime sun. The walls of the fighting pit towered around her, and above them, arranged in concentric circles, were the seats of the stadium. *It’s going to be a good day for Osman.* Already there were several hundred waiting for the bout to begin.

Roughly half the spectators called the city of Sharakhai home; they knew the pits inside and out, knew the regular dirt dogs as well. The other half were visitors to the desert’s amber jewel. They’d come to trade or find fortune in a city that offered greater opportunities than they’d had back home. It rankled that so many came here, to Çeda’s home, and lived off it like fleas on a dog. Though she could hardly complain—

A boy in a teal kaftan pointed to Çeda wildly and called, “The White Wolf! The Wolf has come to fight!” and the crowd rose to their feet as one, craning their necks to see.

—the pits paid well enough.

A ragged cheer went up as she strode to the center of the pit and joined the circle of eleven other fighters. The money men in the stands began calling out odds for the White Wolf. She hadn’t even been chosen to fight yet, so no one would know who her opponent would be, but many still flocked to be the first to wager their coin on her.

The other dirt dogs watched Çeda warily. Some knew her, but just like those in the audience, many of these fighters had come from distant kingdoms to try their hand against the best fighters in Sharakhai. Three women stood among those gathered—two well muscled, the third an absolute brute; she outweighed Çeda by three stone at least. The rest were men, some brawny, others lithe. One, however, was a tower of a man wearing a beaten leather breastplate and a conical helm with chain mail that lapped against his broad shoulders. Haluk. He stood a full head and a half taller than Çeda and stared at her like an ox readying a charge.

In response, Çeda strode toward him and pressed her thumb to an exposed edge on the back of her mailed gloves. She pressed hard enough to pierce skin, to draw blood. Haluk stared at her with confusion, then a wicked sort of glee, as Çeda stopped in front of him and pressed her bloody thumb to the center of his leather breastplate.

The crowd roared.

A new flurry of betting rose, while the rest of the audience jockeyed for position against the rim of the pit.

Çeda had just marked Haluk for her own, an ancient gesture that not all dirt dogs would respect, but these

would, she reckoned. None of them would wish to fight Haluk, not in their first bout of the day. When Çeda turned away and returned to her place in the circle, all but ignoring Haluk, the naked anger on his face was slowly replaced with a look of cool assessment. *Good*, Çeda thought. He'd taken the bait and would surely choose her if she didn't choose him first.

When some but not all of the betting flurry had died down, Pelam stepped out from another darkened tunnel. The calls of betting rose to a tumult as the audience saw the first bout was ready to begin.

Pelam wore a jeweled vest, a brown kufi, and a red kaftan that was not only fashionable but fine, save for its hem, which was hopelessly dusty from its days sweeping the pit floors. In one of Pelam's skeletal hands he held a woven basket. As the fighters parted for him, he stepped to the rough center of their circle and flipped the basket lid open. After one last check around him to ensure all was ready, he shot his hand into basket's confines and lifted a horned viper as long as his lanky legs. The snake wriggled, swelling its hood and hissing, baring its fangs for all to see.

Pelam knew his business, but the snake made Çeda's hackles rise. Bites were rare but not unheard of, especially if one of the fighters was inexperienced and jumped when the snake drew near. Çeda knew enough to remain still, but foreigners didn't always follow Pelam's careful pre-bout instructions, and it wasn't always the person who jumped that the snakes chose to sink their fangs into.

As Pelam held the writhing snake, each of the fighters spread their legs wide until their sandaled or booted feet butted up against each other's. After a glance at each of the fighter's stances, and finding them proper, Pelam dropped the snake and stepped away.

It lay there, coiling itself tightly. The crowd shouted to the baked desert air, their voices rising to a fever pitch as each yelled the name of their chosen fighter. The fighters themselves remained silent. Oddly, the snake slithered toward Pelam for a moment, then seemed to think better of it and turned to glide over the sand to Çeda's left, then turned once more. And slithered straight through Haluk's legs.

Silence followed as a pit boy ran and snatched the viper by its tail, lowering it back into its basket as the snake spun like a woodworker's auger.

Pelam calmly awaited Haluk's choice.

The big man didn't hesitate. He made straight for Çeda and spat on the ground at her feet.

The crowd went wild. "The Oak of the Guard has chosen the White Wolf!"

Oak indeed. Haluk was a captain of the Silver Spears, and a tree of a man, but he was also a particularly *cruel* man, and it was time he learned a lesson.

Like jackals to a kill, the news drew spectators from neighboring pits. The stands were soon brimming with them.

As the rest of the fighters exited the pit, a dozen boys jogged out from the tunnels bearing wooden swords and shields and clubs. Çeda, as the challenged, would normally be allowed to choose weapons first, but she followed ancient custom; she had marked him, and thus *she* was the true challenger, not Haluk, so she bowed her head and waved to the weapons, granting first choice to Haluk. Most would have returned the honor, but Haluk merely grunted and chose one of the few weapons meant for both him and his opponent: the fetters.

The noise of the crowd rose until it was akin to thunder. Some laughed, others clapped. Some few even

stared with naked worry at Çeda, who had clearly just been put at a severe disadvantage by Haluk's choice of weapon.

The fetters was a length of tough, braided leather. It was wrapped tightly around one of each fighter's wrists, keeping them in close proximity and ensuring a brawl.

While glaring intently at Haluk, Çeda held out her left hand, allowing Pelam to slip the end of the fetters around her wrist and tighten it. Pelam did the same to Haluk, then took a small brass gong and mallet from one of the boys.

The pit was cleared so that only Çeda, Haluk, and Pelam remained.

The doors to the tunnels closed.

And then, after a dramatic pause in which Pelam held the gong chest-high between the two fighters, he struck it and stepped away.

There was slack in the fetters, a situation Haluk would quickly attempt to remedy—his best hope, after all, lay in controlling Çeda's movement—but Çeda was ready for it. The moment Haluk lunged in to grab as much of the leather rope as he could, she darted forward, leaping and snapping a kick at his chin. When he retreated, Çeda charged, a move he clearly hadn't been expecting. His eyes widened as Çeda grabbed his clumsily raised arm and sent her fist crashing into his cheek.

She could feel the chain mail dig deep into the fighting gloves she wore, but it was worse for Haluk. He fell unceremoniously onto his rump, his conical helm flying off and thumping onto the dry dirt, kicking up dust as it went.

The crowd stood and howled its delight.

As his helm skidded well out of reach, Haluk rolled backward over his shoulder and came to a stand, so quickly that Çeda had no time to rush forward and end it.

Haluk raised one hand to his cheek, felt the blood from the patterned cuts the mail had left in his skin, then stared at his own hand with a look like he'd disappointed himself. And then his eyes went hard. He'd been pure bluster before, trying to intimidate Çeda, but now he was seething mad.

None so blind as a wrathful man, Çeda thought.

Haluk crouched warily and began wrapping the fetters around his left wrist, over and over, slowly taking up the slack. Çeda retreated and pulled hard on the fetters, putting her entire body into it, making the leather scrape painfully along Haluk's arm. He ignored it and continued to wrap the restraints around his wrist. Çeda yanked on the fetters again, but he blunted the tactic with well-timed grips on the leather, the muscles along his arm rippling and bulging. He grinned, showing two rows of ragged teeth.

Çeda sent several kicks toward his thighs and knees, attacks meant more to test Haluk's reflexes than anything else. Haluk blocked them easily. She was just about to yank on the fetters again when he loosened his grip and rushed her. Çeda stumbled, pretending to lose her balance, and when Haluk came close she dove to her right and swept a leg across his ankles.

He fell in a heap, the breath whooshing from his lungs.

He grabbed for Çeda and managed to snag her ankle, but one swift kick from Çeda's free heel and she was

up and dancing away while Haluk rose slowly to his feet.

The crowd howled again, many of the foreigners joining in, though they had no idea why. The Sharakhani knew, though. They understood why bouts like this were so very rare.

Haluk hadn't been defeated in more than ten years of fighting in the pits. Çeda had rarely lost since her first bout, and she'd lost none in the past three years. Everyone knew how widely the story of this bout would be told, especially if Çeda took him in so cleanly a fashion. Few would dare utter the tale within Haluk's hearing, but the entire city would be alive with it by the end of the day.

And Haluk knew it. He stared into Çeda's eyes with an intensity that reeked of desperation. He would not be so easy to take again.

As the two of them squared off once more, the crowd went completely and eerily silent. The only sound was of Haluk's ragged breathing and Çeda's strong but controlled breaths from within the confines of her helm.

Haluk took one tentative step forward. Çeda stepped away, snatching up some of the slack in the fetters as she went. Haluk did the same until they both held a quarter of the length in reserve, leaving them a scant few strides from one another.

Haluk took two measured steps toward her. He was trying to close the distance, but he was no longer reckless. He was cautious, as a man who'd become a captain of Sharakhai's guard *should* be.

Çeda kicked at his legs again, connecting but doing little damage. That wasn't the point, though. She had to keep him on his guard until she was ready to move in. She snapped another kick and retreated, but she could only go so far. Haluk had drawn up more of the fetters, so Çeda released some of hers. Haluk strode forward, taking up more of the braided rope. Which forced Çeda to release more. Until she had none left.

He drew sharply on it, keeping his center low, his balance steady, and Çeda was drawn forward until she was just out of his striking range.

The crowd began to stamp their feet, the sound of it reverberating in the pit, but otherwise they were silent, rapt.

Haluk pulled again, harder now that they were so close. And that's when Çeda moved.

Using the tension on the fetters to pull herself forward, she launched herself with a leap, straight into his body. In his surprise, Haluk grasped for her neck, but she slipped her forearms inside his and grabbed two fistfuls of his lanky brown hair. She wrapped her legs around his waist, twisted them around his thighs, and locked her feet around his knees, hoping to trip him up and end this once and for all.

He didn't fall, however. He was too big. Too strong. And he did exactly what she would have done. He rose up, preparing to slam her against the ground.

At the high point of his lift, she did the only thing she could: she clung hard to his neck and waist.

When they came down, they came down hard. Pain burst across Çeda's back and rump as Haluk's full weight bore down on her. Through her coughing and the ringing in her ears, she could hear him laughing. "Foolish move, girl."

He tried to lift away, but she'd locked her arms around his neck. Her legs hugged tightly to his waist. He was strong, but he had no leverage to break her grip. Again and again he tried to lift himself away from her to

give himself room to punch, but each time he did, she began slipping her arms around his neck to cut off his blood. He would drop to prevent it, and then they were back, body to body, breath coming hard and fast, the very intimate duel continuing as each struggled for any small amount of leverage.

Once, when he lifted his head too far away, she crashed her forehead against his. The lip of her helm left a long cut against his skin. Blood seeped down his forehead, along his nose. It pattered against her steel mask, filling her nostrils with the smell of it.

Then, in a sudden and furious move, Haluk lifted, slipping a forearm across her throat, managing to pin her down.

Immediately the crowd was up, shouting, raging. But it all became little more than a keen ringing in Çeda's ears. She heard her own heart thrumming. Felt Haluk's arm tighten further.

It was a strong move, a *wise* move under the conditions, but he'd left himself open. She slipped her right hand down along his left arm, near his elbow, where she'd have the most leverage, and pushed. She let out a guttural cry while muscling his arm up, which had the effect of propelling herself down along his body, just enough to slip her head under his armpit and out of the lock.

He tried to slip his arm back under her neck, but before he could, she grabbed the buckles along the far edge of his breastplate and hauled herself away, and now she was halfway to his back. Exactly where she wanted to be.

She reached her left arm—the one tied to the fetters—up and over his head. The rope slipped neatly down along his face and across his neck. Immediately she tightened her grip and drew the fetters back.

Haluk knew what was happening—he tried to throw her off, at least enough to get his fingers beneath the fetters—but her grip was too sure. Still, he was a bull of a man. She grunted while gritting her teeth and arching her back. Her arms strained like cording on a ship's sails.

She thought surely he would have pounded his hand against the ground by now, giving up the match, or fallen unconscious, but he hadn't. He still struggled for air, his breath coming out in a desperate hiss, his mouth frothing from it. And then finally, all at once, his body went slack.

Çeda didn't hear the strike of Pelam's gong, marking the end of the bout.

But the crowd she heard.

Their elation could no longer be contained. They stomped their feet. They shook their fists. "The Wolf has won! The Wolf has won!"

Ignoring them, Çeda pushed Haluk onto his back and straddled his chest. She unwrapped the fetters and saw the blood drain from him, casting his face in a strange, deathly pallor.

His eyes blinked open. He stared into Çeda's eyes with a look of confusion, then took in his surroundings as if he had no idea where he was. The roaring crowd and Çeda's masked face soon registered, though, and a look of deep and inexpressible anger stole over him.

Çeda leaned down until they were chest-to-chest and whispered into his ear. "The next time you take your hands to your daughter, Haluk Emet'ava"—she pressed the thumbnail of her right hand into his side, in the depression between his fourth and fifth ribs—"it will go much worse for you." She leaned closer still and whispered, "The next time, it will be a knife in the dark, not a beating in the light." She rose, her legs still

straddling him, and stared down into his eyes. “Do you understand?”

Haluk blinked. He made no acknowledgment of her demand, but there was shame in his eyes, a shame that spoke the truth of his crimes better than words ever could.

Like a wedge driving ever further into a thick piece of wood, she pressed her thumb deeper. “I would hear your answer.”

He grimaced against the discomfort, licked his lips, and glanced to the cheering crowd. Then he nodded to her. “I understand.”

Çeda nodded back, then stood and stepped away.

Pelam had watched this exchange with a glint in his eye that landed somewhere between curious and concerned, but he made no mention of it. He merely turned and presented Çeda to the crowd with a bow of his head and a flourish of his hand. As some howled and others collected their winnings, Çeda was surprised to see that Osman himself had come to watch—Osman, the owner of these pits, a retired pit fighter himself, the man she’d had to trick to earn her first bout.

How far we’ve come since then.

He stood with the crowd on the topmost row. He was one of the very few—along with Pelam—who knew her true identity. She had no idea how long he’d been watching, but surely he’d caught the end. She couldn’t tell if he was pleased or not. Çeda gave an exaggerated nod to the crowd, but she and Osman both knew it was meant for him.

He nodded back, then tugged his ear, which meant he wished to speak.

To speak, and perhaps more.

A SHORT WHILE LATER, after Çeda had completed her victory circuit of the pit—raising her hands to the cheering crowd—and retreated to the room she’d been given before the bout, Osman came to her.

She heard the two guardsmen intone, “Master Osman,” in unison, and moments later the red curtains parted and he stepped inside the starkly appointed room. She heard the guardsmen shuffle farther down the hall, as they always did when she and Osman met.

She had already pulled her bracers off, but now she was unstrapping her white breastplate.

“Çeda,” Osman said tentatively.

She ignored him, easing off her breastplate and standing, knowing she wore only her white tunic beneath, knowing the sweat on her skin would give Osman easy view of her form beneath. After setting the breastplate on the bench, she unbuckled her battle skirt, slowly collecting the heavy leather garment and setting it on top of the breastplate. She set one sandaled foot on the bench and tugged the tunic higher, exposing her thigh as she worked on the four smaller buckles on her greaves. She did the same with the other, and then with deliberate care cupped one into the other and set them both on top of the battle skirt.

Only then did she turn to Osman, who was standing several paces away, watching with no small amount of interest. He wore fine clothes—red kaftan, rich leather sandals, bracelets of yellow-and-white gold—but the vicious scar that ran across his face, from forehead, across the bridge of his nose, and down his left cheek, spoke of different days.

One of his thick black eyebrows rose as he stared. He seemed to want to smile, but didn't, perhaps waiting to see what she would do next. He was not the sort of man who could walk freely among the richer quarters of Sharakhai, but he was a master just the same. One could see it in how clean he was, how well cut his fingernails, how carefully groomed his short beard. He was a man who had risen from these very pits, but he was a pit fighter no longer.

He was not shy about taking in her form. He never had been. It was one of the reasons she liked him. She had long since tired of quiet, reserved men.

"What did you say to Haluk?" he asked.

She took a half-step toward him, acutely aware of the trail of sweat tickling its way down the small of her back. "My business is my own."

"He's not a man you want as your enemy."

She took another half-step forward. "Then it's good he doesn't know who I am."

"He'll come to me, you know. He'll offer me coin for your true name."

She doubted that. The laws of the pits may be unwritten, but they were ancient, not easily crossed, as she and Osman both knew. "He may," she said, "but you won't sell my name."

"Oh?" The smile that had been hesitant in coming was now in full display. There was no denying he was a handsome man, especially when he smiled at her as he was now. "And why is that?"

"Because if you did—"

She took one last stride. They were close enough now that she could feel the heat coming off him in the coolness of this underground place. She placed her thumbnail between his ribs, exactly as she'd done to Haluk, and pressed. Hard. He didn't flinch, as many men would have, but his breath was coming stronger now, harder.

"—you would seriously regret the decision."

His smile faded until it was a tarnished reminder of what it had been. "Is that so?"

"Never doubt it."

His nostrils flared as she released the pressure and allowed her callused fingers to trail down his chest. To his waist. To his hip. And then she let her hand fall free. She stood still, sharing a jackal smile with him, but nothing else.

For a time it appeared he would go no further, but then he stepped in and slipped his arm around her waist. Pulled her in tight and bowed his head to meet hers. His lips were warm as he kissed her. They pressed their bodies together, his strong hands running over her back, down her neck, pulling her in so tight it neared pain. Which she minded not at all.

She pulled him to the tiled floor, dragged his tunic up and over his well-proportioned frame. He gripped her thighs with strong hands and ran his fingertips roughly down her stomach as she pulled her sweaty tunic up over her head and threw it into the corner. A heavy grunt escaped him as she rose up, slipped him inside her, and dropped roughly onto his hips. She moved slowly at first, while his breathing became more and more labored, but then she moved with a growing urgency, rising and falling faster and faster.

He tried to pull her down toward him that their skin might touch, but she slapped his hands away. He tried again, and she pinned his wrists down, allowed her breasts to trail across his chest, ran her nipples slowly around his. She licked the scars that riddled his chest and arms and shoulders. She scratched his skin. Raked her fingers down toward the tuft of dark hair around his manhood.

She rode him hard, and for a moment, as she crested, all the aches and pains in her body became little more than faint memories.

As she lowered from her heights, she allowed herself to fall against his chest. Osman gripped a fistful of her hair and thrust into her as she bit his neck. She felt him release as well, felt his throbbing slowly ebb, felt his seed slick her thighs. And for a time the two of them lay still, their breathing falling into a steadily slowing rhythm that felt like the setting of the sun and the quieting of life over the desert.

When at last she lifted off his chest, she did not kiss him. She whispered no sweet words in his ear. She merely admired the landscape of his scars, wondering at the stories they told. She had often thought that this was as much a reason to be attracted to him as any other. *Here is a man skilled in the arts of combat*, she remembered thinking, *who knows how to debilitate, to harm, to kill. And if he knows those things, what might he know of the body's more subtle ways?*

She hadn't been wrong. He was as skilled as anyone she'd bedded—which admittedly hadn't been many. Although the emotions between them had never included love. At least not for her.

As Çeda ran her fingers lightly down his stomach, outlining the broadest of his scars, her closeness to him—as it always did sooner or later—became uncomfortable. She tried to hide it, but he noticed, and he'd always been a proud man, even if he wasn't proud enough to leave her once and for all.

"I've a task for you, Çeda," he said while shifting his hips, a cue for her to rise.

She stayed, provoking him. "I'm no servant to do your bidding, old man."

"So you keep telling me." He arched his neck, closed his eyes in pleasure as she squeezed him, but then, almost regretfully, his tone became serious. "It's a simple shade. Nothing more."

Çeda rose and from a shelf in the corner took a folded cotton rag. "If it were simple, you wouldn't be asking me." She wet the cloth in an urn in the corner and ran it over her body, collecting his seed from her thighs, then folding it and carefully washing away the sweat and dirt and blood. For a moment, just a moment, she was glad of the handful of years she'd spent with Dardzada. He'd been a hard foster parent—and there were days under his care that made her want to beat him as mercilessly as she beat those in the pits—but there was no doubt he had taught her much, not the least of which was the herbs a woman might steep in boiling water to deaden a man's seed.

Yerinde forbid, she thought.

Osman sat up. "The shade is simple, but it's important it be done right."

“You’re not listening.” After drying herself, she pulled on her black thawb, then pulled the matching niqab over her head. “Send Tariq if you need it so badly.”

Osman laughed. “Were it a brawl in a southern quarter tavern, I’d send Tariq, but not for this.”

“Why not?” Çeda adjusted her veil, the beaten brass coins worked into it jingling as she did so. “Tariq can run a package as well as I.”

He stood now and pulled his tunic back on. “This package needs to be run one week from now. At sunset.”

Çeda paused for a moment, then continued her final adjustments to her niqab as if his words meant nothing. “One week from now is Beht Zha’ir.”

Beht Zha’ir was a holy night. It came every six weeks—the night the twin moons, Tulathan and her sister, Rhia, rose together and lit the desert floor. It was the night the asirim roamed the streets searching for tributes and the Reaping King went with them. For Osman to ask her to shade a package—to do *anything* on that night—was bold, and for a moment she’d mistaken his desperation for a deeper understanding of her *other* pursuits.

“Does that mean you won’t do it?” Osman asked, a bit too casually.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You’ll need to speak more plainly, Çeda. My mind isn’t what it used to be.”

“I’ll run your package.”

“There will be two.”

This was a message to be delivered in two parts, then; the key to decipher the message would be in one package, while the message itself would be contained in another. And since he hadn’t mentioned anyone else so far, he was letting her choose the second messenger.

“I’ll bring Emre,” she said.

He considered this, nodded, and then reached into the leather pouch at his belt, pulling out a cinched cloth purse. “Your winnings,” he said, casting it to her with a speed that made it clear he was testing her.

Quick as a hummingbird, she snatched it from the air. She weighed the purse in her hand.

“Plus coin for the shade,” he said before she could say anything.

“Paying up front now, are we?”

“Half. You’ll come by my estate for the rest.” He said it gruffly, like an order, but there was a clear request in the way his eyes took her in, a subtle plea for her to come, perhaps spend the night.

After wrapping her gear in a tight bundle and slinging it over her shoulder, she strode toward the doorway with a distinct limp, wrapping the persona she used outside the pits around her like an old and favored shawl. To most she was simply a swordmistress, a woman who was skilled but for the injury to her knee, who could still show the children of rich merchants how to swing a sword or raise a shield. It suited her well enough. She enjoyed teaching, and it gave her all the excuse she needed to be seen near and within the pits.

She stopped when she came abreast of Osman. “Your estate.”

He nodded.

“We’ll see,” she said, and then walked out and into the scalding city streets.

THE NOISE OF THE SPICE MARKET swept over Çeda like a sudden summer sandstorm. It was raucous and biting after the quiet of the streets near her home. Hundreds of stalls occupied the great old building—one of the oldest in Sharakhai—a ramshackle mix of patchwork colors, milling patrons, and heated barter. Çeda had taken her armor to the rooms she shared with Emre, her oldest and closest friend, but even unburdened she retained her limp as she moved through the crowd, many of the stall owners sending her a nod or a smile as they filled small burlap bags with peppercorn or star anise or coarsely ground salt.

A girl with curly brown hair and bright brown eyes broke away from a group of children who were hanging about near the entrance. Çeda had known Mala for years, paid her from time to time for simple things, to act as a lookout, to collect a bit of information, things a girl Mala’s age could do where a grown woman could not. It was surprising how often children were overlooked in a city that at times seemed overrun with them.

“Watch,” Mala said, spinning and drawing a beaten old stick she used as a sword, then bringing it down across her body in a clean, sharp block. It was a move she’d failed to master for weeks now. If Çeda was truthful, it was still a bit clumsy, but it would come.

“Better,” Çeda said, mussing her hair.

Mala frowned and skipped away, pulling her hair back while moving into a mock-serious pose, sword raised. Her sister Jein came soon after, and then more of their band, all of whom Çeda knew. They bore stick swords, and one even a proper shinai. To a child, they raised their swords as Mala was doing, hoping for a lesson. It wasn’t something she’d ever reveal to her students at the pits, but she taught the children of Roseridge for free when she had the time. The trouble was, she didn’t always *have* the time, and Mala and her pack could be an insistent bunch.

“Not now,” she told them, slipping around one of the market’s stout mudbrick columns and into the shade of the building proper. “Not now.” They were disappointed, but it couldn’t be helped. Çeda had business. “Tomorrow,” she told them. “Tomorrow we’ll dance.” And then she was in among the throngs, working her way deeper into the market.

“Try, try,” old Seyhan called as Çeda neared the four beaten tables that marked his territory within this mad place. He was handing out pieces of biscuit made by Tehla the baker. “Try, try,” he called again, this time in Kundhunese to a tall, ebony-skinned woman and her servant, then once more in Mirean to a jowled man with long, thin mustaches.

Çeda snatched a piece as she came close, stuffing it in her mouth before Seyhan could frown at her.

“For *customers*,” Seyhan said, shoos her away.

The bright flavor of cardamom and caramelized onion and lemon zest filled her, making her mouth water so much it pained her jaw for a moment. “I *am* a customer,” she shot back.

“No, no, no,” he replied, wagging his finger first at her, then at Emre, who stood a few paces away, untying a fresh bag of bright red paprika. “You get everything you need from *his* thieving hands. Don’t tell me you don’t!”

He was only joking. He let Emre take whatever spices he wanted; oils, too. It was the one thing that saved their dishes from dropping below mere mediocrity and heading straight for inedibility. Seyhan was generous enough with his coin, too—he gave Emre a few extra sylval when the stall had bustling days like today—and yet Çeda was still surprised Emre had stuck with Seyhan for as long as he had. He was always flitting from this job to that. They always became *tiresome—I want something that interests me, Çeda, else why bother?*—as if jobs were nothing more than dalliances. But he seemed to genuinely like old Seyhan, and for that Çeda was glad.

She was saved from replying to Seyhan’s accusations when a tall man with brown, leathery skin stepped close and took a piece of biscuit. After placing it carefully in his mouth and chewing as if his very life depended on the weighing of the spices contained within, the two of them began talking in Kundhunes, and Çeda moved farther along the tables, which had dozens of open bags of spice. *So many, from so many different places.* If the four kingdoms surrounding Sharakhai were a great wheel—Mirea, Qaimir, Malasan, and the Thousand Territories of Kundhun—then Sharakhai was surely its hub, and the spice market reflected this: a veritable palette of cultures from a thousand leagues in any direction.

Çeda was about to call out to Emre, who still hadn’t noticed her, when two young women broke away from the crowd and approached him together. They were pretty Mirean girls. Creamy skin and exotic eyes and lustrous black hair. Sisters, perhaps, and clearly from a wealthy family—their rich silk dresses and bright jade jewelry spoke clearly of that.

“You came back!” Emre said, standing up straight and putting on the smile he often gave to women he’d only just met. He apparently thought it charming. His black beard was braided and hung down his bare chest, almost to the top of the wide tooled leather belt he wore, the one that matched the bracers on his muscled forearms. One of the girls smiled, averting her gaze, but the other stepped close, clutching a small silk purse in both hands.

She said something too soft for Çeda to hear, and then Emre bowed his head to her and filled two bags with practiced ease, one with pink desert salt, the other with some bright orange spice Çeda had never seen before. Emre chatted with them as he worked, then held the bags behind the table while prolonging the conversation. As Çeda watched him, she wondered, not for the first time, why Emre never gave *her* that smile. He might’ve done so a few times before they’d lain together, but ever since, he’d treated her differently. He’d joke with her when they were around others, play like they were a couple when it suited him, but when they were alone, he never crossed that line.

The woman with the purse tittered. The other watched in silence with wide eyes, cheeks reddening.

Çeda should probably just leave him alone. She didn’t really care who he shared his bed with—she didn’t—but there was something about these women, sailing in from some distant port, wandering about the Amber City as if it were some long-neglected holding they’d finally deigned to visit. It chafed.

“Four months?” she said, loudly enough to be heard over the din of the market. She ignored the women as she stepped opposite Emre. “Four *months*, and now I find you *here*?”

The Mirean girls looked confusedly between Çeda and Emre.

Emre, however, glowered at her. He was trying to hide his annoyance and hoped he still had a chance to a

chance to bed one of these women tonight. He might even have fancies of both at once. "I sent a note," he said as nonchalantly as he could manage. "Did the boy not find you? I said I'd fix whatever damage my mule did to your lord's dray."

As pathetic as his initial parry was, she nearly laughed. She enjoyed playing this kind of game with him, though they seemed to be playing them less often of late. "You did, but there's more to atone for than a split wagon wheel." She put her hand on her belly, cupping it in a gesture she'd seen so many women with child perform. "You did, after all, avail yourself of my lord's hospitality for some time. And there are the dead goats to consider."

The girls stared openly at each other now, edging backward, their eyebrows pinching, which was the most emotion that two highborn women from the northern kingdom were likely to share. Emre, meanwhile, burst into a fit of laughter. As the girls bowed their pretty heads and disappeared into the throng, Emre stared at Çeda. "Goats?"

"Dozens, dead by your hand!"

"Well, I'm sure they deserved it."

"Agreed," she replied. "They should mind whom they butt."

He gave a barking laugh. Seyhan, meanwhile, was speaking with a woman in a once-lavish abaya, one of his most loyal customers, a master chef for one of Blackfire Gate's richest lords. He frowned deeply at Çeda and Emre. "Go!" he said, shooing them away with fluttering hands. "You're worse than thieves, the both of you!"

As he turned back to the chef, Emre rolled his eyes and crawled under the stall. "He's got a shine for that one," Emre said, eyeing the old, bent-backed spice merchant.

"Seyhan?" Çeda asked, stifling a laugh. "Well, good for him!"

Emre began weaving through the crowd toward the scent merchants' old fort. "You don't know the half of it." Already the heavy breeze carried the scents of rose and jasmine and sandalwood, and more filled the air the farther they walked. "I defy you to name a man in Sharakhai who's more deserving of a bit of time stuffing the pigeon."

She slapped his arm. "You're disgusting." She glanced back at Seyhan, who was smiling at the woman again. "Could you imagine them, though? They're likely to have the Silver Spears at their door."

"Yeah, wondering who's being murdered."

A long laugh burst from Çeda, calling the attention of the crowd. When the patrons had returned to the business of barter and trade, Emre spoke in a low voice, only for her. "And the White Wolf, was she victorious?"

Her reply was every bit as prudent as his. "She did well enough from what I hear."

The relief in his expression was touching. "That's good," he said. "Is there another reason you came, then, other than to chase away the fine, smooth-skinned women of Mirea, that is?"

"Those thinly veiled harlots *needed* chasing," she shot back, "and can't I come just to see where your fortunes have led you this week?"

He slapped a hand over his heart. “You wound me! I’ve been at the stall for *ages*.”

“Three months . . .”

“As I said, ages!”

Part of her wanted to laugh, but there was something about the fight with Haluk today—her near loss, if she was being honest—that was making her strangely sentimental. “We hardly see each other anymore.”

After sidestepping a shoeless, sprinting gutter wren—a girl who reminded Çeda of running through the bazaar in the same pell-mell fashion—Emre bowed his head, allowing her the point. “Ships passing in a sandstorm.”

She shrugged. She could hardly throw stones given how little time she spent in their shared home these days. “We should amend that.”

He nodded, glancing back toward Seyhan’s stall, which was all but swallowed by the crowd. “True, we should, but—”

“The master of the pits came to me today,” Çeda interrupted, realizing she should wait until they had more privacy but wanting to know Emre’s answer before she left the market.

“Oh?” Emre said.

“There’s a bit of a run needed.”

“A run?”

She leaned closer and spoke softly. “Through the shadows.”

One eyebrow rose. “When?”

“Seven days,” she said pointedly.

“Seven days,” he repeated, glancing over Çeda’s shoulder to the passing crowd. He leaned in too. “On Beht Zha’ir?”

She nodded, almost imperceptibly.

His eyes scanned the crowd as though he expected the Silver Spears to come rushing through the spice market to take them to Tauriyat, but the look soon faded and he met Çeda’s eyes with a strange mixture of boyish excitement and poorly hidden fear. “It’s been a while, Çeda.”

“Like I said, we’ve seen too little of one another lately.”

Emre leaned in closer, and said most earnestly, “Tell me true, will there be goats involved?”

She laughed. “No goats, gods willing.”

“More’s the pity.” Once more, he bowed his head with a flourish. “And yet, despite your poor standing, I place my heart in your hands.”

They passed through a stone archway and into the ruins of an old fort that had long since surrendered to the

ever-growing market. The sun was high and shone straight down, making the perfume stalls seem to glow. All around, men and women stood beside bright glass globes filled with scented water. The bare stone walls of the fort's interior were stark, bordering on grim, but it didn't seem to hurt business any. It was the place one went to find the most wondrous scents in all the Five Kingdoms. Many high lords and ladies could be found here, running clear glass stoppers over their wrists, marveling at the scents applied. Young boys and girls wandered among the crowd, descending quickly upon newcomers. Each held dozens of strips of thin wood.

"Sir," they beckoned Emre, "the scent of cypress or fir or clove. What better to bring joy to the lovely dove upon your arm?"

"Dear lady," they called to Çeda, "amber for a woman as beautiful as those freshly polished stones. Or lavender. Or lemon balm. See for yourself; my master's scents are the finest in all the Great Shangazi."

Çeda beckoned one of them closer, a girl with jet black hair and intense eyes the color of unpolished jade. "Come, then, come." It had been years since she'd bought a vial for herself, and she had more than a bit of change filling her purse.

The girl ran up with a smile of practiced joy. "Now that I see you close, my lady, vetiver it must be, a thing to make you smile on a day filled with clouds, a thing to brighten—"

Çeda laughed, waving her hands to indicate she was willing to try it and the girl could stop laying it on so thick. But before she could speak, a bustle arose from the far end of the enclosed fort, where several merchants stood near an expensively dressed man. The patron was not only tall, but imposing, and he wore bright red robes cut in the newest Malasani style—loose along the sleeves and tight down the body. He might be a lord of Malasan, or a caravan master, perhaps even a prince. Two women, young enough that they might have been his daughters, trailed behind him, chatting gaily with one another.

Çeda saw through them immediately.

They were careful, but she saw them scanning the space, measuring those closest before moving on to those farther away. They looked for weapons first, and then watched the faces of those gathered, as if memorizing what they saw. When the one in a flowing yellow dress spotted Çeda, she stopped for a moment. The two of them locked eyes, and Çeda suddenly found her heart beating like it did before a bout in the pits.

"What is it?" Emre asked.

Çeda shook her head and looked away lest the woman sense something amiss.

Emre's words died on his lips. He'd sensed it as well now—a strangeness, something surely yet inexplicably *wrong*.

Before Çeda could move, the sound of wooden wheels clattering over stone came from behind. Someone shouted, though what was said was lost in a terrible clatter of heavy wood as it rattled against the stones of the old fort. Çeda turned. The opening before her, the one she and Emre had used to enter the fort, had just been cut off by some massive contraption of stacked logs. The high sound of hammers pounding—metal on metal—came from somewhere beyond it.

Dust sifted down from above, rays of sunlight cutting through it. Conversation vanished like crows before a storm. Many simply stared at the barrier with looks of confusion or worry. But not the two women. One of them remained near her lord. The other ran for the only other passageway out of the fort, but before she'd

taken two steps toward it, another massive set of timbers rolled into place, wedging itself almost perfectly into the opening. Again the sound of hammers pounding came from the opposite side.

The woman—how she'd hidden it from sight Çeda had no clue—was suddenly holding a dark sword in her hand, a shamshir made of nearly black metal. An ebon blade; a weapon only the Blade Maidens bore. The man must be important indeed to demand a pair of Maidens as escorts.

A shadow cast along the stones near Çeda's feet drew her attention upward. Far above, along the ramparts, were the sun-backed silhouettes of four men wearing black turbans and veils across their faces. They were muscling something up and over the edge of the stone walls.

Bladders. Massive, unwieldy, leather bladders, tipping end over end, falling from the ramparts down toward the crowd. They burst against the stones, splashing something clear and viscous over half the gathered crowd. The smell of lamp oil filled the enclosed space, choking the nose and throat and drowning out all others scents, even the perfume. The men had clearly been targeting the lord and the Blade Maidens; Çeda and Emre were far enough back to avoid being doused by the lamp oil.

Spice merchants, patrons, and hawkers alike screamed and shouted, eyes wide, staring around as if demons were about to spring forth from the stones. "Stand away!" someone called. "Stand away!" Though where one might do so, Çeda had no idea.

It had only begun to register who the men above were and what they meant to do when one of the Maidens took two long strides toward the far wall, ebon sword in hand. She launched herself from one perfume stall, which rattled as she leapt toward an exposed beam, a remnant of the floor that had once stood above them. Landing lightly on the beam, she used her momentum to launch herself like a sling stone. She flew toward a bare lip of stone and again propelled herself, leaping higher and higher and higher.

When her momentum slowed at last, she took one final leap. Arcing her body like a drawn bow, she drew a black-as-night dagger from somewhere in her right sleeve and drove it deep between two stones an arm's reach short of the lip above. A ringing sound like shearing metal resonated throughout the old fort.

By the gods, nearly forty feet in the blink of an eye, and she'd cleverly chosen a place where there was a wide gap between the veiled men. Two of them moved toward her while the remaining pair dropped one more ungainly bladder, again targeting the far left corner of the fort, where the second Maiden was using the tips of her fingers to test the stone. The bladder burst off target, but the Maiden ignored it in any case. She seemed to have found what she was looking for, for she stood and stared at the space her fingertips had just brushed. Then she took one stride forward, spun, and sent a vicious back kick against the stone, releasing a powerful shout, a *kiai*, that Çeda felt in her chest.

The wall shuddered, and a bit of stone crumbled away from the point of impact but didn't otherwise seem affected. She kicked again and again, each as powerful as the last, the stone flaking further and further. With each kick came another *kiai* that resonated somewhere deep inside Çeda.

Above, the veiled forms had moved to engage the suspended Blade Maiden, who was holding herself with one hand against the lip of the stone wall, legs spread wide, the sides of her feet somehow gaining purchase. The men wielded curving shamshirs against her, but the Maiden's ebon blade met their blows with frightening ease.

The gathered merchants and patrons were only now starting to understand what was happening. Children cried in fear, flocking toward their parents like goslings. A group of men were heaving their weight against the timbers in an attempt to push their way out, to no avail. A woman had taken out a studded cudgel, but

seemed to have no idea what to do with it.

Amidst all the madness, the lord the Maidens protected stood with such tranquility it made Çeda go cold. A man from the eastern end of the city might demand an escort of two Maidens, but how rare for one of those lordlings to be so calm. The man met Çeda's eyes, perhaps sensing her stare.

That was when Çeda realized how wrong she'd been. He was not merely calm, but serene, utterly sure he was in no danger whatsoever.

This man was no visiting lord. He was one of the Twelve Kings.

Not ten paces from Çeda, in the scurry and scuttle of the spice market, a King of Sharakhai stood, disguising himself as some wealthy lord, though why he would do such a thing she had no idea.

The King looked away, back to the swordfight above. The Maiden had gained the parapet and was now trading blows with the men. Their swords rang like a blacksmith's hammer, the sound amplified in the enclosed space. Meanwhile, the other Maiden was kicking the wall over and over and over, falling into some arcane rhythm Çeda couldn't understand but could somehow sense. The stone upon which she centered her attentions crumbled further, cracks forming around its edges.

Without knowing when it had happened, Çeda realized she had her kenshar gripped tightly in her right hand. She took one step toward the King, preparing to charge, to run the knife across his throat. She hardly felt Emre grab her wrist—the one holding the knife—hardly felt him spinning her around to face him.

"What are you *doing*?" he hissed. "You'll be *killed*."

Çeda broke his grip with a sharp lift and twist of her arm. He tried grabbing her again, but she snatched his wrist and spun him into a nearby corner—the only dry space that remained. "Stay back, Emre."

She'd only just turned back around when something bright entered her field of vision from above—a torch, dropping like a sliver of the sun. The torch touched the spreading pool of lamp oil, and flames spread from the point of impact with a *whoosh*. It shoved Çeda away, and she cringed from it lest she be burned by the initial burst.

I can still reach the King.

Behind her, she heard the crash of glass, the splash of liquid over carpet and cobblestones, the sound of screaming as people caught fire.

I can still reach him.

But her feet wouldn't move as flame licked across the fort's interior, racing over anything the oil had touched. A cart went up in an explosive burst. The fire moved quickly, hungrily, creeping up walls, slipping like thieves along the seams between the cobbles. More carts were engulfed as those trapped tried to back away, screaming, eyes wide as new moons. The flames did not discriminate; they embraced man and woman and child alike in a steadily expanding wave.

Flames now roiled between her and the King. They were thick, but she could take one leap . . .

But no. Gods above, it was too far. The flames too fierce.

Bakhi's chosen, we're all going to die in these flames, Çeda thought, and yet it was the girl who had offered

Çeda a strip of scented wood that truly brought Çeda beyond her thoughts of revenge. The girl had remained in place, petrified, next to Çeda, but now she rushed toward one of the burning men.

“Papa!”

“No!” Çeda shouted.

She grabbed the girl and drew her back, pinning her writhing arms just as something wet and heavy draped over them. A strong arm reached around her waist and pulled them both back. The three of them fell to the cobbles.

A carpet, she realized. Emre had soaked a carpet with scented water and thrown it over them.

“Papa!” the girl screamed, fighting even harder to get away.

“It’s too late,” Çeda said, putting her hand over the girl’s eyes to save her from the horror. The girl continued to struggle—and how could Çeda blame her?—but Çeda held her tight, refusing to relax.

As Emre pulled the carpet low to protect them from the growing heat, Çeda peered through the still-dripping fringe. Wherever the oil had splashed or pooled, yellow flames now coughed black smoke, occluding the air, making it difficult to breathe, even beneath the carpet. One man tried jumping from a cart to one of the exposed beams, as the Maiden had. He managed to grasp it, but slipped and fell onto another cart, knocking several of the glass globes, which fell and shattered, momentarily spreading the flames in hypnotic blue-green whorls. A woman tried to douse the flames on a young boy even while aflame herself. Some few closer to Çeda tried to copy what Emre had done until two men—both burning and screaming—began fighting over one of the sopping carpets.

In the corner where the King had been standing, the Maiden was shoving him through the hole she’d forced through the old stone. The flames caught up with her just as the King’s legs and feet were lost from view. The Maiden had been doused so heavily by the splashing oil she lit like a newborn sun, but she didn’t follow her King. By Gozhen’s sweet kiss, she knelt down and replaced the stone she’d worked free to allow his escape. The fit was imperfect, but it would prevent the flames from following the King, who’d been doused nearly as heavily as the Maiden. Only when the stone had been set back in place did she roll away in agony.

Çeda stared at the black gaps around the stone. A King now lay on the other side, crawling away, vulnerable.

Her chance had come and gone in the span of moments.

Dear gods, the heat felt strong enough to burn them even beneath the carpet. The smoke became so thick it scoured Çeda’s mouth and throat, and she coughed uncontrollably, which only served to make it worse. Those who weren’t screaming were coughing as badly as she was; she worried that she and Emre and anyone else who’d managed to avoid the fire would die from the choking smoke. Through the fringe, she began looking for ropes among the stalls and wagons—perhaps she could tie it to a makeshift hook and cast it up to the ramparts—but moments later sounds came from the barrier behind them as the heavy wooden barricade rolled back and a dozen Silver Spears filed through the archway. They waved people out toward safety, helping some to stagger free of the blaze, throwing blankets over others in a vain attempt at dousing the flames.

Soon Çeda was lifted up and led out of the inferno toward the shaded aisles of the market proper, which now felt cold as ice. The girl came with her, shivering horribly, those green eyes staring up at Çeda with a wide-eyed numbness that echoed everything Çeda was feeling.

She and Emre were questioned by the Spears for a time, but Seyhan came and vouched for them both, and they were soon allowed to leave.

All the while, the only thing Çeda could think was what a coward she'd been. "You couldn't have done a thing," Emre said late that night when they reached their simple three-room home.

You're wrong, Çeda thought. *I could have killed a King*. "I can't talk," she said, heading for her own room, "not now."

She lay awake long into the night, replaying everything that had happened, what she might have done differently. The attack, she had no doubt, had been orchestrated by the Al'afwa Khadar, the Moonless Host. They were men and women from Sharakhai or the desert wastes who'd sworn to fight the Kings. She wondered how long that one attack had been in the making. Months, surely. Perhaps years. Not only would they have had to know that one of the Kings disguised himself to walk as a commoner among the streets of Sharakhai, they would've had to know his patterns as well. How often he went, by which routes, and how many would guard him.

It was times like this, when Çeda came near the Kings in some way, or returned to the foot of Tauriyat where her mother had been hung, that she felt so impotent she could scream it for all of Sharakhai to hear. The Kings left their House so very rarely. And here she had stumbled across one, almost defenseless, and she'd failed to honor her vow to her mother. Even if she'd somehow found the courage to try, she had no doubt she would have died at the hands of one of the Blade Maidens. They saw into the hearts of man. How could *she* hope to stand against them?

She fell asleep wondering when the King's response would come. Surely it would, and surely it would not be kind—the one thing that could be counted on in Sharakhai was that in the currency of vengeance, the Kings paid early, they paid in kind, and they paid with ample interest.

The next morning, as the Silver Spears continued their nightlong sweep through the western quarter for intelligence, Çeda heard a roar far to the west. She stood from her breakfast of bean salad and bread and threaded her way west from her home. The sound grew ever louder until it shook the foundations of the city. Soon she came to Hallowsgate, one of the twelve fortresses spaced along the city's outer curtain wall and the one situated due west of Tauriyat and the House of Kings, at the terminus of the street known as the Spear. Hundreds of Silver Spears were stationed along the wall, staring down impassively, their faces lost beneath the shade of their conical helms, sun shining brightly off steel-tipped arrows, ready against the strings of their short, curving bows.

Çeda could spare little thought for them, however. As she stared at the fortress walls, her world was reduced to the forms hanging by ropes from the battlements. Girls, Çeda realized. All girls. Two dozen. She counted them with morbid fascination. Their throats were cut, their bodies left to bleed down the sides of the tower like gutted rabbits. The bodies and the blood read like some ancient scroll: *Assail our walls*, they said, *and thine is the blood that shall flow; harm but one of our daughters, and twenty and four of thine own shall drown in their wake*. Seeing it so starkly written, Çeda realized it could be no other way. The Blade Maidens were the daughters of the Kings, after all—each and every one, firstborn of the Kings, taking up the blade at an age no older than these slain girls, to protect not only their own, but the city the gods themselves had granted their fathers.

Çeda stared at each body in turn, giving them a remembrance, a promise, especially the last. The little perfume girl with jet black hair and eyes like jade. What had *she* done to the Kings? Nothing. But she'd been there. She'd been present and had survived. That had been enough for the Kings to choose her. Or maybe it had simply been bad luck. A girl in the wrong place at the wrong time, not once but twice.

The anger and sorrow seething within threatened to overwhelm her—as it already had for so many others weeping at the tower’s base. But Çeda refused to give in. She refused to cry. Instead, she stifled the rage, buried it deep inside her and let it burn with all her other regrets.

Then she turned and walked away.

She had no use for the dead, nor they for her.

ELEVEN YEARS EARLIER . . .

SUNRISE OVER THE GREAT SHANGAZI was an aching beautiful sight—a burst of amber and ochre and rust, a panoply of shadows engraved against the lee of the rolling dunes—yet Çeda was blind to the beauty of it all, for her mother had gone deadly silent again.

Çeda was a skinny girl of eight hard summers, and she was sitting on a thwart within the confines of a skiff—a deceptively lithe skiff her mother, Ahya, had paid dearly to hire. The only sounds to fill the predawn desert were the sighs of the skimwood runners over the golden sand—that and the occasional *shush* as Ahya leaned into the tiller, sending the rudder to cutting the sand while the skiff leaned this way or that. The air was chill enough to make Çeda hug herself and shiver, but she said nothing of it. The desert’s pledge of unending heat was rarely broken, and soon, whatever her lingering memories of the biting wind, they would be lost beneath the sun’s brutal, unyielding stare.

Neither Çeda nor her mother had said a word to one another since their journey began. Çeda yearned to coax her mother into talking about the reasons behind their sudden and unexplained flight from the Amber City, but she had long since learned that to push her mother at the wrong time would have the opposite effect. Her mother could be incredibly mule-like that way.

At the very least she wanted to understand the fears that drove her mother so. And fear she did. Çeda could see it in her mother’s bearing—as stiff as the thwart upon which she sat—and in the eagle-eyed way she watched the sands ahead, adjusting the tiller and occasionally glancing up at the sail but never looking at Çeda. Grim lines of worry and toil were etched into the corners of her eyes—eyes that were so often fierce, but on this strange day were heavy with exhaustion and a disquiet that bordered on panic.

As tired and worried as Ahya may be, though, she sailed onward, chin set stoically, her long black hair caught by the wind like a pennant set for war. Her mother was nothing if not driven.

For a moment, Çeda could think of little but the way Ahya, in preparation for another of her clandestine forays, had fallen asleep in their shared bed well before sundown the night before. Ahya’s sleep had been fitful. Several times she’d called out Çeda’s name, long and slow—*Chaaay-daaa, Chaaay-daaa*—with such sorrow it had made Çeda want to hold her mother and weep. She hadn’t had the heart to wake her, but she had laid down behind Ahya, body to body, stroking her hair and wondering what wicked fears had been given life inside her dreaming mind.

Ahya had woken at dusk and left for many hours, returning only when the twin moons had set. She’d rushed into their hovel wearing her black dress and veil—not so different from what the Blade Maidens wore—and barked at Çeda to pack some clothes while she stuffed food and water into a bag, enough to sustain them for a day or two in the desert. Strangely, she’d also insisted on packing their books—the ones that had always

moved with them from place to place, without fail. After changing into a dress that wouldn't get her killed were she to be caught wearing it, they were out and into the city with Çeda desperately wanting to know more.

In this, however, Ahya had trained her daughter well. They'd moved on short notice before—a dozen times at least that Çeda could remember—and Ahya had always insisted that Çeda remain silent until they'd reached a place where there was time to explain.

They'd gone to the sandy western harbor well before first light and paid good coin to hire this skiff, not to mention a healthy dose of prudence from the handsome, dark-skinned man who owned it. Ahya had struck a northerly course upon leaving the harbor, sailing them swiftly away from the Amber City of Sharakhai—the city whose cramped and twisted streets harbored endless thousands, the city that had instilled such fear in Ahya, she'd rushed them from their home in the starlit hours of the night.

"You went to the desert last night," Çeda said, unable to take the silence one moment longer. "Was it to collect more petals?" She said this knowing something else entirely had happened, but she had to get her mother to say something. Anything.

Ahya pulled on the tiller, making the skiff lean around a blunt black stone. "I went to the desert, but found no petals. Not this night." Çeda was going to ask what she *had* found, but her mother met her gaze and shook her head, an indication that she wasn't ready to speak. Not yet.

Only when they had navigated the last of the standing stones near Sharakhai, and the sand had opened up, did Ahya tie the tiller in place with two lengths of rope and face Çeda at last. She stared at her as *other* mothers looked upon their children—not with a frown, or with unkind eyes and a biting command, but with simple compassion; it was a thing Çeda so rarely saw she immediately understood that this voyage was far more serious than she'd guessed. Reluctantly, it seemed to Çeda, Ahya tugged one of her few prized possessions free from inside her dress: a silver locket, roughly the size and shape of a lantern's flame.

Her mother cupped the locket in her lap, hiding it from the wind. After prizing it open, she liberated two dried flower petals from within its folds, each white with a tip of palest blue. They'd been harvested by Ahya weeks ago from the night blooms of the adichara—twisted and wickedly thorned trees that only spread their flowers to the face of the twin moons. Her trespass was a thing expressly forbidden by the Twelve Kings of Sharakhai, but this wasn't what concerned Çeda; her mother had been liberating petals from the blooming fields since before she was born. Nor was it the fact that her mother was granting her a petal; she'd done so many times before, most often the day following the holy night of Beht Zha'ir. It was the fact that this was no mere fragment measured for a child, as it had always been before. No, this time it was an entire petal.

Why? she wondered. *Why now? And why here?*

"Open," her mother said, waving the petal near Çeda's mouth.

The petal eased her mind not at all, for it meant that Ahya thought this day important—important enough to give Çeda an entire petal; important enough to shape Çeda's life in some way—and it was with this realization that Çeda pieced together the clues at last.

"We're going to see the witch, aren't we?"

Her mother waved the petal again, ignoring her words. Afraid to disobey but every bit as afraid to comply, Çeda opened her mouth wide. With clear reverence, Ahya set one petal under Çeda's tongue while placing the other beneath her own. She watched Çeda carefully, though what she was hoping to see Çeda couldn't

begin to guess.

Çeda felt the changes that always came over her, but this time to a much higher degree. Her tongue tingled. Her lips soon after. The skin of her face, the tips of her fingers, the soles of her feet. Even the place behind her naval—the place, her mother always said, where Çeda's shouts should come from when swinging a sword—came alive with the dizzying verve these petals granted. Her mouth filled with spit, forcing her to swallow constantly. Her hearing became sharper. The shush of the skimwood runners over the sand became raucous. Her mother's breathing sounded loud in her ears. She could hear the whine of a maned wolf pup far in the distance. She swore she could even feel the adichara trees that ringed the city, the trees from which her mother had harvested this very petal.

She felt more alive than ever before. As if she could take down one of the mangy bone crushers she'd seen prowling the desert as they'd left Sharakhai by morning's light. As if she could leap from the skiff and chase the sister moons, follow them until they set along the edge of the world. There was nothing she couldn't do. And yet her mother looked at her ruefully, as if this were a test Çeda had already failed. Why, she had no idea. Her mother had often given her petals the morning after Beht Zha'ir, but there had been other times too: on the eve of Çeda's birthdays; on Beht Tahlell, the night the goddess Nalamae had touched her crooked finger to the sands of the Great Shangazi, creating the River Haddah and granting life to the desert; sometimes she even gave Çeda a bit of the petals when they danced with blades. Why, then, would she give Çeda a petal now and then frown when it filled her with golden light?

"Tell me," Çeda said, if only to shake that look from her mother's face. Ahya set her jaw stiffly, muscles working along gaunt cheeks. She was stubborn, but Çeda was her mother's child. "Are we going to see the witch?"

"Saliah isn't a witch," Ahya said finally, perhaps allowing that it was time for Çeda to know more of her secrets now that they were well out onto the sands and removed from those who might hear, including the King of Whispers.

Çeda begged to differ. Everyone knew that Saliah could peer beyond the day and into one's future, could cast spells if mood and need conspired to suit. Çeda smothered her biting reply, though. Her mother looked tense as the string of a tanbur—*more* tense, as if she might snap at any moment.

"Are you going to sell her petals?" Çeda asked, hoping it was true, and that they could leave quickly. For some reason, she now feared the future.

"Never you mind."

"I'm eight, Memma. I'm old enough to know."

With a reproachful look, her mother pulled her eyes away from the dunes ahead and stared into Çeda's eyes. She burst into a fit of nervous laughter, a thing tempered only by the feelings of dread and doubt that were clearly roiling inside her. Then the feelings seemed to break, and she leaned back and laughed, good and long, the sound of it bathing the bright desert sky. It seemed in that moment as if all the tension from the morning and from the night before shed from Ahya's frame and left her a woman reborn. She took Çeda's hand and kissed it three times. "Perhaps you are, Çedamihn, but I'll not tell you. Not yet. Not until I've spoken with her."

Çeda was glad to make her mother laugh—it was a beautiful sound, so seldom heard—but all too soon the weight that had been building along her shoulders these past many months returned, heavier than before, and Ahya was stiff on her thwart once more, hand on the tiller, watching the way ahead with grimly set eyes as

the wind bowed the sail of their sun-bleached skiff.

“You’ll be a good girl for your mother, won’t you?” Ahya asked without looking at Çeda.

Çeda thought at first she was speaking of their visit with Saliah, but her look was much too grave for that.

In the span of a heartbeat, Çeda realized what her mother was planning to do. In the span of another, all thoughts of the desert witch vanished, and her world was reduced to herself, her mother, and this sandborne skiff.

Ahya was going to leave Çeda there. She was going to leave her with Saliah and go somewhere, a place from which she thought she might never return.

Çeda was desperate to press, to ask where she was planning to go and why she would leave Çeda behind, but just then all she wanted to do was show that she *would* be a good girl, so she nodded.

“You’ll read the books I’ve given you,” Ahya went on. It wasn’t a question, nor even a request, but a fervent hope.

“I will.”

“Practice what I’ve taught you of sword and shield. I’ve never said so, but we both know you are gifted. Never take that for granted. Do you understand? And if you ever have need, you’ll go to Dardzada, and he’ll help.”

Dardzada was an apothecary who lived in Sharakhai’s rich eastern end. Her mother took her to him from time to time, sold things to him—perhaps the petals she collected from the twisted adichara trees. The two of them would speak sometimes in the back room of his shop while Çeda was left to sit out front on a stool, told to *touch nothing*. He was always so cruel to Çeda, asking when she’d last bathed and telling her if she so much as looked at his plants he’d sell her to the wandering tribes. Why by the gods’ sweet breath would her mother tell her to seek help from *Dardzada*?

Her mother must have known what she was thinking, for she went on. “He is blood of your blood, Çedamihn.”

“He isn’t, either!” Çeda said, hoping to trample the very thought with her words.

“He is,” Ahya replied calmly. “And you’ll understand that one day.”

As they continued, Çeda begged herself to voice her fears, to ask her mother what she was planning to do. To ask her to stop. But she felt as though voicing them would make them real—that if she were to speak a word of it, it would make her mother do exactly what she feared most—and the more leagues that passed, the more she thought how foolish it would be to question her mother. Ahya had done dangerous things before, hadn’t she? She often went out on Beht Zha’ir, a night upon which it was forbidden for anyone but the immortal Kings and the Blade Maidens to step foot in the streets. She had done so again just last night. She would leave wearing her black fighting dress. Some days she would come home none the worse for the wear, but on others she would return with cuts and scrapes and bruises that Çeda would dress under her mother’s sharp instructions.

She’d flouted the laws of Sharakhai beneath the noses of the Twelve Kings for years and lived to tell the tales. She was a woman who knew what she was about, and she would come home safe. Tonight and every other night. Çeda knew it would be so.

Well after the sun had risen, a lone feature appeared on the horizon: a tall stone column that rose like an accusing finger pointing crookedly at a sky of cobalt blue. When they came nearer, Ahya pulled at the tiller and pointed them due west, and they chased the shadow of their sail several more hours. Çeda watched the horizon closely. She sat higher, wondering when it would appear.

And yet it was the chimes she noticed first. The chimes, so clear and musical, that lay just on the edge of hearing.

Like a dream, she realized.

They reminded her of her dreams.

Dreams she had forgotten until that very moment. And then, as if she were dreaming even now, Saliah's home rose from the sands. It was little more than a mudbrick house with a walled garden, but it looked magical out here in the desolate plains of the desert.

They stopped before they reached the solid stone upon which Saliah's home had been built, and then, in silent concert, Ahya gathered Çeda's bag of clothes and books, while Çeda drew the sail into an efficient bundle atop the boom. Ahya dropped the anchor—a heavy stone tied to a rope to keep their skiff from slipping away in the wind. Before stepping onto the rust-colored stone, Ahya picked up a fistful of sand. She raised it to her lips and whispered a prayer, allowing the sand to fall in a windborne stream. Whatever it was she was asking the desert gods to do, Çeda couldn't say, nor would she wish to. Such words were sacrosanct, meant only for the god to whom they were addressed.

Çeda reached down and picked up her own fistful of sand, lifting it and letting it sift through her slowly opening fingers. "Please, Nalamae," she whispered, "guide my mother, this day if no other."

Saliah was waiting for them near her door. She was a handsome woman. And how tall! She stood at least a full head taller than Ahya. In one hand, she held a crook with gemstones worked into the curling head; her other hand stroked the long braid of her hair, which hung over her shoulder and down her chest. She watched Ahya and Çeda approach, but she seemed to be looking *through* them, not *at* them.

"Who comes?" Saliah asked.

"It is Ahyanesh. And I've brought my daughter. May we speak, Saliah Riverborn? I bring to you a matter most grave."

"A matter most grave . . ."

"I would not have come otherwise."

Saliah considered as the chimes continued to ring from the nearby garden. The time grew uncomfortably long, but at last, Saliah nodded and turned toward Çeda, her eyes staring well over Çeda's head, as if she couldn't see at all. She held her hand out, and although Çeda was afraid to take it, she did so, feeling compelled, though she couldn't explain why or how.

"Can you wander in the garden, little one?" Saliah asked.

"Wait—" Ahya called, her eyes wide at this seemingly innocent request. "Çeda?"

Saliah paused, tilted her head ever so slightly toward Ahya. "A matter most grave, you said."

“I did, but—”

“Then it must be Çeda,” Saliah replied easily.

Ahya considered her daughter, then glanced to the garden wall, then stared at Saliah, her eyes imploring.

“Why not me?”

“Because she is the one who will be wrapped in the cloak of your decisions. Because it is easier to sense hidden things when you look at that which lies nearest, not the thing itself. Go, now, Çedamihnn. Let your mother and me talk.” Saliah released Çeda’s hand, then turned, regal as a queen, and strode toward her home. “Why don’t you see if the acacia will speak to you?” She was soon lost to the deeper shadows of the entryway.

“Go,” Ahya said with a frown, guiding Çeda by the shoulder and shoving her toward the stone wall and the archway that led to the garden.

Çeda didn’t understand what had just happened, but she felt suddenly relieved to be free to wander. As worried as she’d been in the desert, Saliah’s home felt like an oasis, a sheltering cave when the sandstorms came.

If anyone might help my mother, Çeda thought, it would be Saliah.

Çeda had wandered this place before, but as it had been with the chimes, the memories returned only after she’d passed through the arched entryway and into the garden proper.

It was wondrous. Outside, the desert had been quiet save for the chimes that tickled the very edge of her hearing, but inside, new sounds came alive. Birds with bright beaks flitted among the bushes and across the path that wound through them. They chirped and chirruped and called all sorts of songs to the inexplicably humid air. The orchestral sound made Çeda think of the River Haddah in the throes of spring, when the reeds were thick with nesting wrens and larks and wagtails. And the smells! Floral and fragrant and fecund. Valerian mixed with Sweet Anna mixed with the surprisingly acrid scent of goldenbells. And beneath it all an aged smell redolent of shaved amber. It made Çeda wonder if the world hadn’t been born in this very place. It was wonderful, and did much to ease the dark mood brought on by the voyage here.

In the center of the garden towered an enormous acacia, its branches spread like a protective grandmother. Despite the way it dwarfed the garden’s wall, the tree hadn’t been visible until she’d passed through the garden’s gate. Çeda walked to the base of it, looked up at its green leaves and the many-colored shards of glass that hung from its branches.

See if the acacia will speak to you, Saliah had said. Çeda knew Saliah would read the sound of the chimes when people came to her. But Çeda had no such abilities. *That* would take the skill of someone like the desert witch, someone who knew the inner workings of the world.

Wouldn’t it?

Dozens of birds flew among the branches, but they never touched the chimes, nor the delicate golden threads that held them in place. The chimes were not low enough for her to touch, but she wished they were.

It felt blasphemous, but the urge to climb the tree was strong and growing stronger by the moment. Saliah had given her permission, hadn’t she? Çeda swallowed, licked her lips, then stole a glance at the entryway. She could hear her mother and Saliah speaking softly, and with her senses heightened by the petal, some of

their words carried.

"I've found four of their poems," Ahya said.

"Four is not twelve," Saliah replied.

"It is a start."

"It doesn't seem wise, despite what you've told me."

"Then show me another way!" her mother pleaded.

"It isn't so simple as you might think, and there is more to consider than mere Kings."

"So you've said. But the Kings must fall."

"I don't dispute it," came Saliah's reply.

"Then what else? What else can there be?"

Çeda lost some of the conversation as she rounded the tree and was startled by two yellow-crested birds fluttering from a nearby bush. She stared up through the branches toward the blue desert sky, watching the chimes catch the light in a thousand different colors.

"Take her," Ahya said. "Take her, and I'll return, or another will come."

"Patience," came Saliah's deep voice. "I would listen to the chimes."

Çeda heard nothing after that, and she had the distinct impression that it had been Saliah's will that had allowed her to hear as much as she had, and Saliah's will that had caused it to suddenly stop. This was, after all, her home, which meant much to those of godsblood. And there was no doubt in Çeda's mind that Saliah was one of those ancient people, descended from the first gods themselves. What else could explain her power?

Çeda waited for a time, peering up through the branches. She'd completed a full circuit of the tree. After one last huff of a breath, she jogged toward it, leapt off a round stone near its base, and swung herself easily around the lowest bough. She climbed higher, staying near the trunk to avoid the slim thorns of the smaller branches. As she neared the uppermost, she noticed the chimes were ringing differently. They sounded more urgent, somehow. More desperate.

She listened for some time, haunted by the changing notes that reminded her of the sounds the sandstorms made when they blew through Sharakhai. She hung upside down on a branch for a moment, but it suddenly felt very, very wrong, so she pulled herself up and examined the chimes instead.

She saw visions within their bright reflections. Momentary things, like silverscales flitting below the surface of a river, there one moment, gone the next. She saw a woman's callused hand, pierced and bleeding along the thumb. She saw a beetle with iridescent wings land on a blindingly bright flower. She saw a woman in a diaphanous orange dress, dancing in the desert, sand flying high as she spun and kicked. She saw ebon swords raised in triumph, women in black fighting dresses charging over the dunes. She saw a man with oh-so-familiar eyes wearing the elegant garb of a desert shaikh. She saw this and much, much more, but she understood none of it.

One vision, especially, confused her. She was standing before a King. Or she thought he was a King. He had piercing eyes, wore a golden crown and fine raiment, and he stood in a hall of endless opulence. The King's dark eyes were intent, almost proud. He held a shamshir made of ebon steel in one hand, with a mark etched into the blade near the cross guard. The mark was a circular design of reeds at the edge of a river. She could almost see the herons wading through it, hunting for scarletgills. The strangest thing about the vision was not the King, nor the sword, nor even the fact of her in audience with one of the twelve immortal rulers of Sharakhai. It was that the King was holding the sword out for her to take.

She was so captured by this vision she didn't at first notice she was being watched. When she peered beyond the branches, she saw Saliah's tall frame standing in the archway, staff in hand, through the golden threads and glinting chimes. Ahya stood two paces back, her face expectant, even hopeful. Saliah's face, however, was infinitely different. She looked neither angry, nor kind; instead she was staring through the branches with an expression of awe, as if she were gazing into the eyes of Tulathan herself.

Saliah held her right hand out, made a fist several times, turning it over to expose the palm of her hand, then the back, then her palm again. She swallowed and seemed to regain a bit of herself. "Come down, child." Her words mingled with the chimes, as if they were long-lost cousins. "Come down now."

Unbidden, Çeda's limbs began to shake. She knew without knowing how that Saliah's sightless eyes had seen the same things she had, but where Çeda was nothing but a bumbling child, Saliah knew how to read such things. The question was, what could she have seen that would upset her so?

With reverent care, Çeda wound down through the limbs, and when she dropped to solid ground, she saw that Saliah was crying.

"Is it true?" Çeda asked. "Will I wield an ebon blade?"

Ahya's eyes went wide. She swallowed hard, her gaze flitting between Çeda and Saliah. She was waiting for Saliah's answer but was clearly afraid to hear it.

Before Çeda could ask what was wrong, Saliah turned and strode toward her home. "There's no room for Çeda here."

Ahya glanced from Çeda to Saliah's retreating form and back, several times, a woman suddenly lost in a maelstrom. "Please," she called, "there is more we must—"

"Leave," Saliah repeated.

"If you could only watch her for a short while—"

Saliah stopped and spun. She thumped her staff against the stone. The sound of it was low, and it went on and on and on, as if the desert itself were nothing more than a vast skin drum. "There are many paths we might take in this world, and in the next, but for you, Ahyanesh Ishaq'ava, this is no longer one of them. Now take your child and leave this place."

Saliah turned and strode away, her form swallowed by the shadows of her home.

Leaving Çeda and Ahya alone.

Utterly alone.

Ahya turned numbly toward Çeda. It was strange how striking she looked just then. Piercing brown eyes,

raven hair blowing in the breeze. She was not angry, simply dumbfounded. It seemed strange to say, but she looked as though her cares had been washed away, as if there were no true choices left, leaving the path ahead that much clearer. But then she snatched Çeda's wrist and dragged her back toward the skiff.

TWO STORIES UP, on the edge of the mudbrick roof of her home, Çeda rested on the balls of her feet, watching the alley that ran drunkenly from her house, up through the center of the bazaar, and on toward the Trough, the city's central and largest thoroughfare. The wind might be gentle among the sheltered streets of Sharakhai, but up here it was strong enough to tug at the black thawb she wore, and the dust from the desert was thick enough that she'd pulled the veil of her turban across her face. Her mother's silver locket hung around her neck, a weight that this night of all nights tugged heavily on her heart.

The sun still glowed a brilliant and burnished gold along the western horizon, but the rest of the sky was a field of stars scattered across a vast cloth of inky blue. Most nights the city would be loud with the sounds of hawkers in the bazaar, of children running the streets, of wagons rattling along the Trough, but not tonight. Tonight the city was boneyard quiet. Tonight the city was boneyard still. For this was the night of the reaping, the night the asirim would steal into the city like dark hounds, baying and hunting for souls.

Beht Zha'ir came once every six weeks, when the twin moons were full, and when it did, the city transformed from a thing bright and alive to the cowering beast Çeda saw before her. Not a single lamp in the great city was lit. Not a single word was uttered. Neither was expressly forbidden, but none would risk them for fear of luring the asirim to their home. Even the highborn, who considered it the highest of honors to be chosen, would follow custom. They would stand vigil in darkness, praying silently to the desert gods for favor until the sun rose once more. Even on Tauriyat, the hill where the Kings lived in their palaces, no lights shone, and none save the Reaping King and his deadly Maidens would venture out.

And Emre still had not come home. He was out there, somewhere—who knew where?—perhaps in trouble, perhaps wounded. Perhaps dead.

"Hurry," she whispered, a word she hoped was carried on the wind to the gods of the desert themselves.

As she watched the alley intently, she wondered with a morbid and growing fascination whether the asirim would be attracted to Emre's fear. They might. She'd never strayed near enough to one of them to find out. She'd never even *seen* one. Not clearly, anyway. Just a shadow in the night years ago, a crooked form lumbering through the city like a wounded dog.

With full night so near, she could no longer see into the deeper shadows, and she would be unable to until the moons were higher.

"Nalamae's teats, come *home*, Emre."

And yet despite her pleas, the city grew darker, the moons crept higher in the sky, and the lane below lay achingly empty. She ought to go inside. She ought to wait. She'd be a fool to search for him on a night like tonight. She knew he'd gone to the southern harbor to pick up the package, but she had no idea where he might have gone from there. She couldn't abandon him, though. She would never do that to Emre.

The two of them had waited throughout the day for Osman to send word, for someone to give them the location for the pickups. She and Emre—both of them as edgy as they ever were when preparing for a

shade—drank sparingly of water and pecked at a dish she'd made of saffron rice and raisins and pine nuts. Emre had whiled away the time, telling her of a Malasani bravo who'd come to the spice stall last night to try the vinegar peppers that Seyhan kept in clay jars beneath the spice tables.

"Said he'd heard of them," Emre had said with a cat's wide smile, his eyes distant. "He *demand*ed one. Said I must give him the hottest peppers I could find. He left *crying*, Çeda. Crying and searching for anyone who would offer up a bit of water. But not a single one would, not even when he flashed gold."

Çeda knew that every spice merchant kept water behind their stalls, but they wouldn't have taken to a brash easterner pretending he knew more than everyone in the desert combined.

"They all smiled," Emre went on, "and said to him, *the gods' blessing be upon you, but I have none*. He left, and I tell you true, his face was bright as the sun, tears were streaming down his cheeks like a little boy who lost his mother. He's probably *still* crying from it."

Çeda had laughed ruefully, knowing the real reason the merchants hadn't spared the Malasani a bit of water. None of them would have breathed a word of it to Emre, but they all knew of his painful history with Malasani bravos. Still, as quiet as they might be about it, they would always take Emre's side. That they would surely do.

"You're cruel and petty," Çeda had said, "all of you."

But Emre had brushed off her disapproval like sand from the deck of a ship. "The Malasani can die a thousand deaths before I'd care about a single one of them."

And Çeda had left it at that, not wanting to tug on the stitches of a wound that, some days, still seemed half-healed.

Two hours before sunset, Tariq had come to their home, all cocky bravado, arms across his chest, talking down to them as if he owned Roseridge. Tariq was one of Osman's street toughs, a boy she and Emre had both run the alleys with when they were growing up in Sharakhai's west end.

"Two packages," he'd said. "Çeda goes first. Emre, you'll wait here until she's gone."

Tariq had ordered Emre to another room and given Çeda her assignment. She was to go to a distillery east of the city's northern harbor, and she'd soon set out wearing a long abaya and a hijab to cover her head and face—plus two sheathed fighting knives strapped to her calves should she run into trouble—which ostensibly left Emre alone with Tariq.

As soon as she'd slipped down an alley, though, she circled back. Neither Tariq nor Osman would be pleased, but she and Emre had long ago agreed that they would let one another know where they were headed in case anything went wrong. She climbed the narrow three-story building opposite their home and peeked over the stone lip that ran along the roof's edge. Emre had come to the window and leaned on the sill for a moment. His right hand hanging outside, he had pointed down—south—then flattened his hand like a sail, indicating the drop was in or very near the southern harbor.

She'd waited for Emre to stand and adjust the curtains, at which point she pointed up, north, and waved her hand like a leaf blowing in the wind, an indication she was headed to the rich green plantations fed from the Kings' aqueduct. She'd left for her pickup immediately.

Behind the distillery's ox mill she'd met a man of indistinct origin. His skin was dark like the Kundhunese,

but his face looked more like the highlands of Mirea. He was a tall, distinguished sort, with dark clothes and midnight hair pulled back into a long tail. He'd given her a small ivory canister in a leather satchel, which she took to a hovel in the middle of the Shallows, an area with cramped streets and homes stacked upon homes, an area she didn't like staying in for any length of time, that very few in Sharakhai liked staying in for any length of time, even those who lived there. It was a dangerous place, but she reached the hovel in little enough time and was let in by an old, bony woman with wrinkles so deep she looked as though she'd been left in the desert to dry since the founding of Sharakhai. No sooner had Çeda stepped inside than the woman held out a grasping hand. She stared with a humorless, toothless grimace as Çeda held out the satchel, then snatched it away and shooed Çeda from her home. And that had been that, as simple as Osman had made it out to be.

These layers of subterfuge were not uncommon in the Amber City. There were many in Sharakhai who wished to speak to one another, to trade or do business, illicit or otherwise, but who refused to do so openly with the watchful Kings so near, particularly the King of Whispers, who, it was said, could hear one speak, particularly when you uttered words related to the business of the Kings. The men and women who played at these games of power knew that conducting business beneath the bright light of day was foolish, so they would hire men like Osman to ferry commands and money and conditions of trade, hoping, often successfully, to do business in the shadows instead, hidden from the watchful eyes of the Kings and their Maidens and, sometimes more importantly, the royal taxmen. And if it required that men like Osman be added to the ledger, well, that was just the cost of doing business in a city like Sharakhai. The risks might be considerable, but the chance to make money outweighed them.

And there was more to consider than mere money. The coin they paid to have someone like Çeda run their messages might be dear, but it provided a certain amount of insulation. If the Silver Spears or the Maidens managed to get their hands on one of the canisters, they would be unable to decipher the message inside without its necessary other half, and if they captured Çeda or another of Osman's shadows, she would know next to nothing. Even Osman himself—for his own protection as much as his patrons—would know nothing about the contents of the messages.

After leaving the woman's hovel, Çeda had walked away as though that were the end of it. Once out of sight, she slipped around the backside of a four-story tenement house, one of the few in the Shallows. It was grossly overcrowded—twelve to twenty in a flat—but she made use of an inset in the odd, blocky structure that was not only child's play to climb but hid her from prying eyes. Upon reaching the roof, she moved, swift and low, and lay down along its edge, watching the alley she'd just vacated.

This kind of spy work was a lucrative enough business, but it wasn't why Çeda had agreed to start running things for Osman. She liked keeping tabs on Sharakhai. She liked knowing who was talking to whom—an investment, she told herself, that might one day pay dividends.

Nearly an hour later, two men and a woman moved with purpose down the narrow street. Curving shamshirs in leather sheaths hung from their belts. Their light-colored thawbs and turbans blended into the mudbrick homes, and their veils hung free, twisting in the wind as they walked. They stepped inside the woman's hovel and left soon after, heading back the way they'd come. When they came to the nearest cross street, Çeda could see that the woman was carrying the same leather satchel Çeda had just passed to the old woman.

No sooner were they out of sight than Çeda descended to the streets and padded after them, through the Shallows, along the streets of the Well, and finally to Red Crescent, a neighborhood near the quays of the western harbor, the smallest and seediest of the city's four sandy harbors.

She hid in a recessed doorway when the three of them came to an alley. The woman, walking between the

two men, paused and scanned the street behind her with a wariness that made it clear this wasn't her first time carrying packages. Apparently spotting nothing amiss, she followed the other two down the mouth of the alley.

Çeda gave them a bit of time—sensing their wariness would be heightened—then strode down the street, dusting her shoulder as she passed the alley, giving herself an opportunity to glance that way. Of the woman she could see no sign, but the two men were standing in a courtyard just beyond a peaked archway twenty paces down. It was no good trying to reach them that way, but there was another path.

She continued down the street to a bath house built for an ancient caravanserai that had once stood on this ground. Much of it had been torn down when the western harbor was built, but the bath house remained. The bath house alternated their days of patronage—women and girls one day, men and boys the next—and praise be to Tulathan, this was the women's day.

The attendant was a bored-looking boy wearing a blue kaftan. "The baths will be cooling by now," he told Çeda.

"It's all right," Çeda said, and handed two copper khet to the boy.

The boy shrugged, and with two clinks dropped the coins into a strongbox and handed Çeda a folded length of cotton. "Soap or pumice?" he asked, waving to a shelf that held a variety of each, for more coin.

Çeda shook her head and stepped toward the courtyard beyond the gates. As soon as she did, he went back to polishing a curving brass handle.

Four women and one young girl exited the bath house, laughing loudly as they took the steps down. Çeda headed toward the entrance, but the moment the group passed her, she strode with purpose to the corner of the ornate stone building. When she glanced back, the girl, the wind tugging at the ends of her long, damp hair, had turned to watch her. Çeda put her fingers to her lips, then ducked into the narrow space between the bath house and the wall that marked the perimeter of the grounds.

The two walls were close enough, and the brickwork rough enough, that she could easily gain purchase with hands and feet and press her way slowly up until she could grab the lip of the wall. When she reached the top, she heard a low murmur of voices coming from inside the bath house, but she could hear other voices more clearly now—the ones in the courtyard on the opposite side of this wall. She carefully lifted her head, seeing the three who had visited the hovel, plus one more. This man was tall and broad-shouldered. He wore a rich brown thawb, and two shamshirs hung from his belt. It was his forked beard, however, and the coiling tattoos of vipers wrapped around his forearms and wrists, that marked him as a man to be feared. His name was Macide Ishaq'ava, and he was the leader of the Moonless Host, a loose group formed from hundreds, perhaps thousands of members from the wandering folk, the twelve tribes that once ruled the entirety of the Shangazi Desert.

Everyone not simply passing through the city knew of Macide. Çeda had never met him, but she'd seen and heard of the types of things he left in his wake. The massacre at the perfume merchants' was but the most recent example. Years ago, the Host had reached a man who supplied a delicacy to the House of Kings: salted meat that came from rare mountain deer found in the southern ranges of the Great Shangazi. They'd poisoned it in hopes that the Kings would taste of it during their New Year feast. They hadn't, but eighteen of the highborn in attendance had, and they'd all perished from it. The Kings had not taken it lightly.

For the poisoning in their own house, they had poisoned dozens in return: men and women and children chosen randomly from the streets of Sharakhai—low born, recently come from the desert. The Kings had

forced them to eat the same tainted meat, then thrown their bodies into the river so that all could see them on their way to the desert. Silver Spears lined the banks of the Haddah by the thousands, firing arrows upon those who dared to wade into the river to fetch the bodies.

In response, the Moonless Host abducted a young aspirant to the Blade Maidens, freshly chosen and not yet taken to the desert for her vigil. They staked her out on a sand dune and left her there to die. The Kings had found her and, in their rage, rounded up twenty-four girls—all roughly the same age as their young Maiden—and hung them by their feet on poles driven into the sand of the northern harbor. There they'd remained for twelve nights leaving them to die from thirst and exposure, the Maidens and Silver Spears watching carefully for anyone who would deny the Kings their message: that if the citizens of the city wouldn't give up the names of Sharakhai's enemies, then this is what would happen, blood for blood.

It was a vicious circle, fed at least in part by the man standing in the courtyard below.

Macide took the leather satchel from the woman and opened it, retrieving the scroll case hidden within. He examined it carefully, then turned the ivory rings that ran along its length to a certain combination, one that had surely been sent to him days or even weeks before. When he was satisfied, he cracked the wax seal at one end of the canister and pulled out a note written on parchment. Apparently pleased, he nodded and replaced the parchment inside the canister.

"Go," Macide said to the woman. "Fetch the second canister and meet me on the ship."

"Of course," she said, and then the four of them walked down the alley and were gone.

Çeda thought about following them, but she'd seen enough. She likely wouldn't learn more unless she could somehow get the parchment from Macide, but there wasn't time.

The sun was already low. Beht Zha'ir had nearly come to Sharakhai once more, and now that she knew the Moonless Host were involved, the urge to return home to make sure Emre had returned safe was strong and growing stronger. She had no real reason to worry, and yet she worried just the same.

Each and every step toward home had only amplified her fears, a thing helped not at all when she returned to an empty home. Soon the bright light of dusk had died along the horizon, and a chill swept over the city. The threat of the coming night grew like a festering wound, and all the while the threat of the asirim loomed ever larger.

Çeda was startled from her thoughts by shadows in the alley ahead. She stared, waiting breathlessly, but it was only a mongrel dog, followed closely by another, and then a third. They looked skittish, galloping along the street, slowing with hackles raised, then padding forward again. And then they were gone, leaving Çeda alone once more.

Emre wasn't coming, she realized. He wasn't coming because something had gone terribly wrong. She knew it as she knew the hot winds that blew through the desert. Resigned at last, she pulled the tail of her black turban from across her face and let it hang down her chest. With reverent care, she levered her silver locket open with her thumbnails, revealing a dried petal the color of bleached bone, with a tip of brightest blue.

It did not slip her notice how similar this all felt to the fateful day eleven years ago when her mother had taken her out on the sands. The day she'd visited Saliah, the desert witch. The day her life had changed forever. The day her mother had died.

Would her life change so much this night? Would she be forced to witness the death of another she

cherished?

The petal felt light as moonlight as she picked it up and placed it carefully under her tongue. Jasmine and rosemary and mace mixed with the unmistakable floral scent of the adichara, the misshapen desert trees from which she'd harvested the petal. Her skin tingled. Her lips trembled. She heard a crisp sound, a wine-laced finger pulling a note from the rim of a crystal goblet. As she often did, she felt the blooming fields beyond the city, though this time it felt deeper, as if she could feel the hunger of the asirim.

In moments, her aches from the pits faded. Her hands shook. The very moons themselves seemed to shiver in the sky, and for a moment she felt as though she could feel the entirety of the city—every man, woman, and child as they huddled in their homes, fearful of the coming night, fearful of what would stalk from the desert and into this massive and wondrous city, born, however improbably, from the shifting sands of the Great Shangazi itself.

Çeda pulled her veil across her face and tucked the tail back into her turban. She gripped the hilt of her knife, a keen-edged kenshar, making sure it rested tightly in its sheath at her belt. She reached over her left shoulder and did the same with the wooden hilt of the shamshir strapped across her back. Then she leapt down to the exposed wooden beam that marked the space between the first and second floors and sprung forward, somersaulting down to the dry, dusty ground.

She struck a solid pace, heading through the old wall of Sharakhai—a wall that had long since been outgrown—and down the winding lane toward the Trough, the broad street that ran north to south, cutting the city almost perfectly in half. From there, she would make for the southern harbor, where Emre had been told to go. She'd not taken ten strides, however, when a long wail settled over the city like a pall. Another wail sounded soon after, higher and more desperate than the first. A shiver ran through her.

By Tulathan's bright eyes, the asirim must be hungry indeed to come so early. They usually don't come until well after the moons have risen.

Yet another wail, and it sounded like a laugh, as though it knew she was out when she should have been locked safe in her home.

The fourth sounded as though it were calling to her and her alone. *Come*, it said. *Come, and we will lick thine skin.*

She ran harder, the vigor of the petal bearing her faster than any man or woman in this city could manage. She snaked her way through the empty stalls of the bazaar, through the spice market beyond, and eventually came to the edge of the Trough. She was exposed here, especially under the brightness of Rhia and Tulathan, but none would have the blankets over their windows pulled aside; none would dare look out, not now that the asirim's jackal bays were sounding over the city.

She passed the Way of Jewels, the Black Pillar, and Bent Man, the ancient bridge that crossed the dry remains of the River Haddah. Then, as she neared the slave block, she abandoned the Trough for a shortcut to the southern harbor; a shortcut she and Emre had been using since they were gutter wrens.

As she headed down a narrow alley, she trilled the call of the amberlark: four rising notes followed by a long coo. The calls of the asirim came louder. Some were close, she realized. Very close.

One never knew the path they would choose. That fell to the Reaping King and his whims. One never knew *how many* would come, either. Some months it was a bare few; on other nights their calls resounded throughout the city from the rich eastern edges to the slums of the west end.

She trilled again, waiting, listening, fighting down the urge to cower behind a barrel and wait for the night to pass as another asir called, this one much closer than the last.

Then she heard it, some distance away though clear enough—the call of another amberlark.

She knew it was Emre. But the call had been very weak, as if he'd barely managed it through his pain. Or fear. Or both.

The alley ended in a stone lip. Beyond was a canal that ran dry most of the year. The drop was steep, but she leapt with abandon, trusting to the adichara petal to strengthen her legs and dull the pain of her landing.

She trilled again, hearing no reply, but as she listened she *did* hear the sound of footsteps. They shuffled along the ground somewhere above her. She froze, breathless, sure that one of the asirim had found her.

THE ASIR'S FOOTSTEPS ABOVE RECEDED, and Çeda's heart began to beat again. But then a hungry wail—an aching, utterly inhuman sound Çeda had never heard the likes of, even from the grisly asirim—broke the stillness. Çeda cringed, covered her ears with her hands. Somewhere, a door crashed in, and Çeda went rigid with fear. She couldn't catch her breath. A man with a croaking voice called fervent prayers to the twin moons with ever-increasing rapidity. "Choose me, Tulathan," he intoned, "that your light may shine upon me all the brighter. Choose me, Rhia, that I may serve the Kings in the farther fields."

Surely to that man, such prayers were not misplaced. In his eyes he would be given a special place not only at the foot of the Kings, but of the first gods as well. So the Kannan, the book of laws penned by the Kings themselves, proclaimed. Çeda didn't know what to believe, nor did she care just then, for a moment later, a wet thud cut his voice short. After a time the footsteps approached her, as did an intermittent dragging sound.

Çeda crouched beneath the bridge. Made herself as small as possible.

She waited as the footsteps dragged over the stone bridge above her. The shadow that fell onto the bed of the canal was close enough for her to reach out and touch, and it made her feel as though the asir could do the same to her. It never stopped its shambling gait, however, and it moved on, dragging the man it had been granted by the Reaping King out toward the blooming fields. Çeda's reaction was craven, but she couldn't think of the man's loss, only the relief at not being chosen as he had.

By the light of the moons she could see well along the canal but not what lay beneath the bridges. Those were nearly pitch black, and it took long, terror-filled moments for her eyes to penetrate that intense darkness. At last, she caught movement beneath the next bridge, only twenty paces farther on. It must be Emre. She wanted to go to him, but fear still rooted her in place.

Finally, when the dragging sounds had faded and her muscles had unseized, she ran low to the next bridge and, gods be praised, found Emre stretched out underneath, holding his side. In the moonlight a few paces farther sprawled a man wearing the simple clothes one would find in the desert and a turban that, even muted as it was beneath the light of the twin moons, was clearly red. Tattoos marked his forehead, the corners of his eyes, and the palms of his hands, tattoos that would tell—if one knew how to read them—the story not only of his life, but that of his family and his tribe. It was the turban, though, that marked him as someone from the desert. The tribesmen, if they chose to give up the life of wandering and settle in Sharakhai, were forbidden to wear red turbans or thawbs. Their women relinquished their bright red dresses and veils,

embellished with beaten coins and golden embroidery. Any other colors were permitted, but red was set aside for those garbed for war. That was the price the Kings demanded for coming to their city, a sign that they had left their old lives behind, that their aggression lay behind them as well.

Why by the grace of the desert gods would one of the wandering tribes have come here? And why would he have attacked Emre?

She had no time to wonder further before a dark form blurred before her very eyes. Something heavy crashed onto the dry bed of the canal. Another asir, she realized.

She shrank back into the shadows beneath the bridge. Her lips trembled as her mouth began to water at a strange, sickly sweet smell that filled the air. It reminded her of withered apples just starting to turn. It was all she could do not to turn and flee. But Emre was but a whisper away. She couldn't leave him.

The asir stalked forward and stooped down over the fallen man, running fingers with black nails over his chest. The thing had long, emaciated arms and legs, and its head looked somehow too large for its body. Its hair was stringy and hung in matted clumps about its shoulders. It looked, in fact, not so different from the starving children she had seen in the slums, except instead of the skin the color of ginger, the asir's was the mottled black of rotten fruit.

The asir leaned close. Çeda could hear it sniffing along the dead man's neck, and then, as quickly as it had come, the asir threw the limp form over its shoulder, climbed the nearby wall of the canal, and was gone.

Gods protect me, Çeda said to herself, waiting for the sounds of the asirim to fade. Then she knelt next to Emre and whispered to the darkness. "Emre."

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